

Understanding borderline personality disorder and available treatment

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Borderline Personality Disorder, or BPD for short, as described by the National Alliance on Mental Health, is a mental disorder characterised by significant fluctuations in mood, behaviour, interpersonal interactions, and self-image.

WHAT CAUSES BPD?

Researchers suggest that BPD arises from a complex mix of factors, including traumatic life events, genetic predispositions, and changes in some regions of the brain that affect a person's emotions, impulsiveness and aggression.

Women are diagnosed with BPD more frequently than men, but the reasons for this disparity remain unclear.

SYMPTOMS OF BPD

BPD typically manifests in early adulthood. Symptoms of BPD can vary, but some of the most common include the following.

- **Intense emotional instability:** Individuals with BPD often experience intense and rapidly shifting emotions, including feelings of sadness, anger, anxiety, and emptiness.

Seemingly minor events may trigger these emotions and can be challenging to regulate.

- **Unstable relationships:** People with BPD tend to have tumultuous and unstable relationships characterised by extreme idealisation and devaluation of others.

They may alternate between idolising and demonising their loved ones, leading to frequent conflicts and difficulty maintaining stable connections.

- **Distorted self-image:** Individuals with BPD often struggle with a distorted self-image, feeling uncertain about their identity, values, and goals in life.

They may have a poor sense of self-esteem and may engage in self-destructive behaviours to gain validation or avoid feelings of emptiness.

- **Impulsive behaviours:** Impulsivity is a hallmark feature of BPD, manifesting in reckless behaviours such as substance abuse, binge eating, careless driving, overspending, or engaging in unsafe sexual practices.

These behaviours often occur in response to intense emotional distress and can have serious consequences.

- **Self-harm and suicidal ideation:** Individuals with BPD are more likely to engage in self-harming practices, such as cutting or burning, as a coping mechanism for emotional pain.

They may also experience recurrent thoughts of suicide or engage in suicidal gestures or attempts.

- **Chronic feelings of emptiness:** Most people who have been diagnosed with BPD might experience a chronic sense of emptiness and inner void, leading to feelings of internal confusion and profound loneliness.

TREATMENT OPTIONS

Borderline personality disorder can be diagnosed by a licensed mental health professional, like a psychiatrist, psychologist, or clinical social worker, who looks carefully at a person's symptoms, the events that have occurred, and the medical background in their family.

There are various successful therapy techniques and interventions available to assist people in managing their BPD symptoms such as the following.

- Psychotherapy, particularly Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT), is considered the gold standard treatment for BPD.

DBT focuses on teaching skills for regulating emotions, improving interpersonal relationships, and tolerating distress.

Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), schema therapy, and mentalisation-based therapy may also be beneficial.

- Medication: Certain medications may be prescribed to alleviate co-occurring symptoms such as depression, anxiety, or impulsivity.

These may include antidepressants, mood stabilisers, or antipsychotic medications, depending on the individual's needs.

- Hospitalisation: In severe cases where individuals are at risk of selfharm or suicide, hospitalisation in a psychiatric facility may be necessary to ensure their safety and provide intensive treatment and support.

COPING STRATEGIES

Several self-help strategies and coping techniques that individuals with BPD can incorporate into their daily lives to manage their symptoms and improve their wellbeing.

Some effective coping strategies include the following.

- Practice mindfulness: Deep breathing, meditation, and progressive muscle relaxation can help people with BPD remain grounded and present in the moment, lowering anxiety and emotional dysregulation.
- Develop healthy coping skills: Healthy coping skills, such as assertive communication, problem-solving, and emotion regulation, can empower individuals to manage stress and navigate challenging situations effectively.
- Build a support network: Developing supportive connections with friends, family, therapists, and support groups can provide emotional support and encouragement.
- Prioritise self-care: Engaging in self-care activities, such as exercise, hobbies, relaxation techniques, and spending time in nature, can help individuals with BPD recharge their batteries and improve their overall wellbeing.
- Set boundaries: Establishing clear boundaries with others and advocating for your needs and preferences can help prevent feelings of resentment and burnout in relationships.
- Practice self-compassion: Be gentle and kind to yourself, especially during difficult times.

Recognise that healing from BPD is a journey, and progress may be gradual.

Celebrate your accomplishments, no matter how small.