



BORDERLINE PERSONALITY DISORDER RESPONDING TO CRISIS

for carers, families, partners and friends

Overview

Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) is a common mental health condition characterised by challenges with emotions, identity, and relationships. People living with BPD may experience intense and fluctuating emotions, impulsivity, instability in their sense of self, and heightened sensitivity in relationships, often linked to fears of abandonment or experiences of trauma.

This guide was developed by people with lived experience to support responses that help in times of crisis.

What is a crisis?

Crises can be linked to relationship challenges, such as feeling rejected, abandoned, or disconnected from others. They may also be connected to experiences of trauma. In these moments, overwhelming emotional pain can be triggered, sometimes activated by past or current experiences.

This may look like:

- Suicidal thoughts, self-harm, or suicide attempts
- Sudden and intense mood swings
- High levels of distress
- Fragile or uncertain sense of self
- Impulsive or risky behaviour
- Unstable relationship patterns

Creating safety and connection

- People with BPD can be very sensitive to your interactions - attempting to stay alert to any cues or signs in order to protect themselves.
- The person may feel misunderstood, judged or unsafe, which can escalate distress.
- The emotional dysregulation experienced in crisis feels intolerable and can make reflecting or collaborating extremely difficult.
- Responses that are calm, validating and, where possible, offer the person a choice can reduce distress.
- Be aware of your body language, tone and expressions - convey interest, curiosity and warmth.

What doesn't work:

- Threats or ultimatums.
- Dismissing emotions - *"that seems like an overreaction"*.
- Stigmatising language such as *"attention-seeking"* or *"manipulative"*.
- Making assumptions.

If you **notice** that people seem **disconnected or less alert**, consider **dissociation** and **focus on orienting to the present moment** and/or **reduce the information** you are trying to provide.





EFFECTIVE APPROACHES

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1. Before responding

Take a moment to check in with yourself:

- Notice your own thoughts and feelings – try not to let these shape how you see or respond to the person.
- Be aware of your emotional state – feelings like frustration or urgency can be picked up quickly.
- Try to stay calm and grounded, paying attention to your tone and body language.
- Keep an open mind about what the person is going through – avoid jumping to conclusions.
- Focus on helping them feel understood – this can go a long way in easing distress.

2. During – supporting crisis

- Take the first few minutes to slow things down and simply acknowledge them and their feelings. Check if they feel ready to talk.
- Offer calm reassurance, consistency and patience – this can help them feel safer and more grounded.
- Listen without rushing or judgement. Stay present, validate emotions and try not to move to 'fixing' too quickly.
- If strong feelings are expressed as blame – try not to respond defensively.
- Gently re-direct focus to what's happening right now, rather than past issues.
- If suicide or self-harm is part of the crisis, remember this may be a coping strategy, and remind them of their safety plan or helpful strategies.
- Be mindful of physical closeness – always ask about and respect their preferences.
- Set clear but kind limits, so the person you care about knows what you can and can't do, while still showing care.

3. Aftercare

- If it feels right, gently ask what helped (or didn't) so you can better support them next time. This could help make a safety plan if they don't already have one.
- Focus on their needs and what kind of support feels most helpful
- Talk together about what might help over the next few days, especially if you'll be apart.
- Encourage connection with other trusted friends, family, or supports.
- Be honest and clear about what you can do, and what you may not be able to do.
- Acknowledge their anxiety or uncertainty about what's next – it's okay not to have all the answers.
- Involve them in decisions about support, and listen to their preferences.
- Remember physical health matters too – avoid assuming everything is psychological.
- Take care of yourself afterwards – seek support and take time for yourself.

For more carer support information:

Visit: www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/BPDCoSupport

Or contact BPD Collaborative: (08) 7425 6500

