

DID YOU KNOW?

About 2 percent to 3 percent of the U.S. population have been diagnosed with borderline personality disorder, but many more people are never diagnosed because symptoms often overlap with other mental health conditions.

Chapter **1**

Defining Borderline Personality Disorder

How about sitting down on a blanket for a picnic lunch? At one moment, the weather is sunny and mild; then a few seconds later, the wind picks up and clouds move in. Thunder and lightning. Boom and flash! Food and plates flying everywhere! The day is ruined.

People who suffer from borderline personality disorder (BPD) may have many days

like that — from calm to stormy. Like a fast-moving storm, emotions move quickly from joy to boredom or rage. Relationships with others may begin with devotion and then suddenly become fraught with conflict.

Although many people with BPD are brilliant and creative, emotional disruptions may cause their careers to be interrupted and their lives to be marked by underachievement. Impulsive behaviors complicate their already complex emotions. People with BPD have a high rate of self-harm and suicide.

Having BPD is painful, and it can be hard to love someone with BPD. This chapter gives you a glimpse at the diagnosis and definition of the disorder. I describe the process of diagnosis and offer an overview of the major signs of BPD. I also explain some of the problems with diagnosis. If you think you or someone you care about may have BPD, this chapter answers many of your questions.

What Is Personality and What Is a Personality Disorder?

You probably already have a good idea about what *personality* means. Basically, it's how someone typically acts. A person could be introverted or extroverted, open and excited by new experiences, or want everything to stay the same. They may be generally optimistic or pessimistic,

dependable or unpredictable, withholding or generous.

Of course, everyone's personality can change under certain circumstances. For example, a generally contented, happy-go-lucky person may become extremely angry and aggressive when threatened. But overall, personality remains fairly stable and predictable.

A *personality disorder* is a problematic pattern of emotions, thoughts, and behaviors. Like any personality style, disorders tend to be consistent over time. People with personality disorders act very differently. For example, a small setback in life may result in unexpected rage or distress. Some people with personality disorders have little regard for the law; others are highly *narcissistic* (self-centered). Some people with personality disorders are extremely withdrawn and avoid interactions with people; others have an incredible need to be dependent and the center of attention. These patterns of behavior differ from what's expected in the culture and cause challenges in relationships, at work, and in meeting the obligations of everyday life.

What Is Borderline Personality Disorder?

BPD essentially involves a mixture of symptoms. People with BPD tend to be fragile and respond intensely to everyday challenges. Think of a

delicate flower that disintegrates in the wind. There are four common features of BPD:

- » **Impulsivity:** People with BPD often act without thinking about possible future consequences. They may engage in risky behaviors or self-harm.
- » **Unstable mood:** For people with BPD, moods change quickly, with little provocation. They often misinterpret ordinary life as threatening or malicious.
- » **Rocky relationships:** People with BPD tend to idealize others, and then demonize them, leading to multiple relationships. Their feelings may change from love to jealousy to hate.
- » **Distorted thinking:** People with BPD often feel empty inside, lack direction in life, misinterpret others, and feel paranoid. They can feel dissociated from reality.

This combination of impulsivity, quick mood changes, poor relationships, and weird patterns of thinking makes BPD a difficult diagnosis to live with and to treat.

How Is Borderline Personality Disorder Diagnosed?

A licensed mental health practitioner, usually a psychologist or a psychiatrist, diagnoses BPD. The process includes a comprehensive clinical interview, which involves taking a detailed

history of a person's relationships, behaviors, and moods. In addition, they'll take a complete history of previous mental health problems, emotional or physical abuse, substance use, and suicidal thoughts or acts.

Don't be surprised if a diagnosis takes more than one session. The mental health professional may wait until a strong relationship is formed so that the client is comfortable reporting all symptoms. After an evaluation comes a diagnosis and a plan for treating the symptoms.

How Do I Know if I Have Borderline Personality Disorder or Another Mental Health Condition?

Unfortunately, BPD often occurs along with other mental health issues. For example, it isn't uncommon for someone with BPD to have a substance abuse problem, depression, or anxiety. Only a qualified mental health professional can sort out those symptoms.



TIP

Although most licensed mental health professionals are able to make a diagnosis, some specialize in that area. If there is any question or doubt of a BPD diagnosis, look for a person who is experienced in working with those who have personality disorders. Call the psychology department of the nearest university for a recommendation.

Can Borderline Personality Disorder Be Misdiagnosed?

Yes, in fact, some reports show that almost 40 percent of those with a BPD diagnosis have previously been misdiagnosed. BPD shares many symptoms with other disorders.

For example, people with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) often act impulsively, but so do those with BPD. Substance abuse can lead to rocky relationships, impaired judgment, and intense emotions. Mood instability is found in those with bipolar disorder. And BPD has similar symptoms. Therefore, it's critical that people work with an experienced professional to sort out their symptoms and get the correct diagnosis.