

The Dynamic Enneagram: Eights

by Tom Condon

An Eight male who once tended bar recalled a time when a young patron insisted that he didn't need to show his identification.

"Oh yes, you do," the Eight replied, "I can't serve you liquor unless you're old enough. The legal drinking age is 21."

An argument started and the bartender got tough with the young man. Without legal identification he flatly refused to serve him and started to walk away.

Behind the bartender the young man blurted, "You're acting like an asshole!"

Over his shoulder the Eight shot back, "I don't *act!*"

An Eight woman, who inherited a family business in the 1950s after her husband's sudden death, faced consistent discrimination as a female CEO. One day a salesman telephoned and asked to speak with the company's president. "I'm the president," she replied. "Of course you are, little lady," the man said, "now just let me talk to the person above you." "God's busy," the Eight snapped and hung up the phone.

As we move from Seven to Eight in the Enneagram, we return to the styles that are more angry than fearful. Eights, in particular, can express their anger in an overtly aggressive way. When healthy, Eights are dynamic, strong-willed and independent. This style embodies the best of power, wielding force and persuasion for constructive ends. Healthy Eights are natural leaders who inspire others, protect the weak and strive for justice. They are radical in the true meaning of the word: "going to the root." Bold and forthright, they can use their power to challenge or overturn an unjust status quo. Healthy Eights are pro-social rather than anti-social; courageous and determined to implement new ideas that impact their environment in significant, positive ways. They are generally honest, direct and often bring a lusty gusto to whatever they do.

Healthy Eights are generous, loyal friends who protect what is soft and vulnerable in others. They often sympathize with underdogs, identifying especially with the small, young and inarticulate. When they work to reform a system, institution or organization their motive is usually to serve the weak and underprivileged.

While this impulse is sincere, it is also a metaphor for how Eights relate to themselves; beneath their strong outer armor lives a young tender part of the Eight whom the Eight protects. Describing an Eight friend, a man said, "She's both aggressive and vulnerable, and they're connected. The outgoing part is a mechanism for protecting the vulnerable part." The Eight herself added, "Oh yeah, I'm real tough, about as tough as a marshmallow."

The young vulnerable part of Eights is innocent, open, able to see the world as if for the first time, with the unvarnished eyes of a child. They may have a related love of nature that reflects this innocent quality and is a source of their spirituality as well.

When people successfully outgrow the neurotic, defensive tendencies of their Enneagram style they usually develop opposite qualities. Some Eights, who start out life seeing it as a war later come to value making peace. As one Eight, a retired soldier, said: "I'm a warrior, but my conclusion is that war is obsolete. The sole purpose of war is to kill and destroy. There are no winners." Another Eight adds: "The greatest thing a person can do is contribute to the well-being of another. And whenever you help a person it can only be done through peace." Healthy Eights are strong enough to be gentle, secure enough to be open, confident enough to be wrong.

When Eights are less healthy, their preoccupation with power becomes defensively warped. While still relatively free of self-doubt, less healthy Eights begin to mask their sensitivities with shows of strength. They over-identify with being powerful as a way to deny their softness and survive in a world that they believe is full of dangers and affronts. They also tend towards excess – staying up late, doing too much, indulging in addictions – which helps to further numb their more delicate feelings.

Eight is the most “Darwinian” of Enneagram styles in that many Eights unconsciously believe that the world is a kind of jungle or a battlefield. Survival is in question, the law of the jungle prevails, only the strong survive. Against this assumption Eights believe they have to mobilize their wills, to be extra focused and forceful to get what they want. An Eight who was raised in an impoverished village in North Africa said, “Life is so severe in the desert and it was the severity that gave me the spirit of struggle, of the fight, the power to persevere. You have to depend on yourself in the desert.”

Unhealthy Eights enjoy confrontation and often try to make contact through fighting. They push people to assess their motives and measure any potential threat. To protect their vulnerabilities, Eights can act overbearing, arrogant, and insensitive. Underneath this intimidating shell the Eight may feel sensitive to betrayal, exposed to ridicule or weak in a way that they are ashamed of. Just as Sevens run from pain, Eights avoid their weak or soft qualities, preferring to bully them out of consciousness or minister to them in others. “He was very even tempered,” a woman joked of her Eight ex-husband, “always in a rage.”

