Tips for Making the Holidays With Bipolar Run Smoothly

by KIKI WOODHAM

Surviving the Holidays With Bipolar Disorder

In the wake of Thanksgiving, as I lovingly reheated leftover green bean casserole, I looked back on what was (in my book) a great holiday.

Sure, there was stress (there always is) but most of that was due to the fact that there were too many other things going on in the same week, and too little sleep to be had. The day itself, and the preparation leading up to it went more smoothly than any holiday get-together I've hosted so far.

What made this Thanksgiving so much more manageable and enjoyable than usual was a completely new approach. I've never been a terribly organized person, mostly living in a kind of delineated chaos where I run, panicked, from one thing to another when I've realized I should have been there 10 minutes ago.

Christmas and New Year are no exception. No matter how lovely I want them to be, they usually end with me in tears vowing that I will never, ever do things the same way again.

So this year, finally, I did things differently. And in the holiday spirit of giving, here are a few tips for (hopefully) making your holidays with bipolar run a little more smoothly.

Pre-Planning Your Holidays With Bipolar

I know, this one sounds obvious. And it is, really, but sometimes we have a hard time figuring out *how,* and especially how much. Lots, lots, and lots.

Sit down well ahead (weeks, if possible) of the holiday and start making lists. If you're hosting, figure out your menu and bookmark any recipes you need. Make sure your shopping list is done at least a week ahead.

Buy any non-perishables as early as possible. Plan and shop for gifts, and try to keep it simple. Would I love to make gorgeous gift baskets full of tasty homemade goodies for everyone on my list? Absolutely. Should I? No, I will make myself nuts. Not worth it.

First, I made detailed checklists this year that even included things like vacuuming and setting the table. Second, I made sure my outfit was ready to go the weekend before. And third, I had three grocery lists: one for the early shopping, one for the cocktails, and one for the morning of, which included last-minute stuff like flowers for the table.

Visiting during the holidays can be just as stressful as hosting. One of the best things you can do for yourself is to be prepared. As soon as you accept the invitation, make a quick list of any gifts or food you need to bring, and yes, what you're going to wear.

Prepare all of those things at the earliest possible opportunity and set them aside, including wrapping gifts or ironing a shirt or dress. All you'll have to worry about on the day is getting there.

Selecting clothes ahead of time goes double if you have children, as they seem to become ten times stickier and more resistant to soap around the holidays. Make sure you've got an extra outfit on hand for any little ones in your household.

Plan transportation ahead of time as well. If you're driving, it never hurts to print out a hard copy of your route in case technology fails. If using public transport, check out a couple of backup routes in case of delays or overcrowding.

Don't Take Everything On, Delegate Tasks

I'm one of those stubborn people who like to do everything myself. Most of the time that's not much of an issue, but when it comes to the holidays there is far too much for one bipolar person to do alone. So when people offer help, I take it. It's still difficult to do, but I take a deep breath, smile, and say, "Yes, please."

Remember to Rest

I can't emphasize enough how important sleep is for those of us with bipolar disorder. I'm sure your doctor or therapist can't either. Quite a few of us even have medication to help us sleep, because it's something that too often eludes us.

I spent most of my life barely sleeping until I found something that works for me, and I take it every day because there's no way I want to go back to not sleeping. When I sleep well, I am happier and healthier. It's not optional, and it's even more essential during busy or stressful times.

Unfortunately, the stress of the holidays can leave even the best of us tossing and turning through the night, or wide awake staring at the ceiling until thee o'clock in the morning. Sometimes extra medications, like an anxiolytic, can be added to your regular regimen to counter this.

Simple remedies like melatonin, chamomile tea or warm milk can also be effective. Avoid alcohol before bedtime, though; it might help you fall asleep more easily, but it won't help you sleep through the night. Alcohol actually disrupts sleep, causing you to wake up more often through the night.

Have a Contingency Plan

Everything that can go wrong often does. Kids throw up all over themselves on the way to grandma's (see, that extra outfit comes in handy now), the fridge breaks down the day before Thanksgiving, your basement floods and you lose all your Christmas decorations, you burn the turkey, and your dog just knocked over the punch bowl.

Stuff happens at the holidays, just like it does every other day of the year, and the key to not having a huge meltdown in the middle of all of it is to accept that ahead of time. Figure out what you will do if something major goes wrong, and write it down if you need to.

Don't Be Afraid to Lean on Others When Needed

Make sure you have someone you can get a hold of when you need that supportive shoulder to cry on. No matter how well you plan, there will be tears and moments of panic.

You might feel like crying, get really frustrated or angry, or just need to vent in order to avoid bipolar blackouts. Let someone know you might need to reach out if the going gets tough, and make sure they'll be at least partially available (remember that they've got holidays to celebrate as well).

Take a Moment to Breathe

Take time out for yourself whenever possible. Go for a walk, read a book, take a long bath, or do whatever relaxes you. And remember that, though stressful, the holidays can be a wonderful time of year. With some good planning and taking time out for yourself, you can make them truly memorable and enjoyable.

The Takeaway

While the holidays with bipolar can bring on feelings of stress, anxiety, and pressure – these tips can help you push through and enjoy the holiday season more thoroughly.