Things Not to Say to Someone Coping With Bipolar Disorder

by BECKY WICKS

What Not to Say

Bipolar disorder can be hard enough to cope with as it is, but with some of the statements and questions that can be thrown at you at times, it can become even more of a battle.

Below is a list of some of the examples I've come across in my time since going public with my diagnosis. They range from the insulting to the almost amusing, and hopefully will give you some insight into how to cope with these sorts of comments or questions, or at least make you feel that you are not alone.

Are you Bipolar?

One of the most common mistakes that someone can make for me is the phrase 'are you bipolar'. Yes, I have bipolar, but it is not what I am. You would not say to someone 'are you diabetes', so why is a mental illness any different? In this case I normally smile politely at the linguistic slip up, and try and correct them politely.

I'm a Bit Bipolar

For everyone who has been diagnosed with bipolar, I am sure the phrase 'I'm a bit bipolar' will have been heard before. It is of human nature that everyone has mood swings – we all have bad days, and we all have moments of impulse spending etc. but this does not equal a full diagnosis of bipolar. Spending your entire student loan in three days and thinking you are a member of Mensa, however, is more likely to indicate something might be wrong.

Do you Think I Might Have it?

Following on from this, one of the questions I get asked most frequently is 'do you think I might have it?' now whilst I look rather fetching in a white coat, I am not a doctor and nor do I pretend to be. I always advise people that if they feel there might be something wrong with their mental health, that they should seek medical intervention as soon as possible.

You're just like 'So-and-so!'

Celebrity comparisons! Now whilst I'd love to have the wit, intelligence, and humour of Stephen Fry, I sadly do not. Neither can I compose symphonies like Tchaikovsky, paint masterpieces like Munch, or write as wonderfully as Woolf (sadly). So I often have to explain to people that whilst there is a link between creativity and bipolar disorder, this is not necessarily true for everyone with the diagnosis.

Next page: some more things you should not say.

Are You a Genius?

‘Are you a genius?’ – As mentioned above, a lot of people associate bipolar disorder with a higher mental IQ or creativity. Whilst it is flattering to be asked this question (for the most part), I often find myself having to explain that whilst there is a link, it does not directly correlate to everyone with bipolar disorder.

Have You Ever Tried to Kill Yourself?

One of the most personal questions I have been asked by anyone is ‘have you ever tried to kill yourself’. This is probably a reflection of the higher suicide rates in bipolar sufferers compared with those who do not have it, however this is not something that should be thrown about lightly. If someone wants to discuss an incident, then this needs to be on their own terms, and in their own time.

Have you Taken Your Medication?

‘Have you taken your medication?’ – this is a question that I personally find negative on more than one level. Firstly it implies that I am behaving out of norm, or in some way someone is finding strange, and secondly it implies that I am unable to take care of myself down to basic levels such as monitoring my own medication intake.

Are You Better Now?

I’ve luckily been stable now for a while, and can lead a fulfilling life, which often leads to people asking me if my bipolar is ‘all better’ and if it has ‘gone away’. Explaining to people that bipolar is a life long condition, and whilst I will go through periods of stability, there is every chance it will flare up again – a painful thing to think about.

Everyone Has Mood Swings

‘Everyone has mood swings’. This is absolutely true - everyone does have mood swings. We all have bad days, and we all have those days where we impulse spend on things we really don’t need, however these would not equal a diagnosis of bipolar disorder, whereas spending an entire student loan in a couple of days and claiming to be the president of Mensa would come closer.

Those Things Aren't Real

Some kinds of bipolar unfortunately come with psychotic episodes or symptoms, and this brings with even more questions. The most common question I get asked regarding the psychosis I’ve been through is ‘surely you know those things aren’t real’, or ‘can’t you tell you’re just hearing things’. In short, the answer is no. Visual hallucinations to me are as real as the computer screen in front of you, and my delusions are as real as you utterly knowing what colour socks you are wearing.

Next page: other things you should not say.

Anything That Doesn't Kill You Makes You Stronger!

‘Anything that doesn’t kill you makes you stronger!’ – this can be a patronizing statement as it minimizes what you’ve gone through, and as discussed previously, with higher suicide rates and a lower life expectancy, bipolar can kill.

Are You Crazy?

It is an unfortunate circumstance how many times I have been asked questions like ‘are you crazy?’ ‘Are you a psycho?’ or even in one case ‘are you dangerous?’ Mental health statistics actually show that if you are diagnosed with a mental illness, you are far more likely to be the victim of violence. Words such as ‘crazy’, or

‘psycho’, carry negative connotations, and only further the stigma surrounding mental illness.

I Wish I was Manic

As with the views that bipolar can often equal creativity and genius, it is often that bipolar is seen with rose tinted glasses. A few times, a few people have told me that they ‘wish they were manic in order to get things done’. Whilst mania does involve increased productivity and energy, it also usually results in a complete mental breakdown, financial trouble, and a resulting depressive crash. Minimizing mania into an extra strong cup of coffee detracts from the serious nature of bipolar, and can prevent people from fully understanding the issues the illness can bring with it.

But You Seem So Normal

‘But you seem so normal’ – I would argue that there is no such thing as normal. We are all different, we all have our quirks, I just happen to have a mental illness. This view also projects the opinion that having bipolar is something ‘abnormal’, something negative – whilst my illness has caused me a lot of trouble, it is still an intrinsic part of me.

It's All in Your Head

‘It’s all in the mind – you don’t need that medication!’ Technically yes it is in my mind, it is in my head – bipolar is a chemical imbalance in the brain, caused partially (it is believed) by genetics. A chemical imbalance however, needs addressing, and that is something that my medication does. Some people with bipolar do not need medication to control their illness, but this does not mean it is ‘all in their mind’ either, but rather that they have learnt to control their illness through different means.