Dealing With Bipolar Disbelief and Addressing Negative Comments

by BECKY WICKS

Is Bipolar Real?

"But you don’t look sick!" Such a simple phrase, but one that can cut right to the core if you have a mental illness.

No, I don’t look sick, not unless you count the white scars crossing my arms and the vague shakes from medication, but that does not take away my diagnosis or my disorder.

Since being diagnosed with bipolar affective disorder six years ago I’ve had countless comments when people find out, ranging from rude to almost laughable – one of my favorites being, "Psychiatric illnesses are designed by doctors to sell medication."

At first I took every remark to heart, perceiving myself as damaged or flawed, but over the years I’ve learned that more often than not it’s just misinformation or misunderstanding rather than outright malice.

'Almost Everybody Treated Me Differently'

I stumbled out of hospital in early 2009, freshly diagnosed and finding coping with the world akin to walking around with broken legs. I couldn’t do things like I used to, I had to find new ways to go through life, and almost everybody treated me differently. Stigma has changed a lot over the past six years – mental health was a lot more taboo then and I received mostly negative reactions upon disclosing my new disorder.

I’ve been told by a family member that it "did not come from [their] side of the family," and by another that “bipolar is just a phase” and that I had just not “grown up from being a teenager yet” – but what could I expect from someone who referred to another family member taking antidepressants as "The Prozac Fairy."

I admit that these words hurt at the time, but looking back now I can see them as a reflection of the beliefs of far too many regarding mental illness – uneducated and at times even narrow minded.

So what changed? The first thing I learnt when telling people I had bipolar was not to take their reactions personally. The comments that people blurt out were not and are not a direct attack on me personally. Rather, they expose how far there is to go in fighting the battle against mental health stigma.

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Addressing Negative Comments

I normally address the comments in a few different ways – either explaining the condition, discussing why I do actually need medication in order to keep myself stable (and that it’s not "all in my mind"), and pointing out a few mental health statistics (for example, one in four of us will at some point in our lives be affected by a mental health

issue, and one million people die annually across the globe as a result of suicide).

Or, I believe most powerfully of all, I tell my story.

This is one of the most powerful methods I've found of coping with mental health stigma, and one that allows you to really go into detail. Going through with people what happened to me, from my manic episodes cycling back to crashing depression, all peppered with psychosis, gives a personal perspective on how it feels to suffer with a mental illness. Putting it in direct words like this often helps people to understand things on a more basic level, as they can connect emotionally with the person telling the story, and begin to open their mind to the possibility that there are mental health issues that need addressing.

When running through discussions with people, I always try to stick to the science. I've done a fair bit of research into my condition and if necessary, I throw out some facts and figures, or some quotes from well respected researchers, doctors, and scientists. For example, it has been confirmed that there is evidence for susceptibility to bipolar disorder on chromosomes 18q and 22q, and that a gene located on chromosome 13q (gene G72/30 to be precise) plays a role in some afflicted by the disorder.

Don't Take It To Heart

As someone who takes every criticism as a direct attack, learning not to take everything to heart was a steep learning curve, and is definitely one that comes with practice. One thing I found that helped was finding online communities to reach out to – there were people going through the same things that I was, people that understood how I felt, and it gave me an opportunity to develop some strong friendship bonds that I could rely on in times of crisis.

Next page: knowing when to walk away.

Don't Take It To Heart

Online communities also provided me with a convenient place to vent my feelings regarding stigma and negative comments; they allow anonymous breathing space and a sympathetic ear.

Having a good support network in place is vital to cope with every aspect of having any illness, and handling negative reactions is no exception. A simple text from a friend is enough to cheer us up sometimes, and building therapeutic relationships with those around me proved to be a positive experience, and one that has helped me constant times in the future.

While at first my immediate friends and family did not react in the way I hoped, the key here is education – I armed myself with knowledge and gently talked them through the ins and outs of having a mental illness. One vital skill I learnt was to be confident in myself when talking to other people, explain to them that it is really no different to having any kind of visible illness.

I often use the diabetes comparison when explaining medication to people – you wouldn't (sensibly) question someone with type 1 diabetes using insulin, and my use of medication is exactly the same – necessary and important.

The only way that mental health stigma is going to continue being defeated is if people fight it – hence I'm a huge advocate of positive mental health research. I've taken to social media, started a blog, and attend local events in order to try and raise awareness – I've even overcome my fear of public speaking to give a couple of speeches! By attending events I've also increased my support network, and have gained people I can turn to in a crisis, or even just call for a cup of tea.

Know When To Walk Away

Of course, there is one ultimately powerful thing I've done to cope with mental health stigma, although I only employ this method when all other options have been exhausted. If I am still being met with a brick wall of stubborn disbelief at the existence of mental health problems, and am only being subjected to rude comments, then I walk away.

If you take one thing away from this article, let it be this: don't let someone get to you that much. Unfortunately, the world will never be perfect, and there will always be those who don't believe that a medical illness can't exist; that we really do need to "pull our socks up" and "get on with it," because after all it's just a case of "mind over matter."

Happily though, I've very rarely had to go down that route, as most of the time people respond positively to calm explanations, a personal journey, and a smattering of science and facts.