

## Episode 011: Feelings Are Not Facts - Chris Sullivan

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

**Lindsay Kolsch [over music]:** You're listening to the To Write Love on Her Arms podcast, a show about mental health and the things that make us human. We'll be sharing stories and conversations about topics we tend not to talk about, like depression, addiction, self-injury, and suicide.

**Lindsay:** Each week you'll be hearing stories from some amazing people. We'll talk about how mental health has shaped their journey, and you'll continue to hear ways how you can carry this conversation into your community/. We hope you'll not only connect to the episodes and conversations in a meaningful way, but we hope that maybe this podcast will make it easier for you to have conversations in your own life.

*[live acoustic music from Chris Sullivan playing]*

**Lindsay [over music]:** Hey guys, this is Lindsay Kolsch. I'm back this week to share with you our season finale. When we started this podcast, we aimed to do six episodes in our first season. And here we are at our 11th episode. And we just want to thank you for journeying with us for the past few months. Today, as we wrap up the first season of the To Write Love on Her Arms podcast, we thought we'd do something different, something special for you. At the top of this episode, you had a chance to hear some music from our guest, Chris Sullivan. Our founder Jamie Tworkowski sat down with Chris for a live recording at the Bootleg Theater in Los Angeles, California, this past Sunday. Chris is an actor and a musician, who currently stars as Toby on the NBC Drama *This Is Us*. He's also known for playing Taserface in *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2* and he's appeared as Benny Hammond in *Stranger Things*. Chris is a new friend of the organization and we're so excited Jamie had the chance to talk with him. We'd loved getting to know more about him, his work, and why he's passionate about mental health. Like most of us growing up, Chris didn't have a ton of experience talking about his internal world, but as he portrayed characters that have dealt with depression, anxiety, suicide, and intense psychological storylines, he really began to develop a language to talk about his experience, and also what it would be mean to care for his own mental health. I think you're going to love this conversation. The night was all we could hope for. And to top it off, our friend Jon Foreman of Switchfoot closed out the evening with a special performance. So be sure to stick around to the end of the episode for part of that.

*[music leading into interview]*

**Jamie Tworkowski:** I'm really excited to introduce a friend of mine and to have a conversation. And at first we thought that's what this night would be. We would just have a chat and we would record it and we would all go our separate ways. And then, uh, a few days ago actually Chris

had the idea, he said maybe, maybe there should be more music. And so then I texted another friend and I didn't expect him to say yes. And I said, would you want to come play music? He's a busy guy, he flies around, he plays a lot of music. And uh, he wrote back and said, that sounds really fun. I would like to come there and play music so we get to hear from Jon Foreman later tonight.

**Jamie:** Turned out to be something I'm really, really excited about. I do want to say from the get go, if you're here and it's been a hard year, if it's been a hard day or somewhere in between that we're really, really glad that you're here. My hope tonight is not to simply leave with this recording that we're proud of, but my hope is that you walk out of here feeling encouraged. You walk out of here feeling like maybe it's okay to be honest, maybe it's okay to ask for help. Maybe it's okay to be real and to be vulnerable. Maybe it is a night that reminds you the value of connection, the fact that as people we need other people. I've spent the last eight days marathoning my way through a television show called *This Is Us*, which is a lot of crying.

**Jamie:** But I do love and, and we'll get into this in the conversation that, that show is such a picture of the power of relationships and the fact that even when it's messy, even when it's not easy, that we need each other. We need our families, we need our friends. What does it look like to be honest? Um, what does it look like to deal with the ways that we all get stuck in moments and we all feel haunted at times. What does it look like to, to actually get the help that we need? So I do want to say, we hope you are entertained. There's gonna be room to laugh. We hope it's a really, really good night and a fun night. Please welcome, Chris Sullivan.

