

Self-help tips: 3 keys to coping with BPD

Self-help tip 1: Calm the emotional storm

As someone with BPD, you've probably spent a lot of time fighting your impulses and emotions, so acceptance can be a tough thing to wrap your mind around. But accepting your emotions doesn't mean approving of them or resigning yourself to suffering. All it means is that you stop trying to fight, avoid, suppress, or deny what you're feeling. Giving yourself permission to have these feelings can take away a lot of their power.

Try to simply experience your feelings without judgment or criticism. Let go of the past and the future and focus exclusively on the present moment. Mindfulness techniques can be very effective in this regard.

Start by observing your emotions, as if from the outside.

Watch as they come and go (it may help to think of them as waves).

Focus on the physical sensations that accompany your emotions.

Tell yourself that you accept what you're feeling right now.

Remind yourself that just because you're feeling something doesn't mean it's reality.

[Listen: Eye of the Storm Meditation]

Do something that stimulates one or more of your senses

Engaging your sense is one of the quickest and easiest ways to quickly self-soothe. You will need to experiment to find out which sensory-based stimulation works best for you. You'll also need different strategies for different moods. What may help when you're angry or agitated is very different from what may help when you're numb or depressed. Here are some ideas to get started:

Touch. If you're not feeling enough, try running cold or hot (but not scalding hot) water over your hands; hold a piece of ice; or grip an object or the edge of a piece of furniture as tightly as you can. If you're feeling too much, and need to calm down, try taking a hot bath or shower; snuggling under the bed covers, or cuddling with a pet.

Taste. If you're feeling empty and numb, try sucking on strong-flavored mints or candies, or slowly eat something with an intense flavor, such as salt-and-vinegar chips. If you want to calm down, try something soothing such as hot tea or soup.

Smell. Light a candle, smell the flowers, try aromatherapy, spritz your favorite perfume, or whip up something in the kitchen that smells good. You may find that you respond best to strong smells, such as citrus, spices, and incense.

Sight. Focus on an image that captures your attention. This can be something in your immediate environment (a great view, a beautiful flower arrangement, a favorite painting or photo) or something in your imagination that you visualize.

Sound. Try listening to loud music, ringing a buzzer, or blowing a whistle when you need a jolt. To calm down, turn on soothing music or listen to the soothing sounds of nature, such as wind, birds, or the ocean. A sound machine works well if you can't hear the real thing.

Reduce your emotional vulnerability

You're more likely to experience negative emotions when you're run down and under stress. That's why it's very important to take care of your physical and mental well-being.

Take care of yourself by:

- Avoid mood-altering drugs
- Eating a balanced, nutritious diet
- Getting plenty of quality sleep
- Exercising regularly
- Minimizing stress
- Practicing relaxation techniques

Tip 2: Learn to control impulsivity and tolerate distress

The calming techniques discussed above can help you relax when you're starting to become derailed by stress. But what do you do when you're feeling overwhelmed by difficult feelings? This is where the impulsivity of borderline personality disorder (BPD) comes in. In the heat of the moment, you're so desperate for relief that you'll do anything, including things you know you shouldn't—such as cutting, reckless sex, dangerous driving, and binge drinking. It may even feel like you don't have a choice.

Moving from being out of control of your behavior to being in control

It's important to recognize that these impulsive behaviors serve a purpose. They're coping mechanisms for dealing with distress. They make you feel better, even if just for a brief moment. But the long-term costs are extremely high.

Regaining control of your behavior starts with learning to tolerate distress. It's the key to changing the destructive patterns of BPD. The ability to tolerate distress will help you press pause when you have the urge to act out. Instead of reacting to difficult emotions with self-destructive behaviors, you will learn to ride them out while remaining in control of the experience.

For a step-by-step, self-guided program that will teach you how to ride the "wild horse" of overwhelming feelings, check out our free Emotional Intelligence Toolkit. The toolkit teaches you how to:

- get in touch with your emotions
- live with emotional intensity
- manage unpleasant or threatening feelings
- stay calm and focused even in upsetting situations

The toolkit will teach you how to tolerate distress, but it doesn't stop there. It will also teach you how to move from being emotionally shut down to experiencing your emotions fully. This allows you to experience the full range of positive emotions such as joy, peace, and fulfillment that are also cut off when you attempt to avoid negative feelings.

A grounding exercise to help you pause and regain control

Once the fight-or-flight response is triggered, there is no way to "think yourself" calm. Instead of focusing on your thoughts, focus on what you're feeling in your body. The following grounding exercise is a simple, quick way to put the brakes on impulsivity, calm down, and regain control. It can make a big difference in just a few short minutes.

Find a quiet spot and sit in a comfortable position.

Focus on what you're experiencing in your body. Feel the surface you're sitting on. Feel your feet on the floor. Feel your hands in your lap.

Concentrate on your breathing, taking slow, deep breaths. Breathe in slowly. Pause for a count of three. Then slowly breathe out, once more pausing for a count of three. Continue to do this for several minutes.

In case of emergency, distract yourself

If your attempts to calm down aren't working and you're starting to feel overwhelmed by destructive urges, distracting yourself may help. All you need is something to capture your focus long enough for the negative impulse to go away. Anything that draws your attention can work, but distraction is most effective when the activity is also soothing. In addition to the sensory-based strategies mentioned previously, here are some things you might try:

Watch TV. Choose something that's the opposite of what you're feeling: a comedy, if you're feeling sad, or something relaxing if you're angry or agitated.

