

Transcript for Episode 306: “Alicia Gillman: Dear Anxiety”

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

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LINDSAY KOLSCH: You’re listening to the To Write Love on Her Arms podcast, a show about mental health and the things that make us human. 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.

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CHAD MOSES: Hey everybody, this is Chad Moses, TWLOHA’s Director of Outreach. Today we’re continuing our storytelling series on the podcast where we listen to the voices and stories of several authors who originally published their experiences with mental health on the TWLOHA blog.

In this episode, we’re featuring the words of our friend and intern alumnus Alicia Gillman and her blog from 2014 titled “Dear Anxiety.” As the title suggests, it’s an open letter Alicia wrote where she confronts her anxiety and the many obstacles it has presented in her life. She tells a story that many of us can relate to, possibly even word-for-word in some cases, but Alicia also reminds us of something important as well: to never let our mental health struggles define all that we are.

After you hear these words from Alicia, she’ll join me to talk about how important it was for her to learn how to separate herself from her struggles with anxiety and OCD, and the coping outlets she’s adopted—figuratively and literally—over the years.

[music playing]

ALICIA GILLMAN: Dear bane of my existence, dear omnipresent excuse, dear crippling frenemy...

How do you manage to keep showing up at the worst times? No offense or anything, but that whole gig in the middle of that crowded Wal-Mart? News flash, but the frozen food aisle isn’t a cool place to freak out (no pun intended). And, just as I’m about to convince myself I have a hold on things, you remind me of how many different grocery cart paths I’m obstructing by just existing.

Oh, and how could I forget your tendency to butt into all of my conversations? When you jump in like you do, I overanalyze every movement, every facial expression, of the person I am speaking to. Friend, acquaintance, cashier at a drive-thru—every single one. You present me

with all of the most intricate worst-case scenarios. What if they hate me? What if I just said something really stupid?

Don't even get me started on text messages. With you around, a message saying "Hey" with a period at the end gets me panicking that there is a bitter undertone I'm meant to decode. With you, one simple "Hey" isn't a greeting; it's a matter of life and death.

Perhaps it would be easier if you were a person, to have conversations with you and hear your side of the story. But of course, you are no person; you are nothing that I can ever see. First, you came to me with the name of Social Anxiety Disorder, a companion to my attention deficit.

But as time passed by, you earned another name: Generalized Anxiety Disorder. And as more time passed by, you earned yet another: Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. It's safe to say, although you still run rampant while I dream—God forbid I get an ounce of restful sleep for once—you don't hold nearly as much influence over me as you once did. Thanks to counseling and medication, I can now self-talk my way into managing my time spent with you.

They used to speak as if, one day, we would part ways. After all of these years, I know you are a permanent part of my life, but that doesn't mean you have to rule my life.

You're the reason I have to remind myself to breathe, the reason why tiny tasks can send me into a non-stop frenzy until they are completed. You're the reason I have to take pills every day, and why I can't handle the days when I don't. You're the reason I have emergency Xanax when the normal dose doesn't work.

For all these things, I used to blame myself instead of you. Doing so only encouraged you—it only made you stronger. But now I can claim the title of the stronger one. Despite the pain you've caused, I have accepted you as a part of me, just not all of me. You are not me.

All in all, you have caused me a lifetime of pain and frustration. I wish I could say goodbye; we both know that's never going to happen. But that doesn't mean I'll stop trying.

[music playing]

CHAD: Alicia, thank you so much for taking the time to join us. It's my honor, it's my pleasure to introduce our podcast listeners to your voice, to your work, and to our podcast. Alicia has been part of the TWLOHA family for quite some time now. Looks like seven years in the fall will be when you started interning for us. We're just so thankful that all these years later, we can count on you as a friend and as a consistent voice in our mission and in our messaging. So, Alicia, thank you so much for joining us.

ALICIA: Of course, of course. Thanks for having me.

CHAD: So where are you? Where are you calling in from today?

ALICIA: Dallas, Texas area actually. I've been all over the place but, yeah, right now, I'm in the Dallas, Texas area.

CHAD: We just listened to you read through your blog, "Dear Anxiety." So this is a blog that you wrote, I believe, when you were still interning for us, correct?

ALICIA: I think when I first wrote it, the first draft I wrote was probably one of my final years of college. So probably looking at 2012, 2013. Probably somewhere around that time. I remember that I wrote it around that time, and then I ended up revisiting it when I was at the internship to use it.

CHAD: So I imagine, with that seven or eight years of history, that reading the words probably has taken on a bit of a different tabor than when you originally started scribing it. In what ways has anxiety continued to manifest itself in your life since you first wrote this blog?

ALICIA: So back at the time when I wrote the blog, I didn't really have a full grasp of everything that I was dealing with at the time. What I thought was just Generalized Anxiety Disorder, what was hiding underneath that, that I was too afraid to talk about for years and years and years was Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. So at this point in my life, I have been... I guess, the past few years, too, I've been dealing with that side of things a little bit more and accepting it.

CHAD: I think I speak for many of our readers, many of our listeners, when I say that so much of the power in this piece comes from the intro, comes from the title, comes from you addressing this to your anxiety, and saying, in no uncertain terms, "You are not me." How has this statement and this separation been important for you in terms of coping with this diagnosis?

