



TODAY'S OUTCASTS

Our Voices

Borderline Personality
Disorder (BPD)
and
Church Response

with marja bergen

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Today's Outcasts: Our Voices

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GOD'S PURPOSE FOR ME

BPD, stigma and all, or any other mental health condition, should not be a reason to doubt, second guess and certainly not write ourselves off when it comes to the roles or purposes God would have us play in the lives of those whose minds and hearts intersect with ours.

- Peter

WHO ARE WE?

Today's Outcasts are those in your midst today who long for the kind of care and compassion Jesus showed to the outcasts of his time.

What is borderline personality disorder (BPD)? How does it affect our lives? How does the world look upon those of us who suffer from it? How can Christ followers be there for us and for others living with mental health challenges?

These writings come from our voices, those of us living with BPD, a mental disorder with great stigma attached to it.

As individuals living with this and other mental illnesses, we hope the understandings promoted here will help you appreciate what we struggle with. Our stories will give you a window into our world. It is hoped that the writings will encourage compassion and help us be more readily accepted for who we are.

We're like everyone else. We long to experience Christ's love in our communities.

A PLEA TO THE CHURCH

Living with Borderline

Where do you go when you have an illness that medical professionals and counsellors don't want to deal with—treated like an untouchable in a modern world? Have you ever thought what that would feel like? It's happening all the time to people with BPD.

In their book *Beyond Borderline: True Stories of Recovery from Borderline Personality Disorder*, John G. Gunderson MD and Perry D. Hoffman PhD, explain:

“Seldom does an illness, medical or psychiatric, carry such intense stigma and deep shame that its name is whispered, or a euphemism coined, and its sufferers despised and even feared. Perhaps leprosy or syphilis or AIDS fits this category.

“Borderline personality disorder (BPD) is such an illness. In fact, it has been called “the leprosy of mental illnesses” and the disorder with “surplus stigma.” It may actually be the most misunderstood psychiatric disorder of our age.”

People with BPD are truly—in every way—today's outcasts. And I think of the many stories in the Bible of those Jesus befriended, cared for, healed. Where is Jesus today? Where is the acceptance we need? The love we so very much need? The care?

In the way Jesus was there for the outcasts in his day, he calls us to be his presence for those the world has rejected. He

calls us to be there for people suffering from mental illnesses —especially that most stigmatized of all, BPD. I believe compassion, added to effective therapy, can do much to help such people heal. The potential for healing is great.

BPD entered most lives as a result of a difficult childhood, through pain that is always under the surface. I think to myself: *Surely, it's such hearts that Jesus came to heal. What can we as his followers do to help them?*

In a 2018 CMHA article, *Bad Personality? Poor Character?*

[1] I wrote:

“I’m glad that I believe in a God who pays no attention to man-made labels. The God I know sees those of us with BPD as people who might have had rough lives, making us overly sensitive. He sees the hurt child that is deep within so many of us. In other words, he sees our true character. He is less concerned about the personality we display on the outside, because he knows this is not always a good reflection of the character we have within. He will always see us the way we truly are.”

I pray that churches will offer sanctuary for those the world has rejected. A place where they can be encouraged and assured of God’s understanding and love.

[1] <https://www.heretohelp.bc.ca/visions/language-we-use-vol14/bad-personality-poor-character>

WHY “BORDERLINE?”

If you have a friend who tells you he has been diagnosed with borderline personality disorder (or BPD) you would think it must be a very ugly illness. That label itself might cause you to want to keep your distance. The truth is no one in the medical profession thinks the disorder should go by that name.

According to Sarah Fader in her article, *How to Recognize Borderline Personality Disorder*, [\[1\]](#) “The term ‘borderline’ in BPD is an early name given to the disorder as it was understood when it was first described in 1938. People with borderline personalities were thought to be on the borderline of a treatable neurosis and the psychotic disorder schizophrenia. However, since the 1970s, further investigation into the disorder has revealed that this old name is inadequate to describe it.”

No one has come up with a better name. It has been too long. People with this disorder suffer enough stigma without having a label like “borderline” added to it. Why not just call it “emotional damage” since the cause is almost always trauma?

Having a personality disorder simply means that you have a pattern of feelings, thoughts and emotions that cause problems. 1% – 2% of the general population live with BPD.

[\[1\] https://www.betterhelp.com/advice/personality-disorders/how-to-recognize-borderline-personality-disorder/](https://www.betterhelp.com/advice/personality-disorders/how-to-recognize-borderline-personality-disorder/)

SYMPTOMS [1]

Borderline personality disorder (BPD) manifests in many ways, but for the purposes of diagnosis, mental health professionals group the symptoms into nine major categories. In order to be diagnosed with BPD, you must show signs of at least five of these symptoms.

Furthermore, the symptoms must be long-standing (usually beginning in adolescence) and impact many areas of your life.

The 9 symptoms of BPD:

1. Fear of abandonment.

People with BPD are often terrified of being abandoned or left alone. Even something as innocuous as a loved one arriving home late from work or going away for the weekend may trigger intense fear. This can prompt frantic efforts to keep the other person close. You may beg, cling, start fights, track your loved one's movements, or even physically block the person from leaving. Unfortunately, this behavior tends to have the opposite effect—driving others away.

2. Unstable relationships.

People with BPD tend to have relationships that are intense and short-lived. You may fall in love quickly,

believing that each new person is the one who will make you feel whole, only to be quickly disappointed. Your relationships either seem perfect or horrible, without any middle ground. Your lovers, friends, or family members may feel like they have emotional whiplash as a result of your rapid swings from idealization to devaluation, anger, and hate.

3. Unclear or shifting self-image.

When you have BPD, your sense of self is typically unstable. Sometimes you may feel good about yourself, but other times you hate yourself, or even view yourself as evil. You probably don't have a clear idea of who you are or what you want in life. As a result, you may frequently change jobs, friends, lovers, religion, values, goals, or even sexual identity.

4. Impulsive, self-destructive behaviors.

If you have BPD, you may engage in harmful, sensation-seeking behaviors, especially when you're upset. You may impulsively spend money you can't afford, binge eat, drive recklessly, shoplift, engage in risky sex, or overdo it with drugs or alcohol. These risky behaviors may help you feel better in the moment, but they hurt you and those around you over the long-term.

5. Self-harm.

Suicidal behavior and deliberate self-harm is common in people with BPD. Suicidal behavior includes thinking

about suicide, making suicidal gestures or threats, or actually carrying out a suicide attempt. Self-harm encompasses all other attempts to hurt yourself without suicidal intent. Common forms of self-harm include cutting and burning.