**Jamie:** Thank you for doing this.

**Chris Sullivan:** My pleasure. Thanks for having me.

**Jamie:** I've never been to a live podcast thing. Have you?

**Chris:** I think it's one of the more popular activities in Los Angeles, going to live podcast recordings.

**Jamie:** I don't know...

**Chris:** Like the improv comedy boom of the late or of the early aughts. It's now just live podcasts.

**Jamie:** Well, good deal. Um, where did you grow up and what were you like as a kid?

**Chris:** Seamless, just right into it. I grew up in Northern California and Sacramento, California, and I can say now looking back, I was a kid with a lot of anxiety and I had a lot of and it showed itself in, in kind of manic energies and uh, there was a lot of athletics and other extracurricular

activities that were used to kind of channel that energy for good instead of evil. And theater became when I was around 14 or 15, the place where I realized I belonged.

**Jamie:** So you used the word anxiety now. Um, was that something that was in your vocabulary that was on your radar back then?

**Chris:** No, no, uh, up until about two and a half years ago, I was just a happy person who didn't have any fear, anxiety, anger, no nothing. And then about two and a half years ago, I started exploring all of those kind of darker feelings within myself and kind of acknowledging them and therefore kind of a learning to deal with them. And kind of cut them off at the knees.

**Jamie:** So now you're, you're totally good. You're here.

**Chris:** Yep. End of podcast. Everything is fine now and, you know, I'm an actor, so I'm what they call well adjusted, the perfect model of mental wellness. Um, but no, I just hector back there. You know, as, as a young kid not, not knowing what to do with my feelings, you know, it comes out as disruption. It comes out as 'Chris gets good grades, but talks a lot in class.' You know, there was, there was quite a bit of issues in socializing in that way because I didn't know how or where to kind of focus these energies. And I'm realizing now that actors, well, I can't speak for all actors, but for myself, I didn't know quite how to handle my own feelings. So I kind of got into the business of feeling other people's feelings, exploring characters, exploring a different kind of emotional pockets of being.

**Jamie:** When did kind of this subject of mental health, which at this point you're clearly passionate about, you care about, like when did that kind of become on your radar even in terms of the language of depression, addiction, suicide?

**Chris:** I mean for myself, it's been very recent. You know, it's, it's a conversation that I think sits at the base of most of the problems that we're experiencing on a large societal scale. So it wasn't until recently when I started exploring my own mental wellness through therapy and meditation and prayer and things like this, that I kind of realized how present it had been my entire life, trying to get me to notice it and me fighting it every step of the way.

**Chris:** As I get older, the themes of it come into play. I recently lost a friend who took his own life. He was struggling with addiction and depression and all of these things. And I think that that was the first time... that was the first time I had dealt with it so close in my life. And that was like a month ago. When would they come up? You know, the Irish family is, is uh, all but famous for not discussing feeling and letting most of it come out in song and fighting. It's kind of interesting the way, the way those, those patterns, you know, filter their way down through, through family lines into modern kind of ways of coping.

**Jamie:** You took a liking to To Write Love on Her Arms. So what was it that -

**Chris:** The way I found out about this organization, my improv troop back in Chicago would do these monthly shows and we would pick a new charity every month to raise money for. And Dustin suggested your organization and at the time 10 years ago, was it just getting going?

**Jamie:** We were two.

**Chris:** You were two years old, ten years ago, and I had not ever at that point, like your nieces said earlier, you're like our cool modern uncle. I hadn't ever come across a charity that felt modern. Or that was discussing modern issues for mostly for young people. Like it seemed like a, an organization that was for me, even if, even if at the time I didn't realize I had my own my own issues to work through. So yeah, that's how I became interested.

**Jamie:** So does kinda your own journey of kind of figuring out that this stuff has been present in your own life? I feel like the timing sort of matches up with this character you end up playing.

**Chris:** Yeah. I mean surprisingly, my character on *This Is Us*, goes through a lot of the same things that I've been through as far as anxiety and depression are concerned.

**Chris:** In a lot of ways the people on the show, the actors resemble their characters. It just tends to work out that way, whether or not the people casting the show intend for it. But I'm like my character in many ways as far as using comedy to kind of keep people at arm's length or using humor as an armor, you know, as a younger man being being loud and over the top as a place to hide, you know, like the perfect place to hide is in plain sight, which I still do a little bit because it's. But now I do it consciously as a way, as a way to protect myself in an industry that is a, that's always coming for you in some way. Um, but yeah, being a part of the shows is pretty fantastic as far as being part of conversations, current current conversations that need to be had kind of have a context through the show.

