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splitting is a symptom of borderline personality disorder where a person sees everything as either black or white. Understanding splitting can help you support someone with borderline personality disorder. Splitting is a term used in psychiatry to describe the inability to hold opposing thoughts, feelings, or beliefs. Some might say that a person who splits sees the world in terms of black and white—or all or nothing. It's a distorted way of thinking which the positive or negative attributes of a person or event are either weighed nor cohesive. Verywell / Hugo Lin. Common in those with borderline personality disorder (BPD), splitting is considered a defense mechanism by which people with BPD view others, events, or even themselves in all-or-nothing terms. Splitting allows them to readily discard things they have assigned as "bad" and to embrace things they consider "good," even if those things are harmful or risky. This video has been medically reviewed by David Susman, PhD. Splitting can interfere with relationships and lead to intense and self-destructive behaviors. A person who splits will typically frame people or events in terms that are absolute, with no middle ground for discussion. Examples of splitting behavior may include: Opportunities can either have "no risk" or be a "complete con." People can either be "evil" and "crooked" or "angels" and "perfect." Science, history, or news is either a "complete fact" or a "complete lie." Things are either "always" or "never." When things go wrong, a person will feel "cheated," "ruined," or "screwed." What makes splitting all the more confusing is that the belief can sometimes be iron-clad or shift back and forth from one moment to the next. People who split are often seen to be overly dramatic and prone to emotional volatility. While there is no evidence that splitting is a sign of mental illness, it can be a sign of emotional instability. Splitting is a defense mechanism that people with BPD use to cope with their intense emotions. It is considered a consistent and distorted behavior usually accompanied by other symptoms, such as: Acting out (acting without consideration to consequences) Denial (consciously ignoring a fact or reality) Emotional lability (experiencing intense emotional shifts) Intense fear of abandonment (the belief that you possess superiority in intelligence or power) Passive aggression (an indirect expression of hostility) Projection (assigning an undesirable emotion to someone else) Projective identification (denying your own feelings, projecting them onto someone else, and then behaving toward that person in a way that forces them to respond to you with the feelings you projected onto them) Understanding the process of diagnosis and the careful management of borderline personality disorder can be helpful in understanding behaviors like splitting that are associated with the condition. A BPD diagnosis can only be made by a qualified mental health professional. To make the diagnosis, the doctor would need to confirm five of nine symptoms outlined in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5-TR), including: A warped view of yourself that affects your emotions, values, moods, and relationships Anger issues, such as violent outbursts followed by extreme guilt and remorse Extreme attempts to avoid abandonment or extreme feelings of abandonment Extreme depression, anxiety, or irritability that can persist for hours and days Feeling dissociated from yourself, including paranoia and amnesia Feeling persistently empty or bored Impulsive behavior, such as abusing substances or driving recklessly Intense and stormy relationships that involve splitting Suicidal thoughts and/or self-harming behaviors There is no easy answer on how to deal with a loved one who has BPD, especially when symptoms are extreme. How you cope depends largely on the nature of your relationship and the impact your loved one's symptoms are having on your family. However, there are some guiding principles that may help, including: Cultivate a support system. While there is an incredibly painful choice for everyone involved, it can be the healthiest one in some cases. If needed, this decision should be made with the help of a qualified mental health professional. What "splitting" is. Does it occur? Copyright © by Jodi L. DeArment, MEd. The word "splitting" can be used to describe a variety of behaviors that are often associated with borderline personality disorder (BPD). Splitting is a defense mechanism that people with BPD use to cope with their intense emotions. 