

When a Family Member Has Borderline Personality Disorder: Articles and Resources

Psychology Today article: “Borderline: Walking the Line” by Matthew Hutson

Your childhood was full of tantrums—impulsivity, mood swings, neediness, fear of abandonment, and extreme sensitivity to rejection. And this isn't you we're talking about; it's your mom.

If you grew up the constant target of finicky and derisive comments, or the emotional caretaker for one of your parents, you know all too well the pain of having a father or (usually) mother with Borderline Personality Disorder. BPD doesn't just affect the one who receives the diagnosis; it often leaves a wake of turmoil through entire families as the emotional and relational disturbances ripple outward.

When a role model treats you as an extension of herself—there to meet her needs—the trauma can be long lasting. It takes a very strong person to overcome the effects, let alone maintain a constructive relationship with the parent. But there's hope. Here are several guidelines for dealing with a borderline parent, and for moving on with your own life.

Know the Type

Mothers with BPD outnumber fathers, and Christine Lawson, author of *Understanding the Borderline Mother*, has a taxonomy of the troubled parent: "The Queen is controlling, the Witch is sadistic, the Hermit is fearful, and the Waif is helpless," she says. And each requires a different approach. Don't let the Queen get the upper hand; be wary even of accepting gifts because it engenders expectations. Don't internalize the Hermit's fears or become limited by them. Don't allow yourself to be alone with the Witch; maintain distance for your own emotional and physical safety. And with the Waif, don't get pulled into her crises and sense of victimization; "pay attention to your own tendencies to want to rescue her, which just feeds the dynamic," Lawson says.

Build Fences

Borderline parents often can't separate their own needs from the needs of others. And sometimes they can't meet their own emotional needs, so they look to their children to fill it. When the child doesn't do the job, the parent can get angry, making resistance difficult. "Adult children need to define for themselves their limits and boundaries," says Kimberlee Roth, author of *Surviving a Borderline Parent*. "Let's say a parent regularly calls late at night to vent. Whatever your needs, communicate them in a calm, non-accusatory way: 'Mom, I'd like to listen but I can't do it late at night. How about if we talk in the morning instead?'" As a last resort, use Caller ID or voicemail.

Be Firm But Sensitive

Personal validation, which is important in any situation, is essential with a borderline parent. Express your awareness of her emotions even as you set boundaries. "You might feel like a broken record," Roth says, "but it's important to keep repeating your acknowledgement of the parent's needs without diminishing your own."

Trust Yourself

In writing her book, Roth encountered many children of borderline parents who said they felt crazy growing up. "They experienced a lot of inconsistencies—an action or statement that earned praise one day would touch off a three-day, stony silent treatment the next—as well as sudden outbursts and overreactions." So they never learn to trust their own judgment or feelings. The most important element to recovery, she says, is to accept that you're not crazy and that "it wasn't me."

Trust Others

People who've survived a borderline parent most frequently suffer from "feelings of worthlessness, fear of abandonment, and fear of people in general," according to Randi Kreger, co-author of the bestselling *Stop Walking on Eggshells: Taking Your Life Back When Someone You Care About Has Borderline Personality Disorder*. Because these adult children received "such mixed messages—you're a great person one day and you're horrible the next—there's a certain mistrust of people because you're always afraid they're going to hurt you." Kreger advises that they find friends and partners unlike the parent: consistent people who can provide unconditional love. And stop looking for slights; hair-trigger defense systems that developed in the presence of abusive parents often lead people to see ill intentions where they don't exist and end up preemptively sabotaging relationships.

Defend Your Boundaries

Children of borderline parents are often forced to act as the parent themselves—"it's like a child raising a child," Kreger says—and this role can play itself out in other relationships. They grow up very quickly in many ways and act as caretaker for everyone, sometimes at the expense of taking care of themselves. "Having that undue sense of responsibility can leave them feeling very alone in the world," Lawson says. And they allow others to tread their boundaries just as the parent did. So once you learn to set limits for your parent, set them for other people and learn to put yourself first.

None of these steps will come easy. An abusive or inconsistent parent can leave a deep wound. "Trying to manage it can be a lifelong process," Kreger says. But she insists that with a good therapist, and support from a community of other people who have gone through the same thing, "there is real possibility to get better, and I know many people who have."

Article by Dr. David J. Baxter, Ottawa, Canada

The one word that best characterizes borderline personality is "**instability**." Their emotions are unstable, fluctuating wildly for no discernible reason. Their thinking is unstable--rational and clear at times, quite psychotic at other times. Their behavior is unstable--often with periods of excellent conduct, high efficiency and trustworthiness alternating with outbreaks of babyishness, suddenly quitting a job, withdrawing into isolation, failing.

Their self control is unstable--ranging from the extreme self denial of anorexia to being at the mercy of impulses. And their relationships are unstable. They may sacrifice themselves for others, only to reach their limit suddenly and fly into rageful reproaches, or they may curry favor with obedient submission only to rebel, out of the blue, in a tantrum.

Associated with this instability is terrible anxiety, guilt and self-loathing for which relief is sought at any cost--medicine, drugs, alcohol, overeating, suicide. Sadly, oddly, self-injury is discovered by many borderline people to provide faster relief than anything else--cutting or burning themselves stops the anxiety temporarily.

The effect upon others of all this trouble is profound: family members never know what to expect from their volatile child, siblings, or spouse, except they know they can expect trouble: suicide threats and attempts, self-inflicted injuries, outbursts of rage and recrimination, impulsive marriages, divorces, pregnancies and abortions; repeated starting and stopping of jobs and school careers, and a pervasive sense, on the part of the family, of being unable to help.

And, of course, the effect of the illness upon the life of the patient is equally profound: jobs are lost, successes are spoiled, relationships shattered, families alienated. The end result is all too often the failure of a promising life, or a tragic suicide.

Recommended books:

Stop Walking on Eggshells: Taking Your Life Back When Someone You Care about Has Borderline Personality Disorder (Paperback)

by Paul T. Mason (Author), Randi Kreger (Author)

Surviving a Borderline Parent: How to Heal Your Childhood Wounds & Build Trust, Boundaries, and Self-Esteem (Paperback)

by Kimberlee Roth (Author), Freda B. Friedman (Author), Randi Kreger (Foreword)

Children of the Self-Absorbed: A Grown-Up's Guide to Getting over Narcissistic Parents (Paperback)

by Nina W. Brown (Author)

Borderline Personality in Adolescents: A Complete Guide to Understanding and Coping when your Adolescent has BPD

By Blaise Aguire, MD...2007