6. Extreme emotional swings.

Unstable emotions and moods are common with BPD. One moment, you may feel happy, and the next, despondent. Little things that other people brush off can send you into an emotional tailspin. These mood swings are intense, but they tend to pass fairly quickly (unlike the emotional swings of depression or bipolar disorder), usually lasting just a few minutes or hours.

7. Chronic feelings of emptiness.

People with BPD often talk about feeling empty, as if there's a hole or a void inside them. At the extreme, you may feel as if you're "nothing" or "nobody." This feeling is uncomfortable, so you may try to fill the void with things like drugs, food, or sex. But nothing feels truly satisfying.

8. Explosive anger.

If you have BPD, you may struggle with intense anger and a short temper. You may also have trouble controlling yourself once the fuse is lit—yelling, throwing things, or

becoming completely consumed by rage. It's important to note that this anger isn't always directed outwards. You may spend a lot of time feeling angry at yourself.

9. Feeling suspicious or out of touch with reality.

People with BPD often struggle with paranoia or suspicious thoughts about others' motives. When under stress, you may even lose touch with reality—an experience known as dissociation. You may feel foggy, spaced out, or as if you're outside your own body.

[1] <https://www.helpguide.org/articles/mental-disorders/borderline-personality-disorder.htm>

GOD'S PLACE IN MY STRUGGLES

God has allowed me to struggle and have shortcomings in many areas—mental, emotional and relational. I was hurt in several key relationships, yet I was supported by long-term friendships for which I'm very thankful. All through these struggles, I have been sustained by God, who is my Rock, my Refuge, and my Enabler. God has been faithful since my birth, and He has given me the ability to trust Him from the time I was born. Through prayer and study of God's Word, I receive strength, wisdom, peace. Psalm 18:1-3 and Psalm 22:9-10 are my life verses.

- Peter

BEFORE DIAGNOSIS – A BPD LIFE

I had lived more than 35 years with undiagnosed and unaddressed BPD, despite repeated tries at therapy, medication, and other self-help efforts. For many years, I did not know how to manage conflict with others in a productive way. I often raged and shamed when I felt angry and betrayed. Then afterward I would be filled with paralyzing regret.

I had so much fear I would not get what I desperately needed from others, but my actions often produced the very abandonment that so terrified me. In relationships, my all-or-nothing thinking, impulsivity, and mood volatility—all symptoms of BPD—made for continual drama. And when the other person inevitably pulled away, it was excruciating.

The tears and intense loneliness would go on for hours, sometimes days. The emptiness I often felt was so strong that at times I wondered how I would go on.

TREATMENT OF BPD

BPD is treatable

One common myth is that borderline personality disorder can't be treated. This myth just isn't true. Recovery is possible. Though mental health specialists rarely use the word "cured," many people recover or at least have the symptoms of their disorder controlled so that they can live a fulfilling life. Evidence shows that many people who are diagnosed with borderline personality disorder can lose the diagnosis within a few years because they no longer meet the criteria. This sometimes happens even without treatment. Misdiagnosis of borderline personality disorder appears to be very common.

In the past few decades, several new treatments for BPD have been developed. One is dialectical behavioral therapy (DBT).

Dialectical behavior therapy [\[1\]](#)

The most successful and effective psychotherapeutic approach to date has been dialectical behavior therapy (DBT). Research conducted on this treatment has shown it to be more effective than most other psychotherapeutic and medical approaches in helping a person to better cope with this disorder.

DBT therapy was developed by Marsha Linehan, a person who herself lives with borderline. Its main goals are to teach

people how to lead a life of balance by living in the moment (mindfulness), developing healthy ways to cope with stress (stress tolerance), regulating their emotions (emotional regulation), and improving their relationships with others (interpersonal effectiveness). DBT, taught in groups or with a counsellor, has been proven to be successful for treating BPD.

When we look at the Bible, we'll see that these behavioral skills were at work in the life of Christ. By following Jesus, our life could very well be employing DBT principles.

Faith

I believe God can do much to help us recover from mental health problems, including BPD. Staying close to God can help us cope with our day-to-day lives. Time spent with him, in prayer and in reading his Word, will help fortify us and give us the strength we need. It's amazing how big a role our faith can play in keeping us well.

The church family and the support of godly people form an important part of the wellness plan for people living with mental health struggles. Treating those who are struggling with the compassion that Christ's life modelled for us is a powerful healer.

God *"is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine."* (Ephesians 3:20)

[1] <https://www.verywellmind.com/dialectical-behavior->

HELPED BY DBT – A BPD LIFE

DBT has given me the powerful gift of knowing I don't have to be swallowed up by my emotions and that I can, with work, transform my own negative intensity. I know that my BPD symptoms no longer have to be the whole of my reality. I am now more capable of resisting the strong impulse to react when I have dysregulated emotions and instead take a quiet pause and make an active choice *in the moment*. The progress has been slow, and with many dips and setbacks, yet it has also been profound.

Despite my growth, at times I still fail. I forget to use my DBT skills, especially when I am under stress or caught off guard. But I know it is necessary to keep working on myself in order to live a less tortured life. My zig-zagged road to the other side of BPD and to more positive mental health requires that I forgive myself, ask for forgiveness when I make mistakes, and continue to be committed to practicing the precious skills I have learned. My BPD is something I am always managing, always aware of. But it no longer has to define who I am.

THE PAIN OF STIGMA

We hear stigma mentioned frequently, but unless you've experienced it yourself, it would be hard to understand what it feels like. As someone who has learned what it means to be disgraced in this way, I've come to see how being stigmatized is often worse than the illness itself.

At a certain point of my life, those who were once good friends inexplicably turned their backs on me. Some stopped speaking to me entirely. Others would not even acknowledge me when I said hello. The presence of friends in my life had always represented warmth and companionship—support when life got tough. But now my world had turned cold and lonely. I wondered: *What happened? What did I do? What's wrong with me?*

When I developed BPD symptoms, rejection from others started occurring at every turn. If it wasn't because of my behaviour, it was the ugly label my illness had been given. All seemed hopeless. No longer did I feel worthy of being a part of things. I was excluded from a group I had long needed. Eventually I became afraid to take part in social activities. My self-esteem took a beating. Too often it was enough to make me want to die.

In Christian mysticism stigma is a term used to describe the crucifixion wounds of Jesus Christ. The term originates from the line at the end of Paul's Letter to the Galatians where he says, "*I bear on my body the marks of Jesus.*" (Galatians 6:17)

What were these marks? The Greek word here, translated "marks," is stigmata, which in English means "signs of disgrace or shame." "Paul is most likely alluding to the wounds and scars which he received in the service of Jesus."

