

“Intolerance of Intolerance” Diversity Awareness Corner



Beyond This Place... There Be Dragons!

Scott Warrick, JD, MLHR, SPHR

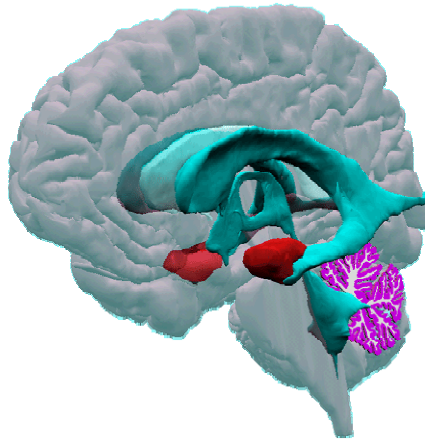
HUMAN RESOURCE CONSULTING, EMPLOYMENT LAW & TRAINING SERVICES
(614) 367-0842 – Office (614) 738-8317 – Cell

www.scottwarrick.com

JUNE 2007

TUNE YOUR NOBS!

**IS EXTREME HYPERSENSITIVITY
A MENTAL ILLNESS?**



IS EXTREME HYPERSENSITIVITY A MENTAL ILLNESS?

by

Scott Warrick, JD, MLHR, SPHR

We have all worked with them. Some of us are actually related to them ... and some unlucky people have actually married them. They are the “hypersensitive” people of the world. These are the people who become so offended over whatever you say to them on a certain topic. Their judgment is greatly impaired and they often become destructive when anyone dares to challenge their opinion on a certain topic.

Yes, people who are hypersensitive, regardless of the issue, such as race, religion, gender, sexual preference, and so on, drive most of the people around them nuts! But have you ever considered the fact that they might just be, to one degree or another, mentally ill?

In the Saturday, December 10, 2005 edition of the “Washington Post,” staff writer Shankar Vedantam wrote an article that sent shivers throughout the psychiatric world. The article was entitled, **“Psychiatry Ponders Whether Extreme Bias Can Be An Illness.”**

The article cited several extreme examples of extreme feelings of prejudice that these feelings actually controlled these people’s lives. For instance:

- A 48-year-old man turned down a job because he feared that a co-worker would be gay. He was upset that gay culture was becoming mainstream and blamed most of his personal, professional and emotional problems on the gay and lesbian movement. These fixations preoccupied him every day. Articles in magazines about gays made him agitated. He confessed that his fears had left him socially isolated and unemployed for years. A recovering alcoholic, the man even avoided 12-step meetings out of fear he might encounter a gay person.
- Another patient was a waiter so hostile to black people that he flung plates on the table when he served black patrons and got fired from multiple jobs.
- A third patient was a Vietnam War veteran who was so fearful of Asians that he avoided social situations where he might meet them.
- A young woman living in Los Angeles thought Jews were diseased and would infect her. She realized she needed help but did not seek counseling because she was afraid her therapist would be Jewish.

The article stated that mental health practitioners say they *regularly* confront such extreme forms of racism, homophobia and other types of bigotry and hypersensitivity in their patients. Consequently, doctors are increasingly weighing the effects of race and culture on mental illness to the point that they are now asking whether pathological prejudice ought to be an official psychiatric diagnosis.

California psychologist Edward Dunbar thinks so. He has submitted guidelines to the American Psychiatric Association, which publishes the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) to classify certain types of bigotry as a mental disorder. Dunbar believes that people whose daily functioning is “paralyzed” by persistent fears and worries about other groups would qualify.

An even stronger statement came from Dr. Alvin F. Poussaint, a professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School. “They are delusional,” Dr. Poussaint said. “They imagine people are going to do all kinds of bad things and hurt them, and feel they have to do something to protect themselves.”

“When they reach that stage, they are very impaired,” Poussaint reasoned. “They can’t work and function; they can’t hold a job. They would benefit from treatment of some type of treatment, particularly medication.”

Doctors who treat inmates at the California State Prison outside Sacramento concur with Poussaint. They have been diagnosing some forms of racism among inmates and administering antipsychotic drugs for quite some time now.

