

Episode 007: Depression Didn't Want Me To Find Help - Kelly Jensen

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: So much of our sense of self is shaped by the stories we consume and connect with as we're growing up. These could be stories we watch on TV, at the movies, or in the books we read. And while in the past few years there have been more stories that tackle a wide range of topics within mental health and the mental health experience, that wasn't always the case. Growing up, Kelly Jensen felt like mental health was always part of a very dramatic story arc, and when she began to feel and experience anxiety and depression in high school and then later in her adult years, she was left feeling like her experience didn't really match those she had seen. On this episode, Kelly and I talk about how her career as a youth librarian helped her want to put together a book of essays for young adults around the conversations of mental health. She shares about what she learned in the process and what getting help looked like for her. We also talked about the five lies depression told her and how finding space on a yoga mat helped her in her recovery. I can't wait to share this episode with you.

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Lindsay: Kelly, thank you so much for joining us. I'm so excited for this conversation, for people to get to know you, and to hear some of your story, but before we kinda dive in, I would love for you to just introduce yourself for people who may not be familiar with your work or with you.

Kelly Jensen: Sure. And I'm so excited to be on this podcast and to have the chance to talk with you guys because your blog has been such a tremendous opportunity for me to finally sort of write about things that I experienced in a way that I haven't written about before, and it's really sort of helped me dig through my own experiences and make, make more sense of them. My full time job is as an editor for Book Riot, which is a large, in fact it is the largest, independent book website in North America. And um, my focus there is sort of on primarily like young adult literature because that's my background. When I'm not working for Book Riot, I write and edit books for young adult readers. I just put out my second anthology called, "(Don't) Call Me Crazy: 33 Voices Start the Conversation about Mental Health," which is a collection of, as the title

suggests, 33 different people who are writing and drawing about their own experiences with mental health, including a wide variety of mental illnesses.

Lindsay: That's amazing. Where does this journey start for you though? I mean, you're, you're writing, you're an editor like, and you're clearly very comfortable in the conversation about mental health, but I imagine that may not have always been the case or was it?

Kelly: It was not, no. My, so, my journey started really because I, I started my career as a teen librarian. I worked for, um, a couple of public libraries and worked pretty much as the only person who is an advocate for teenagers in those situations, which is fairly common in public libraries. And you know, they made me really passionate about being an advocate for young people because so often teenagers especially don't have a lot of people in the community who are fighting for them and fighting to give them a voice and fighting to give them a space where like they can be themselves. Um, you know, and all the various forms that takes. I've also always been a writer and so when the opportunity came that I could work in writing more than work in libraries, I jumped at it with the knowledge that I could take my passion for young people and really weave it into my career in writing. So that's how the writing for that audience...

Lindsay: I was curious about your writing. I mean you said you were always kind of writing. Did that, when did that start for you before it became kind of a vocation, you know, or, or job.

Kelly: I mean I've always been writing. I remember there was like a poem I wrote, it must have been first or second grade about snow, you know, like something really ridiculous like that. And then my elementary school did this young authors program and so everybody in the school would write stories and then they were judged by grade level, I believe. And I won I think two years in a row for, for like second grade and third grade. I wrote about a rabbit who lost his ears from one of them and I wrote about like a seaweed family. I don't know, just like this bizarre stuff, but it was really fun and it was awesome at that age to sort of have that recognition that there's, there's something there, like there is an opportunity to tell stories, you know, no matter how sort of outlandish they are.

Kelly: And it's funny because after that, like my work was very personal. I really took to writing poetry in high school and in college and it was in high school and college too that I went to pretty much the polar opposite end and found myself fascinated with journalism and real world reporting, that sort of sparked my interest in wanting to go into journalism as a career. But by the time I was getting ready to leave college, journalism in print form, which is what I thought I wanted to do, was sort of on the outs. This was like, you know, I'm gonna age myself here, but this is like 2006, 2007. And those jobs weren't really there because so much was moving to digital media. And I didn't think that that's what I wanted to do. That's how I ended up in librarianship because it's, if you think about the core of what journalism is and the core of what librarianship is, it's about connecting people with information.

Kelly: And so those two things fit together in my head really nicely. And you know, the, the humor and the whole thing is here we are now: I'm working in digital journalism and write quite a bit about libraries and, and serving young people both in libraries and out of libraries. So it's like, you know, it's a full circle.

Lindsay: Yeah. So I want to touch on that a little bit because it does sound like your experience within a library kind of opened your eyes to teens or young adults not being connected maybe with information. Like where, what were the gaps that you were kind of seeing and how did that shape your next steps?

Kelly: My biggest frustration working in libraries, I shouldn't say my biggest. One of my biggest frustrations working in libraries and working with books and with teenagers was that there was so little out there that was nonfiction for teenagers that wasn't just like a typical report book.

Kelly: And and I, I've always called them that: They're report books, they're like 200 pages that cover a certain topic. It could be any sort of controversial topic. It could be a biography on a famous person. They're not especially engaging, but they have all the facts that a person needs to write a report. It was such a sad thing to see because there's so much great nonfiction for adult readers and certainly teens and young adults are reading that. But I couldn't understand why teenagers didn't have the same sort of rich nonfiction for them. And um, so that was really like where my sort of like, I can do that.

Lindsay: Yeah. Did you recognize that hole growing up or was it just when you were a working professional? Realizing that?

