

Episode 009: Stories Are Still The Most Powerful Thing That We Have - Hannah Brencher

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: Living in a big city can be lonely. You're surrounded by millions of people, but yet moments of connection can be rare. It can be especially hard when you've just moved there, not knowing a single person. For Hannah Brencher, living in New York City after college created feelings of loneliness and sadness that slowly turned into depression, but Hannah did something a bit unexpected. She started writing love letters to strangers on the subway, in coffee shops and anywhere she could. Leaving behind a bit of herself, hoping to share a bit of love and words she knew she needed to hear. This project turned into a global movement called More Love Letters. Hannah and I talked today on the podcast about why she wrote those letters, what it was like to get a diagnosis of depression and how over the years she's needed connection in a holistic approach to treating her depression. I can't wait for you to hear from Hannah, particularly in this holiday season, because she shares her insight on how we can find and create more connection in our lives.

Lindsay: Wow. I'm really excited today to welcome our guest, Hannah Brencher. Hannah, thank you so much for being here.

Hannah Brencher: Thank you for having me. I'm so excited.

Lindsay: Yeah. So, uh, for people who are not familiar with you or your work, would you mind just telling us a little bit about yourself and about More Love Letters?

Hannah: Yeah. So my name is Hannah Brencher, and I am based in Atlanta, Georgia. I am a, well, I started as a blogger, and I am an author of two books and the founder of an organization called More Love Letters. And we are a global organization that uses the power behind social media to write and mail letters to strangers in need all over the world.

Lindsay: Wow. That's so awesome. I think actually that's kind of where I want to start because if I understand correctly, that came out of a difficult season in your life and so I would love for you just to kind of share like the beginning story or where that all started for you.

Hannah: Well, I always start off by saying that like this was never supposed to happen. Like this is definitely one of the most serendipitous accidents that have ever happened to me. But I moved to New York City right after college, and I found myself struggling with a lot of loneliness that then became sadness. And, you know, I didn't really have vocabulary to put around it. At the time, if you would have told me that I was depressed, I probably wouldn't have believed you because I had grown up where we didn't talk about depression. I didn't know anything about depression. I didn't know very much about mental health and so I thought that something had to be bad or wrong or circumstances had to be awry in order for someone to go through depression.

Lindsay: Like what would be your picture of someone who is struggling with mental, like mental health or mental illness at the time?

Hannah: Well, I feel like with like depression, I think like the, the image that always comes to your mind is somebody who can't get out of bed in the morning and just kind of sleeps all day.

Lindsay: Right.

Hannah: I would have never known that there is high functioning depression and anxiety that you could be productive and quote unquote killing it and still be very depressed. And so I think that that's the image that most people think of when they think of depression or hear of it for the first time. But for me, I think mental illness, kind of, I wouldn't have even put depression into that category at the time. I had an uncle growing up who was schizophrenic and to me that was mental illness, and I thought it was a very rare thing. I thought that not many people struggled or suffered with something like depression. So I really didn't have much to go off of at that time in my life.

Lindsay: Yeah. So you're in, you're in New York and what are you like give us a kind of the setting there. What are you working on or what are you doing during that season?

Hannah: Yeah, so I was doing a year of what they call volunteer service, so I agreed to make no money for the entire year and I had a \$25 a week stipend, so \$25 a week is hard. \$25 a week in New York City feels nearly impossible. Um, and we lived in the Bronx, New York. We lived on the third floor of an immigration center and, um, we lived in an area that experienced a lot of poverty and by the UN standards a lot of the people living around us were experiencing homelessness. And so it was a large immigrant community. I lived with three other girls, and it was just a lot coming at me at once. I think to go from a very small private liberal arts college to all of a sudden a big city experiencing a lot of poverty. It just kind of took my feelings for a ride. I'm an Enneagram four and so I feel everything and so I just think I started to carry all these

extra feelings and it really just made me lonely and it made me sad, especially having to commute from the Bronx to Manhattan for my job. I was working for a human rights organization at the United Nations and so I was seeing poverty on a local scale and then I was seeing it on a global scale every single day and I just don't think I was prepared for it.

Lindsay: Yeah. When in that season did you start to recognize, hey, this is really hard, like this is taking a toll on me.

Hannah: I mean, I feel like pretty instantly I started to struggle with it, but I also remember kind of feeling like it was my fault and feeling like if I'm feeling this then that just means that I need to be stronger or I'm not being brave enough or I'm not being grateful enough. And so to me it was like, what is wrong with me that I can't just pull myself up by my bootstraps. I felt really defeated in that and I think now obviously with the education and the knowledge that I have now, it's not about just 'get stronger.' It's not about something that you did. It's no fault to yourself that you struggle with depression. And so I really just kind of closed in on myself and isolated myself and didn't really tell friends and family what I was going through because I was ashamed of it because I thought well if I just snap to it and snapped together, like they'll never know that I even went through this.

Lindsay: So you were, you were trying to kind of figure it out before you let anybody in?

Hannah: Yeah, because I thought it was something that could be figured out. I thought that it was something that I had to do in order to not feel this way.

Lindsay: Yeah. So where do you go with that? Like what, what happens next?

Hannah: Well, people cope in different ways. Um, I chose to cope by writing letters to people that I would see on the subways and in coffee shops and anyone that I looked at that I really felt like they looked like they were kind of lonely too or kind of sad too. And so for me it was really like processing my feelings and then a lot of ways it was like writing a diary that you then rip out the pages at the end of the day and you leave them behind

Lindsay: So you would, you would never give them to them though, right? Like this is not a 'dear person sitting across from me.' And then you hand them the letter. It was inspired by the people you're experiencing the world with, but not necessarily that there's not a direct transaction there. Right?

Hannah: Yeah. I don't think I would have ever been brave enough to go up to them and been like, 'here's a letter from me,' you know, um, but I definitely would be like strategic of like say for instance I was sitting in a Starbucks, and Starbucks in New York City, it's like you barely ever get to seat and the second you get up somebody else is going to sit down and so I'd be strategic with like leaving a letter right on the table and then like busting out of the coffee shop knowing that somebody is going to read it.

Lindsay: Yeah. So tell me about letter writing because I, I take it that that's not everybody's first impulse is to write letters to um, for lack of a better word, strangers. Tell me about that. Like how was that the thing that you kind of gravitated towards?

Hannah: Yeah, so that was something that really, for me it was like second nature. I had grown up with a mother that wrote letters to me and she got letters from my grandmother. And so letter writing, it's just always been a part of my story. And so when I started writing these letters to other people, I don't think I thought anything of it because I was also like the girl in college that always wrote letters to her friends and so it just kind of felt like it was pretty normal to me, but I think I learned through this experience that it is anything but normal that in the world that we live in, I mean everything is text and it's email and it's instant communication and I believe all of that definitely has its place. But there's something slower and more intentional about letter writing, about sitting down and having to pay attention to what's in front of you. And I don't know, for me that's just always been me being like a longhand writer. Like I write things down before I type them, but I understand that's not how the world really works these days.

Lindsay: Yeah. So in your TED Talk where you kind of talked about the start and this birth of More Love Letters, you say the words 'you were writing to people who have never known themselves loved on paper.' What did you mean by that?

Hannah: I really meant my generation, I mean I meant millennials at the time and now that, you know, people are still watching that talk and it's still getting tons of views and so I feel like it's, you know, the generation that's coming up and the generation that will come after that is that, you know, my generation, like we grew up on the, on the line of...We had some analog, we had some written communication, but we also grew up with technology. But I feel the generations that are coming up, you know, they don't...There is no letter writing unless it's a vintage type thing and everything is basically done by email. It's done by texts. It's done by a more instant form of communication. And so for some people, especially people that I speak to and I work with on a daily basis or readers that I inspire, like they've never received a letter. Like they don't even know what that's like to get a letter that's addressed to them that has somebody's handwriting on it. And that's always like the funniest thing for me to see is that the research shows that the reason that people don't really write letters really isn't even about like they want a faster form of communication. People don't write letters because they don't like their own handwriting and...

Lindsay: I would not have thought about that.

Hannah: Right? I know. Me either, but like it baffles me because I think about like history and about the ways that we knew that people existed and like the tangible, the tangibility of like a diary or a handwritten letter and I often wonder - are we wiping that out? Like will our children never know about that? Will generations to come? Like how will they know that we were here except for stampings on the Internet that could be erased at any time.

Lindsay: Yeah. I think that brings to my mind, like what you're saying is that there's a level of personal presence in the letter and permanence. Is that, is that kind of what you like, how you would kind of wrap that up?

Hannah: Totally. Yes. I think that there's something very powerful about being able to touch something and hold something and keep something. You know, with, with the bundles that we deliver to people on a monthly basis, people like they keep these letters, they keep them in boxes, they keep them underneath their pillows, they carry some with them in their purses. It's something that you can take with you that isn't on a screen, and I find that all the time when I talk to people or when people first hear about what I do, the first thing that they bring up, it's like, 'oh I have a box of letters beneath my bed and if anything were to happen, it'd be the first thing that I would grab. Like if there was a fire, I would grab those letters.' And so, they mean something to people.

Lindsay: Yeah. So you go from writing a couple letters to people and then you open - you kind of put this out there that you would write a letter to anybody who wanted one. Can you tell me about that decision and why?

Hannah: Well, I made a crazy promise to the Internet, thinking in my head rationally, okay, this will be a fun project. I'll do this for like a week, a month max. And I thought, I have like a couple hundred readers on my blog so maybe like 20 of them will ask for a love letter if I give them the opportunity to get one. I never imagined that like hundreds of people would show up and just grab onto this idea and that they would email me, not just like, 'hey, this is cool. I would love a letter from you,' but like crazy stories and really heartbreaking stories and just testimonies of their life and their faith and their family and it just..I mean it was definitely one of those moments where I really like looked around and could not deny any longer that like we're all in some ways lonely. We're all a little bit disconnected. If I ever thought that I was alone in that, like I was sorely mistaken because I think we do a really good job of hiding what's going on behind the screen.

Lindsay: Yeah. And so what was that experience like? You're writing a couple hundred, right by the end of... How much time did that take you?