“We treat racism and homophobia as delusional disorders,” said Shama Chaiken, who later became a divisional chief psychologist for the California Department of Corrections. “Treatment with antipsychotics does work to reduce these prejudices.”

However, the American Psychiatric Association has never officially recognized “racism” as a mental health problem, even though the issue was raised more than 30 years ago by a group of black psychiatrists who sought to have racial bigotry classified as a mental disorder after multiple racist killings plagued the civil rights era.

In the Saturday, March 3, 2007 edition of the New York Times, Poussaint reiterated that extreme racism is indeed a serious mental illness. If someone believes that a certain group of people are responsible for the world’s troubles and must be eliminated, *that alone* meets criteria for “delusional disorder,” a major psychiatric illness that is already included in the DSM.

In 1954, Harvard psychologist Dr. Gordon Allport published his world-renowned book “The Nature of Prejudice,” which is still regarded today as the premier authoritative work in its field. Allport identified a “five-point scale” that categorizes the increasingly dangerous acts of bigots.

1. The person begins expressing feelings of antagonism against other groups,
2. The person then starts to avoid members of those groups,
3. The person then starts to actively discriminate against the targeted group of people,
4. The person starts to physically attack people who belong to this group, which may even include murder, and finally
5. The person begins to act out fantasies of exterminating this other group of people in mass. It is at this stage that the person should certainly be classified with a mental disorder, according to Allport.

Allport also wrote that acting out these feelings on any level “makes transition to a more intense level easier.”

As a clinical psychiatrist, Poussaint said that he has treated a number of patients who projected their own unacceptable behavior and fears onto minority groups, thus making these minorities a “scapegoat” for society’s problems. However, Poussaint said that when these patients became more aware of their own problems, they grew less paranoid -- and less prejudiced.

People may be reluctant to consider racially or religiously motivated attacks as being symptoms of a mental illness. The term “mental illness” alone has a very negative stigma associated with it, more so than with physical disabilities. As a result, few people really understand what is meant by the term “mental illness.”

However, according to Poussaint, human behavior occurs on a continuum. “Insanity” is not simply a “black and white” issue, so its presence is not always immediately obvious. In reality, people with mental issues or even psychotic people with delusional disorders can function so well that they aren’t seen as being seriously disturbed, even by some experts who may see them for evaluation. Many times, such people might at best be seen as just a little “quirky.”

Nobel Prize winner John Nash, whose life was portrayed in the Ron Howard film, “A Beautiful Mind” functioned for years and even completed his graduate studies at Princeton while suffering from paranoid schizophrenia, a severe mental disorder.

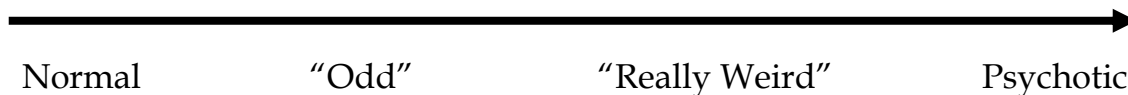
Extreme racism, religious fervor, sexism and all forms of bigotry come from a super-heightened sense of “hypersensitivity.” As Dr. Poussaint points out, all human behavior occurs on a continuum. From time to time, we all go a little “over the edge.” We all suffer from some degree to hypersensitivity, which is “normal.” However, when such feelings grip and control our lives, when we cannot see any other point of view and are controlled by our raging emotions to the point of destruction, it is time to get some help. That is the “hyper” part of “hypersensitivity.”

MENTAL ILLNESS vs. MENTAL DISORDER

Whether or not “extreme bigotry” or “extreme hypersensitivity” should be classified as a mental disorder and given its own specific diagnosis in the DSM is one thing. If such a condition ever is classified as a mental disorder, that will only solve part of the problem. However, that does not mean that the rest of us are off the hook just because we do not meet the definition of “psychotic.”

