

Episode 210: "There Is Light At The End Of The Tunnel - Jenna Lilley"

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

JENNA LILLEY: Oh, that can't be me, like I'm super mentally tough. Like I never miss a rep on a run or anything. I'm on the USA team, how could this happen to me?

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.

LINDSAY: On today's episode, you'll hear TWLOHA founder Jamie Tworkowski interview Jenna Lilley. Jenna is a former college athlete who went on to play in the professional women's softball league for the Chicago Bandits. This past summer, Jenna and other members of the Chicago Bandits wore our shirts during warmups and handed out FIND HELP resources to fans. Jenna opens up about her experience living with anxiety and OCD. She describes the challenges she faced and how it affected her as played softball in her college and professional career, and also they'll talk a little about why she thinks it's important to fight the stigma and speak out about her own mental health issues.

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JAMIE TWORKOWSKI: We are here in Melbourne, Florida, at the To Write Love on Her Arms office. You are in town for a couple of games, a few games, a bunch of games. We'll get to that. Jenna is a professional softball player with the Chicago Bandits, but your story starts in Ohio. So tell me, where were you born? Where did you grow up? What was life like as a kid?

JENNA: I was born in North Canton, Ohio, and I lived there for the first 18 years of my life. And then I went to college. I moved to Eugene, Oregon, and I went to the University of Oregon. And I played softball there, and I graduated a year ago. Now my home, my mom lives in Akron, so that's kind of my home now.

JAMIE: Yeah. So, so we'll go back to Ohio, obviously at some point you fall in love with softball. So what else, what did you love as a kid and when did softball enter the picture?

JENNA: So I have three older siblings. I have a sister who's 12 years older than me, a brother who's 11 years older than me, and then another sister who's six years older than me. So they're all way older than me, and they all played softball and baseball at the division one level in college. So I grew up in it from as soon as I could walk, I was always at the fields and I pretty much was just kinda born into it.

JAMIE: So you guys are a talented athletic family. Did your parents play?

JENNA: My mom was pre title nine, so she played like a bunch of different sports in college. But my aunt was pretty big into it, and I think that's where it started. It was my aunt.

JAMIE: So you fall in love with softball. What else? What else did you love?

JENNA: I actually, I really didn't like softball growing up.

JAMIE: Okay.

JENNA: I don't know. I mean I think I liked it, but I don't think I really loved it. I loved soccer, so I played soccer growing up pretty competitively until, I would say, like my freshman year of high school, I think it was. So, I went through this stage where I was so ready to quit softball and I couldn't stand it anymore and I didn't want it to be a part of my life anymore and I was ready to start playing soccer more competitively. So where I grew up in Akron, they actually had a pro team there. So I started going to their games for some reason. I don't know why I started going, but then I, watching them play and being able to interact with them actually really inspired me. And that's kinda how I found my passion for softball. That would have been when I was in about eighth grade.

JAMIE: Okay. So, to kind of dive into more vulnerable stuff, when does mental health show up on your radar? Like when do you become aware that life is hard?

JENNA: I would say it started pretty young. I wasn't aware at the time, but looking back, I see how anxious I was for all those years. So awareness wasn't there, honestly, probably until my sophomore year of college. But I think looking back, it had been there for a really long time and just was never dealt with because I wasn't aware of what it was. And I thought it was just normal or thinking that like, oh, this is, you know, we're all unique. We're all, have our own unique things about us. So this is just my unique thing about me, but now that I look back, I'm like, okay, that's not what I should have been

feeling like. So I would say like a lack of awareness then. Um, but yeah, looking back, I'd say it started pretty young.

JAMIE: Yeah. So realizing you use the word anxiety, maybe fear, stress, and then you go all the way to Oregon for college to play softball. So what, what was that transition like?

JENNA: When I moved there, that was when like, I would say I love softball the most ever. So I was super just giddy to be there. Giddy. I love my coaches and I was so excited to start something new and I love nature of being outside. Eugene, Oregon is totally my vibe. Very hippie. Um, so was super excited about it and, but at the same time I was moving 2000 miles away from what was familiar to me and that is scary in itself. But honestly, my first year I never missed home. I mean, I missed my family, but I'm getting there. I would say that my first year I was just fully invested in softball. So it was definitely a huge transition, but I was very just softball minded that I was really happy with where I was at and playing what's going really well.

JAMIE: I would think too, one unique and hopefully potentially positive thing is that you don't just show up alone at this new place, but you're around your teammates and hopefully you find pretty quickly some friends among teammates. Right?

