

Rethinking Personality Disorders: From Symptom Clusters to Relational Trauma

Video Resource Pack

Dr Gwen Adshead & Christiane Sanderson

Video Course

CPD hours: 11 / CE credits: 11



Online video access remains available for 1 year from the date you receive the video course.

What if the most difficult clients in the room weren't disordered, but defending? What if their rage, detachment, or emotional volatility were adaptations to relationships that once meant danger — not safety? This powerful video bundle challenges the pathologising lens often used with clients diagnosed with personality disorders, offering a trauma-informed, attachment-rooted framework instead.

Dr Gwen Adshead opens the conversation with a focus on affect regulation: how early attachment failures and adverse experiences lead to chronic dysregulation and relational instability. She unpacks the unique patterns of affective disturbance across PD clusters and offers clear therapeutic implications rooted in neuroscience, ethics, and lived clinical experience. Christiane Sanderson builds on this by reframing personality disorders as enduring adaptations to relational trauma — not fixed pathologies. Her course explores the overlap between attachment wounds, shame, and diagnoses like BPD, NPD, and antisocial personality, inviting us to work with these clients in ways that are humanising, compassionate, and effective.

Together, these trainings offer therapists a way to move past labels and into deeper understanding — supporting clients not only to regulate better, but to reconnect with their own humanity.

What's Included:

- *Personality Disorders and Affect Regulation* — Dr Gwen Adshead (5 CPD / 5 CE)
- *Personality Disorder or Adaptation to Threat?* — Christiane Sanderson (6 CPD / 6 CE)

Who It's For:

- Therapists working with clients diagnosed with BPD, NPD, or other personality disorders
- Clinicians looking to understand PDs through an attachment and trauma lens
- Practitioners navigating ruptures, dysregulation, or shame-based reactions in long-term therapy



What You Will Learn:

- How early relational trauma disrupts affect regulation and shapes personality adaptations
- The affective and interpersonal markers of Cluster A, B, and C disorders
- Why reframing PDs as survival strategies can shift the therapeutic relationship
- How to avoid shame-based or punitive interpretations of client behaviour
- What neuroscience and ICD-11/DSM-5 tell us about modern PD formulation
- How to support clients with enduring personality changes using relational, somatic, and trauma-informed techniques

Course 1
Personality Disorders and Affect Regulation
Dr Gwen Adshead
CPD/CE credits: 5

Early childhood adversity, neglect and childhood sexual abuse are just some of the risk factors that can directly impact behaviours we associate with Personality Disorders. An explanation for such linkage is that clients with personality disorders experience great difficulty in establishing and sustaining interpersonal relationships that require good affect regulation. Their inability to regulate negative affects increases the likelihood of unregulated hostility and angry responses. This actually puts such clients at an enhanced disadvantage – not only do they tend to alienate caregivers, but they are likely to do so at times of greatest need.

At this practical seminar which would be especially relevant for psychotherapists, psychologists, counsellors and psychiatrists, Dr Adshead suggests that it is impractical to provide therapy for behavioural manifestations without a proper understanding of underlying cognitive schema and neurobiological basis. She presents evidence on the development of affect regulation within attachment relationships that explains both the symptoms of and effective therapeutic strategies for personality disorders. By viewing personality disorders through the lenses of attachment and affect regulation, she equips us to recognise the multiple challenges faced by clients: heightened perception of threats, inability to repair emotional states stimulated by threat or fear and the shift in locus from external to internal affect regulation. We comprehend the specific nature of affect dysregulation for personality disorders according to clusters:

- Cluster A: paranoid personality disorders
- Cluster B: borderline personality disorders
- Cluster C: anxious / avoidant personality disorders

By drawing our attention to Affect Regulation as not the only one, but arguably the most critical aspect of personality disorders, Dr Adshead helps us inform our therapeutic approaches when working with mild to moderate disorders across the spectrum.

Course 2
Personality Disorder or Adaptation to Threat:
Attachment, Relational Trauma and Enduring Personality Changes
Christiane Sanderson
CPD/CE credits: 6

Early experiences in childhood shape how we relate to others and how much we value ourselves in relationships. How parents and caregivers relate and respond to their child from infancy forms the template



for later attachments in childhood and adulthood. Research shows that **adverse childhood experiences, relational trauma and early narcissistic injuries render individuals highly vulnerable to developing personality disorders**. Analysis of data from 42 international studies of over 5,000 people showed that 71.1% of people who were diagnosed with Borderline Personality Disorder reported at least one traumatic childhood experience. (*University of Manchester, Lancaster University, Manchester NHS Foundation Trust, published in Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavia*). The most common form of adverse experience reported by people with BPD was physical neglect at 48.9%, followed by emotional abuse at 42.5%, physical abuse at 36.4%, sexual abuse at 32.1% and emotional neglect at 25.3%.

