

"Buster"

by
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Normative Data

Joseph "Buster" Keaton, Jr. is a thirty-five year old white male currently residing in Hollywood, California. He is currently married, having just celebrated his tenth anniversary, although he does not like to speak about his marriage unless as a joke or sarcastic remark. He has two sons, ages eight and six. He is well known as an actor and filmmaker of sight gags and slapstick and is currently under contract with Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer studios.

Presenting Problem

Buster is attending therapy under the "urgings" of his supervising producer Irving Thalberg and MGM's studio boss Louis B. Mayer in response to complaints issued by crewmembers over Buster's drinking habits. The crewmembers have complained that he has become irritable, snapping at minor mistakes, and that he shows up late and unready for the day. Buster admits he drinks, but adds that everyone does. He is quick to add his drinking is not as bad as someone like Lionel Barrymore.

He does admit things have gotten worse. He says he now needs to drink to fall asleep and consumes "eye-openers" in order to function. He suffers from hand tremors and alcohol-induced blackouts. His wife makes excuses for his drunken behavior at social events but does nothing otherwise to curb it. While he is "thankful for that small blessing," he is more grateful towards Mayer and Thalberg for "encouraging me to seek help."

Buster explains his drinking habits as a way to fill time and consume excess creative energy. He has more free time now working at MGM, he says, because he is "just another actor

on the lot." He does not blame anyone but himself for his current situation. He says he has control over his drinking so that it won't get worse, and he is careful to avoid drinking in situations where he could harm others. Taken all of these symptoms into account, a diagnosis of Alcohol Dependence, due to his tolerance and withdrawal cycles, is applicable.

Family History

Since he was four, for sixteen years, Buster Keaton traveled with his parents as part of the rough-and-tumble vaudeville act known as The Three Keatons. His father, Joe, capitalizing on his son's natural comic appeal, illegally incorporated him into an act that mainly consisted of him throwing Buster around until he was old enough to fight back. Buster recalls their touring with fond memories and is thankful to his parents for treating him like their partner, "an adult and full-fledged performer."

Buster has two younger siblings, a brother and sister who Joe tried to incorporate into the act. Neither showed Buster's talents so they were sent to a private boarding school while the trio toured. When they were together, Buster assumed the role of surrogate father, relishing taking care of his young siblings. His mother, Myra, he describes as kind, quiet, not much on maternal qualities but with a passion for pinochle. He talks more about his father, mostly in respect. He admires the way his father fought with stage managers for what he wanted and how he was able to manipulate the press to further their own publicity. Buster admits his father drank a lot and that at times he would have to cover for him, but he does not remember it as being a big problem. Despite all this, he does not describe his relationship with Joe as close. To this question he responded, "about as close as the length of a broom," referring to a skit they performed that

consisted of hitting each other with broomsticks. Despite any lack of closeness, he has his family close to him and is supporting his parents in their older age. He says it is his duty.

Along with supporting this family, he also supports his wife and children, and his mother and sister-in-law who live with them. He met Natalie when he started working in the silent movies. They were not married until four years later. Buster describes Natalie, when he first met her, as "a meek, mild girl who had much warmth and great feminine sweetness," and found her family to be "gay, vital and full of good humor." Currently, all these relationships are strained, that he is now feeling claustrophobic with having everyone around him. When pressed, he confessed that he has not had sexual relations with his wife since the birth of his youngest son and now routinely has extramarital affairs. He does feel a special affinity for his sons, describing them as mischievous boys like himself.

Personality Traits and Interpersonal Style

When asked to describe himself, Buster says he is confident, creative, modest, and stopped there. However, a lot of Buster's personality can be garnered from his behavior. He constantly has a vacant look on his face, a deadpan expression for which he is famous. He rarely offers any information and is sometimes reluctant to respond, spending much of the time in silence, working on his "writin'" as he calls the mapping of his stunts and pranks. Thus, although he could be described as fearless when considering the dangerous stunts he performs, he is in person very shy and withdrawn. He is constantly tense, as if on constant watch. He avoids a topic by changing the subject with a joke or sarcastic remark. Overall, he has made it a habit of suppressing his emotions, exerting incredible control over his body to achieve this goal.