Hannah: It was a total of nine months, um, that I wrote about 400 letters to strangers.

Lindsay: So how does your mental health, like how do those two things kind of track next to each other? Can you kinda walk us through that?

Hannah: Yeah, I mean like, it definitely. I always am very careful to say that it didn't heal me. It didn't like restore me. I wasn't able to...I remember when the story first kind of like took on a life of its own with the media. People would write headlines like she, like, 'girl was healed from letter writing' and that's not the truth. But I think that, you know, media outlets love to wrap things in a

pretty bow if they can. Um, but it helped me pull myself out of myself, and I know that that was very valuable for me, especially as somebody who still deals with depression, is that depression is going to tell you to focus inward. It's going to want you to focus on yourself and your feelings and your wants and all of these things. And one of the most valuable things that you can do is step outside of yourself and think about somebody else. And so while I definitely needed other kinds of help in order to come out of this depression, I think that the letters played a really powerful role in giving me something to do, but then also allowing me to think of other people maybe going through the same thing or something far worse.

Lindsay: Yeah. So what were the other types of help that you leaned on during that season?

Hannah: Well, I think not having much knowledge of depression or how one even treats depression, I, I ended up looking for a therapist. I didn't know anything about finding a therapist in New York City. So I ended up in this pretty bougie therapist office in downtown Manhattan. But I had gone to a therapist once when I was in high school. I think my mom...I had a bad attitude problem or something. My mom put me with therapist - that didn't last very long. Um, and I was just being a preteen. I knew then that a therapist was an unbiased perspective, that you could go to them, you could talk to them, and so I went to talk to this guy because I just wanted to not have to sit with these feelings alone and I didn't feel like I could really process the feelings with my roommates or with my friends just because, I mean I really didn't even know what was going on that this sadness wasn't leaving me. And so with that therapist is where I got the official diagnosis of depression.

Lindsay: Was that through like a couple of sessions or was that... Tell me about that experience a little bit.

Hannah: Yeah. I think it was after, I want to say it was after the second session, so it wasn't, it wasn't the first session, the get-to-know-you session, but I think after the second session is where he said, well, you know, like you have depression, and I just remember being like completely jarred by that because I just wasn't, I wasn't expecting it. Like I wasn't expecting to have this label on it. Now I'm like, okay, this is what I have. Like, this is an illness and so, um, I just remember going home and not really knowing what to do with that information. Like, okay, well I have depression, but like what does that, what does that look like? And it was just something I was completely unfamiliar with. I think about like college and like graduating from college, moving to New York City, but like in college you just don't remember that we put a lot of emphasis on depression or anxiety. I know that we put a lot of emphasis on suicide awareness, but I would say like depression a lot of times leads into that and so we have to talk about that more.

Lindsay: Yeah. So you are seeing the counselor and how long did you work with,with him for?

Hannah: I worked with him for about five months.

Lindsay: Yeah. So I'm curious about that process. When did you kind of know it was ready, you were ready to move on or just even like when to lean in and, and that whole experience. I'm curious about your perspective of that now.

Hannah: Yeah, I think that for, for me, he really just was kind of a person to go to, to know that I wasn't crazy, that I wasn't alone, that I had somebody to talk to, um, with all of these things that I didn't really understand. And so like going to see him every week just became like a given to me, you know? Um, but I stopped seeing him when I ended up getting a job offer that moved me away from New York City. And I think at that point though, finishing therapy with him, I really thought, okay, well I did the therapy thing. Like I don't ever have to do it again. This is over. I'm done with the depression. I know that he had brought up options of medication, but it wasn't something that we really entertained seriously because we really felt like a lot of this was situational and that when I was out of the environment that I was in, I would probably go back to a different kind of normal. And so we really didn't talk about that that much. But I think that at the time I thought depression was something that you just, you dealt with once. It happened once, like the chicken pox, and then never get.

Lindsay: So you moved from New York and you move to Atlanta?

Hannah: Yes, Atlanta, Georgia.

Lindsay: Awesome. So tell me about that experience and what brought you to Atlanta.

Hannah: Yeah, I think that um, you know, in building More Love Letters and in creating this organization that went from like one girl writing love letters to like thousands of people all over the world, I found that even though it's a really beautiful thing, like you can easily get lost in the work that you're doing and then you can easily, like almost allow that work to become a crutch for you of like, well, I'm not really facing my feelings because I'm just engulfed in work. Um, and so I think that in that time I really just became, I really just felt like I had something to prove to people. And so, you know, you build an organization and you check that off the list and then you get a book deal and you check that off the list. And you are speaking around the country and all of these things that I thought mattered so much that I just was like, okay, well then I can do this and I can do this and I can do this.

Hannah: And I think moving to Atlanta really was just checking another thing off the list. It's like, okay, well what do you do after you've done all these things, well, you pack up your life and you move to a new city because that's impressive, you know, you don't know anybody. Great. Do it. Um, and looking back on it, I'm like, what was I thinking? You know, I knew one person from Twitter and they were a friend of mine, but like I had a rude awakening when I showed up there in Atlanta to realize that like all of these things that I think like define health and support health, they don't come instantly. Community doesn't come instantly. It's not like an episode of Friends where like everybody just shows up at the coffee shop and you have your best friends there, you know, like you have to build this life that you want and this life that matters to you in that

takes a lot of hard work and that doesn't guarantee that it's going to happen the first month you moved to a new city.

