When Bipolar Disorder Affects Our Memory

by FLISS BAKER

Bipolar Memory Loss and What to Do About It

Bipolar disorder brings lots of challenges — memory loss is one of them. When I was first diagnosed back in 2008, I struggled with remembering things and my concentration was impacted.

I had no idea my mental health was deteriorating, but strange things were happening. In my workplace I was making lots of mistakes and running up and down two flights of stairs to fetch work I'd printed out but forgotten about.

At home, it became a habit for my cleaner to hand me my house keys, which had been left in my front door overnight. I used to lose everything and spend time frantically trying to find things. This used to make me late, which would stress me out and make me even worse.

The problem was I blamed myself. I thought I was going mad and had no idea my brain was struggling because I had a serious mental illness.

Even after my diagnosis of bipolar disorder I used to fight against my difficulties, trying desperately to concentrate and remember things, but often to no avail. Beating myself up became a daily thing and I used to cry because I was told things over and over but unfortunately I simply could not retain the information.

So Why Does Bipolar Disorder Affect Our Memory?

Our memory is a cognitive skill, which is part of our patterns of thinking that allows us to perform tasks. They include short- and long-term memory, concentration, decision-making and processing speed.

Problems with these skills can have a serious effect on a person's behavior. Symptoms include indecision, memory problems, disorganization and difficulty concentrating. Does this sound like you?

I know I can concur with all of these functions. What is interesting is that all these cognitive functions can be disrupted by the same neurotransmitter disturbances that cause mood swings.

As bipolar is a mood disorder, research shows that our cognition *will* be affected as part of the illness. Bipolar cognitive impairment will impact our ability to work, study and forge personal relationships.

What Parts of Our Memory Are Affected?

Working memory is the area that research shows is most affected by bipolar. It is the short-term storage of information whilst we are performing tasks.

One theory is that people with bipolar experience signaling problems in the prefrontal cortex of the brain. This

region has been implicated in planning complex cognitive behavior, including personality, decision-making and social behavior.

Studies show that when the prefrontal cortex does not function properly with the amygdala — which is responsible in the processing of memory, decision-making and emotional reactions — it leads to mood swings. It also disrupts the executive functioning (mental skills that help to get things done) and information processing.

When Can We Experience Memory Problems?

Some people can experience severe memory problems and some milder. As we know, we are all different and our illness can affect us in different ways.

Bipolar episodes impact our memory loss, and the significance can be dependent on whether we are depressed or manic.

For example, when depressed our cognitive functions are much slower and it is harder to retain information. At the same time when we are manic our brain is racing and we filter out anything we deem to be unimportant.

Fliss's Experience With Bipolar Brain Fog

I remember in the depths of depression wondering how I could complete the smallest of tasks. One day I stared at an egg and a frying pan and tried to remember the stages required to poach an egg. I simply couldn't think.

I've also found myself staring at the kettle and a cup before, struggling to work out how to make a cup of tea. It was a frustrating and upsetting experience because no matter how hard I tried to make my brain work, it just wouldn't.

How Meds Affect Our Memory

Medication plays a huge factor. I have been trialed on many mood stabilizers and anti-psychotics, which can impact cognition.

The introduction of tablets has, at times, made my mind flit, making it impossible to concentrate. I have also been left with mind blanks and found it impossible to make decisions.

Next page: How can you help bipolar memory loss?

Fliss's Experience With Bipolar Brain Fog

Indecision

Decision-making itself has played a big part of my illness over the last nine years. If I am asked a direct question I often find myself with an empty brain where I can think of both options but have no idea which to choose.

This has been very frustrating for me in relationships because I have been pushed to answer, which has stressed my brain. I often find myself hoping the other person will choose for me so the pressure is taken away.

ECT and Memory Loss

One of the worst memory loss experiences I had was when I was given ECT for bipolar (electro convulsive therapy) back in 2012. One of the two electrodes was removed from my head because my memory loss side effect was too significant.

I would come around from the anesthetic and have no idea where I was. I didn't recognize members of the staff,

patients and hospital corridors. It was like being a little child in a playground in completely alien surroundings.

The memory loss was supposed to be short term but I suffered for some time after. I even stopped driving because I couldn't remember the way to places I had known since a child. I was so worried about driving the wrong way I developed terrible anxiety, which I needed help with.

Organization

I have to rely heavily on my family to help me with my life organization. I have a diary — but guess what? If I forget to look in it, I don't do what is scheduled.

I open letters but if I put that letter down without making note of anything it's as though it disappears from my mind. I have missed hospital appointments, deadlines and fixed the wrong dates and times in my head.

I have learned one thing: I can't rely on my brain to help me out. It really is amazing how I don't get the signal to remind me of certain things.

I now have to put plans into my phone with an alarm reminder set and give important letters to my mum, who will remind me about upcoming appointments.

I have been ridiculed in the past about my memory and it has been very hurtful. An ex-boyfriend said he had to repeat himself over certain things and that I didn't listen.

It used to panic me because I felt mad. Was I forgetting? Did he really say that?

It's interesting because I retain a lot of information and can remember some birthdays or events, but there is so much my brain just doesn't process. Maybe it's the stuff I am less interested in or dates and appointments that feel more administrative and don't hold significant meaning?

The truth is I don't know why I can't think, process, decide or remember at times, but I know I need to stop putting pressure on myself because in my eyes there is only one answer. I have a diagnosis of bipolar disorder, it's proven to impact cognitive ability and I shouldn't be apologizing for it.

How Can We Help Our Memory Loss?

- Research has shown that lithium increases gray matter in the brain, which can improve cognitive function.
- We can interrupt the memory loss cycle by reducing our stress.
- We can plan ahead using lists, diaries and taking the time out to concentrate on things — rushing last minute doesn't help.
- We can break down tasks into little steps instead of being faced with big tasks and finding it impossible to cope.
- Talk to others about your struggles and explain that your memory can be affected and you need understanding and patience.

Instead of fighting our memory loss, we need to accept that it is part of our illness and something we need to manage. I still find it incredibly hard to do this because it can feel embarrassing, especially when my struggles are obvious in front of people.

However, I have a good support network that has listened and understood my needs. We can't help it — we can only do the best we can with the illness we have.