JENNA: Yeah. So in going off of that, just being a student athlete on any team you have, like a built in support system with your, um, teammates and your coaches and then getting to meet other student athletes. Um, I think that's something that is unique and very fortunate to have. But I will say that that didn't happen right away and, I didn't really make like my really good best friends until my beginning of my junior year. So the first two years I kind of felt lost and was worried that I didn't have these best friends that I thought everybody else had in their first year of college. But yeah, I wasn't really super close with anyone on my team for my first two years. And then I kind of found my group and, the other girls in my class and we became super tight and kind of the whole vibe of the team changed, which was awesome.

JAMIE: Yeah. So you mentioned sophomore year, realizing and maybe processing and dealing with your past and, and what, looking back were mental health challenges and I wonder if you could talk about that time in your life.

JENNA: Yeah, so sophomore year, I came back to school and I had the best softball season in my life. I was an all American as a freshman. I made the USA junior teams. So I was on like a softball high and I was super excited and was so ready for year two

and just to finish the next three years of my college career. And just build off of that awesome freshman year. And so I came back after summer and I just started feeling a little bit different. Like really distancing myself, especially from my teammates, more than I already had before. And then just being not very social and just not really my happy, normal self. And I look back and I was exhausted all the time. And I was getting pretty anxious then.

JENNA: And then it started, I want to say in December, right around Christmas time I like started having these random crying spells. I was actually telling one of my friends the other day that they were going to Disney World and I was at Disneyland once, which is supposed to be the happiest place on earth and I was sobbing at Disneyland for no reason. And so I remember that. And then from there, I just started having them all the time. So it was like four months of continually crying, and right after it started in December, I made the USA national team in January when I was 19. So I was super excited and I was so pumped for my season to get started. And then it just all kind of hit me at once. So the crying started and it didn't really end.

JENNA: And I think like looking back that I had let years and years and years of things all pile up to this one perfect storm of just, I would say depression and anxiety and OCD. I think that I let a lot of things build up and I had been in, I've been in counseling for like over, over a decade intermittently sometimes and sometimes continually. So even then I was in counseling, but I don't even remember what I used to talk about. But, um, I don't think I ever really touched on things that really deeply like were rooted in me and caused me, so I think all of that adding up and I was super confused because I'm a very, on the softball side of things. I'm a super high energy player and I had no energy.

JENNA: I was crying all the time. I remember I hit a home run and I cried and I was really confused like, "What's going on?" Just not feeling like myself.

JAMIE: Like in the moment, you cried?

JENNA: Literally in the moment, I was so unhappy. Yeah. So there were things like that and I, I just didn't know what was going on. I felt so, looking back I felt really depressed, but I didn't know that's what it was. And like I think that's when the mental health started being talked about more in college athletics. But it was just kind of the start of it. Like yeah, we'd hear about things, but I would say there was less education out there and like all the stuff we have on social media now, I would say there was a lot less of that four years ago.

JENNA: So there was a total lack of awareness even then. And I got to a pretty bad point when I was in college where I was facing all this, but I didn't really tell anybody. I mean, people knew that I wasn't being myself, but I didn't really tell anybody. If I heard of someone being depressed, I was like, "Oh, that can't be me." Like I'm super mentally tough. Like I never miss a rep on a run or anything. I'm on the USA team. How could this happen to me?

JENNA: All this is going on, I'm about three months into season and then on top of this I get hit by a pitch in the face. So I had over tne fractures in my face, some messed up teeth. Um, so that happened during all of this. And then the next week I had my nose surgery. So again, you go under and you're out of it again. And then the next week I had a root canal, so I was constantly on all these medications and drugs and, I was not there for about a month. When I look back, like I had really considered, I didn't want to prove anymore and I think about that as like it was almost an excuse to not be there but still be there, if that makes sense.

JENNA: Because I was just so out of it all the time. I would go under for surgery and it was just like, uh, it was a real relief from being alive and living and having to go every, do everything that I did every day. I think I started to realize that I was having a problem and, I had talked to my counselor and I was telling him how I was feeling and I don't think there was really a lot of recognition on his end. Like I told him that I was, didn't want to be alive anymore. And then he said something like, "Oh, I think you might be a little depressed." And I was like a little?