This behavior in turn creates difficult interpersonal interactions. He says many people don't know what to do around him when he is simply silent. "I make them uneasy." But he describes himself as very devoted to his closest friends, citing how he was willing to put his career on the line to help Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle through his scandal. He says he has no trouble approaching women. I constantly find him flirting with my receptionist. Listening to his stories, there is a recurrent theme of dependence on others for decision making. He is flippant about the matter, saying he just does not have the head for business.

Focal Conflict

Buster's dilemma centers around a need for control over aspects of his life. He desires mastery over various realms, such as creative control over his films and more decision-making power in his marriage. This desire extends into his past as he sought to have control over his own destiny but found himself on a path in show business was shaped by his father's own desires. His father became an external source which blocked this desire's total expression. The father's authority figure role would later be filled by Roscoe, Joe Schenck, who was Buster's first supervising producer and whom Buster considered as a second father. After Schenck came Mayer and Thalberg and MGM as a whole as the studio dissolved Buster's personal crew and finally relegated him to simply being an actor. In a different way, Natalie also fills this role, dictating their sex life and how they should live.

Paradoxically, Buster has internalized this oppression as guilt. From his father onward, these various people have given him opportunities to do what he loves, making people laugh in an industry where few people succeed. These feelings of gratitude make it hard for him to disobey these people by asserting himself; he feels guilty because they have done so much for

him. When he thinks about how he'd like to take some control over his life, he remembers who is there with the control and feels guilt about contemplating such an action because these very people have made possible his lifestyle.

To deal with this emotional conflict, Buster has resorted to a variety of coping strategies throughout his life. On an adaptive level, Buster has developed a stoicism that allows him to face all these challenges with a calm patience and an indifference. Whatever is thrown at him, he doesn't let it stop him. His famous deadpan expression grew out of this strategy. He recalls forming it upon realizing that the audience wouldn't laugh if they thought he was enjoying himself. However, he later admitted that he had been taught by his father to not show physical weakness, to "go on with the show."

He does succumb to maladaptive strategies as well. He uses sublimation, channeling the stress from his conflict into more acceptable aggression such as the skits with his father. Instead of facing his problems and discussing them, he acts out by pulling pranks. He denies certain negative aspects of his existence, such as the abuse he suffered from his father. In contrast, he accentuates the positive aspects of those who are his obstacles in a form of reaction formation. In a combination, he has a preference to avoid arguments that leads to a dependency on others for decisions. Finally, there is his alcohol dependency when anything else fails.

Childhood

Two incidents in his childhood demonstrate this dilemma in different ways. First, there is his only day of formal school education. His father resisted sending Buster to school because they traveled extensively and having him in school would mean he couldn't perform in a matinee. When he finally relented, Buster recalls being taken out of bed at "the ungodly hour of

eight in the morning." He began the day with a joke in role call, and, with a rousing reaction, thought school would be "just putting on an extra show a day." However, as he kept disrupting the class, the teacher soon took him to the principal and he was sent home, never to return.

Reflecting on the incident, Buster admits the one thing he really missed in his childhood was having "an ordinary school education." He would've liked to have the opportunity to explore other options. "I was so successful as a child performer that if occurred to no one to ask me if there something else I'd like to do when I grew up." In discussing this incident, Buster related how he was worried he'd be disappointing his family, which so heavily relied on him for the act, if he continued with school. While he would've liked the opportunity, he says, he couldn't let his family down. His desire for an education was externally thwarted by his father and internally by the guilt generated from his obedience.

To deal with this disappointment, young Buster employed his burgeoning stoicism. He accepted what happened and moved on without dwelling on it or the accompanying emotions. "Instead of formal schooling, I did get the best catch-as-catch-can education from my profession anyone could have wanted." With this acceptance, he was able to downplay the importance and thus his desire for formal education, lessening the impact of the conflict overall. Other incidences in his life demonstrate this ability to push on after a challenge or disappointment. One day Buster was knocked unconscious by his father during an act. The doctor told him to stay in bed for a couple days, but he got up for a matinee anyway. His parents allowed him to perform after he said he was fine. Only one time when Buster was seriously injured did he miss a performance, of which he's extremely proud. In these instances, he has a mastery over his body, partially fulfilling his dilemma.

