



Five Steps to Balanced Responses and Better Outcomes

By now I hope you've gained an understanding of what's behind the behaviors often seen in BPD and why it's so important to respond differently to them than you may have previously. If you read Chapter 3, you have an idea of why validation is so critical to heading off emotional dysregulation. But translating understanding into action is no easy feat, especially when you feel depleted by your helplessness to get your loved one to change. Many people who love someone with BPD reach a point where they feel like they just can't take another 2:00 A.M. distress call or one more unpleasant surprise. They can't bear to watch their loved one experience so much pain over and over. What are they supposed to do?

I tell those who love someone with BPD that understanding where borderline behaviors come from really does make a difference. But realistically, it takes time for a new understanding to produce change. That's why I've come up with five simple steps that you can use right now, to make a difference right now, whenever you find yourself overwhelmed by a crisis or want to keep a conversation on a productive track. These are steps that you can easily commit to memory, that you can rehearse until they're second nature, and that you can then pull out anytime emotion threatens to steal the show. At the end of the day, you can only change your own behavior—your responses to your loved one. The good news is that sometimes when you change your behavior, your

loved one's behaviors will change also. I think you'll be surprised by how much responding with these five steps can improve the outcome of any individual interaction. And over time they just might have a lasting impact.

How to React in the Middle of a Crisis

No matter how often you get those middle-of-the-night SOS calls, no matter how many times you've found yourself under attack in the middle of what seemed like a civil conversation, every time it happens you're likely to be thrown off balance. Extremely dysregulated behavior has a way of blindsiding you. Frustration and resentment well, or your temper flares, when suddenly confronted by accusations, demands, or agonized pleas. Very few of us react with aplomb in these situations. It's in these circumstances that we most need a quick, automatic response that will dampen, not feed, the flames of emotion. You can practice the five-step response described below until it's a reflex that kicks in the minute you pick up that phone at 4:00 in the morning. But you can also use these steps before or after a crisis, such as when you want to talk to your loved one about a behavior pattern that is hurting her. How to use the five steps in noncrisis situations is discussed on page 91.

Before you get into the five steps, I want you to note that the first step is always to regulate your own emotions. You cannot respond effectively if you are really emotionally upset. Your responses will not be as measured, you will inadvertently say things you wish you hadn't said, and you won't be able to think about what you want to do if you are emotionally dysregulated yourself. So the first thing you should always do in responding to your loved one is to regulate your own emotions. You're probably thinking that's easy for me to say. But there are ways to regulate your own emotion even when you've been caught off guard, detailed below.

The five steps to responding effectively to your loved one appear on the next page. You might want to photocopy the page and keep it where you can review it often until it's committed to memory and as a reminder that this is the best way to communicate in almost all interactions with a person who has borderline personality disorder. Directly following the boxed steps you'll find details on how to carry out each step.

FIVE STEPS TO RESPONDING EFFECTIVELY TO BORDERLINE BEHAVIOR

1. Regulate your own emotion.
2. Validate (do this at every step).
3. Ask/assess.
4. Brainstorm/troubleshoot.
5. Get information on your role (if any) and what you can plan on hearing about the outcome.

Practice Makes the Five-Step Response Automatic

Each of the five steps works more easily if they are practiced at noncrisis times:

- Practice emotional regulation in situations that don't involve your loved one with BPD.
- Get used to validating by validating yourself in your head or validating someone who does not have BPD.
- Learn to ask what the other person needs by asking whenever a friend confides in you.
- Look for opportunities to brainstorm or troubleshoot where the skill fits right in, such as at work.
- Form the habit of pinning down your role and arranging to hear the outcome whenever a goal has been set (with a friend's problem, a home project, a work task, etc.).

Step 1: Regulate Your Own Emotion

A few simple methods can help you dampen emotion in the heat of the moment, but it's easier to put them into action in the middle of a crisis if you've practiced them outside of crisis situations, such as when you're dealing with the frustration of a traffic jam or feeling sadness when a painful memory arises. You might want to photocopy the box on page

74 and carry it with you as a reminder until the steps of regulating your own emotion feel like second nature.

► **Pause:** Take a breath and notice your physical sensations. Label them as the emotion you are experiencing.

"Oh, no! Not again—it's 4:00 in the morning! My heart's suddenly pounding, I instantly have a pain in my gut, and thoughts are rushing through my head. The emotion I'm feeling is ANGER."

► **Pay attention to your body posture:** Unclench your hands, relax the muscles on your face. Make sure your other muscles are not tensed.

"When my sister calls me at 4:00 in the morning, I do a little deep breathing before I even answer the phone (I always know it will be her), and then I make a point of stretching my whole body from the bed after I answer it. It helps focus me on my muscles and not my anger."

► **Half-smile:** Send calming messages to your brain.

"I can't believe how well this works. Along with stretching, it instantly makes me feel calmer."

► **Validate and cheerlead yourself.**

"My emotions are understandable given what is going on."

"I love this person, so of course I have these emotions."

"Emotions make me want to do something to help."

"I accept that I have these emotions about this situation and about my loved one."

HOW TO REGULATE YOUR EMOTIONS IN THE HEAT OF THE MOMENT

Pause.

Pay attention to your body posture.

