Helping Others to Understand Bipolar

by FLISS BAKER

Understanding Bipolar Disorder

In relation to understanding bipolar disorder, this is one of my favorite phrases: “Every time we understand the game, the rules change.”

Being able to face a challenge, persevere, learn and adjust your game for the next round is an amazing skill to have in life. It empowers us to use our initiative and better ourselves. I kept quiet for so long in the build-up to my first major episode, but now, after learning to spot the signs, I do not think I could ever allow a crisis point like that to hit again.

In all honesty, itis not the management of bipolar itself that is my problem anymore. It is the unpredictability of everyone around me and their consequential impact on my mental health. People are an unavoidable danger to me like a trip switch is to a bomb.

Finding Support

Family and friends who knew me pre-diagnosis have mostly stuck with me and love me for me. The initial impact on my family was severe, because relationships were strained and I do not think my parents could fathom the fact that their precious daughter was mentally ill. Emotions, blame, guilt, and lack of understanding were mixed with my upset, anger, fear and symptoms of distrust, conspiracy and uncontrollable mood swings. In truth, we were in chaos.

However, my family reached out for advice, listened to the professionals and supported me unconditionally. They learned my behavior patterns, recognized triggers and responded with proven methods.

I understand that most of the time ignorance around mental health is unintentional and down to a lack of education. However, the impact for a person struggling is very serious. I have felt annoyed, upset and frustrated in an argument but these feelings have quickly escalated, triggering behaviors relating to my eating disorder, self-harm and, in extreme cases, suicide.

Getting angry or shouting at me, particularly while I was manic, was like throwing fuel on a fire. I struggled to contain my temper, and often, to prevent hurting anyone else, I would relieve the volcanic pressure in my body by hurting myself. It was the only way I could cope with the extremity of feelings. Being made to feel shame and guilt was also horrendous, particularly when people chose to relay my worst memories while I was in a depressive episode and hated myself already.

Put Yourself in My Shoes

We know symptoms of bipolar include irritability, frustration, intensity, poor concentration and sadness, but so many perceive them as petulance or not trying hard enough. I often feel like reminding people that a genuine

diagnosis is not giving us a "get out of jail free card" for behaving inappropriately, but categorizing us with a genuine and serious medical condition.

People have reprimanded me thousands of times and I have often thought, "There was a better way to say that. You could have been more kind. You've made me feel stupid and embarrassed. I feel like you're blaming me. Why would you think I'd do this to myself?"

I do think those without mental health diagnoses should be mindful of their impact on vulnerable individuals with diagnoses. However, I accept that people have their own stress levels, and education and exposure to mental illness is necessary in order to understand.

How It Feels Personally

In my opinion, people judge and respond based on their frame of reference, responding with thoughts such as, "I wouldn't behave like that," "I wouldn't blow that out of proportion," and "Do they have any idea what they are doing to me?" All are automatic thoughts, yes, but none are empathetic or helpful. This is not a situation where a child is having a tantrum; this is an adult in distress.

I have a friend I met as an inpatient and most of her family have abandoned her because they "can't put up with her." Sometimes I have to repeat myself over and over and I have to talk her down from the ceiling when a letter comes through the door and she panics.

However, I try my hardest not to show any frustration because it is not her fault. The situation is not about what she is doing to me, it is about how she feels and her inability to cope. She needs me to be kind, calm and if I cannot help, point her in the right direction.

The Importance of Understanding Bipolar Disorder

It took me a long time to learn who was right to reach out to in difficulty. It's not always the most obvious. In the early days, everyone was trying to support me with different levels of knowledge and different emotional attachments, and I was confused. It was my psychiatrist and therapists who always advised and recommended without the emotional connection and this helped me gain perspective.

I had the consistency of love and understanding for "Fliss" from friends and family, but also the consistency of care and treatment for "bipolar" from the health professionals. We all work as an integrated unit now, with me in the center as the driving force. However, it is helpful to remind myself that in a crisis, a confidential, non-judgmental ear is always guaranteed with professionals and not necessarily family and friends.

New relationships are an absolute nightmare because strangers are unknown in terms of views, stigma and understanding. Ridiculing around mental health is insensitive and emotionally painful and mostly occurs through conversation with strangers who do not know my diagnosis. It's hard to laugh at something that you feel has robbed you of so much. I have been on the receiving end of spiteful comments, had secrets spilled, struggled with dating and found new people unwilling to make an investment in me because I am "unpredictable" and "high maintenance." It's a bitter pill to swallow.

I have an open mind and a big heart, but of course I am wary of people. I have spent seven years learning that if I am depressed, I can be perceived as a liability and if I'm high, I attract people like a moth to a flame. You find out your true friends when you reach either end of the spectrum because when we need the most tolerance, people often become the most intolerant.

In Conclusion

I am still learning how to manage people and the fear I feel for their lack of understanding. However, I am now able to rationalize the risks through grouping people into most trusted, acquaintances, those not to share personal information with and those not to trust until proven worthy. I have also learned to avoid situations where I am

vulnerable to judgment that could cause distress, for example, through drink or socializing alone with a new group.

I now have a plan for when those red flags wave. I have a few trusted names that I can call any time, I have the number of my support worker and crisis team as well as a 24hr helpline number saved on my phone so if anyone makes me question my sanity (and yes, that has happened before), I can access support immediately. I have less fear now because I accept that I can’t control people and their opinions but I can protect myself through minimizing risks and making support accessible at all times.

I believe if we continue to learn and grow with our bipolar diagnoses and more education is available to those around us, we can close the gap of "lack of understanding." All parties would have better coping strategies, the risk of trigger situations would be reduced and society would have increased understanding and acceptance for what is a very serious medical condition.