



Case Study

BPD: Multidisciplinary strategies to navigate feelings of rejection and fear of abandonment

July 2024

Leah is a 21-year-old woman who currently lives in an apartment on her own.

She received a diagnosis of borderline personality disorder when she was 19 and has a history of difficult relationships and employment.

Leah's family came to Australia from Vietnam when she was two. She is an only child and her mother experienced post-natal depression for six months after she was born. Her mother continued to experience bouts of depression upon arriving in Australia.

A few months after arriving in Australia her parents started a small restaurant in the regional town where they had settled. They worked seven days a week, which led to Leah often feeling very alone.

When she started primary school, Leah would tell her parents that she felt sick and had a really bad pain in her heart, and that it made her feel like she couldn't breathe. Her parents took her to the doctors constantly. The family GP ran tests which always cleared her of any medical conditions.

Growing up in an Asian family made her feel displaced at school. At primary school she was the only Asian girl in her class. Kids would pick on her because she looked different, and her lunch boxes had different food. No matter how hard she tried to make friends, nothing worked. Leah constantly wished she was like the other kids. Often when she felt hurt or rejected by her schoolmates she would hide behind a building and bang her head against a wall until she felt so dizzy she would almost pass out.

When she was 14, her GP referred her to a psychologist. She told the psychologist she would often say things to her classmates like, "something is wrong, very wrong. I don't exactly know what it is, but everything hurts a lot. Nothing feels right. The pain needs to stop. No one understands me and I don't belong here".

She said her parents used very harsh forms of punishment throughout her childhood and rarely showed warm emotions. Leah described that she was rarely hugged and if she tried to talk to her parents about how she felt they dismissed it and said she should be stronger.

Leah helped in the restaurant when she finished school in Year 10. She hated working there because her dad was always barking orders and telling her she was stupid. Her dad's strict demeanour would have Leah berating herself over and over. With negative thoughts spiralling she would often go downstairs to the restaurant kitchen and raid the fridge, binge eating her way into feeling so sick she would throw up. This happened on a weekly basis and sometimes more.

One day when she was feeling particularly low, she reached out to her only friend. Leah told her that she felt like she was in a prison. Together they thought of ways she could get out, coming up with the idea to apply to TAFE to do a short course so she could get a job in administration. Since finishing year 10, aside from working in the restaurant, Leah had only been employed twice in retail customer service and these jobs didn't last long. She often found herself back working in her parents' restaurant to make some money.

Leah's escape has always been reading – especially romantic novels. She would become very emotional reading stories if couples broke up and there wasn't a happy ending.

At 17, Leah became very active on social media, often making posts about the books she read. She had a public profile because she loved the feeling of reassurance that it provided. At 19, she started noticing some of her posts were attracting very negative and nasty comments from trolls. Although she knew she should ignore them, she would often engage in conversation with the trolls. These interactions often meant comments escalated to messages telling her she was a psycho, and the world would be a better place if she wasn't in it. These comments had such a negative impact on Leah that she sought care from her GP. The GP diagnosed depression and anxiety, and prescribed medication. He also referred her to a new psychologist. After four sessions, it was suggested to Leah that she may have borderline personality disorder. Leah was surprised but at the same time felt relieved because all her childhood emotions finally made sense.

Now that things made a bit more sense, and she had psychological support Leah decided to go on a dating app and look for another boyfriend. She'd had a few boyfriends before, but the relationships were all very intense and short lived, the longest lasting four months.

She always felt so sad after a breakup and would question why she couldn't keep a boyfriend like other girls. Her friends told her it was because she spent too much time with them and was too possessive and untrusting. Leah was hurt to hear this, but deep down she knew it was true. She just didn't know how to stop being suspicious and always felt like her boyfriends were interested in other girls. She even questioned her own behaviour when she would constantly text her boyfriend to see where he was and accused him of cheating on her. She knew it was dramatic but couldn't help herself. Her emotions were so overwhelming. This time it would be different though. She was seeing a psychologist and was on medication, so she knew she could do better.

Leah met Damien within the first hour of being on the dating app. She felt an instant connection and they met in-person for their first date just three days after connecting on the app. The date went well, and they became serious very quickly. Within weeks, she was very dependent on Damien and relied on him to make her feel happy. If he wasn't constantly paying her compliments, doing special things like sending her romantic messages and calling her several times a day, she would feel like he didn't care about her, and react by telling him.

Seven months into the relationship, Damien said he didn't want to see her anymore. When she asked why, he said, "you're too needy and I want to spend more time with my mates and on my career."

Leah was devastated. She really thought this relationship would last. Leah just couldn't accept that it was over and started stalking Damien on Facebook and driving around his neighbourhood hoping to see him. She couldn't stop thinking about him and would write lengthy letters and leave them in his letterbox. Damien kept asking her to leave him alone, but she just couldn't. She knew they were right

for each other, she just had to convince him. After two months Damien had had enough and took out an intervention order.

She felt lower than ever and wasn't sleeping so she went to her GP to review her mental health plan and received a referral back to her psychologist.

She spent five months unpacking what was going on for her and why she had such difficulties with relationships. After her consults with her GP and psychologist Leah decided that she should just focus on her work.

Leah is now eight months into a new job as an administration assistant at a law firm and really likes it. Prior to this she had only had two trials in administration at other businesses. Neither had gone well, with both companies saying she wasn't a great fit and letting her go.

At the law firm, she sometimes feels anxious when her boss asks her to do too many jobs at once, or if he sends work back that isn't correct. Leah has always felt sensitive to feedback, seeing it as harsh criticism. At her regular weekly check in with her manager, her boss told her she was doing ok but needed to be mindful of attention to detail. This comment made her worry about making mistakes. Leah felt that she didn't receive any positive feedback from her boss. She had thought that he would give her more details. She didn't want to say anything in the meeting because she was so grateful that she still had a job.

After the meeting Leah thought to herself, "right, I'm going to have to work harder. I'll work at least an extra hour every day, so my boss knows that I am a good worker." She was so fixated on the attention to detail comment that she started reviewing all her past work.