Lindsay: Yeah. So you were writing before you moved to Atlanta. I mean you talked about your blog, but you talk about writing a book. Can you talk a little bit more about those books and that process and, and then I would love to then hit on some of the ideas of community that you talk about as well.

Hannah: Yeah, so I had already written my first book. I had gotten a book deal. I'd written the first book about the love letters and I moved to Atlanta at the tail end of that. I probably had a few more rounds of edits to do, but um, I remember like wanting to move to Atlanta much sooner. My mom was like, hm, like maybe just like write the book first, that would be completely unsettling to like go and write a book in a city that you've never been to and also try to build a life at the same time. Um, and I, I love book writing. I am so passionate about it. I feel like it is what I was created to do, but I also know that it is very much like it is an internal process. It is a lot of dealing with and processing your feelings and being very like internal as opposed to external. And so I've learned since writing that first book that you really just have to make sure that all the other boxes are checked in the sense of like you're being active, you're eating well, you're surrounded by people - like all of these tenants of health. Otherwise you're just sitting in a dark room all day writing by your feeling.

Lindsay: And so that was a, that was like a memoir, am I correct?

Hannah: Yes, it was.

Lindsay: Where did that, cause you were pretty young when you wrote a memoir is that was like, no, I'm just saying you know, no shade on you, but it's like, but that you're a young person writing a memoir. So I was curious if you felt some of it was really fresh or are pretty raw while you were processing that?

Hannah: Well, I definitely agree with you and I definitely feel like I came up against that a lot being like why am I writing a book at this age when like memoirs are like for when you're in your fifties or sixties or like end of your life, you know, that's what I thought. But I also know that I didn't really like push or shove to get this book deal. They really wanted me to write this book and so I kind of took that as a, you know, as a sign of like, okay, like I will let my voice be heard and maybe we do need more pieces of literature from young people and their experiences.

Lindsay: No, I think you sharing your story almost, not in real time but like, like you said, like in that season is powerful. So I think it's great that you did that. I was just kinda curious about the, like if that ever made you feel like this is a weird tension to like put that out there where I don't know where my story is going, you know, like that feeling like is it really ready yet or?

Hannah: Well and I kind of knew that it was for me, I knew it was important to leave that story in that season. So I don't think I could have written that book at the age of 30 or at the age of 35 because when you're 22 years old and the way that you cope with depression is by writing letters to strangers, I think, like me at 30, I would never do that. Like that would not be the way that I would think to cope. And so I really felt like I had to write that while it was still fresh and while, while I didn't have any like, jadedness about the world yet, you know, I had no chips on my shoulder. I was 25 when I wrote the book and I still very much believed in the message of the book and today I still believe in that message but I'm not that 22-year-old girl anymore.

Hannah: Like that's not how I see the world anymore. And so I thought it was a very important way to like have it come full circle and to inspire other people and to inspire young people especially. But then to also just be able to in a weird writer kind of way, like leave that 22-year-old girl behind, you know, like almost like, I don't know, I see this image of me at the train station and like putting her on a little train and like, because it became such a public thing and that was very strange for me...That like you go from no one knowing that you struggled with depression to anyone in America or all over the world, whoever listens to TED Talks, knowing that you dealt with depression. I needed a way to be able to close the door on the story and then evolve on my own.

[music playing, leading into ad]

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[music playing, leading back to interview]

Lindsay: Yeah. And so now we're back in Atlanta and you're still writing or like what does that look like? What does life look like? And you, you talked a little bit about community and it sounds like that's really important to you. So I would be kind of curious to hear like your transition into Atlanta and then how mental health kind of played out in that season in a new way or maybe in a similar way, but, but now you're in Atlanta.

Hannah: I would tell anyone moving to a new city to just do the exact opposite of what I did because I don't think I really rooted myself in any great, particular way. But um, yeah, I moved to Atlanta because I was self employed and so I'm still self employed to this day and so I have the versatility to be able to work wherever I want to and for some people that's like a great adventure; for me that was just really daunting. And so I, you know, I got an office space and I worked around other creatives and I, um, I was, I was lucky to move into a neighborhood that

really had a close knit community and one of the things that like I started to do was going to a Monday night, Bachelor night, you know, that everyone watches The Bachelor, Bachelorette, or some people do. But it really, to me it became a form of community rather than like, I really care or I'm really invested in whoever is giving out roses tonight.

Hannah: It was a way to meet girls in my neighborhood. And so, um, I started doing that. I joined a gym, I did all of these things. But the moment that it got hard and the moment that the honeymoon stage kind of wore off is when I really started to pull back from things. I mean I pulled back from community, I pulled back from these habits that I had set in stone and I missed the warning signs of just, you know, isolating myself and becoming unhealthy. And for me it looked like a lot of, um, instead of being where my feet are, instead of embracing this new season in Atlanta, it became, well this doesn't look like where I came from and I'm actually just waiting to go home and like I'm waiting to move home and I could have moved home at any time. But like it was almost like I started to romanticize the thing that I knew I moved away from. And I think that's one of the things that we do sometimes when the present moment gets tough is we romanticize what we willingly left behind.

