

## Defusing emotional explosions as a skill

Brendan Lloyd PhD, December 2020, b:01

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Emotionally unstable people are frequently prone to emotional explosions. Being in the presence of someone who is prone to doing this can become stressful.

For example, you might have a partner who has Borderline traits, or you might be the parent of a teenager. If so, you have the potential for stress in your life if you are not able to manage or resolve the emotional explosions – as they arise.

You will find various books on the subject of Borderline personality. They have titles such *Sometimes I act crazy* (Kreisman & Straus, 2004), *I hate you don't leave me* (Kreisman & Straus, 1989), *Stop Walking on Eggshells: when someone you care for suffers borderline personality disorder* (Mason & Kreger, 1998), and *Cognitive-behavioural treatment of borderline personality disorder* (Linehan, 1993a).

The first two books by Kreisman and Straus are written from a medical perspective, by medical practitioners. From that point of view these books might make an interesting read but they don't seem to have much practical value for dealing with the emotional instability.

The last two books by Mason and Kreger, and Linehan are very useful for understanding emotional instability. Mason and Kreger give you a good understanding of the problem, what to expect, and how to survive when you are with someone with borderline traits.

Linehan's book is a text for psychologists and from this point of view I found it very useful. Linehan provides a very deep understanding of emotional instability and how it functions.

In the book *Stop walking on eggshells* (p.111-138) there is some very good advice about

how to defuse an emotional explosion. This is not to say that everyone who explodes emotionally in front of you is a borderline, or has a borderline personality disorder.

Sometimes some people explode out of utter frustration. Or the exploding person might be a teenager who is testing boundaries or who is still to learn self-regulation. It is best not to simplify other people's problems to a category. The label of 'borderline' does not explain anything about the person exploding in front of you.

I am describing the behaviour and what to do about it. It doesn't matter really why the person is exploding. You still need to deal with the fact of it happening. It's just that if it is a common pattern in someone then the behaviour of emotional instability is probably part of his or her personality. If this is the case then your responses are going to be crucial in whether or not you suffer, and continue to suffer.

In order to be effective in defusing an emotional explosion it is vital to understand what you are dealing with. The first observation is that someone who explodes emotionally, as a regular pattern of behaviour, is probably having difficulty with their own issues.

Where the emotional exploding is a pattern of behaviour for a person, then the issues are ingrained in that person's personality. Such a person's personality was developed over a lifetime from early childhood. So asking the exploding person to "just grow up" or "snap out of it" is not a workable strategy.

Also, the emotionally exploding person most likely has only denial and blame as strategies for dealing with his or her own issues. What is

more, this is not your business to tell them this unless you want to make your life even more difficult for yourself.

Linehan theorises that emotional instability develops out of two factors, which she puts together as her biosocial theory. These are an “invalidating upbringing” and “emotional sensitivity”.

In this context Linehan is saying that the emotional sensitivity is the biological component. In other words it’s in the person’s personality from a biological point of view. It’s not necessarily inherited. It is a variable like being short or tall, fat or thin, blond or brown hair, etc.

An emotionally sensitive person is not necessarily going to develop into an emotionally unstable person if he/she is raised in a validating environment, which is the social context.

An emotionally sensitive person in the right environment can learn self-regulation. A validating environment for an emotionally sensitive child is one where the social interactions match the inner experience of the child. For example, the child might say “I hurt myself”. A validating parent would say “Oh dear, let me have a look”. An invalidating parent would say “Don’t be such a cry-baby.”

An emotionally unstable person is thinking emotionally, not rationally. Linehan describes their thinking as “hot” and “reactive”. These people have emotional lability and vulnerability. In other words, emotional instability describes “(1) very high sensitivity to emotional stimuli, (2) very intense response to emotional stimuli, and (3) a slow return to emotional baseline once emotional arousal has occurred”.

When something goes wrong for an emotionally unstable person, he/she is over reactive and over sensitive. Such a person might have a range of issues that could be labelled “abandonment”, “failure”, “defectiveness”, “entitlement”, etc.

As an observer you might not necessarily be

aware of the triggers for the issues. You might not even fully understand the triggers or the issues. In *Stop walking on eggshells* there are many interesting vignettes that illustrate emotionally unstable behaviour.

For example...

