Love Like Everyone Else

Temple University Collaborative
On Community Inclusion of Individuals with Psychiatric Disabilities
Love Like Everyone Else

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Introduction

Just like everyone else, people who experience mental health issues desire human connection, intimacy, and loving relationships. Unfortunately, when these desires are expressed or acted upon they are often ignored, discouraged or prevented by the psychiatric system, or narrowly focused on the potential risks related to sexual activity. From 1907 through the 1970s, federally funded sterilization programs were implemented as a means of controlling marginalized populations, including people with mental illnesses, sending the heartbreaking message that individuals who underwent such procedures did not have the right to make choices about their own bodies or pursue intimacy; they had been deemed unfit to even consider parenthood and a meaningful family life. Indeed, supportive intimate relationships can be considered an important part of promoting and maintaining recovery.

But the echoes of sterilization may still remain. Mental health consumers have often reported the devastating sexual side effects of certain psychotropic medications, describing this as ‘sexual suicide,’ which can lead to medication non-compliance and interfere with the development and maintenance of romantic partnerships. Provider support of intimate relationships has also been problematic due to commonly held assumptions and fears about consumers’ intimate lives. Further, providers may be fearful that dating will interfere with the person’s stability and may lead to increased symptoms which could require hospitalization. Additionally, some providers may also pathologize what is otherwise considered normal sexual

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behavior\textsuperscript{5}. Disclosure of diagnosis to love interests or current partners can present an additional barrier to building a loving relationship. For people with mental illnesses, negotiating the ‘right time’ to disclose to a potential partner can be a delicate dance, and is often riddled with balancing one’s lived experience with fear of discriminatory attitudes or rejection by the other person\textsuperscript{6}. Romantic partners of those with mental illnesses often have had more negative reactions to late disclosure as opposed to earlier disclosure (e.g., when the relationship began). However, it is also evident that early disclosure may have also led to termination of the relationship.

Healthy, loving partnerships are often characterized by open, effective communication; love and support; problem-solving; and sharing values and interests. Regularly sharing a good laugh with one’s partner can bring so much meaning and joy to our lives! Partnership often brings about other milestones, as well, such as purchasing a new home, starting a family, or getting a pet together. Positive, intimate partnerships allow people to support one another not only in their journey as a couple or family, but as individuals, as well.

The purpose of this document is to celebrate the experiences of love, romance, and intimacy expressed by persons who report having a mental health diagnosis. It is hoped that these first-person accounts will illuminate the importance of love and intimate relationships as a vital target area for promoting health and wellness. The experiences shared in this document highlight specific ways that mental health service users give and receive love and support, just like everyone else who is in a healthy intimate partnership. We hope that these stories provide insight and facilitate important conversations between intimate partners, service providers and consumers, and family and friends. And we hope that you’re feeling inspired to plan a date night with that special someone!


Love Notes

We received several responses to an anonymous questionnaire asking people with mental health diagnoses to share their positive experiences with love and intimate relationships, and how these intimate partnerships have supported respondents’ well-being and recovery. These are their stories. (Names have been attributed to respondents).

Deanna:

It is nice to be comforted, held, loved. It is like none other.

Jamel:

My wife helps me every day to survive and thrive.

Saul:

My wife Kathy helped me to find my inner person.

Charles:

My wife of 16 years is a constant source of support and strength to me. When I was fired from a high-paying job, she was very concerned that I would descend into a deep depression, and encouraged me to remain active every day and be productive while I looked for additional work. She is my confidante and knows all my secrets. She allows me to speak my truth, even when it’s uncomfortable. When I was diagnosed with cancer, she was right there with me in the hospital...staying by my side even though she had to work the next day. She’s my best friend and there’s nothing I wouldn’t do for her.
Annie:

My boyfriend doesn't always understand my mental health issues, but he's always supportive. The other day I had to take a personal day from work because I was in a depressive episode, and he let me sleep for as long as I wanted, but also made sure that I was getting enough to eat and staying hydrated. When I get stressed out and overwhelmed with responsibilities, he always reminds me to take deep breaths and find calm before continuing working.

My therapist is supportive of me dating, but she always encourages me to make sure I'm not becoming too reliant on a partner. When you're having mental health problems, sometimes you latch onto people to make you feel safe and secure - but I have to be sure I don't do that before I'm confident in my relationship!