Kelly: So YA wasn't as big when I was growing up as it is now and was like as I was working in libraries and so I didn't, I didn't notice it a whole lot, but I do have memories of finding those nonfiction books that I connected with.

Kelly: So there was a, um, I couldn't tell you the name of it, but there is this book that sort of dug into different religions and it was just like these short little excerpts about all kinds of different religious and spiritual beliefs. And I remember reading that and being so fascinated because it's like, it was written for, for young people and it was so approachable without being condescending. It was really respectful of me being a curious young reader but not at the expense of like bogging down everything with way too much detail that, you know, I just, I just wanted snippets of information so that I can then take that and run with it in any way that felt right to me. And I think about that book. I wish I could even remember the name of it. I can't. But uh, I think about that book when I think about when I'm editing my own anthologies - it's like I want these pieces to be super interesting and compelling and respectful for teen readers. But I also don't want them to be these long drawn out, like super technical things because other stuff exists for that already. You know, teenagers are smart enough that if they're like, oh, I really love this essay on let's say, um, I don't know what depression and we'll talk about "(Don't) Call Me Crazy" - there's a piece in there about depression that really capture someone's attention.

There are so many other books that they can then pick up and get a deeper dive into it.

Lindsay: Yeah. Can you talk a little bit about that jump then from librarianship? Is that the right word to use?

Kelly: Yeah, yeah.

Lindsay: To, to the editing and even putting together this anthology “(Don't) Call Me Crazy.” I think that's really an amazing way. Like you can just from your short description, see what you're trying to accomplish. Like give people stories that they can connect with and then to, to choose their path where they go from there. Is that, was that something you were thinking about and kind of when you started the project?

Kelly: Yeah, I was thinking about that and I was also thinking about...So like I'm, I'm a white girl, you know, middle class white girl and uh, I know my experiences are not everybody's experiences and my experiences are also really quite well represented in the work that's out there. So it was essential for me to make sure that my books have as wide a range of perspectives and experiences as possible because certainly like my experience is one thing and I'm happy to talk about it and happy to share and happy to advocate in that capacity, but I only know so much and I'm not going to pretend I know everything or every experience, but I can find people who do have those experiences and give them an opportunity to, to share them and to connect as well. To answer your question about making the jump, I had been writing my own personal book blog for a number of years and it was a project that my co-blogger and I took on when we were in library school because we wanted a place to talk about books in an intelligent, thoughtful way.

Kelly: And I had the opportunity then to begin writing for Book Riot when the site...I think I started about six months after the site launched. Um, and then my writing led to being asked if I wanted to edit. And I wasn't super happy in the library job I was in. It was just part time, I couldn't get the hours I wanted, I couldn't be there for the teens in the way that I really wanted to be. And so was like, well, I'm going to take this opportunity and see what happens and that's how I ended up there.

Lindsay: So when do you start working on this anthology the, “(Don't) Call Me Crazy.”

Kelly: I started working on it in, I think it was the very end of 2016. A book takes about two years or so to put together, um, at least an anthology like this. Both of mine have taken about two years.

Kelly: The first year is my work in finding contributors and working with them to develop their pieces. The second year is really the publisher side of things where they're, um, they're doing their edits, they're doing copy edits, they're doing production side stuff. So finding, um, the printer they're going to use, designing what the cover is gonna look like, designing what the

inside of it is gonna look like. Um, and so it's a longer process than I think many think it might be. Um, especially because you think anthology like, well 33 people are doing the work for you and that's true, but I'm developing relationships with 33 people, uh, and that takes a while and especially with a book like one on mental health where, you know, for me I'm a really like feeling person and I didn't anticipate how challenging it would be to read and edit other people's personal experiences.

Lindsay: Can you talk about that a little bit more? Like I want to hear what you learned from that and what it, what it was like to hear those experiences. I mean, you're the first one, right? You know, in a lot of the cases to hear these specific or read these specific pieces.

Kelly: So yeah, it was um, I really pride myself on being able to do things pretty, pretty timely. I'm generally. So my first anthology was on the topic of feminism and generally people would send me their piece and it would take about a week for me to read it a few times and then to edit it and then to let it sit so I could revisit it the next week. Make any other comments that felt like they should be added. Um, you know, it's like a week of work per piece, per draft. Um, and some writers are multiple draft writers, some are, you know, one or two and they're done.

Kelly: So it was like a really nice workflow that I had figured out. And um, so when the anthology for mental health began, that's what I told people. I'm like, it's, it's about a week, you know, I feel like I've got the system down, I feel comfortable with it. And then everything changed when I started getting the pieces. And these are like emotionally heavy pieces especially, you know, as, as you had said, I was the first person reading these stories of, for many of them and sort of sitting with that, and sitting with the trust that they, these writers had in me to, to hear their stories and then to have thoughtful feedback about them was way more difficult than I thought it would be. And some pieces were taking up to a month to get back to people just because it's like I had to sit with it for a long time and think about the writing, but for me it was a lot to digest just emotionally and knowing like I need to separate all those feelings I'm having from like the writing itself.