Half-smile.

Validate and cheerlead yourself.

If you can't regulate your emotions in the moment using the four steps listed in the box, try "opposite action," a useful trick for using actions to change emotions, described in the box on page 75.

If you feel like your own emotions are a big problem in your interactions with your loved one, even when you've been practicing the methods for regulating your emotion, you might take the time to explore what kinds of events and incidents tend to prompt high emotion in you.

Identifying Your Emotional Prompting Events

All of us have situations that make us more emotional than others. We also have times when we have emotional reactions to a situation that we would not normally react to. Use this assessment if you want to identify the "triggers" that cause you to have emotional responses to your loved one. Once you know what makes you more vulnerable to emotions and the situations that spark emotions, you can make decisions about how to change your emotion or when you may choose not to interact with your loved one.

1. Recall a few times when interactions with your loved one went particularly poorly.
2. Did the interactions start off emotionally, did emotions build gradually, or was there an explosion?
3. Were there other things going on in your life that made you more emotional that day? Were you tired, sick, having problems at work? These factors put you at risk for being emotional your-

Linehan's Skill of Opposite Action: Regulating Emotion with Behavior

All emotions have an action—the thing that they propel you to do. If you want to bring that emotion down a little in the moment, use a little opposite action. The four emotions that people experience the most when dealing with interpersonal conflict are fear, anger, guilt, and sadness. I'll discuss fear and guilt in Chapter 11. Here's how you can use the opposite-action technique to regulate anger or sadness.

Anger

Anger makes you want to attack (on the phone, e-mail, in person, text, etc). What's most important to reduce anger is to DISENGAGE. Walk away, hang up, don't text, don't e-mail—but do so gently, without the last word, without ire. Just get distance. If you stay connected, anger will stay up or even increase. After disengaging, practice kindness. See the world through your loved one's eyes, find compassion (see page 96) for him or her, do something kind for him or her. *Anger cannot be maintained in the face of compassion.*

With anger, rumination is often a problem. Cues of anger keep recurring, so compassion has to be used over and over again to keep anger down.

Sadness

Sadness makes you want to isolate yourself and kind of give up, get in bed and pull the covers over your head. It creates inaction. A lot of times, family members of people with BPD wear themselves out trying to help their loved ones, and many times the loved one just remains sad and hopeless. At some point the loved ones get to that place, too. At that point, opposite action is an activation treatment (as opposed to bringing down emotion, it is about bringing up the physiology of the body). Get moving again. If you're trying to lower sadness in the moment, go take a brisk walk. Play tennis. Go for a swim. Put on your aerobic dance DVD. Over the longer term, activate your support system to do pleasant events not related to your loved one (hard, I know, but this will help your loved one), do research into what is available for your loved one, find a support group, and go to one of the family advocacy programs discussed in Chapter 12 and listed at the back of this book. *Do not let your body and your emotions get still and quiet.*

self and will make you less effective in dealing with your loved one.

4. Do a little analysis of the event.
 - a. When did it start? This is the prompting event. Most problems have patterns. Look for similar prompting events.
 - b. When did it get to the place where the problem between you and your loved one was inevitable? Was there a point of no return?
 - c. What happened after the explosion? Did you change your behavior? Did your loved one change his or her behavior? Did you not speak for a few days? What you are looking for is things that might have reinforced your loved one's emotional reaction (like your backing down) or something that might have reinforced your behavior (she got so mad that she didn't talk to you for a few days and you got a break from having to deal with her problems).

For interactions that did not go well, look at the prompting event and your responses. Are there ways that you can change your responses in the moment to deescalate? Did your emotion get in the way? If so, go back to practicing regulating your own emotions. Did you reinforce your loved one's behavior? If so, change your reaction so that it is not reinforcing. You may have to do this several times until you find reactions that are not reinforcing. Were you reinforced for escalating the interaction? If so, think of ways that you can get the desired outcome without escalating.

Step 2: Validate (Do This at Every Step)

- ***Soothe your loved one's emotions*** by finding something to acknowledge (the emotion, the thoughts, the actions).
- ***Whenever emotion begins to build, stop and validate again.***

For more details and illustrations on how to validate, as well as practice tips, go back to Chapter 3. Here are some quick "rules" to keep in mind:

- Always validate the emotional experience: “I can see that this must hurt a lot.” “I can understand why you would be angry about this.” (Never say “You shouldn’t feel that way,” “It can’t be that bad,” or “Well, look on the bright side . . . ”)
- Don’t correct or contradict your loved one in an attempt to reassure: Say “I know you feel like you’re stupid.” (Don’t go on to say “But you’re not.”)
- Never validate the invalid: Say “You seem to feel that drinking that much last night wasn’t a good idea” instead of “Oh, it’s okay; just don’t drink that much from now on.” Don’t say “Well, I guess you just couldn’t help it.” (This message just confirms your loved one’s fears about her incompetence or lack of “self-control” and fragilizes her. Instead, say “What could you do differently to avoid going to the bar next time you feel this way?”)
- Whenever in doubt, in fact, ask a question instead of making a statement: “What do you think would work well here?” instead of “You should . . . ” “Are you feeling disappointed?” instead of “You’re obviously disappointed.” (People with BPD often object to being told what they are thinking and feeling because they have had such vast experience with being told that the way they feel, think, and act is wrong.)