Lindsay: Yeah. So it's, it's tough. But does that, does that mean you are experiencing like a depression again or what does - kind of give us more insight into what you were facing at that season?

Hannah: Yeah, so for the first six months of living in Atlanta, I think it was a slow but steady decline. So I had a friend that had told me, you know, like you should go to my therapist, you should check her out. And like I said earlier, you know, I was like, been there, done that, don't need a therapist, you know?

Lindsay: That must have been very different, in this season, someone recommending a therapist versus you kind of stumbling in and finding it, you know, like I'm kind of curious... Did that strike you as, 'No, I'm okay because...'

Hannah: Yeah because I don't think I knew or thought it was normal to go to therapy if you don't have a problem, you know, and now I'm like an advocate for it. I'm like, oh wait, why don't you have no problems? Go to therapy, you'll find problems, you know, like just go and become a better human. But at the time it just was like, wait, what? And I think also, I mean I was walking into year 26 and year 26 was where the health insurance went away, and it was like, how will I afford this? Like how do I afford a \$125 session to go and talk about my feelings? You know, it wasn't the priority at the top of my budget. Yeah, I would say like I really kind of didn't even realize at the time, like some of my behaviors that were clearly like flashing red lights on this is depression, you're facing depression, you're going to sleep every single night crying yourself to sleep.

Hannah: Like you're crying at the drop of a hat. Like you're not showing up to your workspace anymore because you'd rather just work from home. Like you're, you know, you're struggling to

get out of bed. All of these things that led to depression. But when I finally knew it was almost like it was too late. Like I had avoided all of the warning signs coming up to the crash. And the day that it really hit me, it came on like an onslaught, which I know is a, it's a rare thing, but I actually like remember where I was sitting. I remember what I was doing, who I was talking to when this sharp pain came from the top of my head down to my toes. It came across my whole body and from that point forward it was like my mind was not my own anymore. Like all of a sudden I was thrust into this crazy paranoia, like this crazy darkness. And I had to start the fight for my life for the next four months.

Lindsay: Wow. So what did that fight look like for you? You had a friend recommending counseling. So did you reach back out to that counselor or?

Hannah: I immediately reached out to that counselor because it was like... And I know that that's like a very, like, that doesn't happen to a lot of people. Like they kind of slipped into a depression without even realizing it. I knew 100 percent that something had happened inside of my body. Like something had happened to my brain and I went to lots of doctors and lots of experts, the best that they could ever call it was like a nervous breakdown, um, that almost that I had worked myself to the edge that I snapped, like, and that my brain just stopped functioning as it needed to function in order to do daily tasks and handle the workload that I was carrying. And so I immediately reached out to that therapist. She took me on like emergency style, like normally she would have me come in and fill out all this paperwork and she agreed to meet me on skype that day, which was just amazing.

Hannah: And I'm still with her today. I like owe her my life in a lot of ways, but the fight was not beautiful and not pretty and not anything that you could ever put into an Instagram caption. It was very messy and it was very hard. And what was different about this fight than the first fight with depression is that I didn't have a choice. It had to be all hands on deck. Like I couldn't not let my people into this mess because I couldn't get out of bed in the morning. Like I, there were mornings where people would just have to come over to hold me or just to hold me accountable to like getting up and going outside and it was almost like this life that I had built where I was super driven and could master all these things and travel around the country, like, in a moment it was gone because my brain just wasn't there. Like there would be hours that I would just sit and stare at the wall with ruminations, like, and I didn't even know what ruminations were at the time, but like they would steal hours of my life from me.

Lindsay: How would you describe that for people who may not be familiar with that term?

Hannah: Yeah. So ruminations is kind of like - I almost feel like it's like, I'm looking for the perfect analogy for it, but it's like, it's kind of like pulling a thread. Like you pull the thread and the whole thing starts to unravel and so it would start as something small and something that you really wouldn't even spend more than like five seconds of your time on, but I would focus on it and then that would lead to another thought and that would be to another thought and I would just spiral downward until I was in this pit where I really felt like I couldn't come out of it. And like

when you would snap out of it, you'd realize that three hours had gone by. Like it was terrifying to lose time that quickly.

Lindsay: So you mentioned that you were seeing physicians as well as a counselor. So was this, when maybe your approach to like what you needed in this season changed with kind of a holistic approach?

Hannah: Yes. This is where the shift started to take place in. This was also the spot where we really didn't have any other option but to pursue medication. You know, it was something that I had tried to avoid and I think that that's because I felt like there was a stigma around medication and I think that there still is a stigma around medication and me personally being somebody who is a person of faith, I found that there was a huge stigma in the church about medication.

Lindsay: Yeah. What do you think you understood with a faith background? Yeah. What would you say were in your mind when you thought medication, like what are maybe some snippets of things you, like, that come to mind, um, that were driving that stigma for you?

