

THINGS YOU ONLY KNOW IF...

YOU'RE DATING WITH ANXIETY



Meeting her last boyfriend on Hinge was the easy part, says *Rebecca Fearn* – then she had to tell him about her struggles with mental health

PHOTOGRAPH  
JENNY LEWIS

MENTAL HEALTH SPECIAL

MENTAL HEALTH – it's a subject that we are all happy to talk about these days, right? At 27, I've been lucky enough to witness how the stigma attached to it has diminished over the past decade; indeed, we're all being especially open during these uncertain times.

And yet, when I first started dating my most recent boyfriend, Ben\*, two years ago, I was surprised by the lack of information and support there was when it came to being in a romantic relationship.

Since the age of 17, I've suffered with a plethora of not-so-fun issues, starting with OCD, and leading swiftly on to an acute case of severe generalised anxiety, which has impacted every corner of my life.

After meeting Ben in the most millennial way possible (the dating app, Hinge), I knew my first obstacle was knowing when to bring up the subject of my mental health. I wanted to be honest from the get-go, but the thought of telling someone I barely knew about my deepest, darkest problem was terrifying. I also didn't want to scare him off by being overly vulnerable in the first few weeks.

However, staying quiet is not in my nature. And, in this instance, it actually worked in my favour. After our third date,

I sat him down and explained my issues, giving him opportunities to ask questions and even a chance to have an instant 'out' if he couldn't handle it. Luckily, he didn't want one and explained he wasn't freaked out at all. While it can be scary to bare your soul to a near-stranger, one thing's for sure: if they react badly, you'll know early on that they're not the right person for you.

The next roadblock was life after the 'honeymoon phase', in which I soon learned that being in a couple when you have a mental illness is not always easy. The hardest part for me was believing that my partner truly loved me, and jumping to the worst conclusions about something going wrong, which would in turn leave me heartbroken.

The unhealthy reassurance-seeking that inevitably accompanies these relentless worries can be draining for both people in the relationship. Having to answer challenging questions and react calmly to irrational fears is tough for the other person and can have an impact on their own mental health too. Ben would get frustrated and angry in certain situations and often told me how difficult it could be for him.

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**There's a balance between getting support from your partner and taking responsibility for your own health**

This was understandable – yet hard to hear.

Of course, reassurance-seeking behaviour can also mask the person you really are. On my best days, I am kind, fun and love making everyone around me laugh. And yet, on my worst, I'm nothing more than the anxiety; everything else about my personality is overshadowed.

Ultimately, Ben and I broke up in January. Why? Well, like most relationships ending, there was no one reason but my anxiety certainly played a part, as did my perception of Ben's reaction to it. I am currently single and, I know it sounds a cliché, but I'm really using this time to focus on myself. I want to feel mentally strong before I get into another relationship so I don't make the same mistake of relying too heavily on someone else to reassure me. I'm now willing to patiently wait to meet a supportive partner.

When it comes to dealing with the effects of my anxiety, what I've learned is that there should be a balance between getting support from your partner and taking responsibility for your own health. There's a fine line between seeking support and just using them as a safety blanket. A successful relationship also requires patience on both sides; while they must be patient with you when things get tough and never take it personally, you must try to understand their frustration at times.

Taking care of number one looks different to everyone with mental health problems. For me, it's taking steady medication, attending therapy (despite the eye-watering cost), and exercising to keep my mind in check.

During a recent midnight scroll on Instagram, I found the perfect message: 'I do not crave anyone who will fix me,' it read. 'Just someone who will hold my hand while I fix myself.' That's *exactly* what I want now.

\*NAME HAS BEEN CHANGED