

Facing the Facts about Borderline Personality Disorder

Adapted from the High Conflict Couple

BEFORE YOU CAN MAKE
THINGS BETTER,
YOU HAVE TO STOP MAKING
THINGS WORSE

**BEFORE YOU CAN MAKE THINGS A LOT BETTER,
YOU HAVE TO STOP MAKING THINGS WORSE.**

Someone has to be first. This means generating the motivation to stop making things worse, learning how to interrupt your own negative responses, and learning how to inhibit your urges to do things that you later realize are destructive to the relationship.

Make a Commitment to Stop Making it Worse

The first step is commitment. By definition, when you are out of control (throwing the proverbial fuel on the fire), you are not using logic (or any other helpful process) enough.

Commitment means practicing alternative reactions ahead of time until they become automatic. Then, as you start to become out of control, this new automatic behavior appears. In a way, commitment gives you self-control.

If you wanted to run a marathon, but you had never run more than three kilometers, you couldn't do it. No matter how much you wanted to keep running, you would be unable to merely will your body to perform in that situation. You would have to really want to run the marathon, which would get you out of bed early every day for months to work out, to practice. With enough commitment, you would engage in enough practice so that you could keep on running effectively (despite the pain).

But, even if you have the capacity to do a particular behavior that is effective, you might still lack the motivation.

In situations of high negative emotion, when it is harder to do the new behavior, you are likely to think, "I don't really care about that now". In this emotional state, you fail to see the consequences of your actions.

So, you need to get to a balanced place in your mind in which you are broadly aware of your real relationship goals and not just your painful emotion of the moment. It is important to practice now, so you can get there in situations of duress..

If you learned to drive on the right-hand side of the street, and you took a vacation in a country where they drive on the left, you would know, on the one hand, that it is very dangerous to drive on the right there. On the other hand, you probably would have strong urges to pull to the right. How would you get yourself to drive safely? Commitment.

Self-Righteousness Is Not "Right"

Do you really see how being nasty, invalidating, or critical toward your partner, no matter what she or he just did; will only make your relationship worse?

Or, do you think that when he or she does these kinds of things to you that you have a "right" to respond with similar behavior (that she or he "deserves it")?

Most of us know it is not effective to be nasty. However, if you truly adopt a mindful stance toward your partner, you will see that you both of you are doing the same thing.

They think you deserve it. You think your partner deserves it. How could this possibly be resolved unless one (and eventually both) of you steps back mindfully and see that, as Gandhi said, "an eye for an eye leaves the whole world blind"?

Do you really want to hurt your partner?

Do you want to hurt yourself? Hurting him or her is hurting yourself and continuing the unending agony of reciprocal retribution.

You can stop it.

Stepping Out Is Not Surrender

Maybe you now are thinking, "It's surrender to be attacked, and not to attack back!"

Well, refusing to continue to fight to the death (of your relationship) is hardly surrendering. Rather; if defeating your partner is also self-defeating; then stopping the fight is both showing the courage to do what is needed to survive and the courage to engage in self-preservation.

You can get yourself out of "win-lose" thinking (which really means "lose-lose") and into recognizing that not attacking is a win-win-win situation: you preserve your self-respect and your relationship and your partner emerges less trampled. Nobody loses.

If you think that stopping is surrender; you will likely feel ashamed; for we are typically taught to "stand up for what is right;" But; when you realize that stopping requires courage; conviction; and skills; and will lead to a better life for everyone involved; you will see that shame is not justified.

Anticipate Your Impulsiveness

Even if you are highly committed to stop making things worse in conflict situations; you still need to practice a host of skills needed to stop.

When we are in the middle of enduring a verbal attack from someone else; our own reaction feels impulsive; like an unpredictable and overbearing urge. However; realistically; a lot of these situations are quite predictable. How many times have you had that fight? How many times has your partner said that particular hurtful and provocative thing? Look descriptively at previous problems: what did your partner do that resulted in your emotions going through the roof to the point where you had urges to retaliate? We will call those things triggers because they trigger your response.

Rehearse a New emotional response

Once you have identified typical triggers; you can anticipate that your partner will do them again. The more aware you are of the triggers; the less potent they will be. In a way; every time you imagine your partner saying that trigger and imagine that you respond in a kind way (or; at least; not in kind); you are reconditioning the trigger because you are changing the cycle.

Identify as many triggers as you can.



The idea is not that these triggers cause your response; but rather that the cycle is now automatic (she says X; you say Y). It's a learned habit; much like reciting the alphabet. You need to stop saying "Y" and do something else.

What else?

The effective thing to do is anything that brings your arousal down and helps you respond differently.

