

Surviving a Breakup with Someone Suffering with Borderline Personality Disorder

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Few things are more intoxicating than a partner who is brimming with infatuation, or more inexplicable than to watch this same person become resentful and start disengaging for no apparent reason. In a relationship with a person suffering with the traits of Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) these extreme highs and lows are commonplace.

In the most troubled of relationships, it is not unusual for a “BPD” partner to abandon the relationship or do something so hurtful that you cannot continue. Your partner may emotionally discard you or become abusive and leave you to feel confused and broken-hearted. Or you may have invested yourself in the relationship and all the latest communication and relationship tools and now feel the relationship has continued to erode and you have no more to give.

So they leave you - or you break up – or one of you finally decides not to reconcile, yet again. If any of this sounds like your relationship, please read on.

Disengaging from this type of intense relationship can be difficult. Rationally, you most likely understand that leaving is the healthiest thing you can do now, yet your emotional attachment is undeniable. You find yourself hopelessly trapped by your own desires to rekindle a relationship that you know isn't healthy, and in fact, may not even be available to you.

Often we obsess and ruminate over what our “BPD” partner might be doing or feeling, or who they might be seeing. We wonder if they ever really loved us and how we could have been so easily discarded. Our emotions range from hurt, to disbelief, to anger.

This guide explores the struggles of breaking away from this type of relationship and offers suggestions on how you can make it easier on yourself and your partner.

BREAKING UP WAS NEVER THIS HARD

Is this because your partner was so special?

Sure they are special and this is a very significant loss for you - but the depth of your struggles has a lot more to do with the complexity of the relationship bond than the person.

In some important way this relationship saved or rejuvenated you. The way your “BPD” partner hung on to your every word, looked at you with admiring eyes and wanted you, filled an empty void deep inside of you.

Your “BPD” partner may have been insecure and needy and their problems inspired your

sympathy and determination to resolve and feel exceptional, heroic, valuable.

As a result, you were willing to tolerate behavior beyond what you've known to be acceptable. You've felt certain that “BPD” partner depended on you and that they would never leave. However challenging, you were committed to see it through.

Unknown to you, your BPD partner was also on a complex journey that started long before the relationship began. You were their “*knight in shining armor*”, you were their hope and the answer to disappointments that they have struggled with most of their life.

Together, this made for an incredibly “loaded” relationship bond between the two of you.

TEN BELIEFS THAT CAN GET YOU STUCK

Breaking up with a “BPD” partner is often difficult because we do not have a valid understanding of the disorder or our part in the “loaded” relationship bond. As a result we often misinterpret or partners actions and some of our own. Many of us struggle with some of the following false beliefs.

1) **Belief that this person holds the key to your happiness**

We often believe that our “BPD” partner is the master of our joy and the keeper of our sorrow. You may feel that they have touched the very depths of your soul. As hard as this is to believe right now, your perspective on this is likely a bit off.

Idealization is a powerful “drug” – and it came along at a time in your life when you were very receptive to it. In time, you will come to realize that your partner’s idealization of you, no matter how sincere, was a courting ritual and an overstatement of the real emotions at the time. You were *special* – but not that *special*.

You will also come to realize that a lot of your elation was due to your own receptivity and openness and your hopes.

You will also come to realize that someone coming out of an extended intense and traumatic relationship is often depressed and can not see things clearly. You may feel anxious, confused, and you may be ruminating about your BPD partner. All of this distorts your perception of reality. You may even be indulging in substance abuse to cope.

2) **Belief that your BPD partner feels the same way that you feel**

If you believe that your BPD partner was experiencing the relationship in the same way that you were or that they are feeling the same way you do right now, don’t count on it. This will only serve to confuse you and make it harder to understand what is really happening.

When any relationship breaks down, it’s often because the partners are on a

different “page” – but much more so when your partner suffers with borderline personality disorder traits.



“She would never try to harm me, intentionally”

Unknown to you, there were likely significant periods of shame, fear, disappointment, resentment, and anger rising from below the surface during the entire relationship. What you have seen lately is not new - rather it’s a culmination of feelings that have been brewing in the relationship.

3) **Belief that the relationship problems are caused by some circumstance or by you**

You concede that there are problems, and you have pledged to do your part to resolve them.

Because there have been periods of extreme openness, honesty, humanity and thoughtfulness during the relationship, and even during the break-ups, your “BPD” partner’s concerns are very credible in your eyes. But your “BPD” partner also has the rather unique ability to distort facts, details, and play on your insecurities to a point where fabrications are believable to you.

It's a complex defense mechanism, a type of denial, and a common characteristic of the disorder.

As a result, both of you come to believe that you are the sole problem; that you are inadequate; that you need to change; even that you deserve to be punished or left behind.