**Jamie:** That must have been a lot in terms of preparing to play that character, figuring this stuff out in your own personal life. Did like kind of?

**Chris:** It was perfect actually. As I was discovering things, I would just take that feeling and that experience and just go to work. Like, it worked out kind of great. One of the interesting things I've kind of learned by, coming at it from the reverse angle is the power of positive thinking, in that I have put myself in some positions with my acting, that have been really detrimental to me physically. Like there was a show I did in Chicago where through rehearsals and performances I would commit suicide every night on stage at around 8:45. And the show was this ramp up of adrenaline and emotion and all of these brain drugs that were flooding my system. When I stopped doing the show the very next night I tried to go out to dinner with my wife Rachel and 8:45 rolled around and she had to carry me out of the restaurant. We got home. Her roommate and best friend was a nurse at the time. She came home to check on me because we didn't know what was going on and she checked some pressure points. She's also a holistic, massage therapist and diagnosed me as going through adrenaline withdrawal. So I was having an actual

drug withdrawal from something that I was doing to myself physically every night by pretending to feel certain feelings. So by pretending and acting a certain way, I actually put my body into a state of withdrawal, talking to other actors I know have done permanent adrenal damage to themselves.

**Chris:** I'd heard it years before. And as a young actor, I didn't listen to anybody, but it was uh, there was an older woman in the cast who was saying, listen, it was another super-intense show. And she said, we all need to really take care of ourselves. We need to practice a lot of self care through this process because our heads know that this is not real and our hearts know that this is not real. But on a cellular level, your body is experiencing the trauma of, in that show, having to murder a 14-year-old boy every night, like the, the point of this story is that if, if that is true, that I can traumatize myself by pretending to feel negative emotion, then I can also affect myself by a lot of times pretending to be happy or putting on a smile when I don't want to or essentially faking it until I make it. Because I can get sucked into all kinds of negative self talk and all of those things. But it's one of the great lessons that I'm just now learning through acting.

**Jamie:** We got a couple of questions from the world, these people and beyond, and somebody asked that just basically, how do you do this job and stay, especially playing Toby, especially season three and him walking through this severe depression. How do you turn that on and off and maintain a remotely healthy life?

**Chris:** One thing that I've realized is that, none of this, *This Is Us*, Toby, any, anything in my career means anything without my partner, Rachel—hashtag wonderwife. The way that I stay connected to the world is through her, and in love that we share and the way that we lift each other up. It's very important to realize like, like how, how important, how much I love what I do and how important I think that it is, but also to look around and just laugh sometimes when you're on a red carpet or, you're in a press junket. You know, the thing that I do the least in my career is act. The thing that I spend the least amount of time, like physical seconds doing is acting. And that's a good thing to remember. It makes me very grateful when I get to do it, but there's all these other things that go into it that can get you off track as far as the popularity of a certain thing or a quote unquote success of a certain thing.

**Chris:** An easier correlation is theater like doing a high school play and doing a Broadway show are the exact same process. A group of people walk into an empty room, they look each other in the eye and they tell the truth and that's how it all starts. Some shows have bigger budgets than others. But it's all the same artistic process. And so staying grounded is easy. If I can remember the reality of what's important.

**Jamie:** Are there any kind of specifics that make up self care for you that you would want to share?

**Chris:** I recently just went and talked to a bunch of high school students at my old high school and we talked about self care and we talked about mental wellness and I talked to them about

how simple it is for me on certain levels, like the top four things that I do for mental wellness are stay hydrated, eat well, get sleep, and exercise. Like they, they seem so pedestrian and easy.

**Chris:** But we forget to do all four of those things if we, if we're not conscious about it. And for young people it's especially important, especially this group of kids. They go to, they go to a high school that is highly competitive that they had to get in through testing and things like this. And so they're already operating at a certain level and they have expectations on them to, to go to certain colleges and become certain things and be something for somebody. And it's too much pressure for a 16 year old, it's too much. It's too much to put on a young person who's still trying to develop and try to figure out who they are. Other things I do are prayer and meditation are two big ones. Trying to give myself the quiet time to, to acknowledge the voices in my head and, and let them say their piece and let those thoughts flow through. That's become very important over the last couple of years. In any of the spiritual studies that I've investigated, they all make time for quiet and contemplation.

