

Stonebriar Psychiatric Services News & Views

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**David T. Tharp,
M.D., M.Div.,**

**Board Certified
Psychiatrist**

Medical Director

**Stonebriar Psychiatric
Services, PA**

3550 Parkwood Blvd.
Suite 705
Frisco, TX 75034

Phone
972-335-2430

E-mail
NewsletterQuestions@
stonebriarps.com

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www.stonebriarps.com

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Ages Served

Adult
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"The Only Hell My Mama Ever Raised"

Some of you who like country music might remember a song from a few years back by Johnny Paycheck, entitled "The Only Hell My Mama Ever Raised." It basically tells the story of a man who was raised by a mother who tried to raise him right, but he didn't listen, didn't feel the usual rules applied to him, and ended up in jail. We have probably all come across situations like this in our lives, and, perhaps even more painfully, many of you may have lived through them. Unfortunately, it's not that uncommon, and I saw a lot of it when consulting to prisons some years ago. Today we're going to pick up on our series of looking at personality disorders, after having an excellent interlude with Ms. Copeland over the past few months in talking about relationships. Today we will look at antisocial personality disorder.

It's interesting how individuals with criminal behavior are often so fascinating to everyone. Conservative, law abiding citizens may enjoy watching movies about mobsters, as evidenced by the success of the TV show, "The Sopranos." Recently there was an article in the newspaper about the infamous Bonnie and Clyde and how individuals are still fascinated by their story. Antisocial personality disorder is present in approximately 3% of men and 1% of women. Studies would indicate that it often tends to be more common in poor urban areas and among individuals with little in the way of family and social roots. Antisocial boys tend to come from larger families than girls, and its onset is before age 15. Studies would also indicate that in prison populations its prevalence may be as high as 75%, and there seems to be some tendency for its predisposition in certain families with the disorder being five times more common among first-degree relatives of men with antisocial personality than in the general population. How much of this might be "nature versus nurture" is not clear.

What Does It Look Like?

Not all individuals with antisocial personality disorder end up in prison. Some may be highly successful professionals or executives and can be difficult to recognize. Although they frequently may look very composed and charming on the exterior, underneath that calm and quiet surface there frequently lies anger, rage, and the sense that the normal customs and rules of society do not apply to him. Frequently there is a chronic history of bending or ignoring the rules. Lying, truancy, stealing, substance abuse, and bullying are frequently a part of their childhood. One author notes that clinicians of the opposite sex are often intrigued by their exploits, whereas same-sex clinicians often see them as manipulative and demanding. The antisocial individual generally does not struggle with anxiety or depression, at least not in their early years, in spite of some of the situations they may get into. However, they are not above using suicidal threats or physical complaints to manipulate others. Frequently, they may give what almost sound like plausible excuses for their behaviors, and the highly intelligent antisocial personality can be extremely dangerous in terms of taking advantage of others. The well-known "con man" often falls into this personality category. They are often abusive, either verbally, emotionally, or physically, in their relationships with others. What is perhaps most characteristic is their lack of a sense of guilt or remorse for their actions. It is also not unusual for these individuals to have been abused themselves as children.

Does this mean that everyone who breaks a rule or a law has an antisocial personality disorder? Not at all. If we are honest, we all must admit that at times we have broken rules or even laws ("... that 55 mph speed limit is really meant for family sedans and not this sports car."). But with antisocial personality disorder, this pattern of behavior is pervasive in many areas of the individual's

life. According to the DSM-IV-TR, the diagnostic criteria include the following. "There is a pervasive pattern of disregard for and violation of the rights of others occurring since age 15 years, as indicated by three or more of the following: 1) failure to conform to social norms with respect to lawful behaviors as indicated by repeatedly performing acts that are grounds for arrest; 2) deceitfulness, as indicated by repeated lying, use of aliases, or conning others for personal profit or pleasure; 3) impulsivity or failure to plan ahead; 4) irritability and aggressiveness, as indicated by repeated physical fights or assaults; 5) reckless disregard for safety of self or others; 6) consistent irresponsibility, as indicated by repeated failure to sustain consistent work behavior or honor financial obligations; 7) lack of remorse, as indicated by being indifferent to or rationalizing having hurt, mistreated, or stolen from another." Other necessary conditions include the individual being over the age of 18 but with evidence of these behavior patterns by the age of 15.

Some studies have indicated that individuals with antisocial personality disorder frequently have underlying neurological or other mental disorders that have not been diagnosed. Even more difficult, and what I saw a good deal of when consulting in prisons, is differentiating the antisocial personality disorder from behaviors that occur in individuals abusing alcohol or other substances. Frequently, these behaviors may occur together and often are evident even in childhood. It has long been felt that one early indicator of possible trouble includes children who are fascinated by playing with fire or by abusing animals. There are also some studies indicating that bullying may also be a warning sign that should be taken seriously.

What Does It Look Like Over Time?

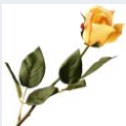
The long-term course and prognosis for those with antisocial personality disorder is not that encouraging. The behavior often escalates and peaks in late adolescence or early to mid-20s. Observations have also suggested that many with antisocial personality disorders "burn out" later in life and may settle down in their behavior, if they live that long and are not in prison. These individuals also may have many physical complaints, and as time goes on increasing problems with depressive disorders and alcohol/substance abuse.

Individuals with antisocial personality disorder may be workable in therapy if they are in a confined environment, such as a hospital or prison, for a period of time. It has been noted that when they are among like-minded peers, their motivation for change may improve, which is one reason why self-help groups have often been somewhat effective in prison settings. There need to be well-defined and firm limits in therapy, with one goal being to somehow establish boundaries to reduce the self-destructive behavior of these individuals. Working toward establishing trust is key due to the individual's fear of intimacy and honest relationships. The use of medication at times may be helpful in dealing with the anxiety, rage and angry outbursts, and at times depression. If ADHD is present, it needs to be treated. However, medications must be carefully monitored because of the individual's propensity for breaking rules and using them inappropriately. If there are abnormalities in the EEG, then frequently antiepileptic medications may be helpful as well.

In general, individuals with antisocial personality disorder are neither glamorous nor exciting to be around in the long run. They frequently hurt or betray those they are close to and cannot be trusted to follow through on their commitments. Whether buying investments from these individuals or possibly thinking of building a life with one, I would only say "may the buyer beware."



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