

Audio Transcript for Episode 603: “Counseling Isn’t Just Talk Therapy” with Art Therapist + Counselor Alyse Ruriani

Please note: This transcript has been lightly edited to remove filler words or sounds.

ALYSE RURIANI: Art can help me process or think through something, in a way that words would not be able to help me *get there*. And so I don't look at it as, one's better than the other. But that one might be better than the other for certain people. There are people who may really struggle with the verbal processing, and so art could be a more beneficial way of exploring that.

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CHAD MOSES: You're listening to the “To Write Love on Her Arms” podcast, a show about mental health and the things that make us human. I'm your host Chad Moses, and in each episode, we'll be talking about the things that can often feel hard to talk about, like depression, addiction, self-injury, and suicide. We'll be sharing stories and exploring big themes like hope, healing, and recovery. If any of the topics we discuss, or the stories we share, feel too heavy for you, know that it's OK to pause, to restart, or to stop altogether. As we discover new stories, we hope to remind you that your story is important.

[music playing]

CHAD:

Mental Health Month is upon us, and we're in the midst of our Show Up For Yourself campaign, which focuses on finding 20 minutes a day to care for things that relate to your heart, mind, body, and community. This can look like gentle movement, calling a friend, journaling, and even— deep breathing. While we're putting an emphasis on small, accessible, and tangible ways that we all can show up for ourselves, there's obviously a bigger avenue available to us, if we have the resources, and that is: Therapy.

So what we're talking about today— is just that. But this isn't about a rather cliché version that we all think about, when it comes to therapy. The shrink sitting upright in a chair taking notes across from the patient who shares their thoughts. Of course, there's great value to talk therapy, but there's also more options. And that's a good thing, because therapy is not one-size-fits-all. We all have varying experiences, varying abilities, and varying needs, so naturally the therapy that best suits us might look different than what we are familiar with, and what the TV shows and films project out into the world.

In today's episode, we have the honor of exploring alternative therapy options, like art therapy, and Dialectical Behavior Therapy in particular, with the guidance of the wonderful and creative Alyse Ruriani.

Alyse is a queer femme art therapist, licensed professional counselor, illustrator, and person with lived experience. She holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Graphic Design, and a Masters in Art Therapy and Counseling. Alyse's work aims to communicate information, provide tangible tools, and validate the human experience through engaging illustrations and designs. They live in a colorful apartment in Chicago with their black cat/co-therapist Boo. And when Alyse is not working, you can likely find her swimming in some body of water, making art with friends, or hyper-fixating on some new ideas.

This conversation is quite special and we're really excited for you to hear it. So, without further ado, I'm your host Chad Moses, let's get started.

[music playing]

CHAD

Alyse, thank you so much for taking the time to join us.

Alyse

Yeah, thank you so much for having me.

CHAD

Alyse, you are an art therapist! I guess probably the question that pops into my mind first is 'Which came first?' Chicken or the egg style. The artist or the empath? What kind of led into this direction of art therapy?

Alyse

Yeah, yeah, that's a great question. I am curious, what came first? I'd say both. I think that my art has always—I've always been someone who made a lot of art as a kid. But I also think I was a pretty, pretty sensitive kid from a young age. So kind of using art to express my own emotions came very naturally. When I did art therapy myself as a patient, I learned about it and realized that it was possible to do something that was both art, and in the mental health field. And so I kind of got my heart set on that pretty early on in high school.

CHAD

As I was reading this, I'm like, 'Man, to combine two very different parts of the brain. I wonder which one was in the driver's seat initially?' Not that they both can't have a hand on the wheel. But, in our conversation with some of our staff members, we really hit on the theme that when we bring up words like therapy, when we bring up words like counseling, a mental image comes to mind. For a lot of us that's been informed by pop culture, through what we saw on TV, or maybe in a cartoon, or in the movies, or maybe just a myth that's been passed down to us. The idea of a patient lying on a couch while a therapist sits in a chair, asking questions, taking notes and basic traditional talk therapy. But when you zoom out, there's obviously many different types of therapies, many different modalities. We've hit on stuff like dialectical behavior therapy. We've talked about stuff like EMDR. That's the Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing. Art therapy, that's what brings you to the table. Equine therapy, and so on. So for you, both personally and professionally, DBT and art therapy have played rather significant roles in your life. Can you talk about those two modalities? Or any of the other ones that I mentioned in that kind of rundown, that you feel paint a more complete picture of what therapy and counseling can look like?