This is largely why you have accepted punishing behaviors; why you try to make amends and try to please; why you feel responsible. But the problems aren't all your fault and you can't solve this by changing.

The problems are not all of your partner's fault either.

This is about a complex and incredibly "loaded" relationship bond between the two of you.



4) **Belief that love can prevail**

Once these relationships seriously rupture, they are harder to repair than most – many wounds that existed before the relationship have been opened. Of course you have a

lot invested in this relationship and your partner has been an integral part of your dreams and hopes - but there are greater forces at play now.

For you, significant emotional wounds have been inflicted upon an already wounded soul. To revitalize your end of the relationship, you would need to recover from your wounds and emerge as an informed and loving caretaker – it's not a simple journey. You need compassion and validation to heal - something your partner most likely won't understand – and you can't provide for yourself right now

For your partner, there are longstanding and painful fears, trust issues, and resentments that have been triggered. Your partner is coping by blaming much of it on you. For your partner to revitalize their end of the relationship, they would need to understand and face their wounds and emerge very self-aware and mindful. This is likely an even greater challenge than you face.

5) **Belief that things will return to "the way they used to be"**

BPD mood swings and past break-up / make-up cycles may have you conditioned to think that, even after a bad period, that you can return idealization stage (that you cherish) and the "*dream come true*" (that your partner holds dear), this is not realistic thinking.

Idealization built on "*dream come true*" fairytale beliefs is not the hallmark of relationship maturity and stability - it is the hallmark of a very fragile, unstable relationship.

As natural relationship realities that develop over time clash with the dream, the relationship starts breaking down. Rather than growing and strengthening over time, the relationship erodes over time.

The most realistic representation of your relationship is not what you once had – it is what has been developing over time.

6) Clinging to the words that were said

We often cling to the positive words and promises that were voiced and ignore or minimize the negative actions.

"But she said she would love me forever"

Many wonderful and expressive things may have been said during the course of the relationship, but people suffering with BPD traits are dreamers, they can be fickle, and they over-express emotions like young children – often with little thought for long term implications.

You must let go of the words. It may break your heart to do so. But the fact is, the actions - all of them - are the truth.

7) Belief that if you say it louder you will be heard

We often feel that if we explain our point better, put it in writing, say it louder, or find the right words ... we will be heard.

People with BPD hear and read just fine. Everything that we have said has been physically heard. The issue is more about listening and engaging.

When the relationship breaks down and emotions are flared, the ability to listen and engage diminishes greatly on all sides.

And if we try to compensate by being more insistent it often just drives the interaction further into unhealthy territory. We may be seen as aggressive. We may be seen as weak and clingy. We may be seen as having poor boundaries and inviting selfish treatment. We may be offering ourselves up for punishment.

8) Belief that absence makes the heart grow fonder

We often think that by holding back or depriving our "BPD" partner of *"our love"* – that they will *"see the light"*. We base this on all the times our partner expressed how special we were and how incredible the relationship was.

Absence may makes the heart grow fonder when a relationship is healthy – but this is

often not the case when the relationship is breaking down.

People with BPD traits often have object constancy issues – *"out of sight is out of mind"*. They may feel, after two weeks of separation, the same way you would feel after six.

Distancing can also trigger all kinds of abandonment and trust issues for the "BPD" partner (as described in #4).

Absence generally makes the heart grow colder.



9) Belief that you need to stay to help them.

You might want to stay to help your partner. You might want to disclose to them that they have borderline personality disorder and help them get into therapy. Maybe you want to help in other ways while still maintaining a "friendship".

The fact is, we are no longer in a position to be the caretaker and support person for our "BPD" partner – no matter how well intentioned.

Understand that we have become the trigger for our partner's bad feelings and bad behavior. Sure, we do not deliberately cause these feelings, but your presence is

now triggering them. This is a complex defense mechanism that is often seen with borderline personality disorder when a relationship sours. It's roots emanate from the deep core wounds associated with the disorder. We can't begin to answer to this.

We also need to question your own motives and your expectations for wanting to help. Is this kindness or a type "well intentioned" manipulation on your part - an attempt to change them to better serve the relationship as opposed to addressing the lifelong wounds from which they suffer?

More importantly, what does this suggest about our own survival instincts – we're injured, in ways we may not even fully grasp, and it's important to attend to our own wounds before we are attempt to help anyone else.

You are damaged. Right now, your primary responsibility really needs to be to yourself – your own emotional survival.

If your partner tries to lean on you, it's a greater kindness that you step away. Difficult, no doubt, but more responsible.

10) Belief that they have seen the light

Your partner may suddenly be on their best behavior or appearing very needy and trying to entice you back into the relationship. You, hoping that they are finally seeing things your way or really needing you, may venture back in – or you may struggle mightily to stay away.