Step 3: Ask/Assess

► **Specifically, but gently, ask** “How would you like me to help? Do you want me to listen, give advice, or help you figure out what to do?”

—**If the answer is “Just listen,”** skip STEP 4 (brainstorm/troubleshoot) and move to STEP 5 (get information on your role).

—**If the person wants your input, assess** exactly what is going on:

- What happened?
- When did it start?
- What does your loved one see as the problem?
- What would he/she like to be the outcome after the problem is solved?

Step 4: Brainstorm/Troubleshoot

- **Generate a list of solutions** with the help of your loved one.
- **Collaborate with your loved one to select an option.**
- **Anticipate what could get in the way** of your loved one's actually carrying out the plan.

Step 5: Get Information on Your Role and What You Can Plan on Hearing about the Outcome

- **Are there things that you need to do to help/support your loved one** in carrying out the plan?
- **Request a check-in/follow-up** if it is important to you. Tell your loved one that you are really interested in knowing what happened and ask to be updated. This is very validating for the person who is in crisis but also doesn't leave you guessing.

What the Five Steps Look Like in Action

Here's a sample script using the five steps. In this scenario, Susan goes to her mom's home, and she is obviously upset.

MOM: What's going on?

SUSAN: You don't really care. You think I deserve everything that happens.

MOM: *(pauses and takes a breath; notices the urge to defend herself but knows that this will not be helpful and will increase Susan's emotions [regulating your own emotions])* Susan, you seem very upset. I'm ready to listen or help if you want. What would you like from me? **[ask]**

SUSAN: *(angry)* I would like for you to make my life better. It sucks.

MOM: I know it does **[validation]**. Tell me what happened.

SUSAN: My boyfriend won't speak to me *(sobbing)*.

MOM: That really hurts **[validation]**. I know it does. Do you want to tell me what's going on? **[ask]**

SUSAN: I tried and tried, but he won't call me back.

MOM: Man **[validation]**. Let's talk about this. Do you want me just listening, or do you want me to help you figure out what to try next? **[ask]**

SUSAN: I want your help (*emotion increasing again*).

MOM: (*half-smiles* **[regulating your own emotions]**). Okay, give me the blow-by-blow. Tell me when this started. I'm listening. **[assess]**

SUSAN: Well, we were out last night, and I thought he was looking at another girl. I told him he was a jerk, and he left. Now he won't call me back.

MOM: Okay, do you want me to help you figure out what to do next? **[ask]**

SUSAN: I don't think you can do anything.

MOM: I am not sure I can either. **[validate]** I guess the big question is—and you are the expert on Bruce—do you think it would be more effective to try to get him to talk today or for you to give him some time? **[assess]**

SUSAN: Probably give him time, but I don't think I can handle that.

MOM: What if you and I come up with some things to do while you give him time? **[ask]**

SUSAN: Like what? Go to a movie?

MOM: That's a good start. Let make a list, and then we'll figure out what works best. **[generate solutions]**

Later, after the list is generated:

MOM: Okay, now, do you need me to go with you to the movies **[role clarification]** or do you want to call your friend Callie?

SUSAN: I'll call Callie.

MOM: What if she can't go? What are you going to do then? **[troubleshooting]**

SUSAN: Will you go if she doesn't go?

MOM: Sure, if she does go with you, will you call me after the movie just to let me know how you're doing? **[what you would like to know of the outcome]**

What to Do If Your Loved One Doesn't Participate

Having a five-step plan doesn't guarantee that your loved one will go along with the program, unfortunately. What do you do when he or she doesn't participate? Let's say you've asked how you can help and tried to assess the problem, and she says: "I don't have time to tell you. I need you to fix this now or I'm going to have to kill myself." (*Suicide threats are, sadly, very common among those with BPD. They must be taken seriously, as with anyone else. See Chapter 12 for a discussion of how to respond.*) Or she interrupts you and won't let you ask questions or provide help.

In cases like these, a positive outcome depends greatly on *how well you know yourself* and *how well you know your loved one*. Knowing yourself means first being fully aware of how this turn of events is affecting you. So when your loved one shows no desire to participate, you need to:

► **Stop and notice your experience.** Pay attention to your:

► Physical sensations

Your stomach (is it tight, clenched, upset, calm?)

Your chest (tight? is breathing slow, shallow, fast?)

Your diaphragm—that place between your ribs (does it feel unsettled?)

Your muscles (are they tight or loose?)

Your hands/fists (clenched or open?)

Your facial muscles (are they wrinkled or smooth?)

Your heart rate (slow or fast?)

► Thoughts

"I had a thought that you were not listening to me" as opposed to "You're showing no respect for how I can help you."

- Urges
 - "I feel like slamming the phone down."*
 - "I want to scream at you to listen to me."*
 - "I want to rush over to your house to make sure you don't do anything drastic."*

- Emotions
 - "I'm feeling the emotions of anger, frustration, and fear."*

When you pay attention to and label your experience, your emotion immediately begins to regulate. But you also know more about how uncomfortable this situation is making you feel. And that tells you something important that you need to know to respond effectively to a person with BPD: what your limits are and when they are being crossed.