ALYSE

So yeah, DBT, which is Dialectical Behavior Therapy, was created by Marsha Linehan, who is a therapist. And it was originally created for people who struggled with borderline personality disorder. But they found that it actually helped a lot of different types of people, and people who deal with really big emotions who struggle with that emotional regulation piece. And so now it's kind of really spread out, and is used for a lot of different things. And what I really like about DBT is—what makes it a bit different from something like cognitive behavioral therapy—this idea of acceptance and change. So a lot of times CBT is really just focused on okay, 'How do we change our thoughts or change these things that we're dealing with?' And DBT brings in the acceptance piece, and really focuses on that word 'and'. 'How can we both have acceptance *and* change because we need both of those?' And so that's what really the word dialectic kind of comes in is, the concept of dialectic, that two seemingly opposite things can both be true. So we can be happy and we can be sad, or we can accept where we are, and also know that we need to change. And so that really drew me to DBT, specifically. And really, it gives a lot of skills, like really practical skills that people can use, which is what makes it a little different than just kind of your typical, talk therapy, where it has a lot more structure to it, and it has these specific things that were kind of being taught, and then you practice and use those in your everyday life.

CHAD

Just as you're describing DBT, there's obviously a huge interplay with visual art, as well. So art isn't so much about what's there; but a lot of what's there, is defined by what's not there. Not everything needs the colors. Sometimes you need a break in the color, to really draw out something there. So let's kind of transition a little bit into the bridge-building between DBT, and art therapy. First, what constitutes art therapy?

ALYSE

Yeah, the way that I often describe art therapy is using creativity, and the art-making process, to help people explore and express their emotions. And also, kind of giving another way to process through things that's not necessarily verbal, in the way that a more traditional talk therapy is.

CHAD

Who is art therapy for? And who is DBT for?

ALYSE

Art therapy is really for anyone, it can be any age, it can be really, any kind of presenting issue, whether that's mental health struggles. It also can be physical health, chronic pain, people use art therapy for that, too. So it's a really wide population that can use it. And you don't have to be an artist. I think a lot of people think that you have to be an art person; anyone can really benefit from it. And DBT I think is used a lot for people who deal with suicidal ideation or self-injury, depression, those things. But I also think it's something that I kind of look at as it's skills that are taught to people if they didn't learn them from a younger age. So, some people have parents that are really emotionally attuned, have people in their life that model how to work through these big feelings. Some people don't have that or didn't learn those skills. And so I really think that DBT can even be taught to kids, teaching them how to use these skills. I don't think people necessarily have to be struggling with some really intense thing, to benefit from DBT.

CHAD

Knowing that they're not the same thing—how are DBT and art therapy different? Even if they play on similar themes?

ALYSE

There are similarities, but I think the way that I often really think of it is that they're complimentary, because I think that they have a lot of differences. In thinking about DBT, for example, being very—it is very structured, especially official gold standard DBT treatment has a very specific way of skill learning groups, individual therapy, phone coaching. It has this specific program. And art therapy tends to be a little more open. And that can be art therapists who use art directives, but sometimes it's also open-studio, and people are making whatever they want to make. So there are differences in, I think, how structured they are. But I think that's why they can go so well together, because I think we can combine them, even though they are really different. There also are those underlying similarities and ways that they can complement each other of being able to practice DBT skills through art making, or through these more like creative ways of engaging with the skills.

CHAD

As we zoom in a little bit more on art therapy—because I reckon for many people, this is kind of the more foreign concept. I think a lot of us when we think about counseling, it's about ways that we can reorient ourselves and reorient our context or readjust, find a new understanding about our world and our role in it. But with art therapy, what's the end goal?

ALYSE

Obviously, I'm not a neuroscientist, but from what we know, as therapists about the brain—it uses our brain in a different way than verbal processing. When we're being creative, when we're making art, we're doing things that are nonverbal, it is using a different perspective, and a different way of literally processing it in our brain, than having to put words to an experience. So for some people—I'm someone who is very much a verbal processor, I talk out loud, I think out loud, all of that. But there also are ways that I know art can help me process, or think through something in a way that words would not be able to help me get there. I don't look at it as one's better than the other. But that one might be better than the other, for certain people. There are people who may really struggle with the verbal processing. And so art could be a more beneficial way of exploring that, but that they are—it's a really good adjacent therapy. So I have a lot of people who will have a primary therapist, they do talk therapy, and then they see me specifically to do art therapy to kind of complement that work that they're doing. So we can explore similar themes, but through creative and art making ways.

