Sensitivity and Bipolar Can Be a Confusing Relationship

by FLISS BAKER

Bipolar and Sensitivity

Opening the doors to intense feeling, creativity and understanding leads to a world of overwhelming beauty, but at the same time offers uncontrollable worry, anxiety and emotions.

Whenever I read about sensitivity, people say, “I always felt different.” At risk of being cliché, so did I. It was an indescribable feeling in my stomach. I had a good childhood and can pick out fun and happy memories, but my life seemed to be peppered with worry and concern and I have forever been called ‘a sensitive child.’

I used to ‘feel’ things so intensely. If anyone said anything upsetting to me I was always deeply hurt and carried the thoughts and feelings around for a long time. I could snap, defend and shout in response to anything I felt was unfair but was always very affected.

Upsetting films used to bother me. On one occasion I watched the end of a violent film and went to bed petrified. I sobbed, panicked and was inconsolable. At the time there had been a bombing on the news and I remember counting in my head, 3-2-1, convinced a bomb was going to explode. My mum sat with me for hours, telling me happy stories to calm me. I finally fell asleep with the light on.

I was just a little girl with a sensitive soul. I grew up telling myself to grow a tougher shell. I had no understanding of the breadth of the word ‘sensitivity’ and how it encompasses your entire mental and physical state.

I believe there is truth that highly sensitive people absorb life like sponges and find it difficult to drain negativity. Emotional resilience is paramount to staying mentally well and I struggled with this. My inability to cope with a dysfunctional family in my teens, a natural ambitious nature with fear of failure and a traumatic car accident wore down that resilience.

I became vulnerable. At the same time I took on other people’s problems, feeling their moods, pain and upset. Genetics was of course a factor but I’ve no doubt my sensitivity to emotions contributed to my inability to cope and ultimately, my diagnosis of bipolar.

Anxious and Afraid

One of my triggers for recognising an episode is my level of physical sensitivity. Chemical changes ignite anxiety, which is a little word for such a magnitude of feeling. Most recently I experienced complications with my medication and this fueled a highly sensitive state.

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Anxious and Afraid

It's like suddenly feeling pulled into a hole where you become in complete tune with your body and aware of your surroundings. You're in a zone. You're heart feels like it is pumping out of your chest and a heat rises up your neck and into your face. People are talking but you can no longer process everything they are saying, sounds become too loud and shouting is too much. Bright lights make you squint and sudden movement can make you jump or shout. Spatial awareness can be affected and as people lean in you quickly retreat, curling up to hide until your intense sensitivity has calmed.

I have often been fearful of myself in these situations, recognizing quickly that anything around me can be a trigger. I have shouted for silence and for people to stay away, which to the onlooker appears over-dramatic and exaggerated. In my recent hospital admission I was distressed and nurses bustled in, touching my arm without warning and not listening to my need for peace. I covered my ears sensing danger all around me. Logically, it was simple to me. My body was in a highly sensitive, anxious state and attempting to protect itself. Misunderstanding and unhelpful responses only exacerbated my symptoms.

Sensitive and Manic

I have sat on a bench as an inpatient of a psychiatric hospital engrossed in drawing with colourful pencils, crying, overcome with emotion at the music flooding my ears through my headphones. The sun had never felt so hot and the beauty of nature was overwhelming. Everything felt so wonderful and meaningful with complete clarity. I used to look down at the grass and see the tiny lines down each shard and their rich, green color. It was as though I was seeing life in its truly magical form.

Going shopping was overwhelming. We often see our environment as a whole with our brain focused on what we intend to do. In mania, our body brings us into the immediate, taking in every detail. I had bipolar noise sensitivity, was sensitive to every sign and its meaning, each aisle, every product, colors, labels, floor tiles, and lighting.

I would often stand on the spot, completely oblivious to my intentions and be drawn to anything that caught my eye. My eyes would fixate and my pupils dilate, processing all the information in front of me. It was uncontrollable and a completely different sensitivity to anxiety and fear. However, it could tip over to where my brain said 'stop'. If my brain could no longer respond to the stimuli, my body recoiled and the instinct to protect would take over once more.

What Helps Manage My Sensitivity?

Life experience has been paramount. I understand it, accept it and have worked out strategies to help me handle it. It's not always possible because I believe being sensitive is part of my genetic makeup, but my efforts have definitely benefited me in managing bipolar.

- I listen, help and empathize with people's problems but I can let them go and be mindful of my own mental wellbeing.
- If someone is not compassionate or empathic I see it as their problem and not mine.
- I listen only to those I trust because they know me, support me and understand me.
- If I feel oversensitive and find myself spiralling downwards I try to distract myself or share my thoughts with someone who can rationalize them.
- I use cognitive behavioural techniques (CBT) to stop any negative thoughts cycles.
- I limit stressful situations and things I know trigger upset. I am confident in saying no if I feel at risk.
- I use relaxation if I start to panic. Diaphragmatic breathing is so important to calm the body down.

These strategies make me feel stronger, more empowered and make my decisions feel balanced.

Embracing your Sensitivity

"Rather than fearfully shutting down your sensitivity, dive in deeper into all the possible feeling. As you expand,

keep only those who are not afraid of oceans.”

-Victoria Erickson

My sensitive nature has enabled me to see the world’s grey areas instead of only its black and white. I am empathetic to people, their lives and stories and never pre-judge. As a result, I campaign, write, lecture and guest speak on mental health issues to raise awareness and change attitudes. I see value in helping others, which motivates me to stay well.

My sensitivity to life enables me to feel my surroundings, moods and moments and creatively inspires. I love to write poetry and I use music to make me smile, socializing with the like-minded to lift my mood and make positive impact on my life. My room interior even reflects the true me, with bright artwork, photos and meaningful things. If I’ve been built to ‘absorb’, I want to optimize that with happy and inspirational stimuli.

As ever, it’s about knowing yourself, welcoming the good parts and learning to challenge the things you have identified as being more difficult. For all the hard times in my life I wouldn’t give up my sensitive nature – it’s made me who I am today.