*The woman says to her husband in an angry and emotional way, “take the kids and just get out here for a couple of hours to leave me alone. I can’t stand it the way you and the kids close in on me.”*

*He says “ok”.*

*He loads the kids into the car to take them off to the park for the afternoon. He is backing out of the driveway when his wife comes screaming after them “that’s right. Just leave me here on my own.”*

*When he gets back after a couple of hours it was like nothing had happened.*

Another example...

*The husband phones his wife to say that he’ll be home late this evening because he and his colleagues are finishing off a job for a big client. They will hand the work over to the client and have a couple of drinks after, and then he will come home.*

*When he gets home he finds his wife is very emotional and upset. She is crying and very angry. She accuses him of being an alcoholic and of having an affair.*

When an emotionally unstable person is in full flight, you might be surprised at how quickly his/her mood change. You might be surprised at the self-destructive extent the person is prepared to take it. You might also be surprised at the way in which the emotional explosions and blackmail escalates.

You might be absolutely floored by the angry and hurtful things that are said to you and the extent of emotional blackmail that is used against you. For example, “If you come home late one more time you might just find me dangling from a rope in the shed”.

To look after yourself in the face of an emotionally explosive person there are a number of *do’s* and *don’ts* (see appendix A).

The things to *do*: you do need to set boundaries, keep track of the triggers; you need to sort out your own vulnerabilities. You will be blamed for the most horrendous deeds; you need a “poker face”. You know that you cannot control what the exploding person is thinking. You cannot control the triggers even if you think that you do understand. Primarily you do need to take responsibility for your own thoughts and actions.

Now the *don'ts*: don't defend, don't deny, don't counterattack, and don't withdraw unless you are in actual danger. If you cave-in here you will only feel beaten, defeated, and foolish, ie., more and more stressed.

There is a skilful strategy that gives you the best chance for defusing an emotional explosion. I often use the analogy of the bomb squad here when explaining this skill to my clients. I often remind my client that sometimes the bomb squad do get blown up in spite of their skills. So don't throw out the skills just because you don't succeed every time.

Nevertheless the bomb squad do their training. They know which wire to cut. “Is it the red one or the white one? I don't know. Quick it's about to blow any second now.” Well maybe this is more like the bomb squad in the movies. But you get the idea. It's your level of skill that will make the difference.

The defusing skill must have two elements. The first is to *validate* the emotionally exploding person's point of view. The second point is to firmly put your view forward. The following is an example of a husband with an emotionally exploding wife who wants him to stay home rather than work late...

*He validates: “I can see that you're very upset. It's clear to me that you don't want me to stay at work for drinks with my colleagues.”*

*Then...*

*His requirement: “But you know this is what I have to do in this job. We've talked about this. You know that I am able to earn this level of income because of these sacrifices, like working*

*after hours sometimes.”*

The emotionally exploding person is likely to escalate this argument by saying something like...

*“Well quit. Ring them up and quit. I didn't ask you to make these sacrifices. I want you home with me.”*

*He validates: “I know you want me home with you. I know you don't want me to do this job.”*

*Then...*

*His requirement: “I do have a sense of responsibility toward my boss. He does pay me well and I do like the work. I cannot just phone him up a quit. That would not be the responsible thing to do. I would not be able to do that.”*

The emotionally explosive person might escalate the manipulation further and say...

*“You don't love me. You never have loved me. All you care about is your bloody job. Why don't you just pack your bags and go and live with your boss?”*

*He validates: “I know that you're not happy about me working late and you seem to think that I'm abandoning you.”*

*Then...*

*His requirement: “I will be home late tonight. It's only for tonight. Have you forgotten that we have a special night this Saturday?”*

You might think that this is hard work. Well what choice do you have? You have the choice of abandoning the relationship or you have the choice of skilfully defusing the emotional explosions.

Here is another example...

A client arrived at my office. He looked emotionally drained. He said that he had just about had it. His wife was far too demanding and that she had taken it too far this time.

He explained that she is ill. She is bedridden. He was about to leave the house for his appointment with me. She announced that she needs a prescription filled “now”. She expected him to go to the chemist straight away.

He knows that it can wait until he gets back in

an hour and a half. He told her that he didn't have time now and that he will do it when he gets back. She exploded.

In this instance the wife has a "particularly nasty tongue". She wants it "now" and if he won't do it now, then she will throw everything she has at him, verbally. She calls him "everything under the sun". She says that he's lazy, selfish, uncaring, an idiot, lame, you name the insult she has it for him.

