

Episode 008: It's Hard Right Now But It's OK - Joel L. Daniels

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.

Lindsay: I heard someone recently say in conversation, "You don't know what you don't know." And it struck me that so of many stories that we've shared on this podcast or on the To Write Love on Her Arms blog confront this idea in some way or another. It feels like a common thread as we come to understand our own stories and how it can create a huge barrier to getting help. It was this challenge that our guest Joel Daniels confronted early on growing up in the Bronx. Joel is a writer, poet, actor, emcee, and a new title he's most proud of: dad. Joel and I talked about why it was so hard for him to talk about mental health growing up. He shares his experience with depression and suicide ideation and why he's grateful he called a suicide hotline. I really loved talking to Joel and hearing his take on writing, creativity as a way to really give space for this mental health conversation to exist and be present across all of the different parts of his identity.

Lindsay: A quick warning on this episode: There is some strong language used so please consider that before listening.

Lindsay: So Joel, thank you so much for joining us today. For our listeners who might not be familiar with you and your work, would you just tell us a little bit about who you are and, and start with your story?

Joel: So I'm Joel. Rhymes with Noel. I am a 35-year-old father to a now three year old.

Joel: Because her birthday is today.

Lindsay: No way. Really?

Joel: Yeah, today is her birthday and I didn't think about it when we scheduled this, but her birthday's today and today's also the one year anniversary of the book that I wrote, a book of

poetry and prose that I wrote and dedicated to her. So it's like, it's a whole bunch of great things happening today.

Lindsay: Well it's an honor for you to spend today with us then.

Joel: I mean, the, the honor is mine. Like, honestly. But uh, I'm a storyteller. Wow. Well, I'm a storyteller for lack of a better word, I guess. Writer, performer, author. Uh, so when I say performer: actor, emcee. I'm a father. I'm a black man. Yeah, I feel like those pretty much encompass the things that probably are most important to me.

Lindsay: When people do ask you kind of your story with mental health, where do you begin? Where does that start for you?

Joel: I think it depends on who's asking.

Lindsay: Yeah, OK.

Joel: I tend to live below the surface as much as possible. Uh, so like a general question of like, "how are you" tends to be wherever I am. So if I'm not feeling well, I'm going to, I'm going to answer with the corresponding response. I think when, when people generally ask me that question, that story starts, I guess with me starting therapy. Now, granted I'm not in therapy now, but, um, I was in a long-term relationship and after that relationship dissolved one of the kind of requirements I was given following the end of that relationship from my former partner, who's now a very good friend of mine was, I should probably see a therapist.

Lindsay: OK. How long ago was that?

Joel: About, five - five and a half years ago. And that journey started a deeper conversation for me about my own mental health, which then led me to have more open conversations with other people surrounding their own mental health, which then also forced me to dig a lot deeper into my past experiences with, with my own depression and with my own anxiety and some of my own trauma from my past. Uh, and then kind of going from there, but it generally starts with therapy.

Lindsay: I want to actually go to the beginning of what you said because I think that's probably the experience a lot of people have is you go through something and then while you're doing the work or healing, you actually start to have language or a way to think about your previous experiences. And I'm kind of curious if you could kind of share a little bit about like the things that led up before you got to a counselor. Like when you were growing were there things that you could identify where that's me struggling with mental health before I had the language to put it there? I kind of want to dive into that.

Joel: Yeah, man. We're just, we're just going in. I love it.

[Lindsay laughs]

Joel: I mean I think growing up as a black male in America, one, and then growing up as a black male in the Bronx, New York, during like the crack era of the eighties and the Reagan era of the eighties informed a lot of how I, um, a lot of the language that I'm able to use now with regards to mental health comes from me not having access to that language or even really being able to recognize what some would consider like PTSD, right? Like you, you grew up in an environment where you're seeing, there's constant addiction. Like my father, my father is a paranoid schizophrenic. And so, you know, my father fought in Vietnam and like there are stories that people grew up in the neighborhood know of like my dad in the streets naked.

Joel: Like, you know, shouting army salutations and chants of that nature and so, you know, but you grow up at the same time, you grow up around, you know, like you grew up around murder, you grow up around hand-to-hand drug sells, you grow up around, um, like physical violence, whether that be from people within our own community or police state sanctioned violence. And so you grow up seeing these things and it becomes your norm like I don't want to say you, you become desensitized to it, but it definitely becomes a part of the, the way we move about in the world and -

Lindsay: Well it doesn't, not have impact on you. You just, like you said, it becomes the thing you grow to expect and your body calibrates to that and that experience. Right?

Joel: Absolutely. And so, a prime example, you know, like I'm kind of back in the community now and literally this happened yesterday. I just want to go grab some pizza and there were these two other men shouting at each other. And I'm ordering my pizza. Pepperoni, two slices, a pepperoni slice, regular slice, and they leave the store and then I hear like, "oh!" and I turn around and just one of the men is like punching the other dude in the face. And so two things: someone calls the police, I stay around to kind of just like assist with like as far as being able to answer any questions or whatever. And the thing that was most interesting to me was people's response in the environment to it, which is like kind of going about your normal routine.

