

THE FIRST TIME IS ALWAYS “NO”

Chapter ONE: Ten Hallmarks of Inhibited Personality

1. *Stubborn Resistance* – or avoidance behavior occurs in response to a set of stimuli which are highly significant to a person with inhibited personality. The specific set of highly significant stimuli [from here-on referred to as “*triggers*”] is different for each person. Some triggers may be clear to others, some not. However, these sensitivities and avoidance responses of the person with inhibited personality are not conscious. They do not realize and cannot articulate to themselves or others what they may be avoiding or the fact that they are avoiding something at all.

In addition, when stubborn resistance to one or more triggers is met with perceived pressure or demand to acquiesce, or perform, the inevitable response is greater resistance.

2. *Sets of Trigger events* - to which each individual is sensitive can result in extreme responses such as a complete shut-down or a ‘caged animal – fight & flight’ response which is essentially physiologically based, and not in the person’s control. It is possible that a child or teen has been confronted, or affronted in a circumstance from which they perceive no clear exit may become aggressive, simply to get away.

3. *Clear “Night & Day” change from stubborn resistance to complete comfort, mastery, and/or acceptance* – Triggers [activities, events, situations, or people] that were initially foreign, unfamiliar, onerous and necessary to avoid can suddenly and completely be accommodated and/or mastered after the individual has managed [as a result of their own clever efforts, the intuitive understanding of others, or luck] to **see** [explore visually] and check out [be able to imagine themselves successfully interacting with the trigger stimulus], with a minimum of expectations and performance pressure.

4. *Strong tendency to forget stressful events, or details or stressful events.* This can be both remarkable as well as disconcerting as they are unable, for example, to report significant events such as arguments at school, which adults would have a high expectation of being remembered. As a result, children or teens with inhibited personality typically are terrible advocates for themselves, and readily misunderstood.

The lack of awareness of the sensitivity-avoidance-denial response to many stimuli in life exist from such and early [infantile], stage of life, is so pervasive, and so consistent, that it extends even to the level of self-concept or self-definition. [An analogy: Astronauts training for travel to the weightless environment of outer space are provided with very complex simulations of zero-gravity. The simulations are necessary because human beings can never be expected to have the opportunity to respond to zero gravity environments which do not exist on earth.]

5. Strong need for Routine [regularity, predictability], a strong need to know what to expect [to be able to see what is about to occur in front of them], and as a result, tend to be perceived by others as rigid. Although rigidity tends to be a visible aspect of the personality and behavior of children and teens with inhibited personality, it is a quality that can be quite misleading. Within their own physical-mental-emotional arenas of comfort [family and other highly familiar surroundings] they are quite flexible, creative, warm people. Their need for predictability presents various problematic, seemingly unpredictable observable behaviors to the people around them in situations in which they do not know what to expect. This aspect of the lives of children with inhibited personality often leads to serious misunderstandings when well-meaning adults [care-givers, teachers, and other strangers] attempt to aid an inhibited personality child who is distressed, by asking many questions. Once a child with inhibited personality is upset [for whatever reason] it is virtually never helpful to impose unfamiliar questions on them. The behavior of well-meaning adults who are trying to understand and help simply adds fuel to an emotional fire. When upset, these children need and respond to familiar routine – rehearsed guidance.

The need for children or teens with inhibited personality to physically **See** anything that they expect or are asked to respond to, is a **sensory-based physiological need**. It does not necessarily equate with a thinking style called visual thinking. They may or may not possess strong visual cognitive abilities, but the essence to their reliance on visual information is based on our general reliance on visual sensory input which tends to be a primary source of information for human beings.

6. The “Newness” Response: Inhibited personality temperament is a physiologically based feature of personality. Life events which are sudden and unexpected will be highly likely to produce a heightened response. We may describe such responses to surprises as emotional, visceral, impulsive, or intense, but it is a virtually universal reaction shared by children and teens with inhibited personality. If the surprise event is also invasive, then the response is likely to be stronger [self-protective rejection, shut-down, or escape].

If a life event is an invasive surprise and also consists of triggers for the individual child or teen, then the experience is likely to be traumatic and of long-term serious consequences, although these may not be obvious, in spite of the intensity of reaction.

7. “The Second time’s the charm:” an essential rule of thumb in understanding, communication, guiding, teaching, and disciplining children and teens with inhibited personality.

If allowed to experience unfamiliar and/or trigger experiences in a psychologically safe manner [by determining the cause for resistance by asking: “I wonder what is bothering you,” providing visual information at a safe distance, reassuring them that they can

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change their minds, and by eliminating or minimizing perceived pressure] a child or teen with inhibited personality can be helped to consider and/or attempt to engage in new situations with the least amount of difficulty for them [although they may continue to appear quite hesitant to the outside observer].

