

Unstable

To be unstable is to lack consistency of mood and feeling-tone, to be prey to inappropriate or unreasonable wishes, or to swing unexpectedly from high to low states of mind. Society, the workplace, and domestic life require a modicum of stability from all of us, some tolerance for routine and for other people's habits. Lacking those self-disciplinary skills, an individual threatens the always shaky balance of the social contract.

Examples

1 Dancing mania

I am generally able to count on my stability, and accordingly to meet the expectations of my work, my domestic life, and my community. Rarely do I become volatile. But one trigger to instability, in my life, has been a crazy susceptibility to dance. I hated dance as a youngster, when I was obliged to 'learn how to dance.' But as I get older, my susceptibility to a hot tango, to Nigerian high life, or to romance—'When the deep purple falls'—has rendered me alarming/ridiculously unstable. I can't sit still when the rhythm heats up. At a wedding party in Nigeria, recently, I got the fever, killed a little gin, and began dancing with the other guests. Unlike them, I was awkward and out of step, but I became increasingly athletic and volatile. My wife, quite humiliated, tried to stop me. To no avail. I was unstable.

2 An unstable friend

I have a friend who is unstable. We understand each other, in the past used to eat lunch together, and have learned a lot from one another. He is a Viet Nam veteran, rich with experience. After a couple of years of our acquaintance, however, he began to behave unstably. (As I saw it, anyway.) We would make a date for lunch at Pacos the next week, then shortly before our meeting time he would call to say he would be a little late. I would be sitting at Pacos for twenty or thirty minutes before he arrived. One day we agreed on a meeting, the very next day, in downtown Cedar Rapids. I was there on time, but though he called, and left me there an hour waiting, he never arrived. The next month the same thing. J's behavior was unstable. I could not rely on him, even after making allowances.