Identifying your limits and knowing when they are being crossed is something that I prefer to call *observing limits*, because I want to stress the need to observe yourself and the circumstances objectively. It's far too easy to view people with BPD as demanding and "manipulative" and therefore deserving of ultimatums, boundary setting, and "drawing the line." When you turn your full awareness to your physical sensations, thoughts, and urges, and then label your emotions, you gather information over time about where you have a true limit. And then you also have enough information to know when that limit is being crossed. You no longer have to subject yourself to seething and stewing until suddenly you've "had it" and impulsively throw up a brick wall against your loved one with BPD.

Observing limits adroitly is a skill developed over time, but it's an important one to cultivate since important personal preferences often seem to get lost in emotionally charged interactions; see page 85 for more details. When your loved one comes to you in crisis but then declines to participate in the five-step approach to keeping emotions in check, you're likely to find yourself needing to consider whether a limit is being crossed and what to do about it. So, once you've stopped to notice your experience, you may need to:

► **Communicate a limit to your loved one:**

► **Tell him/her that you are going to end the conversation if _____ doesn't happen** (you don't lower your voice, you don't let me talk, you keep cursing at me).

► **Give him or her a chance, even if it's brief, to modify his or her behavior** to a way of interacting that works for you. This is a very subjective measure. The key is to think about what is reasonable given the case. If your limit is just about this one interaction ("I want you to stop telling me I don't care about you"), you give just a couple of chances ("You're doing it again. I want you to stop"). If your limit is about multiple interactions ("Every time you disagree with me, you walk out and slam the door"), you will give longer. It may take a couple of similar situations before you get your loved one to quit slamming the door. The key is to make sure there is time to change the behavior.

► **Make sure you "own" that you are ending the interaction because of your reactions and what you want from the interaction.**

"I know this is painful for you, but it's what I need to be able to stay in our relationship."

"I can't do this right now because I have so much going on at work and I don't have the time to give you."

"I know I used to take calls from you all the time, but now you are calling 20 times a day. I have realized that 20 times is just too many for me."

► **YOU ACTUALLY HAVE TO FOLLOW THROUGH.** If you say that you're going to stop the conversation if the behavior doesn't change and it does not, do what you said you were going to do (or you will inadvertently reinforce the behavior you wanted to stop).

► **WHY IT'S SO IMPORTANT TO KNOW YOUR LOVED ONE:** If your loved one's refusal to participate includes threats of self-harm,

you obviously have to know the person and what is reinforcing for him or her to know how to respond. You would never cavalierly say “I’m not going to talk to you anymore” and hang up on someone who has just said she is going to kill herself. But if you know from experience that allowing your limit to be crossed without consequence encourages the other person to keep doing what you find intolerable, you have to find a different response. To the woman who says, “I need you to fix this right now or I’m going to kill myself,” you might say “Okay, then I’m calling the police.” If she is seriously contemplating suicide, then calling the police is the right thing to do anyway. But a good portion of the time, those with BPD will say that killing themselves is not in fact what they want. This allows you to go back to **asking and assessing**, all while restating your limit and at the same time **validating** how your having communicated this limit feels to her:

- **Validate and soothe your loved one’s emotions about having the limit established.**
- **Assure your loved one that you will be available at a different time or for different issues.**

What Responding to Nonparticipation Looks Like in Action

I had a client once who would call and scream at me on the telephone. When I tried to speak, she would talk over me and curse at me. Then she would hang up and I would be worried that she was going to kill herself. Finally I noticed that I was feeling dread whenever the phone rang and that when I was on the phone with her I had the urge to hang up the phone. I labeled the emotion as frustration and noticed that it really hurt my feelings.

First I had a conversation with the client where I described what was happening: “Each time that you have called me recently you have yelled at me, cursed at me, and hung up on me. Now I am noticing that when my telephone rings, I experience dread that it will be a call from you. I don’t think that you are calling with the goal of hanging up on me and know that you are really,

really upset when you call, but it hurts my feelings and makes me feel like an inadequate therapist. If we can't get these calls to go in such a way that I feel better, I am going to have to quit taking calls from you."

At this point, she became dysregulated and told me that I was only thinking of myself. I validated this, told the truth (it was about me), and kept moving. "I know this is not what you want to hear. Here's another person not wanting to talk with you. It's like the pattern of your life. But you're right: this is about me. I don't like to be interrupted, cursed at, or hung up on when I am on the phone. I like to be listened to and appreciated. That's just how I am. The thing is, we've got to work this out or I will quit taking calls after hours."

After I got her to listen, I told her exactly what I wanted. I wanted her to let me talk, not curse, and not hang up on me. I gave her a few weeks to at least make progress. I told her repeatedly that I knew this was hard on her and reminded her that this was about what I wanted on the telephone. Ultimately, she did not stop. At that point I told her that she could not call me after 5:00 P.M. until calls earlier in the day demonstrated that she had changed her behavior (giving her a different way to have access to me). It took her several months, but her behavior changed. As soon as it did, I allowed her to call again at night, and my limits were no longer crossed.