And I think to myself. *I'm not the only one carrying this stigma—these "marks." Many others went before me, including the Apostle Paul.*

STIGMA AND OURSELVES

Stigma is like a dirty word to most of us. We would not think of stigmatizing people with mental health problems or people with other disabilities. We don't want to harm them, and try to follow Jesus by treating them with kindness. We want to help them find healing.

And yet, it's in that very goodness where stigma sometimes grows. We as individuals want to be kind, and in the process don't treat people with mental health issues as we would treat others.

We are afraid to set boundaries—again, simply because we care so much and consider these people to be "needy." The result is pain right across the board. The person who cared becomes overwhelmed with the sick person's needs and inadvertently begins to hurt her. Pain upon pain upon pain!

There are other ways we unintentionally stigmatize people. We patronize them, in essence telling them, "We know what you need. We can help you improve your life." They're made to feel inferior.

Though each of us is different—we should treat all people with the equal worth God has given them. The best we can do for a person is not the "caring *for*" but "feeling compassion *with*." It's drawing together in the pain, in the presence of God.

STIGMA CAN BE TRAGIC – A BPD LIFE

There was a woman with mental health challenges who was emotionally mistreated by a person she had looked up to. This person hurt her with disrespectful words and actions that went on for many months. She could not believe it was happening and waited for things to change. But the pain was great and tearfully she complained, hoping that someone would make it stop. But no one did, and, feeling like a child unable to leave her home, she was powerless to leave the situation.

A story spread that this woman—suffering though she was—was not a victim at all, but the one who was to blame. After all, the thinking went, she was mentally ill and the person who hurt her was not.

The good reputation she had before all this was wiped from people's memories. It gave way to one that made her look despicable before the eyes of those who had known her.

Gradually her personality changed, and she developed symptoms similar to BPD. She angered easily, at times making people fear her.

Before the mistreatment, her life had been rich and admirable in many ways but now people no longer wanted to spend time with her. Now her days and nights were riddled by traumatic memories and suicidal depression.

Stigma caused her to suffer countless losses. May God help her make the apostle Paul's words her own: *"I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ."* (Philippians 3:8)

...and she asks herself. Was she herself to blame for the shunning and mistreatment? Could the people who hurt her help what they did? Could she help who she was? Some would say she needed help, not mistreatment.

STIGMA CAN EVEN COME FROM A DOCTOR - A BPD LIFE

It's no wonder I feel so full of anger, though before this I had been calm and well. When my psychiatrist tries to force an optional therapy on me, even though I know it's not right for me, I feel disrespected. When he doesn't listen to my reasoning, as though it has no worth, I feel like I'm not considered fully human. This is my doctor. To whom else can I turn?

When the person you trust to be looking after your mental health labels you and you know very well that doesn't describe you, what can you do? The description robs you of who you truly are, which may possibly be quite the opposite. But what this doctor writes in your chart will be there forever.

What could that mean for how you're looked on by future clinicians? To be judged in this way is what's making me sick. Today this stigma is where most of my sickness comes from. It makes me feel like I'm not considered a real person.

There's no recourse for me. Is it any wonder that so many decide to kill themselves rather than living with this?

Wouldn't anyone be angry?

MOOD SWINGS

People with BPD often feel like they are on an emotional rollercoaster and typically have an unstable sense of self and fear of abandonment.

Everyone experiences emotional ups and downs, but those with BPD tend to experience mood swings that are more intense and frequent than the typical person, lasting between a few hours and a few days.

While it's normal to have your mood shift from feeling good to feeling down, someone with BPD may experience extreme mood shifts for minor reasons—going from feeling okay to feeling devastated, desperate, or completely hopeless within a matter of moments. In some cases, the mood swings can occur many times in the course of a day.

Very often, a mood swing in BPD happens in reaction to an external trigger, and these triggers are often related to perceived rejection or abandonment by another person. For some, the mood swing is caused by traumatic memories. Such mood swings can quickly bring on thoughts of suicide.

Individuals in such a state may need to talk to someone: A friend who will be able to show compassion. A friend who will try to understand, even though it will be hard or even impossible to do. The important things for supporters to remember is not to advise or try to fix their friend. Simply listening and showing you care is best.

You are God's representative. How can you be his hands for him? How can you show his love?

WHAT PLACE DOES GOD HAVE IN MY LIFE?

I have confessed the name of Jesus as my Saviour but He is not always in the place of authority as Lord of my life in the way He deserves and wants to be. Psalm 86:11, a prayer of David, echoes mine: "Teach me Your way, O Lord, and I will walk in Your truth. Give me an undivided heart that I may fear Your name."

- Peter

AS A TEEN – A BPD LIFE

When I was a teenager, it was very hard to tell whether I was just being a miserable teenager, or whether my feelings were justified. Before I had my diagnosis, I spent a lot of time trying to figure out why things were somebody else's fault. But inside, I think I always knew that there was something stronger about my reactions than anyone else's. Everyone else seemed to be able to roll with the punches.

EMOTIONAL PAIN – A BPD LIFE

How I wish I could find someone who would understand! Helping others appreciate your emotional pain must be impossible unless they've also experienced it. Thus, you're left very much alone—the pain shrugged off as unimportant by friends and family. And so, I write, hoping that perhaps some will understand this clue of where BPD might come from.

When a child is emotionally abused, she has no idea of what lies ahead for her mental health. All she knows is the tremendous pain she's suffering at the present time. Not the obvious kind of pain one can see—the cuts and bruises. But pain that's often far worse—pain that can't be seen on the outside. This pain enters and lives in the very heart and soul of her being. It does not heal so easily.

Often the pain inflicted comes from a parent she had loved and trusted—a person who she had never imagined would treat her this way. And yet he did. Over and over. “*What did I do wrong?*” she wonders.

The hurtful words and actions continue. Wounding her. Damaging her personhood. Lowering her self-esteem and sense of self-worth. Nevertheless, she keeps on trusting, waiting for change. But change doesn’t come.

Running away was far from her mind. Not even considered. How could she leave the only home she knows? Where would she go?

Years later, painful memories and ugly feelings remain. They cling, never far away, surfacing with the slightest trigger. There at every waking.

BPD develops. Dysfunctional emotions. Intense anger follows the slightest hurtful remark or action. Her behavior causes others to judge her, seeing only what’s on the outside. If they could only see the pain inside!

