

Today I read an article with “easy” suggestions for “text messages to help support bipolar friends”, and it made me want to throw my phone against the wall.

Let me start by acknowledging that our society is far flung; we tend to move away from our birthplaces and our friends. Sometimes online messages are all we have to keep our connections open to those we love and care about. This essay isn’t meant for people in that situation.

Some background: I had a friend, Cindy, who I knew from when she was 20 years old until she died at age 47. She suffered from bipolar disorder her entire life. Many people with the condition eventually find a combination of medical and psychological treatments that help in moderating both the manic and depressive phases. There’s no cure for the condition, but it is sometimes possible to manage the symptoms so the person can lead a relatively “normal” life. Unfortunately, that wasn’t the case with Cindy; no treatment regimen, regardless of how strictly followed, worked for any length of time. This isn’t an uncommon situation.

The article that annoyed me was undoubtedly written with the best of intentions. My issue with it stems primarily from long experience with people who befriended Cindy, tried the easy ways to help her, and then disappeared when they didn’t work.

Depending on the person, either the manic phase or the depressive phase can be relatively worse. In Cindy’s case, she didn’t go to extremes in the manic times and from all outward appearances was a typical, happy, outgoing woman. It was the depressive phases that caused the real problems. She’d easily make friends when she was on the up side of the cycle. This phase could last anywhere from weeks to nearly a year on a few occasions—long enough that a new friend would assume that was her typical state, even though she was always clear and up front about her condition.

Then the depressive state would start. Sometimes it was months of a slow slide into it. Other times it was a matter of just a few days between the up days and the down days. “Unpredictable” is an understatement.

The new friends would see this happening and try the usual supportive, rah-rah texts; “It will get better!”, “This is just a phase.”, “Just try...” and so on. To be fair, this isn’t unreasonable for someone who is in a temporary, mild funk like we all occasionally have.

For a bipolar person though, it’s not helpful. Often the reaction is entirely contrary. They know that it’s not going to get better because it’s a lifelong condition. They know it’s a phase, but it’s one that’s going to repeat endlessly for the rest of their lives. They’ve already gone through all of the kindly-meant “Just try...” suggestions, and they didn’t help.

Almost invariably, the attempts to help would taper off as Cindy continued in her down phase. People would become frustrated, annoyed, or mad at her for not “trying harder.” Or they’d become judgmental about how she behaved as she attempted to deal with her problem.

Bipolar people frequently have tremendous trouble maintaining relationships because of the unpredictable nature of the symptoms. It's not easy to be friends with someone who, because they're depressed, refuses half a dozen or more invitations in a row to hang out, or, when you do hang out, wants nothing more than a quiet walk with no questions or conversation. Because of that, they can develop severe social anxiety because of the realistic fear that they'll get close to someone and then get dropped when the friendship becomes anything other than easy. Or they'll go to the opposite extreme; reacting to the isolation by having a long series of one-night-stands in an attempt to connect with someone, anyone, no matter how briefly, and then dealing with being called a slut by people who don't see what's really going on. Worse, there are people out there who are perfectly willing to exploit someone in a vulnerable state and take advantage of their need for their own ends.

So, what's a friend to do? What is actually helpful?

First, you're not a doctor. You're not going to fix your friend. She's not a project that you work on. Never, ever go into a friendship with the intention of "making them better"; either accept them as they already are, or leave. To do anything else is setting her up for disappointment when you raise and then dash her expectations.

Expect that there will be times when you want to just walk away and be done with it. You're going to be yelled at. You're going to be insulted. You're going to be told to just leave her alone. You're going to be told to leave and never come back.

That's the disease talking. Sometimes—often—you will need to take a step back. But that's not the same as packing up and leaving. Eventually you'll learn when the situation requires that one or both of you have some space, and when it's best to just shut up and try again tomorrow. You'll make mistakes, but you'll learn.

Possibly the best thing is to physically be there. It's easy to send a supportive text. It's also easy to think that the "Hey, thanks!" response means everything is better and you can go back to whatever you were doing. The problem is that bipolar people, like everyone else, often want to put on a positive face because that's what society expects from all of us. We're not supposed to complain or say, "I had a shitty day today."

Go to her. Tell her "I'm picking you up at 9 for coffee." Convince her to hang out even though you know you won't say more than five words to each other. Find something that you both enjoy and go do it. It's not therapy; she's your friend after all, and that's what we do together.

You're not going to fix the problem, but showing that you're making an active effort to be there in both the physical and emotional realms goes a long, long way to providing a little relief. A succession of failed relationships can easily make bipolar people feel like they're

unworthy of love. Show her that they are a person you value so much that her disease doesn't prevent her from being able to grab and hold on to that love.

Let her vent. Let her cry. Resist the urge to respond to every statement. Often, just shutting up and listening helps.

Most of all, never forget that she's your friend, she's a good person, and she's worthy of your time and effort.