

# Borderline Personality Disorder

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*A Handbook for Family and Friends*

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## When a Family Member or Friend Has a Diagnosis of Borderline Personality Disorder

Borderline personality disorder (BPD) affects not only the individual but the entire circle of family and friends. When someone close to you has a diagnosis of BPD, life can feel chaotic; one crisis seems to follow another. People with BPD often say that it is difficult to describe how overwhelmingly bad they feel. Some of them cope by engaging in self-destructive behaviour. Such behaviours can include self-harm of various sorts, suicide threats and attempts, explosions of anger, and periods of depression during which they do not take care of themselves. Friends and family may feel like they are on an emotional roller coaster, fluctuating between compassion and a desperate need to help and anger and frustration.

There can be differing opinions among family members and friends about what is the best way to respond to the individual with BPD, and this may increase tension. One issue that frequently arises is how much responsibility each family member or friend ought to take for trying to make things better. Taking a lot of responsibility is exhausting and can take time and energy away from other roles and responsibilities. Also, taking too much responsibility for another adult's life is disempowering for the individual with BPD, who will eventually resent what will be interpreted as control. However, standing back and watching individuals with BPD struggle with their problems on their own can leave suffering individuals feeling alone and without support and can leave those who are close to them feeling helpless and guilty.

Children who have a parent with BPD face their own challenges. Sometimes they blame themselves for their parent's difficulties. They may not have found a way to talk about or make sense of what is happening, and they sometimes act out their own emotional reactions through maladaptive behaviours at home or school.

Families and friends often wonder what caused BPD and if they are to blame. Current theories suggest that BPD arises from a biological predisposition in combination with difficult childhood experiences. While many people with BPD have a history of trauma, abuse, or deprivation, there are also others who do not. Although more is now known and understood about BPD, misconceptions about the disorder continue to exist within treating services, communities, and families. Some people are convinced that this an incurable condition. It is important to note that people with BPD can and do get better with appropriate treatment -- psychotherapy designed for people with this set of problems -- and very hard work on their part.

## Providence Care Mental Health Services

### Personality Disorders Service

The Personality Disorders Service provides specialized care to non-psychotic individuals suffering from personality disorders who tend to experience intense and distorted thoughts and feelings and engage in self-destructive and socially inappropriate behaviours that are long-standing, hard to change, and affect many aspects of their lives.

The service provides assessment, treatment, community groups, community consultation, education, and information sessions. The service has a strong community orientation and works closely with other health care professionals.

## Resources for Family and Friends

### **Books:**

- ♦ Stop Walking on Eggshells, Paul T. Mason and Randi Kreger
- ♦ The Essential Family Guide to Borderline Personality Disorder, Randi Kreger
- ♦ Sometimes I Act Crazy, Jerold J. Kreisman, M.D., Hal Straus

### **Organizations:**

- ♦ Family Resource Centre, FCMHS (613-544-2886) frc@fcmhs.ca
- ♦ Ottawa Network for Borderline Personality Disorder (613-796-1176) www.on-bpd.ca

### **Websites:**

- ♦ www.bpdfamily.com
- ♦ www.borderlinepersonalitytoday.com
- ♦ www.bpdcentral.com
- ♦ www.camh.ca

There is as much -- if not more -- stigma regarding BPD as toward other mental illnesses. Words like “attention-seeking” and “manipulative” are directed toward individuals who manifest these behaviours. Though behaviours such as self-injury, threats of suicide, and emotional explosions can be upsetting and frustrating for family members and friends, a consistent response of caring plus clear limits is much more helpful than alternatively trying to rescue the individual and then becoming angry when such attempts fail and are not always appreciated.

## What Can Families Do?

There are some common experiences when a family member or friend has BPD; however, there are also differences. Every family and each individual will have their own experience. Some ideas that can be helpful in improving relationships are listed below.

### **Learn About the Disorder**

Learn about BPD. Asking questions, reading, and joining support groups may be useful.

Having knowledge about BPD may be helpful when you:

- ♦ try to understand what the person with BPD may be going through.
- ♦ think about how BPD affects your family/friends.
- ♦ talk about BPD within the family and/or friend circle.
- ♦ speak with others outside of the family or friend circle, including mental health professionals.