SUICIDAL IDEATION – A BPD LIFE

From an anonymous person:

People who have not experienced it simply do not understand the emotional and even physical toll mental health issues cause. Suicidal thoughts and ideations became the norm for me. It is not that I ever truly wanted to die, I was just tired of living. I was tired of the pain my behaviors caused myself and others. I honestly believed that I was just “too much” and that my family, friends, and this world would be better off without me. I had to be hospitalized a few times and I attempted suicide twice.

Before I had the correct tools to fight my battle, I used many unhealthy coping mechanisms. I self-medicated with alcohol and drugs for a while. I also started using a very unhealthy way to cope with my pain, and that was to self-harm. I hurt myself on the outside to lessen the pain I felt on the inside.

Suicidal ideations become the norm for many living with BPD. For this person it was because of the feelings of guilt her behavior caused her. For others it was memories of trauma that gave them pain, bringing deep, but relatively short periods of depression. And yet, though they didn't last long, they were at times intense, bringing them to the emergency room for safety.

GOODBYE – A BPD LIFE

From Wichita:

Yesterday, I had to say goodbye to a dear friend of mine, because I became emotional and said things I never should have. I tried to be responsible. I walked away so she wouldn't have to deal with that, because no one should have to. I told my siblings what I really thought of them a couple days before that, because they always use my past against me, and lie about me. And a couple days ago I put my guitar away and said, "I'm done."

She sounds pretty matter-of-fact in relating these losses. But, if she's anything like me, there will be times when the darkness overcomes her as she considers what the losses say about her and who she is. The loneliness and inability to have a secure part in other people's lives overcome her and sink her into a depth that's hard to escape. She feels cut off. As the night wears on and the emptiness continues, she wonders how to escape—to leave the shame of who she is behind.

She needs a kind person to talk to.

FEAR OF BPD

The fear people have of those living with BPD must be one of the most tragic things for those who suffer. Fear is what

causes the stigma that brings with it exclusion from groups and activities and avoidance by others. It becomes difficult to have friends, a job, or a normal life.

Stigma engenders a significant loss of self-esteem, destroying the vitality we might otherwise bring to our lives. In fact, stigma often causes greater pain than the illness itself. There's nothing worse than being thought of as a person set apart—a person not like others, not given respect. Some are even made to feel less than human. It's enough to make you wonder if you should even live.

Where is the acceptance that people with BPD need? Don't we all deserve acceptance? Don't we all deserve love?

Remember the Bible story about the prostitute? Jesus showed her love that she had not thought possible. He showed her the compassion she so badly needed. In the greatest expression of gratitude, one she didn't plan and couldn't have helped, tears spilled over Jesus' feet as he was reclining. After the life she had been leading—a stigmatized empty life—you can understand why the deep emotion.

We who are also stigmatized need to have such love shown to us. We, too, need Jesus. We need godly individuals who can be his representatives—people who will take the time to learn about our illness. We want friends who are not afraid to spend time with us, learning that there's no need to fear us.

RESPONDING TO A PERSON WITH BPD

One of the causes of stigma is that people don't know how to approach those who have mental illness. They fear how that person might respond to them. As a result, the social life of the person with the illness is severely affected, particularly when inappropriate behavior starts coming into play.

If the Church is to be a safe spiritual home for people with BPD, it's essential to become informed about the disorder. Having a grasp of what makes BPD sufferers the way they are will go a long way to help them do well and respond to ministry. Understanding will help us give them the kind of love and care Jesus has modelled for us.

Probably the most prominent part of BPD is emotional dysregulation [\[1\]](#). Through life challenges and trauma, often occurring in childhood, people with BPD have developed a very strong sensitivity. This often results in uncontrollable anger which can include feelings of hurt, disappointment, sadness, and hatred. If not understood, a person displaying such anger or other emotions might be considered bad or evil and be treated that way.

But such emotions are not usually an indication of the person's character. Most probably, they're a different person on the inside. Uncontrollable emotion is usually triggered by something said or done that's causing pain rooted deep in their past. The behavior is not intentional. It can't be helped.

Don't judge a person with BPD by the emotions they show. No matter how scary they may seem, it's not likely an indication of who they truly are at all. On the inside they could very well be gentle and kind.

Although my condition is improving, I did go through a difficult period with frequent uncontrollable anger. In many cases I wasn't even aware of it. People started fearing me and stopped talking to me. I lost friends.

But I had always thought of myself—and been thought of—as a giving person. I led a godly life with compassion for those who, like me, suffered from mental illness. In big and small ways, I gave support. Even while I went through periods of intense anger and pain, I continued writing devotionals, sending them out to a long list of individuals every week. The writings comforted and encouraged my readers, reminding them of God's love. As I wrote, I myself was blessed as well. I was reminded that God still loves me.

So here I was, scaring people with my angry outbursts and at the same time showing love and compassion to those who were suffering. The anger I showed was not the real me. It was only behavior people saw on the outside. Unfortunately, that's what I was judged by.

The anger was an emotional response by a very sensitive person—a response to things said and done that triggered pain left from the past.

“Although the term “dysregulation” might not be immediately understood, most of us have seen dysregulation at one point or another.

Dysregulation can be seen in the grocery store when children throw themselves onto the ground and are literally unable to calm themselves down. Or when a parent stands stoically at a loved one’s funeral, seemingly incapable of showing any real sense of emotional loss or distress.” [2]

[1] <https://www.verywellmind.com/emotion-regulation-425298>

[2] Types of Dysregulation: Definition and Differences by Laura Angers

HOW WELL DO I TRUST GOD?

What I’ve learned in my 50 years is that the more I trust in God, the easier it is to trust or put confidence in myself without wavering. Psalm 20:7 says, “Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God.” What man trusts in is the things he creates, controls or shapes.

- Peter

RELATIONSHIPS – A BPD LIFE

Here is another sharing from the person in Wichita, KS:

Imagine the most intense feeling you have ever had in your life. Maybe it's the first time you fell in love, or the worst argument you have ever had with someone you love. The intensity with which you felt those emotions is probably equivalent to what a person with BPD feels on a regular basis. Now, multiply that feeling times ten and that is what a person with BPD considers intense emotion. That is what a fight with a loved one feels like, or how intensely they can feel love for a single person. The emotion can easily become unbearable, which is when the BPD takes control. Your mind, your body, are completely taken over and you end up doing something you regret deeply but have to live with. People will tell you that whatever you did was your fault, and you will believe it, but they don't and can't understand how hard you fought to keep control.

It can easily end up feeling hopeless and you feel helpless. There is nothing you can do to fix it. You believe you can't get close to anyone because you will love them so much, and they will inevitably hurt you in one way or another, and you will overreact and do or say something that ensures they decide they can't be around you. You are toxic. Your lack of emotional control leads you to damage your relationships, leading people to walk away

from it, which exacerbates the abandonment issues that are a part of your disorder. It's a cycle of negativity. I truly believe that I will never get better, because I am surrounded by negative people with negative feelings toward me that I then reciprocate toward them.