CHAD

Being human is difficult. There's so many things that are competing for our attention, bombarding our senses, and that's just the stuff that we're aware about, right? When you start throwing in conversations about DBT, and maybe our relationship to traumatic experiences. There's things that we are processing that we're not even aware that we're processing. So correct me if I'm wrong, it sounds like it feels like art therapy gives a good chunk of your brain time to rest, time to tap out, to allow another part of you, a part of you that's maybe been underserved, or quieted to step up.

ALYSE

Yeah, I think it does. That's what art therapy can be in so many different ways. Because if we're thinking, for example, in an art therapy session, whether it's a group or individual for using a specific directive, meaning I have a specific thing that I'm asking a client to make that's related to a topic we're working on, and so it's more structured. They're still using their brain to think of these things, and thinking through metaphors, and things like that maybe rather than really logical brain thinking. Or

if it's more of that open studio feel where there's not a directive, it's more open-ended, I think that allows people to work more with their intuition of 'Can I just listen to, what do I feel like making today?' And then we make something and then we look at it, and it's not that we're—I think a lot of people think art therapy is like we're interpreting, like, you show me a picture. And I'm like, 'Oh, here's what this means.' Which is not what art therapy is. I'm like, 'Well, you used blue. So that clearly means you know this thing.' But it's more about helping clients see, okay, 'Can we think about why you think you used blue like, that could mean something different to you than someone else.' And so it's not so much about me putting this interpretation on their art, but helping them to look at that art in a different way. And see if it does give them any information into how they're feeling, or what they're going through.

CHAD

I love that, because at the end of the day, you're not there judging the product. You're there shepherding an individual, you're there helping guide someone. That's so much of what people kind of get wrong about this idea of counseling is that counselors aren't there to fix you. Counselors are there to be a tool, to be a coach, to be an advocate, and to help. You know, on a philosophical level, I'm curious. Is there such a thing as art that is *not* therapy?

ALYSE

So I think there can be things that are therapeutic art, or art that can have these properties that we think of as therapeutic. Meaning that they might feel healing, or help us grow, and these different things. So I think there definitely is art that is not necessarily therapy, but I do think a lot of people who make art do so for reasons that are often related to 'Is it expressing their feelings, their opinions, their emotions?' It's something that you have to share. And so that is why we are creating this expressive thing, whether that's music or visual art or anything like that.

CHAD

As of our recording right now, we are a mere 16 hours before the book is released to the public. So our friend Alyse is publishing a book called "The Big Feelings Survival Guide", which is a workbook that incorporates art therapy, with dialectical behavior exercises. And what is the book? What's at the heart of it? And when someone sits down, and dives into it, what is your hope in creating this and giving this to people?

ALYSE

Like I said, it's a creative workbook. I'm an illustrator. So it has fully illustrated prompts that are based on dialectical behavior therapy skills. So in DBT, there are these four with the core modules. So sort of like topics or themes that the skills relate to. Within each of those modules, there's a bunch of skills, and I created prompts that are based off of a lot of those skills from those different modules. But I organize the book by feelings, which, you know, makes sense given, it's a big feeling Survival Guide. And so it's organized by what I call kind of these parent emotions, of anger, fear, and sadness. So, fear, that's where anxiety would fall under. Anger can also be irritability. So each of those pages has these different words that could fall under those bigger emotions. And then there's also a section that's about figuring out what you're feeling, because a lot of times, we don't even know what emotion it is, or feeling. So there's a section that is like, 'Okay, I don't know what I'm feeling, but I'm feeling something big.' So I think why the name of this survival guide is it's something that you can turn to, when you're feeling this big feeling, you're not sure what to do with it, that you can open up to a page in this book, do a prompt, and hopefully, it helps you kind of navigate through that emotion. And so in the book, I talk about different ways people can use it. It's not necessarily a book that you have to go through page by page, the way a typical book or even some workbooks. But rather, if you know, 'Okay, hey, I'm feeling really angry right now. So I'm gonna go to the anger chapter. And I'm just gonna pick a random page, or I'm going to thumb through it and pick the one that speaks to me.' And so I'm hoping that people can use it when they're in those big feelings. But not only that, it helps them in that moment. But it's also teaching them that skill. So they can use that skill in other times as well.

