

May 2004

Volume 4, No. 2

## **BORDERLINE PERSONALITY (Part 2): Recovering from Abuse**

**David Gersten, MD**

### **Introduction**

In part 1, we looked at the long-term impact of child abuse and neglect. Some abuse survivors are left with scars so deep, they develop borderline personality disorder (BPD). Regardless of diagnosis, those who grew up with severe abuse often spend their lives struggling with the demons of depression, impulsivity, chaotic relationships, self-sabotage, problems with anger and explosiveness, and major identity confusion. Because severe child abuse and neglect give rise to the same problems, in this article, I am always referring to both abuse and neglect when I use the term “abuse,” I will also randomly use the gender terms “him” and “her,” “he” and “she.”

During my psychiatric training I was cautioned to never treat more than two people with BPD during any one time period, because of the difficulty in treating people with BPD. The reality is that half of the people in psychiatric hospitals suffer from BPD, so this recommendation was a theoretical one, and not a practical suggestion. After decades of work with survivors of abuse, I determined that four persistent inner states are at the core of the living hell of many survivors. Those inner states are: 1. the wounded inner child, 2. the battlefield, 3. the void, and 4. the inner abuser. For those who were sexually abused, there is a fifth persisting condition, namely “body armor.” While there is one boy sexually molested for every four girls molested, my clinical experience has been mainly with female adult survivors. Because abuse is epidemic and because every one of you is either a survivor of abuse or knows someone who is, I will clarify in some detail the many facets of abuse.

### **Body armor**

Wherever your body has been injured, the mind and body have a variety of protective mechanisms that kick in. For example, if a needle accidentally gets poked deep into a muscle, the muscle contracts around it. Muscles contract around any areas that are under attack, as part of self-protection. The mind also contracts, creating a symbolic wall around the womb and genital area[ when there has been an attack on the sexual parts (physical and/ or emotional) of a person]. For many women who were sexually molested as children (or later), many muscles in the body, often including the hamstring muscles and muscles of the inner thighs, may become very tight. This is all part of “body armor.” Unconsciously the body responds, muscles contract as if to make sexual penetration more difficult in the future. Body armor keeps the “other” out, but also keeps “self” locked in. Body therapies, including Rolfing and deep tissue massage, can be helpful in relaxing body armor.

During a childhood of abuse, parts of the mind begin to separate, so the person may develop a Jekyll and Hyde personality. The mind-body fabric is “torn.” And usually, there is a spiritual disconnection caused by a child feeling angry with God for allowing the abuse, then feeling betrayed by God, and then finally concluding that God does not exist. There are many levels of disconnection in the totality of body, mind, and spirit that together comprise who we are.

There is no single way to deal with abuse. What follows is a system I developed that I have found to be extremely helpful in treating survivors of abuse. It is a system that helps people become conscious of parts of themselves that have become split off from other parts. Once conscious, the various “parts” can come back together. The “glue” that is necessary for the final healing is profound love and a powerful spiritual re-connection. As you read through this healing process, almost all of you will find aspects of this process that apply to yourselves, for all of us are wounded – some of us severely and some less so.

All of us seek to love and be loved, to have meaning and passion in our lives, to have a clear identity, to enjoy life and be happy. If I could give you an enormous dose of “Love,” so strong that it penetrated every part of your body and mind, you would be healed of all mental and emotional problems. Many of your physical problems would also heal. What I can do is describe a process that allows love to grow back into your life, sealing the cracks where your energy began to leak away.

### **Exposing the family myth**

What keeps the “unstable instability” in place in the survivor of abuse? The Myth, the Family Secret, and the Family Lie. Children who are abused are told that terrible things will happen if they ever discuss the abuse or molestation. So a veil of secrecy descends on the family, and the child becomes mute about the abuse. She becomes part of a family myth that everything is all right, that she is living in a perfect family. Should she speak the truth, she will shatter the myth. Frequently, a child will find it too painful to consciously live with the memory and knowledge of the abuse and may become amnesic, locking the truth away in some corner of her mind that even she cannot access. She no longer remembers the pain and suffering.

Decades after the abuse, memories of abuse often begin to surface. At this point in a person’s life, a 12-step support group can be very helpful – in which one can begin to share one’s experiences with others who had similar experiences. Others find talk psychotherapy helpful as the first images and emotions bubble to the surface.

There are many steps in the healing of abuse. We will explore ways of using mental imagery to discover the Myth and to uncover the details of forgotten and repressed memories. In addition to the inner psychological work, each individual must choose if she wants to explode the family myth, and if she wants to confront the perpetrator. As an initial step, it is important to write a letter to one’s abuser, but not to mail the letter right away.

### **Establishing mental home base**

Survivors of abuse are the same as everyone else when it comes to the basic functioning of the mind. The average person has approximately 5,000 random thoughts per day. The faster your mind turns, the less peace of mind you have. The only difference between the 5,000 random thoughts of the “normal” person and the survivor of abuse is that the normal person tends to have 5,000 neutral thoughts per day, while for the abuse survivor, a significant percentage of those thoughts may be negative, or fearful – perhaps 25 to 50 percent.

