
A FRESH LOOK AT THE TYPE A PERSONALITY?

By Margaret E. Backman, PhD

Do people who had polio have Type A personalities? Some seem to think so, since many of those who survived polio are real strivers and doers. But why should this be important?

One reason is the common belief that overdoing it physically may in part be the cause of their post-polio symptoms, and this raises the question about how personality affects illnesses. However, before we come to any conclusions we need to understand what is meant by the Type A personality.

WHAT IS THE TYPE A PERSONALITY?

Type A behavior is characterized by ambitiousness, aggressiveness, competitiveness, and impatience.

It has been described as the "hurry sickness." Those so classified are easily moved to anger and show frequent displays of irritation and hostility. This is in contrast to the Type B personality, which is more relaxed and more accepting of life and others.

Research Findings Early studies of Type A looked at the relationship of this personality syndrome to heart attacks; the implication of the findings was that a person's Type A personality caused heart attacks. That is still the idea in the popular press, even though more recent research is showing the issue to be much more complex. The results are mixed and seem to depend upon the different questionnaires and interview techniques used to assess Type A traits. It does appear, however, that certain traits, such as anger, hostility, cynicism, and suspiciousness affect a person's tendency to succumb to some illnesses.

Some researchers have also attempted to look at other illnesses, including polio. However, more research needs to be done before one can make any statements with confidence about the relationship between personality traits and polio. Although the polio literature often refers to those who survived polio as being highly successful, we must be careful that our surveys are not biased. Perhaps because of their personalities the Type A's are the ones who tend to turn up at support groups, or seek help from clinics and physicians, or willingly answer questionnaires. Thus, the Type B's may be missing from our data.

I can certainly say that in my private psychotherapy practice many survivors of polio do exhibit Type A traits, but certainly not all do so. There are also those with more "laid back" attitudes and behaviors, characteristic of the Type B personality.

Still, some hearing about the possible association between Type A and polio may worry: Did I cause my post-polio symptoms by doing too much?

A Bad Rap The Type A personality has been given a bad rap. It is not something to be ashamed of, nor is

it necessarily something to be changed. In some cases, it may be a very good type of personality to have, providing certain of the traits, such as hostility and anger, are kept under control. Persons with Type A are often very successful in their lives, and in terms of heart attacks do much better than their counterpart Type B's when it comes to surviving a second heart attack. Some think it is the very Type A traits that enable people to take better care of their health following the first attack. Thus, it may be a good thing that some survivors of polio have the assertiveness and energy so common to the Type A; this may be what makes them seek better medical care and be active in keeping the medical profession on its toes.

To Conclude So what does this mean in terms of the person who has had polio? Did the earlier efforts in treatment cause people to become Type A's? Certainly there was pressure to exercise and to be reintegrated into society at large. Yet in my clinical experience I cannot say that all those who had polio fit the classic Type A description. Yes, many lead successful lives, but many were not so fortunate. Those who were successful may have been ambitious, but not all were hostile or angry by nature.

Having polio or developing new symptoms can make one angry at times. And being frustrated by physicians who do not understand can bring out hostile feelings even in the most even tempered. But these feelings or behaviors alone do not make one a Type A. The issue is very complex as you can see.

Labeling people may be useful in research when one is grouping large numbers of people for research studies. But labeling individuals can be misleading, inaccurate, and possibly harmful. If people who had polio — or for that matter, MS or cancer — are made to feel that their personalities are the cause of their old or new physical problems, that is another burden put upon them, and another one that they must bear. It is this simplistic reasoning that does not help us solve the major problems associated with the post-polio syndrome.

On the other hand, our personalities and behaviors can cause us to do things that are either helpful or harmful to our health. If you understand your personality, you can make it work for you in more positive ways. ■

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