Hannah: I mean, to be really honest, a lot of the conversations that did happen in churches and sometimes do happen in churches still were very damaging. I mean, it was conversations, ah well if you're feeling as you're experiencing this and you just don't have enough faith or that if you just believed God more, you would get out of this. And so there is a huge stigma around medication because it's this belief that you can control what's happening in your mind, you can like quote unquote renew your mind. Um, and so it was really, really, really hard for me being somebody like, wow, like I've given my whole life to this thing and then come to find out I'm damaged goods, come to find out, like I just don't have enough faith. I just don't pray enough and that's why this is happening to me. And like I stand here today and I'm like, that is, those are all lies, that it's not true.

Lindsay: It's like people forget that the brain is an organ. Like, um, you know, just a thing that like all the other parts in our body are susceptible to malfunctioning and that beliefs or ideas or things, truths perhaps that you hold onto could, could change the health of the organ. Um, which is really hard for people to understand and it has done a lot of, um, unnecessary harm and while maybe good intentioned in some of the communities, you know, like they're trying to maybe believe for you, um, that you could receive a healing in a different way. I think the idea, and I'm curious if you've come into this, that what if the doctors and the medicine prescription is part of healing? Like what if that is part of the provision for your body and wholeness, you know, and so I'm curious if you've encountered any of those ideas in your communities.

Hannah: I actually, because I remember when we took, we took that step of like, okay, we're going to do medication. And again it was a random Google search and I was terrified because I didn't, I didn't know and I was trying to go to a clinic where it wasn't going to cost that much money.

Lindsay: Yeah.

Hannah: And I remember being in the, I was in the doctor's office and I was in the little room before you go into the doctor's office, you know, where like the person comes in and they ask you all the questions and they're kind of like the nurse, the nurse. And I just remember having this conversation with this man and we really weren't even having a conversation. He was asking me these questions. He had broken English and at one point he asked me, he asked me if I believed in anything and I said, yeah, I do.

Hannah: And he put his pen down and he said, okay, like I'm not allowed to go here like my job...I'm not allowed to talk about this, but I just need you to know that the devil is rejoicing right now, and we're not going to let him have you. Like, it was the craziest, most powerful thing that I think could happen to me at that point because it was this moment of, like, who is this man who is asking me these questions that then like decides to go out on a limb and just tell me like, hey, we're not gonna leave you here. And it, to me that felt like, okay, like God is in this place. I'm not wrong. Like there's nothing wrong with what's going on here. And honestly as I got put on the medication and um, I actually was hospitalized two weeks into the medication just because I didn't know that...

Hannah: That the medication was going to like not work tomorrow. You know, it got, it almost got worse before it got better, but as I started to come out of the fog and really see the medication work, that was the first time that I was like, wait a minute, you're telling me that like all this time, this thing could have been helping me and I could've had my brain back and like it just changed everything that I felt and I believed about medication and even if anybody wanted to say anything to me today about medication, I mean I could fight back hard because I know that the reason that I thrive and the reason that I'm able to do the work that I do is because of doctors that have come up with these miracle medications.

Lindsay: That's really powerful, Hannah. Thank you for sharing that.

Hannah: Yeah.

Lindsay: How did that season you're on, you're on medication and you feel like now you can kind of use your brain, frankly. What did that look like though to still do, do therapy and do work? Because I do think sometimes, and not every path to healing is the same, but some people will lean in that direction first with medication. Um, but you're kind of doing both. So I'm curious, how did that impact your, your ability to, to kind of be with a therapist and work through other, other issues that may have contributed to your experience?

Hannah: Well, and I am a pretty big, like I'm an advocate for both in the sense that I think that medication is great and it's wonderful, but you never want to use it as a bandaid to cover up what needs to be dealt with, and I think that therapy is when you deal with things. And so, um, it did look like going to therapy every week. And even if I was, I was kind of ping ponging back

and forth between Connecticut and Atlanta because I really, like, I hadn't built my roots deep in Atlanta. And so the people that were fighting for me and fighting with me were people in Connecticut and I, I was definitely awakened to the reality that if I had let people in, if I had built real friendships, then I would have had people in Atlanta to fight through this with me.

Hannah: Um, and so it looked like going to therapy every week. And even if I was in Connecticut, I would be on a phone call with my therapist or on a Skype call with my therapist. And um, it's crazy how that then became the priority of like this is the thing that has to be paid for above everything else because this is so important to me. And it was a lot of hard work. I mean, it was a lot of processing things. It was understanding, you know, the medications I was taking, but it was also a holistic approach of like, okay, like not isolating yourself and getting back to the gym and being mindful of the foods that are going into your body and what those foods do and how those foods make you feel. And so I don't think it was like a one thing fixes it all. It was a combination of a lot of, you know, having to insert balance into my life and having to get healthy inside and out.

Lindsay: Yeah. And so one of the things that strikes me about some of what you share online and maybe even on your, um, in your personal life is that you do have a strong, like self-care routine or are different boundaries. I'm kind of curious if you could share a little bit about those.