A second incident shows a different type of coping strategy. Joe found out about Buster's new smoking habit accidentally before a performance but said nothing. Buster was terrified about what his father would do. They went on with the performance, and their violence escalated as Buster gave as good as he got. It took two doctors and two masseurs to get them into shape for a later performance. After the performance, Joe simply slapped the tobacco on the table. Buster says it was Joe's way of acknowledging he had the right to smoke. Once again Buster displayed a desire to exert some type of control over his life in the form of smoking, but his father was an obstacle. This time, however, Buster was victorious.

Through sublimation he was able to channel this conflict into the violence of the act. In this incidence, he knew his father was going to punish him, so as a preemptive strike he physically punished him in a way that was both socially sanctioned and applauded. Dealing with his frustration in this manner was on an almost daily basis. Their skits varied from hitting each other repeatedly with broomsticks or even more dangerous stunts. Such beatings allowed him to partially fulfill his desire in this highly controlled and choreographed situation without the fear of disappointing his father to bring up guilt. Buster was able to decrease his guilt with the knowledge that he was an integral part to the act.

In looking back at his childhood, Buster typically denies many aspects of his life that he finds unfavorable. For the most part, he does not believe that his father was a cruel man, using abuse to mold him. "All little boys like to be roughhoused by their fathers." He admits his father would occasionally hit him if he even hinted at crying or laughing, but the main reason he says he remained stoic was because he learned that the audience wouldn't laugh if they thought he was enjoying himself. On the issue of physical punishments, he said it was expected if he was

disobedient. "You were supposed to please them. When I disobeyed orders I got a good clout over the backside." Denying the negative aspects of his father's personality allows him

to not care whether or not he pursued mastery and thus decreasing the intensity of the dilemma overall. By focusing on the positive aspects, he convinced himself that he didn't need to break away from such good parents.

Current Life

Two incidences in Buster's current life focusing on two realms significant to him demonstrate his dilemma and three new coping strategies. First, in the realm of the home, he recently had a "miniature war" with Natalie. Buster wanted to bring his two sons and their governess down to Tijuana for the weekend on a private jet. While they were waiting for border crossing clearance in San Diego, the governess took the boys to the bathroom and didn't return. When Buster went to find them, he found the police instead and was told that his sons were in police custody under the suspicion that Buster had kidnapped them, as reported by his wife. Buster allowed himself to be strong-armed, turning over his children and wondering how a father could kidnap his own children. Then he went home and drank the weekend away.

This incident is symptomatic of the Keatons' marriage. Buster wanted to exert some control over the lives of his sons but his wife stepped in and forbid it. When asked why he didn't get angry and assertive over Natalie, he said she already puts up with so much of his trouble that he didn't want to cause anymore. Buster feels guilty about how he treats Natalie, with his well-known extramarital affairs. He also feels that he isn't the best husband for her because he was never truly committed to her. "She puts up a lot when she puts up with me."

To deal with this conflict, he often avoids arguing with her. He allows his wife to spend \$900 of his \$1000 weekly salary without complaining. When Natalie made the mistake of putting pink ribbons on her son's crib and then insisted pink is for girls, Buster backed down. "I didn't argue, figuring she preferred pink." He allowed her to christen their first son James although he wanted Joseph, as the four first sons of the first sons in the Keaton line have been called. Buster avoids arguments that arise from his desire to assert himself, thus suppressing the guilt he feels because he no longer pushes for control.

In the realm of his career, one incident highlights MGM's increasing control over Buster's creative freedom. By the time "talkies" started, MGM had already stripped him of his role as a filmmaker and relegated him to the role of an actor alone. They assigned him to star in Free and Easy where he played a character that saw the beginning of the mutation of the character Buster had worked to create in his own films. Instead of being the stoic, resourceful man who gets the women, Buster was reduced to playing a bumbler who loses the girl. This was two years ago, and Buster has played such a character since. Recently, he was teamed with Jimmy Durante.

This incident simply demonstrates Buster's loss of control over the one thing in his life he had mastery over: his films. He still desires such control, but MGM in the form of Thalberg and Mayer stand in the way. Additionally, Buster came into MGM under the guidance of Joe Schenck, a man he believed in wholeheartedly to not lead him astray. The gratitude he felt towards Schenck for giving him his start transferred to MGM. Buster went into MGM believing they would continue to give him creative control only to have whittled away. Due to his loyalty to Schenck, he feels guilty about doing anything to stop this dissipation.

