

TIPS ON COMMUNICATING WITH YOUR LOVED ONE

“Many of the cult leaders that I have studied in the last fifteen years would qualify for the diagnosis of Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD). Since your loved one is so heavily influenced by someone with this diagnosis, it may feel like you are communicating with a Borderline when you are with your loved one. Consequently, this advice to those who want to communicate with someone with Borderline pathology might be helpful.”

Source: Mason, P.T. & Kreger, R. (1998). Stop Walking On Eggshells. CA: New Harbinger Publications, Inc.

Develop a Noncombative Communication Style

The first step of good communicating is to become a good listener. When it is your turn to listen, really listen. Don't think about what you are going to say. Do not become defensive and tune the person out, even if they are accusing you of things you never did or said. You'll have the chance to address this later.

Pay attention to the person's words, body language, expressions, and tone of voice. This will help you validate the person's feelings. People with BPD are not always in touch with their own emotions, and by listening closely you may be able to hear beyond the words and detect the feelings that lie beneath the surface.

Mary Lynne Heldmann (1990) says:

Listening takes concentration and mindfulness. You must focus only on the speaker and forget about what you want to say. Whether or not you ultimately decide that you agree with your critic's perceptions, listening gives you the opportunity to learn.

Heldmann believes that things that get in the way of listening include preoccupation with your own point, distracting thoughts, deciding that you already know what the other person is going to say, and twisting the speaker's message to fit your expectations. Ways to show you are listening include being silent, pausing before speaking, making eye contact (unless this is threatening), physically turning toward the person, uncrossing your arms, and nodding when appropriate.

Paraphrasing and Reflexive Listening

When responding to the BP, make "I" statements, not "you" statements. You can't read anyone else's mind. You may be wrong about their intentions and feelings. But you are an expert on yourself. You're on safe ground when you describe your own emotions and motivations and let others do the same.

Let's say that you and your co-worker, Shelby, must both pitch in to answer the phones at work. But it seems like you're carrying more of the load. Shelby takes long lunches. Shelby leaves the office for hours at a time. And when he is there, Shelby asks you to take messages for him because "he's busy."

So you decide to have a little talk with Shelby. Following are examples of "you" statements, which all make assumptions about Shelby's state of mind:

- "You are so selfish for pushing this off on me."
- "You take long lunches so you won't have to answer the phone."
- "You must think that you're the only one who's busy around here."

No one likes to be told what their intentions are—least of all someone with BPD. Plus, these kinds of statements invite criticism. What if you're wrong about why Shelby is taking long lunches? Even if you're right, what are the chances that Shelby will agree with your statements about his selfishness and overinflated ego? Remember that feeling invalidated is a key trigger for people with BPD. "I" statements will help avoid this trigger.

Following are sample "I" statements you could use with Shelby. Use a confident voice and physical manner. Do not stammer or act apologetic for having feelings and opinions.

- "I feel like I am answering the phone more often, and this is causing problems for me because I can't get all my work done. Can we sit down and talk about this?"
- "I am having a hard time getting all my work done because I'm answering the phone so often. My understanding is that this is a task we are supposed to split evenly. I'd like to set up a time to talk to you about this."

Generally, "I" statements make people less defensive and more open to exploring a solution to the problem. However, it's possible that the person with BPD will hear a "you" statement even when you're really making an "I" statement. But don't give up. Over time, the person with BPD may begin to hear what you're really saying.

It is also helpful when communicating with a BP to restate their feelings and main points to show that you are actively hearing them. This does not mean that you have to agree with what they are saying. People who work in customer service jobs are often taught that one of the best ways to defuse a customer's anger is to acknowledge that person's feelings. This doesn't mean that the company is admitting fault. It does mean, however, that the company cares that the customer is having a difficult time. Heldmann suggests paraphrasing, or repeating, the key points of the speaker's statements to show that you want to understand what

the person is saying. Develop your own style of doing this so it comes across naturally.

BP: "You never call me anymore. I always have to call you. I am really beginning to wonder if you still want to be my friend or if you're going to reject me like everyone else. I'm really hurting bad right now. You're acting just like my ex-boyfriend Rick did when he decided he couldn't cope with a girlfriend who has BPD. You both make me sick. I didn't ask to have this disorder, you know. I hope you both rot in hell."

