



written by Professor Gordon Parker

mind over matter

The vulnerable, silent type

The suicide attempt of an apparently well-adjusted young man perplexes his family.

PRESENTING FEATURES

FERGUS, a 24-year-old web developer, was referred following a serious suicide attempt.

He sat comfortably in the waiting room with his worried parents, smiling pleasantly to everyone who passed by.

HISTORY

Fergus described the onset of an anxious and depressive period six weeks previously.

He had difficulty sleeping and working, but lacked any clear feature to suggest a melancholic depression (e.g. no significant anhedonia, anergia or psychomotor disturbance).

His suicide attempt (taking his mother's sleeping tablets, then cutting his wrists) had occurred without his parents detecting any obvious change in his mood or behaviour. They found the event perplexing, as he could offer no understandable reason.

The mother described herself as somewhat of an anxious worrier and felt that her son had similar anxious and shy traits, but that he had been always "a kind and perfect son".

During the family interview, Fergus had a persistent gentle smile, attended carefully to whoever was speaking, nodded in acquiescence with statements put by his parents and was attentive to the interviewer.

THE DIAGNOSTIC 'CLUE'

When asked (alone) about possible causes of his depression, a story slowly evolved.

Fergus had never had a girlfriend but, over two years, had become preoccupied with a girl attending his church fellowship.

He fantasised about asking her out and where they might go, before deciding to send her a card gently alluding to his wish to get to know her.

He spent six weeks deciding on the actual card and another four weeks composing a somewhat oblique message.

A week after he had dropped it in her mailbox, she rang to thank him but said she and her boyfriend were going overseas for a month.

He described feeling at a complete loss, that his world of conjectured fantasies for their future together had been shattered, and he believed that he could never get "close to someone else again".

History review identified that he had no close friends and a marked diffidence in getting close to anyone other than at a superficial level, thus a personality style marked by profound 'personal reserve'.

PERSONAL RESERVE

This is a personality style – usually evident from the earliest years – where the individual is apprehensive about getting too close to others at an emotional or personal level, pulling away from closeness or intimacy, and hiding their true feelings from others.

While they can derive pleasure from superficial, casual social interactions, they tend to engage in solitary activities.

In essence, individuals dislike people getting too close emotionally and will withdraw, preferring to keep their feelings to themselves.

Also, they do not seek advice from others.

When stressed or upset, they may withdraw from social interaction, so that friendships are tenuous and fragile.

They feel extraordinarily vulnerable when opening up or offering themselves in a rela-

tionship.

If then rejected, their 'world' collapses, precipitating a severe depression until their defence mechanisms can operate again.

MANAGEMENT

Medication is rarely of benefit. As individuals frequently have high levels of trait anxiety, anxiety-reducing strategies can be useful.

As they are generally unassertive, assertiveness and social skills training can promote active listening and teach them how to make requests of others

and how to know when to disclose personal information.

Behavioural strategies to address loneliness and assist with their real wish to be involved in a 'safe relationship' are always helpful.

Changing dysfunctional and maladaptive behaviour patterns can assist, and may require role plays and modelling of more appropriate strategies, or even videotaping current and projected interactive styles.

Problem-solving strategies for addressing their social diffidence are also useful.

Finding a partner who is supportive – albeit with the relationship proceeding in a 'mannered' way – can 'hold' individuals with such traits.

Personal reserve differs from social shyness, as will be detailed in a future vignette of 'social avoidance', where there is distinct anxiety in social rather than interpersonal interactions.

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Gordon Parker is scientia professor, University of New South Wales, and executive director, Black Dog Institute (www.blackdoginstitute.org.au).