

Silenced Voices: Insight into Those Who Suffer with Mental Illness

October 7, 2025

***Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.
— Galatians 6:2 (NIV)***

Most people move through life with a nervous system that more or less cooperates.

You wake up, maybe a little tired, but you get out of bed. You make decisions. You go to work. You do the laundry, pay the bills, return the text. You might feel stressed, sad, worried, or overwhelmed at times—but you recover. Your “battery” drains and then recharges.

For many people living with anxiety, depression, PTSD, OCD, bipolar disorder, or borderline personality disorder, that's not how it works.

They don't wake up at 100%.

They may not even start the day at 50%.

The battery is already low before the day begins.

If you don't struggle with mental illness yourself, it can be hard to imagine what life feels like from the inside. My hope in these words is to give you a gentle window into that world—to help you listen, to understand a little more, and to love a little better.

These are composite stories—based on common experiences, not any one person. But they sound very much like what your friends, family members, and church members might say if they felt safe enough to tell you.

ANXIETY: “MY BODY IS LOUD EVEN WHEN LIFE IS QUIET”

“From the outside, I know it looks small.

It's just a grocery store. Just a phone call. Just a meeting.

Inside my body, it feels like a fire alarm that never shuts off.”

I wake up already tense. Before my feet hit the floor, my brain is running: What did I forget? Who's upset with me? What if today is the day everything falls apart?

My heart races while I brush my teeth. My stomach twists making coffee. I think about going to the store and my chest tightens. It's not that I don't know how to shop. It's that every step feels like danger.

What if I have a panic attack in the aisle?
What if I see someone I know and I can't breathe?
What if I get overwhelmed and shut down in front of everyone?

By the time I actually go, my battery is already in the red. If I cancel, I feel like a failure. If I push through, I feel like I might shatter.

If you don't live with anxiety, you might think, "They're overreacting. It's just life." What you don't see is that their body is louder than their logic. They usually know it "doesn't make sense," and that actually makes them feel worse.

What often helps is simple, steady compassion:
I can tell this feels big for you. I'm with you.
Do you want me to go with you, or stay on the phone while you go?
What is one tiny part you can do today?

What usually hurts are phrases like:
Just calm down.
It's not a big deal.
You're making this harder than it has to be.

DEPRESSION: "EVERYTHING FEELS HEAVY, EVEN BREATHING"

"I'm not trying to be lazy. I'm trying to figure out how to move when my soul feels like it weighs a hundred pounds."

My alarm goes off and I stare at the ceiling. The thought of getting up feels like climbing a mountain. I am not sad every second; sometimes I feel nothing at all. Numb. Blunted. Disconnected.

Simple things feel complicated: shower, breakfast, answering a text.

I see dishes in the sink and laundry on the floor. Part of me cares. Part of me wants to care. Another part whispers, "What's the point?" Then shame rolls in: "Everyone else can do life. Why can't you?"

It's not that I don't know what needs to be done. It's that I can't seem to connect wanting to do it with the ability to actually move.

If you don't live with depression, you might think, "If they'd just get up and try, they'd feel better." What you don't see is that they often believe that too, and the fact that they can't makes them feel even more broken.

What often helps sounds like:

I see how heavy this feels. I'm glad you're still here.

Would it help if we did one thing together—like starting a load of laundry?

And then, gentle, steady check-ins without guilt or pressure.

What usually hurts:

Other people have it worse.

Just choose joy.

If you had more faith, you wouldn't feel this way.

PTSD: “MY PAST SHOWS UP IN MY PRESENT WITHOUT ASKING”

“I know I’m ‘safe’ now.

My body doesn’t always know that.”

It can be the smallest thing that sets it off: a sound, a smell, a phrase, a time of year.

Someone drops something; it bangs loudly. People laugh and move on. My heart slams against my ribs. My palms sweat. My throat closes. I’m back in a moment I never wanted to relive.

Sometimes it’s not a clear flashback—it’s a wave that hits my body. My brain pulls up old fear like a file that won’t close.

I want to be present in the room I’m actually in. I want to trust that I’m not there anymore. But my nervous system is wired for survival now, and it reacts before I can explain anything logically.

If you don’t live with PTSD, you might think, “That was years ago. Why are they still affected by it?” What you don’t see is that trauma doesn’t live on a calendar. It lives in the body. Their reaction isn’t a choice; it’s a survival system trying to protect them from a danger that no longer exists.

What often helps:

You’re safe. I’m here. You don’t have to explain right now.

Or, I’ll be in the next room. I’m here when you’re ready.

And honoring the triggers they trust you enough to name.

What usually hurts: You’re being dramatic. You need to just get over it.

Or forcing them to talk when they are not ready.

OCD: “MY THOUGHTS SCARE ME MORE THAN THEY SCARE YOU”

“It’s not about being neat or quirky.
It’s about being terrified by my own mind.”

