



## Treatment Tools

### Giving a diagnosis of personality disorder: A guide for mental health professionals

People with personality disorder feel that being diagnosed compassionately can be a positive and helpful experience for their treatment and recovery. When diagnosing someone with a personality disorder, it is important to provide an educated explanation of the disorder, communicate positive ways to move forward, discuss possible treatment options, and offer assurance that recovery is possible. Full comprehensive diagnosis is usually given by a clinical psychologist or psychiatrist. However, this guide is useful for any health professional communicating and educating about the diagnosis.

#### Before discussing a diagnosis of personality disorder

- Ensure a thorough psychological assessment of personality disorder has been completed.
- Be aware that receiving a diagnosis of personality disorder can come with a range of responses. It can provide a framework for people to understand their experiences, but can bring about self-stigma and concerns about stigmatising responses others, including mental health professionals.
- It is important to discuss the personality disorder diagnosis regardless of expected reaction. Not informing someone of a diagnosis of personality disorder reinforces stigma about the disorder and may prevent appropriate intervention.

#### Discussing a diagnosis of personality disorder

- Provide factual and credible education on personality disorders and discuss the person's specific symptoms.
- Set realistic expectations of outcomes. Change is difficult and takes time, but reinforce that recovery is possible.
- Discuss symptoms or conditions that may be comorbid or differentiated from personality disorder including depression, chronic pain, psychosis, substance use disorders, anxiety disorders and eating disorders.
- Discuss treatment options and provide information about services that deliver

specific personality disorder treatments, including private psychologists, peer support (where available), telephone support, community mental health services, non-government organisations and support groups.

- Provide crisis strategies that can be used prior to beginning treatment.
- Discuss how carers, family members, and support people can help someone with a personality disorder, and provide information that supports carers, family members, and support persons.
- Provide written information and factsheets about personality disorder (eg. Project Air Strategy "What is Borderline Personality Disorder", and ANZCP "Borderline Personality Disorder Guide", both available for download from

[www.projectairstrategy.org/mpafactsheets](http://www.projectairstrategy.org/mpafactsheets).





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### How to discuss a diagnosis of personality disorder

- Be genuine. Connect as a human being.
- Take time to explain the diagnosis. It may be the first time that the person is hearing about personality disorder.
- Communicate hope that the person can recover.
- Be aware of language. Explain what you mean when using clinical language and avoid stigmatising language.
- Listen to the person's response to the diagnosis and answer their questions.
- Depending on availability, involve a peer worker or carer to ensure the person feels supported and understands the information provided.
- Discuss the diagnosis openly with the person's carer, family members or support person if granted permission to do so.
- Provide factsheets and information about personality disorder so they can review and share with the people who are close to them.
- Discuss that the internet does not always provide reliable sources of information. Sometimes the information on non-credible websites can be inaccurate and unhelpful.
- It is useful to go through the criteria to discuss how this makes sense to the person. Further detailed guidelines for discussing a diagnosis are in the Project Air Treatment Guidelines for Personality Disorders (2015, p.17-20).  
[www.projectairstrategy.org/guidelines](http://www.projectairstrategy.org/guidelines)

### What to do following a diagnosis of personality disorder

- Direct people to recovery stories. Eg. Project Air Strategy – Personal Journeys  
[www.projectairstrategy.org/mpaperpersonaljourneys](http://www.projectairstrategy.org/mpaperpersonaljourneys)
- Book in a follow-up appointment.
- Provide referrals to appropriate services as discussed with the person, and follow up.
- With consent, communicate with the next treating professional to provide continuity of care.

#### **The Lived Experience Project:**

The information in these resources was provided by people with lived experience of personality disorder and carers supporting people with personality disorder through two focus groups carried out in May 2019. This set of resources were developed through co-design and consultation with people with lived experience and other peak Consumer and Carer bodies in NSW. This work was funded by the New South Wales Mental Health Commission.

