

CASE STUDY OF A PERSONALITY DISORDER

The case of "Sarah", a 22-year-old university student with borderline personality disorder, illustrates the three core features of personality disorder. Sarah has a history going back to mid-adolescence of mood disturbance, intense and conflicted relationships, and binge drinking and misuse of prescribed medication resulting in hospitalisation. She also received treatment for binge eating and purging for about a year at the age of 15 but now describes her eating as "pretty normal most of the time". Sarah's unstable relationships and problems with substance abuse and eating are examples of Millon's self-defeating behaviour patterns, since they are destructive to her and are likely to make situations even worse.

Sarah has one younger sister who she describes as "the perfect one". She reported that her divorced parents still have a conflicted relationship. She openly states that she is angry that her father remarried and that she sees him "as little as possible". She reports sexual abuse by a "friend" of the family between the ages of 9 and 11 years, which ended after she spoke to her mother about the abuse.

Sarah states that she "fell apart" during Year 12 of high school, thus illustrating Millon's notion of tenuous stability under stress. She eventually managed to complete her final high school exams over two years and is currently studying botany part-time. She continues to experience high levels of exam-related anxiety and periodically has to take time out when her mood becomes more depressed.

Sarah readily acknowledges that she is intense and demanding in relationships and "people often find it just too much". The excessive demands she continually places on those close to her contribute to her friendships and relationships being stormy and often short-lasting. She reports very strong feelings of aloneness, emptiness, and abandonment when friends and family pull back from contact with her.

Sarah acknowledges that she finds such situations very stressful and hard to cope with. At these times, she reports feeling overwhelmed with intense distress, anger, and despair and has thoughts that she is a hateful and worthless person. She responds in a self-defeating way with extremely dangerous behaviours, such as taking an overdose of prescribed medication or binge drinking. These self-destructive behaviours tend to frighten, anger, and sometimes alienate those close to her, as well as putting Sarah at considerable medical risk. As some of these

episodes of self-harm result in Sarah being hospitalised, her relationships and her study program are disrupted and she is increasingly drawn into the role of mental health patient, thereby increasing her sense of herself as a failure. As people seek distance from her over time, she has fewer opportunities to experience trustful, respectful, mutually supportive, and stable relationships that might provide evidence to counter her beliefs that she is worthless and unlovable. Notwithstanding these outcomes, Sarah continues to repeat this pattern of behaviour, reporting that she feels powerless to change the direction her life is taking. This repeated use of the same ineffective responses is an example of Millon's idea of functional inflexibility.