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# Dating With a Mental Illness

Your condition doesn't have to keep you from finding love.



Having an open and honest conversation with your date can help you decide if he or she will be worth your time and effort.

By [Amir Khan](#) | Dec. 5, 2014 | 9:15 a.m. EST



First dates are supposed to be exciting – but when you [have a mental illness](#), the fun of dinner and drinks and the chemistry between the two of you can be dwarfed by worrying over how your date will react when you open up about your condition. If you tell him too soon, you might scare him off. Wait too long, and you run the risk of her feeling misled. So what do you do?

Molly Pohlig, a 36-year-old New Yorker, has depression, anxiety and borderline personality disorder – conditions she says have made dating difficult in the past. "Several people were taken aback," she says, "and I've had some relationships or dates end pretty abruptly because of it."

The issue, says Pohlig, who has [written about dating with a mental illness](#), is that many people have not had any experience interacting with someone with mental illness. "All they've seen are TV shows, and they think that if you say, 'I have a mental illness,' it means you're a psychopath."

But Bradley Erford, a past president of the American Counseling Association and professor in the school

counseling program at Loyola University in Maryland, says more people have experience with mental illness than you'd think. One in 17 Americans, or 13.6 million people, live with a serious mental illness, such as depression, schizophrenia or bipolar disorder, according to the [National Alliance on Mental Illness](#). The good news is there are millions of people with mental illnesses – many of whom don't even know it – who are in stable, loving relationships, Erford says. "Most people with mental disorders are undiagnosed and untreated," he says, "so many are already in significant relationships without either partner knowing."

Most of those disorders are mild to moderate, he adds. So even if you're being treated for a condition, be it through medication or [therapy](#), you shouldn't worry that you won't be able to make a relationship work. Below, experts share their advice for how to navigate dating with a mental illness.

**Dealing with the stress of dating.** Start by recognizing that dating is stressful, Erford says, which can sometimes exacerbate a condition. "Dating can feel like a roller coaster, especially at the beginning," he says. "And if you're suffering from depression, first dates can make you feel like you're not making a good impression or cause you to have other negative thoughts that can cause you to spiral downward." Erford recommends [speaking to a therapist](#) about coping methods to deal with the stress and catch potential problems before they arise.

**When to bring it up.** Relationships are primarily about compatibility, says April Masini, a relationship and advice columnist who runs the website [AskApril](#). First dates should be about [establishing what you have in common](#). Throughout the course of several dates, compatibility issues can arise when it comes to religion, political views or sex drive. "Mental illness, however, is often something people are ashamed of, or are worried will be a deal breaker, and so it either comes up right away or not at all," she says.

Your condition should only be discussed if and when you're interested in a long-term relationship, Masini says, because there's no point in turning a fun first date into a serious discussion if you're not sure there's a relationship to be had. "It's important to disclose or ask about any issues that might be an incompatibility if you want a long-term relationship to work," she says. "My advice is that this issue should come up by the third date. This is the date when most people usually decide that they really like someone enough to want to pursue a serious relationship." After the third date, people tend to become a little more invested in each other, Masini says. "It's easier for both parties to back away from a relationship unscathed before a third date rather than after."

But before you decide to tell the other person, recognize that for him or her, your condition could be a deal breaker. "There's still a lot of stigma surrounding mental illnesses," Erford says. "We live in a competitive society where we don't want to be viewed as abnormal in any way. But it's something you need to discuss if you're going to be in a relationship."

**How to break the news.** When it comes time to talk about it, speak candidly, Masini says. Don't beat around the bush. Your date likely has his or her own issues that you'll need to deal with, so don't feel bad about bringing it up. "If you have a mental illness that will affect a relationship, it's much better to be honest about it so you can decide if someone is going to be worth your time and energy," she says.

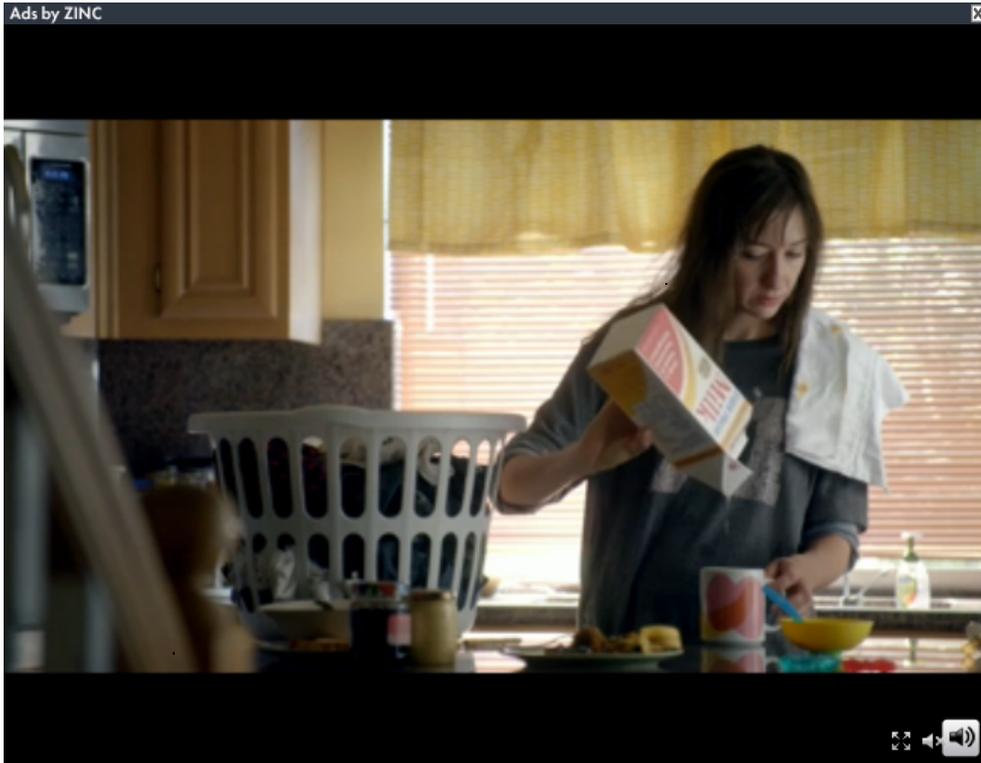
Mental illness is just one aspect of your character, Masini adds, so don't let it define you. Just like rich and poor or people of different religions can be compatible mates, so can someone with an illness and someone without one. "Don't think that just because you have a mental illness, you need to be with someone else who has a mental illness," she says. "The trick is knowing yourself, being honest and choosing a partner who is the same, and with whom you mesh well over the majority of the time you spend together."

**Remember – their response can change.** Pohlig says her condition makes her impulsive, which has caused her to bring it up on the first date. And though her dates often seem fine with it, they don't always stay that way. "When you first start to see someone, you overlook things," she says. "It's hard because talking about it is much different than them seeing it. Telling someone what it's like when you [have a panic attack](#) is one thing, but when they see you having one it tends to freak them out." She suggests it's

much easier to be friends first. For instance, her mental illness wasn't an issue with her current boyfriend because he knew about it before they started dating. "He was a friend first," she says. "It's a much better way to approach it than to lay it on them when [our] endorphins are all out of whack."

But even if you don't choose to take it slow, the one piece of advice Pohlig has is to just be open about who you are and the health condition you have. "Be absolutely honest," she says. "Don't downplay it, don't try to hide it. It just makes it worse in the long run."

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