

How Mental Illness Gets Harder When You're Older

By Gwendolyn Kansen



I don't know about you, but I feel like I'm losing my ability to connect with people. It's easier when you're younger. Even when you have Asperger's like I do, there's a good chance you're doing the same thing your peers are. Studying. Dating. Whatever parties you can get yourself invited to. You have a different makeup, sure. But for right now you don't worry too much about it.

You don't have that sense of permanence yet.

In your teens and early twenties you're more of an abstraction than a person. The world is open. You live on hope. It's strange if you think about it: you know these are probably the most vital years of your life. But the years that *really* count, you assume, are always in the future.

The future, of course, is when you'll work out those niggling little deficiencies you keep trying to tuck away.

But if you have something more serious it isn't going to go away with time. And over time you really start to feel that.

Bipolar disorder and schizophrenia tend to come out in your early twenties. Asperger's is a childhood condition, so I don't know what it's like to be normal and then break. I can say I've seen friends have psychotic breaks at that age and they were never quite the same.

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It's not a snap epiphany though. It's not a light that goes off in your head, like *shit*, I'm mentally ill. It's more of a looming realization that you will always be set apart.

I know some successful people with mental illness. They fought hard for it. I knew a bipolar woman who ran a store that was profiled in a very famous newspaper. I myself have a successful relationship. But more often than not, we are behind in a lot of ways.

An old flame of mine had a manic episode that landed him in solitary. Over the past six years, he's watched his friends slowly fall away as he came to terms with his life as a bipolar person.

A close friend of mine has PTSD and borderline personality disorder. He's always had trouble sustaining things. Friends. Relationships. Employment. He bounced from job to job, lived on people's couches, and went through almost a hundred damaged women hoping each of them was going to save him. Now he's living in a homeless shelter. He's just started seeking help over the past few years, and over the last six months he's started to develop a plan.

This stuff used to be almost funny. Like ha ha, look at Adrian, he's such a mess. When you're twenty, instability is endearing. When you're thirty the world has lost patience with you.

I'm having a really hard time right now. I've spent so long trying to do things the way other people do. Like multitask. Transition seamlessly from activity to activity without needing a rest in between. Come across with a consistently relatable tone instead of sometimes seeming "off" to people.

But I can't. I just can't. I'm wired differently. I hope to make peace with that one day. But right now I'm still coming to terms with the fact that my life isn't what I thought it would be.

I find myself looking for other people with mental illness to be friends with now. People who are trying their hardest, but who know this is something they are always going to have. Life will always be harder for us. I want to be around people who feel that thin but impermeable layer that separates us from the rest of the world.

I don't want to think of the world as people who have mental illness and people who don't.

I'm sorry though, but it is.

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