

# How to Speak Borderline: A Live Demonstration

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# **A personal account of living with Borderline Personality Disorder**



My name is Meghan and I have Borderline Personality Disorder that was misdiagnosed for over fifteen years. This is why I think it is very important to understand the symptoms, and learn to cope with the effects it has on families. It is an unintentional selfish way of thinking. I don't mean people with BPD are selfish at all, in fact I think it's that we over-think, I have found myself in situations where I say and do things I don't mean. This is always followed by guilt and shame a feeling of unworthiness. It's self preservation from a perceived threat or feeling of being wronged that is often untrue. I often isolate myself because of thinking people are looking at me and judging, people that I don't know and will never see again as well as friends and family. Just like with young children it's like a tantrum in a way, when one of my friends or family members is trying to help and says the “wrong” thing. I think it's so hard to understand for people because it's like saying *f\*\*\* you but don't leave me. Talk to me but don't, show me you care in MY way, often a way that I don't even understand*



I can only speak for myself clearly but I get myself in dark places where I want nothing from anyone yet get hurt when people stop trying to reach out. In a lot of ways I think working with an illness as complex and complicated as BPD is extremely difficult on both loved ones and providers. It is hard to know what people want in general, then add bpd, and it feels impossible for both the person with the illness and well meaning loved ones. It is such a complex and deep rooted illness, and the emotions and actions may be misplaced and misunderstood easily which makes it even harder to treat and understand. It is intense for loved ones to handle, people with BPD can be very spiteful and mean when in a bad place. A mood can change based on what would change nothing for others. The most straight forward thing I have worked on with my family is that validation of my feelings is important even if it makes no sense. Boundaries are important because there are lines I just do not want to cross, which I believe to be true of all people suffering with BPD. What I mean is I can't want someone to hug me and go away in the same moment, yet this is a common feeling. I hope a perspective from someone suffering with BPD is helpful to some.

# Borderline Personality Disorder and Loved Ones

What makes BPD different from any other personality disorder is that your anger and impulsiveness -- acting out, kicking over a chair -- only happens when you're dealing with people you really love. If it's somebody you don't care about, who cares?



## What Borderlines would like from friends & family.

Listen to us but try not to judge.  
Educate yourselves on the condition.

Love and affection.

Stability

Reassurance.

Be clear and honest with us.

Know that we do love you and that we are grateful to you for your love & support.

Understand that we need alone time.

Try not to take things said to heart when we are upset or angry, we don't mean them but lack the skills to express our emotions in a more controlled way

Emma - Borderline Personality Disorder Community 

- People with BPD are highly sensitive to feeling disliked, judged, criticized or disagreed with
- Shame is prominent and often comes out as anger and defensiveness
- Validate FEELINGS but not the same as
  - Endorsing factually incorrect beliefs
  - Agreeing with an opinion you actually disagree with
  - Giving into unreasonable requests/demands
- Can only validate what is valid
- Validate feelings first, then offer own POV

# Scenario #1

*My daughter's mood can change very suddenly. When it happens her behavior can become quite volatile at which point I lose control of the situation. Here is a recent example:*

- We were in her car and she was driving and talking about herself expecting me to listen intensely. Then I saw someone we know through the car window and I said "Oh look it's Sue." In reaction, she breaks sharply in the middle of the road and shouts at me for not paying attention to her. I felt fear and helplessness as I did not expect such intense reaction and I felt vulnerable being in her car lest she would attack me physically or throw me out of the car.*

***What technique can be used to restore calm?***



## Understanding the Reaction

- Daughter is probably talking about something that feels sensitive and important
- Interprets the comment as a sign that parent isn't listening or engaged, feels hurt, unimportant, reacts without thinking



## How to Respond

### Immediately

- “You’re really upset, let’s pull over so we can both calm down and re-group”
- Once you’re off the road safely, validate her feelings regarding appearing inattentive or distracted, non-judgmentally ask if she is feeling ok to keep driving or wants to switch off



## **Later (NOT in the car)**

- Ok to need your own space after this incident
- Come back to it when you both are calm
  - Share your point of view especially concerns about safety
    - Validate emotion, express calmly that slamming on breaks is very reckless.
    - It's ok to be upset with me but not to endanger the lives of others.
  - Engage daughter in problem solving for the future
    - Express the importance of both hearing her AND being emotionally regulated while driving
    - Remind each other not to have emotional/important conversations in the car



- Ask her how she could have handled that better, is there a way that you can react without endangering?
- Can we set up coffee dates for time to talk?