There are many strategies for tolerating distress in dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) that might be helpful in these situations. For example; you can distract yourself away from the argument by doing something else (take a walk; read; engage in other activities that are physically active ones or relaxing ones); look for spiritual soothing (say a little prayer; remember your

values); do something soothing to your senses (listen to quiet music; eat comfort food; read a pleasant story or poem); or do something social (call a friend; send an e-mail). Some of these things you can do quickly. Others you will simply have to plan to do after successfully ending the interaction without responding negatively.

Once you have identified the typical triggers and also identified more helpful alternatives; you can put them together.

1. Imagine a trigger;
2. Imagine remembering your goal (not to make things worse; that you love this person; that responding in a negative way just keeps the negative cycle going); and
3. imagine responding in a self- respecting and respectful way.

Of course, whatever you say needs to be in your own words, but the essence of an effective response is staying reasonably calm and describing something about your genuine goals and feelings rather than telling the other person what she or he is doing wrong.

Manage Destructive Urges

Commitment and practicing alternative responses are very helpful in achieving self-control. But there are other skills you can use when urges to do harm are running high.

Did you ever have the urge to eat more dessert and not do it? Did you ever have the urge to stay in bed rather than go to work? Have you always given in to these urges, or have you managed them and done what was needed in those situations (at least sometimes) to make your life work?

Whatever you did to resist those kinds of urges are important skills to use when resisting the urge to treat your partner badly and continue the destructive conflict cycles you sometimes get in.

Here are three common strategies to help you respond without making things worse in a difficult situation:

A. Visualize the Negative Consequences of Giving In to Your Destructive Urges

If the alarm clock goes off and you are tired; comfortable, you may have the urge to turn it off and go back to sleep. But; you remember that your boss is not too pleased when you simply fail to show up for work; you realize that you will be swamped for the next several days trying to catch up. Within a minute or two; you are in the shower.

What happened? You remembered the negative consequences of following your urge instead of doing the wise thing. This method can be very effective at motivating us to act in ways that are responsible to our own longer-term goals.

B. Step Out and Observe the Urge

Alternatively, after the alarm clock goes off, you could observe your own behavior. You might then notice that by not taking the urge to stay in bed too seriously (observing it rather than going with it), the urge is already subsiding.

Interestingly, when we observe urges, they often lose their potency.

C. Visualize the Positive Consequences of Giving In to Your Destructive Urges

Go back to the urges to stay in bed. At that point, you could get yourself to think about your day ahead. If you do, you might realize that you have an enjoyable project to work on and that you are saving money for a down payment on your first house.

The difference between this example and visualizing the negative consequences of giving in is that the former uses your motivation to avoid negative consequences, whereas this one uses your motivation to achieve positive ones. Both can work rather well in the moment.

This is not surrender

Rather, this is an example of a couple working together - they both agree to work on these issues independently and together - there is no intimidating mention of BPD vs Non-BPD – it's just two people building a bridge and ending the unhealthy cycle as a first step. From there they can look to more substantive work.

You can do this and still analyze if they want to stay or leave the relationship.

These are basic tools to stop the bleeding in your household.

This article was adapted from

The High Conflict Couple – A Dialectical Behavior Therapy Guide to Finding Peace, Intimacy, & Validation
by Alan E. Fruzzetti, Ph.D

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Book Description

High Conflict Couple is a concise, easy to understand guide for couples seeking to deepen their relationship and ease their conflicts. This is an recommended book to share with your BPD partner as it doesn't make direct mention of BPD - other than the fact that the authors are all leaders in the field.

Some couples need more than just the run-of-the-mill relationship advice to solve their problems. When out-of-control emotions (BPD) are the root cause of problems in a relationship, no amount of effective communication or intimacy building will fix what ails it.

What these "high-conflict" couples need is help regulating the emotions that provoke the "escape or win" mode of interaction that has come to define them.

In this book, Dr. Fruzzetti, an expert in the use of dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) in couples' therapy, adapts this powerful set of emotion regulation tools. Using mindfulness and distress tolerance techniques, the book shows how to deescalate conflict situations before they have a chance to flare into serious fights. Other techniques help partners in a relationship disclose their personal fears and vulnerabilities and validate one another's experiences. Ultimately, you'll learn how to manage problems with negotiation, not conflict, and how to find true acceptance and closeness with your partner.

About the Author

Alan E. Fruzzetti, Ph.D., is associate professor of psychology and director of the DBT Therapy and Research Program at the University of Nevada, Reno. He is the coauthor with Perry Hoffman and Marsha Linehan of *Dialectical Behavior Therapy with Couples and Families*.