Why doesn't he just leave her? Good question. There might be a reason for him to stay. He says that he's been close to leaving many times. He said that he's probably packed his bags 30 times so far. He says that he's already chalked up three failed marriages and that he doesn't want to fail again. Apart from that he feels obliged to stay and to look after her and her two children.

If this is the case, and he is committing himself to stay, then he needs to develop skills for defusing emotional explosions. By now he has to realise that his wife's emotional explosions are part of her personality. They will go on either forever or until she herself develops some insight into her own issues and gets help for herself. This is what he needs to do NOW...

*He validates: "I can hear you, you want me to get your medication now."*

*Then...*

*His requirement: "But I have an appointment in 15 minutes. I can get your medication when I get back in one and a half hours."*

*She says: "You're a lazy good for nothing selfish bastard. I want you to go and get my medication now. Can't you see that I'm ill?"*

*He validates: "Yes I can see that you're ill. I can see that you want me to get the medication now."*

*Then...*

*His requirement: "I will be back in one and a half hours and I will get it then."*

*She says: "I hate you. You're always thinking about yourself. You have no concern for me at all. It's all you, isn't it? It's always all about you."*

*He validates: "I know that you want me to get it now. I can see that you are not able to do it for yourself."*

*Then...*

*His requirement: "I can also see that it's not urgent for you to have it now. I will be back in an hour and a half. I'll get it for you then." (Even tone, no rising of the voice)*

In this example, you can see the requirement for repetition in the validation and in setting the boundaries.

This woman has pushed this man to his limits in the past and now she is confident that she knows how to get her way. He says that after a bout of abuse from her, she apologises and admits to being demanding. These apologies do give him hope but the behaviour keeps on keeping on.

The one thing that has paid off for the emotionally exploding woman in this example is that her husband has paid far too much attention to her verbal abuse toward him. He took all the insults personally. This is perhaps because he believes these things she says about him are true. He needs to sort out his own vulnerabilities.

In terms of Jeffery Young's schemas, perhaps this man believes that he is defective in some way and that his wife is on the verge of exposing him to the world, perhaps, perhaps, perhaps.

The fact of the matter is that when she is hurling the abuse it is all about getting him to do her bidding. Therefore the abuse has nothing to do with him at all. Only he can't see that at the time. He does, however, need to ignore the abuse and to see it as her feeble strategy to get him motivated to do her bidding.

By ignoring the abuse in this context, two things happen. One is that it helps to defuse by not fuelling the explosion. In other words, do not DEFEND, DENY, or COUNTERATTACK.

Secondly, if he ignores the attacks he can remain focused on his objective. He needs to get on with going to his appointment; he

doesn't need to hang around denying her self-serving accusations, defending himself, or attacking her.

The validation of the exploding person's point of view is crucial to defusing the explosion. It may also be the most difficult part to understand from the point of view the person who is the target of the explosion. "Why should I validate her, that's just agreeing with her isn't it?" Or, "Why should I give an inch? She's just plain out of order."

To "validate" means to authenticate, confirm, to show understanding. It does not necessarily mean to "agree with".

If I can see that you are angry at me, I might not agree with it, but I can validate you by saying, "I see that you are angry at me". The validation is merely stating the obvious fact. It is not a denial, it is not a defence, nor is it a counterattack.

If someone is angry at you and you validate him by saying, "I can see that you are angry at me", you are likely to see his head nod, "yes, I am angry at you." You can see that you have validated someone by his/her head nodding.

Validating an emotionally exploding person is a strategic skill. An emotionally exploding person is in pure emotional-state. This is a hot mind. If you do something that forces the exploding person into reasoning, then you will help him/her change into a cool mind.

Chances are the exploding person is looking for a way to resolve his/her frustration. On one level the exploding person knows that he has "lost it" and that he may not get what he wants, but he also knows that he knows no other way.

The emotionally exploding person needs to find a dignified way out of the mess that he/she has just created for him/herself. By validating this person at the time, in the moment, you are providing the way out, the dignified escape.

Here is another brief example...

