

## Introducing the Phlegmatic

These notes are taken from 'Understanding Yourself' by John Sparkes, a temperament manual which is written from the perspective of what a child needs as they are growing up. It is available as an [ebook](#) via Amazon.

### 1. Keep what you can

Imagine the Phlegmatic clinging to a rock in a rough sea. A little way off is the shore. He could make it to safety. What will he do? The instinctive response of the Phlegmatic is to cling tighter rather than take the risk of swimming even that short distance.

The Phlegmatic starts from the point of feeling fragile. Left to himself he will work on the premise that he is better holding on to what he has. The problem with that position is that the challenges of life demand that he gets involved; demand that he give himself away. So, what is his response? Retreat within himself; create an emotional no-go area between himself and the challenge and hope when he next looks again that it has all gone away. From that position of retreat he surveys his environment and the people in it, making sure that he keeps total control over all who approach his world.

Anyone who tries to breach the no-go area will quickly realise that he is being controlled. Suggestions or advice may be offered to the Phlegmatic, but it will all be filtered with 'selective hearing' and certainly only selective involvement.

He will need to learn that he can only be sure of keeping what he gives away and that the more he protects himself the more fragile he will feel, and the stronger will be the protective defences and the control.

### 2. An observer

From childhood he is, by nature, a good observer, whether it is of other children's games or activities in, and outside, the home. As he gets older the tendency to observe enables him to choose to 'switch off' or ignore what is going on around him. He begins to create his own little world of toys and games. When he is able to read he may use books or TV programmes, to create an escape world. This ability to observe becomes a useful means of protecting himself from the possibility of failure or of being laughed at. It can also lead all too easily into laziness.

When threatened he will take the easy way out - retreat and disappear into his own occupation. When he does get involved, it is a calculated involvement over which he will exercise tight control. From this observing stance in life he operates with a 'them and us' mentality.

This tendency to avoid the harsh realities of life can easily lead to fantasy or daydream. Instead of his emotional needs being met in the challenging and demanding real world of relationships he uses fantasy to meet those needs. Because he knows how to use this alternative it leaves him even less motivated to build meaningful relationships with those around him.

### 3. Digging in

If he is not taught from an early age to:

- go beyond clinging to what he has
- being a spectator

to:

- involvement
- sharing possessions and himself

he will quickly establish defences that are very difficult to break down. His strength will show itself as a stubborn protection - aided and abetted by whichever extrovert temperament he has.

Combine this stubborn protection with his inclination to take the line of least resistance and a barricade is erected that becomes very difficult to remove. He makes comments but does not get involved; he makes sport of others with his dry humour.

From behind this barricade he observes the world and those around him. He offers advice and uses a dry humour, often making sport of others. He appears genuinely confused if challenged and unable to appreciate the feelings of others. The truth is - he has made a series of choices that have led to that position and he can choose to change it! His apparent unwillingness to make those choices leaves those on the outside of his world feeling devalued and frustrated. Attempts to 'knock on his door' and get a heart response seem to only serve to drive him deeper into himself.

### 4. Anxiety

Because the Phlegmatic is not being exercised or developed behind that barricade it remains weak. An extrovert temperament on top can act like a cover over a young plant preventing it from getting sunlight and rain. The extrovert has reinforced this defensive barricade. The plant soon grows yellow and limp. When the plant is exposed it finds itself unable to withstand the elements. The Phlegmatic needs to engage with life at the right level producing a strong person, with backbone to face life's demands and crises.

Within this protected Phlegmatic, anxiety and fears grow out of perspective and he further protects himself, and restricts his lifestyle, in an attempt to cope. Insomnia becomes a problem. Failure to express emotions healthily can result in physical illness.

He has a fear of not having an identity. His only hope, he feels, is to find something to hold on to through which he can express his need to be significant. A never-ending search for meaning, a special role, expecting to be treated differently, finding worth within a particular occupation, are all expressions of this need. These anxieties have their root in the 'fragile' feeling of the Phlegmatic, searching for life's ideals.

### 5. The diplomat

He is a peace-lover and with his ability to stand back and be objective he can use his diplomacy to good effect. However, in situations in which he has an 'emotional interest' his non-confrontational nature tends to take the line of least resistance and he becomes very

subjective. This can mean failing to take proper responsibility in emotionally demanding situations both in and outside the home.

## 6. Choices

The decision-making process is central to the understanding of this temperament and it works in a number of ways:

### a. Selective involvement

He will be very selective in what he becomes involved with and the level of that involvement. He will choose what he feels safe with - and often that is what is less emotionally demanding. Therein lies a real practical danger. He will be good at his work, find his self-worth in it, even to the point of being a workaholic, but will 'switch off' when it comes to the emotional demands of family - to the frustration of that family! Thus, those outside the home see him as amiable, obliging and hardworking whilst the family get a different picture.

### b. 'Decisiveness'

Sometimes his apparent 'decisiveness' is simply shutting out issues he does not want to look at – another form of selective involvement. His dismissiveness of certain people can be his way of not facing the challenge of following something through.

### c. Limited focus

Because of his need to exercise tight control over what he chooses to get involved with he feels he is constantly working under pressure. The doing of a particular task can be like a foray out into an uncomfortable world so he tends to focus on one thing at a time and any distraction or extra demands add to the pressure.

### d. One way or the other

Choices and influences in childhood can set patterns for the rest of his life. This is, of course, true for all of us but for the Phlegmatic those 'points of decision' and influences quickly become set in stone. Major decisions such as careers are affected, as are issues that might seem to be of lesser import. For example, if a child is brought up in a home where he is encouraged to read books, he may well become a bookworm. If there is no literary interest, there is a real possibility that he will never develop an interest in books.