One barrier to maintaining my relationship is having to discuss my mental health issues before I feel ready to share this personal information. But if I have a panic attack or am experiencing depression, it's difficult to hide those things from someone you spend a lot of time with! In a way, it helps make your relationship stronger, by sharing this personal information, but it can also be difficult, like too much too soon.

Raymond

My spouse and I were married for twenty years. During our marriage I was going through crisis after crisis with my mental illness. My spouse was very accepting about what was going on with me and came to crisis stabilization units faithfully and always let me know I was supported and loved. This was not the first marriage for either of us. We both had been widowed and what started as friendship ended up being our love story.
Laurel:

When I entered my current relationship, I was already looking for signs that things weren't going to work out...These signs were largely in my head, but they caused me a great deal of pain, and a lot of embarrassing meltdowns over what turned out to be nothing. But throughout it all my partner was nothing but patient, kind, and above all - just there. He was willing to give me the reassurance I needed. He was willing to hold me while I cried. The next morning, after a particularly bad breakdown on my part, he would be there when I woke up, with a cup of coffee, ready to tell me everything was okay. It never fazed him. He even came to therapy with me when I asked and helped talk through one of my crying spells. And slowly, with his patient, gentle love, with lots of nights in watching B-movies, with weeks turning to months turning to years that he stayed, I began to heal from those wounds of the past. It's a lot easier to accept his love without question. And it's the little things too that make every day better and easier. We have a home together, and he helps me with dishes and cooks me dinner all the time. He brings me my coffee every morning to make it easier to come out of bed. We got a dog together which has been life changing. And he's given me the space and support to grow into a much happier, stronger, better version of myself.

I go to therapy every other week, and I see a psychiatrist for medication management. Being able to talk things out with my therapist instead of just blurting out my worst, least-formed thoughts with my partner has really helped me. I have been able to learn a lot more about my patterns as an anxious-attached person, and how my own traumas affect how I relate to others, especially my romantic partners. With this insight, my communication with my partner has improved so much over the course of our time together.
Nancy

My wife is everything to me. She is the inspiration for my belief that I can recover and loving and being loved by her are the main reasons for the recovery I have achieved. Pharmaceutical drugs are useful tools, the help of a good therapist is important to be sure, but the hope and beauty in my world grows from the life we are building together. I can have a heightened emotion without my wife worrying about my sanity. I can get silly without her wondering if medications should be adjusted. I get to be a human being first. When I am sensitive to criticism or judgment she doesn't face me with impatience and a "just get over it" attitude, and I get empathy not pity. She is in love with who I am, not how I act. We've created a fertile ground that we both can grow from. I'm not saying there are no weeds in our garden, but I like how we deal with them - no Roundup needed. Feeling valued as a person is something that I rarely got elsewhere and something that cannot be overemphasized or overindulged. My wife is fun. F-U-N. And she inspires it in others. She often says how much better the world would be if people would just let themselves have more fun. It's tough to argue with that.

We were definitely not encouraged to date each other. There was the whole gay thing, but mostly there was the absolute no-no of we-met-in-a-psych-hospital thing. Yes, we did, both of us patients. We did mostly get support from our mothers and therapists and if I am completely honest some of the disapproval was helpful in a challenging, motivational way.

I won't lie - a relationship between two people with significant trauma histories can be challenging. Besides dealing internally with a relationship with two people needing a lot of understanding and special care, we faced heavy judgment from some people around us; the 'it'll never last' attitude and a general lack of respect that we are a "real" couple can be tough to take at times. 2020 will make eight years and we just always come back to the love. We want to be together and our dreams are stronger than their negativity and our internalized stigma. She is getting her bachelor's while working full time and then a master's degree will follow. I am also training for a career change mid life. We fully expect to be living our dreams and why not? If we listened to most of those in the mental health field or society in general we would never have gotten this far. My wife was told as a teenager that to be responsible she should never be in a relationship or have children. Her amazingly talented 22 year old daughter is doing well living her life working and going to school across the country. I got a much more subtle message about my capabilities growing up, but about as harmful. In our relationship we have a place to dream, be supportive and know we are supported. There's no amount of assistance I've gotten from interaction with the mental health field that even comes close.