

People with Antisocial Personality Disorders are infrequently drawn to life as a priest or religious. Many aspects of ministerial life are a bad fit for those who are self-focused, impulsive and feel unencumbered by the restrictions of authority and social convention. Helping others, adherence to strong moral and religious values, self-sacrifice and willingness to work with a complex authority structure are not desirable job elements for antisocial people. And as those who live on the salary of a priest or religious can attest, their modest salary is *not* where the money is. Nevertheless, some clients who come to Saint Luke Institute have repeatedly behaved in ways that violate social codes or even the law. When this happens, Church authorities have many questions, wondering is this person “antisocial” and can they be helped?

It is important to understand the many factors contributing to antisocial personality disorder. People with this diagnosis most often report that in their experience, authorities were untrustworthy, societal values were undermined or violated, and needs for nurturance were intentionally denied. In extreme cases, violence and law-breaking were understood as options necessary for survival. This type of environment may lead to serious behavior problems and criminality. Young people on this path are often law-breaking, deceitful, impulsive, aggressive, irresponsible and lack remorse. When this pattern begins in adolescence or earlier, the chances of having an antisocial personality disorder as an adult increase.

When someone is diagnosed with Antisocial Personality Disorder, they have the most severe and problematic symptoms described above. People with antisocial *traits*, a less severe diagnosis, will have less than the full range of symptoms and their symptoms are likely to be less problematic. Less extreme early-life situations may generate antisocial traits but in less overtly malevolent ways. Early-life risk factors might include mild neglect or subtle parental inattention to a child’s dependency needs. Antisocial-like traits might flourish in these environments, ranging from relatively milder traits to intermittent criminality.

Interestingly, in mild amounts, antisocial-like traits are valued in our society and can be adaptive in priests or religious. Self reliance, independent thinking, spontaneity, and autonomy are traits that can be increasingly important in the lives of those who engage in ministry, especially as the decreasing numbers of ministers makes independent functioning more essential to the daily demands of ministry. These qualities are consistent with all levels of antisocial traits. If present in mild levels, religious superiors will be happy to have someone who ministers with independence. Supervisors typically appreciate people who resolve problems on their own and take initiative.

These personality characteristics become problematic when a person is inflexible about who they are and how the world works. When someone feels intentionally and unjustly deprived of nurturance, respect or material well-being, an attitude of “taking what the world has not provided” can develop. Although this may look like greed to others, for the individual, it feels like taking

what, in fairness, should have been given in the first place. Feeling “owed” is a common experience of people with antisocial tendencies. Early feelings of unjust deprivation coupled with a sense of being an outsider can create a combination of resentment and interpersonal disconnection. Frequently people with antisocial tendencies have no trouble feeling anger toward others who they believe have treated them badly, but they feel surprisingly little or no guilt toward others whom they have treated badly.

When Is Behavior Problematic?

Decisiveness vs. Impulsiveness. We applaud the person who resolves problems decisively, but add haste, lack of empathy and lack of caution and the risk for impulsivity grows, as does the possibility that others will feel insulted and hurt.

Independence vs. Ignoring Rules. Following every rule in an overly meticulous way can thwart progress and impair innovation. However, when rules are consistently ignored and replaced by a self-centered determination of which rules apply, antisocial behavior can result. This behavior might look mildly irresponsible (not sending in financial statements) but may, upon closer inspection, include serious violation of rules including stealing money from an individual or a parish.

Realism vs. Callousness. Being a decision-maker often means disappointing those people who feel strongly about the unchosen side of the decision. Facing this issue realistically is important. Most often the antisocial person can behave without empathy or even ruthlessly, explaining that they have acted boldly and for the (self-judged) greater good. The persistent experience of observers, however, is that decisions are made in a self-centered and bruising manner.

Can people with antisocial traits be helped?

This is the most common question we hear from religious authorities. First, we determine whether antisocial personality traits are part of the problem; problematic and even unlawful behavior do not always mean a person is antisocial. Problematic behavior can be part of an addictive process or part of another psychological condition (e.g., bipolar illness). If antisocial tendencies are present, the severity of these tendencies is best determined by a psychological evaluation.

If the antisocial traits are less severe and other personality traits and motivations are present that might counteract those traits (e.g., moral, interpersonal and religious values), people with antisocial traits can be treated. The treatment interventions usually involve shifting the person’s focus onto the needs of others and reducing impulsivity. Group Therapy can be helpful in challenging a person with the impact of their behavior. The therapeutic road can be a long one because the person with antisocial traits is less trusting and may be suspicious of help. The person must accept their vulnerability to impulsiveness and stretching/breaking rules so that they will agree to the necessary external monitoring of their behavior. Returning to ministry usually will include external supervision because ministry often involves money, power and control over others.

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