



Some neurotics transfer old resentments against authority of their father to their boss.

# How to Live

## How to Recognize a Neurotic

How do you recognize a neurotic person? Some of the main symptoms are these:

**Indecision, doubt, and conflict.** Neurotics are afraid to make a mistake or to fail at anything, so they waver, refuse to make decisions or take full responsibility for anything.

**Fear and anxiety.** Almost all neurotics are irrationally afraid of something, essentially of not having the love and approval of others; but this fear is often translated into phobias like fear of crowds, closed or open spaces, or many other everyday experiences.

**Inadequacy feelings.** Emotionally disturbed people usually feel inadequate, worthless, or wicked. They think it is wrong for them to have any failings and

are constantly blaming themselves for personal shortcomings, real or imagined.

**Hostility and aggression.** Neurotics hate themselves, so they tend to hate others. Frustration, born of the belief that they are not liked, turns into aggression against those who presumably dislike them.

**Ingratiation.** In an effort to win love and approval, many troubled people curry favor with others at the expense of their own self-respect. After abasing themselves they hate themselves even more and feel greater insecurity and rejection.

**Self-deceit and lack of realism.** Neurotics refuse to face reality, tending to rationalize, evade issues, and blame others for their own failures.

**Rigidity and compulsiveness.** Feeling unsafe,

neurotics often devise magical rituals such as going through a studied routine at bedtime, which gives them a feeling that some power will protect them if they stick to their formulas. Other common rituals are counting steps, repeatedly washing hands or changing clothes.

**Shyness and withdrawal.** Believing they may do the wrong thing and that others will discover their mistake, many neurotics become shy and withdrawn, retreating into various kinds of solitude.

**Psychosomatic symptoms and hypochondria.** Emotionally disturbed persons often worry themselves into sickness by keeping their muscles and nervous systems in a continual state of tension and excitement, creating symptoms for which no bodily cause can be found. When they do become ill, they prolong it as an excuse for their emotional upsets.

Photo by Mort Shapiro

ONE OF THE QUESTIONS I am most often asked is what percentage of people in our society I consider neurotic. I usually reply, "Roughly 100 percent."

This is not too much of an exaggeration, since technically anyone is neurotic who falls short of his potentialities, suffers needless anxieties, and behaves in an overly emotional manner. A more practical estimate, however, would be that 20 to 30 percent of our people are disturbed enough to be a problem to themselves and those around them.

Do you have to live, work, or associate with a neurotic? If so, you can ease the strain in two ways—by understanding and helping him; or, if he is hopeless, by accepting him as he is and adjusting your own attitude toward him.

Few neurotics are willing to seek professional help—indeed, they resent being labeled neurotic. Since neurosis is probably here to stay, you might as well deal with it realistically. Assuming that you are not too disturbed yourself, you can learn to live with a troubled individual by applying a few techniques.

First, what is a neurotic? Essentially, a neurotic is a person with an emotional impairment in one or more areas of daily living which prevents him from realizing his full potential. He is one who is more unhappy, inefficient, or fearful than he needs to be.

Many neurotics are talented and intelligent. Yet they are so ineffective or disruptive in their behavior that they often get into serious difficulties.

The thing that comes between the neurotic's potential abilities and his actual achievement is his neurosis. He may have the unrealistic assumption, for example, that he must get everyone's approval or that he should never be frustrated or that it is disgraceful if he fails at something he wants to do. He then hates himself for not being as nearly perfect as he thinks he should be and experiences such self-harming emotions as unreasonable anger, needless guilt, feelings of inadequacy, and depression.

He may consciously experience these destructive emotions, or set up unconscious defenses against them in the form of rationalization, self-deceit, compensation, evasiveness, psychosomatic complaints, alcoholism, anti-social behavior, or drug addiction. The pattern, then, is that as a result of irrational beliefs the neurotic blames himself, behaves badly,

blames himself even more for his bad behavior, and thus plunges deeper into neurosis.

Why do neurotics get that way? One reason is that our training of children is torn between contradictory principles. We want the child to "adjust" and "conform" in order to be accepted and popular, but at the same time we want him to develop an individual personality. We want him to be aggressive in the struggle for survival, and at the same time we preach humility, courtesy, and respect for others. These opposing ideologies sow the seed for many a neurosis.