JENNA: So I think that was another, um, frustration for me is like seeing someone who I think may have seen me through the lens of being a star athlete. And maybe, I don't want to say laying that blind him a little bit, but I don't think I was getting the right help that I needed. So then I end up seeing our doctor in the athletic department and I was put on medication, I was put on this one that made me feel really high and like a zombie. So I came off of that right away and then I started on another one. I was on that for about a year and this kind of just continues on in this journey. Like I was feeling much better because I wasn't so low.

JENNA: And then there was a time where I felt numb for a couple months. And then there was a time where I felt really high. It wasn't the best fit for me, but I also wasn't being checked in on by the doctor.

JAMIE: Sure.

JENNA: So that was another, just not getting the right help that I need. Once I finally got all that squared away, I started seeing a new counselor and started seeing a new doctor and that would've been end of my junior year. So I think like getting the right help was really important to me and kind of helped me get through that time. Yeah, that's a long story.

JAMIE: No, no, no. But that's over a year of your life. Physically healing, really struggling with your mental health and it sounds like it was, I mean, clearly a long process.

JENNA: Yeah, it was. And then when you add in, when you don't feel like yourself, and then you add in trying to compete at a high level on that, I think that was the hardest part is softball is typically an outlet. But when I was already not feeling like myself and I felt like I couldn't mentally get to the state where I need to compete, it was, became even more of a stress because it didn't understand why or why I felt that way and I couldn't get to the state of mind where I needed to compete. So kind of adding that in on top just kind of propelled things again, both years.

JAMIE: But it sounds like the new counselor and the new doctor were helpful?

JENNA: Yeah, super helpful. Then I went into my senior year a lot, a lot better. I think that I still struggled with a lot of anxiety. I think the biggest thing was developing an awareness to it and being able to recognize the different feelings I maybe was having and just recognizing is so powerful in its own and being able to talk through those things. And that's another big thing is talking through them because I think I was so unaware that I didn't know that I needed to talk about those things, but being able to not just be vulnerable to a counselor but, beginning of my junior year I got really, really close with some of my teammates and so being able to have them to lean on, they know literally every detail of my life. So being able to have them as support systems and just them listening, always hearing me out or being there for me. Not that you always need someone to say something, but sometimes you just need someone to listen and have a shoulder to lean on. So I think having those support systems my senior year really helped me kind of get back on my feet as a person and also competing as an athlete.

JAMIE: Yeah. And I know you said Kate Fagan, who's a friend of the organization, uh, spent years at ESPN, wrote a book called "What Made Maddy Run?" You heard her speak, right? And you got to meet her?

JENNA: Yeah. So multiple, I think two or three times Kate came and spoke at one of our student athlete meetings, um, at Oregon and she talked about her book that she wrote and basically kind of told Maddie's story and talked a lot about social media and how there was this split image with Maddie of—on social media, you saw this beautiful, smart athletic girl who had everything going for her and looked like she was living a really great life, but on the inside, she was not happy. So she talked a lot about that split image and um, just a lot about the things in her book and it was really powerful, not just for me, but I know a lot of the other student athletes really enjoyed hearing her speak. And so from there I kind of got connected with her and was able to meet up with her after that and she came back a couple more times to Oregon, too.

JAMIE: Yeah. And was she the one who introduced you to To Write Love on Her Arms?

JENNA: Yes. So I actually, I was in New York when she was living there and we met up for coffee and that's when she kinda told me about you guys. And I remember like she showed me and I was like so excited. I was like, this is so cool. Like, I love this. And that was about two years ago. So I followed you guys on like every platform.

JAMIE: When was the shift where it goes from you thinking about your own mental health in that part of your story to thinking about other people and you wanting to make a difference?

JENNA: I would say my senior year, I started to feel more comfortable and sharing my story and I actually got to be on a, we had a mental health, kinda, I don't know if you call it a group, but we did this kind of initiative on campus and within the athletic department we made a video just about reducing stigmas and sharing our stories. So I got to be on a panel for that in front of student athletes, which was really cool. But I would also say that there's been times where I've fallen back into not feeling so great and as much of an advocate as I am. When I fell back in, I felt like I wasn't taking my own advice.

JAMIE: And I feel like, correct me if I'm wrong, but you, you kind of watched the way Ashlyn Harris introduced the organization and our mission to the world of soccer. And so you kinda got to follow along and did that sort of plant some seeds?

