



*Author's note: Increasingly, mentally ill individuals are finding their way into the court system. What follows is a primer on personality disorders. This article is adapted with permission from the book High Conflict People by Bill Eddy ([www.unhookedbooks.com](http://www.unhookedbooks.com)) but departs from the book where it discusses the cause of personality disorders and effective treatment.*



# MENTAL ILLNESS AND THE LEGAL SYSTEM

By Hilary Vesell

**P**ersonality disorders are believed to be formed at an early age in abusive relationships, generally where children cannot get their emotional needs met. At best, their personalities may be slightly odd and rigid; at worst, these children may grow up to be totally unmanageable and largely dysfunctional. Children need loving guidance and positive feedback. They need to know that they are worthwhile and good. They need to have their feelings respected and to be free from overwhelming shame, guilt, criticism, scolding, belittling and contempt. Their ability to cope and their resilience will largely depend on how much positive feedback they receive, versus negative feedback (or lack of any at all), combined with any positive or protective factors.

To be fair, not all individuals come out of less-than-optimal backgrounds disadvantaged psychologically. Some will excel for various reasons, such as resilience or the help of alternate caregivers or role models. It is also possible for environmental stimuli — smoking, drinking and taking drugs by the mother while the child is in utero — to influence the wiring of the brain. Personality disorders can also be formed by undiagnosed medical problems in childhood that would prevent proper bonding with a caretaker. Criminals may also beget criminals, there possibly existing a genetic component to criminality.

