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Do You Get an 'A' in Personality?

By Elizabeth Bernstein

In the never-ending quest to help people co-exist peacefully with their spouses, children, siblings and in-laws, therapists are turning to tools used to assess the psychological stability of pilots, police officers and nuclear-power plant operators: personality tests.

I'm not talking about the pop quizzes in magazines that claim to help you determine the color of your aura or what breed you'd be if you were a dog. I am referring to tests that are scientifically designed and heavily researched, consisting of dozens if not hundreds of questions that identify specific aspects of your personality. Are you a thinker or a feeler? Intuitive or fact-oriented? Organized or spontaneous?

Answering questions like these helped Mardi and Richard Sayer get through a difficult period a few years ago when their adult daughter, Maggie Sayer, moved back into their Middletown, R.I. home.

Testing Your Relationships

The Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory, one of the better-known personality tests, probes subjects with 567 true-or-false statements on a wide range of seemingly random topics, including ...

- 67. Like poetry
- 115. Not afraid of blood
- 148. Feel the best ever
- 163. Don't fear snakes
- 189. Like to flirt
- 193. Avoid stepping on sidewalk cracks
- 220. No worries about appearance
- 275. Difficulty talking in front of class in school
- 302. Easily get impatient
- 318. Expect to succeed
- 348. Wish were a child again

Source: Abbreviated items excerpted from the MMPI®-2 Booklet of Abbreviated Items. Copyright © 2005 by the Regents of the University of Minnesota. All rights reserved. Used by permission of the University of Minnesota Press. "MMPI" and "Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory" are registered trademarks owned by the Regents of the University of Minnesota.

Depressed at the time, Maggie would often stay up half the night watching TV, then sleep past noon. Her parents, worried and frustrated, tried to push her to move forward with her life. "We would fight about God knows what," says the younger Ms. Sayer, now 30 and living in Santa Monica, Calif., where she is an assistant at a school for film-industry professionals.

The three decided to see a life coach, who administered a personality test, the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, to each of them. Mardi Sayer says she discovered that she and her husband are extroverts and "thinkers"; they like to identify goals and move forward directly to achieve them. Their daughter is an introvert, a "feeler" who craves harmony and needs time and freedom to discover what she wants to do.

"It helped us see that she is a different person and will have a different path," says Ms. Sayer, 59, an accounting consultant. "You need to understand yourself in the context of the other people in your life," says her husband, Richard, 63, an attorney.

The tests have had lasting effects on her relationship with her parents, Maggie Sayer says. "My mom and dad weren't being insensitive or uncaring—they just didn't understand how I processed things," she says. "I learned that rather than immediately reacting emotionally to

something my parents said, I could step back and formulate my response without having a dramatic meltdown."

Family therapists, marriage counselors and life coaches increasingly recognize that personality assessments can lead clients not only to greater self-insight but also to improved relationships. The tests "can help get to the heart of the problem quickly," says Richard Levak, a Del Mar, Calif., psychologist, who uses them extensively in his practice. "Too often psychologists operate on their intuition and clinical knowledge, but people are not often as they appear."

A test might reveal that someone who appears jovial and self-effacing may actually be insecure and introverted—constantly working to play a role, he says.

Answer Questions, Achieve Self-Knowledge

Here's how to take two of the best-known assessments:

- **Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory** You can take this test only through a trained administrator. Check with the American Psychological Association, or your local chapter, to find someone certified to administer it and interpret the results.
- **Myers-Briggs Type Indicator** Go to MBTIreferralnetwork.org to find someone to administer the test. You also can take it online and receive a one-hour telephone feedback assessment for \$150 through the Center for Applications of Psychological Type at www.capt.org. Or take a computer-scored version of the test at MBTIcomplete.com for \$59.95.

Hmmm. Dr. Levak offered to give me the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory-2 and interpret my answers. I soon found myself responding to 567 true-or-false statements, on such topics as whether I like to flirt or had trouble speaking in front of the class when I was in school.

Because it was hard to tell exactly what underlying trait each question was assessing, it was impossible to game the test. Besides, individual responses are unimportant; it's the pattern of responses that reveals the personality, says Dr. Levak, who has done personality testing of candidates for television reality shows, such as "The Apprentice."

I wanted to see if the test would reveal something about me that I, or others, didn't already know. When Dr. Levak called with my results, he announced: "You're not hyper like I thought you were." According to the test, he said, I

am extroverted, poised and controlled, hate conflict and aim to please, have a good balance between masculine and feminine and can be a bit of a rebel. "I bet as a teenager you hung out with a nice boy with an earring," he said. I shared the assessment with my best friend. "Spot on," she said.

How can knowing this help my relationships? Dr. Levak explained: Because I hate to get mad, I have a tendency to let resentments fester. By the time I allow myself to express anger, I am furious. Then I come across as judgmental rather than hurt. Knowing this, I can work on dealing with my anger before it builds up, he says. And I can be more aware of how others see me.

Lauren Mackler, the Boston life coach who worked with the Sayers, gives clients the Myers-Briggs and the Life Styles Inventory, which assesses habitual behavioral styles. (Life coaches usually help clients understand behaviors and achieve goals, whereas therapists often help clients explore their pasts to understand how their upbringing has influenced their behavior.)

Ms. Mackler uses the tests to help family members see how problems might be driven by personality differences and come up with strategies to adjust.

Consider what happens when an introvert comes home hoping to chill after a rough day at work—only to find his extrovert partner waiting to recap every moment of her day. The introvert gets angry; the extrovert feels hurt. Ms. Mackler tells the extrovert that her spouse needs time alone; she tells the introvert that he needs to make an effort to come out and talk after he has decompressed.

"When people see something on paper, they realize it's not subjective—they have done the test and described the behavior themselves," she says. "It makes it more palatable for them to see and talk about" the issues.

What, exactly, is personality? John D. Mayer, a psychologist and expert on personality testing at the University of New Hampshire, says it is "the system that organizes one's emotions, motives and capacities to think." Personalities are partly innate, partly learned, he says; we can change them a bit, but it isn't easy.

Dr. Mayer says the roots of modern personality tests date back to the early 1900s, when French psychologist Alfred Binet created an intelligence test predicting which children had special needs requiring alternative education. Testing spread to the U.S. during World War I, when the military used a type of personality test to assess if recruits were mentally fit for service.

Early personality tests were designed to assess mental illness. The Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory, developed at the University of Minnesota to help diagnose psychiatric patients, now is used to assess the psychological stability of people with public-safety responsibilities.

The Myers-Briggs was developed in the 1940s by Isabel Briggs Myers and her mother, Katherine Cook Briggs, who despite little advanced training in psychology, immersed themselves in the work of Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung and designed the questionnaire based on Jung's personality types.

When family members take personality tests, their self-awareness goes up and they quickly figure out their strengths and weaknesses, says John Williams, a life coach in Portland, Ore., who uses a test in his work with teenagers. "People realize they are different from other people," he says. "The personality test becomes a road map."