

Episode 003 - I'm Going To Heal From It - Najwa Zebian

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.

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.

[music playing]

Lindsay: On this episode, TWLOHA founder Jamie Tworkowski talks with Najwa Zebian. Najwa is an author, poet, and speaker. She shares about her journey with writing and what it took to reclaim her voice in spite of her experience with trauma. She also talks about the struggle to find a sense of belonging after moving from Lebanon to Canada as a teenager. I love how Najwa communicates why writing is important to her own healing and how she uses social media to fight the stigma surrounding mental health.

[music playing]

Jamie Tworkowski: So we are talking today to Najwa Zebian, and I know that you are in London, Ontario, and I wonder for those listening who don't know anything about you, if you would introduce yourself and you may even want to tell us where London is.

Najwa Zebian: [laughs] So as you said, my name is Najwa Zebian. I am an author, a poet, a speaker. Above all, I'm a human who struggles with way too many things and is on a constant mission to overcome it all. London, Ontario, where I am right now is like a couple hours of driving from Toronto. By plane it's about 45 minutes. And the easiest way to describe it is it's in between a city and a village. So you have, you still have the calm when you need it, but when you want to go downtown and get the feel of the city, you have that as well. So it's ideal for anybody who enjoys both.

Jamie: I really like that. I think we'll get to how you ended up in London, but I wonder where did you grow up? Like we'll start at the beginning where were you born? Where did you grow up?

Najwa: So I was born and raised in Lebanon, the only one in my family born and raised there. Basically, my parents were both originally from Lebanon and they traveled here at very young ages at different times. They met in Canada, got married, had five children, and then one day decided that they wanted to go back to Lebanon so that their children could learn Arabic. And I was born there like eight years after they moved. So it made me the youngest of six by many years. And that really defined how I grew up and how I felt growing up and which experiences I went through feeling like I was going through them alone, in which I felt like I could look up to my siblings and see what they've done in their lives. So moved to Canada though at 16. So I stayed in Lebanon for 16 straight years and on my 16th birthday was the move to Canada.

Jamie: Wow.

Najwa: Yeah.

Jamie: What were some of those emotions like? I mean not to mention moving on your 16th birthday, but I can imagine that is a giant transition.

Najwa: Absolutely. So I visited Canada once when I was six with my mom and then when I was 13 I came because it was my sister's wedding so we came for the summer. I came the summer after that and the one after that. So I had been kind of acquainted with the feel of Canada but it was always like, you know when you're on vacation you never think of making like long-term changes because it's just a couple of months and then you're going back. So at 16, the plan was that I was going to come here and, and there was a possibility that I would stay, but it wasn't a concrete decision that I would. And so I always had in the back of my head when I came here that there is a possibility I'm going to go back to finish grade 12 in Lebanon and do university in Lebanon.

Najwa: And then a couple months after I arrived, this was in 2006. The war broke out in Lebanon and that kind of made the decision concrete because there was no telling when it was going to end and this was a very sensitive year for me. Like grade 12 is a big deal. You have to decide what program you're going to do in university and you have to apply very early. So I had to make the decision to stay here, but it didn't feel like that. It felt almost like I was forced to stay here. It was so hard. And you know, I always say this - at 16, I didn't know how to put that into words. I felt out of place. I felt lost. I felt, I felt marginalized. Like I was not fully present. I was just getting by, you know? And it's only now that I'm able to look back and say, Oh, this is why I felt that way. I didn't feel like I belonged and I didn't fit in and I had to make all these changes, but there was no attention given to that. Like, no one sat with me and said, you know, this might be a little hard for you, but you'll get through it and we'll help you with whatever. It was just, just you're thrown into this new environment and you just have to adapt and survive on your own. That's what it felt like.

Jamie: So what was that like? New Country, new school, I assume you moved...Did you move with your parents?

Najwa: So my parents were already here. That's another part of my story is that since the age of eight, my parents were in constant motion between Lebanon and Canada because my siblings who are relatively older than me started coming to Canada when they would hit 18 and so my parents were going back and forth so that they could stay with me and then stay with them. And so I, I lived in multiple homes in Lebanon, like with different relatives with aunts and uncles and my sister at one point. And so when I came here they'd already been in Canada, both of them, both of my parents and all of my siblings except for one. So I traveled alone here and had that really disgusting birthday cake on the airplane.

[Najwa laughs]

Jamie: I would think part of that was an exciting move in terms of reuniting with your family, but then I'm sure incredibly challenging as you had mentioned.

Najwa: Absolutely. Yes. So at that age, I was extremely attached to my parents and just wanting to be around them. So it definitely was...I felt like I was coming home by coming to them.

Jamie: Sure.

Najwa: But then when you settle down and they're there, then you start becoming aware of all the other things that you didn't think you were coming to and all the other things that you were leaving behind...

Jamie: Sure.

Najwa: ...in your home country or in your first home. Yeah.

Jamie: So where, where does writing show up? When do you start to realize that you love words and you have a gift for words?

Najwa: When I was 13 years old, I got a gift from one of my friends for my birthday. It was a handmade journal. She basically put five notebooks, glued them together, and made her own cover with really old jeans that she had. And it had a picture of a teddy bear, and it said, "Be Mine" on it and that was my first journal ever. And that's when I started writing in it, writing altogether.

Najwa: Before that I, I loved poetry. My dad had this, this huge bookshelf that basically was a full wall in one of the rooms in our house, and I remember going through the poetry books that he had. And I used to sit with my grandma and she would tell me all these like old stories and things that she learned through from her parents. And I always enjoyed that as a child. Like imagine as a child, you're sitting with your grandma and she's telling you all these stories, you're

six or seven years old and you're genuinely enjoying that. Instead of sitting and reading a book or watching a movie, I was learning about all of that. And her stories were always very poetic.