*You validate: "I can see clearly that all I need to*

*do is agree with you..."*

*Exploding person says: "That's all I need here."*

*Your requirement: "We keep coming back to this point. You know that I can't just change my mind just like that, so what do you think we can do about it?"*

By asking that question, "so what do you think we can do about it?" you are prompting the exploding person to think about something else. You could be diverting his/her attention on to a solution rather than remaining bogged-down in the circular argument. You could be cooling the exploding person's mind and offering a dignified way out.

To defuse an emotional explosion you will need the skill, like the bomb squad. Even so you might get blown up in any case, but this is no reason to throw out the skills. The skill is something that you will need to practise. Have I mentioned before that there are three things that you need to do to develop a skill, (1) is practise, (2) is practise, and (3) is.... Yes, you're right, it's practise.

So far I have explored defusing an emotional explosion as if the exploding person has issues of their own what is beyond your control and beyond the control of the exploding one. This is presented within the context of the exploding one having say, "Borderline" personality traits. There is one other reason why someone like your partner might be emotionally exploding; this would be because you are to blame and you have upset your partner to the point of utter frustration.

By the way, please use these skills to take care of your own potential emergency button banging. Please do not try to teach these skills to someone else. If someone is emotionally exploding in front of you, you are responsible for your own emergency-button and your own wellbeing and happiness.

You are not learning these skills so that you can psychologise or save other people. If you ignore this advice it will end in tears for you.

Kreisman, J. J. and Straus, H. (1989). *I hate you don't leave me*. Avon Books: New York.

Kreisman, J. J. and Straus, H. (2004). *Sometimes I act crazy*. John Wiley & Sons, Inc: Hoboken, New Jersey.

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*Treating Borderline Personality Disorder*, The Guilford Press: New York

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## Appendix A

**Defusing Emotional Explosions: dos and don'ts**

## Things to do...

1. **You do need to set boundaries.** In order to do this you need to know how far you are prepared to go. At what point must you just walk away? But don't be fooled by the walking away strategy. You can only use it once. If you waver or show any sign of weakening, or inconsistency, then you're gone.
2. **Keep track of the triggers.** If you know what will set off an explosion, then don't do it. You will have to balance this against the first point of setting boundaries. If for example you know that you will be home late one night, don't just spring it on your emotionally unstable partner. Tell him/her about it weeks in advance and keep reminding him/her. At the same time you don't want to be tippee-toeing around and not living your life.
3. **You need to sort out your own vulnerabilities.** People who are emotionally unstable have grown up in an invalidating environment. The invalidating environment most probably had some element of danger whether it was physical or emotional. As a result, an emotionally unstable person usually has a good eye for changing moods in other people. As a result your emotionally unstable partner is probably able to read your vulnerabilities. It is not as if an emotionally exploding person **might** use your vulnerabilities against you; most definitely he/she **will** use your vulnerabilities against you.
4. **You will be blamed for the most horrendous deeds** by an emotionally explosive partner. You could begin to doubt yourself. You can always get feedback from other people who you know that you can trust.
5. **Do the poker face.** When in the presence of an emotionally exploding person, the poker face is a good defuser. A negative emotional response from you will most likely escalate the emotional explosion. Or you can take-on a look of interest. Look curious and interested.
6. **You cannot control what the exploding person is thinking** and the reasons for the explosion even if you do think you understand. Take responsibility for your thoughts and actions.

## The four don'ts (Mason &amp; Kreger, 1998, p.135)...

1. **Don't Defend:** Trying to prove to an emotionally exploding person that you haven't done anything wrong can leave you feeling foolish, childish and guilty, even if you haven't made a mistake.
2. **Don't Deny:** You may use denial because you really haven't done anything wrong, or you certainly are not responsible for whatever it is you are accused of. But repeated denials can also make you feel like a child ("Did not!" "Did too", etc).
3. **Don't Counterattack:** You might strike back at an emotionally exploding person to try to win an argument or vent your feelings, but when you do this you are probably falling for the trap to label you as the bad guy. You win the game in this situation by not playing.
4. **Don't Withdraw:** When you've defended, denied, and counterattacked and they haven't worked, it is common practise to withdraw either by clamming up, leaving physically, or tuning out. Of course if you are in physical danger, then you must leave. But the danger is in you remaining passive and silent while your sense of personal power and self-esteem deteriorates.

**The defusing skill must have two elements in a particular order. Validate first then introduce reality.**

Adapted from: Mason, P. T. and Kreger, R. (1998). *Stop Walking on Eggshells:...* (see reference list).