

Geriatric Borderline Personality Disorder: A Guide for Patients & Families

Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) is a condition that affects emotional regulation, relationships, self-image, and impulse control. Although it is often diagnosed earlier in life, some individuals continue to experience symptoms into older adulthood. In later life, symptoms may appear differently and may overlap with depression, anxiety, trauma-related symptoms, or medical illness. With appropriate treatment, structure, and support, many people with borderline personality traits can experience meaningful improvement and stability.

Signs & Symptoms to Watch For

Common Cognitive Symptoms

- Difficulty regulating intense thoughts and emotions
- Rapid shifts in perception of relationships
- Feeling mentally overwhelmed during stress
- Black-and-white thinking (seeing situations as all good or all bad)
- Trouble maintaining a stable sense of self or identity

Behavioral & Emotional Changes

- Intense emotional reactions to perceived rejection or abandonment
- Rapid mood changes
- Difficulty maintaining stable relationships
- Anger outbursts or emotional distress
- Impulsive behavior during periods of distress

Functional Changes

- Relationship conflict with family or caregivers
- Difficulty managing stress or change
- Social withdrawal or interpersonal instability
- Periods of emotional crisis
- Trouble maintaining consistent routines

Typical Presentation & Course

Early Adult Life

- Intense emotional responses and unstable relationships
- Fear of abandonment
- Impulsivity or self-destructive behaviors in some individuals

Middle Adulthood

- Some individuals experience gradual improvement in impulsivity
- Emotional sensitivity may remain
- Relationship patterns may continue to fluctuate

Later Life

- Emotional reactivity may persist but sometimes becomes less intense
- Stress related to health, loss, or aging may trigger symptoms
- Mood symptoms such as depression or anxiety may become more prominent

Treatment Options

Psychotherapy

- Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT)
- Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)
- Supportive psychotherapy
- Skills training for emotional regulation and distress tolerance

Medication Options

- Medications may be used to treat associated symptoms such as depression, anxiety, or mood instability
- Antidepressants, mood stabilizers, or low-dose antipsychotics may sometimes be used
- Medications are chosen carefully in older adults to minimize side effects

Diagnostic Evaluation

Clinical Assessment

- Detailed psychiatric history
- Review of mood patterns and relationship history
- Evaluation for depression, trauma, anxiety, or substance use
- Cognitive screening if memory concerns are present

Medical Evaluation

- Medical review to rule out neurological illness, medication effects, or other medical causes of emotional changes

Planning for the Future

Healthcare Planning

- Maintain regular psychiatric follow-up
- Continue therapy and coping skill development
- Maintain stable routines and sleep patterns
- Seek help early when emotional distress increases

Legal & Financial Planning

- Ensure healthcare directives and power of attorney documents are updated
- Plan for supportive services if emotional crises affect daily functioning

Support for Caregivers

- Maintain calm and consistent communication
- Set clear but supportive boundaries
- Encourage therapy participation and coping strategies
- Seek professional guidance when emotional crises occur

National Organizations & Resources

✓ National Education Alliance for Borderline Personality Disorder

🌐 borderlinepersonalitydisorder.org

✓ National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)

☎ 800-950-6264 | 🌐 nami.org

✓ National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH)

☎ 301-443-4513 | 🌐 nimh.nih.gov

✓ Eldercare Locator

☎ 1-800-677-1116 | 🌐 eldercare.acl.gov

Final Notes

- Borderline personality traits can continue into later life, but many people improve with treatment.
- Psychotherapy and supportive relationships are key components of care.
- With the right supports, individuals can maintain meaningful relationships and improved emotional stability.