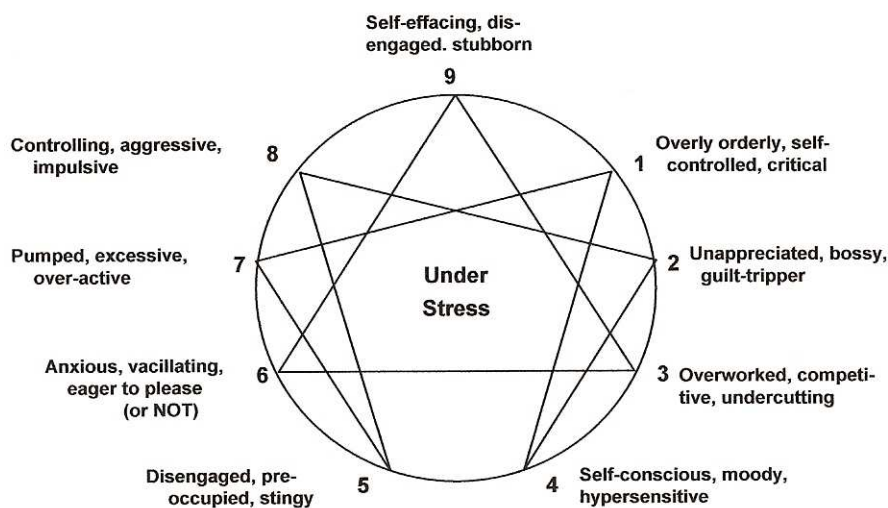


Self-Descriptions Under Stress

Like a bad dream, when we encounter stressful situations our fixation seems to invite the emergence of what one of my clients called “the Evil Twin,” an exaggeration of self-image that separates us from others instead of drawing us closer together. The following chart is based on material from *Relationships Made Easy* by Sarah Aschenbach and *Personality Types* by Riso and Hudson:



Ones

“I get really frustrated and angry when there’s stress I can’t manage,” reported a One, “particularly when it comes out of nowhere – for example when I was driving home yesterday and somebody banged into me from behind. Whereas with stress I can manage, I’ll be rather methodical – if I have a hundred calls to make, I’ll do ten an hour for two hours each day until they’re completed.”

Another One described a party she’d attended recently: “I abhor going into a group of people I don’t know, and found myself making sure everything was in place on the buffet table, the trays of hors-d’oeuvres were filled, and dirty dishes were cleared and taken to the kitchen.” She became so busy managing her anxiety this way that several other party-goers assumed she was the hostess.

Aschenbach:
"Under stress, Ones... feel everything and everyone needs shaping up, and they are impatient and angry with others who seem too casual about doing what is right."

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Twos

“What causes me the most stress,” said a Two, “is feeling overwhelmed, feeling I can’t make a difference. I get positive energy when there’s a course of action I can take. I tell myself, ‘I’m going to fight my way through this.’ When dealing with someone I can’t count on, I’ll write them off completely and take care of everything myself. Then anything they do I can accept as a gift, but I don’t have to worry about it.”

Another Two realized with some pain how she’d tried to make her kids feel guilty, when extended family was visiting for Memorial Day and she found herself burdened with all the cooking. She saw how she’d taken responsibility for planning the menu, doing the grocery shopping, and “handling” everything in the kitchen. She didn’t even know she would have liked some help until she felt so exhausted she couldn’t enjoy herself. But by then she was greatly stressed and lashed out with some version of, “after all I’ve done for you.”

"Twos... can become quite bossy and manipulative, though they don't want to see this about themselves. They may make others feel guilty."

Threes

A Three described herself as particularly stressed with “the unknown, when I can’t move in any direction because it’s still uncertain. Under stress I’m in overdrive, and impatient when others aren’t in overdrive – I start pushing.”

Another Three had been dismayed when two members of his team resigned within three weeks of each other. Each had distinct and legitimate reasons for leaving, to satisfy their own family and career needs, but it left him in the position of having to cover their workload for several months until they could be replaced. Consequently, he hadn’t been supportive of their efforts to make the transition easier for their own teams. Instead, he’d “bad-mouthed” them for “abandoning ship.”

