

# Autism, Betrayal Trauma & BPD: Oh My!

A combination of autism and betrayal trauma could lead to an experience of one's mental health that resembles borderline personality disorder (BPD). It's crucial to differentiate the underlying causes rather than assume a diagnosis, as autistic traits and trauma responses can sometimes be misinterpreted through a pathology-based lens.

## The Overlaps

### Emotional dysregulation

Many autistic people experience intense emotions but may struggle with identifying, processing, or expressing them. Repeated relational violations (especially from trusted caregivers or partners) can lead to heightened sensitivity to abandonment, hypervigilance, and difficulty regulating distress. The combination might look like extreme emotional swings, outbursts, or a struggle to self-soothe after perceived rejection.

### Fear of abandonment and rejection sensitivity

It is unfortunately common within neuronormative society that autistic people experience repeated rejection, misunderstandings, and invalidation, leading to anxiety around relationships. When trust is broken by people they are close to, it reinforces the fear that others will leave or hurt them. They may cope via preemptive withdrawal, extreme reactions to perceived relationship threats, and a lasting intense fear of abandonment.

### Splitting

Many autistic people think in categories as a natural part of their cognitive processing style. This is sometimes called "black-and-white thinking." When trust is violated, survivors of any neurotype may develop similar patterns (e.g. swinging from "this person is completely safe" to "this person is dangerous"). This could resemble the idealization and devaluation that is a hallmark of BPD.

### Self-harm and suicidality

Autistic individuals often struggle with chronic distress, sensory overload, and alexithymia, sometimes leading to self-injury as a coping mechanism. Trauma survivors may develop self-destructive behaviors to manage pain or regain a sense of control. Combined, this may show up as impulsive self-harm, suicidal ideation, or extreme emotional distress.

### Dissociation and shutdowns

Shutdowns, dissociation, or sensory overload when overwhelmed are a norm for many autistic people. Trauma often leads to derealization, depersonalization, or emotional numbing. From both the outside looking in and vice versa, it's tough to tell the difference or guess the origin of a dissociative episode or unstable emotional state.

## Misdiagnosis vs. "True BPD"

- Many high-masking autistic people with trauma get misdiagnosed with BPD because their emotional responses and relational difficulties don't fit neurotypical expectations.
- While BPD is a relational trauma response, autism inherently affects social processing and regulation. The key difference is that BPD is defined by a **pervasive pattern of unstable relationships, self-image, and behaviors**, whereas autistic people often experience **consistent difficulties** rather than shifting personality traits.
- Autistic people with betrayal trauma may need support that focuses on validating, understanding, and accepting their processing style rather than focusing on emotional control.

## Are Autistic People with Betrayal Trauma More Susceptible to Developing BPD?

In a word, yes! Due to the way autism shapes emotional processing, attachment, and sense of self - which are all further destabilized by trauma - autistic people, who already face diagnostic confusion due to overlapping traits - may also be more likely to develop "true BPD." We can't be quick to assume that because a person is autistic, their BPD traits are "just autism" without thoroughly assessing how they were impacted by trauma.

### Heightened sensitivity to social rejection and betrayal

Autistic people might not have the same social intuition to detect when another person (especially an allistic person who communicates differently) is being manipulative or demonstrating untrustworthiness. This can make betrayal hit harder because it feels like a sudden and absolute loss of safety rather than something that could have been predicted or avoided.

- *Autistic vulnerability:* Already struggling with feeling different or out of sync with allistic people
- *Trauma impact:* Betrayal "confirms" the belief that relationships are unsafe or unpredictable.
- *Resulting BPD traits:* Extreme fear of abandonment, hypersensitivity to rejection, difficulty trusting others

### Difficulty regulating big emotions = intensified trauma response

Instead of processing betrayal as a painful but temporary event, it can feel like an unrecoverable loss, leading to black-and-white thinking ("I was safe; now I'm never safe again.")

- *Autistic vulnerability:* Might experience meltdowns or shutdowns but not have the tools to communicate emotional needs effectively, might have differences in interoceptive cues that make them unaware of a feeling until it is at a 10/10 intensity without a chance to cope ahead

- *Trauma impact*: Heightens dysregulation, making emotions feel even more unmanageable
- *Resulting BPD traits*: Rapid emotional shifts, extreme distress responses, and difficulty self-soothing

### Rigid and literal thinking makes betrayal feel like a core identity crisis

Autistic people may struggle to repair relational ruptures because betrayal feels absolute rather than something that can be worked through. This can reinforce patterns of splitting (idealizing people, then cutting them off).

- *Autistic vulnerability*: Thinks in clear, logical structures; betrayal doesn't fit the expected pattern
- *Trauma impact*: Creates a core identity wound - if someone trusted becomes untrustworthy, then all relationships become questionable
- *Resulting BPD traits*: Identity instability, shifting perceptions of self and others ("I am good" to "I am worthless")

### High masking + betrayal = intense identity erosion

If an autistic person is already unsure of who they are or has a fragmented sense of self, betrayal can push them into desperate attempts to "rebuild" themselves, sometimes in unstable or unhealthy ways.

- *Autistic vulnerability*: Sense of self is already shaped by external validation rather than intrinsic understanding.
- *Trauma impact*: Betrayal from a trusted person can feel like a direct attack on identity ("If they hurt me, maybe I never knew who I was in the first place").
- *Resulting BPD traits*: Chronic identity instability, dissociation, and self-destructive behaviors

### Sensory and emotional overwhelm can drive self-harm or impulsivity

What might start as stimming or a shutdown could turn into self-destructive habits when combined with betrayal and emotional dysregulation, when the person is at a breaking point far outside their window of tolerance.

- *Autistic vulnerability*: Might already use repetitive behaviors to self-regulate, but trauma makes them more extreme.
- *Trauma impact*: Escalates the need for immediate relief from emotional pain
- *Resulting BPD traits*: Self-harm, suicidal ideation, reckless behaviors