

Dr. Diane Poole Heller 's

UNDERSTANDING CHARACTER STRUCTURES

Get to know the 5 personality types and the developmental needs central to their healing.

*How valuable would it be to see yourself, or clients,
more clearly and understand needs, motives and desires?*



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Understanding Character Structures

Get to know the 5 personality types and the developmental needs central to their healing

How valuable would it be to see yourself, or clients, more clearly and understand needs, motives and desires?

The study of characterology can be a powerful tool and resource for deeper understanding and self-awareness in helping us understand why people do what they do.

What is characterology? **Characterology**—or the study of personal character development, its types and individual differences—**seeks to explain the way childhood trauma manifests itself in adult behavior, body shape, health, happiness and spiritual well-being.**



Over the last one hundred years, various psychologists have explored the connection between the way a person thinks and behaves, the way their body is structured—and how this relates to physical and mental health. An Austrian doctor of medicine and psychoanalyst, **Wilhelm Reich**, was the first to notice that most of his patients fit into one of five major patterns, or category types.

Reich observed that these five patterns most often develop in childhood as a way to protect ourselves from negative experiences.

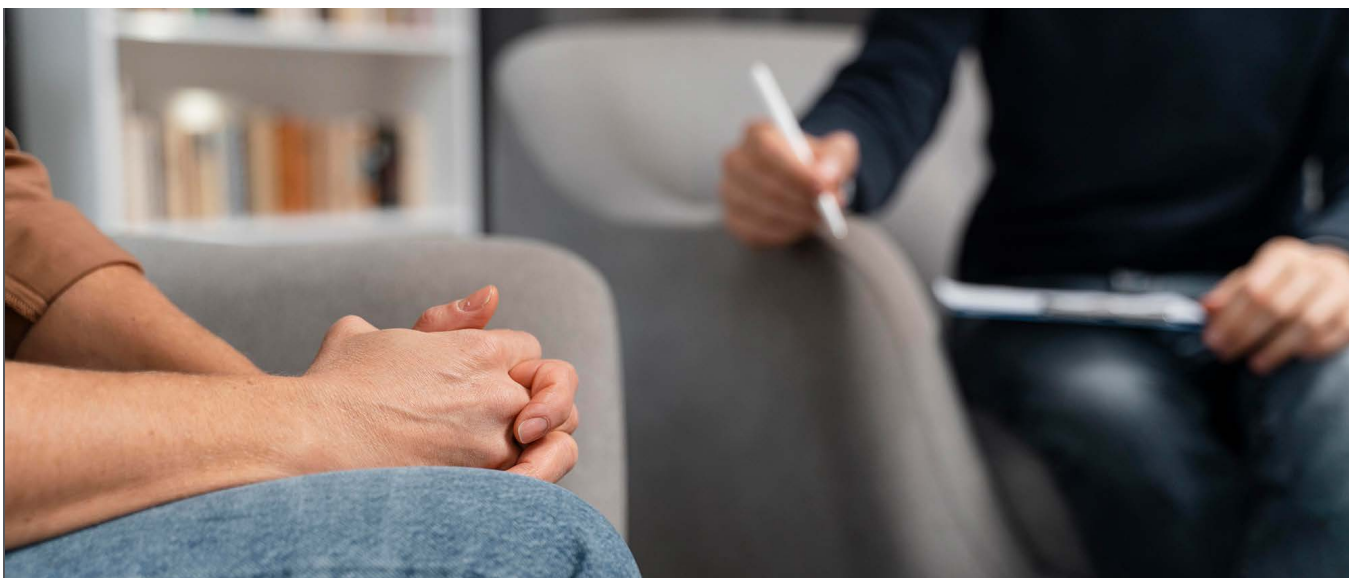
When a child experiences trauma or attachment disruptions during key developmental phases, the trauma may become wired into the brain in such a way that can result in repeating patterns in adulthood.

Additionally, specific traumas can shape or alter the body's physical appearance early on, which means we can often learn to spot trauma simply by observing a person's physical characteristics.

Following the work of Reich, the renowned psychologist, **Alexander Lowen**, further developed the idea of character structure as a consistent, predictable set of pathways or **personality types** that includes physical, psychological, familial and social aspects.

Lowen was the first to define the five characters as: **Schizoid, Oral, Psychopathic, Masochistic and Rigid.**

Today, we understand that the terms originally coined by Reich and Lowen to describe the different character structures may be construed as pathologizing or derogatory.



Rather, I prefer to describe and assign the character structures by what is missing from their childhood development. Greater awareness of the different character structures can thus inform and guide therapeutic strategies towards what is needed for more effective healing.

