

Chapter 5 Excerpt

How Open Can You Be About Your Disorder?

Acquaintances and Friends

Of your different relationships, acquaintances and friendships probably represent the largest numbers of the people in your life. These relationships represent connections that range from superficial interactions to your closest friendships, the ones where you share your innermost thoughts and feelings. Your choice to share the fact that you're bipolar will reflect the depth of your connection with others. Consider those acquaintances where you meet someone and say little more than "Hey, how's it going?" Certainly you wouldn't say, "Hey, how's it going? I'm bipolar!" But with someone you are really close to, why wouldn't you share your bipolar reality?

Okay, there are some common answers to this rhetorical question. You don't want them to think you're crazy. You don't want them to think less of you or that you require special handling. But consider this: you'll worry less about their response once you actually see their response, and, likewise, their concern will be relieved, they'll have a chance to understand, when they see you handle your bipolar issues. You don't want to have to pretend with your closest friends. That robs you and them of the openness and honesty that's part of friendship.

Imagine you have a close friend whom you think you know quite well. And then you discover that she's been keeping a whole dimension of her life hidden from you. You'd probably feel some degree of hurt and disappointment because of her keeping that secret. You'd probably think

she never trusted you, and you'd probably wonder how much trust there ever had been in the relationship. You might even pull back some yourself. Although she kept this important information from you in order to protect the friendship, it could possibly have just the opposite effect.

And now consider the question: Would you truly want to establish close relationships with people who couldn't handle the fact that you are bipolar? Probably not. You want relationships with those who can truly get to know you, understand you, enjoy you, and possibly even step up to help if you ever need it.

It'll be easy to decide not to tell people who don't know you very well about your bipolar disorder. And with people who have known and been close to you for a long time, it will be straightforward to decide to tell them. The tricky part happens with people you know beyond a superficial level, but with whom you haven't yet established a strong connection. Here is where you'll find the greatest uncertainty about how to proceed in coming out. Let's look at a few examples. As you read them try to place yourself in their shoes and then think about how you would respond: