

And – what's your diagnosis?

A client I accompanied through a personal and professional assessment struggled to say no and set boundaries. She suspected she might need psychotherapy to uncover what had gone wrong in her development. But is this difficulty – one she shares with many others – really a serious disorder that requires treatment?

Peter Näf

Of course, there are degrees of such traits that do call for therapeutic support. In this case, however, her difficulty seemed to fall within the normal range, and she could have managed it well with appropriate behavioural strategies and a bit of discipline. Positive self-talk would also have helped – as by repeatedly telling herself how difficult it was, she effectively hypnotised herself and slowed her own progress (see my article “Self-hypnosis - an extensively practised art!”).

The tendency to pathologise personality traits – even to label them with a diagnosis – seems increasingly common these days.

Nobody is perfect

At times, I almost feel like an outsider for not having a diagnosis. And I wouldn't lack potential candidates: could my impatience and restlessness not point to ADHD? Might my reserved nature and occasional need for solitude hint at an autism spectrum disorder? Not to mention my occasionally blunt way of speaking – perhaps a subtle sign of Tourette's?

Joking aside: I prefer the generous view offered by Schulz von Thun's Value Quadrant (see my article “Surrounded by Idiots”). Weaknesses are often simply exaggerated forms of our strengths – they become most visible under stress. My client's struggle to set boundaries, for

example, likely stems from her strong empathy and willingness to help.

When overplayed, our strengths can make us seem slightly pathological and can be exhausting – for ourselves and for others. But as long as we can regain balance – which usually happens once the pressure subsides – this is nothing more than the normal everyday madness that gives life its colour.

A call for personal growth

Learning to manage our overdrawn strengths requires specific strategies – the kind I develop with my clients in coaching. The need for coaching always arises when familiar coping mechanisms no longer work. Through coaching, clients expand their behavioural repertoire and learn to act more confidently across a wider range of situations. That process is called personality development.

Labelling behaviour as a medical condition, by contrast, carries the risk of viewing personality and conduct as fixed – and of remaining stuck in a passive mindset.

Martin Seligman also encourages us to cultivate our personalities. As the founder of Positive Psychology – a field that consciously addresses mentally healthy individuals – he speaks from experience. A self-confessed “grump” with pessimistic tendencies, Seligman has made peace with his nature. Through regular practice, he ensures that he remains – for himself and for others – a somewhat quirky yet pleasant companion who knows how to enjoy life.

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