What is this all about?

Well, at the end of any relationship there can be a series of breakups and make-ups – disengaging is often a process, not an event.

However when this process becomes protracted, it becomes toxic. At the end of a "BPD" relationship, this can happen. The emotional needs that fueled the relationship bond initially, are now fueling a convoluted disengagement as one or both partners struggle against their deep enmeshment with the other and their internal conflicts about the break up.

Either partner may go to extremes to reunite - even use the threat of suicide to get attention and evoke sympathies.

Make no mistake about what is happening. Don't be lulled into believing that the relationship is surviving or going through a phase. At this point, there are no rules. There are no clear loyalties. Each successive breakup increases the dysfunction of relationship and the dysfunction of the partners individually - and opens the door for very hurtful things to happen.

PREPARE FOR A DEPARTURE

Probably the greatest cause of failed departures is a lack of planning and mental preparation.

Take the time to plan.

Consult a therapist

Consult a therapist about your situation. Therapy will help you deal with the emotional aspects of leaving. It will help you interpret your partner's actions. It can also help with depression or other issues.

Seek a therapist with knowledge of Borderline Personality Disorder. Few community therapists have meaningful experience with this disorder – so be prepared to do some investigating.

If your partner is in therapy, tell their therapist about your intention to leave. An ethical therapist will not tell your partner of your intent, but can help prepare them for the event, easing not only your departure, but also your partner's reaction to the change.

Consult a lawyer

There are many legal ramifications of leaving your own home, or forcing an abusive partner to leave a shared home. If you are not legally married, you may not have the normal court protections. Lawyers are also useful in discussing such issues as possible restraining orders.

If you are planning a divorce it is very important that you make legal moves carefully before you

make your intentions known to your partner. Since laws vary from state to state, and country to country, and you may find conflicting advice from friends and family over these laws, give full weight to your lawyer's advice.

Take all your personal possessions with you when you leave

You do not want to be "held hostage" to personal items that you may want to retrieve later; you may even find them missing or destroyed. Once again, consult a lawyer over the legal ramifications of abandoning or taking mutual property. Instead of taking everything at once, you may decide to move individual items one at a time, especially personal items, or those useful in an independent living situation or "sudden exit".

Be careful, however, not to tip off your partner of your intention of leaving by removing everything at once, or obvious items that suggest you are leaving.

As people with BPD are very sensitive to being abandoned, they may increase their strange or abusive behavior beforehand or afterwards, and even exhibit symptoms you have not yet seen, such as suicidal gestures or threats against your person or belongings.

Be aware - Risks are heightened during the act of leaving or in the immediate time afterward.

Do not prematurely tell the BPD partner that you are leaving

It may backfire and catalyze extreme reactions. When leaving, do it suddenly, previously unannounced, and, preferably, in the presence of strangers. People with Borderline Personality Disorder tend to "act out" their disorder more around people they know, you will be inhibiting that behavior by having strangers around you.

Friends may volunteer their help, but you are better off paying for a moving company to aid you -- this not only makes the move happen quickly, it also furnishes strangers who can witness any bad actions. A BPD partner caught off-guard, in the presence of strangers, and during a sudden, quickly-occurring move, is safer than a BPD partner who has had time to prepare their response.

Avoid giving a BPD partner a valid legal issue to use against you

Even if they are having an affair, do not have an affair yourself – it could be used against you in a divorce, a custody battle, a smear campaign, etc.

You may find their reaction much greater than you anticipated (especially from one who is indulging in the same behavior).

False accusations of physical abuse can also be a concern, so be prepared by never allowing yourself to be alone with them. Try to always keep neutral witnesses with you or only meet in very public places.

NOW THAT YOU ARE SEPARATED

Put some distance between you

Disengaging is hard. Whether you were together for a long time or the relationship was very intense, your dreams, values, and emotions are tied to the other person – that's normal. If you were have some co-dependent or narcissistic traits, or are insecure – then you are even more entwined. This is why it is hard to let go.

The longer you stay connected, the longer it will take to disengage, heal, and move forward.

Initially, it is best to end all "personal" discussions – stay away from comments like "how do you feel", "what are you doing" or making any value statements like "you really should see a therapist".

Conduct your business and move along. Do not meet alone, bring an outside observer, or meet in a very public place. Keep the conversations strictly on the topic (e.g., exchanging the children, making a business decision, etc) and if the former partner gets personal, end the conversation. The same advice goes for e-mail, if it gets personal, don't respond. Send personal mail back unopened (e.g., cards, etc) with no note. Do not do anything that could be interpreted as a message.

All this will help you disconnect.

Your BPD partner may beg to return at the time of leaving or afterwards.

