

The arsonist's mind: part 3 – personality disorders

A personality disorder is a persistent pattern of inner experience and behaviour that differs markedly from the expectations of the individual's culture, is pervasive and inflexible, and leads to distress or impairment. Sufferers may show inappropriate emotions, perceptions and ways of interacting with others. Having a personality disorder can impact on work, family and social relationships. The disorder may be severe and dominate a person's life, or may be mild with symptoms becoming stronger and problematic during times of increased stress or external pressures.

While the prevalence of personality and other disorders in bushfire arson is not known, among those who become serial bushfire arsonists (lighting more than one or two fires) there is likely to be a high proportion whose behaviour is at least partly influenced by a personality disorder. In a sample of over 700 youths in the US, Johnson et al. (2000) found those with personality disorder symptoms were significantly more likely than others to commit violent acts, including arson and vandalism. Each additional symptom increased the risk. Personality disorders most likely to be found among bushfire arsonists are:

- *Paranoid* – a pervasive distrust of others so that their motives are interpreted as malevolent. May light fires in retaliation against perceived threats or insults.
- *Schizoid* – inability to enjoy close relationships or to take pleasure in most activities. Displays emotional coldness and indifference in interpersonal relationships.
- *Schizotypal* – demonstrates social and interpersonal deficits marked by inappropriate or unusual emotions together with odd, bizarre or deluded beliefs and thoughts. Distorted perceptions or ideas may lead sufferer to believe that lighting fires is somehow necessary or appropriate.
- *Antisocial* – sufferers may engage in a range of antisocial, often criminal, behaviours including firesetting and other acts of wilful destruction. The disorder is characterised by a failure to conform to social norms by repeatedly performing acts that are illegal, and by exhibiting deceitfulness, impulsivity, irritability and aggressiveness. Includes a reckless disregard for the safety of self or others, consistent irresponsibility and lack of remorse for harm caused to others.
- *Conduct disorder* – a repetitive and persistent pattern of behaviour, usually evidenced by children or adolescents, in which the basic rights of others or social norms are violated. Behaviours may include aggression and cruelty to people and animals, destruction of property by fire or other means, deceitfulness and theft, and serious violation of parental or school rules. Where a person with conduct disorder starts a fire it will typically be with the intention of causing serious damage and perhaps endangering life.
- *Histrionic* – sufferers want to be the centre of attention. May display rapidly shifting and shallow expression of emotions and be easily influenced by others. Speech may be excessively impressionistic and lacking in detail. Mannerisms may show self-dramatisation, theatricality and exaggerated expression of emotion. May display inappropriate sexually seductive or provocative behaviour and may consider relationships to be more intimate than they actually are. Behaviour is likely to make them stand out in a workplace or other team situation. HPD will typically be seen in arsonists motivated by the desire for attention or to be seen as a hero.

For more information:

Johnson JG, Cohen P, Smailes E, Kasen S, Oldham JM, Skodol AE & Brook JS 2000. Adolescent personality disorders associated with violence and criminal behaviour during adolescence and early adulthood. *American journal of psychiatry* 157: 1406–1412

Mental help net 2005. Personality disorders. http://mentalhelp.net/poc/center_index.php?id=8