

Dating & Shalom Bayis

Tips and Tidbits

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From Dating Coach, Rabbi Dr. Jack Cohen
Written by Elan Perchik

Dating and Mental Health

One of the more important and relevant matters to discuss when it comes to dating, yet generally shied away from and avoided, is that of mental health struggles.

While significant inroads have been made in our day to remove the stigma surrounding mental health, there yet remains the sentiment that an individual is looked down upon for struggling in this regard. Especially in the Jewish community, unfortunately, the stigma is even more intensified. Notwithstanding, a reasonable thinker will be able to understand that mental health issues, aside from personality disorders, do not reflect a person's core character. An individual struggling with depression, anxiety or OCD is, for all intents and purposes, as wonderful a person as someone who has never experienced these challenges. That is something too important to overlook. Mental health does not reflect character, and in fact, many a time, such individuals exceed in their exceptional character far beyond.

That being said, the question which begs is why someone with mental health issues generally has a difficult time getting married through the *shidduch* system. In one respect, the answer is straightforward: lack of education. When people hear the word "depression" "anxiety" or the like said in relation to someone, they tend to move on. The word triggers concern and going down that road is not something they would like to do.

However, here we will not focus on all the theoretical reasons why this is so and go into great detail about each of the mental health disorders, but rather focus on what can be done both for people struggling with mental health and someone considering dating such a person. First, we will deal with dating someone who is struggling with mental health.

Firstly, *find out more information*. If you learn that someone has depression, take a deep breath. Look more into the matter and become informed about what that means for this individual person. How does he/she experience depression? How long has it been going on for? If relevant, what medication are they taking? Once you have gathered this information, you can make an informed decision about how you would like to proceed. That is the first step. Do not reject, rather research.

In the event that the information pertaining to mental health is revealed only some time into the dating process, also

remember, you are not yet married to them. At this point, you may not have done any research, but now is the time to do so.

Now, how do you go about looking into the matter? It is important to note that here you are not looking for brief or vague answers, but precise and comprehensive information. If the individual you are dating is comfortable providing this information to you directly, that is an extremely good sign. For one, it shows their openness about themselves and reflects that they are comfortable and confident with who they are. Secondly, you will be hearing it directly from the person themselves and not receive any watered-down information from someone outside of them.

However, aside from this or if the above option is not presented, a very useful way of proceeding is to have a doctor-to-doctor conversation. With permission and with permission only of the person you are dating, the psychologist and/or psychiatrist of your date can be contacted by a psychologist/psychiatrist of your choice and openly discuss the matter. They will be able to understand the presenting issue with the full range of knowledge and comprehensiveness and be equipped to touch upon points that you may have never considered. Once this discussion takes place, you will be able to have a follow-up conversation with the psychologist you reached out to and learn more information.

While this can create the feeling within the person you are dating that they are being looked at under a microscope, you should not be deterred to find out this information, whether from your date directly or their psychologist. At the same time, bear in mind that this is a sensitive matter, and grilling your date or the doctor and being obsessive about every nuanced detail is both over-the-top and likely a reflection that you will not be able to bear dating such a person. If you cannot look at the presenting issues and still see the person for who they are, you should not continue dating them. You must be able to appreciate the person all-encompassing, with everything they struggle with and even more so because of the things they struggle with, and feel at peace. Otherwise, you will be letting him/her down and be shortchanging them as well as yourself.

Once this information has been gathered, whether before you have dated the person at all or after some number of dates, you can make an informed decision.

Next to keep in mind is the fact that *a decision to date them does not meet a decision to marry them*. You can remain relaxed knowing that there is no harm in getting to know the person and see for yourself what they are like and how their mental health is a part of their life. You can enjoy the process of getting to know them and appreciate them for who they are. Their mental health struggles do not define them; and if anything, it has only provided them with greater inner strength and resilience, which are wonderful assets. While you (and your parents) may worry about becoming emotionally attached and invested in the person, which will only make it more difficult to end the relationship later if need be, that is unavoidable. The most you can do is remain realistically aware of what you are dealing with and make deliberate, thoughtful steps one at a time. The only exception is when you know with deep-down certainty that you cannot go through marrying this person, and you simply continue dating them nonetheless. That is unfair and misleading both to your date and yourself. Only proceed with dating if you are open-ended about a future marriage with them.

One hugely important point to note is *the time at which the individual struggled with mental health*. Are they currently dealing with depression/anxiety etc. or was this experienced years ago? If, for example, a person dealt with anxiety in high school and was on medication, but outgrew it and has been functioning fine for the past number of years, there is little to worry about. What you want to primarily focus on is current mental health issues, not past ones. As a general rule, research indicates that there is a combination of biological/genetic factors and environmental influences and stressors which precipitate mental health issues (in technical psychological terms, a diathesis-stress model). Individuals may have gone through periods of stress that precipitated their condition, which then faded away when the stressor ended. As such, past depression or anxiety which is not currently affecting an individual and will likely not recur and have a significant impact on the marriage, is of little concern.

There are exceptions to this, such as conditions which are chronic and ebb and flow with a person for many years. Many of these struggles (e.g. anorexia) are ongoing and hit a person harder at certain points of life given environmental and stress factors. They are indeed surmountable, however, and certainly do not mean that a person who has struggled in this regard cannot get married. Rather, it is simply important to understand how these past struggles continue to play a role in the person's life today.

Another presenting concern to many is the presence of mental health problems with family members of the man or woman they are dating. To this end, consider the words of Rabbi Dr. Abraham Twerski:

When the problem is not a history of an emotional illness in the proposed chassan or kallah, but of a family member, and the concern is whether it may be hereditary, I refer to a professor of genetics. He told me that he always provides the information requested, and often advises the people not to let this be an impediment to the shidduch. He

said, "There are so many conditions in which there is a genetic factor – heart disease, diabetes, cancer, emotional illness – that it is virtually impossible to find a family that is free of a hereditary condition. Health problems in Jewish families are often concealed. If everything else about the shidduch is favorable, genetic issues, unless of an overwhelming nature, should not be an obstacle'" (Dear Rabbi, Dear Doctor, pp. 243-244).

Concerns that relate to medication and future ramifications as it pertains to continuous usage should be forwarded to a psychologist/psychiatrist. Many medications for anxiety and depression (e.g. Celexa, Wellbutrin, Luvox) are mainstream and taken by millions worldwide and, along with therapy, have proven to keep individuals well-balanced and healthy. In this respect, it is more important to focus on the person themselves and see how they function and how you feel around them, than focus on the exact medication, barring extenuating situations. It is advisable to take your time in dating them and really get to know them in a variety of settings at different hours of the day and night. In this way, you will get to see them on the whole and get to know them as a person, outside of the medication. That face-to-face interaction and dialogue will be more telling than reading a book on medication and making a snap judgement. Ultimately, use your medical resources, but rely on them only so much. Remember, you are dealing with a person here; not a bottle of pills.

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email: elan@torahanytime.com

For dating consultation, contact Rabbi Dr. Jack Cohen at 305-206-1916

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