

## Being Patient

Insights into personality disorders from a girl who's had one  
by Stacy Pershall

### Parents of Sasha Menu Courey Talk About BPD

When their daughter died by suicide, Mike Menu and Lynn Courey became activists.  
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Sasha was definitely very depressed, especially after her failed suicide attempt in Columbia MO a few months earlier in April 2011. As my wife often said, after that attempt she was 6 feet under, her sense of failure and shame was excruciatingly painful to her – her love life, social, academic, and athletic goals crushed. Sasha had unusually lofty goals for herself and her sense of failure and shame was deeper than we could ever understand. While she was getting better during treatment, she could not accept the realization that this would be a long process of recovery and the thought of needing to move her treatment with a new team in Toronto was more than she could take. From her journal it is clear that her suicide was planned well in advance but in the end impulsivity had a lot to do with it. While at the hospital Sasha told us she was ready to make the transition to treatment in Toronto and we believe her when she said it, but unfortunately it was too late.

**6. I found that it took me about 18 months to really "get" DBT, to the point that I could incorporate it into my daily life. However, I had outpatient treatment, rather than inpatient, like Sasha. How much do you think she was able to learn about DBT in her time at McLean?**

From an academic perspective her understanding of all of the DBT skills was very good. However, partly due to the residential setting and partly due to the relatively short amount of time she had with the skills, her practical knowledge was probably weak. Sasha was able to recognize which skills she needed in which situations and she was able to apply them with coaching from staff but that is far from knowing when to apply them seamlessly in the real world.

**7. What would you like to see changed about inpatient BPD treatment? (Besides the cost, of course.) What did Sasha see as the assets and shortcomings of her treatment?**

Boston McLean has made changes to their program as a result of Sasha's case. For example, there is now a staff transition person (which is separate from the individual's therapist) assigned to work out issues/concerns related to the individual's transition to other treatment. Sasha had written in her journal that she could not understand how in the last few weeks of her treatment she was spending so much time (and money) worrying about the transition rather than concentrating on her treatment. From the financial side, they have opened a scholarship fund designed to help individuals with financial constraints to stay in treatment longer. We are continuing to talk informally with McLean about other areas -- for example, for individuals with lots of goals, to come up with a way of keeping the path to their goals alive in a positive yet realistic way. Also, we believe having recovered "graduates" come in and give a message of hope to those in treatments could be very important. While it is difficult for one to say "on the inside" that there is light at the end of the tunnel, hearing from someone that has gone through it can make a significant impact.

**8. What do you think of the proposed changes to the BPD diagnostic criteria in the DSM-5?**

Wow, not an easy read for us mere non-professionals. We are not psychiatrists or psychologists so we could not claim to understand the impact of the proposed changes. We do however, clearly see that in Sasha's case the failure to diagnose her with BPD when she was 16, after her first suicide attempt, meant neither she (or we) had any exposure at all to things that

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**Stacy Pershall** is the author of *Loud in the House of Myself: Memoir of a Strange Girl* (2011; Norton), chosen for the Barnes and Noble spring 2011 Discover Great New Writers program.  
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would have helped us -- like DBT skills, because of the no-diagnosis, no-treatment rule. Given the vast number of people that are affected with mental disorders which are rooted in the difficulty in regulating emotions, we do feel strongly that the mental health system needs to do a better job establishing preventive, educational, early intervention measures to the broader population as well as to provide better training in school, as well as practical experience for mental health professionals so that they are able to effectively treat people living with these issues. We have to do better at reaching out to so-called difficult clients (e.g. people living with BPD) with more effective treatments. The 'difficulty' of the client is not extraneous to the disorder but rather an integral part of it, and one which we must be able to readily treat by applying evidence-based treatments that work (such as DBT vs. just plain CBT). The 'client is not co-operating with the treatment' attitude must be replaced by the 'treatment is failing client' attitude.

#### 9. Was Sasha taking medication? If so, did she find it helpful? Did you see any difference in her mood and behavior?

Sasha was taking some medication while in treatment, mostly to stabilize her mood, but it was mostly about the treatment rather than the medication. She did not say to us or write in her journal whether she found this helpful. Her mood and behaviour was very volatile and on edge during her treatment due probably to the stress of what she was dealing with. Despite our DBT skills family training sessions we were often walking on eggshells when taking to Sasha for outings during weekend visits.

#### 10. What has been most helpful to you in healing as the parents of a child who completed suicide?

You can never get over losing a child; you can only get used to it. We often say that although McLean could not save Sasha, they saved us, as we gained a better understanding of what she was going through. As painful as it is, sharing her story in the hope to bring awareness and make a difference for others in her name has given us a strong sense of purpose. We've had overwhelming support from family and friends, and especially all of the members of the sashbear.org group who took us under their wing and gave us the courage to make a difference in Sasha's name -- we would not be where we are today if it wasn't for them. And last but not least, our love for our daughter Kayla and her support have meant the world to us.

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