To cope with this dilemma he has found other outlets for his creative energy. No longer given the option of acting out his frustration on the screen, he acts out in other ways, just now in

therapy finally discussing it. One night, joined with several friends, he stopped at his private dressing room on the MGM lot for a nightcap. Without warning, Buster grabbed a baseball bat and smashed the place. While he was a prankster all his life, recently his pranks have become more dangerous, for others. He bribed a sleigh driver to give them a treacherous ride, making his wife and sister-in-laws scream. He broke into a mansion while the couple was away for the weekend and threw a huge party, drinking incessantly and destroying an expensive gown. "I thought it was funny, but they weren't laughing." With this behavior, he is again able to find partial control, if at least situation specific, that he no longer has on the studio lot.

Additionally, his alcohol dependence manifests itself as almost a last-ditch strategy. When his wife accused him of kidnapping, all he did was drink. He routinely shows up late to the shooting of his new movies because he has a hangover. Sometimes when his tremors are really bad, he doesn't show up at all. While filming his latest movie, Speak Easily, co-starring Durante, he called in sick two days in a row. His drinking lowers his inhibitions, which increases the severity of his pranks. He says he drinks to get rid of excess energy, the creative energy he no longer can channel into his films. Additionally, alcohol has the effect of numbing the emotions caused by the conflict and giving him an excuse for why he doesn't have control; he's too drunk now.

Transference

In the therapeutic relationship, Buster's dilemma has also manifested. I am a male figure, of roughly similar age to his father, and pose the type of authority figure that has routinely been placed in the obstacle role of his dilemma. From the onset of our sessions, Buster has been unwilling to even negotiate the terms of our meetings. He is more than willing to simply agree

to whatever stipulation or limitation I wish to impose. "You should know best, you're the Doctor." He depends on my decisions for how our time will be spent together. He compliments me for many reasons, such as calling me "damn perceptive" and "clever," commenting my office décor and my taste in women, referring to my receptionist.

However, our next session after we discussed his relationship with Schenck, he did something unexpected. During the session he sat quietly listening, then complimented me and left. Before our next session I heard an exclamation from my receptionist. Rushing out, I found Buster sitting expressionless in the waiting room having just pulled a prank on my receptionist. She had just stepped out to the restroom, leaving Buster alone. When she came back, she found her desk had been totally reorganized. Her files were all backwards, everything on her desk was either taken apart or in some other way undone. Buster had even managed to turn the entire desk around within those few minutes and without me hearing it.

During that session, I pointed out how he was acting to me like he acted toward his father, Schenck, and even Natalie. I explained how complimenting me and allowing me to make all the decisions was the same as he had been doing in his other relationships. "I was just doing what I thought I should. I didn't think you'd want me to argue with you." Realizing he was falling against his guilt conflict, wishing not to disappoint me by being an assertive client, I turned the discussion to what had just happened in the receptionist room. I asked him why he'd done that. "I just wanted to, I guess I thought it was funny." We then discussed why he had decided to pull this prank instead of discussing with me what the problem was. Here his calm façade showed a crack. "What am I supposed to do? Push myself on you?"

Once again Buster is desiring control, this time over the course of his therapy and thus the treatment of his life. Yet he sees in me the same type of authority figure he has always

relinquished control to. This time he came to believe he has to feel obligated and grateful to me because I am willing to spend my time helping him. If he were to then assert himself and force his own will on mine, he'd feel guilty because I am "such a good person for listening to him." To deal with this conflict, he fell back on his avoidance, allowing me to make all the decisions, which left him dependent upon me for his own treatment. Doing this decreases his guilt because he is no longer trying to assert himself. His acting out by pulling that prank gave him an outlet for the frustration he was feeling as he gave me total control over his treatment. He retaliated against me instead of talking to me, and this retaliation gave him some of the control he seeks over the course of his therapy. Finally, he also employed a form of reaction formation and denial as he focused on positive aspects of my behavior, as he did with his father's behavior. By focusing on only these aspects, he convinced himself that I was a good person and that he is doing good by acquiescing to me. Such a belief then decreases the overall intensity of his dilemma.

We are currently working on his insight and understanding of the true nature of his dilemma and all the influences on it. But together we have agreed upon the treatment intervention to handle his alcohol dependence with the intention of examining his dilemma as the real curative measure.

Sources

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