

what you

NEED TO KNOW

about...

Borderline Personality Traits in Youth

All humans are social, and one of our deepest needs is to attach, or feel connected to others. In fact, we can't survive without others. When we're young, our most important attachments are to parents and adult caregivers. As we get older, our attachments change to include friends and peers. In adulthood, it changes to focus on romantic partners.

Because one of our deepest needs is to attach, it is natural then, that one of our deepest fears is lack of attachment, or rejection, or abandonment. For youth with borderline personality traits, these fears become overwhelming and extreme.

Youth with borderline personality traits are very emotionally sensitive. They are especially sensitive to rejection. They may feel rejected by others, even when the other person did not intend to reject them. This can cause problems in relationships.

When things are going well, youth with borderline personality traits can be exciting and fun to be with. They can be very appreciative, and 'idealize' friends and loved ones. This can make friends and loved ones feel very important and valued.

But it's a different story if things are not going well. If youth with borderline personality traits feel rejected (perhaps because of a disagreement), their feelings can change very quickly. For example:

- Feelings of happiness may suddenly shift to feeling depressed and suicidal
- Appreciation may suddenly shift to anger and hatred of others



Unfortunately, the fears of abandonment and rejection can be a self-fulfilling prophecy. Youth with borderline personality traits fear abandonment or rejection. This leads to behaviours like excessive clinginess and jealousy that make it so others find it hard to be with them.

How do I know if my teen has borderline personality traits?

Youth who have Borderline Personality traits:

- **Are very afraid of being rejected or abandoned.** Because of this, they can become very clingy in relationships. They may need a lot of reassurance, which can be hard for others to understand.
- **Have trouble regulating their emotions** (for example, controlling intense emotions and anger). It's natural to care about our relationships. It's important for us to get upset if we have stress in our relationships, because this reminds us to work out the problem. For youth with borderline personality traits, their extreme emotions can get in the way of working out problems and can cause difficulties in their relationships.
- **Can have impulsive and harmful behaviour.** Youth with borderline personality traits may turn to behaviours (such as self-injury, or self-medicating with drugs and alcohol) to control their intense emotions. But in the long run, these negative behaviours end up causing more problems.

Youth go through many changes during the teen years. And the way they react to people and situations can change a lot too during this time. For these reasons, psychologists and psychiatrists generally don't make a formal diagnosis of Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) until youth are at least 18.

Borderline personality traits include:

- Intense and frequent mood swings
- Trouble managing anger
- Feeling alone and empty inside
- Fears of being alone, rejected or abandoned to the point where your teen makes frantic efforts to avoid being alone, rejected or abandoned
- Relationships that go from one extreme to the other (alternating between powerful love and hate for the same person)
- Problems from impulsive behaviour (acting before thinking)
- Repeated thoughts of suicide or self-harm behaviours (like cutting)

Families of youth with borderline personality traits may feel that they are ‘walking on eggshells’ much of the time.

There are many theories, but it’s likely caused by several things working together like:

What causes youth to develop borderline personality traits?

- **Emotional sensitivity.** Youth with borderline personality traits seem to be born or “hard-wired” to experience stronger emotions. They are more inclined to have very quick, intense emotions, and may struggle with calming down or controlling their emotional reactions which may make the lives of these youth feel like a rollercoaster ride. This emotional sensitivity tends to run in families. For youth with these traits, up to half of their family members will also have a very intense emotional system. Having just enough sensitivity in relationships is a good thing, but being extremely sensitive causes problems.
- **Life events.** Many youth with borderline personality traits have experienced some form of abuse or trauma. It may be that trauma causes changes in the brain that make it more likely that these youth will experience intense feelings.

Other conditions

Youth who have borderline personality traits often have other conditions, such as:

- Anxiety disorders
- Substance abuse
- Mood disorders (like depression)
- Eating disorders, (usually binge eating or bulimia, but sometimes anorexia nervosa)

It's important for youth to get help for these conditions as well. *(National Comorbidity Survey Replication study)*

How common are
borderline
personality
traits?

There are very few studies of borderline personality traits in youth. Two studies suggest that 1 to 3 out of every 100 youth under 18 may have these traits. Researchers estimate that 1 to 2 out of every 100 adults have Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD). Recent studies show that the number of women and men in the community with BPD are similar. More women see professionals for treatment, though.