What to Do If Your Loved One Attacks or Gets Extremely Emotional

Remember, a major goal of the five-step response is to regulate emotion. If your loved one declines to participate and doesn't hear your validation or take the time to answer your questions, his emotions are likely to keep spiraling out of control. Sometimes you might find that despite your attempts to respond helpfully you end up attacked. In these cases:

- **1. Stop and regulate your emotions (see page 72).** *Hold ice in your hands if you can get to it (it will dampen your urges to attack back).*

► **2. For a few minutes, do nothing but validate:**

Restate what your loved one is saying.

"So, you were at work and your boss wanted to talk with you. You were really, really anxious."

Say things that sound interested and caring.

"I understand; tell me more."

Ask questions.

"What happened next?"

Normalize SOMETHING in his/her response.

"It's really upsetting just talking about it. It's tough. I know this is hard. It would be hard for anyone."

► **3. Go back to what you were doing (problem solving, giving advice, etc.) before the outburst.**

► The key here is to stop and validate until the emotion subsides. Enough validation and anyone is going to run out of steam with the emotion. It may go up again in a moment, but then you stop and validate again.

If you feel like finding something in your loved one's behavior to normalize will require you to make something up, it might help to remember that there is what we do naturally and then there's what we need to do strategically.

Identifying and Communicating Limits

All of us have personal limits, and it's our job to maintain them. The crises in the lives of people with BPD and the lengths that we will go to to help the people we love often result in our limits being stretched and crossed, as discussed earlier in this chapter. Unfortunately, research is really clear that there is a point of no return with limits. When they are pushed too far, they and the relationship are irreparable. So that that doesn't happen, we have to know where our limits are. The tough thing is that we don't know where our limits are until someone/something

pushes up against them. For this reason, we need to observe to know our limits. The steps for regulating your own emotion (see page 72) show you how to observe your internal processes. Pay attention to your physical sensations, your thoughts, your action urges. Have you ever noticed that your body clenched whenever you were around a particular person or that you experienced dread at the thought of being with that person or that when the phone rang you didn't want to pick it up? You were observing. If you knew what caused that reaction (she called too late, too often, cursed too much in front of you, berated or criticized, said hurtful things), you would observe that you have a limit (you don't like to be called after 10:00 P.M., called more than four times a day, cursed at, berated or criticized, have hurtful things said about you). You would have to decide whether the relationship was important enough to you and whether you wanted to "communicate those limits" to the person.

Practicing Spotting Your Limits

We all have lots of limits that we don't articulate clearly. Before you start actively observing yourself to identify limits, it might help to try identifying some of your unarticulated limits, including ones that have nothing to do with the person with BPD that you love. Ask yourself:

- Do you have limits about your loved one coming to your home?
If so, when is it all right for your loved one to visit?
When is it not all right for your loved one to visit?
- Do you have limits about phone calls with friends?
With family?
With your loved one with BPD?
- What are your physical limits with touch with your loved one?
- What are your limits with language and emotionality (are you a person who can tolerate cursing, loud speaking, physical agitation)?

Using "Pros and Cons" to Make Decisions about Communicating That a Limit Has Been Crossed

In DBT, we use a four-way pros-and-cons analysis to help people make decisions in a wise fashion. At first glance, it would seem that these

would repeat themselves, but they generate very different solutions. I'm going to do a pros and cons about whether to take telephone calls on Friday nights from my sister after she has been out drinking and calls my home after midnight.

	Taking the Calls	Not Taking the Calls
Pros	She's not angry on Sat. Phone doesn't ring all night Know she's at home	Don't get yelled at Can spend time with husband Won't be mad at her
Cons	Ruins my night My husband gets upset I feel out of control	I will worry about her She'll call my mom She'll leave 100 voice mails

There is no right or wrong interpretation of the pros and cons, and it is not about adding up the different quadrants. It is about finding the "wise" answer for yourself. As I look at these pros and cons, to me it leans toward the cons of taking the calls and the pros of not taking the calls. If possible, I would have a conversation with my sister in advance and explain what my limits are and that I will not answer the phone when she calls after a certain time on Friday nights.

The process of identifying and communicating limits is summed up below. Consider photocopying it and carrying it with you as you begin the process of observing limits effectively.

IDENTIFYING AND COMMUNICATING LIMITS

Observe your experience to identify your limits.

Notice whether your limit is being crossed.

Decide whether to communicate that your limit has been crossed.

If so, communicate with your loved one (start by regulating your own emotion if needed).

How to Communicate a Limit ahead of Time

As in the example of my sister's Friday night phone calls, most of the time you'll do best if you communicate ahead of time about a limit you've identified:

► **1. Make sure you know your own limits.**

► **2. Don't talk with your loved one about your limits when she is already emotionally distressed about something. At this point, she is vulnerable and the response is bound to be negative. Describe the facts of the situation—usually it helps to have a recent event that everyone will remember.**

"On Friday nights when you go to happy hour, you often call me when you get home. Last Friday night, you called me four times after 10:00."

► **3. Express your feelings about this situation while also validating and soothing your loved one.**

"I enjoy talking with you, but I really want to have Friday nights with my husband. It really frustrates me when you call and you've had too much to drink."

► **4. State the limit.**

"So, I don't want you to call me after the bars on Friday night anymore."