I find mantra meditation to be the easiest way to begin to tame the mind. Mantras are created by using your word for God or a higher power. Some examples: Jesus Christ, Elohaynu, Loving God, Allah, Shiva, and Rama. The mantra must be at least two syllables, but not more than nine or ten. Spend five minutes twice a day silently saying your mantra. If your mantra is “Loving God” (which in Spanish is “Dios Amoroso”), as you inhale, silently say “Loving,” and as you exhale, silently say “God.” Then, throughout the day, you can practice mantra meditation with your eyes open, when you are not engaged in work that requires a lot of focus. Do not do mantra meditation while driving.

Mantra meditation quiets the mind, helps reduce the amount of negativity in the mind, provides “mental home base,” and deepens your spiritual connection. “Mental home base” is the inner thought you “come home to” over and over again, after your mind has galloped around, churned out thousands of random and worthless thoughts, and is looking for a place to rest. The mantra becomes an incredibly potent anchor. It can make you very powerful and centered. For survivors of abuse, the mantra is like a tall mast they can hold onto, for their lives are like ships adrift on a stormy sea.

### **Healing the wounded inner child**

There is a child within each of us. For the abuse survivor, it is important to get to know this child, and in meditation or mental imagery, to talk to this child, comfort it, find out why she is upset, what she wants and what she is afraid of. This is very easy work to do. The wounded inner child has many things to tell the grownup. For more on this, I recommend Charles Whitfield, MD, “Healing the Child Within” (1989), providing a set of techniques to re-parent the child within that was abused, neglected, raped or in other ways mistreated.

A sense of trust slowly builds between the adult and the wounded inner child. After the inner child feels comforted and trusts the adult, she will want to begin exploring the world, as if for the first time. Just as if this were a “real” relationship, the inner child will want to make sure that the adult does not abandon her. Then she will start to play, will have fun, and will play at some “distance” from the adult. For example, one patient of mine discovered that her inner child, after having gotten to know her and feeling safe with her, “built” a tree house. In this imagery state, the inner child climbed high up in a tree. Every now and then she would climb down to interact with the adult and make sure she was still there and that everything was safe. Then she’d climb back up her tree. Eventually, she invited her adult self to climb the tree with her.

A great deal of work can be done while working with the wounded inner child. I encourage my patients to give their inner child permission to have a lot of fun and know it is safe. Once this work has been started, my patients can continue on their own, checking in every couple of days with their inner child to see how things are progressing. Working with the wounded inner child begins to create strands of love that re-connect parts of the individual that had been dis-owned or hidden a very long time ago. To use a different kind of language, the survivor of abuse begins to love a part of herself long feared, estranged, or even hated.

### **The battlefield**

Decades after a traumatic childhood, an abuse survivor will often find himself standing alone somewhere, but arguing with someone in his head. The argument will seem so real that he will temporarily forget that he is fighting with no one. He is alone. The war rages on until the roots of rage are finally uprooted. The best approach to take when you are at war with yourself is first to stop and become aware of the process. Then say to yourself, “Oh, I am in the battlefield again.”

Don't judge the process. Just observe it. The players in the battle may be from your childhood, or may be current family, friends, or co-workers. Once you become aware that you are fighting with yourself, take a couple of deep breaths, and re-focus your mind on your mantra.

My goal is to help people become the directors of their own inner plays, as well as the directors of their lives. On your healing journey, the first step is non-judgmental awareness, then gentle re-focusing back to home base (your mantra), along with a good dose of humor. While the survivor of abuse is likely to beat himself up because he has caught himself beating himself up, that only keeps him locked in battle. It is better to simply acknowledge that the human mind can be quite a pigpen. Notice the mess. Laugh at it, and say, "Look at this pigpen. What a mess. It is time to do some cleaning up." By bringing humor to your own inner drama, you are bringing self-love and healing.

### **Setting personal boundaries**

The person with BPD has difficulties with personal boundaries. They are never quite sure where they stop and where others begin. They may interrupt conversations or speak so loudly that their boundary spreads over the entire conversation. They may have a hard time saying, "No," and being told, "No," or "Stop." Conversely, they are anxious about others intruding in their space, and often feel attacked when no attack was intended. Here is a simple technique to establish your boundary, and to "keep people out of your space and out of your face."

Focus your attention on your solar plexus and identify that area as the core of your energy. Allow the energy to expand until it fills your entire body. Then move the energy through your skin, so that it surrounds your body by several inches. Determine what your personal boundaries are. If you don't want people coming within five feet of you, allow the energy, or force field to expand until it extends five feet from you in all directions. Remove all doubt and pour your intention into this exercise. With practice you will find that people do not invade your space. I have worked with people who were able to set up such powerful force fields, that people approaching them would appear to bump into their force field and just walk away . . . at exactly the distance they had created for themselves.

