

Paranoid: When fear is not enough

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By Kim Dawson

Imagine feeling scared all the time, scared that others are out to get you, exploit you, hurt you, or deceive you. Imagine being preoccupied with doubt about how loyal your friends or colleagues are, or whether they deserve your trust. Imagine being continually worried, without reasonable justification or proof, that your spouse is having an affair. Imagine taking pretty much everything anyone else says as an attack on your character or reputation, even when they're saying something nice to you or giving you a gift. Imagine life as a conspiracy against you and the world. In a nutshell, this is a description of a person with paranoid personality disorder.

As our *Perspectives* series on Personality Disorders continues with this week's focus on the Paranoid Personality Disorder, let's take a look at an example. "Jim" worked as a video game designer. When another designer received a promotion, Jim held a persistent grudge against the supervisor and said he "had it in for him." He was sure that his co-workers were insulting him. As he watched others take coffee breaks together, he imagined they spent this time talking about him. When he saw a group of people laughing, he thought they were laughing at him. He brooded constantly about the mistreatment he received that his work suffered. His supervisor told him he must improve or lose his job. This action reinforced all Jim's suspicions. He soon found a position in another company. But after only a few weeks at his new job, he noticed that others in the office didn't like him, excluded him from conversations, made fun of him, and insulted him. Jim has changed jobs five times in the last six years and he doesn't believe his devoted wife when she tells him there is no basis for his suspicions. Instead, he suspects she is having an affair with one of the men he works with. Jim has paranoid personality disorder (PPD).

Basically, Jim is suspicious without cause, to the point where both work and family life are disrupted. It's normal for anyone to be guarded or cautious in any new situation such as a new job, but the person with paranoid personality disorder latches onto anything that confirms their suspicions while ignoring all the evidence to the contrary. They may be "on the alert" for signs of threat. They expect trickery and cannot let go of their fears. They are highly critical of others while refusing to accept criticism. Any such negative commentary, even attempts to make constructive changes, are taken as confirming that others are against the person with PPD.

Often seen as making "a mountain out of a molehill", people with PPD are argumentative, uncompromising, and emotionally cut off from others. They appear cold, lack tenderness, avoid intimacy, and pride themselves on their objectivity and rationality. In contrast, this objectivity is poorly supported in their behaviour, which can appear hostile, complaintive, and sarcastic. There is an excessive need for self-sufficiency, autonomy, and control over those around them. Being quite rigid in their style of relating, they often have difficulty collaborating with others. They may be involved in frequent legal disputes. They hold negative stereotypes about others, and repeatedly attribute evil or malevolent motives to others. In actuality, these motives and beliefs about others are projections of their own fears.

Paranoid personality disorder may resemble various other conditions that have paranoia as a characteristic. One medical problem sometimes associated with paranoia is temporal lobe epilepsy, while another is paranoid symptoms induced by consumption of cocaine or marijuana. Another psychiatric problem associated with paranoia is schizophrenia, but the hallmarks of schizophrenia are so-called delusions (false beliefs) and hallucinations. It is interesting that PPD can be a precursor of delusions or schizophrenia. Depression or bipolar illness can be associated with paranoid thinking as well and those with PPD are at risk for depression or obsessive-compulsive thinking and behaviour. Not only that, one personality disorder brings along with it a risk of having another personality

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disorder. It can be difficult to sort out what's what, so it's always important to consult your physician or a mental health professional for help with diagnosis and treatment of any mental condition or disorder.

Unlike the conditions just mentioned though, it is unlikely that individuals with PPD would attempt to get help because, like most people with personality disorders, they lack the capacity to feel for the people around them who are having difficulties with their excessive mistrust. They would probably see an attempt to get them to see a mental health professional as even more evidence that the world is "out to get them." So, instead of trying to get help for them, how might we help someone in a family or work relationship with a person who has paranoid traits? First, don't belittle or challenge their fears, but don't be controlled by them. Don't let their fears stop you from being warm to them. But don't get too warm. They won't trust it.

It is possible that such individuals find a place in the work world where their suspicious and punitive style is acceptable. People with these traits in lesser amounts may make good accountants, politicians, or soldiers. Rob, Marie, and Eryn have mentioned in previous weeks, the disordered person has an "extra dose" of traits most people possess in smaller amounts. The paranoid individual is overdosed on fear. Yet most people have imagined conspiracies in big business or government. And most can sense the fear, lack of security, and at least a touch of paranoia evoked by sound-bites of news reports focussing exclusively and repeatedly on tragedies.

As Halloween approaches, I am struck by the thought that paranoid traits are actually quite adaptive and helpful, especially in genuinely threatening environments. The problem, then, is separating the trick from the treat! For more information about the paranoid personality, Hampton's recent book *The Two-Edged Sword* may be either enlightening or frightening, but it is recommended.

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