What exactly is STEPPS?

STEPPS is a weekly 2-hour CBT based group programme, which takes place in a classroom format. STEPPS is run by staff from different disciplines, including psychology, occupational therapy and nursing. The programme is composed of three areas: Awareness of Illness, Emotional Management Skills training and Behavioural Management Skills training. The skills taught include:

- **Awareness of Illness**: describing and understanding BPD
- **Filters**: to be aware of patterns of thinking which filter our thoughts
- **Distancing**: learning to step back from the intensity of the disorder
- **Communicating**: learning to describe how we feel, psychological sensations, thoughts, filter and action urges
- **Challenging**: identify distorted patterns thinking and develop alternative ways of thinking
- **Distracting**: Behaviours that lower our emotional intensity
- **Managing Problems**: identify problems and plan/carry out action steps
- **Setting Goals**: develop strategies to manage specific problematic behaviours
- **Eating**: Balanced eating habits
- **Sleeping**: Good sleep habits
- **Exercise**: Regular and balanced exercise
- **Leisure**: Regular leisure activities
- **Physical Health**: Working effectively with health professionals
- **Abuse avoidance**: Strategies to replace abusive behaviours
- **Relationship Behaviours**: Developing healthy relationships and defining healthy boundaries.

Who is STEPPS aimed at?

The STEPPS programme was primarily designed to support people with a diagnosis of BPD. Group members may have differing diagnosis but all present with borderline traits and have difficulty in managing their emotions. The authors of STEPPS have suggested the term ‘Borderline Personality Disorder’ is not a helpful description. For this reason they have termed the condition ‘Emotional Intensity Disorder’ (EID)?

What is EID?

- People with EID are desperately afraid of being abandoned, this fear can be real or imagined. Many will go to great lengths to avoid being on their own.
- Often people with EID will be involved in very intense relationships with people, characterised by swinging from extreme idealisation and devaluation.
- A key characteristic of EID is struggling to find your own identity, which often leaves people with an overwhelming sense of emptiness.
- Another feature of EID is impulsivity (i.e. spending, binge eating).
- Engaging in behaviours that look suicidal is often a symptom of EID.
- EID is often characterised by experiencing intense emotions. Intense episodes of anger, anxiety and irritability are common.
- Other symptoms include stress related paranoid ideation or severe episodes of dissociation.

What happens during a typical STEPPS Session?

Typically all of the sessions follow this format:

1. Group members are first asked to fill out the Borderline Evaluation of Severity over Time (BEST). This is a short questionnaire used to evaluate the effectiveness of treatment and measure symptoms of BPD over the last week.
2. Group members also fill out the Emotional Intensity Continuum (EIC) (or known to members as the “Pot” form). This is used to keep a record of your strength of emotions over the last week.
3. In the first hour will usually include a recap of previous sessions and a relaxation exercise. Examples of some of the exercises include: relaxation breathing, creating a collage depicting a safe place, blowing bubbles and creating a portable beach collage.
4. Then the group takes a short break (10-15 minutes).
5. In the second half of the session, a new topic/skill is introduced.

6. The session will end with setting tasks to complete before the next session (e.g. Practice skills and work through worksheets).

What is STEPPS Reinforcer?

The goal of STEPPS is to equip the person with EID, their family, friends and other professionals treating them with a common language to communicate clearly about the disorder and the skills to manage it. As well as teaching group members emotional and behavioural management skills, attendees also identify key professionals, friends and family to be part of their “reinforcement team”. These individuals are invited to learn about STEPPS and are encouraged to support the group member by reinforcing the STEPPS skills taught. Professionals are invited to take part in specialised “Reinforcer training” to learn about EID and how STEPPS helps to manage symptoms. The group member is encouraged to meet up regularly with their professional Reinforcer to discuss their progress. Family and friends are invited to attend evening sessions led by the group facilitators to discuss what STEPPS is about and to have the opportunity to ask questions. Each Reinforcer is given a ‘Reinforcers Guide’ which provides a guide to each week’s sessions, as well as proving prompts to help reinforce each topic. Feedback received from the training events has been very positive. Here are some of the comments received...
Is the STEPPS group effective in reducing the symptoms of BPD?

Each session begins with a short self-report questionnaire called the Borderline Evaluation of Severity over Time (BEST), it is used to evaluate the effectiveness of the treatment and to check on the progress of each group member. The BEST asks group member to rate intensity of their thoughts and feelings, as well as rating how often they exhibited positive and negative behaviours (which are often associated with EID) over the last week. Table1 below illustrates the reduction in BEST scores across the course of the programme for group members in Walsall and Dudley. There is also a marked decrease in average BEST scores at the first and end/current session. Results like these indicate STEPPS has had a positive impact on reducing the number of symptoms associated with EID.

The above graph shows the progress of average BEST scores collated from four STEPPS groups across Walsall and Dudley.

The graph above displays a comparison of average BEST scores for Adult Mental Health STEPPS groups and Substance Misuse Substance STEPPS group at the beginning and end/current STEPPS sessions.

What do STEPPS facilitators think?

We asked the current STEPPS facilitators how they thought the current group members were getting on. We asked them to rate group attendees on their engagement with the material so far, using the following scale:

- Does not use the skills, does not complete homework
- Generally fails complete homework but uses the skills; finds them ineffective
- Generally completes homework and uses the skills; finds them ineffective
- Generally fails to complete homework but uses the skills; finds them effective
- Generally completes homework and uses the skills; finds them moderately effective

Facilitators commented that 90% of the current group members were using the skills learnt in the STEPPS group.

And a from that 70% of current group members were finding the skills learnt were effective in helping them manage their emotions day to day.

Is STEPPS effective in reducing emotional intensity?

Each week group members are asked to complete the Emotional Intensity Continuum (EIC). We liken this measure to a pot of water on the stove and for this reason this is also known as the ‘Pot’ form. This asks group members to record the percentage of time they have been in varying levels of emotional intensity. The levels range from level1: feeling calm and relaxed (the water in the pot is still and cool), to level5: the highest level of intensity, feeling like losing emotional control (the pot of water boils over). This aims to help group members spot an emotional episode.

The graph above displays the average EIC percentages in each level at the first session in comparison to last/current session. It illustrates that STEPPS has had a positive impact on reducing the level of emotional intensity when experiencing an emotional episode.