► **5. Anticipate an emotional increase and move in to soothe and validate.**

"I know you are lonely when you come home to the big old apartment on Friday nights and it's hard not to have someone to talk to."

► **6. You can now move into using the five steps to act and react outside of a crisis and problem-solve what your loved one can do to avoid crossing your limit while doing something helpful for herself.**

"What do you think you could do on a Friday night when you're lonely?"

Tips for Communicating Limits Effectively

- No matter what happens next, keep repeating some version of your limit ("I don't want you to call me after going to the bar"), along with some validation.
- Remember that limits are about you, not about your loved one. *Communicate this.* Recognize that life might be better for your sister if she could call at 10:00 P.M. after she got home from the bars. It certainly wouldn't get worse. Don't act as if limits are for her good. Limits are not. They are for your good.
- Make sure you soothe your loved one when you communicate a limit. Limits are hard and kind of devastating. If possible, offer something else. In the case of the Friday night telephone calls, you could say "I know you really want to talk with me on Friday night and I really want to hear what is going on with you. Why don't you call me on Saturday morning when you wake up and we will debrief Friday night."
- Validate how hard it is to have someone withdraw something. Say, "I know it's hard for you because you really want to talk with me on Friday night and it's hard to hear someone say you can't do what you want." Or "It's hard to have someone tell you you can't call when you want to."
- Be honest about what you are doing and why. Don't tell your sister that the reason she can't call is that your husband is making you do it.

How to Stick to Your Guns When Communicating Limits

- Remind yourself that giving in if your loved one gets upset when you communicate a limit will reinforce your loved one's escalated emo-

tions. (Similarly, if you take the inevitable calls next Friday night, you are reinforcing that behavior.)

- Keep in mind that it's likely to be painful for your loved one to hear about your limit, and your loved one's pain is likely to bring up emotions in you that will make you want to reconsider. Let's say you've paid your brother's rent for several months and now realize you don't have the money to do so anymore. You have "observed" that you have a limit and you need to communicate it to your brother. When you tell your brother that you cannot pay the rent any longer, he will undoubtedly react emotionally. It could be that the emotion is anger that you won't pay anymore or fear that there will be no way for him to pay the rent. Those emotions may begin to persuade you to give in and pay the rent. Now you'll want to revisit your limits. It could be that there is some money to pay the rent for a few extra months. Or maybe you're willing to take some phone calls in the middle of the night. Usually, the problem is that your loved one's emotions (and resulting actions—tears, threats) are influencing your emotions.

The typical emotions that people feel when communicating limits are guilt ("I shouldn't have said that. She needs this more than I do. I hurt her"), shame ("I should be a better parent/husband/friend"), and fear ("If I don't do this, she may kill herself"). These emotional responses are discussed further in Chapter 11. For now, know that if you back down on your limits out of your own emotion, you will reinforce your loved one's emotional reaction. More important, you'll be edging close

Limits are hard to communicate, but they keep you in the relationship.

to burning out on the relationship. If you continue to change your limits, resentment will grow in you. Think about a situation where you really did not like what someone was doing. Think about what you really wanted to tell that person or a limit that you wanted to communicate but didn't. What ultimately happened? Most often, there is an explosion at some point where you just hit your limit with the behavior. Many times, that ultimate explosion results in the relationship ending.

- Use the "broken record" technique when communicating a limit. This means repeating yourself verbatim. It gives you something to be mindful of—the repetition of your limits, the soothing statements, and so on—and it keeps your emotion tamped down. Remind yourself of the benefits of communicating the limits. If you have done a pros-and-cons analysis, repeat to yourself the results of the pros and cons. The

important thing is to repeatedly tell yourself the end result if you don't communicate the limit.

- Know the difference between giving in on a limit and changing it because the circumstances have changed. When you think of a limit as being a boundary, you'll find that it feels set in stone. Historically, therapists and talk-show hosts have talked about the need to "set boundaries" with people with BPD. But today we don't use the word *boundaries*. Boundaries are walls. They are impermeable and inflexible. Once you set a boundary, it cannot be changed. We use *limits* because we see them as flexible and able to change with circumstances. Limits change with time, between people, and with situations. My limits with my husband are different from those with my mother, which are different from those with my coworkers. My limits around being accessible to clients with BPD are usually pretty open, but if my partner were having back surgery and needed me to care for him for a few weeks, my limits would be temporarily different. I wouldn't be as available as I usually am.

Limits can change due to circumstances. If something catastrophic is happening in your loved one's life (she works for a company that is going out of business and laying people off), you may extend limits that you usually have. For instance, if you have a "don't drop by the house without calling first" limit, you may, for that period of time when the layoffs are occurring and until your loved one gets a new job, relax that limit. Of course, if your loved one begins to drop by every day and at inopportune moments, you may have to communicate some limits, even around the temporarily extended limits. The key is to see limits as fluid and changeable.

How to Act and React Outside of a Crisis

People with BPD tend to get trapped in patterns of destructive or self-destructive behavior. When you care about one of them, it's awfully hard to watch the same mistakes being made over and over. Yet it's also hard to find a way to talk about these problems without triggering emotional upheaval in your loved one. Maybe you hate seeing your brother engage in risky sexual behavior and want to talk to him at a calm moment about how he could make more self-protective choices. Or maybe your daughter comes to you matter of factly and wants to talk about what's been going on with her boyfriend. With or without BPD

in the mix, you would hope that you could have a constructive discussion about these issues in your loved one's life. Your fondest wish might be that gradually your loved one could begin to chip away at a problem that's been interfering with his or her happiness or even safety.

