Sharing can help deal with mental illness

All relationships are hard work but never more so than if you or your partner have a mental illness. Mental health problems can place an enormous amount of strain on a relationship which can be challenging to bear. But there is no need to despair just yet. A survey carried out in 2013 by Mind, a mental health charity, and Relate, an organisation specialising in relationship counselling, showed that people are more willing than ever before to open up about their mental health issues to their partner and support someone who is suffering from one.

Paul Farmer, the chief executive of Mind, believed that this was because mental health problems were becoming less and less stigmatised and the trend has only gone up in the six years since the survey.

So, for those who still feel cautious about entering into a relationship, perhaps it is time to reconsider.

Angela's Story

Angela Needham, a freelance journalist, has had a very successful relationship with her partner, Lucy, who also suffers from mental health issues. Angela has dealt with depression and anxiety since her teenage years but did not receive a diagnosis until much later in life. As a result, she struggled for many years without support.

Things finally came to a head when she suffered what she believed to be a heart attack.

"My chest hurt, and I couldn't breathe. Heart disease runs in the family, and since my dad had had a heart attack, I was worried. The paramedics came and checked my heart. It was fine, and they said I had just had a panic attack."

Angela was only then diagnosed with depression and generalised anxiety disorder and received medication and counselling support which she says has helped her.

Angela met Lucy last year, and they became a couple in May 2018. From the first date, Angela and Lucy both discussed their mental health problems, and far from deterring her, Angela said that connection meant they really hit it off.

"In fact, I remember thinking, 'she's a really cool lady'," Angela says.

This connection, she said, meant they were able to support one another effectively. "Having someone who completely understands without having to explain to them is especially helpful."

Mind and Relate statistics 2013

- 77% of people said they actively tell their partners about their mental illness

- Two-thirds of people who told their partners about it said that they "weren't fazed" or "really understanding."

- Three-quarters of people said they regularly talk about it with their partner

- 60% of people reported being in a relationship had a positive impact on their mental health and made it easier to manage.

- Half of the partners said dating someone with mental health issues was not as daunting as they first thought

- Half of the partners said a mental illness did not define the person

When asked whether the mental health problems have caused problems in the relationship, she said: "Sometimes I think I'm not good enough for Lucy and wonder why she's with me. But I think that's just me."

This is not to say that there are no longer any relationship problems involving mental health issues. Mental illness can put a great deal of strain on a relationship. Those suffering can feel isolated and miserable and may end up taking it out on their partner, while the partner may feel frustrated, shut-out and unsure how to help.

Rianne Eimers, chief executive of Mind in Kingston, said: "Having a mental health issue can impact someone's sex life (such as loss of libido), or it can intensify feelings of unattractiveness or unworthiness. This can be distressing to your partner."

Shannon's Story

Shannon Moyer, a student at Kingston University, has experienced a tumultuous relationship with her partner. She suffers from depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which put a lot of strain of her partner, Will, notably when he later developed anxiety issues.

"PTSD is a unique mental illness especially regarding a relationship," she says, "When Will and I started dating I was still processing a lot of that trauma that I thought we had worked through. But in PTSD little things can bring back memories. I love being hugged, but there was one time that Will hugged me in a certain way, and I just flipped out and had a panic attack."

Despite this, the relationship seemed to be running smoothly, and Shannon and Will became engaged. But Will suffered an anxiety attack in his last semester at university, probably brought on by worries over what would happen after he graduated, and the engagement was broken off. Will later admitted that he had acted rashly, and they are back together.

But, as Shannon says, a relationship works well when partners can deal with mental health issues. But when both partners are panicking that is when problems occur. For some people, she says, it works, but for others, it is too much stress, and it does not.

Angela's experience shows that this does not have to be the case, and people with mental health issues can have healthy relationships. The key to this seems to be one that can be hard to master though: communication.

A Relate spokesperson said: "Although we often like to think our partner should understand what we are feeling without us even saying, this is not always realistic. The best way to make sure they 'get it' is just by telling them.

"Being open can be an empowering thing. It can allow you to take ownership of how you are feeling, to recognise your emotions and to understand them in perspective."

Both Shannon and Angela also emphasise the importance of talking to partners about their mental health problems. It allowed Angela to have a happy relationship with her girlfriend and to bring Shannon and her partner together again.