Maintaining Long-Term Romantic Relationships With Bipolar

by KIKI WOODHAM

Bipolar and Long-Term Relationships

Long-term relationships are hard. Even on the best days, they still take work to maintain. On the tough days, they take a lot more.

Looking out for each other, putting another person's needs before your own, trusting and relying on someone, and being the person they rely on in return – all these things take effort.

When you mix bipolar and long-term relationships, things go from tough to seemingly impossible. No matter how unrealistic it may seem, though, plenty of bipolar people have long and fulfilling marriages and partnerships.

It's not easy – but it isn't easy for healthy people, either. No matter what TV and movies might want you to believe, nobody gets through a marriage (or other committed relationship) without their fair share of speed bumps and roadblocks.

In It for the Long Haul

My partner and I recently celebrated our ten year anniversary. We didn't do much in the way of partying – a nice dinner at home with the kids, a cake, and a quiet dinner out together the following weekend – but it was a huge milestone, especially for me.

Before we met, I'd never been with anyone for more than a year (and usually much less). My relationships were dictated by moods and episodes and were fraught with drama, passion, angst, and finally a big, explosive ending after which I'd never see the person again. To say I'd grown tired of it would be an understatement.

I wanted to find someone I could settle down with. I'd been married briefly, but that went just about as well as every other relationship I'd had. I didn't know yet that I was bipolar, but I did know I needed someone who counterbalanced me – someone who could be my rock, someone I could count on, someone who wasn't as fiery and temperamental as I was.

I'd always gone looking for people who were just like me, but now I knew that what I actually needed was the opposite. And when I found that, I held on tightly.

Next page: having someone to rely on.

In It for the Long Haul

Now we've made it through a decade of stability, instability, illness, new jobs, unemployment, children, transatlantic moves, buying our first home, losing loved ones, holidays, vacations, parties, and so much more.

Sure, we face different challenges than many healthy couples we know, but we face them together just the same. We haven't said wedding vows, but we promised each other the same things so many years ago and we've stuck to those promises. We're in it for life, and that's a comforting thought.

You're Not Alone

Having someone to share your days with can be a huge help when things get tough, but for someone with bipolar disorder it can also be incredibly stressful to have someone who's always there. It can feel downright suffocating at times.

There are plenty of days when I feel that way. It can be so difficult not only to be around the same person every day, but also to trust them and show your vulnerability. If it's going to last, though, you will have to let them in at some point.

Your partner needs to know what's going on with you and your illness – not necessarily every minute detail, but at least an overview of how you're feeling and what they can do to help. Shutting the other person out doesn't get either one of you very far. You both have all kinds of needs, but your partner (probably) can't read your mind and predict what yours will be without some kind of feedback from you.

At the same time, no matter how challenging sharing a life with another person can be, the simple fact that I have someone in my life who wants me to stick around helps motivate me to stay as healthy as possible.

I take my meds, exercise, eat well, and go to therapy. When I'm not well enough to do that for my own sake, I think about the people who count on me, and that can be just the right amount of motivation. And when I still can't manage to pull it together, my partner is there to help pick up the pieces, convince me to eat or coax me to try to sleep, to drive me to appointments and remind me to take my medication.

And since he's been depressed the last few years, I'm there to do the same for him. I remind him to go to bed on time, gently nudge him to spend less time on his computer and more time with people, and drop subtle hints that he might want to go for a walk or get a little space to clear his head. It's a delicate symbiosis where we support each other, we lean on each other, and we share the weight of illness as well.

Next page: to cheat, or not to cheat?

To Cheat or Not to Cheat

Cheating happens. Healthy people do it, too. For people with bipolar disorder, monogamy can be a big challenge. You're not always totally in control of your impulses, and mania can cause drastic changes in libido.

Some of us cheat, and that can be extremely damaging to a relationship. The most important thing to remember is that a little honesty can go a long way. Talk to your partner (preferably before it happens) about the possibility. Explain that total monogamy might not be the most realistic option for you.

If you're up front about what can and cannot be expected of you and what you expect from your partner in return, chances are much better that a one-night stand won't destroy your relationship.

On the other hand, bipolar disorder and the medications that come with it can also leave you feeling like a sexless zombie. When that happens, your partner may have some difficulty understanding that it really isn't personal.

It has nothing to do with how attractive you find them, or how much you care about them. Love and sex are both

important in a relationship, but sometimes your brain's chemistry works against you where the second is concerned.

This is another time when it's very important to let your partner know how you're feeling and why. Reassure them that you still love them, and that a lack of sex at home doesn't necessarily mean you're getting it elsewhere.

Make sure they understand that the last thing you need is pressure; adding stress to the situation is only going to make things worse, and may breed feelings of resentment towards a partner whom you may feel is always pushing you to do something you just don't want to do.

Find other ways to be close, and remember that skin on skin contact causes your brain to release dopamine, which makes you feel happier and could even lead to – you guessed it – sex. And if it doesn't, it's still nice.

You Can, If You Want To

Long-term relationships aren't for everyone. We don't all want the same things in life. Unfortunately, I know enough bipolar people who have given up on the idea of a lasting relationship simply because of their illness.

Some think they'll never find someone who wants to be with them because they're ill; others have cheated in the past and are afraid of hurting and losing someone they care about. Still others can't stand the thought of living with someone day in and day out. But whatever the case, bipolar disorder should never stop you from having the life you want.

Your relationship may not look the same as someone else's. Maybe you live together part-time and still keep a place of your own for when you need space. Maybe you have an open relationship. Maybe you absolutely don't want to have children. But the bottom line is this: if you're open and honest from the start, you have a much better chance of having a long and happy relationship.

Here's to the next ten years!