JENNA: Yes. Yeah, absolutely. So I saw what she was doing and then I wanted it to bring more of a to the softball world. So that was my idea for our mental health awareness game this summer, which was cool. And a lot of people are, they really love their shirts. And then we had a bunch of people asking like, where did you get these from? It was really special to do, but yes, that's where I got the idea from. Yeah.

JAMIE: Do you want to talk more about the game? Like how that came to be and what it actually looked and felt like?

JENNA: So it was a couple of weeks ago, and we had about a group of ten or so of us, that we got the shirts and we did a bunch of photos and so we posted a lot on Instagram and I think it was cool, just to see, how many, how this is important to so many people, whether it's for themselves, for a friend or a family member. I think we all know someone who's been affected by mental health. So whether you're experiencing it yourself or you're there for a friend. I think it was really cool how a lot of them took part in that. And, we had a lot of fun doing it and kind of promoting it to the world because it's super important. And—

JAMIE: So you guys had to bring that to the team, like to the organization, right?

JENNA: Yeah. Yeah.

JAMIE: So you pitched that idea?

JENNA: Yeah, I pitched the idea to our assistant GM and then just kinda got working on it and I had a bunch of ideas in my head.

JAMIE: They were receptive?

JENNA: Yeah. Yeah. They were. They thought it was cool and something different. Like it wasn't, I don't think it's ever been done before in our league or anything, so something different and it's really meaningful for me. It's definitely probably my biggest passion in life. So I'm really happy that I was able to kind of integrate that into softball and my platform was softball.

JAMIE: Did you get much feedback or interaction from fans?

JENNA: Yeah, we did, we did. So we had like a lot of comments on social media, tons of positive feedback. And then at the game as well, we did.

JAMIE: Yeah. And you guys wore our stuff, right?

JENNA: Yes. So we wore the gear during our pregame warmups. Yeah.

JAMIE: Yeah. That's so cool. I remember my sister mentioned, cause you guys sent so many awesome photos like wearing the shirts, and we were joking cause sometimes it's so hard for us to get like one good photo from someone who wants to help. And so it was really funny where, not funny but awesome where it's like, oh my gosh, you guys had, you know, we got 30 amazing photos and it was so cool to see all of you wearing the shirts. Uh, no it was, it was really neat. So beyond the recent game, kind of big picture as you've chosen to speak up and to use your platform to talk about mental health, what has that been like for you? And I imagine you've heard a bunch of stories and gotten a lot of feedback and I wonder what that's been like.

JENNA: Yeah. So I kinda try and view it through a lens as what would I have needed four years ago. What could I have seen that maybe would've helped me? But when I post, I really try and one share my personal story, and also some element of education to it. So people do know. Um, so I'm really passionate about psychology and psychopathology. So I love learning about it and I love sharing what I learned about it because I think it can be so beneficial to people who may not be aware of what it really actually is. I've gotten a lot of good support, really strong support, not just for my teammates and coaches, but in the softball community as well. So that part has been really meaningful and special to me. And also I feel like talking with people, then they want to share their stories as well. So just sharing that connection I think is also really special.

JAMIE: I'm going to hit you with a couple questions that came in from people on Instagram. Is that okay?

JENNA: Yes.

JAMIE: How can you use the game of softball to change the mental health game for future athletes?

JENNA: For me, a big thing is using my platform, to one, share my story and also to inform people. I think by educating people, um, I can have better awarenesses whether it's for, um, helping themselves, or helping a friend. Um, I think a big part of this is making people aware so they can help themselves or help a friend or be there for someone and reach out to someone. So those are my two main goals when I use my platform.

JAMIE: Awesome. What advice do you have for an athlete struggling with their mental health?

JENNA: I would say, um, that sport requires a lot of mental toughness. And when you think of what mental toughness means in my head, I always think of running through the line, being able to finish all the tough runs and the tough workouts and compete at a really high level that sometimes it's easy to think maybe you're immune to struggling with mental health. I think understanding that it can impact anybody. And it can impact teammates or whomever. It doesn't care how talented of an athlete you are or how good you are at your sport or how well you do at conditioning and how mentally tough, you could call it, you are in workouts and grinding through the toughest practices. Um, but remembering that it can impact anybody, um, and that no one really is immune to it. So acknowledging your struggles and if you are okay, maybe reaching out to a teammate if you see them struggling.

JAMIE: What simple pleasures make you the happiest?

JENNA: Simple pleasures that make me the happiest would definitely be being outside. I, so I went to school in Oregon, so I was around mountains, oceans, rivers, lakes, basically...

JAMIE: Trees?

