FREE GUIDE · FOR FAMILIES

Supporting someone with EUPD (BPD): a guide for families

What may be going on in your loved one's brain, and practical ways to support them without losing yourself.

If someone is in immediate danger, call 999. For urgent mental health help in England, call NHS 111 and choose the mental health option. You can talk to Samaritans any time, free, on 116 123.

If you love someone with emotionally unstable personality disorder (EUPD), also called borderline personality disorder (BPD), you'll know how exhausting it can be. One day things are close and warm. The next, a small comment sets off a storm, and you're left wondering what you did wrong. This guide is for parents, partners and family members. It explains what may be going on in your loved one's brain, and how you can support them without losing yourself.

What is EUPD?

EUPD is a complex mental health condition. The main features are:

- **Intense emotional responses** that are difficult to control.
- **Fear of abandonment**, which can lead to conflict in relationships.
- **Impulsive behaviours**, which may include self-harm or substance use.
- **Feelings of emptiness** or an unstable sense of identity.

Behaviour makes sense in context

This is the idea I come back to again and again: behaviour makes sense in context. Not always good sense, and not always sense in the present, but sense.

Brains learn by trial and error, using whatever they have available at the time. A brain that has learned the world is unpredictable may watch closely for rejection, react fast and react big. Those strategies were solutions once. The trouble is that they keep running long after things have changed, and they run on autopilot.

This isn't about blame. Brains learn from many things, including temperament, and most families did the best they could with what they had. But it does change the question. Instead of "why are they doing this to me?", try "what is their brain trying to protect them from?"

What families need to know

It isn't a choice

People with EUPD often feel emotions more intensely, and for longer, than others. Think of a smoke detector set very sensitive: it goes off at burnt toast, and it goes off loudly. The reaction is real, even when the threat isn't. Seeing it as part of the condition, rather than a deliberate attack, makes it easier to stay steady.

The past can colour the present

Brains compare every new situation with what they've seen before. If someone has a long library of people who left, a late reply or a cancelled plan can feel exactly like being abandoned again. It's like looking through glasses tinted by old experience. You don't need to argue with the glasses. You can acknowledge the feeling, while gently making it clear that the feeling isn't the whole story.

Spikiness usually protects something

Anger, criticism or pushing people away often guard a much more vulnerable place underneath, like a scab over a wound. Once things have calmed down, a useful question can be: "What did that get close to?"

Validation matters

People with EUPD often feel deeply misunderstood, and that makes everything harder. Validation doesn't mean agreeing with everything. It means acknowledging the feeling without judgement: "I can see you're really upset," or "It makes sense you'd feel that way, given what you thought was happening."

Boundaries are part of caring

Boundaries aren't a punishment. They keep you well enough to keep showing up, and they give your loved one something stable to lean against. They might cover money, how and when you're in touch, and what behaviour you can and can't accept. Hold them calmly and consistently.

When things get heated, you don't have to catch every grenade that's thrown at you, and you don't have to throw it back either. How you respond is yours to choose, even when the other person is struggling.

Plan for safety

If your loved one self-harms, has suicidal thoughts or takes serious risks, make a safety plan together when things are calm. Include people they can contact when distressed, the things that help them get through, and the crisis services and professionals to turn to.

Encourage professional support

Therapies such as dialectical behaviour therapy (DBT) and cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) can help people build skills for managing emotions and relationships. But treatment is a personal choice, and people come to it when they're ready. You can open the door; you can't push them through it.

How you can help

- **Get curious.** The more you understand about EUPD, the less personal the storms feel.

- **Don't complete the puzzle for them.** Rescuing can feel kind, but it can build dependence and frustration on both sides. Listen, reassure, and ask the questions that help them find their own way: "What's helped before?" "What could you try?"
- **Step out before it tips over.** Emotions can escalate fast. If you can feel a conversation heading for the edge, it's fine to pause and come back later. Use "I" statements ("I feel worried when…") so they don't feel attacked.
- **Help with the practical stuff.** A lift to an appointment, a meal, help getting organised. Practical help frees up energy for the harder work.
- **Notice the wins.** Turning up to a session, handling a disagreement differently, bouncing back faster after a bad day. Small changes are how brains learn.
- **Watch your own tokens.** Supporting someone with EUPD can drain you. Sleep, support, time off and your own therapy if you need it all help you stay steady for the long haul.

Common challenges in families

Fear of abandonment

Your loved one may often fear you'll leave or stop caring, and may "test" the relationship to see whether you stay. Reassurance helps, but not at the cost of your own boundaries. Calm, consistent presence often reassures more than words do.

Unpredictable behaviour

Mood swings, sudden changes of plan and impulsive decisions are hard to live alongside. They're part of the condition, and they tend to get worse when your loved one is tired, stressed or overwhelmed. Consistent boundaries create stability, and gently encouraging coping skills gives them back a sense of control.

"Splitting" (all-or-nothing thinking)

People with EUPD may see people and situations as all good or all bad, idealising you one moment and criticising you the next. Rather than arguing, try offering another angle: "I can see why you feel that way. Could anything else be going on?"

Key takeaways

1. **Their behaviour makes sense in context,** even when it doesn't make sense to you.
2. **Acknowledge the feeling** without treating it as the facts.
3. **Support independence:** ask, don't fix.
4. **Look after yourself too.** You can't keep giving from an empty tank.
5. **Be patient.** Brains change through repetition, and setbacks are part of the process.

Further help

- NHS: symptoms, treatment and advice for families.

- Mind: information on personality disorders, including support for family members.
- Rethink Mental Illness: factsheets, self-help guides and an advice line.
- SANE: emotional support and an online community.
- BPD World: factsheets and a forum for individuals and families.
- Carers UK: advice on looking after yourself as a carer.
- NICE: UK clinical guidance on recommended treatment.

Books: *Stop Walking on Eggshells* by Paul T. Mason and Randi Kreger; *The Borderline Personality Disorder Survival Guide* by Alexander Chapman and Kim Gratz.

Written by Dr Monica Berntsen, HCPC-registered Consultant Psychologist and Neuropsychologist. This guide is for general information and isn't a substitute for individual assessment or treatment.

Want some help with this?

I offer online therapy across the UK. Get in touch at drmonicaberntsen.com/contact and I'll suggest the best next step.

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