

Hopelessness for Family Members of Individuals with Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD)

Mehreen Tariq and Neelam Mishra

Psychiatry Department, Gangaram City Hospital, New Delhi

The main focus of the present study was to investigate the phenomenon of hopelessness present in family members of BPD patients. This study attempts to fill this gap by exploring the antecedents and consequences of hopelessness in caregivers of BPD patients. Building on existing literature, the study highlights the unique emotional burdens that caregivers experience as a result of the unpredictable course of BPD, including emotional exhaustion, learned helplessness, and compassion fatigue. Core findings show that the cyclical crises, relational volatility, and chronicity of BPD contribute to despair, resulting in psychological distress and strained relationships within the family. The study also emphasizes that caregivers' mental health suffers in the face of hopelessness, leading to social withdrawal and diminished capacity to give care. These findings underscore the pressing need for family-centered approaches, including psychoeducational and therapeutic interventions, to alleviate hopelessness in the caregivers which can be crucial in nurturing resilience. The study fills a gap in research by examining this underexplored emotional state and improves clinical practices required to ensure both caregivers and people with BPD are included in improvements to clinical practices.

Keywords: borderline personality disorder, hopelessness, caregivers, emotional burden, family dynamics

Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD), as defined by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), is a complex and often debilitating mental health condition involving a pervasive pattern of instability in interpersonal relationships, self-image, and moods, as well as marked impulsivity (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Individuals with BPD have pervasive and enduring patterns of emotional dysregulation that cause dramatic changes in their interpersonal relationships. The nature of BPD is highly unpredictable, compounded by recurrent emotional outbursts, creating added stress on family members who are often the primary caregivers (Lawn & McMahon, 2015).

The emotional toll on people with borderline personality disorder (BPD) is already difficult enough, but its effects can be felt on those around them too. Hoffman et al. (2005) perhaps describe this best saying "They are often trapped in cycles of caring that lead to chronic distress, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion". Families face challenges in creating stable communication and boundaries for their loved ones, frequently feeling powerless and hopeless as a result (Fruzzetti et al., 2005). This chronic stress and emotional strain put them at higher risk of developing a sense of hopelessness-the frequent feeling that one's situation is out of one's control or will only worsen (Beck et al., 1974). Because of the cyclical nature of BPD episodes, many of the family members of the BPD sufferer feel at a loss, as if they will always be caught in the psychological trauma, which adds to a sense of real psychological hopelessness (Scheirs & Bok, 2007).

Significance of the Study

Family members of those with borderline personality disorder can bear a tremendous emotional burden. Studies show that caregivers of people with chronic mental illnesses, including BPD, are at high risk for mental health problems themselves, including depression, anxiety, and hopelessness (Bailey & Grenyer, 2014). Hopelessness, specifically, is a major player as it can inhibit mental health conditions and lead to additional isolation or withdrawal from caregiving responsibilities (Hughes et al., 2015). Without the right support, family can become emotionally overwhelmed, which both increases their mental ill-health and may also exacerbate the person with BPD's distress due to the dysfunctional relationship (Lawn & McMahon, 2015).

The current research proposal focuses on the presence of hopelessness among family members of BPD patients. As mental health professionals rise to the challenge of understanding this phenomenon, drawing upon the parallels with the distress of the families can tell us more about how to effectively treat both the individual with BPD as well as their families. This becomes crucial, as unaddressed hopelessness can create a risk of burnout, as well as increased likelihood that family members will disengage from supportive roles within the patient's therapeutic agenda (Hooley & Hoffman, 1999).

Relevance in Clinical Psychology

Although research that examines the experiences of family members of individuals with mental illnesses is burgeoning, the literature often highlights caregiver stress and burden rather than the unique experience of hopelessness. Although there have been some studies investigating the needs of caregivers of people with BPD, the impact of hopelessness does not seem to have received the same level of investigation in comparison to more general psychological distress (Bailey & Grenyer, 2014). The lack of research on hopelessness as a specific emotional experience has consequently raised the need for more extensive studies looking at hopelessness as a separate psychological condition with unique considerations for mental health treatment.

Author Note

Mehreen Tariq, Junior Psychologist, Psychiatry Department
Gangaram City Hospital, New Delhi

Neelam Mishra, Consultant Rehabilitation Psychologist, Psychiatry
Department Gangaram City Hospital, New Delhi

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to
Mehreen Tariq, Junior Psychologist, Psychiatry Department
Gangaram City Hospital, New Delhi

E-mail: maheatwork@gmail.com

Filling this void can have important clinical implications. Family-based interventions, such as psychoeducation and family therapy, can be strengthened with strategies for hopelessness reduction and resilience promotion (Hoffman et al., 2005). Moreover, by facilitating improved mental health of family members, the clinical psychologist can indirectly impact therapy outcomes for those with BPD in their family, fostering a more supportive and stable environment in the home (Lieb et al., 2004). This work is thus particularly pertinent for clinical psychologists in the realm of improving patient and family health through more sophisticated, family-oriented mental health care.