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difficulty in maintaining stable relationships. Individuals with BPD may experience intense connections with others, often idealizing them and attributing positive qualities. However, this admiration can quickly transform into feelings of contempt and resentment when perceived flaws emerge. For instance, a person may initially regard a friend as supportive and loyal, only to later view them as unreliable and selfish, highlighting the duality of emotions common in splitting. Another common trait is the tendency to devalue others, which is intricately linked with idealization. In extreme forms, this behavior manifests in strong reactions to perceived abandonment or criticism. A person experiencing splitting may respond to constructive feedback with rage or withdrawal, causing further strain in interpersonal relationships. Real-life examples illustrate this phenomenon; for instance, a partner might shower their significant other with affection, only to react with hostility if they feel neglected or dismissed, thus perpetuating a cycle of emotional turmoil. Individuals exhibiting splitting often struggle to navigate their emotional landscape, leading to intensified feelings of isolation and misunderstanding. This duality in emotions complicates not just romantic relationships but friendships and family dynamics as well, resulting in a series of tumultuous interactions. Recognizing these characteristics can be vital for fostering empathy and understanding for those living with BPD and their experiences of splitting behavior. Causes of Splitting Splitting, a hallmark feature of Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD), often emerges from a complex interplay of biological, psychological, and environmental factors. At its core, this behavior stems from an individual's attempts to cope with deeply rooted emotional distress and instability. Understanding the causes of splitting is essential for grasping its role as a symptom indicative of more significant emotional challenges. Biologically, individuals with BPD may possess neurobiological vulnerabilities that affect their emotional regulation. Research has indicated that dysregulation of neurotransmitters, particularly serotonin and dopamine, can lead to mood swings and impulsive behavior, which are prevalent in BPD. These neurochemical imbalances may predispose individuals to perceive and respond to situations in black-and-white terms, a characteristic trait of splitting. Psychologically, splitting often arises from attachment issues developed during the formative years. Early experiences of inconsistent caregiving can lead to difficulties in establishing secure attachments, which consequently foster an unstable self-image and fear of abandonment. As individuals grapple with feelings of insecurity, they may resort to splitting as a defense mechanism, idealizing some relationships while devaluing others, reflecting their internal chaos and emotional turmoil. Environmental factors, particularly childhood trauma, significantly contribute to the development of splitting in BPD. Witnessing or experiencing abuse, neglect, or significant losses can shape an individual's coping strategies. Such traumatic experiences often engrain a sense of helplessness and contribute to a distorted perception of relationships, prompting individuals to categorize people and situations in extreme terms as either wholly good or wholly bad. A deeper understanding of these factors provides valuable insights into the mechanisms behind splitting in BPD, underscoring the importance of addressing underlying emotional struggles through therapeutic intervention and support. Treatment Options for Splitting Treatment for individuals experiencing splitting due to Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) encompasses various therapeutic approaches tailored to each person's unique needs. One of the most widely recognized methods is Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), which places significant emphasis on emotional regulation, distress tolerance, and interpersonal effectiveness. DBT helps patients understand their emotions and thoughts more clearly, allowing them to lessen the impact of splitting, a common symptom characterized by extreme black-and-white thinking. Through skills training and individual therapy sessions, DBT fosters a balanced perspective, teaching patients how to navigate relationships and manage intense emotions effectively. Another valuable therapeutic approach is cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). This method focuses on identifying and changing unhelpful thought patterns and behaviors that contribute to emotional distress and splitting episodes. By addressing cognitive distortions, patients can cultivate healthier thought processes, thus promoting emotional stability and resilience. CBT equips individuals with practical tools to challenge irrational beliefs and replace them with more nuanced and constructive perspectives, thereby reducing instances of splitting. In some cases, medication management may also play a crucial role in treating BPD. While no specific medications are approved solely for BPD, antidepressants, mood stabilizers, and antipsychotic medications can help alleviate certain symptoms. This pharmacological approach, when paired with therapy, offers a comprehensive strategy, potentially enhancing the overall effectiveness of treatment. Furthermore, a personalized treatment plan, developed collaboratively by the individual and their healthcare providers, ensures that the therapy and medications selected align with the person's symptoms, lifestyle, and preferences. Lastly, the support systems surrounding individuals with BPD are essential in facilitating their treatment journey. Family and friends can provide encouragement, understanding, and stability, creating an environment conducive to recovery and growth. Engaging in support groups can also offer validation and shared experiences, further enhancing the individual's capacity to manage their condition and develop effective coping strategies.

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