



Families and Carers

Strategies for Effective Communication & Healthy Relationships

Why focus on relationships?

Relationships are at the core of our mental health, particularly for a person with personality disorder. People with personality disorder are very sensitive in relationships, and tend to react with very strong emotions to changes in relationships and perceived criticism or abandonment. This causes difficulty both for the person with personality disorder and those close to them. Carers often describe being in constant fear of triggering distress in the person with personality disorder. Due to this, it is essential for clinicians to involve families and carers when working with someone with a personality disorder.

Contagious emotions

We are often contagious with our emotions. When our loved ones are feeling good – we are feeling good. When those around us are hurting – we are hurting too. Often when someone with personality disorder feels overwhelmed with their own emotions, such as anger, rage and hopelessness, they push them out of themselves and onto someone close to them. This is called projection. However, families, partners and carers can be contagious with their own emotion also, both in helpful and unhelpful ways.

Five key relationship strategies

The five key relationship strategies are simple and effective principles to improve relationships, particularly with a person with personality disorder:

1. Care for yourself to care for others
2. Be contagious with your calm
3. Draw your line in the sand
4. Listen without fixing
5. Develop a Safety Plan and practice the steps in time of calm – like a fire drill

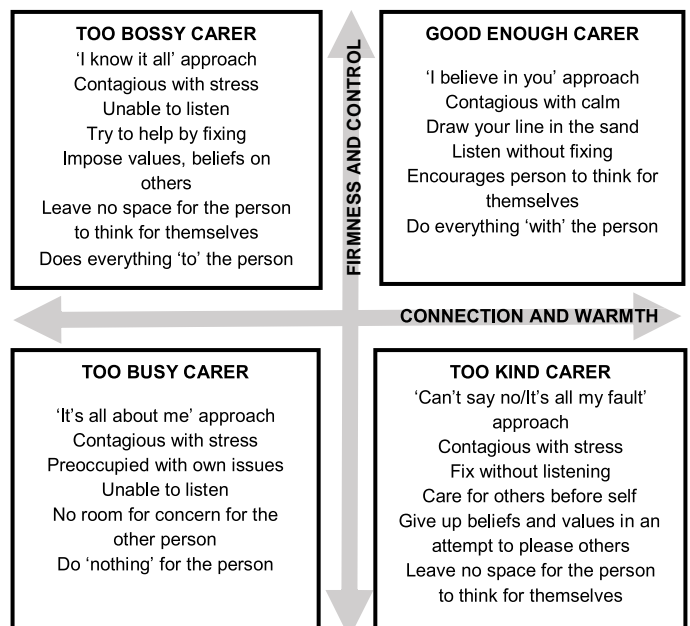
The relationship dances

Conceptualizing relationships as a dance is a helpful way to think about ourselves and our influence on interactions in our relationships.

The four relationship dance scenarios

The two key components in understanding relationships are firmness and control, and connection and warmth. In using these components, we can understand the four common relationship dances as being on a grid. It is important to remember that these dances occur in all relationships.

To understanding the four relationship dances, we have developed four scenarios with characters based on everyday struggles faced by a person supporting someone with a personality disorder. These four carer dances demonstrate how the carer's different approaches impact on the person with personality disorder's ability to manage her distress.



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Safety planning – Like a fire drill

Of course, it is more challenging to dance as a good enough carer when risk is involved. In times of distress, it is not uncommon for people with a personality disorder to seek a quick fix to help them cope. These solutions may include projecting distress onto others, withdrawing from others, or using coping mechanisms that may be self-destructive (such as cutting, burning, overdosing, bingeing or vomiting). These quick fix solutions often provide immediate relief but cause serious problems of their own, which may include compromising the safety of themselves or others. Safety is an essential right for everyone and when carers use the five key relationship strategies safety always comes first.

Safety planning involves developing a plan together with the person with personality disorder in a time of calm to equip you to be most helpful in a situation of distress. A safety plan may include what is acceptable (such as anger), and what you will do if unacceptable behaviour is displayed (such as aggression). Then, like a fire drill, it is also important to practice the steps of your safety plan in a time of calm, so that everyone knows what to do and expect. You may require the help of a professional to develop a safety plan that suits your particular situation.



Calling emergency services – An act of love

It is important to distinguish between life threatening situations that may need emergency services, with situations where you can invite the person with personality disorder to take responsibility. For instance, it is not uncommon for a person with personality disorder to cut themselves in an attempt to alleviate distress. Depending on the severity of the cut, this may require minimal treatment, such as a Band-Aid, or more involved treatment, such as sutures by a medical professional. When the safety of someone (the person with personality disorder or yourself) is compromised it is important for families, partners and carers to remember that it is an act of love to call emergency services to keep everyone safe.

Credits

This fact sheet complements a film resource 'Staying connected when emotions run high'. The film was developed as a training tool illustrating these strategies for communicating with others when they are in distress. The goal of this resource is to assist in improving key relationships for people with personality disorder and other emotional problems. These relationships may include their carers, partners, families, colleagues, and the health service. We would like to acknowledge and thank the families, partners and carers who have worked with us and shared their lived experiences which have informed the development of this film.

Original film script developed by Annemaree Bickerton, Janice Nair and Toni Garretty.

The introduction and conclusion is by Brin Grenyer.

Film directed by Farnaz Fanaian from Joon Films, with actors Juliet Scrine as Jill, and Debbie Neilson as Mandy.

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Air Strategy acknowledges the major support of NSW Health. The Project works with mental health clinicians, consumers and carers to deliver effective treatments, implements research strategies supporting scientific discoveries, and offers high quality training and education.