What is a “mental illness”? It simply means that something in your brain is not working quite right. Again, according to Poussaint, human behavior occurs on a continuum. “Insanity” is not simply a “black and white” issue. There are varying degrees of it, as “unscientifically” diagrammed below:

BEHAVIOR



However, it is important to understand that if someone has a “mental illness,” that means there is a physical problem occurring in their brain that falls somewhere on this continuum. Either the brain is “burning too hot,” or it is not “burning hot enough,” or it is a blood flow issue ... or maybe a combination of the three. Unfortunately, when we think of someone having a “mental condition” we do not immediately think that something might be physically wrong with their brain. However, in reality, that is exactly the problem.

There is no better example how the brain's physical ability or inability to function relates to our behavior than in the case of Phineas Gage. Gage, a hard working man who was well-liked by everyone until he damaged his left frontal lobe in an accident. (If you recall, the left frontal lobe acts as our "Neural-Thermostat" keeping our amygdala (emotions and ego) under control.) After he suffered this injury, he was never the same person again. The physical injury to his left frontal lobe left him unable to control his impulses, his anger and his ego, which made him self-centered and hypersensitive. Clearly, Gage suffered from a mental disorder that caused his terrible behavior after losing the functional capacity of his left frontal lobe. In other words, after his accident, there was nothing standing between his emotions (his amygdalas) and his actions.

According to Dr. Daniel Amen, CEO of the Amen Clinic's, which houses the world's largest data base of nuclear SPECT scans examining various human brain functions, says that almost 50% of everyone you meet everyday will suffer from some sort of mental illness in their lifetime. Actually, Dr. Amen has offered to give a free scan to anyone who thinks they have a "normal" healthy brain. So far, 600 people have taken him up on his offer. However, only 24 of these people actually had "normal" healthy brains. That is only 4% of the brains scanned. Therefore, the norm is to be "abnormal."

At the far extreme, some people take their beliefs to radical and illogical ends, such as in the case of bombing abortion clinics and crashing airplanes into buildings and so on. These are cases of extreme and dangerous hypersensitivity to a certain topic, such as with religion, race, etc.

But what about the person who works beside us in the next cubicle who is offended by **anything** you say to them on a certain sensitive topic. Many of these people are so hypersensitive that they cannot even hold a "mature" discussion on the topic without being horribly offended that someone actually has a different opinion from them. We have all known people who act like children when it comes to certain issues. Their outbursts and intolerance cause great disruptions in the workplace whenever anyone dares to disagree with them.

With the new research that is coming out relating to our emotional system, our amygdalas and the great power they exercises over us, especially when they malfunction for one reason or another, did you ever consider the fact that this hypersensitive person who is driving us "nuts" is him or herself in reality "mentally ill?"



Scott Warrick, JD, MLHR, SPHR

Human Resource Consulting, Employment Law & Training Services
(614) 367-0842 Office ♣ (614) 738-8317 Cell ♣ (614) 367-1044 FAX

www.scottwarrick.com

Scott Warrick's Human Resource Consulting, Employment Law and Training Firm specializes in:

- ❖ **PREVENTING Employee Problems from happening and**
- ❖ **Training Managers and Employees ON-SITE in over 35 topics and**

2007, 2006 and 2003 SHRM National Diversity Conference Workshop Presenter

Scott travels the country presenting his revolutionary “**Cutting Down The Jungle: Becoming An Emotionally Intelligent Communicator**” and his “**Intolerance of Intolerance Skill-Based Diversity/Tolerance Program,**” which focuses on the **FOUR BASIC SKILLS** needed to combat **ANY** type of bigotry/bullying employees encounter in the workplace, rather than the traditional “Cultural-Based” types of programs that focus on only a few select different cultures.

Scott's clients include Ohio Department of Administrative Services, The Gap, Area Agency on Aging, Skyline Chili, The Ohio Supreme Court, Heinz Frozen Foods, Fayette County Hospital, Honeywell, Caraustar International, Utah State Workforce Development, etc.

Scott's academic background and awards include:

- Masters degree in Labor and Human Resources: The Ohio State University
- Capital University College of Law (Class Valedictorian (1st out of 233))
- Lifetime Senior Professional in Human Resources (SPHR) accreditation
- The Human Resource Association of Central Ohio's Linda Kerns Award for Outstanding Creativity in the Field of Human Resource Management and the Ohio State Human Resource Council's David Prize for Creativity in Human Resource Management

Solving Employee Problems BEFORE They Happen!