*[music leading into break]*

**Lindsay [over music]:** We want to take a quick moment and thank everyone who has listened to season one. To everyone who has helped us share these episodes and for all the words of encouragement. You have kept this conversation going online and it's truly been a privilege. Over the break, we wanted to give you a few ways you can stay connected. First, if you're not already following TWLOHA on social media, you should. It's not only a great way to learn about what we're working on and how you can stay involved throughout the year, but you'll also find upcoming announcements about season two. And if you've missed any episodes, now is a great time to go back and listen. And as always, if you haven't already, please write and leave us a review. We love hearing your thoughts about the show and it's also super important to help new people find this message and these stories. Finally, as we look to 2019, we want to continue bringing stories and this conversation about mental health here on the podcast, but also on our blog and at over 195 events a year. If you want to support TWLOHA and this podcast, consider making a gift to our into19 campaign. Every dollar matters and it helps us continue this work.

*[music leading back to interview]*

**Jamie:** What have you learned from playing this character?

**Chris:** I think the things that I've been going through over the last couple of years as much as they informed the way I play that character, the way the writers have led this guy's life have kind of given, given me ways to deal with those things. They've kind of given me ways to process and given me ways to cope. The thing I love about the show is, is it in a certain way it's like a, it's a handbook for healthy relationships. It's every, every relationship in it is 100 percent flawed and 100 percent healthy. 100 percent is a, is a hard number to use, but they are. What I mean is that they're balanced. They're not just idealized and they're not just thrown away. They're,

they're very well considered. I think I've learned how to relate to others, uh, in a more compassionate and loving way by getting a chance to play him.

**Jamie:** What about interactions with, with fans, people who appreciate the show, which is, that's what a fan is...

**Chris:** Someone with, someone full of appreciation.

**Jamie:** But kind of getting, getting to share Toby's journey, especially specifically related to mental health and connecting with people who I imagine want to share with you how they relate to that part of the character.

**Chris:** There's the, the weight loss line of the story that a lot of people connect with. There's the depression and anxiety. There's the miscarriage storyline. Um, they've been through, they've been through the ringer. The thing that I've heard from, from people, and I'm sure we'll talk later about it, but, our show has gotten this reputation for being sad. Like I run into people - Oh you're on *This Is Us*? I can't watch it. I can't because I've heard it's gonna make me cry Okay. And you don't want to cry? No, I can't. I can't, I just can't right now. I don't have, too much to do.

**Jamie:** How many of you have cried watching this show? Yes. You can give yourself a hand.

**Chris:** Yeah, it's a podcast. And it comes off sounding sounding a little mean, but it's, it's the show is not sad. You're sad and you didn't know it until you watched this show. And that's one of my favorite things about this show is that it digs in to things, relationships, past feelings, experiences that people have had and it holds up a mirror through this, this group of characters. And it says, how do you feel about this. Remember when this happened to you, did you process it at all? Did you just kind of compartmentalize it? Is there someone you need to call? Is there someone you need to apologize to? Is there a relationship you need to mend? Is there any opportunity for you to be living up to a higher standard?

**Chris:** And that can be scary to people. So it just, it can kind of get reduced sometimes to - Oh boy, we cry, we cry. My wife, my, my wife talked me into watching it, and you know what, I cry too. And it kind of gets left at that. And a lot of times now there are a lot of people who are doing a lot of soul searching with the show. People who are reconnecting with their biological parents. People who are adopting. There was one fan who I know adopted a baby girl based on seeing the show and named the baby Kate. There's a lot of ways to interact with art, and this show isn't for everybody. There's one cast member in particular who watches the show, and was like, yeah, I don't cry.

**Jamie:** Really?

**Chris:** Yeah, it's Susan. She said it. She's like, yeah, show it doesn't get me.

**Jamie:** She's a badass. Right?

**Chris:** And if not, then this show, if the show's not making you feel anything than it isn't for you, you know, art should be making you question what you believe. Question what you feel, question what you think, and if it's not doing that, then it's not for you.