Joel: Like maybe you see someone who's bloody on the floor, on the ground and you'll look and you'll walk by. There was a person that was in the pizza shop when the commotion started and after who was still eating his pizza, who hadn't really engaged. And it amazes me how we do - we become accustomed to certain kinds of elements in our community. Um, especially, especially in that community, specifically the community I grew up in. But like, between the physical violence, sexual trauma, there's a whole lot of things to unpack that I didn't know how to unpack or thought that I should be trying to unpack until relatively recently. When I say recently about, we're saying like five, six years ago.

Lindsay: So you grew up in the Bronx and then you, like tell me a little bit more about just like the transitions that you've been through because it sounded like you more recently moved back to that area?

Joel: Correct.

Lindsay: Okay.

Joel: So growing up in the Bronx, I go to public school in the Bronx. I wind up going to LaGuardia High School, which is the performing arts high school in New York. Like most people know it as the “fame school.”

Lindsay: OK.

Joel: And that was significant for me A, because it was in Manhattan and I had never actually traveled outside of the Bronx, maybe twice in my entire years leading up to high school. Um, I've been outside of New York, granted, but I mean like as far as like intercity traveling, I'd never really had to leave the Bronx.

Joel: Um, and it was also the first time that I had direct contact with people who didn't look like me. Like I had white friends in high school, didn't have white friends growing up. The only time I actually interacted with white people where people in positions of power. So teachers or police. It was the first time that I, I encountered like the LGBTQ community because one thing that was really cool about LaGuardia was that it was such an open space for people to identify as whomever they chose to. Part of that kind of shaped how I started to see the world. It was the first time I started listening to jazz, the first time I listened to like Bob Dylan, like I had people...It changed how I viewed things culturally.

Joel: I can't tell that story without also though recognizing Ms. Ann Petroski who was my English teacher in middle school from, from seventh to eighth grade and she was our drama teacher in sixth grade, and it was Ms. Petroski who said like, ‘Joel, you should audition for LaGuardia, I think you're going to get in,’ and LaGuardia, I will say probably saved my life because I'd always been involved in the arts, but it was kind of like in a way you're given art in school as like a thing to do. So you have to choose an elective, as opposed to like seventh and eighth grade, even though it was an elective, like we were putting on shows in school and I was taking it really seriously, you know, like we'll do shows. But like, I really wanted to do this thing and then high school comes along and I'm around all these people who like were groomed in these schools that other famous New York City acting kids went to and whose parents had a shitload of money and they were going to Broadway shows all the time and I didn't. I just kinda was the kid who had a really active imagination and liked performing.

Joel: And that gave me the platform to do that.

Lindsay: So acting was probably the first kind of creative content that you were working with or that you were creating? I mean, is that...

Joel: I mean, kind of. You know...

Lindsay: Were you writing at that point?

Joel: Yes. So, you know, it's like chicken or the egg for me when it comes to like arts and creativity. Like I have a, there's a, a friend. I used to have an elementary school who found me on Facebook and he was like, 'Joel, I don't know if you remember, like in third grade I would write him rhymes that he will give to girls.'

Lindsay: Aw, that's sweet.

Joel: Yeah, you know, like, I was that person. Like for as long as I knew how to write, Lindsay, I would like put a sentence together. I was writing, like writing not for school but like horrible poetry and you know what I'm saying? Like art was kind of like my safe haven away from all the other shit that was happening.

Lindsay: Yeah. So, so bring me up to speed. Um, you're in high school and what does that like, what do you understand about your mental health journey in those years? It sounds like it would be a big transition to that school, like you're talking about...

Joel: Yeah, it was, it was. It was like my mom was taking me to school for like the first, I think week. Um, while uh, when, when I started high school. And you know, it's, it's a new environment for me. I'm learning like methods of acting, something I hadn't tackled before. I'm around, I'm around white people. I'm around white students and that's kind of awkward for me. And trying to fit in and, to be fair, trying to keep the, the, the street mentality and attitude that I was reared on and grew up with, in combination with like learning the Stanislavski Method and being around cats who again, who weren't maybe listening to hip hop, but they were listening to like Joni Mitchell and Bob Dylan and they were reading all these, they were reading Walt Whitman and I'm like, who the fuck is he like?

Joel: And granted it's not like I didn't learn these things in school and care about them. Like my poets were Nas. My poets were like Jay-Z, like those are the people that I, I leaned on for like lyrical inspiration when it came to writing. I didn't look at it at the time as an experience that needed to be looked at through the lens now that we were talking about now. But when you asked me that question, yeah, it was a heavy transition for me, especially as a teenager, right? Like coming into this new environment, um, and I think there was a lot of learning. There was a lot of fear, um, but there was also a lot of unpacking the things that I had been taught about who I was supposed to be at that time, you know, and then learning how I like who I could be and a lot of that centered around race, around my sexuality.

Joel: Just kind of also trying to figure out who for, for whatever reason, trying to figure out who I was going to be, which is like, so like we put this on our, our children so early like you, like the whole idea of going to college just so that you figure out what you want to do at like 18. Like doesn't make any sense. And so at 14, 15, trying to discover who I am and what I want to be and what I'm going to do and how fucking difficult it was. But glorious at the same time because LaGuardia also again like again, changed and saved my life.