Their problematic stubborn avoidance to individual newness experiences can be circumvented with understanding, creativity, and patience which results in allowing the child or teen to engage with a new experience at their own perceived pace, and in their own preferred manner [in other words, with maximum feeling of choice and control]. This is very important because experiences of newness [whether they involve new people, places, things, or procedures] which trigger shut-down due to inability to respond to stimuli or result in a fight and flight reaction, resulting in trauma can be expected to have a long-lasting impact on responses to same or similar stimuli.

As I explained to parents that you do not teach these children by a “sink or swim” method, the Dad shivered violently. His response to my inquiry was: “Yes, when I was seven, my father threw me off our boat into the River. I still don’t swim.”

8. *Narrow Range of Interests:* If we accept the hypothesis that the opposite of difficulty with newness [the inability to respond or the need to avoid newness] is achievement or maintenance of maximum familiarity, predictability, and control in life, then we begin to understand the underlying causes of Hallmarks eight and nine.

Due to the limits of time, the inevitable limitations in variety of early life experiences and the available guidance about these experiences of young children, it makes sense that the balance of needs of a child with inhibited personality temperament with tend strongly toward mastery, confidence, and comfort with fewer people, places, activities, or things, rather than a balance of needs strongly tilted toward novelty [which is, in fact, the case for the 10 to 15% of the general population of children who exhibit the features of *uninhibited personality temperament*].

The preference for familiarity, predictability, and routine is a nearly universal characteristic of children or teens with inhibited personality temperament. It is also very often a source of significant parental concern, and in addition often leads to conflict between one or both parents and a child regarding going along with family activities, willingness to try a wide variety of new things [some of which are mysterious and/or difficult to understand], as well as intense difficulty with changes in plans or expectations.

Imagine the child who refuses to his favorite dessert – vanilla ice-cream – because the cardboard container looks different.

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Other predictable consequences of their narrow range of interests include a desire to choose, possess, and monopolize the relationship with one best friend, indicating no interest in befriending even one other friend.

9. Performance Risk Aversion: Children and teens with inhibited personality temperament need to know exactly what to expect and they have a very strong need-desire to do things *exactly correctly*. Performance risk in this context means that it is necessary for inhibited children to conceptually visualize themselves executing a task, performing an activity, competing in a sport, or responding to mental problem solving challenges at extremely high, often impossible to attain, levels. This is not the same as fear of pain, as they may be daredevils. What counts is performing successfully according to their concepts and perceptions. Therefore, inhibited children and teens have a distinct tendency toward being perfectionists. If they are gifted children or teens, this tendency is greatly intensified, to the extent that increasingly higher levels of giftedness, in my experience, are correlated with greater struggle with and resistance to performance risk.

Objective measures of competence do not correlate with confidence and willingness to try new things, or to respond to new learning challenges in gifted-inhibited children. The opposite is, in fact, the case. This becomes the source of one more conundrum: gifted-inhibited children have overly intense reactions to mental states such as boredom, or they are extra-sensitive to their parents' concern about or disapproval of a particular educational [classroom] environment, and are consequently often involved in various attempts to accelerate them academically. However, the results, in my experience can be quite disconcerting because when extra challenge, or stimulation, is offered, the inhibited child is most likely to resist – not due to competence or intelligence or potential, but because of their fundamental [unrecognized] difficulties with newness, or “the state of not knowing,” per se.

10. Anxieties & Fears: It is the singular nature of responses triggered by stimuli to which a person with inhibited personality temperament is sensitive [termed “triggers” or “trigger stimuli”], and the associated physiologically initiated reactions, have little or no existence in the person's conscious awareness. In other words, the sensitized trigger stimuli are simply and consistently avoided without the individual even being aware that it is happening. It has been indicated previously, but bears repeating, that this feature of inhibited personality temperament means that the individuals involved are very poor advocates for themselves, and are most often misunderstood, very often perceived as being predominantly stubborn, resistant, and rigid.

However, common and age appropriate anxieties and fears, with primarily different features such as: 1) heightened conscious awareness, 2) a feeling of lack of control, 3) a wish to eliminate the thought and/or behavioral reactions associated with the feelings, and 4) existing along a continuum of experience from mild to intense,

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may exist alongside inhibited personality triggers. In other words, a child or teen may be unaware of and unable to verbalize inhibited personality triggers and yet still be able to experience and verbalize anxieties and fears. In addition, the quality and progression of these difficult to control feelings tend to be the same as for other children or teens.

The treatment, improvement, and resolution are likely to be tentative at first and gradual improvement with appropriate help, and also include the possibility of regression later in life.