CHAD

Now, are these exercises? Are these skills proprietary? Are these things that you have discovered? Or are these kind of riffs off of some gifts that have been given to you throughout your studying?

ALYSE

There's a lot of these different skills that in DBT, you would be taught, 'Okay, here's how you use a skill,' and a lot of times there would be some sort of worksheet, but the worksheets are a pretty typical, plain therapy type of worksheet that doesn't have color and it can be a little bit dry. And so, while it does teach you that skill, and those are useful, I wanted to have this other way of how can we also teach this skill in a way that is maybe more creative, maybe it's having the person work with it in some sort of metaphor, or they're drawing it out instead of having to write it out and things like that.

CHAD

You're adamant that one does not need to be a skilled artist in order to benefit from art therapy, I guess, as I'm considering different barriers to access points of therapy. That's the first one that kind of comes to my mind on wondering if art therapy is right for me. I'm barely able to do a stick figure. To what degree does someone need to have any element of dexterity in their lives to benefit from your book?

ALYSE

It's not so much that you need to be good at art, or be an artist, or anything like that. But I think you have to be open to trying, because sometimes it can be that—there can be times where someone might be interested in art therapy, but they feel really insecure about being able to draw, or be an artist. But having the openness to be like, 'Yeah, I'm gonna make this and it doesn't need to look good, whatever reason good is, it doesn't need to look any certain way.' But I'm open to the process of this. I don't draw realistically, it took me a long time actually, to start doing illustration work, because I went to art school for graphic design and was like, 'Yeah, I can't draw,' because I couldn't draw realistically, in the realism style. But that is not the only way to draw; we see illustrators who have all different types of styles. Some, really, really complex and some are like mine—are more flat color, they're not necessarily the most detailed. And that's still art. And that's still drawing. And so I even benefited from taking a course in grad school, it was a comics class. And the first several weeks were just like, 'Anyone can draw, I know, you think you can't draw, but literally anyone can draw.' And you can draw, and it can be—there are comics that are so popular, and it basically is a stick figure, so really it does not matter, it's just having that openness of, 'I am going to draw, and I'm not going to judge it,' or I'm at least going to be aware of the fact that I might be judging it. And we can even work with that in the therapy of 'Yeah, you're having a lot of judgments about your art. What makes you think this has to be this beautiful work of art in order for it to be beneficial?'

[music playing]

BECKY EBERT: Hi there, it's Becky Ebert, TWLOHA's editor and producer. I want to talk to you for a moment about something specific: T-shirts. To Write Love on Her Arms has always sold t-shirts as a way to help fund our mission—the mission of hope and help. But the products we sell in our store do so much more than help us financially. Each piece of merchandise is a conversation starter. It spreads the TWLOHA message to someone who may not have found out about us otherwise. So whether you wear our shirts, hats, hoodies, or rain jackets, we want to thank you for bringing a message of hope and help wherever you go. To see our latest designs, head to store.twloha.com now and use the promo code **PODCAST20** to receive 20% off your entire order.

[music playing]

CHAD

If you've been following To Write Love on Her Arms for any amount of time, you know that we're passionate about breaking down barriers to access points to the mental health care that we believe everyone deserves. And we're aware of some of those barriers, stuff like *money*, stuff like *where you live*, your geography can radically affect how accessible mental health care is, and, and even beyond that, just finding a good fit, there's almost 8 billion people on the planet. In some ways, finding that great fit feels almost miraculous. But we do believe that there's benefit with people meeting other people. So in what ways can your workbook step in to be a friend, to be an ally, as we're navigating these various barriers between ourselves and the help that we deserve?