Lindsay: Yeah. Do you feel like in that transition or in that season that you had any real way to talk about those things? I think a lot of young people and maybe even people listening like it is such a...it feels like no one's ever done the thing you're doing. Um, but I'm curious if you had any support or if there was any outlets within the school to kind of just process that and, and to figure out what that was or was it, did you kind of do it on your own in your own way?

Joel: I had to do it in my own way, Lindsay, and, and thank you for asking that question because I don't want to keep bringing race into it, but it speaks volumes to why? Because that might, might have been available in school, I wouldn't have known. Not to say the school wasn't trying to reach out to me, but the stigma within the black community surrounding mental health, especially at that time, like you were crazy. Like you were either crazy or you weren't. There were no in betweens. There were no conversations about depression, anxiety, like depression, it's like you just pick yourself up, like if you're sad about something or some shit happened to you that you don't like, suck it up. Keep it moving. That's what you're, you're reared on. That's what my mom was raised on like, like, 'oh, everything is OK.' Even when it's not, you know, like how do you deal with heartbreak? How do you deal with rejection? How do you deal with like loss and loss of your youth. Like loss of like the, like the unrequited attention of the girl that you dig or the boy that you like or whatever the case might be. Like, there's no, there were no conversations surrounding to that. And if people were having that conversation, I wasn't having it with them.

Lindsay: Yeah. So there was never anybody who just said like, 'Hey, you need to talk with someone' in those in those years? Or what you're saying is, I guess more so, is that there just wasn't, there wasn't an attitude, that that's even a possibility. Like that's not within the framework of what is acceptable to even kind of go there. Does that make sense?

Joel: That makes absolute sense. And it's more of the latter. And I think, and it's something I keep talking about a lot, which is like we can give people language, but if they don't know how to access that language, it means nothing. And so I didn't have the language or access to it, you know, like we weren't having, I wasn't having conversations about mental health. I didn't even think to have the conversation about it, you know, like it wasn't as if I hadn't maybe seen stuff on the news or in media or whatever the case might be. But this is still early Internet days, we're talking - I started high school in 1997 and so I'm still learning how to use the Internet, let alone have a conversation with a person about what I'm feeling like today or what does that even mean. It wasn't like people weren't crying in the hallways when traumatic things happened, but we were never ever unpacking the trauma. We weren't having conversations surrounding the

trauma or the events that led or that would lead up to it, you know, it was just, it was a thing. It was a thing that happened and then you just kind of keep it moving from.

Lindsay: I kind of want to camp out here a little bit longer because I think this is really significant. Um, and I'm really grateful that you're sharing this. I'm curious what, what other lies or, and we kind of tied the lies of what people believe about mental health, what, and that can just kind of be encapsulated with stigma, right? Like these are the lies we believe. What other lies? I mean, you say the dichotomy of just like you're crazy or you're not, like what other things have you noticed or kind of been able to pinpoint, um, maybe in your community or in your childhood that you would say, yeah, that's, that was stigma acting in my life right there. Like are there other ones you can like identify?

Joel: When I think about the stigmas, I think about, I think less about the stigmas and more about how we relate to mental health in the community that I grew up in. Like there's certain way that depression looks, right? And I'm not saying that's what it is, but I'm saying like that's what the community will tell you. Like if you are depressed and it looks this way, and like your, your mental health looks this way. So like my father's a paranoid schizophrenic, but he also quote unquote looks the role, right? So my father was the person who was picking cans from the garbage and like he'd bring them home and granted he was collecting for money, but my father was also an alcoholic and so my father would look disheveled in the streets and it's like that very token, this is what a crazy person looks like, quote unquote, um, as opposed to really trying to navigate the layers, the real contextual layers of what it means to suffer from a mental health illness.

Joel: And how does that look and how does that look and how does it feel for each individual person? Um, I think we've gotten into a habit of dictating what a person's sanity looks like and what it comes across as. Especially because in this day and age, I think everyone feels like they can be, they can be a psychiatrist because they have access to WebMD or because we can have elevated conversations about mental health. It's like, oh yeah, I know what depression looks like. Oh, I know what anxiety looks like and comparing other people's anxiety and depression to someone else's. Like, I'm on, I'm on Lexapro, and so like, you know, like I'm on this and you're not on that or you're not taking any psychotropic medications, so what does that mean? As opposed to like trying to really dissect and giving room for people to dissect what it means to suffer from a mental health illness - diagnosed or undiagnosed.

Joel: Right? But again, that's not language I had access to and not until again maybe five, six, seven years ago. But that's, that's part of, I think, the stigma that we, that we attach to it, that it has to look a certain way. And if it doesn't look that way to a person, then it, then it doesn't validate that person's experience which has everything to do...Especially for like people who like growing up the way that I grew up where you didn't have conversations about depression, you were either sad or you were mad. You know, like we, the very generic ways that we label an emotion that doesn't give enough room for the complexity of the emotion and the feeling of the thing.

Lindsay: Or knowing that you need help with this. Because it's, the sadness has now turned into weeks or months and days and now it's debilitating and you and you, you don't know why. So you can't ask for help you don't know that you need.

