Coping With Distraction and Lack of Concentration

by FLISS BAKER

Bipolar and Concentration Problems

Concentration is defined as "the ability to direct one's thinking in whatever direction one would intend."

We are all aware of mood-related symptoms when coping with our mental health problems. Just a few include feeling helpless and a failure, having no motivation, feeling emotional, eating too much or too little, or having difficulties with sleep.

However, our cognitive symptoms tend to receive less attention. They are just as debilitating and in my opinion, less understood by those around us. These include difficulties with problem-solving, concentrating, distractibility, memory and negative and distorted thinking. All impact work, relationships and every other aspect of our lives.

I was diagnosed with bipolar six years ago and have trialed many mood stabilizers, anti-psychotics and antidepressants to reach my relatively stable state. My illness has had a colossal effect on my concentration and distractibility and I often question how I was ever able to easily complete tasks pre-diagnosis.

Do you know how long I took to write this article? In all honesty, days! I have short bursts of typing where my head is running fast with thoughts and ideas but I can’t hold concentration for long and often flit between other things. Somehow, over time the article emerges! I have to check it many times and it can be a long process, but I love it.

When I started writing this article I asked my Twitter followers how their concentration was affected by their mental health problems. Here are a few responses:

- “Like on Monday taking five hours to watch a 90-minute film.”
- “My antidepressants make me forget words quite often.”
- “I’ve given up trying to read.”
- “I dwell on the fact that I can't focus then the vicious cycle starts up and the panic attack starts, then I end up leaving work early.”
- “I cannot read, watch films, play games & I struggle to maintain long conversations. Ideations/urges also cause my mind to wander off topic constantly.”

Focus Problems With Bipolar Disorder: My Experience

Looking back on the ‘final days’ leading up to my diagnosis, I remember being very irritable if anyone walked into my office and interrupted me. I was intensely absorbed in my work and a single distraction could make me lose my concentration and frustrate me. I also used to continually leave my house and car keys in my front door, sometimes overnight. My mind was never on the immediate task; it was always racing ahead with negative thoughts.

Once I drove my car into a wooden barrier in a parking lot. I wasn't concentrating and broke my front number plate. Scarily, a few days later I reversed into a tree. It was impossible to miss, I just wasn't focused. I berated myself constantly and told myself to concentrate harder. I had no idea this might indicate an underlying mental health problem.

We can't forget that although medication can treat mood symptoms effectively, they can often have a negative effect on our cognitive functions. On my first prescribed antidepressant, it felt as though my mind was short circuiting and I couldn't keep up with conversation. I was taking figures of speech literally and thought the term "pull yourself together" meant reattaching your arms and legs. I couldn't process information and my memory was atrocious. It was like my brain was an empty filing cabinet and I couldn't understand where the files had gone.

I found manic episodes challenging as I was stimulated by anything and distracted by everything. For example, in a supermarket, I was faced with colorful packaging, illuminated lighting, people, movement and noise. I didn't know where to look and would rush off to whatever was brightest and looked most exciting. Talking at high speed about my big life-changing ideas gave no room for response. Interruption distracted me from my train of thought and sent me into a confused state where I forgot what I was saying, and it was infuriating.

Next page: My experience with bipolar and concentration problems (cont'd), and tips on how to improve bipolar concentration problems.

Bipolar and Concentration Problems: My Experience, Cont'd.

In contrast, my concentration could be so intense it felt as though I was locked in a zone. I once made an intricate card for my friend's wedding day and spent hours with my nose to the scissors cutting out tiny petals to build a beautiful flower. Any interruption or distraction would send me into a rage, yelling verbal abuse and on the odd occasion throwing things. It was as though any unexpected stimulus was my brain's worst enemy and it couldn't cope.

I mainly cope with depression now, which brings its own challenges. I can only concentrate on my negative thoughts and it is almost impossible to distract me from them. I am lost in a vacuum of pain and anguish whilst staring blankly at a TV, unable to retain any of the information. We are so internalized by our overpowering thoughts we can't listen, interpret movement or noise, learn or remember things.

People are sympathetic to these difficulties in a crisis, but living with a long-term mental health diagnosis brings day-to-day challenges. If you see a man with a broken leg you see the cast, but mental health problems are invisible. There is no cast.

I get frustrated from not being able to follow fast conversation, watch complicated films, concentrate for long periods, complete big tasks with ease, answer complex questions and read books. I try to push myself but frustration, struggling and failure triggers upset, and the impact of common comments from outsiders who don't understand, such as, "Try harder,' and, "Come on, think," are damaging. I've seen so many faces look at me in annoyance, and it's soul destroying.

What Helps Bipolar Focusing Problems?

The key to improving concentration and distractibility is by controlling mood swings, which is usually through mood stabilisers. I always ask my psychiatrist what I should expect from my medication, as we know in psychiatry the 'one size fits all' rule does not apply. To aid my treatment I always report back noticeable changes.

There are many other ways we can help ourselves, and some of these techniques have been invaluable in my recovery:

- I manage racing or negative thoughts by imagining them rushing past me like traffic as the more I focus on

them the more I become distracted.
- I say, "STOP!" in my head to bring myself back to the task in hand.
- It’s important to face situations, but if I feel they are overwhelming to the point I can’t concentrate, I calmly leave. I avoid pushing my brain to the point where I can’t cope and feel panicked.
- I set realistic targets and reward myself e.g. if I write 500 words of an article I can go and watch TV.
- I know if I am sitting with my family there will always be noise so I choose to watch films in the quiet.
- I take much longer to complete tasks so I give myself more time, and I’m ok with asking others to check for mistakes.
- It’s also about going back to basics. Lack of sleep, stress, drugs, alcohol, and caffeine contribute to poor concentration and distractibility so it’s about looking after yourself.

- It is also worth talking to those around you to make them aware of your struggles. If we’re relaxed about being ourselves and don’t fear pressure or judgment, we are far more likely to concentrate with less distraction and achieve what we desire. This helps to build our self-esteem, encouraging us to try again next time!

A combination of professional support, medication, self-help strategies, and understanding from others is definitely a proven formula for my bipolar and concentration problems. I’m not perfect, but who is? I do things to the best of my ability and that’s enough for me.