Talking About Bipolar: Having “The Talk” With People You Love

by CHRISTIAN MORALES

Advice and Tips on Talking About Bipolar

Christian and Becky offer their advice and tips on talking about bipolar disorder with your loved ones.

At some point, there will likely come a time when you have to have “the talk” with the people in your life about the fact that you have a mental illness on the bipolar spectrum. Talking about bipolar can be difficult, but it doesn't have to be.

Regardless of where you stand on the spectrum, there is a good chance at least some people will not fully understand and possibly be a little frightened when one of those keywords (mental illness, bipolar, schizoaffective, cyclothymia) are brought up.

As the character, Yul Brenner said in the movie *Cool Runnings*, “People are always afraid of what's different.”

Why Even Have the Conversation?

Thanks to the image the entertainment industry has painted of mental illness, some people fear us. Others just feel we're being overdramatic.

What's the point of even having the conversation about mental health if the people in your life might not care? What's the point if nobody believes you are sick?

In reality, there's no way to know how people will react until you have the talk, which may be voluntary or involuntary.

You might bring it up because you feel the time is right. Maybe a close friend, or even your boss, might sit you down after an intense episode and want to know what is going on with you.

In either case, you can either lie, as I used to, and downplay the severity of the situation by saying something simple like, “I'm sick.” Or you can be honest.

In my personal experience, simply telling people you’re sick doesn't result in much more than continued scoffing. I would recommend being as honest as you feel is necessary to get the people in your life to understand where you are coming from.

Mentally Preparing for the Talk

First and foremost, do not disclose this information if you are not ready. There is no rule stating you must tell people you're bipolar.

Make sure you can trust the people you are going to be telling. People tend to gossip, especially when it comes to stuff like this. This is a harsh reality many of us have to face. Before you do anything, make sure you are prepared to face the consequences posed by the enduring stigma against the mentally ill.

Hopefully, you have some very understanding people in your life. This will make this conversation go smoother, plus you won't have to worry about losing anybody close to you out of fear of your illness.

All that said there is also a chance that your friend or loved one will be very caring and be accepting of your situation.

You should never psych yourself out when it comes to things like this; you might miss out on a great, deeply personal conversation with somebody who might even become a closer friend than before.

While you are mentally preparing, I would suggest reading up on the disorder from a more professional perspective. Below I have listed some of my favorite resources to provide a vast array of information on bipolar disorder that may prove useful.

Bipolar Resources

Depending on the intelligence level of the person you are talking with, your conversation may be as simple as saying, “I'm bipolar.” However, chances are even the most well-read friend you have will still have questions about your illness.

The Mayo Clinic website offers a wonderful section on bipolar disorder, which provides basic information, symptom descriptions, and more.

One book I would recommend is “Bipolar Disorder: A Guide for Patients and Families” by Francis Mark Mondimore. This book is written by a professional and does a great job at explaining bipolar disorder from a professional perspective.

And lastly, if your friend or loved one is more visually inclined, a simple search for “bipolar” or “bipolar disorder” on YouTube will result in numerous videos, both from the perspective of those living with bipolar disorder as well as professionals. Two channels on YouTube I would recommend are Kati Morton for a professional perspective and Raw Sammi for a channel recorded from personal experience.

Though websites and books offer great overviews of the illness, everyone experiences bipolar differently. Do not rule out your own experiences — you may wish to use them as examples of how bipolar has personally affected you.

Having the Talk

Have a clear direction of where you wish to take the conversation. Remain mindful of the conversation you are having, and yourself. That is, realize that stuff happens and, even if it doesn't go as well as hoped, it's not the end of the world.

It's entirely up to you as to how much information you wish to disclose during the talk. You may very well wish to leave it at the basics without going into too much personal detail about your symptoms, and that is perfectly alright.

You can always give the basics and then direct your friend or loved one to one of the resources as mentioned above and continue the conversation once they have a basic understanding of bipolar disorder.

This will give them some time to develop clear, appropriate and legitimate questions you can then answer honestly.

Remember, unless you are backed into a corner, you are having this conversation because you feel the time is right. Even when on the defensive, don't let yourself be treated like a criminal.