Joel: Exactly, exactly. How do you learn how to know that you need the help? And I struggled with it so much because it's like, how do we get certain people to the place where they can recognize the thing is the thing. You know, like how can you know how to label a thing if you don't know what that label is. And so you try to fix other things. You try to fix it in other ways. Alcohol, you know, like any sort of like opioid, drug dependence. And again, not, not to label anybody who is, who is going through that process or their journey, but the idea of not having a language to find other ways to substantiate the feeling without necessarily claiming it as a thing. Because you don't have, you don't have the language for it.

Lindsay: So we've talked a lot about a pretty important and informative part of your life, but where does your story go after high school.

Joel: I was kind of scared shitless of attacking the world as an actor. And so I felt like going to Temple University was going to give me the well roundedness that I wanted as a human. But then also I didn't have to sign with an agent. I didn't have to go on auditions because as good as I knew as I was as a talented actor, I was still scared shitless of it, especially at 18. So I go to Temple University, I leave Temple after two years. A) because I just was not diligent enough as far, as far as paying. Like, following up on like financial aid, student loan stuff or whatever. So I come back to New York. I start doing more theater, spoken word stuff when I'm back in New York. I'm also working a retail job at that time. I make a shift from retail to doing community case management for the HIV AIDS community.

Joel: That experience was great. That was a rough period of time when I was doing retail and that job and it was driving me...it was driving me mad essentially because I wasn't able to be creative because I didn't have the time to do so. I meet my partner, the same partner I mentioned earlier who then, um, kind of brought up the conversation of therapy to me, but I meet her. We moved to Florida for about nine months where I'm a roofing technician. We leave Florida. I moved to Atlanta. We're in Atlanta for two, about two months or so. I couldn't find work. We come back to New York. We bounce around from the Bronx to the Upper East Side to Brooklyn. I'm still pursuing like this rap career of mine. So I'm doing a lot of shows. I'm getting my music posted on blogs and other and other websites and cool music publications. Around the same time I start working with the forensic population, um, which is, which is also important because that was the first time I was really introduced to, to real language surrounding, like diagnoses surrounding mental health because I was working with working with brothers and sisters that were getting released from Rikers Island who suffered from DSM IV diagnoses.

Joel: And they were getting diagnosed while they were at Rikers. And so outside of my father who I didn't really have much and very limited time to like speak to and with because he just

wasn't around enough...I'm sitting across men and women who are dealing with taking psychotropic medications, who are seeing psychiatrists once they come home from incarceration, some who had diagnoses prior to their incarceration, um, a lot who didn't have diagnoses until they actually were on the island. Um, and then kind of helping them walk through that process, which in turn also allowed me the opportunity to kind of look at some of the things that I was dealing with, um, from a distance I think. So I spent about seven years doing that, um, and it wasn't until about two years ago where I made the transition to, to like advertising marketing. One, because I knew I was expecting a child. So I was like, I need to make more money to be quite honest.

Lindsay: You're a writer now and you write, and you've actually even written a blog for To Write Love about your experience with depression. And so when does writing become something that becomes more than something you love, that's a passion and part of your career?

Joel: When people ask me about my creative process and my journey and like sometimes I'll get the question like when did you become a writer? It's a two part answer because I've been writing since I already knew how to put a sentence together that conveyed some level of emotion. So I'll say like first, second grade, but as a professional writer, I didn't, it didn't start until about 2013 when I won, I won a poetry grant. I had submitted a manuscript of some poems I'd written and that was the first time I had received monetary compensation for my art, which I have to shout out my mom because Linda T. would always say 'Joel, you're not gonna make any money using your name,' because I had a rap name, a rap name I was going by.

Joel: My mom would be like, 'you're not going to make any money using that name. I gave you the name that I gave you for a reason, so until you start doing that,' and I can laugh about it now, but when my mom was talking about what she didn't know because she doesn't have the language for it. Right? But she was talking about owning your truth and owning the truth of who you are, and granted nothing wrong with having a pseudonym, with having an artist's rap name whatever the case may be. But I think for me it was important to notice that I was living under this name because I wasn't stepping into the courage of myself yet. And what happened was once I started going by Joel Leon Daniels, because that is the name that I have, like the opportunities started coming because I started owning my truth more.

Joel: So after high school I was still writing. I was, there was this post website called Starlight Cafe and I would just write all these endless love poems on, oh, they were so bad. But it's part of the process, part of the journey. Um, I spent a lot of time on that and going to the Nuyorican Poetry Cafe in New York and trying to, trying to really hone my craft as a spoken word performer and artist and storyteller in combination with like pursuing a rap career. So like going into the studio, recording songs, making projects all that other stuff. But it wasn't until 2015 when outside of like the poetry writing, I started pursuing writing as an essayist. And Medium.com was a really big support in that because it, it gave me as a writer, a platform without a middleman. So it wasn't about me submitting to the New York Times and, or to The Atlantic and then getting rejected, which I think is also a part of the process and a needed part of the process.

Joel: But it allowed me to convey these personal narratives out and like put them out into the world, um, without an editor. And granted I was self-editing, you know, I'm a writer. I, I, for the most part, I'm good with that. But what it, what it allowed me to do was take the raw emotion of the thing, whether that be race, sexual trauma, dealing with religion, fatherhood, um, mental health and put that out to the world. And that's kind of how I grew my, my, my brand and how I grew my audience as, as a writer was through Medium.com and through the support of awesome publications such as your own and like Blavity and in other spaces that would provide them with the opportunity to share my story and then also share my art.