# Scenario #2

*My 23 year old daughter just completed a 45 day residential BPD program. She is home and continues to suffer from deep anxiety to the point that she was unable to start her intensive outpatient program. She believes Xanax is the only thing that will help, which she does not have. She has abused Xanax in the past. She is using alcohol as a numbing agent. I believe she is an alcoholic, but she doesn't. **How can I talk to her about her drinking or any other addictive/destructive behavior without her exploding?***

# Scenario #2

Here are some examples of things that I have said that have been unsuccessful:

- I've tried sympathizing by saying it must be hard to feel anxious all the time. I've told her I sometimes feel anxious too.
- I've suggested that she use some of the coping skills she's learned
- I've suggested she talk to friends she made at the treatment program and see how they cope with anxiety. Her response was that none of them suffer from anxiety.
- I've tried to say that using substances to soothe/numb makes things worse

Her responses have ranged from yelling at me, saying that I never help, asking me to get Xanax for her, and saying that she hasn't learned anything helpful in treatment. I rarely raise my voice, but she often says I am yelling at her.



## Understanding the Reaction

- Sounds like parent already understands her daughter's anxiety and strong emotions are genuine and painful, which is a great first step. It is likely that she does have some idea that using alcohol to manage her anxiety and emotions isn't a healthy choice, but doesn't see alternatives and feels shame in response to the idea that might be an alcoholic.
- She may feel shame/self-critical if parent says they too have anxiety but it's clear parent is better at coping, or may feel that parent "doesn't get it"



## How to Respond

- **Try to address the concerns about drinking debating the labels**
  - **“I can see how anxious you’ve been and believe you may be using alcohol to cope. I get why that feels like the best or only option, but I worry about the downsides.”**
  - **“I know you may see it differently, but I think that alcohol is causing problems in your life and I want to support you to find healthier ways of coping.”**



If the drinking is disruptive and getting dangerous

- Offer going to an AA meeting with her

- Ok to use "tough love" she may need to hear the reality that you love her but if she is continuing on this destructive path then she needs to support herself

# Scenario #3

*Our daughter will tell us that she doesn't want to live anymore and that she wants to die. When she does this, we bring her to the ER. Once she is there, she is calm, and says that she no longer has those thoughts and they send her back home. When she gets home, she starts saying the same things again (sometimes that same day). **How do we deal with these situations?** We are terrified she will hurt herself, but we can't keep engaging in this cycle.*



## Understanding the Reaction

- What is the underlying function of saying “I want to die?”
- This may be her way of saying “I’m in pain and I can’t stand it“
- Response depends on whether there has been a history of dangerous behaviors or realistic threats to harm self in present. If not, may be her way of trying to communicate that she’s having painful and overwhelming emotional distress



## How to respond

- Validate her feelings, while explaining that this cycle is unhealthy.
- Ask her what they can do to be helpful to her when she is feeling unsafe without using the ER
- Talk to her about healthier ways of expressing that, that you love her dearly and want to ensure her safety.
- Try something to distract, “Would you like to watch a movie with me? What can we do to help?”
- Offer to take a walk with her

# Scenario #4

*I went to visit my son who lives alone to bring him some home cooked meals and food for his cat. When I rang the doorbell at the main entry of his apartment building, he buzzed me in, but when I knocked on his apartment door, I heard nothing. After a few knocks I tried the door, which was open. My son was in bed under the covers and said nothing. I unpacked all the food and put it in his fridge . From past experience I have not had positive results when I try to draw my son out. So I left and went home. Later he emailed me a series of messages saying:*

- *“Nice of you to stay to chat”*
- *“Stellar communication”*
- *“I was tired and lying down”*
- *“Wished you had asked”*
- *“A simple hello to the cats would have been nice”*

*I feel like he is baiting me and really doesn't want to chat and that there is nothing I can say that will be right. He has cut off everyone from the family. I have sent email messages and a card in the mail. **What can I do to repair this communication? Or do I leave it alone for now?***



## Understanding the reaction

- “I hate you, don’t leave me”
- Sounds like the son is baiting, he is saying basically leave me alone and stay at the same time.
- Very typical response from someone with BPD who is really struggling.



## How to Respond

- Example of how one can't validate the invalid
- Parent was trying to respect his expressed preferences, negative reaction just as likely had she tried to draw him out.
- It is important to set limits as well.
  - Eg., I can tell you're really struggling, but I can't read your mind. If you want me to engage with you in a different way, you need to ask (politely)
- If he can't come up with a plan that isn't negative and rude, then it is probably time to leave it alone.