Kelly: And that was what proved to be difficult is like, how do you, um, you have somebody who's written this really emotionally powerful piece. How do you then tell them like, oh, you would make this piece even stronger in the writing if you went into this really tough thing even deeper? You know, and you know, asking that, um, generally when I edit I ask a lot of questions as opposed to like, insert my, my feedback, you know, this line is not strong like that, I don't find that interesting. I find it more interesting to say, can you tell me more about this? Or like, this is really fascinating, you know, I'd like to know a little bit more about why you think that way you experienced that. And um, it was tough then to be like, okay, you wrote about this traumatic experience, can you really dig into it a little bit more and to not feel like I was exploiting their pain or their stories, you know, to get somewhere that the essay could get to.

Lindsay: Yeah. So you're thinking about their experience. You're also thinking about the reader and what they might experience reading it. Um, what about, can you talk a little bit more about

yourself? Like did you find yourself in any of these stories and made you kind of just say, whoa, like that's that those are my pieces are, those are the pieces of my story. And it was just kind of curious if we could talk a little bit about that.

Kelly: This is a question I've had come up at a number of events and it's interesting to think about because there are pieces that I certainly related with. Um, and there are pieces that I knew nothing about in terms of like the experiences others had, but still felt them really deeply. When I do events where they want me to do a reading, I can't read my own piece. I don't think mine is the most interesting one in the book, but I wanted to include it because I don't think a lot of people think about the, um, the grief aspect that can come after you've been diagnosed with anything. It's an important piece but not a compelling one. Um, and those are two different, two different ideas, but I, I tend to read Emery Lord's piece and it's called "The Five People You Overhear When Depressed At A van Gogh Exhibit."

Lindsay: That's a nice title. I like that.

Kelly: It's exactly that. She talks about when she is having hard depression days and she goes out in public. What she overhears people saying can really impact her own feelings about herself. Um, so sort of the like, you think about the throwaway lines people say and she, she puts it in context of going to a van Gogh exhibit and people talking about like, you know, van Gogh was crazy and he did this and that and the other thing, you know. She, she's really reflecting on that and she's responding in the piece by saying, no, he wasn't crazy, he was depressed and this was awful and this is how he got through that, um, you know, it doesn't mean that it was logical or rational, but that's what he felt like he needed to do. That piece like really struck me because it, it made me think a lot about how I talk when I'm out in public and not realizing who might be around me or you know, it also made me think a bit more about just having empathy for people who are in any public area with me, you know, we don't know what they're going through or experiencing and they might be behaving a certain way or saying certain things because they're dealing with something difficult.

Kelly: And her piece just like really struck me as, you know, I would want people to treat me with that same compassion. Especially when I'm going through a really tough, you know, depressive episode or my anxiety is sky high. Like I want to be that sort of person as well.

Lindsay: No, I mean I think that's pretty powerful. I think to recognize that the words we use just in everyday situations contribute in some way to other people's experiences and not to, make people feel like they have to overly sensor. But I think being thoughtful about language, it's one thing that does challenge the stigma of mental health and I think that's, I think that's super convicting, or super worth us thinking about and being aware of. Um, I'm kind of curious, where does mental health enter your story because you wrote a piece for this. So I'm going to just go out there and say you have an experience with mental health and I'd love for you to kind of identify or just walk us through some of that part of the story.

Kelly: It's funny because as I started talking about the book, um, when it came out, you know, my story was pretty like, yeah, I was diagnosed when I was 30 and took medication and then taking that medication helped me calm my anxiety enough to be able to start going to yoga. And then yoga helped calm my anxiety because it was a thing I was doing as, you know, self care for me. And then it ultimately has been like a big, big part of my life now. Um, that was the story that I was telling. But the more that I thought about it and the more that I dug into it, I realized I could sort of pinpoint the moment where my mental health like really sort of changed. And that was my freshman year of high school. I would experience these really terrible anxiety attacks. And it was always when I walked to the same class, it was my English class, it was after I had lunch.

Kelly: And so I'd go upstairs after lunch and then have this terrible panic attack as I'm walking down the hallway and I'd get to my English class and just calm down or you know, relax. I could not, like nothing would work. And I sort of traced that back as I'm reliving this experience now I'm thinking, okay, what, what could have caused that? And I realized that I think it started because that teacher I had said something to me that all of the, uh, eighth graders would go to this like high school open house and you can meet with different teachers and um, discuss your schedule and the classes you wanted to take. And I had met the teacher I had for freshman year English that night and she said something to me about how she didn't think that I would be able to handle her honors English class because I hadn't tested into it.

Kelly: It wasn't like a judgmental comment. It wasn't a mean comment. It was just a, you know, she's seeing 800 freshmen who are probably all asking her the same thing. And so like the only thing she can say is like, well, your test suggests, you know, maybe not. And I did it anyway. I signed up for the honors class and she was my teacher. And all I can think about is that must have planted a seed of doubt in my head that every time I went to that classroom I thought, I'm not good enough. I'm not smart enough. I can't handle this. And it certainly, again, I reiterate it because it's important, it's not her fault, it's just that my brain had latched onto this idea and that idea played out every single day for me.

Lindsay: And I bet that felt even worse because it was something you probably were really passionate about and felt at one point confident that, that you had a gift or some, some words inside of you, right?

Kelly: Yeah. Yeah. And so, um, that experience then paralleled what would happen when I got home at night. I would get home from school and take a nap like every single day. And it wasn't just like a, you know, I'm exhausted from school kind of nap. It was like I am so emotionally overwhelmed, I need to take a nap. And um, this was, you know, this was before there was more open cultural conversation about mental health. And I remember very distinctly my mom woke me up from one of these naps once and said something offhandedly about, she had seen on tv that sometimes kids who were depressed would sleep a lot.