ALYSE

Access to therapy in this country can be really difficult. And it really should not be, but that is how it is currently. And so it is important that we have other avenues of healing, and ways that people can engage with this work. And so I sort of see, when we think about self help like that kind of umbrella of workbooks, or all of these are things that are out there that are this idea of self help. And those things can be really beneficial. They don't replace therapy, they're not the same thing as therapy. But they also are helpful. And honestly, people who are in therapy—it is not the only way for us to heal. And so even if you're in therapy, people are often doing things that would fall under self help, in terms of 'Yeah, I, go outside, I take my little mental health walk, or I do these other things.' And all of these things are ways we're helping ourselves. And so I kind of see this as that sort of tool of, it can bring in some of these concepts from therapy that people might not be able to be accessing, through that individual therapy relationship. And kind of give them a primer of some of these skills and ways that they can learn them and engage with them on their own time in their own sort of self work. And hopefully, at some point, will be able

to access therapy or find from this book, like 'Hey, I actually really liked DBT. So I'm gonna look and see, is it possible for me to see a therapist who uses that modality? Or is it possible for me to join an art therapy group that's virtual, because it's available in my state?' And I think it's important there are these different access points into this type of therapy-based self-help work. And so it was really important that the book too was, at a more affordable price. We had talked about not wanting it to be something that's really expensive, or is really hard to access. And so it's really awesome to be able to have a book that people can use, and they can use it if they're in therapy, but they also can use it if they're not.

CHAD

You mentioned just a little bit ago about the big feelings that you really address in this. The overarching umbrella feelings that we're trying to address. Those being anger, fear and sadness. And from there, you kind of divvy up how we can relate to these or process these big feelings through four techniques. You mentioned mindfulness, distress tolerance, emotional regulation, and interpersonal effectiveness. Can we quickly, lightning round, go through what we're referring to when we talk about mindfulness, distress tolerance, emotional regulation, and interpersonal effectiveness?

ALYSE

Yeah, absolutely. So those are the modules of DBT. So DBT has these four modules, which then have skills within each of them. And so mindfulness is sort of the core tenet of DBT, which is where that acceptance piece comes in, like we talked about earlier. So mindfulness is a lot about being aware of our internal experience, and our external experiences. So being present in the moment. Distress tolerance is kind of like those crisis skills. So when we're feeling really, really big emotions, it's not a time for us to process. I think that's what's really beneficial for folks who deal with suicidal ideation or deal with self injury. Having these skills that are like, 'Okay, what is something I can use to really quickly address this really intense feeling?' And so they're not necessarily these longer term skills, which are, what are more the emotional regulation? So emotional regulation skills are more your day-to-day, it's not necessarily you're in this huge crisis feeling. But there are things that, 'Hey, what can I use in my day-to-day?' Or what are the things that I can incorporate more of to help me have more regulated emotions? And then interpersonal effectiveness is a lot about communication. How do we communicate with people in our lives, and improve those relationships? Because when we're having really big feelings, and we don't know how to express them, and we're really struggling, it can negatively impact our relationships. And so those skills are about, 'Okay, how do we also like—we're working on ourselves, but how are we also working about how we connect with other people?'

CHAD

Yeah. So it's almost like all the different ways that we can push pause in a moment, or push play in a moment to get to a safer place, or a place that feels perhaps a bit more stable than what we're currently experiencing? We're talking about these different modules relating to these big 'parent feelings' of anger, fear and sadness? In what ways does that manifest? What does it look like to be mindful with a colored pencil in hand, as I'm dealing with a deep seated fear?

ALYSE

I think a good example for that would be—there's a skill that comes from the mindfulness module. There are these two sets of skills that are called the 'What and How' skills, and so, 'What' meaning what are we doing? And so the skills are 'Observe', 'Describe', and 'Participate'. And so they're three separate skills, because a lot of times all of those are together. We're not in our brain, taking the time to just observe and not putting words to it, just observing. We're not naming it, we're not judging it, nothing like that. Then describing it, and describing it just with facts. Not with these judgments, or bias or anything. And then fully participating in that moment. And so for example, one way that we can practice the observed skill—because a lot of the ways that I'm using art with CBT—are to teach the skill, and practice the skill. So then you can apply it in other ways in your life. So, for example, like you said, 'How do I do that with a colored pencil?' So one way we might practice the 'Observe' skill, or maybe just in general, all of those 'What' skills with art, could be, okay, you're gonna make some art, using colored pencils. And first, while doing that process, observe what is happening. So make sure you're really present, observing what is going on both your internal and external experience, then describing it. So describing it might be, 'Okay, I'm feeling the color pencil is hard in my hand, and I can feel kind of the texture of the paper while I'm drawing it. And I can see that I'm using pink, you know, it's these things that are very—they're factual descriptions. And those things can help us to more fully participate in that moment. And it helps us to kind of slow down those thoughts. So a way that I might use that skill outside of the art would be, 'Okay, I'm having an emotion, I'm going to observe the emotion because a lot of times—say I'm feeling sad, I might go be like, Oh, why am I feeling sad? What happened? This is so annoying, I'm always sad.' And, you go through this whole rumination and so using the skill would be like, 'Okay, let me let me observe. What is going on?' And then I start describing it. I might be like, 'Okay, I feel tears welling, in my eyes, I feel really tense in my body, this thing just happened. And that could be making me sad', but we're using just these really factual descriptions, and it can help us slow down. So that skill of observing and describing using it through art to practice then we can use it by applying it to when we're dealing with those emotions.