People joke about being “so OCD” when they like things clean or organized. That’s not what’s happening in my head.

I get thoughts I never asked for—images, ideas, urges that feel completely opposite of who I am. They crash into my mind uninvited: What if I hurt someone? What if I yell something awful in church? What if I left the stove on and the house burns down?

I don’t want these thoughts. They feel like intruders. The more I try not to think them, the louder they get.

So I do things to try to feel safe: check the lock again and again, wash my hands until they’re raw, repeat certain phrases in my head, ask you the same question over and over: “Are you sure it’s okay?”

I’m not trying to annoy you. I’m trying to neutralize a terror you can’t see.

If you don’t live with OCD, you might think, “Why don’t they just stop?” What you don’t see is that the ritual—the checking, washing, repeating—brings a tiny moment of relief, and their brain has learned to cling to that relief for dear life.

What often helps is taking their distress seriously, even when the content feels irrational to you, avoiding jokes about “being OCD,” and saying, I can see this is really intense for you. I love you. I’m not going to answer that question again right now, but I’m not going anywhere.

What usually hurts: That’s crazy. You’re being ridiculous.

Or mocking their patterns in front of others.

BIPOLAR DISORDER: “I DON’T ALWAYS TRUST MY OWN BRAIN”

“Sometimes I feel too alive.
Sometimes I feel barely here.
I’m always wondering which version of me people will get.”

There are seasons when I feel on top of the world. My thoughts race. I have energy to spare. I start projects, big ideas, plans that feel brilliant at 2:00 a.m. I don’t need much sleep—why waste time? I talk faster. I spend more. I feel invincible. From the outside, it might even look like I’m thriving.

Then there are seasons when the light goes out. I crash hard. The energy is gone, and all that's left is exhaustion and shame. I look back at what I said, bought, promised, or posted and feel sick. "Why did I do that? Who was that?"

I'm not being "moody." I'm living on a roller coaster my brain builds for me.

If you don't live with bipolar disorder, you might think, "Why can't they just find balance? Why do they self-sabotage when things are going well?" What you don't see is that they often feel like a stranger to themselves—afraid of their highs, crushed by their lows, and worried they will exhaust the people they love.

What often helps is consistency: staying when their mood shifts, not only when they are "up." Encouraging treatment and healthy rhythms without shaming. Gentle reality checks: I notice you haven't slept much this week. How are you really?

What usually hurts:

You're too much.

You were fine yesterday; what happened?

Or treating their diagnosis as a reason to dismiss everything they say or feel.

BORDERLINE PERSONALITY: "I'M AFRAID YOU'LL LEAVE, AND I DON'T KNOW HOW TO STOP THAT FEAR"

"Relationship is where I most want to be held... and where I feel most terrified."

When I love, I love hard. When I hurt, I hurt deep.

If you don't text back, part of me knows you might just be busy. Another part panics: "They're done with you. You said something wrong. You're too much."

A small conflict can feel like the end of the relationship. My emotions move fast and big. One moment I feel safe and connected; the next, I feel abandoned and enraged—sometimes over something that seems small to you but feels huge to my heart.

I hate that I can go from "You're the best person I've ever known" to "You don't care about me at all" in the same day. It scares me too. I often feel ashamed after the storm passes.

I am not trying to manipulate you. I am desperately trying not to be left.

If you don't live with borderline personality dynamics, you might think, "I can't keep up with their emotions. They're always causing drama." What you don't see is someone whose attachment system is raw—someone who may have been deeply hurt, neglected, or abandoned in the past and now lives braced for it to happen again.

What often helps is clear, calm communication:

I care about you. I'm not leaving. I do, however, need a little time to cool down, and I will come back.

Boundaries that are consistent, not punishing. Naming the good: reminding them of the ways they are more than their reactions.

What usually hurts: sudden cutoffs, silent treatment, calling them "crazy," or making promises you do not keep.

WHAT ALL OF THIS HAS IN COMMON: THE BATTERY

Every story here is different, but they share this reality:

Many people you love are starting the day with a nervous system already in survival mode.

Their battery is not broken. It is working overtime.

If your battery tends to stay charged, you are not better—you are simply wired differently. Your invitation may be to notice, to slow down, to listen, and to believe people when they say, "This is hard for me," even if it would not be hard for you.

You don't have to fix anyone. You can't.

But you can exchange judgment for curiosity. You can trade, "Why can't you just...?" for, "Help me understand what this feels like." You can move from minimizing pain to honoring the courage it takes to live with it.

The people in your life who carry these diagnoses are not problems to manage. They are people made with intention, walking through realities you may never fully see.

Sometimes, the most healing words you can offer are simple:

I believe you. I'm listening.

You are not too much for me to care about, and you are not junk to God.

That won't remove their struggles. But it may lighten the weight of carrying them alone.