Bipolar and Loneliness: How to Avoid Isolation

by SHARON DAVIS

Isolation, Bipolar and Loneliness

Have you ever had a bad week, barely making it out of bed in the morning and besieged by toxic thoughts once your feet hit the ground? Are you barely able to get to the bathroom before the crying spell starts, panting for breath while your shoulders heave and tears quickly form trails down your face? Do you go home each night feeling like a failure, with guilt and remorse? And then before you go to sleep you get a text message:

“Wanna go to the movies tomorrow?”

This can illicit several reactions, including the following two extremes:

- **Panic and fear** – One more choice to make, what if I go and have a rotten time, what if I don’t like the movie, might as well play it safe and stay at home.
- **Delight** – This is exactly what I need after such a horrible week, let me text my friend back right away.

Relationships, Relationships, Relationships!

After a hard week we may want to isolate, but many times our recovery hinges on these small choices. A plethora of scientific data has shown that mentally ill people succeed better in recovery when they are in healthy relationships.

This fact extends beyond the mentally ill to the general public. Relationships — or better yet, healthy relationships — go a long way in wellness. So, what are healthy relationships and how do we partake in one?

Healthy relationships are ones in which both parties honor one another. They do not abuse or misuse one another. They do not put each other down.

When you have a mental illness a true friend tries to understand your struggles. A friend cannot there to save you, but is there to support you on your healing path.

People in healthy relationships don’t always agree with each other and, yes, they have been known to get on each other’s nerves from time to time — but they do not intentionally hurt each other and their interactions give off positive vibes.

As you learn and refine your expectations for a healthy relationship, learn to never settle for anything hurtful of destructive.

Finding Relationships

Healthy relationships must be cultivated before we can enjoy the rich fruit. Unfortunately bipolar disorder can be

hard on relationships and many have lost a lot of friends through the result of illness.

Before going out to make friends it is best to have clear expectations:

- **Social media sends us a strong message as to what friendships should look like.** Don't buy into it, you may not have dozens of pictures with beautiful people, but you can still have healthy relationships.
- **Relationships are a two-way street.** If you want people to reach out to you, you have to learn to reach out to them too.
- **As you get to know people, don't be afraid to state your needs (and we bipolars have unique needs).** Many times people are more than willing to accommodate your requests; it is just a question of you making your needs known.
- **Don't be afraid to exit from any relationship that triggers negative aspects of your illness.**

Friends can be found online and face to face in a variety of settings.

- **Join a support group** – this can be related to mental illness, 12-step or many other topics. These groups can be found via the internet and are likely in your community.
- **Find or revisit a hobby** – pick up those old painting brushes or knitting needles or find something new. Thanks to websites like Meetup.com you can easily locate people who share your passions.
- **Volunteer in your community** – depending on where you live there are always great opportunities to give back. Volunteering helps you meet new people as you serve in your community.

You also have to talk to people. Introduce yourself, ask questions, tell stories and be engaged.

The Case for Relationships

Healthy relationships have the following benefits that go beyond our mental health:

- **Live longer** – findings from 148 studies showed that people with healthy relationships are 50 percent less likely to die prematurely.
- **Deal with stress** – the support of close friend can provide a buffer against the effects of stress. A study of over 100 people found that people who completed a stressful task experienced a faster recovery when they were reminded of people with whom they had strong relationships.
- **Be healthier** – in one study people with strong relationships were half as likely to catch a common cold when exposed to the virus.
- **Feel richer** – a survey of 5,000 people found that doubling your group of friends has the same effect on your wellbeing as a 50 percent increase in income!

Relationships are a pivotal part of recovery. So when you get that text with an invitation to go to the movies, take a chance and go. If you don't get an invitation, maybe it's your turn to invite someone else out.