REACTIONS FROM FAMILY AND FRIENDS – A BPD LIFE

When we think of being stigmatized because of an illness or disorder, our first thoughts are that these kinds of responses come to us from the world “out there”—from the people who don't necessarily know us very well. Yet I have come to see that some of the most painful stigma comes from people close to us—our family and friends, people who have known us for years and who we think know us and love us for who we are. People we need for support.

When I was first diagnosed, I found that some friends started to attribute everything I did as part of a BPD issue. It was as though I'd been given a bad name. The stigma was exceptionally greater than what I'd experienced with bipolar disorder, but I hadn't changed that much from whom I was before. Within one circle I was a well-respected leader one day, and the next I was out—rejected, even mistreated.

When friends hear we have an illness with such an awful sounding name, chances are they will immediately google it

to learn what it means. What are the symptoms? What does the web have to say about us?

Below are some of the reactions family and friends have had to my condition. I have experienced all of them, but probably from only a few of my closest friends. Yet it's these few who have hurt me most deeply. If I had not received the BPD label, I believe things would be different.

- When friends became familiar with symptoms they found on the internet, everything about me became suspect. All my behaviour was attributed to the illness, although there might have been valid reasons for it. They did not recognize that I'm not all BPD. I have a side that is as normal as the next person.
- Often the way I express myself in response to something painful is as normal as anyone would. What might be normal for others, is misconstrued as a sign of illness for me.
- I started feeling judged, as though I myself were to blame for the illness. Few seemed to recognize that this disorder was not of my own making, but that it was, in most cases, the result of past trauma.
- Many believe that I willingly release strong emotional responses. But unless I've had intensive DBT therapy to

control them, I'll probably have a hard time holding them in. We need to realize that emotions themselves are not a cause for shame.

- Friends and family do not show the kindness and compassion as freely as they do for other illnesses. (When we have gone out of control emotionally, it would be helpful if a friend would talk it over with us in a compassionate way.)
- Even when there is undeniable rejection—something that would hurt anyone—the pain we experience is too easily blamed on our over-sensitivity, and thus not serious, not real, and not worthy of compassion. If they only knew how intense such pain can be! It has led many to suicide.

I've lived a rich life with many accomplishments—been thought well of. But in some quarters, the BPD diagnosis I received brought on a disrespect I hadn't experienced before. I was judged and criticized, no longer having the good in me recognized. Not listened to. All I had done in my life and what I was still doing, no longer received the credit it deserved. Eventually I started questioning my self-worth.

WHAT BOUNDARIES MEAN TO ME

Much has been written about the need for boundaries when supporting people with mental health issues, but I don't think we hear much about what having boundaries means to those of us who live with such issues. I will describe a bit from a point of view I held at one time.

Many of us living with mental health issues find it hard to realize why supporters need to set boundaries. Although I knew I had a mental illness, I never saw myself as being so different from others. So when a good friend didn't want to spend time with me, I wondered why she didn't treat me like her other friends. What did I do wrong? Was I really that unlikeable? I can't describe the depth of my pain.

People living with mental health challenges often have a greater need for love and attention than the average person. We may be drawn to those who treat us kindly and really seem to care. The trouble is, when we overdo seeking their attention, both we and our supporters can get hurt.

Those who support us have others in their life who need them. How can they look after others if we burden them to the point of burn-out? Because, yes, we can do that if we're not careful. Trouble is, in dealing with our issues, we are not always able to control ourselves.

MAN'S INHUMANITY TO MAN

If we want to follow Christ's ways, we must try and treat those who are considered today's untouchables in the way he treated the untouchables of his day. With compassion.

I believe that for many of us the idea of "stigma" is not much more than a word. We don't fully understand its meaning. We know it's bad, but it's only those who are affected by it who know *how* bad. In fact, the pain from stigma alone causes 10% of people with BPD to die by suicide.

To be stigmatized can mean a lot more than what we might think. The sad truth is that some individuals with BPD are not simply avoided. They are also despised and treated with disrespect and anger.

Put yourself in such a person's shoes:

You feel hurt. But you might not even know why you're being treated this way. You could have had two or three episodes of over-the-top anger. They happened in response to being hurt and couldn't have been helped. But word gets around. And you ask, "*Will it ever be forgotten?*"

It's easy to start feeling less than human. Easy to feel you don't belong anywhere. "*Is there anyone left who appreciates me? Hardly anyone wants to spend time with me. There seems to be nothing left for me in this world.*" It's this line of thinking that leads many to suicide.

And this is how the person who did the hurting might think:

“It’s not hard to hurt a person who is so sensitive. Pretty scary to see how they behave at times. Sometimes it’s hard to be nice to them.”

So they do what they can to keep the person with BPD at a distance. And sometimes that means not showing kindness—even treating them with disrespect.

But you need to remember that before you is a fellow human being who cannot help the illness that’s befallen him! It’s not his fault that he had a troubled childhood. He needs your love and compassion. He needs to be included in your world.

Have a good look at Jesus. Remember what it means to follow him. Jesus loved from the depth of his heart. The lepers, the demoniac. The love he felt left no room for fear. Can we follow him in the way we’ve been called to follow him? I believe we can. In a spirit of love, we can follow him.

When we access the love God has put in us, we will know that we don’t need to fear this person with his challenges. *There is no fear in love.* (1 John 4:18)

Jesus has given us this command: *“Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.”* (1 John 4:21)

We all need brothers and sisters.

THE NEED FOR COMPASSION

“Compassion.” We all know the word and we know that, among other things, it’s a description of what Jesus showed the outcasts—those the world had rejected.

The Bible tells about his unconditional love, the love he has for each of us, no matter who we are, no matter how good or bad we are. We would like to be his followers. We want to show that kind of love to people around us. Can we do that? Or will we unwittingly make exceptions?

Some people may be so different we find it hard to get close to them, to say hello to them, or to ask how their day is going. We may fear them, not knowing what to expect in response. But remember what the Bible said:

There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. (1 John 4:18)

Everyone feared the demoniac and the leper. But through his unconditional love, Jesus had compassion for them.

He was as one with them. Though divine, he was a human being in the same way those who were rejected were human beings. He knew how to put himself in their shoes, appreciating what their lives must be like. He was able to feel their pain and join them in it.

Isn't that "feeling with" exactly what compassion is all about? This is why Jesus came to earth to be with us as a fellow human being. This is why he knows us so well.