This is not unusual... especially if you have a history of splitting up and getting back together.

Be prepared for it. Discourage it at the start by not engaging in the conversation – no matter how curious you are or how validating you may think it would be.

Encountering the "smear" campaign

An abandoned BPD partner may try retaliating. This can be avoided or mediated somewhat by paying careful attention to the *"Prepare for your Departure"* section. If your BPD partner degraded previous partners, you should assume that they will "bad-mouth" you. Anticipate how you may be smeared and 'nip it in the bud'. Speed is important. Some smears can get ugly.

Put yourself above blame, be an adult, don't get defensive - get on with your life.

Disturbed dreams, ruminations, doubt

A healthy person processes events through their dreaming, so your dreams may continue to be about the situation or the BP for some time. These dreams may go away, only to crop up later. Know that this is normal; use dreams as useful tools to analyze your reaction to the stressful events that triggered them. You may even gauge your progress by how quickly the bad dreams are fading.

You may also ruminate about your partner – go over it all day long, day after day. There are ways to manage ruminations - use them.

Feelings of doubt. Did you do the right thing? How is the person with Borderline Personality Disorder doing? Am I BPD too? Remember that you may have acquired such BPD traits as projection by merely being in contact with the disorder; a therapist will help you straighten out any feelings of doubt about these issues. Remember - your partner functioned without you before you met them -- as did you -- so relearn how to concentrate on your own needs and priorities again.

Loneliness

You may find yourself feeling isolated in your new surroundings and without a support group. You may feel that you do not have the energy left to make new friends, or even to reconnect with old ones. You may not want to go anywhere; you may also feel depressed. So treat yourself: go for a walk. Go to a coffee shop and be open to conversation. If you have hobbies, like painting, writing, reading, etc., use this new-found time -- when you are no longer dealing constantly with BPD issues – to pursue your interests. Go back to school. Look upon this as a new beginning. You will also find during this period that having your familiar things around you helps.

AN IMPORTANT PART OF HEALING IS MOURNING, SELF-EXAMINATION, AND ACCEPTANCE

Mourn the relationship.

The end of a relationship is a "death" of sorts and it is important to grieve. You will likely go through the stages of grief characterized by Dr. Kübler-Ross - Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, Acceptance. These don't happen overnight, so be kind to yourself and give yourself time.

Focus on settling in to your new life, making new friends, telling family members and others about your transition, etc. - and most importantly, start setting new goals.

You may experience a period of anxiety and tension from the experience, and it may be overwhelming. You may feel exhausted, with drawn, unmotivated, confused. You may experience depression or other stresses (e.g., PTSD). Be aware that these feelings will slowly subside; seek therapy as needed.

Self-examination

"Why" did you get into the relationship in the first place? This is a good time to examine your family background and see what blinded you to the fact that the BP was trouble (it is true that people with BPD are sometimes very good at hiding their illness, but in retrospect you will see that some early signs were there). You may have doubts or fears about making new friends or dating because you are afraid that you will once again choose a BPD partner. Keep in mind

that you are now an expert on recognizing BPD symptoms, and so practice looking for these signs and deciding if your fears are real or not.

Continue therapy. Self-awareness is actually one of the "gifts" received from having been in an abusive situation; with enough work, you may actually come out of the experience as a stronger person. Be warned again, however, about rushing into any new relationships before you have fully processed the previous bad one.



Acceptance

While it is easy to be mad at either the person with BPD or the illness itself, personal recovery is greatly facilitated by acceptance and understanding on your part.

Borderline Personality Disorder is a real illness, not just a bad attitude and/or stubbornness. Find out as much as you can about BPD - this will help you to better understand what transpired – and what was (and was not) contributed by you.

This will also improve your ability to recognize unhealthy symptoms in other people and increase your social confidence and safety.

Give yourself time to heal

How long does it take to really recover from an abusive BPD relationship? Count on the first several months to process the dreams, anxiety, doubts, exhaustion, etc. You will need more to rationalize what happened and feel open to others. Be careful not to prematurely proclaim yourself as healed. Use others to gauge your progress.

Resist rebounding into another relationship – it might feel good, but it may just set up another “loaded” relationship bond.

In the end, you will be amazed that you even allowed yourself to stay in such a relationship -- and even more amazed to find that you now have the inner strength and awareness to avoid repeating it in the future.

This is a point of view article written by the volunteer staff at BPDFamily.com. The opinions expressed are those of the authors and based on personal experience, an informal monitoring of 1,000,000 comments posted on the BPDFamily support group message board, as well as review of the books and article published in the field. The authors are volunteers with careers in health care, education, and small business. This is not the product of licensed healthcare professionals nor it is not based on clinical findings. This article is intended to augment, not to replace the relationship between patient and their physician. ~ Skip

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