Don't Be Afraid

You are not on trial here. You are opening up about a very personal illness, and if the people you are coming out to can't handle it, that's their problem.

If anybody tries to make you feel worthless or like you are less of a person, there is no shame in getting up and walking away. Bipolar disorder is something you will live with for the rest of your life; by opening up to the people in your life, you are making yourself very vulnerable.

Don't let people take advantage of that vulnerability. Instead, show them you are comfortable in your skin; this will hopefully make them more comfortable in having this conversation with you. Best of luck!

Next page: Read more advice about talking about bipolar disorder with your loved ones.

Talking About Bipolar – Becky's Advice and Tips

With any relationship, it is essential to have strong communication skills in place to promote honesty and an open connection between the two parties. However, it could be argued that this is even more vital in a situation where one or both has a diagnosis of bipolar.

The different mood states that are associated with bipolar may put barriers in place of effective discussion, so it is important to be aware of these risks and to work actively to challenge them.

For example, someone going through a depressive episode may feel as though they are not worth talking to or may lack the motivation to open an intense conversation.

On the other side, someone who is experiencing a manic episode may have the impression that there is nothing wrong with them and therefore there is nothing to talk about, or they may talk in a confusing and accelerated manner and can be challenging to understand.

In both situations, it may be ideal to break down the exchange into smaller and more manageable sections; that way each potential problem or point of conversation can be discussed as a stand-alone, and the persons concerned will not feel overwhelmed.

Discussing Bipolar At the Point of Diagnosis

Talking about bipolar with your loved ones at the point of diagnosis can present unique challenges, and may bring with it some intense emotions.

If you have recently been diagnosed with bipolar or if you want to tell someone for the first time, it can be an idea to plan ahead of time about what you are going to say.

Researching your diagnosis can be beneficial to both and your perceptions of the disorder, and the information you present to your loved ones.

Many mental health charities and organizations will have useful literature on their websites that you can print off or send to people, which may help to answer some of the initial questions they might have.

You could also consider bringing someone close to you to your medical appointments so they can gain a better insight into what you are going through.

Communicating About Your Bipolar Episodes

Another situation where communication is indispensable would be the build-up to a mood episode.

If you are the family member, partner or friend of someone who has a diagnosis of bipolar, it is important that you voice any concerns that you have, and alert the person with the disorder if you feel they are beginning to exhibit symptoms.

Sometimes it may be that the bipolar person does not realize that an episode is starting, and it is often the case that those around them recognize the early warning signs and start of an episode before they realize it themselves.

This is a difficult circumstance and one that needs to be approached with a great deal of care, but this does not mean it is impossible.

It is probably not a productive idea to rush in with both barrels, but instead, it would be better to sit with the bipolar person and gently explain why you are worried, and what you have noticed in their behavior.

Coming out of an episode will also bring with it the need for clear dialogue, as it may be that the events that took place or the behaviors exhibited have had a negative impact on those close to the diagnosed person.

If you feel hurt or have had other adverse effects arising from someone's episode, it is important that you communicate to them what has happened, and how it has made you feel.

The next stage would be to discuss how to prevent this happening in the future, and the steps you can take to restore the relationship to a healthy balance.

Addressing Stigma Surrounding Mental Health

Unfortunately, there is still a lot of stigma surrounding mental health, and it may be that you come across this during talking to your loved ones about bipolar.

Out-dated, incorrect and stereotypical views of bipolar and other mental health diagnoses are still rife today, and this may be a potential challenge you come across.

Remember, try not to get too upset by the comments made or the misinformation people hold, more often than not it is a down to a lack of understanding of the subject.

Rather than getting emotional at their views, try talking to them about the disorder, explain how you personally have experienced it, and how they might further their perceptions of bipolar and in fact mental health overall.

It may be that you change someone's views for the better, and help to decrease stigma.

Educate Your Loved Ones About Bipolar Disorder

Planning for potential episodes can be vital in helping towards a stable life, and communication is key here.

Let the people around you know how you might present if you are beginning to become unwell, and you may even consider developing a traffic light document that signals your symptoms.

Loved ones can often help you manage your condition or recognize symptoms in you before you, which can limit some of the damage an episode can bring with it.