Years ago a cartoon showed a tattered survivor of a nuclear holocaust wandering alone across a barren, destroyed landscape chanting, “We won! We won!” As with Twos, the healthy versus unhealthy expressions of the Eight style are unusually extreme. When Eights are deeply entranced, their potentially benign use of power becomes drastically corrupted. They can do immense damage – mostly to others – in the service of maintaining their grandiose image of an invulnerable self.

I once watched an Eight father bombard his introverted Five daughter with angry criticisms. When he finished his tirade the girl was pale, breathless and obviously devastated. Confronted with the effect of his communication, the father said, “Well, at least I’m not a hypocrite!” Unhealthy Eights can inflict little deaths upon loved ones with a self-fulfilling rage that is a disguised desolate fear of abandonment. The Eight’s belligerence often drives people away; their “honesty” lacks compassion and is experienced by others as demeaning. Also, translating all their other subtler feelings into anger also blinds Eights to seeing their own untended wounds. And staying angry becomes a false way of garnering power.

As you might expect, someone who abuses others tends to feel guilty about it and most Eights instinctually know when they have hurt someone. But guilt is another “weak” feeling, so unhealthy Eights will pave over it by acting more aggressive, trying to convince themselves that they are so powerful that they are exempt from guilt. The essayist Edmund Wilson once described author Ernest Hemingway – an occasionally cruel Eight – as “the kind of person who had a high sense of honor, which he was always violating; and this evidently gave him a permanent bad conscience.”

A news story told of an incident in which a young man's truck had run off a highway and plunged into a ravine. Eyewitnesses said that the man grew enraged when traffic moved too slowly. As he leaned out of his window to make a profane gesture at another driver he lost control of his car, ran off the road and was killed.

Very unhealthy Eights can become poisoned with the need for revenge and monomaniacally believe in force, force, force. A “get them before they get me” attitude rules the unhealthy Eight’s behavior and, to this end, they can be bullying, vengeful, ruthless or homicidal. Many of the world’s bloody dictators have been deeply disturbed Eights and their brutal excesses reflect how unhealthy people with this style actually murder their own humanity. Although they are much more prone to act against others, very unhealthy Eights are ultimately *self-destructive*. They do unto others what they do to themselves.

Anger and Lust

Eights are part of the trio of Enneagram styles who delete themselves, are unconsciously angry and have trouble thinking clearly. Eights delete themselves in anticipation of being unseen by others, becoming preoccupied with maintaining personal strength while transferring their attention onto other people who seem to need protection – people who are stand-ins for the Eight’s disowned vulnerabilities.

Eights, Nines and Ones all react instinctually to the world and have few doubts about their capacity to take action. Their problem is in clearly conceiving a course of action and remembering what to do, especially as it pertains to fulfilling their own needs and priorities.

Eights, Nines and Ones all tend to self-erase, to make themselves invisible. After erasing themselves Eights compensate by pumping themselves up and acting extra-forceful, in effect saying, “Dammit, I’m here after all.” Underneath, however, they may feel absent, overlooked, as if their needs are irrelevant. The anger in Eights is more narcissistic, designed to serve an image of a strong self unlike a One’s anger which can be about rules, propriety and principles. Both, however, are compensations for feeling absent in an essential personal way.

Eight are prone to polarized thinking, seeing things in oversimplified opposites that leave little room for ambiguity. Suddenly there are only two choices; people are either friends or enemies, the Eight is either totally strong or totally weak. An Eight social activist said, “I think you can do one of two things with your life. You can either spend your time in introspection or you can spend your time doing something. I’ve devoted myself to being effective. And if you look at light beams, the most effective are the lasers because they’re concentrated.”