Non-BP (paraphrasing): "It sounds like you're really upset because you feel like I haven't called you lately. From what you're saying, it seems like you're worried that I don't want to be friends anymore and that I'm behaving just like Rick did a few weeks ago."

Non-BP (interpreting): "It sounds like you're mixing me up with Rick and assuming that because he left you, I will too. You must still be hurt over that and taking things out on me [notice interpreting and "you" statement]."

Reflective listening is another helpful style of communicating where you give the speaker your impression of what they are feeling to show you are listening and that you care. Says Heldmann:

We all have feelings, and there is no point in challenging someone else's feelings or telling the other

person not to feel that way. Making a neutral observation about the other person's feelings is, however, a good way to invite someone to open up, to give him or her room. It isn't necessary to be "right" in your statement of what the other person is feeling. Merely making your honest observation is often enough to open the door.

If the other person's feelings are obvious, you may phrase your observation as a statement, such as, "I can see that you're very angry," or "You seem very sad right now." If the feelings are subtle and unstated, it may be better to ask a question, "Are you feeling scared right now that I might want to back out of our marriage?" Avoid excessive probing, though—your goal is to help the other person express their feelings, not analyze them.

Heldmann says, "Reflective listening can be difficult if the speaker is criticizing you. But if you can stay calm and in control, the speaker will have let off some steam and will probably feel better. And by allowing him free expression of his feelings, you have communicated your openness."

BPD-Specific Communication Skills

Some of the following suggestions are adapted from Marsha Linehan's (1993) work.

- Stay focused on your message. While you are talking, the other person may attack or threaten you or try to change the subject. This could be happening for many reasons. For example, the person may be trying to divert you because you are touching on a sensitive area. Ignore the attempts to distract you. Just calmly continue making your point and come back to the other subject later if it is appropriate.
- Simplify. When you are communicating about a sensitive issue, or if the person with BPD seems upset, simplify your communication. You and the BP may be feeling such strong emotions that there is little energy left for either of you to do much high-level thinking. Make each sentence short, simple, clear, and direct. Leave no room for misinterpretation.
- Give positive feedback appropriate to the person and your relationship. One BP says, "I try to focus on what is right about me, but most of the time the people in my life keep reminding me 'You're mentally ill; you're borderline/ I am working hard to see the possibilities and a future in which I can be happy and productive. This is not made easier by those who label me and refuse to recognize my individuality and potential to grow.'"
- Ask questions. Turn the problem over to the other person. Ask for alternative solutions. For example, "What do you think we should do here?" Or, "I'm not able to say yes, and you seem to really want me to. How can we solve this problem?"

- Be aware of your own voice inflection and nonverbal communication. These may communicate as much as, or more than, the words you use. Speak calmly, clearly, and confidently. If you're stating what you want or need, don't let your voice rise at the end as if you were asking a question. This is called "uptalk," and it undermines what you are saying.

Responding to Attacks and Manipulation

Sometimes the responses discussed in the previous section are not appropriate because the BP is "snipping" at you rather than initiating an honest conversation about something you said or did that bothered them. In these types of instances, you may feel attacked, manipulated, or undermined. Examples include:

- "Your sister was always prettier than you."
- "I'd *be* a better kid if you were a better parent."
- "I see you're going out with your friends again" (said in a disapproving way).
- "That's what *you* think."

Heldmann writes that most people respond to criticism with behavior they learned in childhood. She calls them "The Four Don'ts": Defend, Deny, Counterattack, and Withdraw. You want to avoid these types of responses.

- Don't Defend: Trying to prove to others that you really haven't done anything wrong can make you feel foolish, childish, and guilty, even when you haven't made a mistake.
- Don't Deny: You may use denial because you truly haven't been responsible for whatever it is that you're being accused of. But repeated denial can also make you

feel like a child again ("Did not!" "Did too!").

