Emotional Switching in Borderline Personality Disorder: A Daily Life Study

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In an attempt to better understand emotional instability that is characteristic of persons with a borderline personality disorder (BPD), we examined the notion of emotional switching in BPD in daily life, defined as changes between positive and negative mood states from one time point to the next. The notion that switching might be particularly characteristic of BPD resonates with the concept of dichotomous thinking that involves the tendency to evaluate or observe the world, people, and feelings in terms of extreme, dichotomous categories which are mutually exclusive, rather than evaluating in a more gradual manner. As far as we know, one study has investigated the occurrence of dichotomous affective experiences in daily life of persons with BPD. Coifman, Berenson, Rafaeli and Downey (2012) showed that BPD patients are characterized by heightened polarity of their affective experiences in daily life, compared to healthy controls. We extend this line of research by investigating whether polarized affective experiences can change from one point to the next in daily life, resulting in abrupt changes between positive and negative mood states over time, i.e. emotional switching. We focused on two aspects of emotional switching. First, we investigated the probability that a switch between a positive and a negative state occurs, independent of the magnitude of the emotional change, reflecting switching propensity. Second, we investigated the magnitude of emotional change in case a person switched between a positive and a negative state, so-called switch distance. We conducted an experience sampling study in which 30 BPD patients and 28 healthy controls carried handheld palmtops in their everyday lives and recorded their emotional states using a bipolar valence scale 10 times a day for 8 consecutive days. Results showed that while BPD patients did not differ from healthy controls regarding their propensity to make switches between positive and negative mood states, they did display emotional changes larger in magnitude if they made such switches compared to healthy controls. In contrast, changes from one time point to the next within the negative or positive realm do not seem to be particularly larger for BPD patients. These results extend previous findings, that characterized emotional instability in BPD patients mainly in terms of larger overall fluctuations in positive mood or in negative mood separately. Moreover, the findings provide insight into possible processes underlying emotion dysregulation in BPD, and can inform treatment of emotional instability in BPD.