

Are You an Onion or a Garlic?

American psychologist Nicholas Cummings has a unique way of differentiating personality types. He divides people into Onions and Garlics. In Cummings's system, Onions are people who are hard on themselves, while Garlics are people who are hard on others. The extreme version of an Onion is the anxiety-ridden "neurotic" person who worries about everything, blames themselves for things that go wrong and stew in their own juices. Because they have a lot of fears and internalize blame, they often are passive interpersonally and lose out in getting their needs met. Garlics are people who see only their own needs, tend to blame others for their mistakes, are ruthless and aggressive in pursuing their goals and are interpersonally selfish. The extreme version of the Garlic is the narcissistic personality or the psychopathic personality, where the needs of others are irrelevant.

Fortunately, most people possess some combination of onion and garlic traits. One might argue that a very well-balanced person would have equal measures of both: the ability to self-reflect and take responsibility for their short-comings and fears (onion), the ability to empathize with others (onion), and the ability to promote their own agenda fearlessly at times (garlic). However, people are not perfectly well-balanced, and we can probably slot ourselves and those around us more in one camp or the other.

This simple typology points us to some important lessons for daily living and self-improvement. If you are primarily an Onion and your boss or spouse is a Garlic, you will be very uncomfortable. You will need to work on either changing your environment (a transfer, job change or new relationship) or developing self-protective ways of filtering the Garlic's messages. The best therapy for an Onion may be cognitive behavioural therapy which can help the person self-soothe, think positively about themselves and develop skills to be assertive with the Garlics of the world.

The Garlics don't have it completely rosy either. They usually show up in a therapist's office because someone else has been unhappy with their behaviour. Being aggressively self-serving only works to a point. Eventually, people begin to resent you and plot your destruction. It is very difficult to maintain long term intimate relationships if you are self-centred. Garlics need to be convinced that a balanced approach is best. Therapeutic goals would include improving personal accountability, empathy-training and inclusive decision-making.

This simple culinary-based distinction can be a useful guide to living and self-improvement.

Dr. Jim Browning is a Registered Psychologist in West Vancouver - <http://www.jimbrowning.ca/>

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