Lindsay: Yeah.

Kelly: We didn't like take that conversation anywhere else. That was just a thing she said and that has always stuck with me that she had an idea of what was going on but didn't know how to like go further with that and I certainly didn't know how to go further with that and now you know, as somebody who has written about and studied and like really worked through my own mental health story, I'm starting to see like how all these pieces played out when I was young and now like I can look back and be like, wow, you know, all the signs were there.

Kelly: We just didn't have the language or their capacity to talk about it in the same way that like as an adult I have now. But also just culturally we're, we're much better. Like we're not great, but we're much better 20 years later talking about mental health and having language to discuss our interior experiences than we did then.

Lindsay: Yeah. And I want to, I want to touch on that. I'm not sure if that season that you're talking about is what you were writing about. Um, when you wrote for To Write Love on Her Arms, you wrote a blog that was, that really resonated with a lot of people. Um, it was titled "Five Lies Depression Told Me." Was this writing in reflection of that season or was it a different season? Because I really want to get into this piece and kind of bring some of the lies out. I think it's gonna really connect with some folks. So I'm curious, is that different?

Kelly: I wrote that within the year that I was diagnosed I believe, and um, that was sort of my opportunity to like tease out what had happened when I was diagnosed with depression and anxiety. I went into my doctor and was 100 percent convinced it was only depression and like that was the answer to all of my problems. It was part of the answer. It wasn't the whole answer. And my doctor had said to me very clearly, she was like, I really think the problem is anxiety here. And those two challenges intertwine a lot. And so, um, that was sort of what sparked writing that piece, but it was that piece then that helped me trace back to those experiences I had in high school, you know, thinking that, okay, I slept a lot and was depressed.

Kelly: Well also that's because I was so worked up in anxiety that like, that was how I recovered from it. And so like that piece was a weird sort of therapy for me, you know, now, and it continues to be.

Lindsay: Yeah. So I want to share those lies that you kind of identify in your piece and then I'd love for you to just kind of unpack it a little bit and if it means something different to you now than what you had written at that time, that's totally cool as well. Um, so the first one you say is the first lie depression told me was that I did not have depression.

Kelly: Yes, I was just tired, you know, um, it was just how I dealt with being exhausted. Um, depression didn't want me to find help and identify that that was the reason that I was struggling with anything in my life.

Kelly: Um, I am very high functioning and I was able to believe this idea that I had through depression that because I was high functioning because I got all my work done because, you know, I was a star student because x and y and z that I wasn't actually struggling with something deeper inside. And um, you know, it was a lie that I allowed myself to believe for a long, long time. Um, and it was finally when I was in my thirties that somebody was like, whoa, like you really do want to consider getting help. And I think it was...

Lindsay: Who was that person?

Kelly: Um, it was a friend who had listened to a lot of my, like, what's going on in my day to day and kind of saw some of the stuff that, like my coworkers would never see, that my husband will never see because these people weren't getting the down and dirty every day.

Kelly: Like what's going on in the background. And part of that is because depression was telling me it was fine, you know, if they didn't know, there was no reason to like make a thing of it.

Lindsay: How did that feel to have your friend ask that?

Kelly: Uh, it was terrifying and I remember saying that her saying that to me scared me and um, you know, I sat with it for a day or two before I brought it up with my husband and said, you know, I think, I think I'm gonna talk to somebody about it. And he was like, well, what do you mean? Um, and I was like, I'm really good at hiding it. And so like he was very supportive, of course. It wasn't like he wasn't supportive, but it was, it was surprising because I like hid it so.

Lindsay: Well I think that goes into maybe the second lie that you write, the second lie depression told me whereas that things were okay if I maintained control. Is that part of it for you?

Kelly: Yep. Yep. And that was where the anxiety really played into, like I was such a control freak about everything and it calmed my anxiety to have control over everything and feel like if I was able to like maintain appearances, if I was able to be a high performer at work, if I was able to do x and y and z and have all these good things happen, then like it was all fine, you know. Um, and, and part of it too, this is something else I've sort of identified, especially through, through working on the book, is that rarely do we see depression or anxiety shown in the way that I experienced it. And I don't say that as like mine is so special, but I say it more as and like, my experience is so boring that it doesn't make a good story.

Kelly: You know, you think about the ways that you see depression played out in pop culture. A lot of it is very high highs and low lows. It's more bipolar disorder than anything else. And even there it's not quite accurate most of the time. Um, but that makes a far more interesting story to tell than the story of somebody who gets up in the morning, works, puts on a great face, and

then sleeps for six hours in the middle of the day. Um, there's nothing there, you know, it's not compelling. It's not interesting.

Lindsay: So does that play in or is it separate from the third lie? The third lie depression told me was that I wasn't good enough. Like, it almost sounds like your story about depression isn't good enough in your mind. So I'm curious, is that what you meant?

Kelly: Yeah, exactly. Exactly. Um, it's so interesting to hear these now and it's like if unpacked so much more than even what I said then as I was starting to unpack, makes more sense now.

