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# Empowerment through the Battle of Mental Illness

by Heather Smith



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Two weeks into our relationship, Trey asked, “Heather, how are you *really* doing?”

Unbeknownst to him, I had a counseling appointment earlier that day revealing that my anxiety levels were dramatically decreased after many months of hard work. Therapy helped me find practices and tools to battle my anxiety. I was finally winning. I wanted to share my hard-fought victory with Trey.

The only problem was to that point in our relationship, I hadn’t told him about my battle with anxiety. I hadn’t told him about the days when my heart beat out of my chest because of high expectations set by myself and others. Or about the nights when I lay in bed crying when a bright future seemed unattainable. I hadn’t told him of this internal battle I was waging.

I had plans to tell him. Eventually. Honestly, I was afraid how he might respond to that conversation. Would he be upset? Uncomfortable? Speechless? Scared?

And yet, for some reason it all came out. Right then and there. Every last bit. I told him about this battle in what must have been an incoherent, ineloquent description at best. To his credit, he took the information well. He strived to understand with hopes of supporting and comforting me.

Despite his understanding and support, thoughts crept in: “You’re too much to handle. It’s not fair to him to deal with your anxiety. Maybe you should break up with him and spare him the trouble.” While our story has a happy ending, it required its own adjustments. Mental illness on the part of one partner does impact the other, even when the other is gracious enough to give support.

This experience is common. Each year, 1 in 5 adults will experience some form of mental illness,<sup>1</sup> and of all adults in America, according to the Pew Research Center, about 50% are in a committed relationship.<sup>2</sup> The ability to understand mental illness, find credible help, and fully support a partner can lead to a thriving, healthy relationship.<sup>3</sup>

## To Those Who Battle

First and foremost, if you battle a mental illness and are in a relationship, you are so much more than your mental illness. You are not too much for others to handle. It’s okay to ask for help. It’s okay to take time for yourself. It’s okay to change. And it’s okay to battle.

*Asking for Help.* Your struggles may need your partner’s assistance. Your moments of despair may need their encouragement. Your worries may need their attention. Resources such as professional counselors, self-help books,

and your relationships may aid in combating the despair and worries that overwhelm you. But why can it be hard to ask for help?

Some suggest that battling the stigma of mental illness may be harder than the illness itself.<sup>4</sup> The label of having a mental illness can lead to feelings of weakness or inadequacy.<sup>5</sup> However, the daunting task of seeking and receiving help leads to a courageous and fruitful life. When an individual combines credible resources, the result can be powerful.

While meeting with a counselor, share what you are learning with your partner. By sharing, you give your partner credible tools and resources to help fight the battle of mental illness at your side and not behind you. If possible, allow your spouse to participate in therapy with you. This can be incredibly helpful not only for mental illness but for the marital relationship.

*Overcoming Negative Thinking.* Often a mental illness can lead you to believe you are unworthy of help. While there's no cure-all for negative thinking, the process of reprogramming our thoughts can help. The messages I told myself required reprogramming and still do. I began the process of meta cognition, or thinking about one's thinking.<sup>6</sup> For example, I have a negative thought. Then, I think about where the thought came from, how it is making me feel, and what I plan to do with it. This process allows me to slow down and attempt to change the action of the thought. Reprogramming is not a one-and-done event. It's a process. Usually, a life-long process.

Over time, you can learn that the battle is empowering.

It's empowering to ask for help. It's empowering to take time for yourself. It's empowering to change. And it's empowering to be involved in the long journey of overcoming.

### **To Those Who Support**

If you are in a relationship with a person who battles mental illness, be patient. Though you may want to know what they are feeling and why, your partner may be wondering the very same thing. It may take time and practice to fully understand how you can help. It's okay to not always understand. It's okay to just listen. It's okay to take care of yourself. It's okay to just love.

*Showing Empathy.* The National Alliance on Mental Illness published, "Empathy sounds more like, 'I don't know how

to help you, but I'm sorry you're hurting,' and less like, 'I know you're having a hard time but it could be worse, at least you have a roof over your head.' When we empathize with the people in our lives without needing to hold their circumstances up against ours or anyone else's, we lessen the chance that our loved ones feel alone in their pain and we strengthen the chance that they'll be vulnerable enough to reach out to us in their times of need."<sup>7</sup>

Trey's empathy looked much more like, "Here's my shoulder. I can't take it all away, but feel free to cry while I patiently listen" as opposed to, "well it could be

worse." Sometimes, even just sitting next to your partner while actively listening shows your dedication to the relationship and your desire to support them in this battle.

*Engaging in Self-Care.* Providing support can become emotionally taxing. Self-care is not only important for those with a mental illness but for you too. Self-care is "any activity that we do deliberately in order to take care of our mental, emotional, and physical health... it is knowing what we need to do in order to take care of ourselves, being subsequently, able to take care of others as well."<sup>8</sup> Take care of yourself so you can best take care of your partner. Remember: "Self-care is not selfish, but a necessity if you have a spouse with mental health problems. If you don't focus on your own health, you are at risk of being sucked into the vortex of the mental illness."<sup>9</sup>

Self-care looks different for everyone. These deliberate activities could include relaxation exercises, spending time with family, getting enough sleep, and promoting a nutritious diet.<sup>10</sup> Whatever it may be, take care of yourself so your very best self may help in the battle.

Over time, you too can feel empowered in the relationship.

It's empowering to support. It's empowering to show clear, genuine empathy. It's empowering to actively listen. It's empowering to take care of yourself. It's empowering to just love.

Thankfully, I didn't give in to destructive thoughts to end the relationship with Trey. He showed me unconditional love when I felt unlovable. He showed me I was of great worth in a way no one else had. He empowers me to manage and continue to overcome the battle of mental illness.

We're now living happily ever after.

**“It’s okay to ask for help.  
It’s okay to take time for  
yourself. It’s okay to change.  
And it’s okay to battle.”**

## Endnotes

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