

Notes from Professionals – John G. Gunderson, MD

Etiology of BPD

Like other major psychiatric disorders, the etiology of the borderline personality disorder (BPD) involves both genes and environment. The genetic component, which has been under-appreciated, is substantial. It is not, however, the disorder itself which is inherited. Rather, what is inherited are forms of temperament that predispose a child to develop this disorder. The predisposing temperaments (aka phenotypes) for BPD are Affective Instability, Impulsivity, and Needy/Fearful Relationships.

Each of these temperaments predisposes to other disorders as well as BPD; Affective Instability also predisposes to mood disorders, Impulsivity also predisposes to substance/alcohol abuse, bulimia, and conduct disorder, and Needy/Fearful Relationships also disposes to histrionic, dependent, and avoidant personality disorders. The presence of these inherited temperaments helps explain why patients with BPD are often co-morbid with these other disorders.

Still these predisposing temperaments do not by themselves explain the etiology of BPD. They make it possible for someone to develop this disorder. To develop BPD also requires unfortunate environmental conditions. Most theories believe that early caretaking experiences are very important. Here, patients who have BPD will often report that their parenting was inconsistent, neglectful, or even malevolent.

This perspective is deeply distressing to parents. Some parents will feel deeply guilty as they review the past and elaborate on their failures. Others will dismiss the accusations, deny having any role, and thereby add to their borderline offspring's alienation.