**What the Heck Is SOPS?**

*HOUSTON THERE’S A PROBLEM IN THE SYSTEM*

SOPS stands for Safety-Oriented Personality Style. So what is it or what exactly does it mean to say a person has SOPS? Well, let’s look at how it appears to work. To begin with SOPS is an emotion-based condition. The technical name is: Phobicentric Psychopathology (PCP).

We know that emotions are expressed in behaviors like laughing, crying, anger, sadness and fear. They are however expressed in many other behaviors that we may not usually associate with emotions, such as wanting something, deciding on anything (e.g. to read a story, go shopping etc) or being interested in anything (e.g. math, sports, art or science etc); in fact an emotion is what prompts and sustains every action, whether mental or physical that we perform, although we may not necessarily be aware of the distinct “emotional state” as soon as it arises or even at all and often not how to label it.

Nonetheless immediately after the emotional prompt the areas of the brain, which among other things are responsible for rational and critical thinking, as well as for organizing intellectual skills, are activated to guide the mental experience, whether to make a decision or attend to something interesting etc., towards a “reasonable” behavior. This behavior or reaction is reasonable in the perception or judgment of the person who has to act and not necessarily from an observer’s point of view. In people with SOPS mood plays a disproportionally influential role in determining the behavior of choice. As such, a person with SOPS seems to process information differently.

*How It Makes People Behave*

Normally in other individuals in ordinary (not intense) situations, the triggered emotion is supposed to turn off, guided by rational thinking, within a few seconds or less as other interests attract our attention. The kind of reaction that we become aware of mentally and/or in one’s body is what defines our anger, fear, joy, despair etc. In the case of SOPS, fear is the dominant reaction; and when that emotion triggers a reaction more often than not the emotion does not appear to switch off to allow non-emotional, rational thinking to occur. In fact the fear reaction stays on and directs the entire course of the response. Often however fear is mostly underlying rather than being openly or clearly displayed.

Neuroscientists are fond of describing fear as what causes us to jump from stepping on a snake; or our first ancestors to run or freeze when confronted by a saber-toothed tiger in our evolutionary history. Fear and safety are two sides of the same coin and this is where SOPS gets its name. The always-dominant need for safety (a.k.a. fear emotion) as seen in SOPS would have undergone changes as it develops into a personality style in a person. As a result, the thoughts, behaviors and other emotions that a person with SOPS exhibits are mostly reactions prompted by fear.

This happens when, for a variety of reasons, some people’s pattern of behaving and thinking become fear-controlled causing them (after being this way for many years) to display a fear-based or safety-oriented personality. This is what it means to say a person has SOPS. Like all other human qualities SOPS may be expressed to a mild, moderate or excessive degree. Be aware that what I’ve written here is a simplified description of SOPS. A full account of it is to be found in the book: “*TO YOUR HAPPINESS: A Self-Healing Guide to Peace of Mind*” [See under Publications on the homepage].

People who have SOPS often tend to display self-centered behaviors, however mostly unconsciously. They also usually want to control situations, including how others behave around them and can change very quickly from a normal and calm demeanor to being angry, depressed or anxious (though usually angry); they can be stubborn, abusive and vindictive. Self-contradiction and impulsive reactions are not uncommon among people with SOPS; but they can also show great insight and are usually very skillful in defending their point of view. To them the most persuasive source of information tends to be their own thinking regardless of the validity of objective sources.

You might know people like this in the country you live in, where you work, in your family or among your acquaintances; but you would not have described them as having SOPS. Or you may have found yourself behaving in this way and not understand why. Whatever the case please leave a comment.

*Leaders with SOPS Become Dictators*

A great deal has been written about how to identify our emotions but all experts do not agree even on the definition or nature of an emotion. Nonetheless they and the public do agree on some, one of which is fear. No one disputes that fear is an emotion. It is considered to be one of the most ancient and crucial of our survival characteristics. Such an essential and somewhat powerful emotion has made it a target for an enormous amount of scientific research. A number of behavioral conditions have been discovered that arise from it. SOPS has been empirically confirmed and its role in accounting for why some people would behave in those ways has been uncovered in a 2018 study: https://doi.org/10.4236/psych.2018.97098

The vast amount of information on how fear affects people however supports the concern that it is important to fully understand SOPS.

