

# Mental Health: Romantic Relations



When you have a mental health condition, you may wonder whether or not to talk about it with your significant other. And if you're single, you may wonder if having a mental health condition rules out the possibility of a romantic relationship for you. It's important to know that many people with mental health conditions have strong, supportive, long-term relationships.

Relationships can affect your health significantly. A good relationship provides valuable social support during difficult times, whereas a bad relationship can worsen your symptoms, particularly in cases of depression.

## Should You Tell Your Partner?

As you begin a new relationship, you don't need to share your health history right away, but as your relationship grows more committed, think about starting the discussion. This would be important if you desire a long-term relationship since you and your partner need this information to support each other through health crises. If you're in a long-term relationship, it's better to disclose your health condition when you are well than to conceal it until a crisis situation.

## How Should You Tell Your Partner about Your Mental Health Condition?

If you're worried about disclosing, remember that many people with mental

health conditions have strong relationships. Your partner probably already appreciates the qualities that have helped you live well.

By sharing your health history, you share insight into not just your challenges but also your strengths.

Because of the fears and misconceptions that surround mental health, even well-meaning people may not know how to react to your disclosure. Three kinds of reaction are often the most likely:

- Some people won't consider your mental health condition an issue. They know that everyone has struggles and that a long-term relationship means supporting each other through difficulties.
- Other people may not be able to handle their concerns, leading them to end the relationship; this is a reason not to wait too long to disclose.
- Many people will respond to a partner's mental health condition with uncertainty or curiosity. As they learn more about the facts and your treatment plan, they'll grow more comfortable and learn how to support you. Many relationships grow stronger through this process.

To talk to your partner, choose a time when you aren't actively experiencing mania, anxiety, depression or psychosis. As for many important conversations, you may want to start by acknowledging you want to

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talk about something that isn't easy for you to talk about (For example, "I want to tell you something important that I've been worrying about. This is difficult for me to say, though. I hope you can listen and understand.")

If you have books or know of websites that provide more information about your condition, have them ready to offer your partner. Allow them time to absorb the information.

### **Can You Start a Relationship Now?**

Having a mental health condition can make it more difficult to date and meet people, largely because you may not feel like connecting with others when your life is unstable. Depending on your condition, you might be dealing with impulsive behavior, irregular moods, a desire to withdraw, trouble feeling empathy, or anxieties about other people. Following your treatment plan to care for your health is an important part of building a healthy relationship.

Think about what qualities you're looking for in a partner. How can you strengthen these qualities in yourself? Show your positive qualities to the world and you will meet people who share your values. Above all, don't get discouraged. You deserve a loving, healthy relationship whatever your health history.

### **What about Sex?**

Mental health conditions can disrupt your sex life in many ways. In particular, the side effects of certain medications may reduce your desire for sex, your ability to get aroused and your ability to maintain an erection or achieve orgasm. For people with schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, the sexual side effects of antipsychotic medications are perhaps the most significant side effects.

If you experience these side effects, it's important to recognize that they can damage your quality of life and your romantic relationship. Talk about the sexual side effects with your partner and your doctor.

Do not stop, however, taking your medication. Mania or psychosis will likely do worse long-term damage to your relationship than a low libido. Take your time and work with your doctor to reduce negative side effects. Second-generation ("atypical") anti-psychotics have fewer sexual side effects, for instance, and sometimes simply changing to a different medication can reduce or eliminate side effects.

As you and your doctor work to get your sex life back, don't forget to show affection and love for your partner in ways other than sex. Remind yourself and your partner that neither of you is to blame for sexual side effects, and that this set-back is temporary.

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