



How to Respond to Insensitive Comments

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Rita once told her dad that she disliked being single but felt like it was the best option at the time. “I just get too anxious with dating.” He replied, “Well, no one wants to have a relationship with someone with bipolar disorder.”

Even close family can make insensitive remarks about mental illness from time to time. While their intention is likely not to be harmful, these comments can still sting. And they can nick an already slim sense of self, which is likely bruised from your own biting inner critic. Yet, while these statements do hurt, they don’t have to affect you — at least not so significantly. Below are several constructive ways for dealing with insensitive or ignorant remarks.

Consider/Seek Background of the Person Making the Comment

What is the knowledge and experience of the person making the comment? Sometimes a simple, non-judgmental question such as “what had led you to think that?” can shed light that helps you decide if and how you want to respond.

Acknowledge & Correct the Comment

The solution is to acknowledge what the person said so that they know you are not attacking them and then correct them so they don’t say it again. A sample response to the dad above might be:

“Dad. It may seem that people don’t want to go out with someone who has bipolar disorder, but I’ve never experienced this. The guys I have gone out with are usually amazed at how well I handle things. The dating issue is about me, not about the guys. It’s my extreme anxiety about meeting someone new. Bipolar disorder is the reason that I don’t date, but it’s not the reason that someone would not want to date me. Does that make sense? I’m actually seen as someone who is very stable.”

Ignore the Comment

Sometimes, depending on the circumstances, you might prefer to disregard a comment. For instance, you may be with friends at a local bar with someone whose team keeps changing tactics. You may hear something like, “What is up with that coach? Can’t he decide what to do? They play like two different teams. He is so schizophrenic.”

He may continue, “He really needs to get his act together. It’s like he is hearing voices telling him different things. Its like he is bipolar. It’s awful!”

Your first thought may be to tell him to at least get his illnesses straight. But in that case it might be best to say nothing. It is a situation and location where honest and open conversation will not likely occur.

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STIGMA
TOGETHER
one story at a time

Educate the Person

People often say insensitive or ignorant comments because they simply lack the education about mental illness. In fact, it's only recently that words such as depression and bipolar disorder have become part of daily conversation. Even two decades ago, they were rarely discussed.

Ignorant remarks are rarely intended to be cruel. (We've all certainly said insensitive things in the past.) This can be an opportunity to educate others on discussing mental illness "in a kind and supportive way."

For instance, when someone confuses bipolar disorder with schizophrenia as in the above comments at the bar, one might say:

"I know what you mean about the coach's behavior, but schizophrenia and bipolar disorder are different illnesses. I never understood schizophrenia until I met people who live in recovery and they described the symptoms to me. It is a psychotic illness; the person stays the same, but the symptoms make the person say and do things that are not their normal pattern of behavior when they are in a healthy place. It is sometimes about hearing voices, but not about being two different people. Bipolar disorder can be about experiencing extreme high and low moods but again, not about being two people."

When educating someone, consider:

- **Watching your tone:** Use a "kind and educating" tone, even when you'd rather tell someone they're just being ignorant. This prevents people from getting defensive. If you say, "That's a stupid thing to say. You have no idea what you are talking about," the dialogue is usually closed.
- **Telling a personal story:** If you feel comfortable, you might choose to talk about yourself first and then try to educate.



Refocus on Your Healing

Many of the things others say have a kernel of truth to them and could be helpful, but when reduced to just one offhand comment they seem simplistic and offensive.

Take the example of prayer. Someone might say that you'd feel much better if you just prayed. For individuals who are religious, prayer can be incredibly helpful. It may help them feel energized, provide a new perspective, and can give them hope that a loving higher power is involved.

However, prayer is rarely the only effective intervention. There are often behavioral, emotional, relational, and physical self-care interventions they can implement. And, of course, to someone who isn't religious, this might be doubly insulting.

But whether the comment is ill- or well-intentioned, try refocusing on what you need to do to get better. Insensitive and ignorant comments sting. You can choose to correct or ignore the comment or educate the individual. But whatever you do, remember to refocus on your recovery and take good care of yourself.