Dealing With Loss While Managing Bipolar

by KIKI WOODHAM

Bipolar and Grief

The loss of a friend or loved one is a deeply personal experience, and something we all experience differently. No two people grieve in the same way. But does bipolar disorder inherently change the way we experience loss?

I think the answer is yes, absolutely. I've had more experience with grief and loss than I care to in recent years, and I've noticed a few difficulties I've faced that I don't see reflected in the people around me.

I've also thought long and hard about what makes these experiences so different, and how I might be better able to cope with them in the future. Here are some of the challenges bipolar people are up against, and some adjustments you can make to help keep the grieving process as manageable as possible.

Losing Your Hold on Stability

When we lose someone close to us, sadness and anger are common reactions. We move through some or all of the stages of grief — denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance — at our own pace and in our own way. For most people, this is a healthy way to process the painful loss of a loved one.

For those of us with bipolar disorder, however, these responses can become more extreme or overblown, and can lead to a serious episode. While a healthy person might experience deep sadness that lessens over time, the trauma of death might trigger a severe depressive episode in a bipolar person.

Anger and denial may manifest as mania and psychosis. Shortly after losing my father-in-law to cancer two years ago, I suffered a mixed-state episode (mania and depression together) with a psychotic break that culminated in being hospitalized for a month.

Holding on to stability can be difficult during the emotional upheaval that comes in the wake of profound loss. One of the keys to hanging in there, though, is to keep other aspects of your life as normal as possible.

This can be difficult in situations that demand a lot of your time (when a parent is hospitalized, or someone's house needs to be cleaned out and their possessions sorted, for example), but do your best to find every possible shred of normalcy and hang on to it.

Try to go to bed at the same time, keep your morning routine intact, eat meals at regular times, and make room for a hobby or other activity you enjoy whenever possible. Regular exercise can also be of great help. By keeping your surroundings and daily routine as consistent as possible, you're keeping stability within reach.

Next page: leaning on friends and family to lighten the burden after a loss

Shouldering Too Heavy a Burden

When a close family member passes, even non-bipolar people can feel overwhelmed with the amount of responsibility they suddenly find themselves faced with. Funeral arrangements, settling an estate, and distributing a deceased person's belongings are all time-consuming and emotional tasks that can leave even the healthiest person feeling overwhelmed and overstressed.

I've known plenty of people who say they'd rather be busy because it gives them less time to think about their loss, but not everyone feels this way, and even those who do can sometimes find they've bitten off more than they can chew.

In these situations, the best course of action is to use whatever resources you have at your disposal to lighten the burden on yourself. Ask family or friends for help, hire a cleaning or moving service, or rely on a funeral director's expertise (they really are absolutely wonderful people). Don't try to take everything on yourself. You don't need to show anyone what you're capable of — the fact that you live with bipolar disorder every day already proves you have amazing strength and fortitude. Take care of yourself, ask for help, and don't be afraid to delegate.

Feeling Isolated and Alone

Nothing can make a person feel more isolated than the death of a loved one. It is, however, very rare that we are actually alone in our loss. Most people leave many grieving loved ones in their wake when they pass away, and it is in those times we need to lean on one another.

This is especially true for those of us living with bipolar disorder. We face so many challenges every day, but we are only alone in them if we choose to be.

Grief is no exception. Lean on your friends and family. Keep them in the loop on what you're feeling and experiencing.

Don't be afraid of burdening them with your struggles and emotions. Your loved ones are there for you, just as you're there for them, and they will be happy to share with you and help you through a mutually difficult time.

Suicide and Your Own Mortality

Nothing makes us realize how brief life really is like the loss of someone we care about. A person is here one day, and literally gone the next — it can be a shocking reminder that death can come to anyone, at any time.

Next page: coping with loss and confronting mortality

Suicide and Your Own Mortality

Particularly in the wake of a suicide, questions like, "Why am I still alive but my loved one is gone?" or, "Could I have done something to prevent this?" may race through your mind. For someone with bipolar disorder who may struggle with suicidal tendencies, this realization can often bring about very disturbing and even dangerous feelings.

I struggled with this a couple of months ago when I learned of a friend's suicide. I have always had a very pragmatic view of suicide, probably due to the sheer amount of time I've spent thinking about it.

I believe that, for some people, their suffering is simply too much to continue living through and that, just as for a terminal cancer patient, death is sometimes the most humane option. I've never blamed anyone for making that choice or considered it a coward's option. That choice is not for anyone else to judge.

On the other hand, losing someone to suicide can be very difficult to accept, no matter how much you may understand what drove them to it.

In my friend's case, he had suffered from severe depression for years, and had other problems as well. My feelings of regret came from the fact that he never sought help or treatment for his depression, and told no one about his other struggles. If he had done those things, would he have been able to live a happier life? I'll never know.

All we can do after losing someone to suicide is accept that the person made the best choice they were able to with the tools they had, and that it wasn't just one factor that drove them to that decision. We will never know if we could have changed someone's mind about taking their own life, but the answer is that we probably could not.

I'm not saying that you shouldn't try to help someone who is suicidal — in fact, please give it your all. But if someone has gone through with it, know at that point it was the only option they saw for themselves.

Making the Grieving Process Less Destructive

Death and loss present added challenges for people with bipolar disorder, but that doesn't have to mean you're doomed to pain, instability, numbness and hospital stays. There are plenty of things you can do to make the grieving process less destructive.

Learning from the experiences of others, and leaning on loved ones in a time of grief, are valuable for helping you process your loss. Your doctor, therapist, or other health care professional can also be an excellent resource. Reach out to those around you, in person or online. You are not alone.