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WORKING WITH  
YOUNG PEOPLE

## FACT SHEET

# SUPPORTING YOUNG PEOPLE EXPERIENCING PERSONALITY DISORDER

### AT A GLANCE

This fact sheet can support you and others working in youth mental health to have conversations with young people who are experiencing personality disorder. It explores:

- what personality disorder is;
- common experiences and impacts of personality disorder; and
- what support can look like.

Work through this resource with young people to help them understand personality disorder and support them to make sense of their experiences.

*This resource brings together evidence from young people and families with lived experience of personality disorder, subject matter experts and research literature.*

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### WHAT IS PERSONALITY DISORDER?

Personality disorder is a mental health condition where a person's thoughts, feelings, perceptions and behaviours cause them difficulty in adapting or responding to their day-to-day tasks as well as to life's challenges. This leads to enduring difficulties in self-functioning (sense of identity, self-esteem and direction in life) and interpersonal functioning (how they understand other people and form and maintain relationships with them). It is a condition that can cause significant distress and long-term challenges.

#### A CHANGE IN HOW WE UNDERSTAND PERSONALITY DISORDER:

Young people may have heard of diagnoses like 'borderline personality disorder' or 'narcissistic personality disorder'. However, the way personality disorder is understood and diagnosed has changed significantly. Guided by decades of research, clinicians are moving away from diagnosing distinct categories of personality disorders. Instead, personality disorder is now understood as a single, general diagnosis that reflects ongoing difficulties in two core areas: self-functioning and interpersonal functioning.<sup>(1)</sup> Using a general personality disorder diagnosis recognises that every young person experiencing personality disorder will have different experiences and challenges.

## HOW DOES PERSONALITY DISORDER DEVELOP?

Personality disorder usually develops during adolescence and early adulthood. It is thought that there are several pathways to developing personality disorder, with a complex mix of biological, environmental and psychological factors likely to be involved.

- Biological factors include genetics as well as the impact of early childhood illness or injury.
- Social and environmental factors usually include where a person grows up, who they grow up with and the experiences they have in life, such as financial hardship or emotional neglect.
- Psychological factors include how a person experiences different situations and how they cope with life's challenges.

## HOW DOES PERSONALITY DISORDER AFFECT YOUNG PEOPLE?

Personality disorder mostly affects how someone relates to others and with themselves. This can lead to extreme or unhelpful reactions and ways of coping, which can cause distress to the young person and those around them. The way these challenges are experienced is described below.

### RELATING TO OTHERS

Young people experiencing personality disorder can find it challenging to understand the points of view of others or to put themselves in other people's shoes. This makes it hard to empathise with other people or understand their reactions. The young person may also find it challenging to understand and tolerate the fact that other people have different perspectives or opinions to their own. They may find it hard to resolve differences and manage conflict. All this impacts on how well the young person can form and maintain mutually positive relationships with friends, family and intimate partners. It may also affect broader social relationships, such as at school or work.(2)

### RELATING TO THEMSELVES

Young people experiencing personality disorder often feel negatively about themselves. They may feel like they don't have a clear sense of who they are or they don't have a consistent way of describing themselves. They might have challenges reflecting on themselves and being able to realistically describe their strengths and limitations. Their emotions are often extreme and can change a lot, and young people can describe them as difficult to control. They may also struggle to set and follow through on long-term goals.(3,4)



## WAYS OF COPING AND BEHAVING

Difficulty relating to oneself and others can cause extreme and overwhelming emotions, such as distress, sadness or anger. When anyone is in an intense emotional state, it can be hard to think rationally and reasonably about the possible consequences of actions. For young people living with personality disorder this is especially the case given the challenges they have with reflecting on themselves and managing life's ups and downs.

Given many of these emotions can feel overwhelming, it makes sense that a young person living with personality disorder has difficulty coping with how they feel and may want to impulsively change their situation. Many will not have had the opportunity to develop effective coping skills and may therefore use ineffective, unhelpful or even self-defeating strategies, such as:

- running away from home or school;
- harming themselves;
- feeling intensely angry and acting aggressively or violently; and
- drinking alcohol or taking substances in an excessive and unplanned way.

Most young people who use these sorts of coping strategies report that in the short-term they work, alleviating their distress. However, the relief is usually temporary and sometimes the coping strategy stops working or leads to further difficulties and complications.

It can be difficult for those supporting a young person (family, friends, clinicians and other professionals) to understand why they are engaging in behaviours that appear self-defeating or even dangerous. It is important to understand that the young person is doing the best they can to manage their feelings or are trying to find a way of connecting with others. It is also important to remember that if this is the only way a person knows how to deal with a difficult situation, they are unlikely to stop until they have learned an alternative, more effective way of coping.