Do something you enjoy that keeps you busy. This could be anything: gardening, painting, playing an instrument, knitting, reading a book, playing a computer game, or doing a Sudoku or word puzzle.

Throw yourself into work. You can also distract yourself with chores and errands: cleaning your house, doing yard work, going grocery shopping, grooming your pet, or doing the laundry.

Get active. Vigorous exercise is a healthy way to get your adrenaline pumping and let off steam. If you're feeling stressed, you may want to try more relaxing activities such as yoga or a walk around your neighborhood.

Call a friend. Talking to someone you trust can be a quick and highly effective way to distract yourself, feel better, and gain some perspective.

Tip 3: Improve your interpersonal skills

If you have borderline personality disorder, you've probably struggled with maintaining stable, satisfying relationships with lovers, co-workers, and friends. This is because you have trouble stepping back and seeing things from other people's perspective. You tend to misread the thoughts and feelings of others, misunderstand how others see you, and overlook how they're affected by your behavior. It's not that you don't care, but when it comes to other people, you have a big blind spot. Recognizing your interpersonal blind spot is the first step. When you stop blaming others, you can start taking steps to improve your relationships and your social skills.

Check your assumptions

When you're derailed by stress and negativity, as people with BPD often are, it's easy to misread the intentions of others. If you're aware of this tendency, check your assumptions. Remember, you're not a mind reader! Instead of jumping to (usually negative) conclusions, consider alternative motivations. As an example, let's say that your partner was abrupt with you on the phone and now you're feeling insecure and afraid they've lost interest in you. Before you act on those feelings:

Stop to consider the different possibilities. Maybe your partner is under pressure at work. Maybe he's having a stressful day. Maybe he hasn't had his coffee yet. There are many alternative explanations for his behavior.

Ask the person to clarify their intentions. One of the simplest ways to check your assumptions is to ask the other person what they're thinking or feeling. Double check what they meant by their words or actions. Instead of asking in an accusatory manner, try a softer approach: "I could be wrong, but it feels like..." or "Maybe I'm being overly sensitive, but I get the sense that..."

Put a stop to projection

Do you have a tendency to take your negative feelings and project them on to other people? Do you lash out at others when you're feeling bad about yourself? Does feedback or constructive criticism feel like a personal attack? If so, you may have a problem with projection.

To fight projection, you'll need to learn to apply the brakes—just like you did to curb your impulsive behaviors. Tune in to your emotions and the physical sensations in your body. Take note of signs of stress, such as rapid heart rate, muscle tension, sweating, nausea, or light-headedness. When you're feeling this way, you're likely to go on the attack and say something you'll regret later. Pause and take a few slow deep breaths. Then ask yourself the following three questions:

Am I upset with myself?

Am I feeling ashamed or afraid?

Am I worried about being abandoned?

If the answer is yes, take a conversation break. Tell the other person that you're feeling emotional and would like some time to think before discussing things further.

Take responsibility for your role

Finally, it's important to take responsibility for the role you play in your relationships. Ask yourself how your actions might contribute to problems. How do your words and behaviors make your loved ones feel? Are you falling into the trap of seeing the other person as either all good or all bad? As you make an effort to put yourself in other people's shoes, give them the benefit of the doubt, and reduce your defensiveness, you'll start to notice a difference in the quality of your relationships.

Diagnosis and treatment

It's important to remember that you can't diagnose borderline personality disorder on your own. So if you think that you or a loved one may be suffering from BPD, it's best to seek professional help. BPD is often confused or overlaps with other conditions, so you need a mental health professional to evaluate you and make an accurate diagnosis. Try to find someone with experience diagnosing and treating BPD.

The importance of finding the right therapist

The support and guidance of a qualified therapist can make a huge difference in BPD treatment and recovery. Therapy may serve as a safe space where you can start working through your relationship and trust issues and "try on" new coping techniques.

An experienced professional will be familiar with BPD therapies such as dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) and schema-focused therapy. But while these therapies have proven to be helpful, it's not always necessary to follow a specific treatment approach. Many experts believe that weekly therapy involving education about the disorder, family support, and social and emotional skills training can treat most BPD cases.

It's important to take the time to find a therapist you feel safe with—someone who seems to get you and makes you feel accepted and understood. Take your time finding the right person. But once you do, make a commitment to therapy. You may start out thinking that your therapist is going to be your savior, only to become disillusioned and feel like they have nothing to offer. Remember that these swings from idealization to demonization are a symptom of BPD. Try to stick it out with your therapist and allow the relationship to grow. And keep in mind that change, by its very nature, is uncomfortable. If you don't ever feel uncomfortable in therapy, you're probably not progressing.

Don't count on a medication cure

Although many people with BPD take medication, the fact is that there is very little research showing that it is helpful. What's more, in the U.S., the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has not approved any medications for the treatment of BPD. This doesn't mean that medication is never helpful—especially if you suffer from co-occurring problems such as depression or anxiety—but it is not a cure for BPD itself.

When it comes to BPD, therapy is much more effective. You just have to give it time. However, your doctor may consider medication if:

You have been diagnosed with both BPD and depression or bipolar disorder.

You suffer from panic attacks or severe anxiety.

You begin hallucinating or having bizarre, paranoid thoughts.

You are feeling suicidal or at risk of hurting yourself or others.