

How can we talk about this?

Hi, my name is Flick Grey. My role here today is to open up our thinking and enable deeper conversation around this challenging and controversial diagnosis. If we are to truly “raise community understanding,” we have some difficult dialogues ahead.

To do this, I’m going to start with some of my own lived experience. I was labelled with Borderline Personality Disorder in 2005. Now, I’m not going to tell you a story about how back then, I was suffering immensely and behaving in inexplicable and challenging ways, but then I got properly diagnosed, linked into appropriate treatment, co-operated and am now in recovery, living a better life, and grateful for the interventions I received.

That would be too comfortable a story and it’s not my truth. In fact, it’s light years from my lived experience. My truth is far messier and painful – for everyone involved. My truth sings of constant emotional pain and shame and blame and suffering and inarticulate traumas, invalidation and neglect and judgement and confusion. And wading in deep shame, wading through shame. And grappling, constant grappling.

I’m also not going to indulge any voyeuristic tendencies, by displaying just how “severe and disabling” my experiences have been, how “sick” I was, or how “serious” my Borderline experiences were (or are?), how traumatic my childhood was (or wasn’t), how “real” my suicide attempts were, or how “shocking” my self-harm. Just trust me, I can be extremely messy and extremely competent, often both simultaneously. This is part of the paradox of Borderline, and it does make it challenging to get our heads around.

I’m not here as a harbinger of doom and despair. At least not today. That comes and goes.

I can say that almost everything I read about Borderline after I got the diagnosis was horrific to read. I read everything from textbooks to pop-psychology, current journal articles to “anti-stigma” materials from all the mental health charities.

It wasn’t until I came across the work of Merinda Epstein that I found non-shaming explanations of my distress, explanations that didn’t objectify me, deeply invalidate me, blame me and shame me. And later I read Kiera van Gelder’s wonderful book “The Buddha and the Borderline.” Soul food for me.

Borderline is what I call “someone else’s diagnosis.” It’s not MINE; it’s an account of my experiences from someone else’s perspective. It colonises my experience but actually says more about *your* experiences than mine. Gunderson has called it “collective counter-transference.”

Has the BPD diagnosis been helpful to me? Yes and no. It has certainly politicised me! As an observation of patterns of my behaviour, it was a revelation. As an explanation of my pain and shame, it hasn’t been that useful: developmental trauma, neglect and invalidation are better explanations for me. As a tool to guide service provision and supports, it has been worse than unhelpful. It has been used to blame me, exclude me, neglect me, and shame me. In other words, it has been re-traumatising.

But, my experiences with borderline have opened up new and profound spaces. Borders are always uncomfortable and productive spaces. Why else do we talk so fervently in this country of “border protection” as if a handful of desperate people at the borders could possibly threaten our national security. I suggest to you that Borderline – like all borders – is rich and intriguing, and that it shines a light on much broader tensions in our mental health system, in our own emotional lives and in our communities. There’s a beauty in that complexity that I want to hold. I refuse to simplify the paradoxical truths I hold in my body so that other people can feel comfortable and hopeful.

So, today, I want to speak of discomfort, and its value. If you go away with nothing else from today, I hope you reconnect with and value your own discomfort and what it is telling you. If you come away from today

feeling relaxed and comfortably hopeful, then I'm afraid you're not listening deeply enough, or thinking critically enough. And you will be part of the problem. You would probably have stopped listening to that little voice in your own body that whispers that all is not well. I ask you to try to listen to and honour that voice inside you.

If I hear one more "expert by training" publicly declare that we have all the answers in mental health, we just need bucket loads more money, I think I will cry. Honestly.

And don't misunderstand my tears. I value this exquisite sensitivity of mine. It's a gift of Borderline.

I yearn for spaces where we can hold the totality of our lived experiences, in all their various shapes and sensations. I'm sharing my truth with you, and I hope you will share yours. And that's what I hope for us all today, that we can honour our true, lived experiences, in as much complexity as we can hold.

All too often when the topic is Borderline Personality Disorder, our defences come up. The main one that I witness is silence, a deafening cultural silence.

Another is blaming someone else. "I don't know what to do in this situation, so it must be his fault" or "it must be her fault." ***We all do this.***

So, for example, we may be a service provider at our wit's end, trying to support someone who repeatedly self-harms. Our tool kit feels inadequate. And so we blame them and call them "manipulative," "attention seeking," "splitting," "not serious" or "engaged in a power struggle."

Or we may be a partner or a parent struggling with someone whose behaviour is at times challenging, maybe even abusive, and we don't know where our own boundaries lie, or should lie. Or maybe we feel guilty that we genuinely don't know how to really support this person we love. So we learn to blame them. Maybe, we read pop-psychology books like "Stop walking on Eggshells" or "I hate you, don't leave me" which blame those of us with this label and refuse to see these problems as relational and profoundly complex, deeply human and meaningful.

Or we may be someone who has been diagnosed with this disorder, struggling to receive support in our healing journey: when we seek attention in our shame and distress, we may be insulted and humiliated over here, locked up and traumatised over there or turned away, ignored or neglected. And we too learn to blame others.

We feel a need to defend ourselves from the painful bits and so we use our various defence mechanisms. Today, I ask that we try to sit with discomforts instead.

To the mental health workers here, I ask that you stay open to hearing how the language and conceptual tools you use to understand us may be experienced as shaming. That even when you work hard, in good faith and with thoughtfulness, you may be unwittingly doing harm. Despite the value of your learning, you may have much to unlearn too. Please accept such feedback as a gift, even if it's sometimes wrapped in shit.

To the families in the room, please be open to hearing about our experiences of trauma, abuse, neglect and less than nurturing childhoods. Having our experiences invalidated can be the most harmful experience. But I know it can be hard to hear. And, again, it's often wrapped in shit.

To the consumers in the room, people with lived experience of being labelled as "Borderline," please try to stay open to hearing uncomfortable facts-as-experienced-by-others, that sometimes we do react in ways that are difficult to be around, that our sensitivities can be challenging to hold, and that we too can drive those around us a bit mad.

Today may well be challenging, indeed if it isn't, I don't think we'd be doing our job properly. There are people you can seek support or debriefing from, should you need that. If you want support, please approach the Spectrum table and they can discuss the options with you. There are professionals, consumers and carers who have put their hands up for this role.

Just for today, I ask that we all keep listening to those little voices inside, honouring our lived experience, and holding the complexity that is Borderline and resist the temptation to settle for less than our deepest truth.

One of the most healing paths I have explored is spoken word poetry, for this medium is expansive enough to hold my multiple truths. Here's one I prepared earlier.

Strange and beautiful things grow

Strange and beautiful things grow where there has been a pond of tears
I water them with a watering can.

Strange and beautiful things grow where there has been a heaping of shit and blood and sweat and tears.
With constant churning, deep inhalation and the passing of time,
abjection nourishes new growth.

Some clumps don't soften, remain hard.

Strange, beauty, growing.

Strangely, beautiful things blossom where there has been a withering
an apparent paralysis and closing down,
breaking down,
life withdrawal.
In darkness, spirit stirs.

And
where there has been gnawing, sharpness of blades,
blood and guts spilling out, boundaries breached,
strange and unruly beauty grows.

Strange and beautiful things even grow
in harsh, arid desolation
in fetid decay
in neglected wastelands
in the crevices of desecration.

Strangely familiar beauty grows
where there has been a convocation of erudite sophistication
and life's yearnings.

For it is in quietness that we grow
and in stirring
in neglect,
in joy-pain,
in tenderness,
when whole limbs are hacked off,
we grow.

Strange and beautiful things grow.