**"I felt stigmatised for the ways I sought help, without being offered any assistance to seek help in different ways. It was as if they didn't know how to treat me... I thought the only way to get help was to show them how unwell I was by doing more and more dangerous things."**

**YOUNG PERSON EXPERIENCING PERSONALITY DISORDER**

## THE IMPACT OF PERSONALITY DISORDER

Personality disorder impacts across many different settings and situations (for example, at home, with friends and at school or work). Life can be very challenging for young people living with personality disorder. The core challenges associated with personality disorder can disrupt development into adulthood and can include disruptions to:

- schooling, education or finding and maintaining work;
- finding and maintaining housing;
- developing skills to live independently;
- engaging in hobbies and leisure activities;
- engaging in a healthy lifestyle and exercising;
- coping and managing physical health challenges, injury, and sexual health; and
- managing other mental health or substance use conditions they may also be experiencing.

**"It was really important for my recovery when my care team started to identify and explore symptoms of comorbid health conditions with me. When these were identified, diagnosed and treated, I felt like I was being seen as a whole person. It enabled me to understand all the different parts that made up me, validating my experiences and making real progress towards early intervention and recovery."**

**LIVED EXPERIENCE CONSULTANT,  
WHO HAS RECOVERED FROM  
PERSONALITY DISORDER**



## EARLY INTERVENTION FOR PERSONALITY DISORDER

The overall aim of early intervention is to help young people live a fulfilling and meaningful life.<sup>(1)</sup> This is especially important for young people living with personality disorder as the challenges they experience can disrupt their transition into adulthood.<sup>(5)</sup>

Each young person living with personality disorder will experience different challenges. Many will have practical needs (for example, help staying in school or work) in addition to their mental health concerns, and for some young people, addressing their practical needs might be their most important goal. Intervening early with personality disorder can support young people to build skills to manage and prevent the severity of challenges in the long-term.

**“Personality disorder isn’t a hopeless condition. With empathy, support, hope and tenacity, we can live at the same time as managing illness.”**

### YOUNG PERSON EXPERIENCING PERSONALITY DISORDER

Early intervention should aim to:

- Increase meaningful participation across different areas of life, for example, engaging in work, school, relationships, daily living skills, recreation and leisure activities.

- Decrease distressing mental health symptoms so that the young person can do the things they want to do.
- Assist the young person to ask for help effectively and when they need it.
- Support the young person to build skills to have and maintain positive relationships.
- Improve how the young person cares for themselves both physically and psychologically.

Intervening early helps to identify the young person’s challenges before they escalate. This provides an opportunity to discuss their goals and what’s important to them. Sometimes clinicians, young people and their family may have different goals for intervention, and this may require some negotiation to achieve agreement. It is usually helpful to set both realistic short and long-term goals to work on together.

Agreeing on regular review points, as well as the length of time working together, will help manage expectations, keep goals realistic and everyone focused. Where possible, discussions should involve the young person and those who are supporting them (including family members, friends and other professionals).

### OTHER SUPPORTS

Young people with personality disorder often have, in addition to mental healthcare, considerable practical needs that might require specialist input. For example, a young person might have concerns about physical or sexual health or housing support. It is likely to be most helpful to the young person when all agencies offering support are working in a collaborative and integrated way towards similar outcomes.



## TAKE HOME MESSAGE

Personality disorder is a complex issue affecting many young people. Living with personality disorder can disrupt many areas of a young person's life. With early intervention and the right support, young people experiencing personality disorder can learn new skills to manage their mental health and live meaningful, rewarding lives.



## WORKING WITH THE WHOLE PERSON: A LIVED EXPERIENCE PERSPECTIVE

“When my care team addressed my care holistically and took an intersectional approach, we were able to identify aspects of my life that contributed to the difficulties I was facing. This helped us to explore what systems and services could be supportive to my recovery. In doing this, I felt like I was being seen and addressed as a whole person, not just a person in the process of recovering from personality disorder. They supported me to understand and apply to receive Centrelink for financial hardship and an Access Travel Pass to be able to freely use public transport without barriers (in Victoria). These are examples of the many supports that addressed every part of me which helped me to go to university and be more financially secure, reducing other stressors and improving stability in my life. I could then effectively focus on working on my symptoms as well as other aspects of life that I identified as important for my recovery, providing hope and enabling me to build a life that's worth living.”

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LIVED EXPERIENCE CONSULTANT,  
WHO HAS RECOVERED FROM PERSONALITY DISORDER.

## RELATED RESOURCES

- Videos. [Personality disorder and young people.](#)
- Fact sheet. [Supporting the families of young people experiencing personality disorder.](#)

## FURTHER INFORMATION

- Australian BPD Foundation. [www.bpdfoundation.org.au](http://www.bpdfoundation.org.au)
- National Education Alliance for Borderline Personality Disorder Australia (NEABPD–Australia). [www.bpdaustralia.org](http://www.bpdaustralia.org)
- Project Air. [www.uow.edu.au/project-air](http://www.uow.edu.au/project-air)
- Spectrum. Specialising in Personality Disorders and Complex Trauma. [www.spectrumbpd.com.au](http://www.spectrumbpd.com.au)

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**Orygen acknowledges** the Traditional Owners of the lands we are on and pays respect to their Elders past and present. Orygen recognises and respects their cultural heritage, beliefs and relationships to their Country, which continue to be important to First Nations people living today.

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