

THE ARTERBURN WELLNESS SERIES

UNDERSTANDING AND LOVING A PERSON WITH

BORDERLINE
PERSONALITY
DISORDER

*Biblical and Practical Wisdom
to Build Empathy, Preserve Boundaries,
and Show Compassion*

**STEPHEN ARTERBURN, M.Ed.
AND ROBERT WISE, Ph.D.**

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transforming lives together

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CHAPTER ONE

Blindsided!

Do any of these sound like experiences you've lived through with someone you love?

- You worry that what you say may be twisted and taken out of context.
- You've become the target for intense and sometimes violent responses to innocent questions or simple inquiries.
- The other person seems to be denying what you know is reality, and it makes you feel crazy.
- The significant other in your life inevitably puts you down and abruptly hits you from out of nowhere.
- This important person in your life accuses you of irresponsible behavior, sexual misconduct, lies, or antagonism when you know these charges are not true.

If these are just the beginning of what you have been worrying about and struggling with, then this book will help you.

An Unexpected Visit

Alice Jones had been around the church for almost a month. The first Sunday she attended, Alice was overwhelmingly enthusiastic about what the services had meant to her that day. She particularly

thanked me for how I had helped her. Since that time, I had seen her around the building several times. She had never failed to express her appreciation. When she showed up in my office one afternoon a few weeks later, I expected another round of applause.

Was I wrong!

"I was talking with one of your members," Alice began. "She wasn't happy."

"Oh," I said, "there's a problem?"

"Seems you don't give your members much of your personal attention," Alice said as her smile disappeared and her eyes narrowed. "Some of your folks feel left out."

I blinked and tried to let my mind catch up with what my ears were hearing. Nothing clicked. I wasn't connecting with anything she was saying.

"May I sit down?" Alice asked as she dropped into the chair before I could answer. "It seems like you are so caught up in your own ideas that you don't pay much attention to people's problems."

"Wait a minute," I said, mystified. "I've never had anyone complain about me being indifferent. On the contrary, most people would say I'm always concerned."

"Well, you don't show it."

"What are you suggesting?" I asked, now feeling defensive.

"Take me, for instance. I've been here for a number of weeks, and we've never sat down and had a personal conversation."

"I really am not tracking with you, Alice."

"See! That's just it!" Her voice became shrill. "You don't get it. Let me tell you a thing or two. I'm not going to put up with being treated indifferently. You aren't going to use me as your punching

bag!” She was now on the verge of yelling. “Get somebody else to treat like a dog. I’m out of here!” Alice stomped out of the room and slammed the door.

I don’t use this word often, but I was most definitely *thunderstruck*.

Hit by Lightning

If you have thought you had a relationship with someone only to be suddenly smacked in the head for some unknown reason, this book is for you. If you’ve been completely unable to comprehend something disturbing that happened with someone you thought was your friend, you’ve come to the right place. Did you ever have a cordial friendship and then suddenly the individual attacked, exploded, screamed, or accused you? Then you know how it feels to be run over by someone who might have BPD.

I’ve known people who thought they married their perfect matches only to discover that their mates were not who they appeared to be. It’s true that everyone has to make adjustments in a marriage as he or she gets to know the other person in depth, but the problems with a loved one with BPD usually demand far more than compromises and accommodation. The other person proves to be difficult, harsh, and even treacherous. How can people misread one another so much?

Some years ago, Susan came to my office for counseling. George, the man she had married, had turned into a “control freak.” Every dime she spent had to go through her husband’s hands. He demanded she keep the house in a certain order. He controlled their children as if they were horses with bits in their

mouths. George was always on Susan's case and condemned everything she did.

During the counseling process, George suddenly lost all interest in his wife and began an affair with another woman. After a confrontation with Susan one evening, he jumped on his motorcycle and went speeding down the highway. George missed a sharp turn and went flying into a freshly plowed field. A short while later, he died.

Even though George was gone, Susan struggled to understand what had gone wrong. Was it her fault? Why had this man been so impossible? Why did she feel so run over all the time?

The goal of this book is twofold. First, it will help people like Susan—and perhaps you—unravel the mystery of why these people you love are so difficult and unpredictable. You will be able to recognize a borderline personality, and you will be in a better position to respond. Second, information is power, and this book will empower you not only to understand but perhaps also to empathize with people with BPD. This won't come naturally. People with BPD are not always loveable or easy to figure out.

