

Ask a psychotherapist

Question: My younger sister has always been 'different'. Even as a kid, she got her way by making scenes 'sobbing hysterically over small stuff or getting mad and not speaking to you for days, sometimes weeks! My parents gave in to her a lot just to keep the peace. She would make BFF and then suddenly dump them and never speak to them again. She can't seem to hold a job or keep a relationship for very long because of her emotional outbursts. She used to wake our parents up in the middle of the night hysterical about something and threatening to kill herself. Now that our parents are gone, she's calling me instead!! I don't know how to help her and I'm a nervous wreck. I dread hearing the phone ring. What's going on with her and what can I do?

Answer: Without seeing your sister, I can't say for sure what's going on. However, assuming that she's physically healthy (has had a full physical examination with an M.D. including blood tests for various things such as thyroid malfunction which can dramatically affect mood), she may have a significant psychological problem.

The fact that your sister began to exhibit this pattern of behaviour at an early age and it's remained robust into adulthood is suggestive of a personality problem rather than a mood disorder. Current research suggests there's an inherited (genetic) component to personality problems which is then modified by environmental factors (family, school, etc). Personality problems range from minor (annoying traits) along a continuum of increasing disturbance to full-blown disorders that interfere with many aspects of a person's life and seriously affect those around him or her..

I think it's not an accident that you used the word 'hysterical' twice. There is such a thing as an Hysterical (Histrionic) Personality Disorder but hysterical features also manifest in Borderline Personality Disorder. I'll have more to say about these two disorders in my next column.

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