Hannah: Yeah, I mean I'm a very big advocate for self-care. I think I used to think that self-care was maybe like a selfish thing, you know, like I think it was kind of like the way that I used to look at self-care was like, oh, it's a manicure and it's like a massage and it's luxury things. And I never realized that like self-care was something that you could do every single day just to make sure that you were in the right headspace, you know. Um, and so I do try to exercise a lot of boundaries when it comes to, when it comes to my work, when it comes to social media, when it comes to how much I'm plugged in and interacting with a screen because I find that those things can really toy with your emotions if you're somebody who deals with depression, like you're way more susceptible to like how social media might fuel your emotions or change your emotions.

Hannah: And so in order to live my best life and to be able to show up for the things that I think are worthy of showing up for that being, you know, my work and my family and my faith and my friends, like I have to limit other things, I have to make sure I'm getting that workout in. I have to eat differently than a lot of other people. And this has been, I mean, gosh, like a four-year journey, you know, it wasn't like I got the regimen and now I do this. You're constantly tweaking and revisiting and I am somebody who I think the biggest thing and the most important and helpful thing for me has been finding rhythms. Rhythms are huge, especially for me dealing with depression, because if I don't have a routine then that just means that I could be floating aimlessly. Like especially being self employed, if I don't show up to work today, no one's actually going to notice, no one's going to know that I did anything at all and so... it's okay, what are the things that I do everyday without compromise and then like when I'm traveling for work, like how do I make sure that I consistently do these things so that there's a sense of normalcy in an otherwise not so normal schedule?

Lindsay: I'm kind of curious for you. I want to go back to the social media boundaries. I think a lot of people listening will probably identify with the experience of feeling kind of bad in general after maybe being in social media for an extended amount of time. What for you guides, like is it time restriction? Is it what you're looking at? Is it who, you know, like what, how did you create that rhythm or how did you create those kind of, not rules, but just the guidelines for yourself because you do work in, in media, you were, you know, you, write. You use social media I assume every day in some capacity or, or do you? You know, I mean that's part of your business. So I'm curious if you could share a little bit about that and what you've learned.

Hannah: It's a variety of different things. So for me, having a job that heavily relies on social media, I've learned the value of scheduling things, scheduling tweets, scheduling Instagram posts so that I could never, I could never lean on the excuse of like, oh well I have to be on social media for work. You know, there are some times where if I'm not in a very good head space, getting on social media is not going to make it any bit better. And so I need to have something to lean back on or fall back on so that, you know, like I'm still showing up to my work and to this platform that I, that I think I need to steward but that I'm also not just using that as a way to become even more unhealthy. Um, I think it's being really like being really intentional about when you do scroll.

Hannah: I think we pick up our phone the day and we just scroll haphazardly or we watch stories haphazardly and I put myself into a mindset of like, okay, if I'm going to scroll through social media, I'm going to engage with the content that's in front of me. I'm going to comment on things. I'm going to like things. I'm not going to be some person that is watching and looking into your life. But like you'd never know that I'm there. That's just kind of a little bit weird. And yet we do it all day, every day, you know. And so I engage with people, I leave comments on things to cheer people on. I might see a post that's really powerful and I'll send them a message to encourage them and let them know I'm thinking of them. Um, that allows social media to stay social for me.

Lindsay: Yeah, it's connection, like are you connecting with people or are you consuming? That kind of strikes me as the distinction you're making there.

Hannah: Totally. It's true. Because it's like when I was in college and social media, Facebook was just becoming like the thing, you went on social media because you were going to go write on somebody's wall, you know, like you were going to engage with people and that has just, that's no longer the requirement of social media. And I think that a lot of people feel exasperated by that. Um, and I think another thing that's been important for me is just to be like very, just to be mindful of what I'm feeling. Like if I'm feeling sad, if I'm feeling a little bit lonely, social media is not going to help that. I don't think I've ever walked away from a social media session feeling like, wow, I'm super inspired. You know, like sometimes, yes. But most of the times like you feel kind of drained or you feel less than or that you need to size yourself up in some way.

Hannah: And so I just wanted to be really intentional about, you know, not using it as an escape from whatever I'm feeling, but to really feel the thing. And so all of these things are just like they're incredibly hard to master and I'm definitely still a work in progress, but it's that; it's a collection of little things. It's, you know, getting an alarm clock so that your phone doesn't wake you up in the morning because the first thing you'll do is you'll scroll through other people's lives before you've even started your day. Um, and so we're constantly tweaking and making it better. And I think that like the things like I used to love and almost like took for granted, like reading a book instead of getting on my phone. Like those things have to like, you have to reacquire the taste for them just because you pick up a book and it's almost like in the first five minutes you'd rather pick up your phone, like you stick with it and you build a new habit and reacquire the taste for the things that you love.

Lindsay: That's awesome. I actually really love that alarm clock trick because I don't know. I don't even wear a watch anymore. And so you're like, dang it. I have to see notifications. I have to see what's unread and what's undone before you even are allowed to take your first kind of sip of coffee or to connect with yourself in the morning. I think that's really awesome. I'm kind of curious for you. You've written now two books. What do you feel like you've learned from sharing your own story and I know you don't just do it in written form, you speak and you share in a lot of different platforms. What do you feel like you've learned in that process?