Unfortunately, even in the absence of BPD, such discussions can push too many buttons and end without improving the situation—or possibly even make things worse. But *with* BPD in the mix, your brother might get extremely emotional if he feels criticized. Or as you talk to your daughter, thinking you're having a good conversation, something could set her off and you could find yourself suddenly accused of causing all the trouble because you never liked the guy. Because of the potential emotional charge, it's especially important to use the five steps to respond in a way that will keep emotions under control and pave the way for problems to be solved.

The steps are the same as when you use them in the middle of a crisis. But when a crisis isn't imminent, you reach a fork in the road at Step 3:

- **3. Ask:** “Can I help you?” or “Do you want my help?”

“Yes”
↓

Assess:

What is going on? Get an accurate picture of where the issue started, when it started, and who is needed to solve the problem.

“No”
↓

Validate your loved one's point of view.

Accept being unable to help.

Approach your loved one about the problem again later.

Identify and communicate a limit if the continuation of this behavior makes it necessary.

If Your Loved One Wants Your Help ...

Your task is to proceed with Steps 4 and 5, doing your best to communicate in a way that is supportive and encouraging without being over the top: Give low-key (not over-the-top, fragilizing) encouragement that

your loved one can do what you have planned. Think of yourself as a coach. Your loved one is still the athlete and could compete without you, but things will go much better if you are on the sidelines.

When you ask in Step 4 what role you should play, be explicit:

"Should I help directly?"

"Do you want me to be a cheerleader on the sideline?"

"Do you want me just to wait to hear how things turn out?"

In Step 5, express interest in the outcome:

"I would really like to hear how this turns out."

"Will you check in with me and let me know how it goes?"

Throughout the five-step process, if your loved one's emotions increase, back down a little and validate a lot. When the emotions subside, move back in with problem solving. If your emotions increase, go back to the tips for bringing your own emotions down (page 72).

If Your Loved One Does Not Want Your Help ...

You might have to work on cultivating acceptance. Compassion and acceptance, discussed in the following section, are enormously helpful when dealing with someone with BPD.

If you find yourself feeling very sad about having your offer of help declined, try the "opposite-action" technique described in the box on page 72.

It could be that you go through all of the steps in regulating yourself and offering help to your loved one and she not only refuses your help but becomes more dysregulated. At that point, acceptance and self-compassion are the way to keep yourself from falling into the emotional and behavioral abyss with your loved one.

Practicing Acceptance and Self-Compassion

We are often told that we cannot change other people. As a behaviorist, I believe that we have some capacity to change others by changing

our reactions to others. Most of this book talks about how to do that. At the end of the day, however, a lot of acceptance is needed in dealing with our loved ones.

In DBT, we teach that misery is caused by pain (emotional or physical) plus nonacceptance of that pain. Pain is a part of life and definitely a part of dealing with other people. We cannot have relationships that are pain free. However, it is when we do not accept the current reality that we escalate from pain to misery.

Think of putting your hand on a hot stove burner. The stove burns your hand. Nonacceptance is not moving your hand and leaving it on the burner. You are crying out, "My hand hurts. It's burning?" Nothing changes until you accept that your hand is on the stove. Then you move your hand. Often, we just keep talking about how badly our hand hurts and we never accept that our hand is on the stove and the stove is on.

In every moment, we need to accept reality as it is. We need to accept

1. Our loved one as he or she is in this moment.
2. Our reactions to our loved one as he or she is in this moment.
3. The situation at hand.

To be clear, accepting these things doesn't mean that we don't wish it were different and that we won't work really hard to change the next moment. What it means is that we are clearly seeing reality as it is.

People often think that they have to accept the future. They say, "I have to accept that she will never change." YOU DO NOT HAVE TO ACCEPT THE FUTURE. You only have to accept this moment. I worked one time with women who were incarcerated and had BPD. Most of them had committed tragic crimes and had life sentences. They would ask me how they could accept that they would be in prison until they died. The answer was that they did not have to accept being in prison until they died. They had to accept being in prison right then. That day. The next day, of course, they would have to accept being in prison again. And the next day. And the next day. Acceptance for them had to repeated over and over.

You have to accept your loved one right where she is right now. Tomorrow you may have to accept that she is the same way. Or she may be different tomorrow and you will have to accept her then. Equally important, you have to accept yourself right where you are now. Tomor-

row you may have to accept that you are the same way. Or you may be different tomorrow and you will have to accept yourself then.

Acceptance of yourself means accepting your emotions. You are bound to have many emotions about your loved one. Sadness that her life did not turn out as you would have wished. Fear that he will do something catastrophic. Anger that she is hurting herself and you. Disappointment in his situation. Guilt that you did not do certain things at certain times to help your loved one. Whatever your emotions are, when they arise, it is important that you accept them. You have to acknowledge their existence. Only after you acknowledge them can you either continue to accept the emotions or work to change them.