THE FIRST STEP in coping with a neurotic is to accept fully the fact that he is emotionally disturbed and is going to behave that way. He will often be hostile, ungrateful, illogical, or just plain irritating. But don't respond as if his actions were directed against you personally. Above all, don't criticize.

This will not be easy, but remember that the neurotic is constantly blaming himself anyway. Usually he has received too much criticism and harshness in childhood.

Our opinion of ourselves is formed largely by the opinion of those around us. By changing your attitude of criticism and condemnation, you can make him feel that he is a worthwhile, capable person and that his occasional failures are not important.

Giving a neurotic warmth and support often works wonders. Consider the case of Frank, a student who had an exceptionally neurotic, insecure wife. Every time Frank sat down to study she became jealous and tried to distract him. A quarrel ensued which consumed most of the evening and the school work remained undone.

At my suggestion Frank tried a new approach. Before beginning his work, he was exceptionally attentive to his wife, told her of his problems with certain subjects and professors, and asked her advice. Soon she was typing for him, reading to him when he was fatigued, and cooperating in every way to further his education.

You can often give a neurotic insight to the reasons for his disturbances, but this must be done with caution. A therapist might say to a patient: "You say your boss is inconsiderate and that's why you resent him, but could there be something else that bothers you?" Your boss is an authority figure,

just as your father was when you were a child. Could you be transferring some of this old resentment to your boss?"

A word of warning—do not try to cure your friends or relatives who are exceptionally depressed, agitated, or behaving strangely. They may require professional attention.

Also, in dealing with a neurotic, be both kind and firm. Don't let him take advantage of you. If he does something wrong, be forgiving, but don't take away his entire sense of wrongdoing.

UNDERSTANDING OTHERS is often the path toward greater self-understanding. A young wife,

Julia, was having trouble with her mother-in-law, who persisted in telling her how to run her home, children, and husband. Having escaped from a domineering mother of her own, Julia was in no mood to accept another overseer.

In talking this problem over with me she began to realize her mother-in-law was an extremely disturbed woman who could not make decisions in her own life for fear of making a mistake. As a substitute she told other people how to run their lives.

As a result of my talks with her, Julia's anger vanished and she tried to give her mother-in-law a feeling of worth and security. Also, somewhere during this process Julia realized that she often criticized and bullied her own daughter. Thus she gained insight on her own neurotic tendencies.

Julia's story illustrates the point that even if an individual is not too disturbed, one of the best things he can do to help a neurotic relative or friend is to have some professional counseling himself. The aims of psychotherapy are not only to help people overcome serious disturbances, but to show reasonably non-disturbed individuals how to achieve their own maximum potential.

The unconscious thoughts and emotions which cause neurosis are hard to get at by oneself. But with the help of a trained psychotherapist they can be ferreted out. If a person has neurotic tendencies, he should try to understand and overcome them. If he cannot cope with them himself, the intelligent course is to admit it and seek professional help.

A neurotic will often identify with and imitate a strong, stable personality. If you behave in a calm, logical, mature manner in the face of problems, he will have confidence in you and your opinions.

# with a Neurotic

Here is common-sense advice from an expert on how to recognize and cope with an all-too-common disturbance.

**Alcoholism and drug addiction.** These two aids to the temporary reduction of anxiety boomerang on their users, since they create new problems leading to a need for still-larger doses. The user obtains no real increase in self-confidence knowing that, without their aid, he cannot do the things he fears. Indeed, having to use these methods of release makes him hate himself even more.

**Self-centeredness and inability to love.** Though they need an inordinate amount of love themselves, neurotics are so preoccupied with their own needs that they have little true emotion left to give another person.

Almost all of us will recognize in ourselves fleeting behavior patterns like these, but the neurotic persists in these patterns to the point where they dominate his behavior.



Dr. Albert Ellis is a psychologist and marriage counselor whose theories on how to cope with neurotics have attracted nation-wide attention. Dr. Ellis has served as clinical psychologist at the New Jersey State Hospital at Greystone Park; as instructor in psychology at Rutgers and New York Universities; as chief psychologist of the New Jersey State Diagnostic Center and of the New Jersey Department of Institutions and Agencies.

by Dr. Albert Ellis  
with Lillian Pompian