

Personality Matters

Three adolescent personality traits could signal heightened vulnerability to addiction

Adolescence and young adulthood are emotion-fueled years, filled with choices and experiences that shape a young person's character and disposition. Some personality traits, such as persistence, thoughtfulness, and patience, are associated with developing resilience and well-being. Other personality tendencies, namely impulsiveness, insensitivity, and evasiveness, may play a role in a young person's susceptibility to substance use disorders, including addiction.

Experts at the Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation specialize in the prevention, assessment, and treatment of addiction and co-occurring disorders among adolescents and young adults ages 12–25. Brenda Servais, PsyD, LP, LADC, lead psychologist, describes three personality traits that are characteristic among the adolescents and young adults she and her colleagues counsel: impulsive risk taking, lack of empathy, and avoidance of dealing with stressful situations.

An emotional roller coaster.

"By using alcohol or other drugs to escape negative feelings, adolescents don't learn how to regulate their emotions or handle stress in healthy ways."

—Brenda Servais, PsyD, LP, LAC,
Lead Psychologist
at Hazelden in
Plymouth, Minnesota

When is acting on impulse an issue?

Taking risks and pushing boundaries go hand-in-hand with healthy adolescent development, but impulsive risk taking can signal trouble. "Impulsivity is the key attribute here," says Servais. "These are young people who repeatedly take risks for the adrenaline rush, who jump into situations without thinking through potential negative consequences to themselves or others, and who continue to take risks despite experiencing negative consequences." Impulsive risk-taking behavior is one of the most common personality traits of adolescent treatment patients, both male and female.

Does your child have difficulty relating to others?

Lack of empathy—the inability to recognize, understand, or validate another person's pain—is another common characteristic among the young people Servais and her colleagues counsel. "If I can't put myself in another person's place, if I don't have the ability to feel another person's pain, I don't care how my behavior might hurt or harm someone else," Servais explains. Damaging or losing relationships carries little or no consequence for young people who lack empathy. It's a key characteristic of two clinically defined personality disorders common among people who have addiction: borderline personality disorder and narcissistic personality disorder.

Does your child avoid dealing with the tough stuff?

Part of growing up is learning to handle life's negative experiences. For adolescents, that might involve initiating conversations they would rather avoid or facing situations they would rather sidestep. Those are character-building experiences. But teens who habitually avoid dealing with stressful situations or negative emotions don't have the opportunity to develop important coping skills. "Adolescence is a stage of life when we learn how to regulate our emotions," says Servais. "By using alcohol or other drugs to escape negative feelings, adolescents don't learn how to regulate their emotions or handle stress in healthy ways. Instead, they discover a 'magical escape' through alcohol or other drugs—an escape that can become a vicious trap."

Listen, watch, talk—and reach out.

Keeping the lines of communication open throughout the emotional roller-coaster ride of adolescence can be the single most important move parents make. Servais encourages parents to talk openly with their teens about behavioral concerns and to seek out professional help if troubling behaviors related to impulsiveness, insensitivity, or avoidance escalate. Enlisting the help of a school counselor can be especially effective. "School counselors are a terrific resource," says Servais. "They can keep an eye on behaviors, offer a little coaching as needed, and help to facilitate mental health or chemical dependency assessments if that seems to make sense."

Find help and get answers today. Hundreds of young people find freedom from addiction every year through Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation's programs for adolescents and young adults. Our clinicians are especially attuned to the struggles and concerns of adolescents, young adults, and families. We understand that reaching out for help isn't easy, and the path to healing isn't always clear. Learn more today by visiting [HazeldenBettyFord.org/Youth](https://www.hazeldenbettyford.org/Youth) or by calling **855-348-7032**. Phone consultations are free and confidential.

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