[music playing, leading into ad]

Lindsay: To Write Love on Her Arms has always sold t-shirts as a way to help fund our mission, but the products we sell in our store do so much more than help us financially. Each piece of merchandise is a conversation starter. It spreads the TWLOHA message to someone who may not have found out about us otherwise. So whether you wear our shirts, hats, hoodies, or rain jackets, we want to thank you for bringing a message of hope and help wherever you go. To see our latest styles, head to store.twloha.com now and use the promo code **podcast20** to receive 20 percent off your entire order.

[music playing, leading back to interview]

Lindsay: So the fourth lie depression told me was that I didn't suffer from anxiety. How does that, how did you experience that one?

Kelly: Oh, that was, that was the one where, um, I believed it was only depression. And then when my doctor was like actually like your anxiety is sky high. I always looked at it as just like normal stress, normal people stress. Um, it wasn't, you know, like, and again I'm able to sort of pinpoint these moments. A big one for me was I wanted to try yoga. We had a new studio in town. I lived in a really small town at that time. Very little was going on. There wasn't a great way to sort of meet people or build a community or get involved. And I really wanted to do yoga because I thought this will be a great opportunity to do that and also to like get a good workout in. The problem was like I couldn't even get myself to go.

Kelly: I was so stressed out about it and I did this bizarre thing and, and emailed the instructor and was like, am I allowed to come? You know, like what sort of, um, I should, I should preface this by saying like, I have a larger body. And so I was also like flipping out about that. Like, am I allowed to be there if I'm not this like Instagram worthy, you know, model doing yoga, like is that, am I allowed to be there? And she, she was like, yeah, she's like, this is average people. And you know, doing yoga, like it's fine.

Lindsay: That must've been really hard for you to send that email. Like I can. I mean, I know it's, it's funny to think like, yeah, you like everyone belongs in a yoga studio, but I totally

understand what you're talking about. Like your brain kind of warped that experience to like, you're not allowed to be here.

Kelly: Yeah. And it's, it's one of those things, it's like, that's it exactly. Since my brain is just telling me these bizarre lies and um, I'm really grateful because my instructor, um, struggled with anxiety and depression herself, so I got to know her pretty well and it was one of those situations where you're like, man, people who are coming here like are all dealing with something, you know? And that, there was really great comfort in that and that certainly eased my anxiety. And as somebody who teaches yoga now, I make sure that like when I meet somebody new that I want them to be there, that they're welcomed there, that, you know, like their experiences and their, the things they bring with them, it's fine. Like you showed up, that's what matters.

Lindsay: Yeah. Like getting to your mat is like A+. It's your mat and just show up.

Kelly: Yeah.

Lindsay: So the fifth lie depression told me, this is your writing, the fifth lie depression told me was that it wasn't bad enough.

Kelly: That kind of ties in with number three. Um, and, and also I guess number two and the idea that like we all have bad days, and I just saw mine as happening maybe more frequently than others and maybe not as extremely as the things that I had heard from other people or seen from other people. Um, and it's really interesting to hear that that was what I put down now because a number of people who I was close to in my life are dealing with really challenging, um, mental health issues. I've got a good friend who is bipolar and she never told me until I talked a bit more openly about my own experiences and I kept thinking like I would've never known that about her. She seems like she's so normal and you know, ultimately I learned, it's like she's, she's got bad days too, but she's not going to share that, you know, unless she wants to. Um, and, and there's no reason for her to. And the good days outnumber the bad days because she's medicated and because she sees a therapist and you know, reflecting on that, it wasn't bad enough. I'm like, well, what is bad enough? Like what, what does that even mean?

Lindsay: It's like so we don't go to the doctor when maybe we have a cold but you have to wait till, you know, you have the, like the flu and you're down and out. Like I think some of those same maybe metrics like we apply some of them but, it's a, it's a bummer though because what is missed or what could be, what could be even a healthier person, you know, like you go for wellness checks at least into the physical doctor, but who is like, oh go to check in with my therapist. It's like that...If that's like a normal thing that people are just expected. And if that was in healthcare plans and all this other stuff, like how much more would that lie not exist in people's minds.

Kelly: Right, exactly.

Lindsay: Like you wouldn't have to wait until quote unquote, it's bad. Like we shouldn't have to, you know frankly. But, but we do, we condition ourselves.

Kelly: Yeah, exactly. And you know like how can we even determine what bad enough is? It's like what are we comparing ourselves against? If it's what we're seeing in pop culture, like that is an unfair metric to use because pop culture most of the time doesn't get it right anyway. Or it's extreme enough that it tells a story versus like being an actual lived experience. And I think that that distinction is kind of where I was too in the terms of like, oh, you know, I'm not, I'm not doing x or y or z, so it must be fine.

Lindsay: Yeah. Yeah. Well I want to talk a little bit about the yoga, but before we jump into that, I, I kind of wanted to circle back real quick to some of your work in YA or young adult literature, because I imagine there are people out here, out there listening who are fans of YA books. Um, it's obviously become a huge market and so it's not only young adults reading YA books, and you can correct me if I'm totally off base there, but I'm just curious if like, if you're seeing any helpful depictions of mental health or like what you've noticed are still kind of myths that are being presented to a lot of young people or just people who are fans of YA, like genre.

