

The Polio Personality: DOES IT EXIST?

People often ask if there is a "Polio Personality". My simple answer is: "Not that I've seen."

Those with polio come in all stripes, as they say. Some are ambitious, others more laid back, some have up-beat personalities, and some are depressed.

Polio affected people in different ways, physically, psychologically, and socially. Those who got polio came from different home environments. They went to different institutions for treatment and had different treatments. And they also had different educational and social opportunities and experiences. The list goes on and on, with each factor interacting with the others, shaping the person.

That said – the more complex answer recognizes that there is still some common ground that polio survivors share. Although there may not be a specific polio personality or a specific polio self-concept, the stories of others may sound familiar, and you may find yourself reacting in a similar way.

Let us look at one personality type that is common, though not universal.

THE DOER

Many polio survivors describe them-selves as Doers. They are the ones that spend a lot of time taking care of others – family and friends. (At this point you may be smiling and shaking your head in recognition.)

The need to take care of others may come from guilt felt over the years, for having relied on others so much. "Doing" may be a defense that is intended to lessen the sense of guilt and help you feel accepted. In moderation "doing" can be a good thing, but when it takes on a life of its own and becomes "over-doing", it can become a problem unto itself.

Maria, a self-reported Doer, says that even when she gets tired, she is not able to stop herself:

"I just keep on "doing", until I'm fatigued – and then I become resentful."

"I do too much for people and come on too strong."

"I try to fix others. If I can fix others, I don't have to focus on myself."

HELPING THE DOER NOT TO OVER-DO

Take a piece of paper and write down the WHYS and WHATS:

1. Why do you feel you have to keep going?
2. What are you afraid of?
3. What do you think others will think of you if you don't keep going and "doing" more?
4. Why do you care?
5. What would happen if you weren't so helpful anymore, if you just stopped?
6. What may you be avoiding in looking at yourself?

THE TYPE A PERSONALITY AND PPS: FACT OR WHAT?

Let us not confuse the Doer with the Type A personality. Do polio survivors have Type A personalities? Some seem to think so, since many of those who survived polio are real strivers and doers – so to speak. But before we reach any conclusions we need to understand what is meant by Type A.

Type A and Type B Personalities

People typically think of those with Type A personalities, as very active, ambitious, hardworking, and successful. But this is not the whole story.

The Type A personality is characterized by

- aggressiveness,
- competitiveness, and
- impatience. It has been described as the “hurry sickness.” Those so classified are easily moved to
- anger

And show frequent displays of

- irritation, and
- hostility,

Particularly when things are not moving fast enough nor going as they would like.

This is in contrast to the Type B personality, which is more relaxed and more accepting of life and of others.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Early studies of Type A personality looked at the relationship of this personality syndrome to heart attacks. The implication of the findings was that a person’s Type A personality caused the heart attacks. That is still the idea in the popular press, even though more recent research is showing the issue to be much more complex.

Results are mixed and seem to depend upon the different questionnaires and interview techniques used to assess Type A traits. It does appear, however, that certain traits, such as *anger, hostility, cynicism, and suspiciousness* affect a person’s tendency to succumb to some illnesses.

The polio literature often refers to those with post-polio syndrome (PPS) as having Type A personalities. If we accent this, we are then saying that those who had polio are typically hostile and angry, cynical and suspicious? I think not. Some may be, but is this the rule? Having a little bit or some of the traits does not mean one is Type A.

Amongst those who had the gumption to try psychotherapy with me, some survivors did exhibit Type A traits. But I cannot say that this was in greater proportion than in the general population. And there were certainly those with more “laid back” attitudes and behaviors, typical of the Type B personality.

More research needs to be done before one can make statements with confidence about the relationship between personality and PPS. In so doing, we must be careful that our surveys are not biased.

Those who participate in research studies are quite possibly a select group. Because of their character traits, survivors with Type A traits are the ones most likely to turn up at support groups or to seek help from clinics and physicians. They are more assertive, for example, than those who stay home and do not seek help for their problems. They are also more likely to answer questionnaires in greater numbers than their Type B counterparts, who are, thus, not well represented in our data.

Why is This Important?

One reason is the common belief that over-doing it physically may have contributed to post-polio symptoms. After all, the treatment early on was to exercise, exercise, exercise, and exercise. And throughout life for many there was the continued pressure to be like others, to succeed, if not excel, in the mainstream. Do; do more; do more and more.

Still some hearing about the possible association between Type A and polio may worry: Did I cause my post-polio symptoms? Did all that exercise and activity throughout my life lead to PPS?

A BAD RAP

The Type A personality has been given a bad rap. It is not something to be ashamed of, nor is it necessarily something to be changed. In some cases, it may be a very good type of personality to have, as long as certain traits, such as hostility and anger, are kept under control.

Persons with Type A are often very successful in their lives, and in terms of heart attacks do much better than their counterpart Type B's when it comes to surviving a second heart attack. Some think it is the very Type A traits that enable people to take better care of their health following the first attack. Thus, it may be a good thing that some survivors of polio have the assertiveness and energy so common to the Type A; this may be what makes them seek better medical care and be active in keeping the medical profession on its toes.

PPS AND TYPE A

So what does this mean in terms of the person who has had polio? Did the earlier efforts in treatment cause people to become Type A's? Certainly there was pressure to exercise and to be reintegrated into society at large. Yet in my clinical experience I cannot say that all those who had polio or have PPS fit the classic Type A description. Indeed, many lead successful busy lives, but others were not so fortunate. Those who were successful may have been ambitious, but not necessarily hostile or angry.

Having polio or developing new symptoms can make one angry at times. Being frustrated by physicians who do not understand can bring out hostile feelings, even in the most even-tempered. But these feelings or behaviors alone do not make a Type A.

In fact it may be the keeping in of hostile feelings that compromise one's health. The issue is very complex. As we've said before.

Labeling may be useful in research when one is grouping large numbers of people for studies. But labeling individuals can be misleading, inaccurate and possibly harmful. If people who had polio – or for that matter, cancer, MS, or other diseases – are made to feel that their personalities are the cause of their physical problems, that is another burden put upon them.

By overusing the term Type A, we obscure what the experience and behavior of those with PPS is really about – interfering with our deeper understanding of the late effects of polio.

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