CHAD

Do you have a favorite exercise in the book that you want to brag on? Something that you feel particularly proud of?

ALYSE 38:04

Yeah, so I was thumbing through it before this, because obviously, I've been working on this book for so long. I looked back at— we did the proposal in 2019. I was still in grad school at that time, like, it was such a different time. And then I've been working on these prompts for a while. And really, it was interesting, because I had gotten to really know those skills so deeply in a way that I— I knew them already, because I had been through DBT, but it was so different to be interacting with them in this way. So it feels really hard to pick a favorite, but I think I'm gonna base it off of one of my favorite skills in DBT because it's a really core skill, is this concept of wise mind. And basically, it's looking at, we want to find our wise mind when making decisions when really just going through life. Because we have— a lot of people think of this as like, your analytical brain and your creative brain kind of plays on that concept of we have our emotional mind and then we have our logical mind. And wise mind is finding the synthesis between those two because we don't want to be all or nothing either. We don't want to be only in emotion and totally not paying attention to logic, but we also don't want to be fully in logic and not taking into account emotions. And so finding that inner wisdom, and approaching things with that wise mind. And so there's a couple different prompts in the book that deal with that. That concept one just sort of teaching it, but one that I like to use— my clients will tell you if they could— I use tons of metaphors all the time, often really silly, but that translates a lot into how I create these prompts too, because I'll think of this metaphor or kind of cheeky way of exploring it. So I thought of using a magic eight ball because there is a skill where you ask your wise mind, 'What is that answer that I'm needing or looking for?' And so, I drew a magic eight ball, and there's room for you to write, 'Okay, here's what my logical mind is saying. Here's what my emotional mind is saying,' and then the little triangle in the middle is like, 'Okay, now, what is the wise mind actually saying? Like, what actually is that middle ground answer?'

CHAD

Look, we know that therapy is not a 'one size fits all' kind of deal. Whether that's clicking with a certain counselor, or getting familiar with a particular type of therapy. So what might you say to someone who's currently frustrated by the process they're in— the idea of this being, kind of trial and error. There's so many options for therapy. But how do I know I'm doing the right one? Picking the right path.

ALYSE

Yeah, I think it's something I think a lot about. I think that as a therapist, but also as someone who's been in a lot of therapy, into a lot of different types of therapists, is because I think people can have not good experiences in therapy. And that can lead them to feeling like therapy as a whole is not helpful, or that it's always going to be these negative experiences. And so, I'd say, I know, firsthand, it's very frustrating to be trying these new therapists, and these new therapies, and feeling like things aren't working. And also, I believe that there are types of therapy out there for everyone. And there are types of therapists out there for everyone. And so, I think, going into it knowing, 'Okay, I might have to shop around a little bit. I might have to try something out, and see how that lands with me.' And trying again, it's okay. I've had people who — clients will be like, 'Hey, I scheduled a session with you. But I also scheduled consultations with a couple other people.' I'm like, 'Yeah, go, please go do that. Like, I love that — schedule those consultations, get the vibe of the person.' Because research shows us that the relationship with the therapist really is the most important thing in therapy, rather than the interventions. Obviously, those interventions are important. But having that therapeutic relationship be really strong is what allows people to do that work that helps them actually heal. And so I would say, 'Keep looking. Think about the things that you respond really well to in a person because it doesn't have to always be the really official 'Well, what is their approach?' Obviously, those are important, but it also could be like, I have a lot of people who would reach out to me because they're like—my hair is not bright right now— but in my profile picture or something they're like, 'Oh my God, you have bright pink hair and a septum piercing and so, I just felt like you were gonna be cool.' And that helps them to feel open with me. And, for someone else, they might be like, 'Yeah, that is not the therapist they want,' and that's okay, too. So, thinking about what types of things are going to help you feel comfortable with a person, because it is a vulnerable experience. But it can be really beneficial, and beautiful.