### **Practice Acknowledgement and Acceptance**

Families and friends can offer a helpful, supportive environment for people with BPD. Acknowledging and accepting their experience and feelings, along with offering support without criticism or blame, is helpful. This does not mean that you have to agree with or completely understand, but a friend or family member can accept that this is the way the individual with BPD feels and thinks. Dismissing the intensity of an individual's suffering (“Lots of people have much worse problems”; “just pull yourself together”) can lead to desperate attempts to demonstrate just how bad things are through emotional explosion, self-harm behaviours, and suicide attempts.

As well as validating the feelings of your friend or relative, it is important to recognize and accept your own feelings. Sometimes you may feel supportive and warm and other times irritated and frustrated. Though it is normal to experience a wide range of feelings, it is crucial to maintain as much emotional stability as possible in response to the intense emotional states and the provocative behaviours of your BPD friend/relative.

### ***Support Within Limits***

All families and friends have rules, limits, and expectations in order to maintain stability and to balance the needs of each individual and of the group. There is a difference between accepting feelings and accepting behaviour. Setting limits might include saying no to destructive behaviour in your company or within your home or limiting how much time you give. You can care about people but not agree that how they express their distress is respectful or acceptable. It is likely that the limits you set will be tested at times of stress. Despite the struggles, it is important to insist on limits that are essential for the stable functioning of all.

It is important to make decisions about limits and talk about them in a non-blaming way, preferably before a crisis is enacted or during a period of stability after a difficult experience. To set and hold a limit can involve fear and anxiety. "If I insist she leave my home if she keeps screaming, cuts herself, etc., she may kill herself and it will be my fault." The experience of having limits set may also be difficult for your relative/friend with BPD, who may claim that she or he cannot control disturbing behaviours and that anything short of total acceptance is rejection. However, if limits are presented in a consistent and non-blaming way, they help create a caring and safe environment. Framing your needs in "I" statements ("I need a peaceful home in which my family can be assured of a calm atmosphere") rather than "You" statements ("You always create such chaos and scare us with your attention-seeking behaviour") is a respectful and constructive way of insisting that limits be maintained. This nurtures and sustains relationships.

### ***Balance Individual Health And Family Relationship Needs***

Tension can intensify when the needs of the person with BPD are put ahead of the needs of other family/friends over a long period of time. There will be a limit to how much you can offer. It is also important to know that looking after your own needs and attending to your relationships with others can be helpful to the person with BPD in the long run, even if it is interpreted as

rejection at the time. Any relationship between adults where all the giving is on one side, and there is no requirement for reciprocal nurturance and respect, is unhealthy and not respectfully supportive.

Balancing the health and relationship needs of family and friends involves:

- ♦ maintaining good physical, emotional and spiritual health.
- ♦ maintaining other life roles such as friendships, leisure activities, and work.
- ♦ seeking support from other family/friends.
- ♦ seeking professional assistance.

### ***Learn About Self-Harm And Ways To Manage Crises***

Self-harm and suicidal behaviours are frightening and stressful for family and friends. It is hard to remember that these behaviours may be a way of dealing with emotional pain.

It is always tempting to try to take control away from the person with BPD in order to protect her or him. However, in the long term, it is better for everyone if you do not take over. It is helpful to develop a plan about what the family or friend circle will do when your relative/friend self-harms or is suicidal. This is best done with your relative/friend, others in your family or friend circle, and helping professionals. This plan should include a focus on the protection and the emotional well-being of any children in the family.

### ***Explore Treatment/Therapy***

Therapy can help someone with BPD in a number of ways. Treatment sometimes involves several workers and different services. It is helpful if treatment is consistent, coordinated, and undertaken in a collaborative manner. Families/friends can contribute to a shared treatment plan that outlines everyone's role and how to respond to crises. Support from family and friends, though an extremely important part of the individual's healing process, cannot replace professional treatment.

Sometimes those with BPD find it hard to accept that they have problems and that they might benefit from treatment. It is best to support them in finding their own way and making their own choices. Even though treatment may be a good idea, it is every individual's decision whether to engage in a treatment process and what kind of therapy is helpful.