

## WHEN A FAMILY MEMBER OR FRIEND HAS A DIAGNOSIS OF BORDERLINE PERSONALITY DISORDER

Borderline personality disorder (BPD) affects not only the individual but the entire circle of family and friends. Everyone shares the experiences and challenges of BPD as it impacts on their family member and themselves. In this brochure, the word family includes immediate family, extended family and friends.

When someone in the family has a diagnosis of borderline personality disorder, life can feel chaotic and as if everything is in crisis. Each person will experience a range of feelings, and cope and act in different ways. There can be different opinions about what to do and this may increase family tension.

People with BPD often say that it is really difficult to describe how overwhelmingly bad they feel. Some of the ways they cope can include confronting and destructive behaviour. Others around them may feel like they are on an emotional roller coaster, often with feelings of love, compassion and patience alternating with anger, frustration and intolerance.

There is often family tension about how much responsibility each family member takes for trying to make things better and protecting each other. Taking a lot of responsibility is exhausting and can take time and energy away from family roles and relationships. Alternatively, standing back can leave some family members feeling alone and without support. This conflict between taking a lot of responsibility and standing back is common within a family. Being able to think and talk about it can be difficult.

Children who have a parent with BPD will have their own thoughts and explanations for what is happening. Sometimes they blame themselves for their parent's difficulties. They may not have found a way to talk about or make sense of what is happening. Children can be at risk of trauma due to their parent's behaviour.

Families often wonder what caused their relative to have these difficulties. They often wonder if it is something they have done and think that they are to blame. The burden associated with self blame and guilt is made worse by theories about causes. Current theories suggest that BPD arises from a biological predisposition and difficult childhood experiences. While many people with BPD have a history of trauma, abuse or deprivation, there are also others who do not. Although more is now known and understood about BPD, misconceptions about the disorder continue to exist within treating services, the community and families.

It is important to note that **people with BPD can and do get better.**

## WHAT CAN FAMILIES DO?

There are some common experiences for families when a family member has borderline personality disorder, however there are also differences. Every family unit and each individual will have their own experience of BPD and tend to have their own words and language to describe this. Some general ideas that can be helpful in improving family relationships are listed below.

### Learn about the disorder

Learning about borderline personality disorder can help families, including children, to better understand what is happening. Asking questions, reading, and joining family support groups may be useful.

Having some knowledge about the disorder may be helpful when you:

- think about how BPD affects your family
- try to understand what your family member with BPD may be going through
- talk about BPD within the family
- speak with others outside of the family, including mental health professionals.

*"Without knowledge and without time to think, you lose the pattern of logic and get into the same spiral that they do."*  
Family member

### Practise acknowledgement and acceptance

Families can offer a helpful, supportive environment for their relative with borderline personality disorder. Acknowledging and accepting their experience and feelings along with offering support without criticism or blame is helpful. This does not mean that you have to agree with, or completely understand what they are feeling, but you can accept this is the way they feel. If the person does not feel understood and accepted it can lead to desperate attempts to communicate just how bad they are actually feeling.

In addition to acknowledging the experience of your relative, it is also important to recognise and accept your own feelings. Everybody, including the person with BPD, is often doing the best they can under difficult circumstances.

## WHAT CAN FAMILIES DO?

### Support within limits

All families have rules, limits and expectations in order to maintain balance and stability. It is likely that these will be tested at times of stress. However, despite the struggles it is important to hold on to what is important for family functioning. There is a difference between understanding and accepting feelings versus accepting behaviour. Setting limits might include saying no to destructive behaviour or limiting how much time you give. You can care about and love a person but not accept their behaviour.

It is important to think about and decide upon family limits and to talk about them in a non-blaming way. To set and hold a limit can involve considerable fear and anxiety. The experience of having limits set may be difficult for your relative with BPD. However, if limits are presented in a consistent and non-blaming way they help create a caring and safe family environment. This nurtures and sustains family relationships.

*"It's important to let them know how you feel."*  
Family member

### Balance individual health and family relationship needs

Family tension can intensify when the needs of the person with BPD are put ahead of other family members needs. In order to balance family roles and relationship needs, there will be a limit to how much you can offer your relative with BPD. It is also important to know that looking after your health and your relationships with others in the family can be helpful to the person with BPD.

Balancing health and relationship needs involves:

- maintaining good health, emotional and spiritual well-being
- staying connected to others within the family
- maintaining other sustaining life roles such as friendships, leisure activities and work
- seeking family support from friends
- seeking professional assistance.