ALICIA: So in a way the diagnosis has been kind of freeing in being able to separate myself from my anxiety because I think when I write, "You are not me," it's also a reminder for myself to my anxiety, "I need to remember that." Because so many times I forget that it's not all of me, and it's not part of me. With Obsessive Compulsive Disorder in particular, there are a lot of scary thoughts that you have. So being able to look at those, distance yourself, and despite how much your brain wants to convince you it's a part of you, it's not. That still holds true when I deal with... in my coping mechanisms with OCD, it's me saying, "You're not me. This is not who I am." But it's something that I'm dealing with. So it's kind of like, it's validating, for sure, to know that it's not a part of me and to remind myself that I don't have these thoughts all because of myself. It's the diagnosis, the disorder that's making me feel uneasy, anxious.

CHAD: I think in that, I reckon a huge piece of that freeing sensation that you mentioned is in the belief that there's so much more about you. There are far more important things about you

that makes Alicia, Alicia than a collection of letters or a collection of doctor's notes. I still get goosebumps when I consider this blog. Just the power in separating the pieces of you from the essence of you. So you kind of hinted towards this as you were responding to that last question in terms of OCD. Since writing this, and perhaps even during the time of writing it, what are some ways in which you've learned to cope, you've learned to manage anxiety and OCD?

ALICIA: Well, I think probably one of the biggest ones was, I did get a dog a few years ago. My dog has been... Taking care of him and putting my energy into him has really helped me with managing my anxiety and with taking myself outside of my own head. Because I know that without him, it would be so much easier to get lost in the thoughts of, just the worries and the intrusive thoughts and stuff like that. So he's one of my biggest ones. Taking care of him, definitely. I have put effort into other coping mechanisms that have helped, but sometimes I am bad about keeping up with them. Like meditation, for example. There's a really awesome app called Headspace that my brother actually had a subscription to. I ended up using that to kind of like take a breath and relax a few times. And then I have been learning how to open up more with people and talking to them and seeing my therapist on a weekly basis and working with medication. I think all of those combined have helped tremendously in occupying myself but also like addressing my own issues and working through them.

CHAD: What do you wish people knew about Generalized Anxiety? For people with mental health challenges, there are often well intentioned voices that try to offer help that can be...well, a little less than helpful. So, Alicia, to you, what does a supportive voice sound like?

ALICIA: With Generalized Anxiety Disorder and with other forms of anxiety, I think one of the biggest things that I've learned this year, too, is that one of my biggest obstacles in getting my correct diagnosis was kind of downplaying how much I was feeling. So, I would be like, "Well, it's not that bad. It's not as bad as what I think it's supposed to be like." So, a lot of times people, they experience anxiety in any form, but they're like, "Oh, I don't experience it to this extent, so I'm probably not dealing with it," or "I don't need help because of it." But something that I've learned this year, especially, is that with anxiety, also in particular, is that the symptoms are what matter. It's not always the complete diagnosis but the fact that your life is at a stage of unrest and uneasiness, and it's preventing you from being able to do things that you want to do. That's the part that matters.

CHAD: We've talked on the podcast a bit about comparative diagnoses, comparative grief, comparative experience. And, Alicia, I think you hit the nail on the head. That your pain, your psychological pain, does not have to be compared to someone else's in order to be valid. So, just to echo what you said, if you're feeling a sense of dis-ease, if you're feeling an uneasiness, then you're worthy of the help that you think others should be getting in your place. You can get the help that you believe other people deserve as well.

ALICIA: Right, definitely.

CHAD: One last thing. Is there any other piece of advice or encouragement that you'd care to offer someone who may be dealing with anxiety, OCD, or just confusion about life during this time?

ALICIA: I'd say just to invest the time into yourself to get to the bottom of it, or just to be willing to explore and take on the journey of finding out what's hurting you. And to actually go and address it and just to take the first step, one step at a time. Whether that's talking to somebody about it, whether that's signing up for a therapy appointment, just give yourself the grace to explore it with a goal of finding some semblance of peace or getting better in general. Also, I'd say definitely writing and journaling is definitely a good thing. I've always been able to express myself in creative writing. So if you're a person that likes to write at all or maybe isn't opposed to writing, just feel free to jot down your thoughts, or I always like to put myself in someone else's shoes, like a fictional person's shoes and write from that perspective, as well. Sometimes that makes things a little bit easier.

CHAD: Yeah, that's great advice.

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CHAD: We want to thank Alicia for joining us on the podcast and for sharing her past and current experience with anxiety, and how she's dealing with and even reclaiming her mental health. You can read her words in their original form, and the stories of so many others, by visiting twloha.com/blog or clicking the link in our show notes. And if you've been inspired by these stories and want to contribute to the TWLOHA blog, we invite you to send a 500-900 word submission to us at blog@twloha.com.

And as always, if you or someone you know is struggling, know that help exists and it's okay to reach out. By going to twloha.com/findhelp, you'll find local, affordable mental health resources that are available in your community. Thank you again for tuning in. We're glad you're here.

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

If you're struggling right now, know that it is okay 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.

Or, if you need to talk to someone right now, you can always reach out to our friends at Crisis Text Line.

Simply text the word TWLOHA—that's T W L O H A—to 741741. And you'll be connected to a crisis counselor. It's free, confidential, and available 24/7.

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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 Lindsay Kolsch, with editorial support by Rebecca Ebert. Music assistance was provided by James Likeness and Ben Tichenor.

I'm Lindsay Kolsch, thank you so much for listening.

To Write Love on Her Arms is a non-profit 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.