A note on the word *practice* that is used with acceptance. There are some things that we just accept. If you wake up one morning and you don't want to go to work that day, you may accept that it's Wednesday and that you have to go to work. Then you get up and go to work. However, the acceptance that we are talking about here is more problematic than acceptance of Wednesday and work. The acceptance here is of painful things. We use the word *practice* as an acknowledgment that there is no magical place called "acceptance" that you arrive at where things are not as painful. Instead, we keep working and working at acceptance, so we use the word *practicing* acceptance instead of *getting to* acceptance in acknowledgment of the journey.

How Do You Practice Acceptance?

You can practice acceptance in the heat of the moment with your loved one when you notice that you are holding on to an idea or an emotion and it is causing you discomfort, or you can practice it when you are not interacting with your loved one. Many times, you will have pain from previous interactions or distress about current life situations that will require practicing acceptance.

1. Determine what you are not accepting. Ask yourself, what is making me miserable?
2. State out loud: "I accept. . . ."
3. Pay attention to your body posture. Make sure you have an accepting posture:
 - a. Make sure your hands are not clenched.
 - b. Relax your facial muscles.

Compassion as Acceptance

One of the sure ways to keep your emotions in check is to practice compassion, which, of course, requires acceptance of yourself and your loved one. There are formal Buddhist practices called *loving-kindness meditations* that are really helpful in developing compassion for others. However, you can practice the acceptance and emotional regulation by developing compassion. Compassion allows you to experience empathy with others' difficulties. It's important not to confuse compassion and empathy with pity. Pity will make you treat your loved one as if she is hopeless or fragile and will not be helpful. Pity often has some judgment in it as opposed to acceptance ("I feel so sorry for her because . . ."). Compassion is deep-rooted acceptance of the person as he or she is in the moment.

Compassion starts with self-compassion. You cannot accept another person and have compassion for him if you don't have compassion for yourself. It's hard to have compassion in the heat of the moment, so you have to practice it before emotions are high.

Ways to Practice Compassion

1. Start with yourself:
 - a. Visualize yourself as joyous and accepting. What does that look like? See a half-smile on your face. Visualize yourself doing kind things. Picture yourself responding to situations with patience and skill.
 - b. Think of your positive qualities. What are some of your past acts of kindness? When were you accepting of someone even in the face of unpleasantness?
 - c. Make statements out loud that are compassionate, accepting statements of yourself. These can be affirmations but also can be statements of fact about past compassionate moments ("I have put myself in her shoes and realized how difficult it is for her to feel like she is losing everything even when she was yelling at me that she hated me"). Find things about yourself to love and say them over and over again.
2. Now, try the same thing with your loved one. It may be helpful to write down what works in the different ways of practicing compassion.

- a. Visualize: picture your loved one being joyous and unburdened. What does this look like?

- b. Think of positive qualities of your loved one and kind, compassionate things that he has done in his life:

- c. Make statements out loud that are compassionate, accepting statements of your loved one. Choose the statements that bring you acceptance (a feeling of peace) and turn these into statements that you can commit to memory.

Self-Care as Self-Compassion

One way to take care of your relationship with your loved one is to care for yourself. In addition to developing an accepting, compassionate stance about yourself, you need to take care of your body and your emotions. Having a healthy body will make you stronger and less vulnerable to experiencing emotions even when your loved one is emotional. There are several ways to do this:

- *First, take care of your physical self.* Make sure you eat well, sleep well, avoid too much caffeine, alcohol, and sugar. Take time off from work to recharge yourself. Find things to do that bring you pleasure and make you feel in control. These things will decrease your emotional reactivity.

- *Soothe your senses.* Experts have found that people who self-soothe every day are less irritable than people who don't self-soothe. Making sure that you soothe your senses is one way to keep your emo-

tions down. Take some time every day to do little things that take the edge off your emotions. Think of the five senses:

Touch: take a warm bath, snuggle with your pets, touch soft blankets

Taste: eat soothing foods, put soothing tastes in your mouth (caramel), drink warm tea, cocoa, coffee

Smell: create a relaxing, spalike scent in your home or space with lavender, eucalyptus, flowers, cinnamon, candles

Sight: look at things that bring you calm. The water, the mountains, pictures, children playing

Sound: listen to soothing music, surf sounds, cats purring

- *Take a little vacation.* Vacations are all about healing and fortifying ourselves so that we are refueled for life. Take a few hours for yourself. Sit outside in a lawn chair, watch sports, read a novel. Do something that you can do without worrying or ruminating about the past or the future. Just take a break. You will be less vulnerable to emotions at the end of the break.

One way to get through difficult situations is to cheerlead yourself. Many of us are really good at telling others that they can get through situations or building them up when under duress but not good at doing so for ourselves. If you are one of those people:

1. Think of what you would say if a friend called and told you of a situation that was similar to yours.
2. List three things that you would say to cheerlead your friend.
3. Repeat those three things to yourself each day until they become statements that you can say automatically.

Now that you have step-by-step methods for responding to the out-of-control behaviors and emotions of your loved one, we will begin to look at exactly what some of those behaviors are. In the next section, we will examine six specific behavioral patterns in people with BPD and give illustrations for how to use regulation and acceptance with each.