"Threes compete harder, even with friends and family... do little things to make others look less successful."

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Fours

From a Four: “It’s stressful for me to feel I have a blueprint in mind to deal with some problem and suddenly I’m not able to develop it, because it looks to others as if it might venture out of ‘traditional’ boundaries. Then I feel I was deprived of the opportunity to defend my ideas. If this takes place more often than I can tolerate, I start to tell myself I do not belong in that place or among those people because we think differently. I start dreaming about how I can leave that situation.”

"Fours begin to feel no one understands or appreciates them for their unique gifts... they demand the right to do only what they want to do when they want to do it."

Fives

“When my Two wife gets emotional,” acknowledged a Five, “I feel as if I’m in a boxing ring with her but I’m wearing lead gloves.”

“I forget things, don’t finish things,” said another. “I know I’m scattered, so I decide to do something physical – for example, if I’m on the computer I’ll print something out and read it to decide if it’s what I want to say.” There was some laughter in the group when we realized what a Five considers to be “physical.”

"Fives slow down, putting off what needs to be done until they feel prepared to tackle it... which makes them prickly and high-strung and even more pressed for time."

Sixes

A Six recalled how hard she’d worked to get a “dominating” supervisor to see the team’s point of view. When those attempts failed, she led an insurrection against the supervisor. Both she and her supervisor lost their jobs.

Another Six said, “Under stress I have a lot of undirected activity. I tell myself, ‘You’ve got to get this under control,’ but I’ll still keep doing it. I become short, agitated, abrupt, very annoyed; I don’t pet my dog! I want to be in motion and I don’t particularly care which direction I’m going, just so I’m moving. It’s got to run its course. Later I pet my dog and he forgives me.”

"Sixes begin to vacillate between caving in and taking a tough stand... try to make everyone happy then suddenly turn on one or both of the forces that they feel are trying to tear them apart."

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Sevens

According to a Seven, “I fragment, find it very difficult to focus. And I avoid doing the thing that’s causing me the most stress. I become disorganized, discombobulated; I drop things, bump into things.”

Another Seven (with an Eight wing) had a different response: “I get very controlling, tell people what to do. Until I learned about the Enneagram I’d turn on the radio, or listen to spiritual tapes, or read a novel – actually several at once. Now I know I have to figure out what I’m afraid of, find out what’s holding me emotional prisoner. I turn off the radio, slow down, breathe, listen, meditate.”

"Sevens try to run away from their anxiety... try to keep themselves 'pumped up,' and they are prone to excesses of all kinds."

Eights

“I believe I can handle most situations others would find stressful,” announced one of the Eights, “but there’s no air conditioning where I work, and right now I’m stressed by the 90-degree weather. It took me a while to become aware it’s because I have no control over it.” When asked what he does when he feels out of control, he mused, “Well, normally I react like the guy in the Far Side cartoon at the ‘Stress Institute,’ where he throws the doctor out the window and says, ‘Hey, I feel better already!’”

Building on this, another Eight talked about how hurt his wife was because he’d been flirtatious with another woman: “I reared back in my chair and told her ‘Your self-esteem must be in tatters If you’re going to get so worked up about something this minor. I’d hate to see you when something really tough comes up in our marriage.’”

Both Eights agreed they sometimes turn their feelings inward – “which eventually leads to vengeance of some sort.”

"Under stress, Eights are even more controlling... Because they will not compromise, they are increasingly difficult to be around."

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Nines

From one Nine: “It’s a clue for me I’m under stress when people say, ‘Hi, how are you?’ and I don’t know!”

From another: “I feel really stressed when something unpredictable happens. When I took karate I loved the forms. It was a discipline, like dancing. But when we had to do free fighting I was just awful – I have no street sense. That’s what I’m like under stress: I can take anything if I know it’s coming; otherwise I feel as if somebody’s just pulled the rug out from under me.”

"They... give others the silent treatment... suppression of their natural instincts and feelings builds up over time, and some Nines explode occasionally while others simply 'shut down.'"