Managing Bipolar While Coping With Anxiety

by KIKI WOODHAM

Bipolar and Anxiety

It's 7 o'clock, I'm sitting in the cinema with my oldest daughter and my partner, and I'm fighting back an anxiety attack. A trailer has just finished playing. It was loud - really, really loud. Sustained high volumes, and for too long. It featured countless explosions, blaring music, and the sound was turned way up. It takes some time to calm myself, return my breathing to normal, and slow my pounding heart down to a healthier rate, but I do manage it and I don't end up having to leave. We enjoy the movie and by the time we get home, I feel normal again.

These days, that kind of loud, nonstop noise is all it takes to bring on a panic attack. I've been sensitive to noise my entire life, but the last few months have been far worse. A crowded bus full of rambunctious children is enough to send me spiraling into waves of nausea and fear and that uncontrollable need to flee or hide, anything to get away from whatever has triggered it this time. I deal with these bipolar hypersensitivity attacks in the only way I can - tackle them head on, because they're coming eventually and there's not much I can do to prevent them.

My story isn't unique or special. The fates seem to have decided that bipolar disorder wasn't quite enough to deal with, so lots of us find ourselves facing extra comorbid conditions in addition. Anxiety, in its many forms, is common. Me? Throw some ADHD, borderline personality disorder, severe social anxiety and rapid-switching type I bipolar into a blender and you've got a Kiki cocktail; sprinkle with random panic attacks for that extra special zing.

The Biggest Challenge

The panic attacks aren't even the worst aspect of my battle with coping with anxiety. My real fight comes in the form of social anxiety, which was never much of a thing for me until I moved to a foreign country (the Netherlands) and had to learn a new language (Dutch). Sure, I grew up shy and reserved, but I was a late bloomer, and found my inner social butterfly in college. From then on I was more outgoing than I ever could have imagined.

It wasn't until the move that things changed. I'd moved too many times - Germany, Canada, all over the U.S. - learned too many languages, and left too many friends behind. This was the proverbial straw and I was the camel. I became withdrawn, anxious, and reserved around all but my closest friends. With each passing year it became more and more difficult to connect with family, make friends, go out, maintain relationships, attend birthday parties, and generally function around other people.

What I've since learned about social anxiety is that it stems from perceived scrutiny; it makes perfect sense, then, when I add the strain of trying to communicate in a new language and adapt to radically different cultural standards, as well as a dip in self-esteem following significant weight gain, that I feel like an object of scrutiny as I struggle to adapt and blend in. The strain grows exponentially the longer I'm subjected to a social situation, to the point that I'm often usually ready to leave a birthday party an hour after arriving. I need to take medication just to get out of the door, and when I'm in a group I spend most of my time quietly listening and waiting for it to be over instead of engaging and participating.

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Finding Ways to Cope

Spontaneity has become a thing of the past, but I've found that with sufficient planning I'm able to better cope with the stresses and triggers that set my anxiety off. For a recent evening at the theatre with my in-laws, I planned and prepared my outfit a week ahead, allowed myself about twice the usual amount of time to get ready on the day, and picked up a healthy salad for dinner that I could eat while getting ready. By doing this, I made sure I wouldn't feel rushed and would encounter no last-minute surprises (not having the right pantyhose, for example) that might ruin my night. It was still stressful, but not nearly as much as it would have been if I hadn't been so well prepared.

In my own home, I can be much more comfortable and relaxed. I do stress ahead of time about the cleanliness of my house, to a different degree depending on who's visiting (again, that scrutiny), but here I make jokes that we're in American-annexed territory and should all speak English. I have my comfy couch to curl up on, don't have to worry about appearing rude by refusing a cookie or snack that contains ingredients I'm sensitive to, and can retreat to the kitchen or my bedroom if I absolutely need to for a break and a chance to catch my breath.

I also feel a lot more comfortable out of the house in certain situations - going to a craft group where I know I'll see a bunch of my English-speaking friends, for example, isn't too scary. I still have to overcome the hurdle of getting out the door, but once I manage that I'm with like-minded people in a familiar environment where I feel no pressure to comply with linguistic or cultural standards that simply don't come naturally to me.

The Long Term

Preparedness can certainly help me to cope with the symptoms of my anxiety, but a long-term solution is what I'm ultimately looking for. Right now my psychiatrist and I are trying to find a medication that works for me without too many side effects (the last one left me unable to stay awake during the day and didn't really alleviate my anxiety, either).

Cognitive behavioral therapy can be helpful as well with social anxiety, and is definitely something we'll look into down the road. Rewiring that switch that tells me to feel self-conscious and afraid will go a long way toward me feeling comfortable around people again. But for now, I still have plenty of behavioral changes to make and would really like to feel like my old self again as soon as humanly possible, even if it's just a chemical reaction.

Few people are close enough to me now to see that bubbly, outgoing side of myself that I discovered in college. She was great - fun and spontaneous, she had a great sense of humor and never cared what anyone thought of her. She used to make conversation with everyone, be it her neighbors, friends, or the checkout clerk at the grocery store. She's been away for a long time now, but I feel pretty confident that she'll come back, and that quiet, introverted, and sometimes sullen person that took her place will be gone for good.