The Benefits of Having Hobbies With Bipolar Disorder

by KIKI WOODHAM

Bipolar and Hobbies

Last weekend I started crocheting an afghan. It’s not the kind of thing I normally do, since I prefer knitting, but I have boxes and bags of leftover balls of yarn and they need to be used up – in other words, my husband is tired of them taking up all the storage space in the living room.

I don't have a cute, warm blanket to curl up under on the sofa, so a nice thick throw is the perfect use for it all. I spent some time coordinating the right combination of bright jewel tones, interspersed with white stripes, that will liven up my monochromatic and vaguely mid-century modern living room.

It’s nothing fancy, this project – some bright colors in wavy stripes, a simple combination of three basic crochet stitches that anyone can learn (I taught myself from a book when I was 8). There are no complicated instructions; the stitch pattern is easily memorized and requires no great skill.

It will probably take a few months, with various knitting projects peppered in between rows, to finish, and I’m sure my garden will start taking time away from it when the weather starts to improve. But I think I’ll get much more from this blanket than just the warmth it will provide and the satisfaction of making something useful.

There’s been so much written about the positive effects of hobbies on those with mental illness, and the many ways to reap those benefits. Arts and crafts are often used as therapeutic tools, as ways to express ideas that might otherwise be too complex or painful to put into words.

Listening to music has been shown to be relaxing and can help to induce sleep; playing a musical instrument has powerful cognitive benefits. Outdoor hobbies such as sports or gardening have countless upsides, not the least of which are the exercise and exposure to daylight that they provide.

And my afghan? It will require time and patience. I’ll have to keep coming back to it, week in and week out, and it will push me to persevere even when the new-project excitement wears off. I’ll get to watch it grow, and I’ll have something to keep me busy in the evenings. And according to some studies, it will even help cut my risk of developing dementia later in life by as much as half. Not too shabby.

Next page: expanding your horizons.

But There's so Much More

Not only do our hobbies improve cognitive functioning, they can help stave off depression as well. A Norwegian study of almost 50,000 participants found that participating in cultural and artistic activities reduced depression in men and increased the overall sense of wellbeing in men and women.

The simple act of doing something creative can also help us ward off an oncoming depressive episode by giving us a sense of purpose and accomplishment, which in turn leads to those elusive happy thoughts we can't always seem to find.

So how can you cash in on this veritable gold mine of warm fuzzy feelings? Go to a concert. Make something. Paint. Listen to music. Knit. Fold origami. Scrapbook. Take photos. Doodle. Start a craft group at home, or join one in the area. Do something – anything – creative.

Try your hand at ceramics or basketweaving. Make a quilt. Sew a pillow or embroider a wall hanging. The possibilities are endless, and you don't have to master something to enjoy and benefit from it. Try something, see how you like it, and above all, have fun.

The More, the Merrier

It's great to have a few hobbies if you can – some fit better into different moods, seasons, or situations. I love to potter about in my garden, but there's not much to do there in the winter and I can't bring it along on vacation. Fishing, though, is a great portable hobby. It gets me outdoors (daylight is awesome), can be done any time of year, and makes me move my lazy butt. In the deepest part of winter, I pick up my knitting needles and make warm scarves, shawls, hats, and sweaters. Knitting is also really portable, and I often stuff a project in my bag when visiting friends.

When I'm really manic I can't focus much and just spend a lot of time cleaning, but when a depressive episode has me in its grips, the one thing I can always manage to do is make something – anything, really. I can catch up on a season of a good TV show and curl up on the couch with some little project I've been wanting to try out or have been meaning to finish for ages. It gives me a sense of being productive even when I'm feeling really down, which can definitely help lift my mood.

When I was hospitalized a couple of years back, I spent a month folding origami cranes and stringing them all around my room; I also knit an entire sweater and made a few pieces of art. I couldn't manage to go on the group walks or eat dinner with the patients or staff, but I could make stuff. Those paper cranes decorate the ground floor of my house now, and I still have that warm, cozy sweater.

Next page: how to get started.

The More, the Merrier

In summer, my energy levels pick up again and I find myself outdoors in my garden, either soaking up the sun or spending time caring for my plants. I grow fruits and vegetables and herbs, and love to turn them into delicious meals. One of my favorite things to do when I wake up in the summer is to walk out the back door and pick a bowl of fresh berries for breakfast. The feeling of satisfaction I get from having grown something tasty and nutritious is a great start to my day.

A Great Icebreaker

Aside from their many therapeutic properties, hobbies can be the perfect way to break that awkward silence in uncomfortable social situations. Bringing your knitting or crochet project along to a picnic or barbecue will always pique the curiosity of those around you, and often saves you the trouble of starting conversation yourself, which is a big help if you suffer from anxiety or are depressed. Talking about hobbies is also a nice way to find common ground with people who you might otherwise feel somewhat intimidated by or awkward around.

And however cliched it may sound, hobbies still remain a great way to meet new people. Going to your local Stich 'n' Bitch group, joining a beer brewing club, or participating in a fishing competition are all guaranteed ways to find people who share at least one common interest with you - and we all know that having a strong social support network is one of the keys to staying healthy.

The friendships that form in those kinds of groups are often uncomplicated, easygoing relationships that provide a welcome retreat from the stresses of illness, work, kids, and bills.

Sometimes It's More than a Hobby

If you’re persistent, dedicated, and maybe a little bit lucky, a hobby can become lucrative as well. Perhaps you start selling crocheted hats or knitting patterns on Etsy; maybe you decide to give piano lessons or become a fishing guide. You might discover a talent for photography that ends up becoming a career, or maybe a local gallery is interested in selling your paintings. My own hobbies slowly melted together and evolved into a career in illustration and typography; you never know where something might take you.

So try something new, or dust off an old, forgotten hobby. Or if you already have something you love to do, get going! Start a new project, finish an old one, join a group.

Do something you enjoy, and see where it takes you.