Christ's compassion healed many hurting individuals. Through us, and the love God gives us to share, his compassion continues to heal those who may be starving for such love.

How can we show God's love to hurting people when we're not at ease with them?

Just asking how they're feeling, is enough to help them feel cared for. It's enough to help them feel some of their pain lift. It takes away the loneliness of carrying it.

This is like the compassion we see expressed in the life of Jesus. He asked the blind Bartimaeus, "What do you want me to do for you?" (Mark 10:51) Wasn't that, in essence, asking Bartimaeus how he was and what he needed? Most likely, the healing started the moment Jesus showed an interest in this lonely individual.

Imagine if you had BPD and you had just gone through a bout of uncontrollable anger or emotional dysregulation. You're struggling with the pain, and someone asks you if you'd like them to stay with you awhile. "Tell me what's going on for you," they ask. They show no fear, only concern and compassion. They care enough not to leave you alone with your distress. It's through that kind of compassion that healing begins.

WE ARE REAL PEOPLE

We are real people like everyone else. Yet we suffer in ways few would be able to comprehend. Please try to imagine what it would be like to be this 26-year-old woman from Wichita, KS. She writes:

I was diagnosed with BPD about seven years ago. When I was told what it was, I went home and researched everything I could about it. I was excited because all my problems finally had an explanation, and just maybe I wasn't such a bad person. Maybe it wasn't all my fault like I was always told, and I always believed. And most importantly, maybe I had a chance to get better.

Most of my family doesn't believe in my diagnosis, and any friend I ever made has left because of the brief periods of time when I couldn't control my emotions. I could never blame them for not wanting to be around me, but this all left and leaves me with absolutely no support system. Yes, I live in my father's house, but we barely speak, and I harbor so much anger toward him that sometimes I can't talk to him because I don't know what awful words could come out of my mouth. My surroundings have left me feeling like there is no hope, because no one wants to help. Not someone like me. Not someone with questionable actions in their past.

This person and the many others who live with BPD need understanding. It's true, every one of us does. Yet the way their illness affects them with hard to control behavior, hides the truth. It hides the good they have inside them. Don't blame them for who they are. Accept them. Love them if you can.

When she comes to the end of her life, will there be anyone left to say she was a good person?

LIKE AN OUTCAST

And a leper came to him beseeching him, and kneeling said to him, "If you will, you can make me clean." Moved with pity, he stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "I will; be clean."

Mark 1:40-41 (RSV)

At the time Jesus lived, touching an outcast with contagious leprosy was unthinkable. Imagine how it must have felt to be such a person, banned from living with the friends and family he knew and loved. When the leper in this story asked Jesus if he was willing to heal him, Jesus responded with compassion and healed him.

Consider the great love Jesus must have felt for this "untouchable," to willingly reach out to him and touch him! It's one thing to have compassion and heal a lame man or a blind man, but to lay hands on a person with ugly sores all over his body?

How great the love of Jesus!

Jesus came close to the leper and cared for him like the real person he was—a person deserving a normal life, a person deserving love.

We who live with BPD, and other mental illnesses as well, are often treated like lepers were years ago. Too often we are shunned, not accepted like others, not considered someone to whom we can get close. How would it feel to have Jesus show us the kind of respect we've been missing for so long?

But he does – even now.

With tenderness he cares for us and reaches out, like he did to the leper. He offers to heal the pain we have inside. And he can do that in a way no one else can.

I'M NOT A BAD PERSON – A BPD LIFE

When asked, most will say a person should be judged by what's in their heart, not by their outward appearance. But it's amazing how that goes out the window when they see behavior they find alarming. Behavior they don't understand.

I was hurt by things said or done to me. Without the ability to stop myself, I got angry, even experiencing emotional dysregulation at times. Because of that behavior, the people

around me started thinking of me as a bad person. I started to be treated as a bad person. More hurting followed. And then, more “misbehavior.” It became a vicious cycle.

I wasn’t a bad person at all. I had done a lot of good in my life before all this started occurring. Why was this happening? Inside, I felt like the good person I had always been. Yet I was helpless to change people’s view of me—to remind others of who I truly am. Eventually, all the good people had known about me was forgotten. I lost my reputation.

What I needed was compassion. What I needed was to be treated like the good person I had inside me.

Those who care, have it in them to show such compassion, despite the oft-scary emotional dysregulation, despite anger that sounds threatening. We need to remember that this behavior is an expression of deep pain and requires a sympathetic response.

How?

There is a way to respond to anger in a compassionate way.

THE COMPASSIONATE RESPONSE TO ANGER

Suppose someone said something or did something especially hurtful to the person with BPD. Such a sensitive person might not be able to help but react, often with over-the-top anger or emotional dysregulation. That's the feature of BPD that's most alarming in the eyes of the people around us.

And yet, it was only a reaction to a hurtful situation. It doesn't necessarily mean we are any "crazier," or that we're dangerous, or that we're bad or evil. If we were good people before this, we'll be good people after, despite this reaction.

Trouble is, it only takes two or three of these angry outbursts for us to be branded—to have a lot of negative talk about us circulating. And no matter how good a person we might be, no matter how much we've done for others, that tends to be forgotten. The "bad person" we come to be known as overshadows the good. We become ostracized—outcasts. Victims of stigma.

Such is the tragedy of BPD. But does it have to be?

What can you do when someone gets angry—perhaps even sounding threatening.

Unless there's a true danger of attack (not likely), a caring response would be to stay with the person, treating them as

you would any other hurting person. Be kind. Keep respect. As the anger starts to subside:

- Give them some space, maybe bringing them to a quiet place.
- Ask if they'd like you to stay with them.
- Offer a glass of water.

When they have settled down, ask if they would like to talk:

- What caused the anger?
- Was it something that was said?
- Did they misinterpret something?
- Spend some time praying with them, bringing it to God.

If this kind of caring response were to become common in our churches, we might be surprised at how much healing would be done.

Try to follow Jesus. He does not judge us on our outward appearance or behavior. He sees who we are on the inside. He sees what's in our heart. That's where our real self is to be found.

HOW CAN WE HELP?

More thoughts from the person in Wichita, KS:

My surroundings have left me feeling like there is no hope, because no one wants to help. Not someone like me. Not someone with questionable actions in their past.

I read *The Art of Asking* by my favorite artist Amanda Palmer, and it was absolutely wonderful. That book made me see that there are good people in the world. That some people really are willing and even eager to help, and that makes me smile every damn time. I need frequent reminders of this, because if I don't it feels like I will lose faith in humanity completely, and that will shatter every belief I have ever held dear. I want there to be love in the world. I want to know that humanity can be beautiful. I want to know that honesty and loyalty exist. I need them to... but as an outcast to society, I don't see it. My belief in it is fading.