- Don't Counterattack: You may strike back at the person with BPD to try to win the argument or vent your feelings. But when you do this, you'll fall into the projection and projective identification trap that the BP has unconsciously set for you (see chapter 3). As the doomsday computer in the film *War Games* discovered, the only way to win this game is not to play.
- Don't Withdraw: When non-BPs realize that Defend, Deny, and Counterattack don't work, they often Withdraw. Some non-BPs clam up completely. Some leave physically. Some learn to dissociate. There is nothing wrong with leaving if you feel attacked. In fact, there are times when it's a good thing to do (see chapter 8). The damage comes from remaining passive and silent, absorbing the other person's criticism while your sense of personal power and self-esteem deteriorate.

Heldmann advises keeping a log of critical remarks in order to heighten your awareness of them and how they might be affecting your self-esteem. Living with constant criticism and blame can be like dwelling in a smog-filled city: when you're living there, the smog is unnoticeable because you're in the middle of it. Also, keeping a log also distances you from the remarks and enables you to look at them less emotionally and more objectively. Track criticism and blame coming from the person with BPD (and perhaps from others in your life). Note what is said, how it makes you feel, and how you respond. Did you Defend, Deny, Counterattack, or Withdraw?

Defusing Techniques

Following are some of Heldmann's better choices for responding. These disarm your critics and enhance and empower you. If you use these suggestions, speak sincerely, riaturally, and neutrally. Avoid being flippant or counterattacking. Also, use them cautiously, since you never know how the other person will respond. The same technique, used on two different days, may spark different reactions.

Agree with Part of the Statement

Criticism: *"I see you're going out with your friends again" (said in a disapproving way).*

Response: *"Yes, I am going out."*

Criticism: *"When I was your age, I never would have gone on a date looking like that."*

Response: *"No, you probably wouldn't have" (said in an agreeable way).*

Criticism: *"I can't believe you won't let me go out with my friends just because you found some pot in my room. If you weren't my mother, my life would be so much better."*

Response: *"True, I'm not going to let you go out with your friends because you've been smoking pot."*

Agree with the Possibility That Your Critic

Could Be Right

Criticism: *"I had an affair. Big deal!"*

Response: *"Some people might not think it was a big deal if their husband had a affair. But I'm not one of them."*

Criticism: *"How can you even suggest not inviting Mom to the party? So she acts a little strange, sometimes. She's still your mother!"*

Response: *"Yes, she is still my mother. And some people would invite all their relatives, no matter how they act. But I believe that Mom has a choice about how she wants to behave. If she's going to choose to say outrageous things that hurt people's feelings, I don't feel comfortable inviting her."*

Recognize That the Critic Has an Opinion

- Criticism: *"Children belong with their mother, not their father. And I know the judge will see it that way too."*
- Response: *"I can see you have strong opinions about custody. The judge may see it the way you do. Or they may not."*
- Criticism: *"If anyone has BPD, it's you, not me."*
- Response: *"I can see that you disagree with the therapist's opinion that you have BPD."*

Source: Mason, P.T. & Kreger, R. (1998). Stop Walking On Eggshells. CA: New Harbinger Publications, Inc.

Use Gentle Humor When Appropriate

- Criticism: *"I can't believe you forgot to buy charcoal. How are we going to grill the fish?"*
- Response: *"Well, we've always been meaning to try sushi" (said without sarcasm.)*

Practice defusing response in less threatening situations first. And no matter what happens, congratulate yourself for your efforts.

In this chapter, we've given you the foundation you'll need in order to make substantive changes in your relationship with the BP. In the next chapter, we'll show you how to actually discuss this with the BP in your life. Make sure that you understand the information presented in this chapter thoroughly before you go on. You should have a clear understanding of the following:

- *The factors that can trigger BPD behavior, along with the concept that while you may trigger the behavior you are not to blame for it*
- *How the BP in your life may trigger you with fear, obligation, and guilt*
- *How personal limits (boundaries) help relationships*
- *The personal limits that you would like the BP to observe*
- *The futility of discussing your "rights" to set limits—the question is not about "rights" but about your personal feelings about how you want to be treated*
- *Guidelines for good communication*

In the next chapter, we will go over how you can begin to effectively assert your needs with the BP in your life.