

A glimpse into Dating, Interviews, and Depression.

A couple of weeks ago, I had dinner with a friend of mine who works for a mental health trust and we were discussing how honest someone should be who suffers from depression on a date. At first, I rallied for absolute honesty. "Of course if there were an opening in the discussion, I would mention that I suffer from depression," I said gamely. "Why hide it? I mean, it is so glaringly obvious at times in my mind that I think it is already obvious."

My companion gave me a quizzical look. "Would you really? Would you? I mean, what if you weren't actually depressed when you met? Would you bring it up then?"

I shifted uncomfortably in my seat. "But if I wasn't depressed or having a bad spell, is it relevant? I would talk about a history of depression but I don't know I would classify it as an ongoing problem." Which is a lie, lie, lie, but what can a girl do when she refers to her depression as though it were a chic little clutch purse?

"But for some people it is. And if it is clinical it definitely is." He sat back in his chair and studied me contemplatively. "People can go for years and not have a depressive episode. You can meet someone, get married or whatever it is that happens, and not even think of the depression until it rears its head." I nodded thoughtfully.

"I don't tell would-be employers," I said in an almost-whisper. "I'm terrified they won't hire me."

"But you'd tell a date?"

This conversation gave me pause. I've recently returned to single life and have started dating people, in the very American sense of "dating," being more like amateur sport. You meet someone (the mechanics of how you meet vary; I've met people in bars, bookshops, on public transport, online, etc.), you chat, you arrange to go out, and go from there.

The first date is a great deal like a job interview. You show up freshly laundered and pressed. You've got your arsenal ready. In my case, I try to have a good lipstick and good selection of witty stories. I try to sparkle and charm. I am flirtatious by nature, so this generally comes easily. When I'm going through a depressive streak, this is harder work. It will take me hours to get ready for a date or an interview. Literally hours. I have to start prepping at least 2 days in advance. I end up having conversations with myself in the cupboard I hide in or in the bathroom that go something like this:

"I don't think I can do this. Seriously. I really don't. I'm going to make an ass of myself. A complete ass. Just another failure to have to live down."

"Do you actually listen to the shite that comes out of your mouth? I mean. . ."

“Look, it’s easy for you. You don’t have to leave the house. I do. You’re just the voice in my head. I’m the one who actually has to deal with “the shite” as you call it.”

“Well, if you’re going to be so defensive. . . do you think you could stop hitting your legs for a second? We’re going to bruise. You know we bruise easily.”

I keep pounding my legs with my little hands. My tiny hands make mean marks on my legs, the continuous pounding getting faster as the hysteria rises in my chest, turning into a wailing that could bring down most funeral homes.

“Seriously. STOP THE FREAKING BANGING!!! No wonder people think you’re a nut case. Either just go ahead and off yourself, girlie, or get up and go decide what to wear. I’ve got things to do; I don’t have time to sit around and wait with you for the waaah-imbalance.”

That usually works to at least lure me out of the cupboard. Who knew my conscience was a bully?

A couple of days later, I inevitably find myself sitting across a table from either a prospective bit of somethin’ somethin’ or a potential employer. I begin to ramble nervously, sometimes even playing with my hair. I take it down from its perch on the top of my head. I put it back. I take the hair down, I put it back. On and on. I answer the questions, I smile lightly and tell whatever witty story seems appropriate. If it’s a date, I usually have to excuse myself to go and vomit in the nearest ladies room. If it’s an interview, I am able to wait it out until I can find an empty alley. And I begin to wonder if it is really worth it, all this hassle.

Dating used to be easy. It used to be larky to get all dolled up and go out. To flirt and be flirted with, the air ripe with possibility and intention. But somewhere along the line sex began to have serious consequences. (I generally associate it with the same time that sex began to have known consequences, like an abortion because the condom broke and one has been taking antibiotics which renders the pill one takes so religiously and with fear of never being able to conceive). It doesn’t help that I sometimes see sex and mainstream culture as willing culprits who happily allow sex to be traded like a commodity on the open market.

What is the going price for dinner and a play? Well, usually an obligatory third date. After the 3rd date, the pressure is on. A good girl doesn’t want to put out too soon (there are rules, after all). A good girl with a complicated sense of self and independence panics while she tries to decide what she wants. A depressed good girl will do manic things to reinforce either her frayed sense of self or her complete worthlessness. Sometimes, she’s so desperate for human contact, she seems to step outside herself and let the situation messily unfold. It’s not an easy line to toe. And sometimes, her judgement is very, very cloudy.

A girl can't tell would-be employers that they might one day find her curled up in the copy room or curled up under her desk in tears that may well have nothing to do with work. It is bad form. Employers, in my experience, frown on such behavior. And they certainly don't like to be confronted with early warning signs.

And prospective mates, in my experience, either take these warning signs as an excuse to get the hell out of Dodge or as a challenge. Nothing is more insulting than the ol' "I can save you," line, the protective crusader rushing out to try and bandage everything. One wants to shout "I'm depressed, not bleeding to death, you fruitloop!" But that response is seen a bit harsh.

So what does one do? How honest can we be with the world at large if we still our own depression as the feral animal that can't come out to play at parties? Even with changes in legislation, I have yet to see legislation and a change in cultural attitudes that really makes it perfectly acceptable to check that little disability box that is bandied about. If anyone has any ideas, let me know. Until then, I've got to go and get one of my emotional carry-on bags repaired.

© Redbridge Concern for Mental Health