

Dealing With People Who Don't Understand Mental Illness

Not many people have a good grasp on how to treat people with mental illness. Depression, anxiety, PTSD & C-PTSD in particular seem to be targets for those with little to no compassion. If you have any or all of those illnesses, chances are you're going to face at least a few people without compassion at some point, so you need to be prepared.

One thing that seems to diffuse people from further insensitive, invalidating comments is a calm, logical response. I'll give some examples to show you what I mean.

"It's all in your mind" is a frequent comment. This one tells me the person saying it thinks you're crazy & has no patience for you. A good response could be, "Well, yes it is. It's a mental illness after all. Where else would it be?"

Some people say things like, "Think happy thoughts." Well, gee, why didn't I think of that?! Depression, anxiety, PTSD & C-PTSD can come with intrusive thoughts that may be impossible to control. A possible response could be, "You seem to forget- my brain doesn't work like yours. It's physically broken. It's not that easy for me to just think happy thoughts."

"You should just..." is another one. Unasked for advice is never fun & it's just rude. It's even worse when the person giving it has absolutely no idea what they are talking about. This one really gets under my skin, especially when it's wrapped in fake concern like, "I mean this in love, but you need to get over that..." for example. I've responded with, "Thank you but I didn't ask for your advice on this subject." The person who did this with me stopped speaking to me for months after saying that, but tough. I was respectful & I didn't ask for her advice.

Some people say, "I know how you feel." No. No you don't. You aren't me. You don't live with the mental illness that I do. We are two very different people. So no, you don't know how I feel. That can be a good response. I admit, I usually get snarky when told this. My responses aren't usually that nice. I've said, "You spent most of your life suicidal too? You have C-PTSD too? Aren't those flashbacks terrible? Oh, you don't have them.. then I guess you really don't know how I feel." Not nice, but it tends to get people's attention when nicer comments don't.

"That doesn't sound so bad" is another ridiculous comment. I think some people forget that human beings are all very different. What doesn't sound so bad to one person can devastate another. My high school guidance counselor told me this phrase after I told her that my mother would scream at me & tell me how horrible I was multiple times each day. Her insensitive comment made me feel wrong for being traumatized. I was young & didn't know about narcissism then, so I didn't respond. Now? I think I would say something like, "Maybe it doesn't sound so bad to you, but

you weren't there. You weren't the one being screamed at & going through the trauma I survived."

Another comment is "You can't have PTSD. You weren't in the military." Unfortunately, because there has been a lot of attention on PTSD in soldiers, the rest of us with it resulting from non-military trauma have been disregarded. It reminds me of when AIDS was first coming into the public eye in the 80's, & people thought it was a "gay disease." AIDS isn't a "gay disease" any more than PTSD is a "military problem". It's a trauma problem. And, reminding someone who says you can't have it because you weren't in the military of that fact is a very good response.

I hope these examples help you to respond to the rude comments made by insensitive people about your mental illness.=