Hannah: I mean, I think that I've just learned that like by sharing your own story, like you can remind people that they're not alone, you know, that your story actually resonates with a lot of other people. Um, and I, I think I've also learned that like the messier parts, the parts that I didn't necessarily want to share like a lot of times, like it's important to talk about those things because those are the things that like they help people. I think that with everything feeling so perfectly polished, people want to know that they're not defective, that they're not broken, that they're not alone. And it's just crazy to me with like sharing my story that...I don't think I ever thought that...like by sharing my story I could help people whose lives were like hanging in the balance, you know, but I continue to do it because I'm continually proven wrong that like people, I think stories are still the most powerful thing that we have and I think that we have to tell them.

Lindsay: Yeah. And it strikes me that the theme that you're hitting on again is, is that connection like you connecting through letter writing or connecting online like in the end that is in a sense what saved your life, you know, like having some level of connection and I know that a lot of us feel more desperate for connection now than ever. So what would you say for people who want to just facilitate that connection maybe in this holiday season, just coming up, what would be some things you would like encourage people to do who struggle with that specifically?

Hannah: You know, one of the things that I challenge people to do some times when they feel very disconnected or they feel lonely or like, like for me, like one of the things that I've noticed about myself is that for some reason, and I don't understand why, I feel much lonelier if I scroll through social media on a holiday, if I scroll through social media on Thanksgiving or Christmas.

Hannah: So I've stopped doing that because I don't like the feelings that come with it. Even if I have a beautiful family and I have everything I could possibly need for this holiday. There...I think still something inside of me, you know, like feels like, well it doesn't look like that or it's not perfect. Um, and so I think being mindful and knowing yourself, but the challenge that I make to people, it's like, okay, like look at the last month of your life. We're about to come up on December, you know. What is one or two things you could do in December that would mean that you've lived more than you did in November. You know? And it might be that you make a coffee date with a friend and it might be that the whole time that you're making the coffee date with a friend you want to cancel it.

Lindsay: Yeah.

Hannah: Like we all cancel last minute sometimes. And I want to be like, no, go and do the thing you don't feel like doing right now. Because like I've never walked away from one of those things that I've set up that would require me to go outside and put pants on and like I felt like I shouldn't have done it, you know? Make that one coffee date. I know the holidays are like super busy. So like one is enough. Two, if you want to be like really goal oriented. Maybe it's like, you know, creating a process of gratitude that like throughout the days of December, you know, like take the time to like, throughout your day, send one text message to somebody in your life to let them know, hey, I'm thinking of you or this is why I love you or this is what I love about you.

Hannah: I think that like we forget to do these things. We think of people and then we forget about them, you know? And it's like, well if somebody comes to your mind like stop call them on the phone, they're going to be so shocked that you're calling them. They're probably going to think it's an emergency of some sort to call somebody to say like, hey, I just wanted to hear the sound of your voice. You know? So those are just a few things I think like even if you're not feeling it this holiday season, if you, even if you are battling with some kind of depression, like do the things that normally would light you up anyway, you know? Go and see the lights even if you're not fully feeling it, you know, because I think that sometimes like, I don't know, I'm just an advocate for like I don't think that I can completely 100 percent trust my feelings all the time because my feelings are kind of like a whirlwind and like feeling through waves. They come in waves. The sadness comes and then the sadness ends. And so it's like one of those things where it's like resume your life, continue to do the things that like make you come alive and in a lot of ways like you fake it till you make it. Like I've found it had to do that in different areas of my life because I know I love these things but the feelings aren't there. But I want to be able to look back on my life and say like, well, I did the things, you know, I did the thing.

Lindsay: That's awesome. Thank you for sharing that. Before we kind of wrap up, one thing I, I love hearing from all of our guests is this question, um, if you don't mind answering it, it's if you could go back and kind of address yourself at like your lowest season, what would you say?

Hannah: Oh, I don't know. I feel like I was just telling him that like, the sun's going to come out eventually. You know, like I, I know that that version of myself felt completely hopeless and felt like there was no light. And I think I would just tell her, you know, like you're gonna come out of this eventually. And like all of this is going to serve a purpose. Like you going through the woods one day is going to help somebody else come out of the woods. And so as much as it sucks to have to go through this, I can keep going because you're going to come out of this and there's going to be so much purpose in it.

Lindsay: Oh, that's awesome. Oh man, this is. We could talk for hours. Thank you so much, Hannah, for sharing about your journey and your story. Do you want to let our listeners know where they can kind of connect with you and where they can find your books?

Hannah: Yeah. Everything is at Hannah Brencher - hannahbrencher.com and Hannah Brencher on social media and my books are in bookstores, wherever books are sold, but also online, Amazon.

Lindsay: Would be a great holiday gift. Cool.

Lindsay: Awesome. Thank you so much, Hannah. I really, really enjoyed this.

Hannah: Thank you for having me.

[music playing]

Lindsay: Thank you so much to our guest, Hannah Brencher. If you want to learn more about Hannah and any of her writings, you can visit hannahbrencher.com. We'll also have a link to that in our show notes.

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