Maintaining Friendships With Bipolar Disorder

by BECKY WICKS

Friendships With Bipolar

This article is intended to carry on from my previous article on managing friendships with bipolar disorder. Like the other article, I have structured this to offer tips for both a person with bipolar and the friend of a person with bipolar.

Post Crisis

For the Bipolar Individual

One thing I always try to bear in mind when I'm talking to my friends about my bipolar, or even privately assessing how things have been, is that I may at times not have the best perception of my illness.

If I'm hypomanic I might think that there is nothing wrong with me, that everything is going really well and everyone is just trying to spoil my fun. It is important to try to remember that there is a chance you could be heading for a crisis in this scenario, and you should try and listen to your friends if they raise concerns.

Another thing that can be a huge sticking point if you have bipolar disorder is memory, especially remembering episodes once you have come out of the other side. I found talking to my friends to be vital in helping me piece things back together post crisis, as they could explain to me what had happened and help me look out for future warning signs.

Try to talk things through with your friends. You may have said some hurtful things or done something that you regret, but it is important to do what you can to build bridges – it will likely result in stronger relationships.

For the Friend

Friends are people we should be able to rely on in times of need, and during a bipolar episode this should be no different. Unfortunately during a bipolar episode there may be a chance that your friend is insensitive, hurtful, or even downright rude – this is not a reflection on you, or your relationship, but is rather the illness talking.

Try and have patience during these difficult times, and bear in mind we may need a while to lick our wounds before coming to you and apologizing. After a big manic episode there is every chance that we will experience a crash of sorts, and we may need extra support during that time as we feel exposed and humiliated by what we might have done.

Hospitalization

For the Bipolar Individual

Hospital can at times be the only option in order to keep us safe and help us to get the best treatment we can. Being an inpatient is a scary prospect but it is important to try and remember that a hospital will provide a safe and stable environment to try and get back on track, and then further care can be provided out in the community.

You may feel embarrassed about your friends visiting, or may not want to see them at all. This is completely your choice, but seeing familiar faces can give hope, distract you slightly, and be a really helpful thing in your recovery.

It might be hard for people to visit you, and they may not know how to act at first but given time this will change.

Next page: when your friend with bipolar has been hospitalized.

Hospitalization

For the Friend

Having a friend go into hospital can be upsetting and may leave you very worried. Try to remember that in times of crisis, a hospital is sometimes necessary in order to keep bipolar sufferers safe, and is a stable environment.

Visiting can be challenging as you may not want to see your friend like that, however seeing friends can give someone structure to their day and a reason to try and get well.

Each hospital environment will be slightly different and so there is no specific advice I can give you on what to expect, however it is important to try and put stereotypes of psychiatric wards out of your mind.

General Advice

For the Bipolar Individual

You may discover your friends find it hard to visit you during a hospital stay, or find it hard to approach you post episode. It is important to try and rationalise your thinking during this time, and not think they are abandoning you completely as this may lead to self-sabotaging behaviours.

You may lash out if you think you are being rejected, and may in fact make the situation worse. If something was said or done during an episode then try to make contact to apologize, even by letter, but bear in mind it might take people a while to feel ready to get back to you.

Post episode if you know you have done something wrong to someone, or if you have been hurtful, it is vital to try to build bridges again. Your friends may be reluctant to talk to you at first if you have been nasty, but explain that this was not meant, and was part of your illness. Apologising is important, and goes a long way.

For the Friend

One of the most important things to remember if you want a stable friendship with someone with bipolar is how vital it is not to stereotype. Everyone the world over is different and unique, and the way in which a bipolar sufferer goes through their illness is the same.

There are obviously trends and symptoms that run through the illness (in order to make it a recognised diagnosis) but everyone will experience it slightly differently – therefore it is important to try not to compare sufferers to a character you have seen on TV or in a film – these are usually inaccurate.

Your needs are vital and should be central to your life, and this should be the case even if your friend is having an episode, or is in hospital etc. It is important to always try to put yourself first, and to try and keep your needs paramount. This may feel difficult, and may feel as though you are being selfish – during an episode your friend may even use this as a reason to attack you, but you have to keep yourself as number 1.

Unfortunately, during an episode there is every chance that your friend with bipolar might lose their temper, or say something hurtful. Not taking things personally is another vital tool in your friendship kit, but a very hard one to acquire.

Try to assess what they are saying – is this something your friend would say normally, is this how they normally would behave? If the answer is no then remember that this is part of their illness, and not a reflection on how they feel about you.

The most important advice I can give anyone in a bipolar friendship, whether they are the individual with the disorder or the friend, is how important forgiveness, patience, and understanding are. Focusing on those will help keep your friendship strong.