Review of Literature

Understanding BPD and Caregiver Burden

We are going to talk about borderline personality disorder (BPD), a mental health issue characterized by a pattern of instability in interpersonal relationships (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) and emotion regulation (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The impact of BPD does affect family members, who often act in a primary caregiver role, as well. Such a dynamic leads us to the concept of “caregiver burden”, a multi-faceted strain that includes aspects that are psychological, emotional, physical, and social (Pearlin et al., 1990). Research shows that the burden of the stigma is particularly high in BPD in comparison with other mental disorders, due to the specific, unpredictable features of BPD, such as impulsive behaviour and extreme temperaments (Lieb et al., 2004; Steele et al., 2016). Such features make it particularly difficult for family members to find emotional footing, as they must routinely contend with sudden and severe mood lability from their loved one (Skodol et al., 2002).

Family members offer their challenges, with the same family member suffering from BPD as opposed to other disorders such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder (Hoffman et al., 2005). More specifically, relatives of patients with BPD experience higher rates of emotional exhaustion, due in large part to a cycle in which the patient repeatedly engages in crisis behaviour, often in the form of suicide attempts or self-harming behaviour that is characteristic of BPD (Bourne et al., 2015). Moreover, these chronic stressors have been shown to increase the prevalence of psychological symptoms in caregivers (e.g., anxiety, depression, & helplessness; Bailey & Grenyer, 2014).

Emotional and Psychological Impact on Family Members

The emotions felt by the family members of those with BPD can be severe, often leading to high levels of psychological distress, such as anxiety, depression and comparative inadequacy (Hoffman et al., 2005). A study by Steele et al. (2016) observed that the relational instability in BPD leads family members to do constant crisis management, often resulting in cycles of emotional exhaustion. This emotional toll is compounded by the internalized guilt of caregivers, who often feel they are responsible for the health of their loved one and blame their struggles on personal failing (Lawn & McMahon, 2015).

A further problematic factor is the chronicity of BPD symptoms, which usually causes relapsing-remitting phenomena, described as “chronic sorrow,” whereby caregivers are mourning continuously because their loved ones will not recover (Morse & Carter, 1996).

Chronic sorrow, although ordinarily referenced within the frame of physical cares, applies here as it represents the parallel: such experiences are cyclical, and caregivers to persons with BPD appear to undergo processes of regrieving that may become magnified during times of symptom exacerbation and somewhat ameliorated during periods of relative stability (Hughes et al., 2015). This kind of sorrow can be “learned helplessness” (Seligman, 1975) in which, after successive crises, caregivers start to believe that nothing they do works which leads them to a hardened form of hopelessness.

Hopelessness as a Unique Experience

Hopelessness, a psychological state characterized by the perception that one's predicament is unlikely to improve, is frequent in family members of patients with BPD (Beck et al., 1974). Hopelessness is different from general caregiver distress in that it is both permanent and pervasive; caregivers may begin to see their entire lives as inextricably linked to the immutable distress of their loved one's disorder (Scheirs & Bok, 2007). The hopelessness is especially prevalent in family members who feel no progress is being made despite their continuing efforts to engage, something which is often true in the case of BPD due to its chronic nature and remedial difficulties (Krawitz, 2004).

Beyond the mental and emotional toll that caregiving can take, caregivers often are adversely affected by their work with patients resulting in a state of physical and emotional depletion called “compassion fatigue” as they remain in high-stress situations over prolonged periods (Figley, 1995). In the case of BPD caregivers, compassion fatigue not only adds to feelings of hopelessness, it also drives emotional distancing, in which caregivers use disengagement as a protective way to minimize further emotional harm (Perseus et al., 2005). This detachment, which is a form of self-protection, can ironically exacerbate feelings of hopelessness, as it is frequently accompanied by guilt about withdrawing from the caregiving role.

Impact of Hopelessness on Family Dynamics

Hopelessness in caregivers leads to family dynamics that affect caregiver-patient interactions as well as family atmosphere. According to Hooley and Hoffman (1999), higher levels of expressed emotion such as criticism and hostility are common among caregivers who remain in a protracted state of hopelessness; caregivers who psychologically believe there is no escape from caregiving with little potential for change in their situation. This highly expressed emotion is damaging for both the caregiver and the person with BPD (often making the symptoms of BPD worse & creating negative feedback loops in family relations) (Gunderson, 2011).