How is it
diagnosed?

Many parents struggle with wondering whether their teen's behaviour is truly a problem, or part of normal adolescence. If you think your teen has a number of the borderline personality traits outlined above, have her assessed by a psychologist or a psychiatrist. It is best to do this as early as possible. Professional help can give youth the support and strategies that will help them (and their families!) to cope. Most youth who receive appropriate treatment will benefit and show improvement. Youth who don't get treatment are at higher risk for aggression, criminal behaviour, ongoing mental health problems, suicide, homelessness and relationship problems.

Will my teen
get better?

In adults, the symptoms of Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) are worse in early adulthood and the young adult years. Most have more stable lives and emotions by their 30s and 40s. Newer, more effective therapies, like Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT), outlined next page, can help youth recover more quickly. With this therapy, youth learn skills to help them build healthy lives.

Treatment

1. Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT)

In DBT, youth learn to accept themselves without judgment. At the same time, they learn to find ways to change problem behaviours in ways that bring them closer to their own goals. This therapy includes education for parents, family members, and other important individuals in the youths' lives. In DBT, youth learn many skills to help them handle their intense emotional system including:

- Mindfulness
- Interpersonal effectiveness
- Distress tolerance
- Emotional regulation

We'll outline these skills in more detail below.

2. Psychodynamic and interpersonal therapies



It can be hard to find a therapist who is trained in DBT. But there are other types of therapy that can be helpful for youth with borderline personality traits. In practice, most therapists will use an integrative combination of therapies depending on their training, and your teen's situation.

3. Medications



There are no medications that treat borderline personality traits specifically. But there are medications that help with anxiety or depression (especially if they are not getting better with talk therapy.)

Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT) Skills

Mindfulness

Youth with borderline personality traits can become “stuck” in their intense and distressing emotions, “I feel terrible; I’m such a bad person for feeling this way.”

Practicing mindfulness can help youth get “unstuck”. It can help them cope with their feelings, and give more options for how to deal with them. For example; “I’m feeling terrible. Anyone would feel terrible in this situation. This is what I’m going to do about it...”

Mindfulness is one of the core strategies in DBT. It is a kind of focused awareness where youth:

- Practice being in the present moment, instead of thinking or worrying about the past or future. The youth focus their awareness on the present (sights, sounds, body sensations, breathing) instead of other anxious or negative thoughts; this helps with worry and sadness.
- Learn to look at themselves and the world without being critical or judgmental; this helps them to accept themselves.

Distress Tolerance

For youth with borderline personality traits, everyday conflicts and problems can feel like life or death situations. In these situations, youth tend to react quickly in ways that reduce their emotional distress. Unfortunately, these reactions don’t usually help solve their problems; instead, they may create more problems in the long run.

With support, youth can learn to tolerate intense emotional responses without doing things that will make the situation worse.

Emotional Regulation

Emotional regulation is about:

- Learning about and working with emotions so that youth are able to manage them and act effectively - even in the face of strong feelings
- Being able to keep feelings in balance and not let them become overwhelming. This allows youth to stay calm and rational, even when faced with emotionally difficult situations.

Emotional regulation includes:

"I'm feeling upset... I'm angry that my sister didn't say hi to me in front of the other family members."



Recognizing your feelings.

"It's natural to feel upset in a situation like this."



Accepting your emotions.

"I'm too upset to deal with this right now. I'm going to go to the bathroom and calm down before I do anything rash."



Being able to calm down if you're too upset.

"Maybe she's upset with me, or just too busy with the other guests? Either way, the safest thing to do is to be nice. When things are quieter, we can talk alone and see what's up. Even if she is pissed off now, if I'm kind and helpful, she'll apologize later"



Choosing how to respond appropriately.

Types of emotional regulation strategies that are taught in DBT:

1. Keeping a health 'emotional bank account' by doing things that make youth less susceptible to intense and negative emotions. (For example, "eating well" and "getting enough sleep" would be recorded in this bank).
2. Thinking about whether or not feelings "make sense" for the situation at hand. If they do, youth should act on these feelings. But if the feelings aren't justified by the facts of the situation, youth can learn how to change their feelings by adopting an opposite emotion.