### e. Crossing the line

One of the most important decisions a Phlegmatic can ever make is to choose to stop protecting himself and 'come out into the open'. The Phlegmatic will say 'I can't' when what he means is 'I won't'. He may have hidden behind his barricade, he may have covered his Phlegmatic temperament over with his extrovert temperament but he has far more power to choose than what he cares to believe! And herein lies the key for the Phlegmatic – it is that fundamental choice to step out of the place of protection and into the place of involvement. And it can happen in a moment of time. He can choose to change his stance once and for all. Of course, that ground is consolidated by a continuous series of choices but the whole quality of the Phlegmatic's life hinges on that basic choice. Unfortunately, the Phlegmatic is convinced someone is trying to take something away from him so generally fights the process every inch of the way making life frustratingly difficult for those who love him.

## 7. Pain

At heart he is a tender person; therefore he finds it difficult to cope with pain of any kind whether it be physical or emotional, in himself or others. Once again to switch it off is easier, to the point of a shrug of the shoulder or a baleful stare. It is a fact that what we do to our own emotions is what we do to other people so if the Phlegmatic switches off his emotions he will switch off those around him. That will leave those who love him feeling hurt, controlled or dismissed. He loses the ability to feel what someone else is feeling. So, the real world around him becomes lost as his mind becomes absorbed with a much easier, less painful, fantasy world. This world can consist of idealistic fantasies that have their roots in the simple childhood pleasures such as reading or modelling. He will often play a significant role in this world as it fulfils his need to be special or different.

## 8. Roller-coaster

Calmness under pressure is a characteristic of the Phlegmatic. However, there is an emotional roller coaster that goes on beneath the surface, and it relates, as do most other things for the Phlegmatic, to the issue of involvement. There are certain areas of life that he is involved in on a regular basis and, provided he is not too emotionally challenged in those areas, life goes on in a steady and routine way. However, there are other areas of responsibility that do not come easily, for example, the challenge of consistent, constructive involvement in family life. When challenged to get involved, if he makes the decision to do so, he will then focus on the task in hand and will probably do well in it. However, because his level of involvement has been raised higher than what he is used to, he will only sustain this for a while before it peaks and he starts down the slippery slope. For his part, he becomes aware that emotionally he is 'off colour' and in decline and wonders what caused it. Others, too, notice that things are going wrong. This downward slide continues until he runs into a crisis and is again challenged and the process starts over again. It is tempting to look for a particular reason as to why the decline sets in but usually it is simply that he is operating above his usual level of involvement. The answer is to catch the downward slide as soon as it occurs. Encourage him to motivate himself to remain at that higher level of involvement permanently.

## 9. Neglect or damage

For the Phlegmatic a distinction must be made between neglect and damage. Neglect opens a door for many problems, including the Phlegmatic's ability to create their own worlds. However, damage can lock a child into such a feeling of worthlessness and vulnerability that a key has to be found to unlock that door. Damage can be caused by such things as unfavourable comparisons with siblings, a value system based on performance or overbearing parental control. The key is to help him fully face the reality and effects of this damage, to forgive the people who caused it and to recognise that he is no longer subject to those pressures. He needs to learn to live in the present with all that is good and positive in it and, at the same time, deal constructively with the legacy of that damage.

## Meeting the needs of the Phlegmatic

### 10. Warmth

The Phlegmatic has an enormous capacity for affection and this needs to be met by warmth in the form of understanding and cuddles from both parents. If this need is not met adequately the embarrassment level of this child will be high.

### 11. Backbone

This youngster appears to be good and easy-going. He seems to make few demands and it is tempting to let him be in his own little world. Therein lies the danger. Watch for switching off and laziness. He must be encouraged to face and handle pain. His tenderness needs to be given a 'backbone' so that he does not collapse in the face of difficulty. Make him do what he can for himself rather than become the centre of attention through 'being helpless'. Discipline his lifestyle, his bedtime, eating habits, tidiness etc. Help him develop healthy motivation, disciplines and organisation in life. Beware of the easy option of putting him in front of the TV, computer or equivalent.

### 12. Someone else's shoes

Help him to see the effect that he has on others. Make sure he allows himself to feel what is being shared to the point where it really touches him. This is the key to helping a Phlegmatic break the habit of self-protection. If he has been allowed to develop selfish patterns encourage him to make decisions which genuinely put the other person's feelings first. These will sometimes involve doing something practical for the other person. Do not let him argue with 'mental debates'. This is part of his defence and simply keeps the process going. Consistently hedge him in with the reality of his effect on others. It may seem clever to calmly stand on the edge and criticise and so justify his lack of involvement, but it can be positively hurtful!

### 13. Fantasy

Recognise that he will quickly and naturally develop a fantasy world. Be aware of his literary, film or any other interests which can influence his thinking. Take care that the playing out of heroes and victims, daddies, mummies and little babies do not become an alternative way of meeting emotional needs. Be aware of games that meet 'comfort' needs (e.g. doctors and nurses). Watch for anything that provides escape from reality. Even harmless hobbies (e.g. Lego, modelling) can become places of retreat and some can provide escape for fantasy. The Phlegmatic's unreality does not have moral boundaries.

## Summary of the Phlegmatic

The Phlegmatic has qualities that can be outstanding.

- His tenderness can help him identify with other people and their needs. He has a real ability to empathise.
- He can be practical, dependable and a real sticker.
- His sense of humour can save the day.

- He makes a good diplomat
- When he chooses to become involved with something he can be methodical and organised.

It is worth the parent becoming involved with the 'good' child to avoid hurt later and, in particular, to give the child the capacity to form healthy relationships with others.