The 5 Character Structures Types include:

- 1
Contact/Existence
(Schizoid)
- 2
Nurture/Nourishment
(Oral)
- 3
Independence/Will
(Masochistic)
- 4
Dependence/Trust
/Autonomy
(Psychopathic)
- 5
Love/Sexuality
(Rigid)

However, it's good to remember that there are no "pure characters" because character types are ideas and concepts...and people do not necessarily conform to any one ideal.

The brief overview below describes the **five primary personality types**—and identifies how each type is embodied through body traits and behavior patterns, as well as potential therapeutic interventions and spiritual practices (for each structure).

Contact/Existence Character Structure (Schizoid)

Clients with a **Contact/Existence** character structure struggle with disconnection, alienation, and—sometimes—question their very right to exist. This character structure often exhibits numbness, little or no joy and has an inability to engage in intimate relationships. They can suffer from intense fears, paranoia, phobias, panic attacks and dissociative episodes.

Often, their development may have been compromised very early on, as a result of a neglectful, threatening, resentful or chaotic family environment. As a result, they have a primary fear of falling apart and a longing to feel whole—which means they need therapeutic help to develop a sense of body, self and life.

With **Contact/Existence** character structure, it's important to establish a supportive, nurturing environment—and acknowledge the frustration and despair the person feels in trying to get their needs met. **To help with healing, this type needs to know, “I have the right to be.”**

This character type responds to healing with a profound spiritual awareness and wisdom, displaying great courage to connect with feelings, and exhibiting a great capacity to appreciate beauty...often growing into an artist or inspirational teacher.



BODY STATUS

The **Contact/Existence** character structure has a body that is often narrow and contracted in an effort to hold together against their fears. The head may be large (or with a large forehead) and seems pushed forward, dropping down or off to the side. Shoulders can be up (in fear) and arms hang like appendages (to prevent contact with others).

This type may even exhibit psychosomatic illnesses and hypochondriasis (headaches, eczema, digestive and respiratory problems are common).

Therapeutic and Spiritual Practices:

- Rejuvenate your clients' sense of self from repeated invitations "not to exist" in childhood.
- Help clients find inner groundedness to tolerate increasing warmth, expansion, and aliveness without shutting down from terror.
- Help clients gradually reconnect to their bodies, feelings and life force—slowly and safely.
- Encourage connection while honoring withdrawal; provide reassurance that fear does not signify a regression or setback.
- Natural therapist/client relationship dynamics may be naturally triggered in the "now" of the session; read the affect and remind them that the relationship (even in conflict) is still a viable and caring one.

Nurture/Nourishment Character Structure (Oral)

Clients with a **Nurture/Nourishment** character structure often have difficulty identifying and/or expressing needs. Typical presenting problems may include a lack of motivation and energy; addictions and eating disorders; depression and/or chronic mood swings; and an inability to sustain relationships, projects, jobs or other interests.

Due to separation trauma, or inconsistent and unpredictable parenting, this character structure fears constant rejection or abandonment. Because their emotional needs were frequently denied or suppressed by will, their inner emotional climate is characterized by deprivation, grief, despair and even anger. This deep-seated bitterness (or even rage) at unmet needs is often turned against the self—where aggression is expressed passively or indirectly (e.g. sarcasm, refusing to follow-through on tasks, not paying bills, etc.).

With the **Nurture/Nourishment** character structure, it's important to help clients acknowledge, accept and express their emotional needs and longing and connect to others without feeling a loss of identity or autonomy. **To help with healing, this type needs to know, “I have the right to need.”**



This type is very sensitive, attuned and often over-giving to loved ones—but is sorely unable to take in much care, love, or nourishment from others. There is an intense focus in the personality on the functions of the mouth; and continuous habits like smoking, eating, drinking, talking (often fast), biting, etc. may be present. Typical masking behavior as a rescuer, compulsive giver, or exaggerated self-reliance/independence hides the inadequate sense of self.

With healing, they can become highly attuned, nurturing and generous in healing others, while accessing genuine autonomy, self-esteem and confidence.

BODY STATUS

The **Nurture/Nourishment** character structure often has a posture that is one of tiredness and collapse, with a neck that is long and reaching forward (as if seeking nourishment). Shoulders are rolled forward. The body is generally child-like in appearance or immature-looking (i.e. underdeveloped or undercharged), and chronic areas of tension include the jaw, area between the shoulder blades, lower abdomen/lower back and root of the neck.

Therapeutic and Spiritual Practices:

- Strengthen your client's physical and emotional capacity to receive.
- Guide your clients to clearly express, instead of repress, their feelings, needs and longings—directly and maturely.
- Support your clients as they process real grief resulting from abandonment and loss experiences due to early “on-again/off-again” parenting.
- Help clients stay connected to an autonomous self while in the presence of others.

