Bipolar Romantic Relationships: Dating and Marriage

Whether you or your loved one has bipolar disorder, you can learn to make the relationship work.

BY STEPHANIE WATSON

Navigating any romantic relationship — whether it’s dating or marriage — can be a tricky endeavor. Add bipolar disorder with its roller-coaster ride of emotions into the mix, and relationships become even more challenging.

When Jim McNulty, 58, of Burrillville, Rhode Island, got married in the 1970s, everything seemed fine at first. “It was an absolutely normal courtship,” he recalls. “We got along well.”

Then the mood swings began. During his “up” or hypomanic states, he would spend huge sums of money he didn’t have. Then he would hit the “down” side and sink into the depths of depression. These wild swings put stress on his marriage and threatened to run his family’s finances into the ground. He eventually signed the house over to his wife to protect her and his two young children. Finally, he says, “She asked me to leave because she couldn’t live with the illness anymore.”

THE BIPOLAR RELATIONSHIP

When people get into a relationship, they’re looking for stability, says Scott Haltzman, MD. Haltzman is clinical assistant professor in the

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Brown University department of psychiatry and human behavior. He's also medical director of NRI Community Services in Woonsocket, R.I. and author of The Secrets of Happily Married Men and The Secrets of Happily Married Women. He tells WebMD that bipolar disorder can seriously complicate a relationship. "The person, particularly if untreated, may be prone to changes in their mood, their personality, and their interactions that can threaten the consistency that is the framework of a relationship."

He adds that not everyone with bipolar disorder experiences the distinct mood phases of mania and depression. But when those episodes do occur they can wreak havoc on a relationship.

During the manic phase, a person can lose his or her sense of judgment. That means spending money recklessly, becoming promiscuous, engaging in risky behaviors like drug and alcohol abuse, and even getting into trouble with the law. "When you have a spouse with bipolar disorder who gets in a manic phase," he says, "it can be extremely detrimental to the relationship because they may be doing things that endanger you or may endanger you financially."

On the other side of the curve is depression. Depression can cause the person to withdraw completely from everything -- and everyone -- around him or her. "If you're a partner with someone, it's very frustrating," Haltzman says. "That's because you want to pull them out of their shell and you don't know how to do it."

Dating With Bipolar Disorder
Bipolar disorder can become an issue from the very start of a relationship. When you first meet someone you like, it's natural to want to make a good impression. Introducing the fact that you have bipolar disorder may not make for the most auspicious beginning. There is always the fear that you might scare the person off and lose the opportunity to get to know one another. At some point, though, you will need to let your partner know that you are bipolar.

"I don't think it's necessary to introduce your psychiatric problems on the first date," Haltzman says. "But once you sense that there's a mutual attraction and you decide to become more serious with this person, when you decide that you want to date this person exclusively, I think at that point each partner needs to come clear with what the package includes."

Knowing what triggers your cycles of hypomania, mania, and depression and watching out for warning signs that you're entering one or the other phase of the cycle can help you avoid uncomfortable situations in your new relationship. "I think the more the person knows what their cycles are, the better they might be able to be in charge of them," says Myrna Weissman, PhD. Weissman is professor of epidemiology and psychiatry at the Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons. She is also chief of the department in clinical-genetic epidemiology at New York State Psychiatric Institute. Warning signs, she says, can include disturbed sleep and changes in activity level.

Bipolar Disorder and Marriage
Any number of things, from work stress to money issues, can lead to arguments and put strain on a marriage. But when one partner has bipolar disorder, simple stressors can reach epic proportions. That may be why as many as 90% of marriages involving someone with bipolar disorder reportedly fail.

McNulty watched not only his own marriage fall apart, but the marriages of others with bipolar disorder as well. "I've been running a support group for almost 19 years," he says. "I've seen dozens of couples come through the door with their marriage in tatters." Bipolar disorder "puts a huge additional strain on a relationship, particularly when you don't have a diagnosis."

Healing a Troubled Relationship
Having a relationship when you live with bipolar disorder is difficult. But it's not impossible. It takes work on the part of both partners to make sure the marriage survives.

The first step is to get diagnosed and treated for your condition. Your doctor can prescribe mood stabilizing medications, such as Lithium, with antidepressants to help control your symptoms. Therapy with a trained psychologist or social worker is also important. With therapy you can learn to control the behaviors that are putting stress on your relationship. Having your spouse go through therapy with you can help him or her understand why you act the way you do and learn better ways to react.

"I think the more a partner can learn about these things, the better he or she can play," Haltzman says. "Being involved in treatment can really help make the treatment for bipolar disorder a collaborative effort. And it will actually increase the sense of bonding."
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CRISIS NUMBERS

Adult Services:
Western Region 951.358.4705
Mid-County Region 951.791.3300
Desert Region 760-863-8455

Mental Health Numbers

Western Region:
Blaine Street Clinic 951.358.4705
Children's Treatment Services 951-358-4549
FACT of Corona 951.273.0608
Jefferson Wellness Center 951.955.8000
Main Street Clinic 951.738.2400
Tyler Village for Mature Adults 951.509.2400

Mid-County Region:
Hemet Clinic 951.791.3300
Lake Elsinore Adult Services 951.471.4645
Mt. San Jacinto Children's Clinic 951.487.2874

Desert Region:
Banning Clinic 951.849.7142
Blythe Clinic 760.921.5000
Cathedral City Older-Adult Services 760.863.8455
760.773.8767
Children, Adult, Crisis & Residential Services 760.773.6767

Emergency Treatment Services (ETS) 951.358.4881
951.358.4882
951.358.4883

Inpatient Treatment Facility (ITF) 951.358.4700
Oasis Rehabilitation Center (OCR) 760-863-8600
CARES Line (Community Access, Referral, Evaluation & Support Line) 800.706.7500
Public Guardian 951-955-1540
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