JENNA: Trees, everywhere you look. Um, it's really beautiful. And so having that, being able to look at nature, um, is something that I really love and value. It's really important to me just being able to take a deep breath in nature. Um, so that, and I also love coffee and journaling.

JAMIE: Yes! (laughs)

JENNA: So I would say those are the things and just the people side of it. Just spending quality time with my closest friends and my family and just cherishing those memories or those moments when I do get to be around the people I love the most. And also meeting new people. I'm super extroverted, so I love meeting new people and getting to know new people.

JAMIE: We have a couple of questions that we love to ask every single guest, but before we get to those, you asked me if we could talk about OCD and I wonder if you want to talk more about how that's personal to you or what you've learned. I really just want to give you the floor to talk about OCD.

JENNA: First off, I think that there is a really big misunderstanding of what OCD actually is. I think that, it's very overused in our everyday language if you like something clean you're OCD about that. So I think it's misused in that way and it kind of undermines the legitimacy of and the severity of what obsessive compulsive disorder actually is. So for me growing up, you hear, "Oh, I'm so OCD about keeping things tidy." And, I never knew what it actually was and it's something that I struggled with for probably eight years before I was one, aware of it and two, got help for it. It's something that I dealt with, so for so long and so much and I thought that it was normal. And, I kinda talked about this earlier about, you know, we're all unique individuals and we all have quirks about us.

JENNA: I thought that, that was just my quirk. But it was a really painful quirk. I struggled with counting and so I, I would look at something and I'd have to count to 10. 10 was my number and the number 10 consumed me for a long time, sometimes intermittently, sometimes all the time. And I didn't really know what it was and I didn't want to tell anybody because it's kind of weird if you go up to your friend and say you have to look at something and count to 10, um, or else you can't go on with the rest of your day. I think holding that in for so long and not really understanding what OCD actually is and how that can affect people, I think that was damaging to do for so long and I wish I would've known what it was so I could have acted on it sooner and gotten help for it sooner. But yeah, I think that's kind of a big part of my anxiety and things that I struggled with. And once I got help just learning, different coping different coping mechanisms to deal with them and overcome them to an extent as much as I can. But for so long, I just wish I would've known what they were and how I could work to get help for them.

JAMIE: So I mentioned a couple of questions we like to ask each guest. The first one is, if you could say something to that little girl growing up in Ohio with older siblings, maybe she's dealing with anxiety, but she doesn't have the language for it yet. What would you say to that little girl?

JENNA: I would say to be more vulnerable and not just to that little girl, but early through college, just being more vulnerable to people, and I think that I tried to give off this vibe that I had it all figured out and I didn't need anyone's help, but really I needed a lot of help. And so I would say just being more vulnerable from when I was younger, um, with people you trust and feel comfortable with, because holding it inside, whatever it may be, never, never feels good and it never solves the problem. So whether your outlets are friends or maybe even it's just starting out by writing in a journal of getting your thoughts out there and recognizing your thoughts. I think that's really empowering

and special. And then using the people around you because people do want to help. Sometimes they just might, they don't want to step on anyone's toes. They don't know if you want to be asked about how you're actually doing. So I think just not being afraid to put yourself out there and, share yourself with other people because they can help you a lot.

JAMIE: Hmm. And if someone is listening right now and someone is struggling, whether that's depression, addiction, anxiety, OCD, whatever it might be, if someone is in a difficult or dark place, what might you say to that person?

JENNA: I would say that things might seem like they're in a downward spiral, it's like a really big black hole. And things may feel that way, but that's not how they have to be forever. And, if you are feeling that way, know that there is light at the end of the tunnel somewhere and just finding that light and, remembering that that light will be there and always will be there, no matter when you start to feel that downward spiral. And that people do care about you and they really do want to help. Again, being open and vulnerable to other people, and always remembering that there is hope and there is light at the end of the tunnel.

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LINDSAY: We'd like to thank Jenna Lilley for being the driving force behind the mental health game with the Chicago Bandits over the summer and for spreading this message to her fans on social media. And after we recorded this conversation, Jenna officially announced that she was retiring. We wish her all the best as she leaves her professional softball career behind.

LINDSAY: 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 we've been talking about. We believe that help exists. 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 dot com. 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. The To Write Love on Her Arms podcast is produced by Mark Codgen, with editorial support by Claire Biggs and Rebecca Ebert. Music assistance was 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 To Write Love on Her Arms at twloha.com.

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