At this training workshop, which would be especially relevant for counsellors, psychotherapists and psychologists across modalities, we will be presenting relevant elements of attachment theory and research, we will look at the role of attachment, the range of attachment styles, including disorganised attachment, and how these link to personality disorders, in particular Borderline Personality Disorder (*aka Emotionally Unstable Personality Disorder*), Narcissistic Personality Disorder and Anti-social Personality. We will explore how personality disorders present in the therapeutic space and how they impact on the therapeutic relationship.

Emphasis will be placed on **understanding personality disorders as adaptations to relational threats and how to reframe these as enduring personality changes rather than a personality disorder**. The training will evaluate the traditional psychiatric formulation of personality disorders and compare these to current conceptualisation of personality disorders in ICD-11 (2022) and the DSM-5-TR (2022) Alternative Model for Personality Disorders. This will be combined with clinical formulations that reframe personality disorders as **disorders of attachment and relational trauma** rather than a personality disorder. The focus will be on understanding *what happened to the person* rather than *what is the problem* and what they had to do to survive including enduring changes in their sense of self and personality.

This reformulation of personality disorders enables us, as therapists, to work in a more compassionate, non-judgemental and non-shaming way. It humanises those who have been labelled with a personality disorder and enables them to make contact and facilitate connection. With our understanding of *personality disorders* as manifestations of deep emotional suffering in response to traumatic attachments, we are able to transform the therapeutic process for our clients to create a sustained positive impact on their lives and relationship patterns.

Overall Programme Learning Objectives for two sessions:

- Discuss the evidence on the development of affect regulation within attachment relationships that explains both the symptoms of and effective therapeutic strategies for personality disorders.
- Analyze personality disorders through the lenses of attachment and affect regulation.
- Discuss the multiple challenges faced by clients: *heightened perception of threats, inability to repair emotional states stimulated by threat or fear* and the **shift in locus from external to internal affect regulation**.
- Describe the specific nature of affect dysregulation for personality disorders according to clusters:
 - **Cluster A:** paranoid personality disorders



- **Cluster B:** borderline personality disorders
 - **Cluster C:** anxious / avoidant personality disorders
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- Enhance awareness of the role of attachment, relational trauma and personality disorders
 - Examine the **link between impaired attachment in childhood and vulnerability to developing personality disorders**
 - Examine current conceptualisation and formulation of personality disorders in ICD-11 and the DSM-5 Alternative Model for Personality Disorders formulation
 - Discuss the impact and **effects of relational trauma and traumatic bonding in which relationships become places of fear rather than safety**
 - Identify how impaired attachment and relational trauma can be misdiagnosed as personality disorders, in particular Borderline Personality Disorder (*aka Emotionally Unstable Personality Disorder*), Narcissistic Personality Disorder and Anti-Social Personality and early attachment experiences
 - Explain how to work with enduring personality changes

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About the speakers

Dr Gwen Adshead is a psychotherapist, group analyst and forensic psychiatrist. She trained as a psychiatrist, and then as a forensic psychiatrist after completing a master's Degree in medical law and ethics at King's College, London. She was lecturer in victimology at the Institute of Psychiatry, where she studied interpersonal trauma and its effects; then trained as a psychotherapist, with a particular interest in Attachment Theory. She first started work at Broadmoor Hospital as a senior psychiatric trainee in 1990; and over the last twenty years has worked as a responsible clinician, as well as a consultant psychotherapist.

Her research interests include moral reasoning in psychopaths and antisocial men; the attachment narratives of abusive mothers; and how psychotherapies work with violent people. Gwen has published over 100 papers, book chapters and commissioned papers; co-edited three books and is working on three more.

Gwen's principle training is group dynamic; but she also has experience of cognitive approaches to therapy, DBT, and mentalization based therapies.

Christiane Sanderson BSc, MSc. is an Honorary Senior Lecturer in Psychology at the University of Roehampton, of London with 35 years of experience working with survivors of childhood sexual abuse and sexual violence. She has delivered consultancy, continuous professional development and professional training for parents, teachers, social workers, nurses, therapists, counsellors, solicitors, the NSPCC, the Catholic Safeguarding Advisory Committee, the Methodist Church, the Metropolitan Police Service, SOLACE, the Refugee Council, Birmingham City Council Youth Offending Team, and HMP Bronzefield.

She is the author of *Counselling Skills for Working with Shame*, *Counselling Skills for Working with Trauma: Healing from Child Sexual Abuse, Sexual Violence and Domestic Abuse*, *Counselling Adult Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse*, 3rd edition, *Counselling Survivors of Domestic Abuse*, *The Seduction of Children: Empowering Parents and Teachers to Protect Children from Child Sexual Abuse*, and *Introduction to Counselling Survivors of Interpersonal Trauma*, all published by Jessica Kingsley Publishers. She has also written *The Warrior Within: A One in Four Handbook to Aid Recovery from Sexual Violence*; *The Spirit Within: A One in Four Handbook to Aid*



Recovery from Religious Sexual Abuse Across All Faiths and Responding to Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse: A pocket guide for professionals, partners, families and friends for the charity One in Four for whom she is a trustee.

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