Kelly: It's gotten so much better than it used to be. Um, there are some incredible books out there that dig into mental health in ways that are really realistic and really heartfelt. Um, but before I talk about a couple of those, I was going to mention this. I'm just going to write about this, but I'll, I'll bring it up here because they think maybe it's more appropriate here. Um, I was doing a school visit and um, it was, it must've been 300 or 350 kids were in this visit and it's a big...We're using like the open library space to talk and one of the kids raised their hand and goes, what do you think about the depiction of mental health in young adult literature? Like why do we see so many depictions where the sick person finds somebody who loves them and is suddenly cured? And I started laughing because that is the trope that I dislike the most when I see.

Kelly: Because I think about my own experiences with when I'm in a, you know, when I'm having a low mood, when I'm depressed, when I'm highly anxious, I am the least lovable person around, and I don't want to be around anybody either. You know, I just want to like deal with my stuff on my own time alone and like stop asking if I'm okay, stop asking if you know x or y or z. Like I don't, I don't want that. I certainly don't think that it's impossible. You know, that the love would happen. But I do think that it's overstating it that a relationship between two people, particularly two teenagers can suddenly change someone's mental health, like that it can suddenly make them go from being depressed, maybe even being suicidal to suddenly everything is okay.

Lindsay: I imagine behind some of that construction is this idea of like being known and being in love, like those are such powerful antidotes to maybe that, but what happens when you are experiencing depression or anxiety or suicidal ideations and you, you are in love with somebody

but it's not enough and it's not actual...it's not giving you the skill set to address your mental health. And so like where does that leave, um, young people or just anybody, frankly, I mean that you can see that in, you know, adult content anywhere sort of. Um, but I'm just, yeah, that is, that sounds very on the nose for that young person to point that out.

Kelly: I brought that up because it was fascinating when I said that, like the room was just like nodding their heads in agreement and it's like the kids know too, which is one of those moments where, you know, as an adult, as somebody who writes for that audience, as somebody who's really passionate about that audience, like looking around being like they're thinking the same exact things I'm thinking and that is such a relief. Like I'm, I'm not saying anything that they haven't thought or like something...I'm not tearing apart something that they love. They're able to look at it really critically too and they can enjoy the story, but also point out like, yeah, you know, that that's not enough. And in fact it can do the opposite. You know, if, if somebody reads that and they are dealing with any of those challenges and they realize that they're not in a relationship or they might never be in that relationship. Like what does that say? Like they're never going to be worthy of, you know, finding a way to get help of feeling better? Like, oh, it's so tricky.

Lindsay: Yeah. So what, what would you say have you seen, like, what would be an example of some helpful portrayals? Like what's helpful? I hate to say getting it right or getting it wrong. I know you've kind of written about that too, but just like what actually does give people helpful...I imagine your anthology of a lot of diversity in voices is one step in that direction - are there other things you'd recommend?

Kelly: Yeah. Um, and, and I liked that you say that I have like my spine just raises when I hear gets it right, because there is no one right way to get any mental health experience right. Doing so would feed into some of those lines that I wrote about that, you know, there's only one, one way to be bad enough or you know, like you're never going to match up. Um, but there are books out there that are doing phenomenal work in shedding a light into different mental health challenges. So one of my favorites is "The Memory of Light" by Francisco X. Stork. It came out a few years ago and it's about a girl named Vicky who the story starts with her waking up in hospital after she has attempted suicide. She wakes up and the story starts there, so it's about her finding the tools and means of recovery to function as somebody who's been at the bottom of the bottom.

Kelly: It's not one of those books that's like happy, cheery, you know, all the problems are worked out. Rather it's one of those books that has its ups and downs and really understands what it's like to live with depression day in and day out. I was sent that book from the editor because I had written a piece on my own blog about seeing a number of books about suicide where it becomes this weird sort of like who done it, who is the person to blame for why somebody died by suicide. And I don't know, that that whole trope really bothers me to no end because it's somebody else taking control of the person's narrative. And so she sent me this book saying, you know, I know you don't like books that feature suicide but give this one a shot.

And I'm so glad I did because it was just, it was so refreshing and so honest and, you know, I don't want to say gets it right, but gives readers a look at somebody who's really struggling and what that might look and feel like, you know, and it's not a linear path like it goes up and down some days are better than others and yet there is hope. There's certainly hope.

Lindsay: I think, realistic maybe just like, or helpful and realistic, um, to the, to the diversity of experiences as kind of a, probably just like the best way to approach finding things that you can connect with. Exactly. So certainly something we try to do here at To Write Love on Her Arms. Um, it's where all of this began. Um, I, I love what you say. We're going to make sure that, that recommendation will be in the show notes. But I want to touch real quick about, um, you had talked about becoming a yoga teacher and how the yoga kind of intersected with this journey and almost helping you realize there was something going on. I would love for you to touch a little bit more about like what did yoga and what does that mean? I mean sometimes it seems very mystical to people and they're not quite sure, but, but you wrote about this actually on our blog and something you said was "everybody needs something different," which means it's important to honor what it is that you need right here and right now. And I'm curious, how did you get to that point to be able to write that from where you had just talked about where you weren't even sure you belonged in the room?

