



SA Federation for
Mental Health

PERSONALITY DISORDERS

BORDERLINE PERSONALITY DISORDER

What it is:

Borderline personality disorder is characterised by a deep fear of real or imagined abandonment, as well as intense and volatile relationships, an unstable self-image, and emotional instability. Individuals with this disorder experience intense abandonment fears, and may react with inappropriate anger or fear when faced with even realistic time-limited separation. The individual may associate abandonment with their own perceived negative behaviour, and feel that being left alone implies that they are “bad.” Their efforts to avoid abandonment can become extreme, and lead to self-mutilation or suicide.

Individuals with this disorder may idealise their caregivers or lovers, but they can just as easily switch to devaluing them, if the individual feels they are not receiving enough attention or care. This devaluation can lead to extreme anger and verbal outbursts when they feel neglected or uncared for. Another common trait of borderline personality disorder is that the individual has an unstable self-image. This will be manifested through dramatic shifts in the individual’s personal views and plans regarding their career, values, or sexual orientation.

Individuals with this disorder typically display impulsivity in areas that are potentially damaging or dangerous to themselves, such as gambling, or engaging in unsafe sex. They may also experience emotional instability, and their emotions can change easily depending on the circumstances of the environment.

Common symptoms:

1. Extreme fear of abandonment, and frantic efforts to avoid abandonment of any kind
2. A history of unstable and intense relationships characterised by shifts between the extremes of idealisation and devaluation
3. An unstable self-image, shown through frequent and dramatic shifts in personal views, values and work goals
4. Impulsive behaviour in at least two areas that could be harmful to the individual, for example engaging in unsafe sex, gambling, substance abuse or binge eating
5. Self-mutilation or suicidal behaviour
6. Chronic feelings of emptiness

7. Intense and inappropriate anger, for example frequent angry verbal outbursts or physical fights
8. Extreme stress can lead to individuals with this disorder displaying paranoid behaviour
9. Extreme stress can lead to individuals with this disorder experiencing dissociative symptoms
10. Rapid shifts in mood based on external events



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Causes:

Borderline personality disorder is diagnosed more commonly in women than in men. The disorder is more likely to develop among first degree relatives of an individual who has borderline personality disorder, and there is also a family risk for the development of substance use disorders, antisocial personality disorder, and depressive and bipolar disorders. Childhood physical and sexual abuse as well as parental loss are also risk factors for the development of the disorder.