If you had a friend like this, struggling with BPD, what could you do to help her experience the goodness she craves? If you're a follower of Christ you will have a good example in him. The Bible teaches us to love others in the way we're loved by God.

Forgive them their flaws, realizing that you have flaws of your own. Talk with your friend, listen to them, discover the good that is sure to be under their exterior.

Can you be a person who is “willing and even eager to help?”
Can you show them that there are good people in the world?

MY CHURCH FAMILY

The people in the family of God are my soft place to land, my confidantes, my prayer support, my cheerleaders. They believe in me and encourage me to keep fighting the urge to give up. They encourage me to keep going, knowing that God is fighting my battles. Knowing this, I have been quite open, honest and vulnerable in sharing my struggles with many. I have not once regretted the decision to do this. As Proverbs 27:17 says, “as iron sharpens iron, so one (person) sharpens the other.”

THE FULLY HUMAN HEART

Jean Vanier was the founder of L'Arche, an international network of communities for people with developmental disabilities. The following comes from his book, *Becoming Human*, in which he shares his profoundly human vision for creating a common good that radically changes our communities, our relationships, and ourselves. He proposes that by opening ourselves to outsiders, those we perceive as weak, different, or inferior, we can achieve true personal and societal freedom.

Sometimes we have to forego group approval and even accept rejection, if it should happen in order to follow what the ancients call “scientia cordis,” the science of the heart, which gives the inner strength to put truth, flowing from experience, over the need for approval.

The science of the heart permits us to be vulnerable with others, not to fear them but to listen to them, to see their beauty and value, to understand them in all their fears, needs, and hopes, even to challenge them if need be. It permits us to accept others just as they are and to believe that they can grow to greater beauty.

The mature heart does not seek to force belief on others. It does not seek to impose a faith. The mature heart listens for what another's heart is called to be. It no longer judges or condemns. It is a heart of

forgiveness. Such a heart is a compassionate heart that sees the presence of God in others. It lets itself be led by them into uncharted land. It is the heart that causes us to grow, to change, to evolve, and to become more fully human. [\[1\]](#)

[\[1\]](#) Becoming Human by Jean Vanier – p. 88

EQUAL UNDER GOD

As a person with mental health challenges, I feel I am as worthy as others are. I may be different, but I am equal under God, the same as everyone else.

Many have accepted people with problems like mine, making us part of their church and community. But unfortunately, this doesn't mean we're always considered to have equal value or equal respect. We are still discriminated against in ways most people don't consider.

Supporters are told they should have boundaries when they deal with us. "*Protect yourself,*" they're told. And we who need the support are left wondering what happened when the coffee time we used to enjoy is stopped. "*What did I do?*" they ask. But nobody answers. The supporter's personal needs are not explained.

Why don't people talk with us as they do with others? Why don't they consider us like they consider others? Too often we feel looked down on instead of being thought of as brothers and sisters.

If we could only be honest with each other. It may be difficult without one getting hurt. But maybe we should take that risk. We must—openly and from the heart, and with the greatest kindness we can bring to the situation—tell each other how we feel.

As equals under God, we must learn to understand each other. And we must—preferably together—search for ways to create boundaries that will work for both of us.

MORE WORDS FROM JEAN VANIER

There can be no forgiveness of ourselves or of others unless we believe that we are all part of a common humanity. What this means in practical terms is that no one individual, no one group, is superior to others. To say that we are all equally important seems a redundancy. And yet how often do any of us act as if it were true? How often has history demonstrated this human truth—that we are equal? Not often.

So, it needs to be said again and again. We may be different in race, culture, religion, and capacities, but we are all the same, with vulnerable hearts, the need to love and be loved, the needs to grow, to develop our capacities, and to find our place in the world.

We all need to find ourselves of value. We are all the same because throughout our lives we have, everyone of us,

been hurt in one way or another. Fears have been implanted in us; we have difficulty relating to others; there is a certain chaos of anguish and violence within us.

In order to enter the path of forgiveness, we have to lose our feelings of both superiority and inferiority. Each of us has hurt another and each of us has been hurt. And so, we must own and take responsibility for our lives as well as for the future. We are called upon to stand up and take our place freely in the world. [\[1\]](#)

[\[1\]](#) Becoming Human by Jean Vanier – p. 153

LOVING THE UNLOVABLE

In his day, Jesus did not avoid or fear the leper or the demoniac. He reached out to them with the compassion that was so much a part of who he was. How can we follow Jesus by bringing such empathy to those the world turns away?

I believe the compassion God calls us to have—compassion Jesus has modelled for us throughout the Bible—is the most powerful healer for those who are hurting. The heart of God is at its centre. Through our obedience to God's leading, we can carry the love of God to those who suffer.

Jesus does not shudder at the sores on the leper's body. He does not fear the demoniac's behavior. He sees the heart that

lives inside them. He recognizes the love for which such individuals hunger. And Jesus has that love to give—love he gives to all of us, but especially to those who suffer most.

People with BPD are stigmatized and ostracized. They are lonely. They need friends who will care about them. Can we give them the kind of love that Jesus, as our example, is teaching us to give? How can we bring healing to them?

Those who live with BPD need to be able to talk to people who won't be judgmental. When we listen to them tell us about their pain, we are helping them carry that pain. That's compassion. That's love.

With such love, we can bring God's healing power to those who need it—even to those the world has deemed unlovable. The more regularly such compassion is shown, the more effective the healing will be. People with BPD can and do recover.

HOW DOES GOD KEEP ME GOING?

I can summarize with Psalm 18:28-29: "You, O God, keep my lamp burning. My God turns my darkness into light. With Your help, I can advance against a troop; with my God, I can scale a wall." I have found that physical endurance and spiritual endurance go hand in hand. And so, through physical work and playing sports, I stay fit, healthy and active. I also gain a greater ability to discipline myself - mind, will and desires—for good attitudes and habits that will benefit my spiritual condition. (1 Timothy 4:8)

- Peter

BEING A PASTOR TO A PERSON WITH BPD [\[1\]](#)

The following is part of an article addressed to pastors in *Christianity Today*:

It is easy to view people with BPD as hopeless cases. Yet there is hope. Churches and their leaders can help these persons function at a higher level, manage their emotional turmoil, and disrupt the congregation less. Here are several principles to use:

First, set firm limits on tolerable behavior. Giving into demands for excessive time and allowing temper tantrums or threats of suicide if demands are not met proves unhelpful. More helpful is setting limits that are clear, realistic, consistent, enforced promptly, and logistically sound.