Kelly: Well, so let me go back to when I was diagnosed, when I was officially diagnosed with depression and anxiety. One of the things that I had been doing to sort of like self medicate was to work out a lot. I worked out a lot. I worked out like one or two hours a day. Most days of the week and um, that doesn't sound like a lot probably for elite athletes, but for just like an average person that is a lot of working out, especially when it's all cardio when it's all super high intensity stuff. I was pairing that with not eating very much and my doctor was like, what are you doing? She's like, you're starving yourself and you're working out way too much. And that's when a light bulb went off that I was like, I was following all that weird advice you get sometimes when you're not feeling your best when you're dealing with depression to just, you know, just work out and eat better.

Kelly: And it was actually a detriment to me to listen to that, that feedback. So fast forward, when I finally did step in the yoga studio and I had sent that weird email to my yoga teacher. She had not like put two and two together. She did not realize that when I came in, I was the person who sent the email and I didn't bring it up with her for a few classes. And then I brought it up and she was like, oh, I kind of forgot about that. She's like, but I, now that you say that, you know, I remember that and she's like, I don't know why you were so concerned, but she didn't leave it at that. She also, you know, was like, I'm so glad you're here and this is a journey. And one of the things that's central to, to yoga in general is this idea that, you know, you need to honor your body where it's at today and your body is both your physical body as well as your spiritual body, as well as your mental body.

Kelly: It's, it's the whole package of who you are. And this is something that she brought up again and again and again, every class. Um, and it's something that like really, really hit me the

first time I heard it because I'm thinking, I'm dealing with my mental health issues, I'm also dealing with having an atypical yoga body. And I, you know, like all these, like just terrible thoughts are in my head as I'm just like trying to do something for myself for 75 minutes because really ultimately like how yoga is in the western world is that. It's 75 minutes anywhere, but I guess between half an hour and two hours of time for yourself to connect with yourself, you know. And um, there's so many varieties of yoga out there. Some focus on the posture, some focus much more heavily on the, um, the subtle body, the interior stuff and some combined both.

Kelly: Anybody who is not like doesn't have a background in yoga probably doesn't know this. But yoga as we practice it here in the western world tends to be just one of the...yoga is an eight limb path or eight different components to living a yogic life. And just one of them is what yoga as we see it in media, as we see it in the western world really is. And that's just the postures. And so as I learned more and more and really started to understand some of this stuff she was saying, which sounds really nice and sounds, you know, quote worthy and sounds like motivating and feel good. It's like that's based in yogic scripture stuff like this is deep Indian medicine, this is, you know, Hinduism, like this is a lot of spiritual and historical and cultural backgrounds that brought us to where we are now.

Kelly: And to be faithful to understanding yoga and to be a good teacher, I need to know not just like how to get somebody into this pose, I need to know too like why they're doing it. Like why they should care about that. Like what, what else is worth working on in that moment. And sometimes it's literally stopping and realizing you're not there to do a lunge. You're there to just like connect with your breath and remember that you're breathing. Sometimes you're just there to connect with whatever is hurting you that day. And just sitting with like, why? Why is my heart heavy today? Or why is my ankle feeling weird?

Lindsay: Um, yeah, connect to being present into being okay with taking up space on the mat.

Kelly: Exactly, exactly. And, and, and taking that time to be you exactly as you are, you know, and accepting it just like that. Some days you're going to come to your mat and, and I, I say mat both in the physical sense in a yoga studio and I mean just getting out of bed, um, day to day, sometimes you're going to come full force, you're going to have all of your energy, you know, everything is working out great. And other days you're like, I'm pulling the covers back over and that's it. Um, and that's okay. Like tapping into that is, is what you need to do, is, that reflection is the key.

Lindsay: Yeah. So, so tell me, does that, is that kind of what your self-care looks like or is it kind of expand beyond yoga?

Kelly: That's honestly like my big self-care thing. I make it a priority. I go a few times a week, um, I know many people who do it at home and like find that to be really important in their practice. I can't, um, and I also, meditation doesn't work for me, which is like, I know, if any Yogi

is listening to this real life, but I actually, I do think it's true. I think that there are some things that just don't work for you. Um, for me, I'm a very, very, um, sensitive person to like any sort of physical experience and something about just focusing on meditation is too overstimulating for me. So it doesn't work. Doesn't mean that I can't practice mindfulness, which is a totally different experience that's being in the moment, that's, you know, really tasting your food when you're eating it. That's really tapping in with why am I feeling this way or is it just a thought? And, and so for me, it really the, to come back to your question now that I've like trail off there, it's understanding that like some stuff isn't gonna work for me and that's okay. It doesn't mean that it's not going to work for somebody else, but also respecting if somebody says something doesn't work for them, I can say, hey, you know, maybe try it this way, but it could also stop and be like, yo, stop. Maybe it doesn't work for them, you know, maybe they have tried and, and you know, like my own experience tells me something's don't work for me and me pushing my idea of what ideal self-care looks like on somebody else is just a jerk move.

Kelly: So, um, yeah, my, my big thing is I show up for myself a couple times a week and um, I've also gotten much better about like things like social media when I get to the point where I'm like, I can't handle it anymore, it's impacting mental health. Sometimes I'll just say that like, this is impacting mental health and people understand that. Other times I'm like, you know what? I don't need to explain myself to anybody. And it's like, oh, just disappear for awhile and it's fine.

Lindsay: Do you find yourself reading or writing for self-care or is that to [inaudible] a professional now?