*"Professional help for yourself is essential, it's too much to deal with alone."*  
*"Get help for yourself early, that is the most difficult time."*  
Family members

## WHAT CAN FAMILIES DO?

### Learn about self-harm and ways to manage crises

Self-harm and suicidal behaviours are frightening, confronting and stressful for family and friends. It is hard to remember that this behaviour may be a way of dealing with emotional pain. This is when the time and effort that the family has put into learning about the disorder, accepting the experience of your relative with BPD and discussing limits can be helpful.

It is always tempting to try to take control away from your relative with BPD and to protect them. However, in the long term it is better for everyone if you do not take over. It is helpful to develop a plan about what the family will do when your relative self harms or is suicidal. This is best done with your relative, others in your family and mental health or helping professionals. A family plan should include a plan for the protection of children. It is important that children are helped to make a plan of their own, for times when they are afraid.

*"We can assist them. We can't do it for them. Empowerment is important. They can do things for themselves."*  
Family member

### Explore treatment

Treatment and therapy can help someone with BPD in a number of ways. Treatment sometimes involves several workers and different services. It is helpful if treatment is consistent, coordinated and undertaken in a collaborative manner. Families can request and contribute to development of a shared treatment plan that outlines everyone's role and how to respond to crises.

Sometimes those with BPD find it hard to accept that they have problems, and that they might benefit from treatment. It is best to support them to find their own ways to have control and make choices in their lives. Even though treatment may be a good idea – it is their decision.

### Seek help for the family

Family counselling and support assists each family member to learn about how they cope, what is helping and not helping, and how they can better balance and enrich family relationships. Counselling and support helps families to step back from the demands of everyday life and hear different perspectives. It creates a time to think about each other and what is happening in the family.

## SERVICE PROVIDERS

Some places to seek help are:

- Your local doctor (GP) who can refer to an appropriate service or mental health professional
- Community Health Centre
- Area Mental Health Service - see [www.health.vic.gov.au/mentalhealth/services/index.htm](http://www.health.vic.gov.au/mentalhealth/services/index.htm)
- Psychotherapist/counsellor
- Private psychiatrist

Other services for families include:

- ARAFEMI Carer Helpline  
Phone support and information, support group  
Ph: (03) 9810 9314
- The Bouverie Centre – Victoria's Family Institute  
Family therapy, group for families/carers  
Ph: (03) 9385 5100
- Mental Illness Fellowship  
Ph: (03) 8486 4222
- FaPMI (Families where a Parent has a Mental Illness)  
Referral service for supports for children, young people and families  
Ph: (03) 9385 5100 - contact Rose Cuff
- Sane Helpline (information and referral line)  
Ph: 1800 187 263
- Mensline  
Ph: 1300 789 978
- Carer information and support groups see <http://www.health.vic.gov.au/mentalhealth/carers.htm>

Sometimes people with BPD and their families can have difficulty accessing an appropriate service. Families may seek a friend, mental health professional or someone in authority to assist them in trying to obtain a service.

## RESOURCES

Please refer to Spectrum website:  
[www.spectrumbpd.com.au](http://www.spectrumbpd.com.au)

## SPECTRUM - The Personality Disorder Service For Victoria

Spectrum is a statewide service in Victoria that supports and works with local Area Mental Health Services to provide treatment for people who have a personality disorder. Spectrum focuses on those who are at risk from self-harm or suicide and who have particularly complex needs.

Spectrum provides services for people with personality disorder who:

- have current involvement with a local Area Mental Health Service
- are aged between 16 and 64 years
- live in the state of Victoria

Staff at Spectrum strive to develop collaborative relationships with clients, families and with the services involved.

Spectrum provides a range of programs to support mental health clinicians and their clients.

Spectrum programs include:

- secondary consultation
- assessment
- outpatient groups
- residential treatment
- care coordination with a small number of clients
- training
- research
- advocacy

All programs are accessed via a referral from a clinician working in a Victorian Area Mental Health Service.

If you think a family member has borderline personality disorder, it is usually best to speak first to a GP (local doctor) who can refer to an appropriate service or mental health professional.



A member of Eastern Health  
Melbourne, Australia

### Contact details

Spectrum is located in East Ringwood and delivers services to the whole of Victoria.

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*A Brochure for Family and Friends*

