Managing Suicidality in Patients With Borderline Personality Disorder

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**Suicidality is a defining feature of borderline personality disorder (BPD).** It is also the feature that creates the most anxiety among those who treat patients with this disorder. It is rare to find patients with BPD who have never shown any suicidal behavior. As described in criterion 5 in DSM-IV-TR,¹ these patients are characterized by "recurrent suicidal behavior, gestures, or threats, or self-mutilating behavior." Suicidal ideas and threats are ubiquitous, and most patients make multiple suicide attempts.² Suicidality in patients with BPD is chronic and can continue for extended periods (months to years).³ ⁴ This feature helps distinguish patients with BPD from those with classic mood disorders, who are suicidal only when acutely depressed. While BPD often begins with repetitive suicide attempts starting in adolescence and continuing into young adulthood, these behaviors tend to remit over time.⁵ ⁶ Suicidal thoughts vary in intensity over time, waxing when life is stressful and waning when it is not.⁷ Suicidality in patients with BPD is associated with traits of affective instability.⁸ ⁹ ¹⁰ Instead of continuous depression or mania, lasting for weeks to months, the rapid mood swings of BPD occur in response to life events.¹¹ The unique quality of these symptoms is shown by the failure of mood in BPD to respond consistently to antidepressants.¹² ¹³ ¹⁴ Suicidal actions are also associated with impulsive personality traits.³ Soloff and associates² reported a mean of 3 lifetime attempts in patients with BPD, and the frequency of attempts was related to levels of impulsivity.² ¹⁵

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