We are going to examine in depth how troubled personalities operate. Although people with BPD push others to the edge, it is possible to develop empathy and insight that can lead to change. Hopefully, you will even become an agent for renewal and healing.

Not only will you discover how to understand their behavior, but you will learn to protect yourself, make your interactions with them more positive, and hopefully love them.

Don't worry if you feel alone. Help is on the way.

Undependable

A counselor friend of mine told me about the Allan family, whom he'd known for a number of years. The mother and father had both been in and out of trouble many times. Drugs were no small part of their conflicts. Various relatives were raising their three children. Sadly, this arrangement had not worked out well for the kids.

Their youngest son, Jack, loved his mother and father despite how they treated him. Unfortunately, Jack couldn't keep out of trouble. By the time he had become an adult, Jack had served a short prison term. Because my friend had helped the family, Jack turned to him for counseling advice.

Jack was immediately enthusiastic. He thought my friend could be his mentor and help him straighten out his life. Jack particularly wanted help with his finances. Jack believed my friend's insights on investing could help him turn his life around and enable him to become a success.

Over the course of a month, they had several intense conversations, and then Jack made no further contact. After several weeks, my friend tried to find out what had become of Jack. Finally, he discovered that Jack had spontaneously left town and moved to Canada. He was now working as a mechanic in Calgary, Alberta. When he finally got Jack on the phone, Jack laughed and said he was playing with some children at the moment and would call back later. But my friend never heard from Jack again.

When someone abruptly drops us, treats us badly, or becomes erratic for no good reason, we are naturally bewildered. What did *we* do wrong? How could this have happened? Where did *we* miss

the boat? The natural assumption is that *we* are somehow at fault. Self-blame is unavoidable when we have no explanation for someone's erratic behavior. One of the most difficult aspects of working with a troubled person is that conscientious people tend to blame themselves for what went wrong. We struggle to understand what we said or did that caused the problem. We need to know why. We think it's time to stop and recognize we've made a wrong turn.

I want to convince you of one thing before we go any further. Some relationships go sideways, and it *might not be your fault* in the least.

This book will give you insight when ...

- the other person's behavior is erratic and unpredictable.
- you feel responsible but know it can't be your fault.
- the other person makes you feel crazy.
- the other person's responses are not appropriate for the situation.
- you have been deceived.
- a timid person turns into a lion.
- you can't figure out what went wrong.

This short list might be the tip of the iceberg when you are trying to understand and love people with BPD. Why? Their odd behaviors are not only unexpected but usually completely out of order. Their behavior leaves you dumbfounded nearly every time. You have become a victim.

You might feel like giving up, but don't throw up your hands quite yet. You have to turn over every rock as you try to understand

how these personalities function. Usually damaged emotions produce such unexpected behavior. People with BPD have deeper motivations behind what they do and what they say—motivations you never would have dreamed of.

Behavioral Knots

Loved ones with BPD have knots in their brains and emotions they haven't figured out how to untie. While the irrationality of their behavior seems obvious—sometimes even offensive—to us, it seems quite normal to them. They lack inner mirrors to see themselves as their victims see them. Their confusion comes across as narcissistic and self-absorbed.

What makes them so problematic is that they can still maintain some degree of concern for others. If someone is particularly close to them, they are able to respond with kindness. However, what makes them difficult to handle is that they suddenly shut down the positive side of their personalities and become completely negative. Relating to people with BPD has often been called “crazy making.” People with BPD can be high spirited and positive one day and indifferent the next.

Reason to Hope

Whether difficult or totally self-absorbed, BPD types have a history that can equip us to understand them. We can learn how to deal with their behavior.

Although they generally leave us angry and frustrated, good reasons exist for feeling sorry for them and wanting to help them. In the following chapters, we will explore what we can do to make

a difference. But first, let's take a ten-thousand-foot view of this disorder and look at it a bit more clinically. It's more common than you think.

During my years as a pastor, I encountered the same problem again and again. I struggled with both men and women as they tried to straighten out relationships that were highly important to them, but the significant other wouldn't seem to budge. During my years studying psychotherapy in graduate school, I attempted to understand how borderline personalities function and what can be done to help them. In the following chapters, I will take you with me on this journey to make sense of what feels like nonsense. My objective is to help both you and the troubled person. I don't want you to be a victim again.

I'm sure you've felt alone many times, but that's no longer the case. I am with you!