Guidelines benefit both the person with BPD and us. They enable us to stay involved; we can avoid either responding to every request or refusing to have any involvement. And consistent involvement tells the person that rage will not destroy the relationship, as it has others in the past. When we demonstrate measured consistency, we provide a healing emotional experience.

[\[1\] https://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/1989/fall/89l4042.html](https://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/1989/fall/89l4042.html)

GIVING SUPPORT – OUR HUMANITY

We sense our humanity most fully when we walk with someone through their pain. There's something about the process of encouraging a troubled person to peel back the layers to find their healthy self again. It's a privilege to be allowed to accompany them on their journey.

We experience our humanity most when we can be a friend to someone who's hurting. When we can be the beacon of hope they need. When we can show them that there's still goodness in the world.

Everyone, no matter how unpleasant they may seem on the outside, has a heart that needs the presence of God. Everyone needs love. Can we be God's representatives? Are we willing to follow Jesus?

WHAT I APPRECIATE MOST IN MY SUPPORTERS

Their honesty, even if 'brutally' so, not sparing my feelings if necessary to get their care and urgency across. Their loyalty and confidentiality, keeping private the information I entrust them with. Their unconditional support and help, whether practical in nature or in encouragement and godly counsel.

Proverbs 27:5-6 is a 'hard truth' to accept at first, but one that grows on you as you experience its benefits: "Open rebuke [correction] is better than hidden love and wounds from a friend can be trusted..."

- Peter

THE CHURCH COULD HELP STRENGTHEN OUR FAITH:

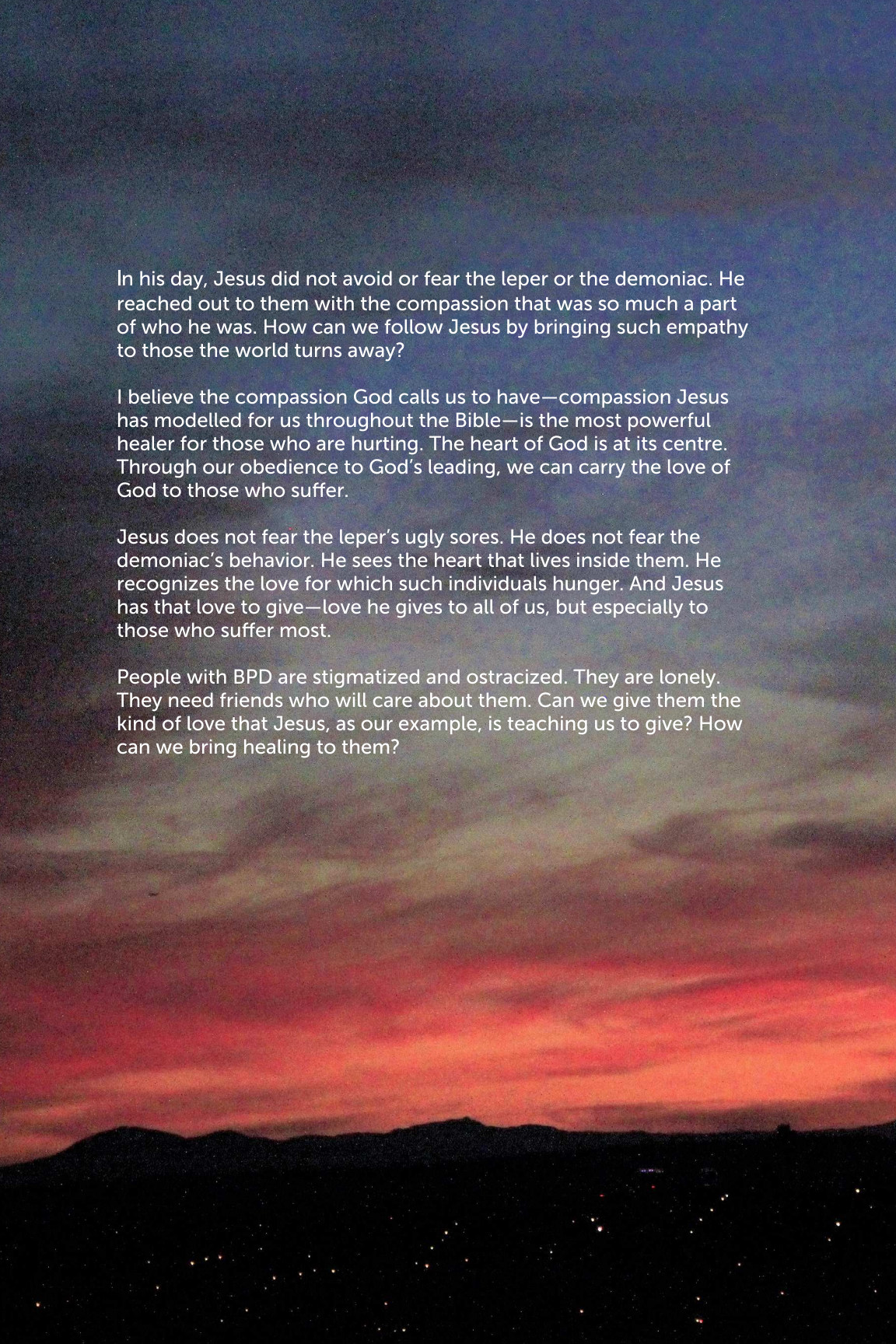
By being humble, gentle, merciful, peace-making, kind and overall expressing a love that "binds [all of these godly character qualities] together in perfect unity" (Colossians 3:12-14)

By bearing with, forgiving and accepting unconditionally those who continue to struggle and don't seem to be making significant progress. These people need grace, not judgment. They are broken people like the rest of us and not projects to be fixed!

- Peter

Marja Bergen is a 75-yr-old mental health activist living with bipolar disorder since 1965. In 2015 she developed symptoms similar to borderline personality disorder. She is the founder of the Living Room faith-based support ministry, from 2006 to 2015 leading a large group of her own. She has been raising awareness about mental health in the Church since the year 2000.

Peter Brooke is a 50-yr-old who has taught high school for 26 years at Regent Christian Academy in Surrey. He's a father of five children between the ages of 8 to 21. Peter has a growing interest in reading and writing about mental health challenges and in mentoring the younger generation who are dealing with spiritual struggles and emotional and relational issues.



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Jesus does not fear the leper's ugly sores. He does not fear the demoniac's behavior. He sees the heart that lives inside them. He recognizes the love for which such individuals hunger. And Jesus has that love to give—love he gives to all of us, but especially to those who suffer most.

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