Learning this technique is helpful to survivors of abuse, because a lack of clear personal boundaries is always part of the picture of BPD. Learning to feel safe and to say, "No" in this way and others must be practiced by survivors of abuse until it becomes easy to do.

### **Going down to the basement**

For most survivors of abuse, there was a special place where they were violated, perhaps in the basement... or perhaps behind a particular door in their childhood house. Through mental imagery, and with the help of a guide, you can imagine yourself walking down a long, dark flight of stairs into the basement of that house. Even if the actual house had no basement, this imagery will still work, for the basement is an image that conveys going deep down into one's unconscious mind.

In the basement, you may see the actual furniture and other items from your childhood, or you may look for symbols. For example, I might suggest to my patient, "Look around the basement for symbols that represent some aspect of the abuse. That symbol can be anything. . . perhaps a table, a bed, or even a funeral casket. You have control over the light in the basement, for you are carrying a very bright flashlight. You can light up anything. You can have anything revealed to you through the power of your flashlight."

Because this can be a frightening undertaking, I might suggest that they explore the basement with God, an angel, or some other loving, powerful, protective figure. It is important to bring a spiritual presence to the healing of each part of the abused mind.

One can also explore dark hallways, and open secret passages and locked doors. For some, behind a locked door lie the memories of what happened to them as a child. It is important in such explorations for therapists to be careful not to insert false memories into adult survivors. It is very important that the individual comes to her own conclusions, without much interpretation from the therapist, and without the therapist declaring, "You definitely were sexually molested." There is no hurry with this work, and one wants to avoid making the terrible mistake of destroying a family by convincing someone they were abused, if they were not.

Explore the basement, or unlock the secret door, when you are ready. This process can take place at the beginning of the healing journey, or after other layers have first been examined and healed.

What I want every reader to understand is that most of us have secrets we have kept from ourselves. Many of us maintain family myths, spending our entire lives going to family gatherings because we feel guilt, and not because we feel love. In a sense, we abuse ourselves when we do that, or when any part of our life is motivated by fear rather than by love.

Thus far, we have looked at the long-term effects of abuse and its most severe form, borderline personality disorder. We have learned how to ground the mind in mantra meditation, how to begin healing the wounded inner child, how to set up clear personal boundaries, and how to uncover one's family myth and discover the truth by peering into the dark corners of the basement.

This is not just work for survivors of abuse. It is work for all of us who, as adults, have not yet fully shaken loose the chains from our childhoods. With these initial steps, parts of the self that were unknown to us become known, and those parts begin to re-connect with our core Self.

What is required for this work and for all deep healing is a hunger for the truth and for personal healing. If you want to know your personal truth at a 100 percent level, it will be revealed to you and your life will change profoundly. With a 100 percent commitment to truth, all the tools and techniques you need for your healing will come to you, in the proper time. It is not my job to insist that anyone be fully committed to knowing their truth, but my job is easier with those who do have that level of motivation.

In the next issue, we will conclude this series on Survivors of Abuse, and will take a journey down the Void, and finally stare the Inner Abuser in the face.

In the meantime, here is some important advice. As you begin to tear down your own walls, you may temporarily experience fear and anxiety. In addition, you are making yourself truly more open and available to love. Become conscious of this change and allow yourself to receive whatever love is coming your way. You will find that part of why you have felt unloved in life is because you have had to use so much energy defending yourself that you push love away. Use discrimination in how you receive love and from whom. But, in order for healing to become real and permanent, you need to allow it to manifest in action and in real world feeling. When someone pays you a compliment, allow it to sink in, rather than just brushing it off. Allow yourself to feel the love in the hug of someone who already loves you. And begin to do things for yourself that are about bringing love into your heart. For example, buy yourself flowers and keep fresh flowers in your house. Get a massage. Pamper yourself and allow yourself to drink in a bit of the sweetness. Don't try to absorb all the love in the world at once. You'll burst. Drink in a few sips of love at a time and it will help heal all those cracks caused by an abusive childhood.

(Part 3 on the Borderline Personality will examine the "void" and the inner abuser.)

## Reference

Charles Whitfield, *Healing the Child Within*, Health Communications 1989

**David Gersten, MD** (formerly Dennis Gersten, MD) practices nutritional medicine and psychiatry and can be reached at his Encinitas office 760-633-3063. Please feel free to sign up for Dr. G's Health Digest newsletter at [www.aminoacidpower.com](http://www.aminoacidpower.com) and access 1,000 on-line pages about holistic health, amino acids and nutritional therapy.

#### TERMS OF USE

The International Journal of Healing and Caring On Line is distributed electronically. You may choose to print your downloaded copy for relaxed reading. Feel free to forward this to others.

**The International Journal of Healing and Caring**  
**P.O. Box 76, Bellmawr, NJ 08099**  
**Phone (609) 714-1885 - Fax (609) 714-3553**