Some Eights say that they if the don’t feel like they are always right then they must be completely wrong and their strength will collapse into a heap of weakness. While Ones divide things into black-and-white moral choices, Eights polarize to maintain a strong self: You’re either with me or against me.

Eights control through *lust* which includes sexual lust, but encompasses a lust for power, a drive to dominate and prevail. This is similar to Freud’s concept of the libido, which includes sexuality, but also has a more expansive meaning. After unconsciously deleting themselves Eights compensate by filling themselves with energy, some of it sexual, some of it angry; all of it driven by a will to prevail. This drive can be aggressive or mild, but its force is unmistakable. An Eight’s lust is sometimes expressed through their sexuality but may also come out through excessive or domineering behavior as when Eights invade the boundaries and trample the dignity of others. Another possible expression is through restless motion: A business associate of an unhealthy Eight described him as having a “driving fear of boredom, and therefore the need for activity – not action always, but activity – it is any activity, all activity, as much activity as possible, all the time. He has no friends, no hobbies, no interests. Nothing except activity.”

Eights dissociate from their vulnerable feelings through the defense mechanism of *denial*, an inner refusal to identify with their softer feelings or admit or the effect of their actions on others. Defensive Eights cope with their wounds and soft spots by denying they are there; or by internally overpowering them or by leaping into external action. Denial is a kind of willed insensitivity, buttressed by the Eight’s tendency to think in oversimple either-or terms.

This defense explains the difference between the powerful effect the Eight has on others versus the Eight’s inner experience of that same power. Most unhealthy Eights don’t realize how obnoxious they can be because they defensively deny feedback. An Eight might deny their guilt, cover it up with more attacks, and pretend they have nothing to apologize for. As one Eight joked, “It didn’t happen, I didn’t do it and besides they deserved it.”

Out for dinner with an Eight in denial and you might have a conversation like this:

“You just hurt that waitress’s feelings.”

“No, I didn’t, you’re imagining things.”

“When you told her her shoes made her walk like Porky the Pig, she blushed and winced.”

“Nah, she didn’t, she ...”

“Then she started crying.”

“No way. She’s probably just been cutting onions.”

“I can see her crying across the room right now.”

“She’s probably having her period.”

“It started with you.”

“OK, OK! What do you want from me? If she’s going to be such a crybaby maybe we should leave her a kleenex for a tip!”

The combination of denial and their desire to protect underdogs can lead Eights to take peculiar ideological stances. An Eight ex-politician used to make well-paid speeches to select businesses in which she would deride all claims about the dangers of industrial pollution. In an interview she explained her mission: to protect and support companies that were *known polluters*. Why? “Because they need cheering up the most – everyone’s against them.”

Cartoon Thinking

The Eight defense of denial is bolstered by “cartoon thinking” a way that Eights visually distort reality when defensive. Sometimes at carnivals there are sketch artists who draw comic portraits of people. Such a drawing will accurately capture someone’s essential likeness but exaggerate a specific feature like their teeth or hair or nose. It looks sufficiently like you to be identified as you, but it’s also a distorted cartoon, a caricature, an affectionate grotesque. The same process can be seen in political cartoons and in the depiction of the enemy in wartime propaganda.

This is how defensive Eights see people. To maintain their sense of strength and dissociate from their weakness, Eights de-identify with others. Using their imaginations they make three-dimensional people – especially their “opponents” – into flat, two-dimensional caricatures and then fight with or lampoon those caricatures. Being pushy, forceful or cruel to a cartoon is not the same as harming a real person, so the damage Eights do is easier to rationalize and deny. If the real person reacts badly to the Eight’s aggression, the Eight might then further ridicule their caricature for being weak.

One Eight father, disappointed in sensitive, other-worldly Four son, used to mock him with the nickname “Ferdinand” after a bull in a Walt Disney cartoon who preferred smelling flowers to fighting. An Eight football player used cartoon thinking to prepare for games: A few days in advance he would begin to manufacture a hatred for his opponents by visualizing them as various grotesque caricatures. He did the same thing to himself: “By the day of the game,” he says, “I would look like a monster and feel like a dog with rabies.”