Lindsay: So do you feel like not having to prove the worth or the value of your words like gave you more freedom with Medium? Is that kind of what I'm hearing or?

Joel: Yeah, absolutely, absolutely. Like being able to have that freedom and have that time to kind of really sit with, um, with like the thoughts be...without having to attach anything to them. Because when you're submitting to these other publications, there's also this like there's that need for, um, to, that need to be seen. And it's not to say that that doesn't exist when you're submitting to like a Medium.com or if you're writing on your own blog. But what it does mean is the sting of it is not as as um, it's not as strong. And I realized too, like the output was important to me because it's one thing for me to write the words, but it's like, I like to share the experience of my art and so I can't do that if I keep getting rejection letters and being able to share my story in hopes that it helps other people. Um, and some of that can't be conveyed in like 800 words between 800 and a thousand words, you know, like, like it allowed me the opportunity to share the experience in a real and raw way without someone else dictating how that experience look and feel.

[music playing before promotion break]

Lindsay: To Write Love on Her Arms has always sold t-shirts as a way to help fund our mission. But the products that 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 styles, head to store.twloha.com now and use the promo code **PODCAST20** to receive 20% off your entire order.

[music playing leading back to the interview]

Lindsay: When you were posting or when you were kind of writing these essays, was this pre or was this before therapy and that experience? Or was it, is it only after kind of going through that, that you felt like this needs to be heard? Like what prompts you in this writing journey to kind of expose these...your story, to own your truth, like you were saying?

Joel: It was after therapy. But what I will say is like, as much as therapy played a role in that, I think fatherhood was a, was a really big part, probably the biggest part in me exploring the world of like essays because I realized I was getting like I was getting really, really anxious and nervous about fatherhood, like financially, like emotionally. Um, I was still working at the, uh, the, the job that I mentioned where I was servicing the forensic community and so I wasn't making a lot of money and granted I'm not making a lot of money now, but I'm making way more than I was before. And so there was the worry and concern of like how am I going to raise this, this human in the world without the income.

Joel: And I remember being in the park and I felt like I wanted to harm myself. And I was like what can I do in order to make this pain go away? Like I imagine like starting a fight with someone and then that leading to something or like me, like me walking out into the street and just like letting whatever was going to happen happen. And what that then led to, um, interestingly enough was me writing a monologue that became like a series of monologues that I constructed for like this one man show that I'd working on. But that monologue I wrote, I posted it on Medium.com and that was around the same time Medium opened up the opportunity for folks to post outside of their, um, you can post on your mobile phone because I wasn't able to do that before.

Joel: And so that gave me more access to do the things that I felt like I needed to do. And then I started, I started posting a lot more and then there was a, there was a, there was a situation that occurred between my co-parent and her coworker. A coworker threatened her. And I remember being so infuriated by it. Um, and I wrote something, I wrote a piece that was basically like it was called how not...like don't be a fuckboi. And granted I say that with now recognizing that language, like the fuckboi language is kind of steeped in like a negative connotation towards like gay male community, which I didn't know at the time - I had a friend kind of check on that, but at the time that title and that storyline was about checking men and their abusive behavior, um, and checking masculinity and patriarchy.

Joel: And that went viral. Like Huffington post picked it up. There was like a whole bunch of other publications picked it up and that kind of like started the bigger journey of me writing more about race, about my own trauma because, you know, like around the same time we're, we're dealing with Ferguson. We're doing with a lot of heat. Um, and so the writing gave me more things to chew on, in a way that making music couldn't, like I was writing rhymes, but I couldn't encapsulate what I was feeling in 16 bars and a hook and the verse.

Lindsay: Wow. Can we go back to one of those first posts that you talked about? Um, because I think you said some really important things there. So your, your daughter's on her way, Lilah. Um, and so you're...How old are you when, when you are dealing with, and I don't know would you call that depression in that, that experience, like, is that the first time you kind of name that experience that way?

Joel: Yeah, I was calling it, I was definitely calling it depression. Like kind of depression of my circumstances and my situation. It was around that period of time and so at that point I was 33. Yeah, I was 33 years old. Kind of trying to process these, like these suicidal ideations and then also too the feelings of not being enough for this person. Um, and what can I do? Like I can't do anything. I felt powerless, but like the writing was a way for me to kind of examine that from like a very different lens.

Lindsay: Yeah, so you're feeling anxious and depression is kind of part of your daily experience and then you...in this post, if people haven't had a chance to read it yet, you talk about what it's like to, to call a suicide hotline. Um, can you kind of walk me through the piece so people kind of get a sense of that if they haven't kind of encountered that part of your story yet?

Joel: Yeah, absolutely. So I had been struggling for a few weeks with um, just a majority of different things and they kind of all came to a head. I was, uh, I remember being in the park having a very difficult conversation and I remember being on a phone, like just yelling and fighting back tears and I'm yelling at this person and I'm just like, what? Like in my head, like, what the fuck is going on? Like what? Like why is this happening to me right now? Just very, very much like attacking myself about either A) letting this happen and B) being in this situation with this thing, like this stress and anxiety feels like it's kind of taking over me. And so at the same time I'm mostly having to pick up Lilah. So I'm battling the idea of feeling, feeling the way that I'm feeling, but knowing that I have to be around my child and not wanting to bring that kind of energy around her because the, the, the understanding of energies is really important to me.