Independence/Will Character Structure (Masochistic)

Clients with an **Independence/Will** character type often report of “feeling trapped,” exhibiting chronic suffering, anxiety and a sense of crushing shame, humiliation and defeat that arose from an upbringing that did not honor personal authority.

As a result of being overpowered in an attempt to assert their independence or greeted with threats of abandonment or withdrawal of love, people with this type often have difficulty setting boundaries and asserting themselves. They often present in therapy with a pattern of self-destructive behaviors, such as sabotaging their career, relationship success, or acting out sexually. They can't seem to let go or change repetitive patterns, as seeking pleasure or success elicits immobilizing guilt and fear.

With the **Independence/Will** character structure, it's important to establish a light and warm environment—and acknowledge the genuine kindness, compassion and goodness to neutralize the shame and guilt. If this type drops the mask and releases raw negative feelings or fear, they will need reassurance that they can tolerate these feelings and that the fear is not a setback. **To help with healing, this type needs to know, “I have the right to be free.”**

When recovered, this character type has great capacities for optimism, joy, playfulness, pleasure, humor and strength. Once they learn to assert themselves positively, it becomes much easier for them to be able to surrender control, trust in others and approach others with support, compassion and understanding.



BODY STATUS

The **Independence/Will** character structure body is typically shortened, thick and muscular (to restrain negative impulses and assertiveness). There may be an awkwardness or even clumsiness in the person's movements, with frequent minor accidents (messing up) along with a general discomfort with their body. Chronic areas of tension include the neck, large muscles, pelvis and buttocks. Their expression is one of suffering, often accompanied by compulsive smiling.

Therapeutic and Spiritual Practices:

- Avoid authoritative confrontation, as it will backfire with these clients. They will rarely do what they're told, since they have a wound around control. Instead, approach sessions with a sense of curiosity and openness.
- Help these clients accept, feel and release pent-up negative feelings, defeatist attitudes or depressive and sadistic tendencies without exacerbating crushing guilt or paralyzing anxiety.
- Release the judgmental attitudes of disgust toward bodily functions.
- Reinforce their right to be free.
- Activate the right to say, "No!"
- Help the person recognize their compassionate and joyful nature and to see that they have hidden gifts despite their wounded personality.

Dependence/Trust/Autonomy Character Structure (Psychopathic)

As children, clients with a **Dependence/Trust/Autonomy** character type lose their inherent authenticity and capacity for love and connection. Whether one or both parents manipulated or used the child as a buffer or weapon (coverly or directly) for their own narcissistic purposes, people with this character type learned quickly how to behave in order for adults to feel good about themselves.

Due to a role reversal in which the child was maneuvered (sometimes with sexual overtones and promises of love that were never provided), this character structure has intense fears of being defeated, humiliated, used or controlled. Feeling betrayed and heartbroken, they invest in the creation of an ideal image of themselves where they are never wrong and are always in control.

Deep down, they simply want to recover trust, truth and integrity. Feelings and the body are not to be trusted and are often belittled. These can be challenging clients to work with if you do not know what to expect, as they use power dynamics to turn the tables and react negatively to any authority.

With Dependence/Trust/Autonomy types, it's important to establish an honest and sincere environment, where there are clear and direct boundaries (understanding that this person will test them to discover potential lies or a hidden agenda). **To help with healing, this type needs to know, "I have the right to trust."**

With healing, these character structure types can grow into inspiring, visionary leaders, bringing people in conflict together in harmony. They are genuine seekers of truth and can develop great empathy and compassion when reversing the numbing pain and denial of feelings.



BODY STATUS

The **Dependence/Trust/Autonomy** character structure body serves the purpose of dominating or seducing, and can take almost any form—depending upon the main image the person is primarily attached to. In the “overpowering” type, the top is inflated, with a barrel chest, broad shoulders and large head and relatively rigid small pelvis, buttocks and thin legs. The “seductive” type may be inflated in the pelvic area, with broad hips and hyper-flexible back. For either type, the eyes are sometimes large and sparkling; with the dominating type, the eyes are penetrating; in the seductive type, they are soft or sleepy looking. Chronic areas of tension include: base of the skull, shoulder girdle, chest and rib cage, pelvic area (specifically the genitals).

Therapeutic and Spiritual Practices:

- Deflate grandiose self-images by feeling inner devaluation and recovering innocence, sincerity, and integrity.
- Develop a capacity for loving kindness toward themselves and others in the aftermath of being lied to, betrayed, manipulated, or used as a dependant child.
- Manage feelings of emptiness that arise from a constant effort to be on top, win-at-all-costs, be right no matter what, and seek revenge to maintain a need to feel special.
- Allow people to access and emote real feelings; help them access their bodies instead of dissociating.
- Restore original feelings of natural healthy dependency without fear of collapse.