CHAD

So as promised, we're going to kind of get back to a bit of your lived experience. You mentioned being someone that benefited greatly from art therapy, before you were an artist. And before you were a therapist.

ALYSE

Yeah, so I had been in some different regular talk therapy, because a lot of times art therapy specifically, it's more common now for it to be in these outpatient— like, you can have an art therapist one-on-one. Or a lot of times in treatment centers, or hospitals, things like that. And so I experienced art therapy when I was in treatment, and found that it was so beneficial to me because I had a really hard time verbally, sharing what I was going through, especially something that felt really vulnerable. And so I already had been using art, for just my own kind of processes. I was doodling, or making different collages, and things. And so in treatment I remember, something that was one of the first art— I know it was the very first one— but definitely one of the first art directives we ever did, was to pick a song that meant a lot to us, and we created a CD cover for it. And I love music. I know To Write Love On Her Arms loves music. And so having this be like, it was therapy, and it was music, and it was art. And I was like, 'This is literally the perfect thing for me.' And so I created a CD cover for this song from Paramore called 'Looking Up,' and it's a song that really helped me when I was really struggling with suicidal ideation. And I remember drawing this CD cover, and I knew all of the words to the song. I wrote every single lyric to the song, and it just helped to be able to look at this thing that meant so much to me, and having it not be in my brain. Getting to see it on paper, and getting to use that creativity of 'Yeah, what would a CD cover for this song look like for me?' And so just these different directives that I feel like I really got excited about. 'Oh, here's this way I can express how I'm feeling or process through this thing.' And learning that art therapy was a thing, because I had already been sort of thinking about, 'Do I want to be a therapist? Do I want to be an artist and go to art school on this stuff?' And so it kind of felt like someone was handing me this thing of, 'Oh, you could do both!' And then I often was seeking that out in my own therapy in the future, and really worked towards being like, 'Yeah, I think art therapy just really falls in line with my own work and my interests.'

[music playing]

CHAD: Thank you, thank you, thank you to Alyse for playing such a big role in this conversation. Your perspective is refreshing and gives us permission to envision and explore mental health care in new and imaginative ways. We're so grateful for your energy, honesty, work, and of course, your unique role in the To Write Love On Her Arms story.

And we also want to say thank you to you, our listeners. If you're interested in expanding your mental health toolkit, then we invite you to purchase Alyse's book, The Big Feelings Survival Guide at store.twloha.com. And to connect with, and keep tabs on, Alyse via the world wide web, you can follow them on Instagram at [alyseruriani](https://www.instagram.com/alyseruriani), or go to their site alyseruriani.com.

And if you haven't joined TWLOHA's Minutes for Mental Health Challenge, there's still time. Go to twloha.com/showup for more information on the Show Up For Yourself campaign.

Lastly, we hope you enjoyed this episode and that you leave feeling encouraged to meet your needs in some ways that originally felt perhaps a little outside of the box. And as always, thank you so much for tuning in. We're so glad you're here.

[music playing]

CHAD: We hope this episode has been a reminder, that your story is important, you matter, and that you're not alone.

If you're struggling right now, know that it's OK to reach out, and that there are people who want to help. Part of our mission is to connect people to the help they need and deserve. You can find local mental health resources on our website twloha.com. That's T-W-L-O-H-A.com. And Click FIND HELP at the top of the page.

If you're in the US or Canada, and need to talk to someone right now, you can always text our friends at Crisis Text Line. Simply text the word TWLOHA— again, that's T W L O H A—to 741741. You'll be connected to a crisis counselor. It's free, confidential, and available 24/7. For a list of crisis support

resources for listeners living outside of the United States, please visit TWLOHA.com and click on the International Resources tab.

Finally, if you've enjoyed this episode and you want to hear more, we really hope that you'll subscribe wherever you get this podcast. And if you can do us a favor, we'd really like for you to write us a review. It'll help more people find this podcast and the mission of TWLOHA. If you have any feedback or questions, please send us an email to podcast@twloha.com.

A big thank you to our friends at Copeland for the original music on this episode. The To Write Love on Her Arms podcast is produced by Rebecca Ebert. Music assistance was provided by James Likeness and Ben Tichenor. And again, I'm Chad Moses, thank you so much for listening. We're glad you're here.