**Jamie:** And we haven't talked a lot about this, but, um, I feel like you wanting people to do more than cry in a healthy way - is that where your support have To Write Love on Her Arms comes from? Wanting people to do more than be moved by...

**Chris:** I don't want people to do anything. I want to do those things and I want to be in that type of relationship with the people in my life where we are investigating the difficult things, where we are pushing each other to be better people, where we are challenging our old ways of thinking. The show has offered me a way to do that. And so I, I enjoy relating to people in that way.

**Jamie:** I think just wanting people to have tools and resources, kind of helping people take a step beyond kind of what you joked about just in terms of, 'Oh, I'm sad,' but you kind of saying, 'Hey, the conversation -

**Chris:** Starts there. It doesn't end there. It's, yeah, the idea of just having the conversation is 90 percent of the work, you know, 90 percent of the difficult feeling goes away when the conversation is had. I've made this, this metaphor before one of my favorite, one of my favorite genres of film are horror films and especially the demon movies, possession films, and it didn't occur to me until a couple of years ago. It's an amazing metaphor, in all of those movies, the only thing the hero has to do is learn the demon's name and say my, scream the name of the demon, and as soon as they call the demon by its name, by its historical biblical name, it's sent back to the bowels of hell. And it's like this amazing metaphor for anxiety, fear, anger, resentment, whatever these negative feelings are, that you're having, that I've had, as soon as I realize what they are, they tend to dissipate. And so the conversation about mental health or suicide or, or any of those things is not only happening everywhere, maybe it's me, but everywhere I go now people are, people are discussing these things. Yeah, I guess it's, I guess it's a preferred, preferred way to kind of guide people that you run into. I, every time I have shared something difficult in my life with someone, that person undoubtedly has something that they're dying to share. And so to be in service of one another is as far as I can tell over the last couple of years, the only road to happiness. Happiness, not being a goal, but service being a goal and happiness hopefully being a byproduct.

**Jamie:** There was a really cool moment and you'll remember and maybe it's mostly - just before season three started, for me that was like yesterday. But every actor had the chance to present a message to their character and you chose to share our statement for World Suicide Prevention Day, which was "tomorrow needs you." For us and for me that was such a, like this inception, just this really cool moment that our real life World Suicide Prevention Day had like



sort of infiltrated the most popular show on television. But I feel like you really, you really grabbed a hold of that campaign. Like it felt like it mattered to you.

**Chris:** Yeah, I mean in the middle of that campaign I, I lost my friend and this is a person that I spent a lot of time with who at one point in my life considered myself to be very similar to. And so when that happened it was, it was a sliding doors type moment about the way my life might've gone or it could have gone and I had a lot of empathy for him and for how much pain he must have been in

**Chris:** To be involved in, in the Tomorrow Needs You campaign was, I don't know, maybe I was trying to convince myself, maybe it was something that I needed to hear. And if I need to hear it, then chances are a lot of people just need to hear it. We walk, we walk through this world now we're more quote unquote, more connected than ever. And people, especially maybe especially in Los Angeles, have that separation. You know, there, there are people I know who can go through a whole day without having a human interaction. And it's super easy to change the direction of someone's day. If I can step outside myself and let people know that they're seen, that they're heard.

**Jamie:** We did a campaign a few years back called Fears Versus Dreams, which was based on two questions and I'm going to ask you those questions. What is your greatest fear? What is your biggest dream?

**Chris:** My greatest fear is that my negative core beliefs are true. If I dig down through shitty behavior or lashing out or anger or whatever it is, and I go back, what's behind that fear? What's behind that fear? What's behind that fear? The fear that I'm not good enough, the fear that I'll never be good enough. The fear that I am incapable of loving others, the fear that I am incapable of being loved. My greatest fear is that those are true because those are the little seeds that got planted who knows where. Some I do know where. Some, they just came with the programming. So if I don't actively do the work to remind myself that those things are not true, then they'll take over. They will take over my line of thinking in every way. And what was the other one?