As a consequence, family members who feel hopeless even are pulling away from social and support networks, leaving themselves even more isolated and deepening their despair (Lawn & McMahon, 2015). With no one to turn to, this isolation only exacerbates their sense of entrapment and suffering, and as they feel more unsupported, their struggle to communicate their emotional struggles is hindered further by the fact that many people simply do not understand the many complexities of BPD. Thus, caregivers can experience “vicarious trauma,” where they each exhibit going through similar symptoms as PTSD being in close proximity to their loved one's trauma and crisis for an extreme amount of time (Herman, 1992).

This expanded review also documents how hopelessness among family members of individuals with BPD is a complex experience that emerges from the chronic, unpredictable nature of BPD, as well as the cumulative psychological burden of caregiving. Hope has been demonstrated to confer resilience against psychological difficulties, though little is known about its inverse forces, i.e., hopelessness, on caregiver health.

Discussion

Because of the contrast and variability of emotions, behaviours and self-perception many individuals with this condition experience, borderline personality disorder (BPD) is largely known as a disorder of paradox. People with BPD may have overwhelming fears of abandonment, but they often have difficulty trusting or feeling close to another person. This paradox generates a fierce push-pull: They might long to be close to people, but push them away out of fear or distrust. Relationships can be lumpy, with people swaying between intimacy and coldness. A fear of losing them can, paradoxically, create behaviours that push them away. In BPD, individuals can jump from idealising to devaluing others (to devalue is to see something as worthless and is sometimes referred to as splitting). This emotional cycling can be bewildering for the person with the disorder and those around them. It causes relationships to become intense and sour fast and leads to a pattern of instability.

Many people with BPD experience affect very strongly, but may also have periods of emotional numbing or dissociation in which they feel disconnected from their own affective experience, and this oscillation can be confusing and drive the patient to self-harm or risk-taking behaviours when the person wants to either liberate kicking feelings or feel anything when feeling numb. There is so much disorder and instability within with a core sense of self. People with BPD may struggle with a stable sense of identity but may immerse themselves obsessively and utterly in different roles, opinions or personas at the moment. This shifting self-image is difficult to accept within ourselves and results in our needing others to validate that, which can be exhausting for both us and those around us.

BPD often includes an intense need for control, over emotions or relationships but people with BPD are often at the mercy of their own raging emotions and behaviours. This paradox breeds a powerlessness that leads to repeated cycles of impulsive behaviour that feel like control but can ultimately lead to regret. People with BPD may act impulsively by doing things like making reckless decisions or hurting themselves, while also fearing the possible negative consequences of their actions. This battle between impulse and awareness of consequences may create a cycle of wrongdoing, feelings of guilt and shame, and self-destructive behaviours.

Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) is a condition that indeed feels like walking a tightrope of opposites. Emotions are strong but temporary, relationships are strong but tenuous, and self-image swings from one extreme to the other. One of the paradoxes of BPD and this inner world is that opposites coexist; thus, your inner world is a storm; connection and conflict. [BPD Is Incompatible with Love-Understanding these paradoxes is what enables compassion-both for BPD patients, and for the people surrounding them. As they work through these challenges, those with BPD frequently emerge will a sense of empowerment, resilience and self-awareness.

Conclusion

This illustrates the depth of emotional pain and suffering that many,

including the family of people with borderline personality disorder (BPD), commonly experience." The finding of subject-specific cycles of caregiving stress, learned helplessness, and compassion fatigue highlights the specific and unique challenges associated with supporting family members with such a highly complex and unpredictable disorder. A separate emotional state, hopelessness not only serves to erode a caregiver's health but poses great risk to the stability of familial relationships, such an outcome in turn angling toward the therapeutic outcome of the BPD individual.

This study is important as it could contribute to informing targeted and evidence-informed interventions that tackle caregiver hopelessness. Programs that include psychoeducation, emotional support, and even family therapy-practices are essential in addressing hopelessness, building resilience, and ultimately improving caregivers' mental health. This approach not only aids in understanding the complexities of BPD but also emphasizes prioritizing mental health which can drastically improve the dynamics within family systems while lowering the stigma surrounding mental health issues.

Both the findings and new specifics this study contributes deserve consideration, as it fills an important gap previously highlighted in the literature-conceptualizing the often-ambivalent experience of caregiving not from the angle of caregiver burden but via the more omnipresent experience of hopelessness. It matters for the development of public health policy, mental health practice, and the work of advocates in this space; providing practical pathways for the strengthening of families as a social support network. Acknowledgment of the emotional burden on caregivers will help with not only patient recovery but with family units becoming healthier and sustainable by eliminating caregiver burnout and paving a path for holistic treatment.

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