Joel: So, uh, I leave the city, I'm on the train, I get on the bus and I'm like, my hands are shaking. I can't stop shaking my hands. I'm like, I need to talk to somebody. I started feeling hot. I started feeling like I wanted to jump off the bus. Like I literally was like, I need to jump off the bus. Like open a window. Jump through the window.

Lindsay: Was that the first time you'd ever felt that experience before?

Joel: Yes. I've had like a panic attack before and that was kind of what, what, what I was describing when I was, um, when, when I wrote the monologue that I mentioned, but this was different, like the shaking, the, like the nerves, like the nervousness that I felt and not knowing what to do and it's like I need to talk to somebody because I really do feel the need to not be here any longer and I want to harm myself because I don't know what I'm doing right now.

Joel: How it started was I tried to send a text to um, this, this hotline in New York City is made available where you can text like a mental health person professional, and they'll kind of try to essentially they'll try to talk you off the ledge, right? And while I'm doing that, what I'm realizing is that A) they're not really responsive and if they were, it wasn't - I could tell that it was like an automated response until I was going to get to a professional and it was taking too long. And then where I'm at, where I was in the Bronx, I knew that the Montefiore Hospital was nearby and I mean working with the forensic population, working with the mental health population, I already

knew the process. Like I would walk into intake, I will let them know that I wanted to harm myself or potentially other people.

Joel: Um, and then that would open up the opportunity for me to be moved into the psych ward because that's what I wanted. And, but then I'm like, also I have to pick up Lilah. And so like I'm, I'm dealing with all that when I get off the bus, I'm like, okay, well fuck it, whatever I'm going to call, I'm going to call lifeline. And so I called the suicide hotline here and it just having a person like, because when I call, like there's no identifying information, they're not asking me, she's not...the woman who I spoke to, this wonderful woman, um, and I forget her name, but she like first name, she gives me her first name. She didn't ask for any identifying information as far as like my name, anything else was concerned. And so like just having someone affirm who I was, she was asking me why I was calling and just listening, literally just listening and saying like, based on what I'm hearing, I think you are doing an amazing job as a father.

Joel: And I just cried. I cried, I cried for like five, ten minutes straight. Um, and I was late picking up Lilah but it was just so...it was like even now thinking about it, like it was such, such a warming experience and the idea of being that close to what I felt like was the edge and have someone telling me like, it's okay that you feel this way and I see you for who you are, you know? Like, that was enough, you know that because like I wasn't really getting that from...Not from other people, but from I guess maybe from the people that I wanted to hear it from.

Lindsay: Yeah. How did you, how did you have access to that number?

Joel: Google. Yeah. I googled. Google is my best friend sometimes. And it's always interesting when you see how Google auto populates because it auto populates based on, based on like the searching a popular search and so that came up quickly. But yeah Google. It was Google.

Lindsay: I think what's so interesting about what you just shared and I'm really grateful that you have shared that with us and um, we're going to have links to that specific essay in the show notes because I really think it's powerful and I think people need to hear what you've written, but or read what you've written. But I'm, I think what's really interesting to me when I read it and when I'm hearing you kind of talk about it, is that you, you kind of knew what you needed. Um, but there was still this physical thing that was happening. And so it's almost like when people know what they have access to, like I wonder if that was the difference. I mean you got to the hotline but you kind of knew. Well, you knew about choices. Right? And then you were making these choices and you knew enough to kind of keep you from acting on, on the suicidal ideation. Have you ever thought about that kind of piece of it? Like what if I didn't know any of these things? Like have you ever thought about where that, how that would have like I don't know how you had that might have changed the story a little bit.

Joel: I actually, to be fair, I haven't, I've never thought about it for me. I have thought about that kind of access in general for people. So like when we get into these conversations about ignorance, right, or a person not knowing a thing, and it kind of goes back to what we spoke

about. I try to go into every situation, every conversation with the cognizance of knowing that some people have not. We all have biases and bubbles and so I can't fault...I mean I can fault a person, but it doesn't. I don't think that's, that's not loving behavior to fault the person for not knowing something. There are things that I don't know, like if a person who works in finance came to me and had a conversation about some financial shit, I know some stuff, but their wealth of knowledge is deeper than mine.

Joel: So I have to be. I think it behooves me to be aware of that and to operate in the space of not everyone knows because not everyone has the access. And there are people in my community who don't have the access or honestly don't think that it's important to have access to the language because that's something that they've been reared on or they've been taught and so there's a lot of unlearning that has to happen in order for people to receive the information, receive the language and be able to function in the space of doing the work. Um, and knowing that there's work that needs to be done as well, but I can't imagine not having that language and not being able to also look at my daughter and say like, 'Lilah, you're mad. Okay. And it's okay for you to be mad. I want you to feel that, it's okay to cry. I want you to feel okay to do that. Let's discuss why you mad, you know? Can you tell me why you're mad? Okay. You need to be. You want to be left alone? Cool. I'll leave you alone. Do whatever you need to do.' Like giving her the space to feel the things that she's feeling and then also being able to give her the language because she may not understand the language, but I want to at least give her the language so she can use it as a tool later. You know? I just need her, I need her to have the thing first because I grew up without the thing.

