

SANE

FACTSHEET

STEPHANIE

I love my life and have been quite privileged. I have also struggled with different mental illnesses for almost a decade. I was diagnosed with bulimia at 18 and had my first suicide attempt just before my 23rd birthday. It was just after this that I received my diagnosis of borderline personality disorder (BPD) and was able to seek treatment and support.

It was actually quite a relief for me and my family to be able to put a name to what I was experiencing and to learn my triggers. While the symptoms of borderline personality disorder can be quite diverse, for me it was an irrational and impulsive response to different situations. I was very black and white. One minute I could be totally fine then something would trigger me into a complete suicidal episode and a 24-hour downward spiral. BPD generally also is a co-morbid self harm type illness. In my case it was an eating disorder – a sort of combination of anorexia and bulimia.

I've felt the stigma and discomfort around mental illness both in the workplace and in my personal life. There have been times I've had to take sick days for mental illness issues and it hasn't been viewed as a proper sick day. I've also been excluded from certain social situations. I had quite a large group of friends and was sometimes not invited to things because I might have an episode. I've also isolated myself from events when I've known people would be there who have certain views on mental illness. So I've felt quite alienated at times.

I don't blame anyone, as it's such unfamiliar territory. People can identify with a broken arm, because they can see it. They can't see mental illness so they can't sympathise with it. They can't comprehend the way your mind can change itself into thinking such deep and dark thoughts.

I feel there just isn't enough accessible education around mental illness. There's a lot of information about it, but you have to look for it. It hasn't been as saturated in mass media the way other illnesses with the same statistics are.

Supporting someone with a mental illness is definitely challenging. Your family and closest friends feel they should be able to support and love you no matter what, but you really test that. My loved ones have been amazing and I am so grateful. My partner has been incredibly patient with me and he's taken the time to learn my triggers. He'll hide under the blankets with me until I've calmed down. He knows not to say anything. He knows just to be there.

People might say they support mental illness, but most don't want to talk about it. Being part of a community who have had similar struggles can be a big help. Mental illness is not a convenient thing – it's not 9 to 5, Monday to Friday. So it's really important to have

somewhere to go any time of day, such as the online SANE forums. Reading about others' experiences or having someone empathise with your own can give a lot of hope during your darkest moments.