Positive Coping

Youth can learn many different ways to handle challenges and problems more positively.

Problem Solving

- What's the problem?
- What would I like to see happen?
- What are my goals?
- What are the possible ways to reach my goals?
- What are the pros and cons of each possible way?
- Did it work? Should I try something else?

Grounding exercises

Connecting to the present moment. For example, "What day is it? It's Saturday. Where am I? I'm in the living room. What's in the room? I see the couch, the coffee table, and my cup of coffee."



Getting social support

- Spending time with family and friends
- Reaching out to talk with people close to you during rough times



Keeping busy (behavioural activation)

Being passive and obsessing about stresses doesn't help. Keeping busy with an activity can be a really positive way to handle stress.

Relaxation exercises

- Deep breathing
- Progressive relaxation
- Mindfulness



You can support your teen by:

How can I support my teen?

- **Understanding that:**
 - Youth with borderline personality traits experience emotions differently than most people (especially anger and anxiety). For these youth, a conflict with a loved one can feel like a life or death situation.
 - Feeling abandoned can 'trigger' these youth. Reassure your teen often that you always will be 'there' for her. For example, whenever you have to leave, talk about the next time that you'll be together ("Have a good day, and I'll see you tonight!").

- **Trying not to take it personally if your teen has an outburst or tantrum.** Understand that this is part of the condition. Be patient, and stay calm. You might say things like: “I can see you’re upset.” “What’s making you so frustrated?” Empathy is one of the most powerful ways to support youth with borderline personality traits.
- **Validating your teen’s feelings.** This means recognizing the feelings, and not criticizing or ridiculing your teen for having them. You don’t have to agree with your teen’s feelings or response to a situation. You just need to show that you can see how she feels. For example, “I can see you are very worried about this”.
- **Setting clear expectations with your teen about what she can and cannot do.** It is important that you set limits to avoid burning out. For example, you can make it clear that you need a little time to yourself to recharge. Your teen might take this as rejection. Make sure that when you talk about the times when you’ll be away, you also talk about the reunions. You might say, “I’m starting a yoga class on Wednesday evenings. I need to take care of myself and stay healthy, so that I can be there for you. I’ll be away from 7-9 pm. I’ll be back home by 9:30 pm to check and see how your evening went. How does that sound?”
- **Arranging regular, one on one time alone with your teen.** Go for a walk, take in a movie, play a board game, bake or build something together. When you make a plan for regular ‘special time’ together with your teen, you’re showing your teen that he is important to you.
- **Asking your teen if they are open to some advice.** All of us need to be accepted and validated, and this is especially true for youth with borderline personality traits. If you constantly give youth advice in a lecturing tone, they may think you don’t accept them or want them to change. If you know your teen needs help, then try asking him if you may give him some advice: “I am worried about you. Can I give you some advice?”
- **Asking your teen how they would like to be supported.** You might say: “I’m here for you. How can I support you?” Your teen might respond in many ways. For example, she might say “I just need someone to listen to me”, or “Let’s go out for a walk”, or “I need a hug”, or “I need your advice”. The key is to follow your teen’s lead. If your teen can’t tell you what kind of support would help, then you might make a suggestion.
- **Keeping regular routines for your teen.** These include wake up times, meal times and bedtimes.

- **Supporting your teen’s treatment.** Parents and family are essential to effective treatment. Help your teen get to appointments, and take part in family education and group sessions. If your teen gets upset:
 - Be there for him or her. If you can’t be there in person, connect by phone.
 - Let your teen know that you can see that she’s upset, “I can see you’re having a tough time. It’s hard to be upset.”
 - Stay close, but don’t try to problem solve until your teen’s had a chance to settle.
 - Once your teen has settled down, help him to ‘look for the kernel of truth’. Even though your teen’s response was intense, it was likely not completely ‘out of the blue’. There is probably an issue that needs to be worked out.
- **Remarking on improvements** you notice if your teen is taking part in treatments that have been helpful. But you can also reassure your teen that just because you’ve noticed improvement, it doesn’t mean that you expect everything will go well all the time.
- **Remembering that you are not the therapist** (even if you happen to be a therapist, your role is to be a parent in this situation). Avoid trying to ‘analyze’ your teen. And if you’re asked for advice, just share some suggestions. Try not to be too forceful in telling your teen what to do.