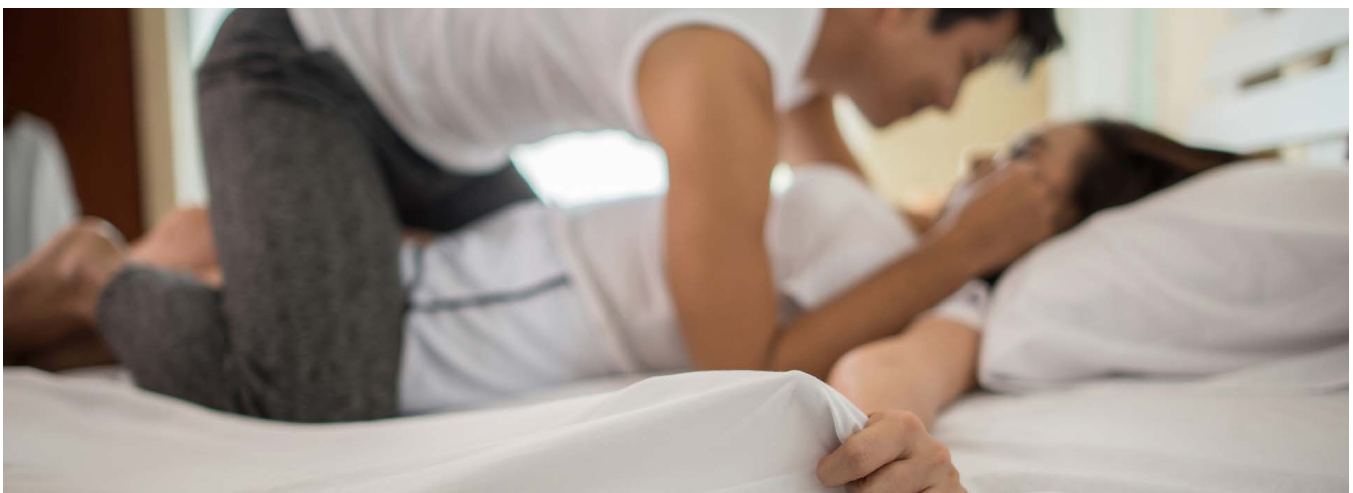
Love/Sexuality (Rigid)

Clients with the **Love/Sexuality** character type are unwilling to fall too deeply in love or engage in a long-term monogamous, romantic relationship. Obsessed with perfection and being attractive, they often trade admiration for love, seeking therapy after a series of broken relationships, marriages or extramarital affairs. This character type often comes to therapy exhibiting extreme restlessness and hyperactivity. Despite substantial outward success, they often feel dissatisfied, betrayed and fear vulnerability.

Quite often, significant rejection, severe disapproval, punishment, or an extended absence of a parent (of the opposite sex) during the child's 3rd to 5th year of life contributes to repressed longings for the opposite sex—as a result, persistent fears of betrayal, fears of retaliation and intense competitiveness with the same sex create further unresolved conflict.

With the **Love/Sexuality** character structure, it's important to establish a respectful and professional environment. Acknowledge the person's accomplishments; at the same time, also acknowledge the disappointment the person feels that, despite these achievements, they are lonely, dissatisfied or bored. **To help with healing, this type needs to know, "I have the right to love."**

This character type responds to healing with a better understanding of passion and connection to sensuality of adult relationships, with a greater capacity to let go and surrender to the flow of love, themselves and life. Just as importantly, they learn to make and sustain commitments.



BODY STATUS

Though the **Love/Sexuality** character structure body is generally integrated and balanced with proportionate parts, there is often rigidity and excessive uprightness to the posture. Correlating to pride, the back and head are straight, the chest pushed out and the jaw set in a look of determination. In men, the face may be hard and extremely masculine; while women may have a doll-like, seductive face.

This type may even have a history of “hysterical” symptoms that appear and disappear without any physical cause, such as vertigo, fainting, hyperventilation, heart palpitations, etc.)

Therapeutic and Spiritual Practices:

- Heal the “heart-genital split” (having either love or a sexual relationship, but not both).
- Help them learn to express feelings and emotion, and surrender to others without fear of losing face or expecting retaliation.
- Reinforce their right to love.
- Work to resolve psychosomatic symptoms.
- Help to relax their fierce competitiveness.
- Help them recognize the limitations and reality of the idealized self image.



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