**Jamie:** It's another softball. What's your biggest dream?

**Chris:** See, the more I think about it, the more people are like, oh, here comes something good. Look at the way he looks off at that glowing exit sign, wondering if I could make it to the door before they notice. This is a stalling tactic I used to use when I did this touring one-man show and I would forget my lines and I'd stand here and I'd stare and look at the audience and I'd say, I don't know what the next line is. And they would laugh and I go, I'm not kidding. I don't know. I don't know what the next line is. And we would go around in that loop.

**Jamie:** I can ask a different version of the question.

**Chris:** Oh yeah, let's hear it. Let's hear that one. Maybe it'll spark something.

**Jamie:** What, what are you excited about?

**Chris:** And we'll go with the first one. [laughs] You know what I'm excited about? I am excited that I am the healthiest, happiest, most present version of myself that I've ever been in 38, in 38 years. I'm really excited about that. And so my biggest dream is to continue in that fashion.

**Jamie:** I love that. We got two left. These are two that we love to ask on every single episode. The first one is, what would you say to your younger self? We could say teenage self.

**Chris:** None of this is that serious. To talk to the younger, the younger version of myself as is, it's a good mental exercise because I still carry that version of myself around, but the things that I went through or the life that I lived in that, in that time are so important. I would say to my younger self: Someday you will learn that this suffering is going to make you the person that you were meant to be.

**Jamie:** What would you say to somebody who's here tonight in the room or somebody who's listening to this who is struggling?

**Chris:** Feelings aren't facts. They're not true. They're real. They're very real, but they're not factual. Feelings are information that, that something is something is off for, for me. I acknowledge my feelings, I process my feelings, but I don't allow my feelings to control the way that I treat myself or others. Because once I externalize them in that way, it's me pretending as if they're factual and they're just they're not.

**Jamie:** Can you guys give him a hand? I want to say thank you for doing this, for supporting To Write Love on Her Arms the way that you do, for being my friend. I'm grateful for those things.

**Chris:** It's my great pleasure.

*[music playing]*

Lindsay [over music]: Thank you so much to Chris Sullivan and Jamie Tworkowski and the wonderful audience at the Bootleg Theater. You can learn more about Chris and what he's working on by connecting with him on Instagram at @SullivanGrams. And *This Is Us* will return to NBC on January 15th. We'll have links to those in our show notes. And finally, a huge thanks to Jon Foreman for his special performance at this live recording. We're excited to leave you with Jon performing "Caroline," off his album *The Wonderlands: Sunlight*.

*[audio of Jon Foreman performing "Caroline" plays]*

*[music playing]*

**Lindsay [over music]:** We hope each episode is a reminder that your story is important. You matter and you're not alone. We understand that so many of you listening might be struggling or know someone who is struggling with the issues that we've been talking about. We believe that help exist. Part of our mission is to connect people to the help that they need and deserve. You can find local mental health resources at our website, T-W-L-O-H-A-dot-com and click the Find Help at the top of the page. Or if you need to talk to someone right now, you can always connect with our friends at Crisis Text Line. You simply text the word TWLOHA, that's T-W-L-O-H-A, to 741741 and you'll be connected to a trained crisis counselor. It's free, confidential and available 24/7.

**Lindsay:** If you enjoyed this episode and you want to hear more, we hope you'll subscribe on iTunes or wherever you get your podcasts. And if you can do us a favor, we'd really love for you to write us a review. It will 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](mailto:podcast@twloha.com).

**Lindsay:** A big thank you to our friends at Copeland for the original music on this episode. The TWLOHA podcast produced by Mark Codgen with editorial support by Claire Biggs and Jennie Armstrong of Lore de Force and Becky Ebert, and music assistance provided by James Likeness and Ben Tichenor. I'm Lindsay Kolsch. Thank you so much for listening.

**Lindsay:** To Write Love on Her Arms is a nonprofit movement dedicated to presenting hope and finding help for people struggling with depression, addiction, self injury and suicide. TWLOHA exists to encourage, inform, inspire, and also to invest directly into treatment and recovery. You can find more information about TWLOHA at [twloha.com](http://twloha.com).