Supporting a teen who self-injures

Youth with borderline personality traits often ‘self-injure’. They often do this by cutting themselves. This can be very stressful for parents and families. The following suggestions can help you cope more positively if your teen self-injures:

- Remember that youth with borderline personality traits self-injure because they are trying to cope with intense emotional pain.
- ‘Connect before you direct’. Connect by asking how your teen is feeling. You could also observe out loud that your teen must be in a lot of emotional pain. (“I see that you’re hurting and trying to cope”).
- If your teen responds, then express how much you care. Gently offer your support in helping to find other ways to cope. If your teen is seeing a therapist, ask if the therapist has suggested things to do in times of intense emotional distress.
- While it’s ideal if youth can confide in parents or caregivers, they may not feel it’s possible. If your teen just can’t share thoughts or feelings with you yet, remind him that he can call his therapist or a crisis line.

- While it's ideal if youth can confide in parents or caregivers, some may not find it possible. If your teen just can't share thoughts or feelings with you yet, remind him that he can call his therapist or a crisis line.
- If your teen has self-injured and needs medical attention for the injuries (such as stitches for self-cutting), then bring her to your doctor, an urgent care centre or emergency department.
- Let your teen know that you care and that you will be there to help with the problem when he's ready. When your teen is self-injuring, focus on what is causing the most immediate stress. For example, "What's causing you to feel upset?" "What stresses are you under?" You can then help resolve some of those stresses.

Try to avoid the following:

- Avoid telling youth to stop self-injuring, or making them feel guilty about it. This doesn't help, and may make things worse in the long run, because:
 - Youth will feel worse, and will be less likely to share feelings with you
 - The youth may have tried to stop injuring themselves, but felt she could not stop
- Avoid saying things like, "How can you do this to me?" Try not to take your teen's behaviour personally, because it's not about you.

Finding help in Nova Scotia

- In a crisis? Mental Health Mobile Crisis Team, 902-429-8167 or toll-free, 1-888-429-8167
- To find a Psychologist anywhere in Nova Scotia: Association of Psychologists of Nova Scotia, 902-422-9183, www.apns.ca
- Kids Help Phone, 1-888-668-6868, www.kidshelpphone.ca

Finding help in Halifax Regional Municipality

- **IWK Mental Health & Addictions**, offers programs for ages up to 19, 902-464-4110 or toll-free, 1-888-470-5888 (ask to be connected to Central Referral), www.iwk.nshealth.ca/mental-health
- **Laing House**, offers assistance for ages 16 to 30 living with a mental illness, 902-425-9018, www.lainghouse.ca
- **Capital Health Addictions & Mental Health Program**, offers programs for ages 19 and up, www.cdha.nshealth.ca/addictions-and-mental-health-program
- **Healthy Minds Cooperative**, www.healthminds.ca



Websites

- Behavioural Tech is the website for Marsha Linehan, founder of Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT), www.behavioraltech.com
- NEA-BPD National Education Alliance for Borderline Personality Disorder, www.borderlinepersonalitydisorder.com
- National Alliance on Mental Illness, www.nami.org
- Borderline Personality Disorder Demystified, www.bpddemystified.com
- Teen Mental Health, www.teenmentalhealth.org
- Mental Health Canada, www.mentalhealthcanada.com
- eMental Health, www.ementalhealth.ca
- Self-Injury Outreach and Support, www.sioutreach.org

Further Reading

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About this Document

Written by Dr. Deanna Mercer (Ottawa Hospital); Dr. Marjorie Robb (CHEO), Dr. Michael Cheng (CHEO) and CHEO's Mental Health Information Committee. Adapted by the IWK Health Centre, with permission. Special acknowledgements to the Ottawa BPD Network for their comments and suggestions.



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Disclaimer: Information in this fact sheet may or may not apply to your child. Your health care provider is the best source of information about your child's health.

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902-464-4110 Central Referral

www.iwk.nshealth.ca

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