Lindsay: Yeah. And I think that kind of, and maybe that speaks a little bit too to the book that you released last year where you kind of talk about the things that you just want her to have access, access to, um, right? Like some of the experiences. So has that, has fatherhood been that kind of catalyst for you to like really find them for yourself? These tools?

Joel: Absolutely. Absolutely. Like Lilah is by far my greatest teacher. She has taught me how to kind of dig deeper beyond the surface for things like I thought I was patient but I can be a lot more patient. I thought I was loving but I could be a lot more loving. I thought I was understanding and compassionate but I could be a lot more of those things because I see her and she sees me. Like, I let out this gasp um, last night when I picked her up from daycare and Lilah's immediate response was, um, she's like, 'Daddy, what's wrong?' And so part of that is me being able to sit with the thing and recognize it and say what that thing is because she gives me the access and the space and the freedom to do so because I've given her the language, and she's given me the language too in a way that I wasn't expecting because fatherhood has allowed me the opportunity to do that, to investigate because I'm open to the process and she's allowed me to be open to the process.

Lindsay: That's awesome. I think that's a huge gift to give any child frankly. Um, and it's, it's kind of unique as there are probably parents listening. I'm actually a parent as well. I have a four year old and yeah. And it's the one thing that I think I didn't anticipate and I'd love to even kind

of circle back with the conversation is like the transition into parenthood is very stressful and there's so much learning that you have to do. And then as soon as you feel like you get kind of the hang of one thing, they change and then you're changing again. And so, um, it's interesting to me kind of even going back to your other, the story about when you called the suicide hotline was like the balance that you have to like, these choices you have to make about your own mental health.

Lindsay: Like you were saying like you don't want, he didn't want to bring that in front of your daughter in that moment, but you knew you had to go pick her up. And like all of these choices that we have to now navigate when our lives circle or, or kind of intersect with this small person that we're responsible for. It seems to me like you've been able to use it as a great teacher. And I'm curious if you like ever anticipated that happening or if you knew of anybody who's been able to express that way. Cause I'm still learning that. And it's really cool to hear you talking about it. So I'm just curious if this is kind of like, do you have anybody you're looking to that's helping you learn this or are you kind of just navigating it on your own?

Joel: It's a little bit of both. I think a lot of it is trial and error. Like I tell people I've treated...I been, I've been treating Lilah like a science experiment for the past three years now, which is how much love can you put into a thing, into a person, and see like what unfolds.

Lindsay: I think that's a great experiment.

Joel: I'm just curious. I'm like I wonder what's going to happen, you know, because my mother gave me a lot of love but she had the language but she didn't give you tools because like she was raising black boys in the Bronx and the crack era. Like she was worried about keeping a roof over our heads and giving us love. But like what's the language and the tools look like so I can access the world in a different sort of way? And so my job feels like I'm creating a world for, for her.

Joel: And so I have to be mindful of that, I think, in the most beautiful way possible. But like her godfather, John, he was a person who I think I was guided more by his principles, like as far as like his spirit was concerned more so than like the language, like there's a way that John walks in the world that I was very curious about and it was less about asking John. John is a father to two at this point and John was the father before I was, but it was just watching him walk, walk in the world was such peace in wanting that kind of peace, more of that peace in the world, and asking myself how can I get there? So some of that was like Buddhist practice, some of that was reading like Eckhart Tolle and like Deepak Chopra, like all these other individuals.

Joel: But really a lot of it was the self, the self investigation and the willingness to be vulnerable in the, in the spaces. And then also being and having that vulnerability received with love from like my brother, my, my big brothers and my sister. And like other people that I loved and cared about and having, and honestly too black women. Black woman really gave me the space to be vulnerable and have that vulnerability received openly and warmly, which then it gives...it's

given me also the opportunity to do that with my child and give her the space, the space, the courage and the freedom to do the same thing.

Lindsay: Yeah. Do you feel then, I mean, you, you mentioned women specifically, do you feel like men in the black community have like space to be vulnerable?

Joel: We're starting to see more of that, but I think there's a lot of attachments of patriarchy and keeping like defined rules for how men move about in the world by both black men and black women, to be completely fair and honest. Um, and so we're starting to seek more conversation surrounding...I have a lot of male friends who were kind of also too having conversations about that. So part of that for me is also like, it's cool to see that happening, but could, there needs to be more of that. Absolutely.

Lindsay: What do you think in the current way that a man is understood keeps men often from reaching out?

Joel: Um, I think it goes back to, I think something we kind of touched on, which is like men are expected to perform certain...There's a certain like performative masculinity that's accepted, um, so loud, abrasive, aggressive, like the alpha male. There's a certain kind of way we look at an alpha male. Like leadership roles. What does that look like as a black man? Or as man in America or in the world. Granted that changes culturally too. Like how we identify like what's a strong Indian man might be different than what's a strong American man? What's a strong Nigerian...But I think part of that is that there's an expectation that men are supposed to be a certain way, the same way women are expected to be a certain way. Um, so the showing of emotion is deemed a weakness. Being vulnerable is deemed a weakness. Being soft is viewed as a, as a slight more than it is viewed as a thing worth celebrating. And so how we navigate those conversations and how we choose the words that we use, to choose to ascribe to a person and to a behavior. It's also part of the problem.