Kelly: So I do sometimes and generally it's like literal physical journaling, like I have a physical pen to paper journal that I use and um, I haven't done a long time because part of it is the same thing that sort of can impact my yoga practice is that if I go through a period of depression or a period of really high anxiety or both of them are hanging out together and like making everything miserable, I just can't get myself to do those things.

Kelly: And so I give myself permission not to, um, and I keep giving myself permission not to journal because I had been doing great for the last few months.

Lindsay: That's good to hear.

Kelly: Yeah, no, it's a good. And sometimes it's a good permission. It's like, you know what, I don't need to, I don't need to like sit down and write out my thoughts and then sort of like sit with them or figure them out or just like let them be what they are. Um, so yes I do, write. I don't share it with anybody and sometimes it's like drawing pictures. Sometimes it's, you know, I'll make a collage from magazines I've got. It's like just little things that can kind of redirect my thinking.

Lindsay: I was kind of curious actually. Are you still seeing a counselor or where were you able to see a counselor when you were struggling with depression?

Kelly: I actually, I never went to a therapist. I just took medication. I still take medication. Um, my choice on that is because I know that it would not work for me. I'm not like a talker. I'm not like a share-things-with-people kind of person, which I know is like a stereotype, but I'm just, yeah, it's one of those things. It's like I tried medication first and honestly medication works really well, so I also have never felt compelled to like change it. Will that change in the future? Maybe. And I think too, being at that point where I can, can say like maybe it would work for me in the future means that if medication stops working, that's an avenue I might consider now older, wiser, more experienced etc. etc. etc.

Lindsay: Well, these are some questions that we, we love to ask our guests. What would be one thing you would say to someone struggling?

Kelly: My answer is always talk to somebody, you know, and that's, that's going to change depending on who the person who asking that is. So I had a high schooler ask me, who came up to me during one of my presentations - I do like a, when it gets to the end, I do, if you want to come talk to me privately, you know, feel free to come up. And this student came up to me and she's like, I think I'm more than stressed out. She said, I think, I don't think it's stress. I think it's something more. And she's talking about it and, and you know, like you feel the relief. Just saying it and saying to her like, talk to somebody that you trust. Like any adult that you trust. Like I don't care who it is, you know, it could be your neighbor, it could be a parent, it could be a teacher, it could be a school counselor.

Kelly: They are going to be able to then get you started on that right path. And I, I truly do think like reaching out to somebody is where it starts because they can at least then be your advocate and they can be your partner through the process, whatever that process, that looks like, you know, um, maybe the answer is they just needed to talk to somebody. Maybe the answer is they talk to somebody and then are able to realize they need professional help and you know, and can ask them, can you help me do that? Can you make that phone call for me? You know, can you give me a phone number? People start from so many different places in their journey and their, you know, the easiest. I think the most direct thing to do is find somebody you trust and talk to them.

Lindsay: Yeah. That's awesome. I'm curious, I'm going to flip that question a little bit. Um, what is something you wish you could have told yourself when you were struggling?

Kelly: That quote about it gets better. I know that that's applied to the LGBTQ community, but I think it also applies to anyone struggling with their mental health that it can get better, that you can change your life. Um, it might not feel like it, but once you are able to find an advocate, even if it's finally finding the voice to be your own advocate, that's when everything can change. Um, you know, I really wish that something like To Write Love on Her Arms had been around

when I was in high school because that would've, that would've been so helpful to me to hear other people's experiences. And that is a big reason why I found doing this book so powerful in doing it for teenagers, you know, um, before I was able to get help, I had read so many stories and something I didn't mention here is my background is in psychology.

Kelly: I've studied this stuff, but it's hard to take what you know in the abstract, so something academic and then consider it on the personal level. And so hearing other people's stories and experiences really helped me and I wish that more of that had been around when I was younger so that I can see myself or see these experiences and be like, oh, I'm not alone. And also there's hope out there.

Lindsay: Thank you so much, Kelly, for joining us. This has been a really great conversation and I'm excited to share it with folks. I would love for you to tell us like what are some ways people can get connected to your work?

Kelly: Sure. Um, first, thanks for having me. This is awesome. It is so awesome. I really do think that writing that "Five Lies Depression Told Me" piece was one of the big steps and not just my own sort of understanding of my experiences but in being able to then advocate for other people in their, their experiences. So in, in terms of like connecting with me in my work. You can find me, I think most social media, for sure Twitter and Instagram, at @veronikellymars. So like Veronica Mars, but Kelly Mars. And, and um, I work for Book Riot. So bookriot.com. You can find my bio, which we'll link to all of my writing, which I think it also links to my contact information, so I'm pretty easy to track down.

Lindsay: Great. Well, um, thank you so much for joining us and for sharing all of these, um, I mean, just these things that I think people are really going to connect with. So thanks, Kelly.

[music playing]

Lindsay: Thanks again to our guest, Kelly Jensen. If you want to connect with Kelly and her writing, she can visit kellyjensen.com. You can also find links to her website in our show notes.

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 that we've been talking about. We believe that help exists. Part of our mission is to connect people to the help that they need and deserve. You can find local mental health resources at our website: twloha.com and click the "Find Help" at the top of the page. Or if you need to talk to someone right now, you can always connect with our friends at Crisis Text Line. You simply text the word TWLOHA, that T-W-L-O-H-A, to 741741, and you'll be connected to a trained crisis counselor. It's free, confidential, and available 24/7.

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

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

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