In the trance of their Enneagram style, Eights see themselves as caricatures as well. In keeping with their Darwinian view of the world, it’s not unusual for them to describe themselves as aggressive animals – an attack dog, a junkyard dog or an alpha predator like a lion or a shark. One Eight used a military metaphor to describe his days as a professional athlete: “I was a gladiator, a one man army.” Another chronically ill Eight referred to himself as “a broken down tank.” These types of self-images are consistent with a warlike view of the world, but they are also cartoonish.

Other Sensory Distinctions

Many female Eights are socialized out of overtly expressing the aggressiveness of their style. They are taught to be sensitive to other people’s feelings, have good manners and act “lady like.” In some ways this is helpful for neutralizing the willful insensitivities of the Eight trance. It is also, however, an expression of how patriarchal cultures react to strong women and many female Eights remember receiving negative messages about their “masculinity.” (“Don’t be so angry. Don’t be such a tomboy.”) Some female Eights felt like they were raised as a son or trained to be male: “The message I got from my father was, ‘You’d better do something, you’d better contribute something, and don’t be afraid.’ I wish I had been told that it would be nice just to be a girl, too. It would have been nice not to always have to achieve so much. I wish that I could have been easier on myself.” As adults, female Eights can have trouble accepting themselves and may suppress their power in order to protect others from it.

Eights tend to use colorful, blunt and profane language. They can also be facile with metaphors, often without being conscious of the fact. A very high percentage of Eights swear liberally, even priests and nuns. The language of blame pervades the speech of entranced Eights. Rather than making “I” statements, they make “you” statements. They also have trouble listening (denial) and can distort what they hear when defensive.

When angry their speech can have a rat-a-tat tempo like machine-gun fire, especially if they have a Seven wing.

Eights frequently have deep voices, an indicator of both a kinesthetic bias – many feeling-oriented people are deep-voiced – and possible increased testosterone levels in their general body chemistry. Although there are many exceptions, a steady percentage of Eights have either stocky Endomorphic or athletic Mesomorphic body types. Only a few are thin, lean, long-muscled Ectomorphs.

Some Eights have a permanent downward junction in their brow resembling a slight frown, what one woman called her “angry brow.” Some Eights have such strong physical constitutions that they can continue to drink, smoke and carouse into old age. Others Eights who live the same way can’t sustain it and eventually have abrupt health collapses.

As body sensors, Ones, Eights and Nines all tend to translate emotional feelings into physical sensations and be more aware of body feelings rather than emotions. Eights, in particular, transform their emotions into sexual lust, physical energy and somatic symptoms. One Eight, working at home with the television on, watched extensive news coverage of a school bus accident resulting in the death of many children. He said he had a knot in his stomach for 48 hours. He also felt rage but knew enough about his Eightness to suspect that his anger was covering up pain. After two days he was able to get in touch with his emotional sadness over the event. The moment he did, his stomach ache went away. Another Eight recalled her emotionally numb reaction the day her brother was murdered: “The strange thing is when I learned he had died, I lost my grip, the power in my arms. I couldn’t make a fist.” Later she was able to grieve emotionally.

Some Eights can be contradictory about sex, acting alternately libertine and then pious. They could also demonstrate a “Do as I say not as I do,” attitude, especially towards their children. One Eight, who was horrified to discover that his daughter was gay, also invested money in pornographic films, each of which included a lesbian sex scene.

Eights will sometimes talk as though sex and love are separate, implying that their body feelings and their emotions are disconnected. They may also talk about sex in animalistic metaphors that are intentionally anti-sentimental and, therefore, anti-vulnerable. With this mentality an Eight could, for instance, believe that having sex is the best way to solve an emotional conflict with a spouse; rather than, say, talking about and exposing their feelings. An Eight with this pattern recognized what it covered up: “I knew that I was afraid of falling in love. It’s such a frightening, painful process. It’s annihilating. You’re weak, vulnerable. Breaking up is worse. Perhaps the perfect love is one that has a short beginning and a quick ending.”

Next: How Eights Grow and Change