Lindsay: Yeah. So it sounds like you do have friendships or relationships where you have space to share. I mean, you're sharing these writings publicly. I'm wondering, do those come into like those male relationships, friendships, or mentorships or...

Joel: It comes from all of those things like, and, and I think the writing has also opened more of that conversation for me to have with other men, with other people. So I, I think part of that is because I've been writing so much and being open about the conversation, it feels like it's also been facilitating that, um, that conversation that happened as well for other people.

Lindsay: Yeah. And I think it'd be hard to not read your work and want to talk to somebody about the things you're sharing. I mean, it's, it's true and I think that's part of what To Write Love has always tried to accomplish is to just...sharing stories that give people framework to - it doesn't have to be their story, it doesn't have to be identical, it doesn't have to reflect every bit, but it's the, the experience, kind of, that you, that you read between the lines, the pain and loss

and these big questions. I think people can relate to those topics. I mean, we all encounter them. And so when I even talked to people about the work of *To Write Love on Her Arms*, I talk about just the human experience, right? Like we're, we're trying to connect people to that, outside of the word of just mental illness, um, because it's mental health and it's, and that's a human, that's humanity, you know, we all face it.

Lindsay: Um, but I do think it gives an even something like this podcast gives people a chance to have one more story to kind of help put their own story together. And so I, I thank you for sharing those things and thank you for being an advocate and a voice that is not only talking about mental health but you're talking, like you said, you're pushing into these other areas like fatherhood, masculinity, all of these topics that are so...you kind of have to push against them to kind of, to change and to reshape them. So thank you for those. I want to ask a little bit about if you could identify, your writing, this is kind of largely, but how would you say writing specifically has helped you, if you could kind of encapsulate that?

Joel: I think writing has given me breathing room, I think is the best way to explain it. Writing has given me the opportunity to explore my spaces and explore my creativity and explore the world.

Lindsay: When you think of oversharing, where do you kind of have boundaries? Or where do you distinguish...I think we get that question or people wrestling with that question a lot. Like, when I'm sharing my story for the first time, what's oversharing versus sharing. Like you said, to drive a conversation.

Joel: I think it depends, honestly, to be quite honest. I think that depends on the context and that's difficult to know, to be able to discern that, but I think and part of that is the practice of being able to discern what, like when you're comfortable enough to share because I don't necessarily believe in oversharing, but like for me, I recognize what oversharing looks like. That might be different for you though, you know, or different to the, to the person that you're sharing that information with. So what I've recognized in me is like I don't, I share things about Lilah, but I don't share the specifics of what I'm going through as Joel. Maybe through fatherhood, but I don't talk in detail about my co-parenting relationship or whatever the case may be. Maybe later, but for right now it feels like that's not where I want to be, but that might be different for somebody else, you know. So I, I think there's room for that depending on who you are and where you are.

Lindsay: If you could speak to yourself when you were struggling, what would you say?

Joel: It's OK for right now, like, and it's hard right now, but it's OK. One thing that Buddhism has taught me, granted I'm not a practicing Buddhist, but the idea that pain is a part of the process, but like the suffering, like that's the option, like the suffering when we cling and attach ourselves to a moment, whether that be good or bad because we want this thing to end or we want this thing to continue and everything is transient. Everything keeps moving and so and everything is

always shifting. So like it's OK. Like it's OK and even if it doesn't feel OK, recognize that there's room and opportunity for it to be if you just open to it. If you can open to it. Correction.

Lindsay: Joel, this has been a really awesome conversation and frankly I wish we had like five more hours because I think we could just go back and forth and talk about so many, so many cool topics and, and your take on everything has been really wonderful and we're so grateful for you. So thank you for your time. If we wanted to let people know how to find you and to get connected to your work, where can we send them?

Joel: Um, you can find me on twitter and IG. J o e l a k a m a g. That's my twitter and IG handle. You can also find me at the website mydaughtermayhave.com where you can find like my writing, my performances, my music, all that other good stuff.

Lindsay: That's awesome.

Joel: And my book.

Lindsay: Oh yes. Your book, which is one year, one year old today. Correct? And that is "A Book About Things I Will Tell My Daughter."

Joel: Yes ma'am. That is also correct.

Lindsay: All right, well we're going to have a link to all that in the show notes. Joel, thank you so much for today. Thank you for the conversation and I hope you get to celebrate your beautiful daughter today. Happy Birthday, Lilah.

Joel: Thank you so much, Lindsay, thank you to you and the team for being so awesome and courageous and wonderful.

[music playing]

Lindsay: Thank you again to Joel Daniels. You can find more about Joel's work, his newest book, and ways to connect with him in our show notes. 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 exists. 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: twloha.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.

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Lindsay: A big thank you to our friends at Copeland for the original music on this episode. This episode was produced by Mark Codgen with editorial support by Claire Biggs 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.