One important reason the display of this condition is concerning has to do with its consequences in social-political situations, particularly with respect to leadership roles. Due to the nature of party politics in many countries, someone with this personality can become a leader with a parliamentary majority. Unless there are effective checks and balances, such an individual can easily acquire almost total power, which they will use disproportionately to ensure their own safety while appearing to protect the country. Autocratic rule in such hands can lead to unpredictable, unwelcome, even destructive consequences for a whole country. We have heard descriptions in the news media or through other reports about leaders who are characterized as overly control-oriented, too security-conscious, secretive, having a tendency to be unexplainably angry; easily offended; who are constantly self-promoting or require to be lauded and the like. These are warning signs in a leader or potential leader at any level in any organization or family.

*Partial Profile of SOPS*

Here are some other typical characteristics of individuals with SOPS:

* Maintaining fault-free appearance and image are very important (as such they also tend to be very defensive and are selective as to where or when they show certain behaviors)
* Usually keen to get full information but keep their complete agenda undisclosed (although secretive generally, they may also spontaneously offer unrequested information)
* Frequently use sarcastic humor
* May display “emotional drama”
* Tend to be controlling; seem to strongly desire others to act or think in agreement with them
* Use retaliation and punishment for perceived wrongs done to them, though usually in a passive-aggressive or indirect manner
* Low tolerance of discomfort
* Tend to be moody, irritable and impatient
* Very cautious in spending money; or may often spend seemingly freely
* Close relationships tend to be difficult

Another social issue of grave importance, which SOPS raises is that it may well be this same behavior pattern that leads to domestic violence, sexual assault, abduction, bullying and even terrorism. The evidence seems to indicate that only when confronted with much greater fear or by receiving total agreement, conformity or support will a person with SOPS back down from or change their disagreeable behavior in a given situation. Whether from damage or acquiring a different structure in the brain due to the process known as brain plasticity, after many years of using and being positively reinforced by a SOPS way of behaving change in such individuals becomes very complex to achieve.

Our nervous system provides a connection to the world within and outside of us through our senses. This is how we can tell what’s there, that is, have knowledge of reality. On the other hand our emotions inform us about the reaction required for what we perceive, sense or feel. They allow us to interpret our perceptions to ourselves so we can navigate our environment appropriately. The different emotions have special roles to play in this regard and together with our senses they account for our survival. To depend on our emotion alone gives a distorted or unrealistic view of the world around us. And indeed, people who are mainly safety-directed (that is they have SOPS) tend to make unrealistic evaluations of events.

For example they may express joy or pleasure at something that most observers would not see as joyful; or convey disgust, shame or fear that a majority of other people do not share; or assert that something did or did not happen when the opposite is true. These faulty reactions are most likely the result of fear, the dominant emotion, “hijacking” their attention and perception and distorting them. Such misperceptions make SOPS individuals appear to be living in a parallel universe. Indeed, to depend on one channel (emotion) when most others operate on two (emotion and rational thinking) puts one in an alternate reality, often making that person come across sometimes as unintelligent, unrealistic or even irrational.

*SOPS Can Show Up Anywhere*

From this brief description of SOPS it is clear that people from all areas of life can show from some to many of its characteristics: mayors, presidents, prime ministers, teachers, prison guards, caregivers, the unemployed, CEOs, their deputies, substitutes or potential successors etc. whether male, female or other gender. This means its presence in one or more individuals in any situation is bound to affect the quality of interaction (mostly negatively, though sometimes positively) between people with SOPS and their independent-thinking spouses, work colleagues, members of a non-doting constituency and employees etc. It is however not true that just about anyone is susceptible to SOPS. A person’s life comes under the command of fear in definite ways as verified in the research. All the characteristics of SOPS are explained in detail in: “*TO YOUR HAPPINESS: A Self-Healing Guide to Peace of Mind*”, which is found under the Publication on the homepage of this site.