Jamie: Yeah.

Najwa: And then the books that my dad bought where, you know, they weren't age appropriate for me. And my dad told me that, but I would still go and read them because I loved them so much. So at 13 when I received the journal, that was kind of my first chance to start putting my own thoughts and my own words to paper. And my writing was basically about how I was feeling. And that journal started becoming to to feel more like home day after day because, at the time, in school, for as long as I could remember, I was always bullied for being too sensitive and being too kind and always thinking the best in people and being so naive and vulnerable and again at such a young age I didn't know how to put that into words, but I would write about how it made me feel. So I was coming to this journal every single day and writing in it because it felt like somebody was listening to me without judging me, without telling me something's wrong with you. And it was a secret. Like nobody could read it. So I wrote and wrote and wrote. And then when I came to Canada and I started feeling this bigger pain of being out of place and not feeling like I belonged, I didn't want to feel anymore. So I ripped up that journal and said I'm never going to write again because I don't want to feel this anymore. I don't want to feel. It's too overwhelming for me. And so I stopped at 16.

Jamie: And then when obviously you're a writer now. So, so what happened next?

Najwa: So what happened next was I went through grade 12, first year, second year, third year, fourth year university. Then I did teacher's college. Still not writing. Still, honestly, when I look back at those days, I see them in black and white because I don't see myself as somebody who was feeling at all unless I really had to feel a feeling. When I started teaching, my first week the principal brought in six students; they ranged from the age of, from grade two to grade eight. So they were very young and those students had arrived from Libya, which was torn by war that year. So they were refugees. And I remember seeing my 16-year-old self in those kids because...and they didn't even have to tell me. I could feel that they felt out of place, that they were pushed into a new place that they didn't want to be in.

Najwa: They were used to a certain lifestyle back there, especially the older ones, the grade six and eight, they were like top students back home and here they were having to learn a new language, having to adapt to a new environment, having to make friends all over again and prove themselves all over again. It was really hard for them. So that's what made me want to respond to that and say, you do belong and you do have a place here and it will get better. It absolutely will. You do have a voice. There is space for you. So I started writing to inspire them and I started writing...I don't know if you, you probably didn't have a chance to read all of Mind Platter, but there's a few entries in there about education and about how I started viewing education differently as a result of seeing how these students were being treated.

Najwa: And I started talking about education reform and saying, you know, if we really want to teach kids, we need to look at them as humans who are experiencing certain things. We need to actually do what helps them and not make them memorize and, and just feel like they have to fit a certain criteria we have; we have to be, as educators, adaptive to them. So that's when I started writing again and then with time I started writing for myself because as I described it before, you think that you're in control of your words, but for me at some point my words and my feelings started controlling me and there was this flood of emotions that were just bottled up inside and, and they were coming out and I was healing by doing that. So that's what I started. And then three years after that, I just compiled all of my writings and put them into a book that I self published.

Jamie: So had you shared much of your writing publicly prior to self publishing the book?

Najwa: Yeah. I would share them with my students. I would share them with my colleagues. I would share them on my Facebook page, like my personal Facebook page, and my friends would read them and I didn't really get much engagement. I wasn't looking to, it was just, these are my thoughts and I'm going to say them. Yeah, so most of them were publicly available, for sure.

Jamie: And then what was it like to take that next step, which really is a significant step, to release it in the form of a book or to release some of your writing in the form of a book?

Najwa: There were a few people who said your writings are really helpful. It would be great to have them in one place, like if you could put them in a book and publish them. And that was the first time I started thinking that I could one day be an author because I never thought of that before. It was never like a dream of mine -

Jamie: Sure.

Najwa: I thought that I was meant to be a teacher. So I thought to myself, yeah, that's a good idea. So I started compiling them but didn't really do...I didn't have the courage to do it because I didn't want to go through sending my manuscript to multiple publishers and waiting for one more person to tell me something's wrong with you, you feel too much.

Jamie: Yeah.

Najwa: Nobody will read this, you know, I didn't want that anymore. I was avoiding rejection, so I just didn't do anything with it.

Najwa: And then I went through an experience, uh, while I was teaching with a superior of mine who took advantage of my naivety and being so vulnerable and young and, and I started feeling like I didn't want to teach anyone. I didn't want to be in this environment anymore because I felt like I couldn't grow in an organization where somebody who is way more powerful than me

could ruin my reputation, could say certain things about me. And so I was looking to have my voice heard in any way. And my writings were all I had, that was my voice and I remember clearly where I was sitting in December of 2016. I was sitting at a local bookstore, in a corner, with my laptop and that's when I sent my first manuscript for editing to be self published. And I remember the feeling of this is literally my only voice in this world.

Najwa: This is me, this is who I am, this is my only chance at being heard. And if these words could help one person out there then that's good enough for me. And I just, I did it. I took a leap of faith, and I went ahead and did it without any expectation at all. Like I didn't, I wouldn't dream at that point to have this kind of influence that I have today. I didn't even - like that wasn't even a thought that would cross my mind at all. It was a genuine struggle to be heard and say, this is who I am.

Jamie: Yeah. I love something you said a minute ago. You didn't, you didn't want to be told that you feel too much. And you may not know it, but my book is called *If You Feel Too Much*.

[Jamie and Najwa laugh]

Najwa: Perfect. That's going to be my next tweet.

[Jamie laughs]

Jamie: So I, I relate to a lot of what you're saying and mine was primarily compiled over 10 years, so it was similar in terms of having a lot of material.

Najwa: That's incredible.

[music playing leading into a break]

Lindsay: People often ask how they can help TWLOHA. Our intern program is a great way to be directly involved and immersed in the mission of the organization. Interns are invited to join us at our headquarters in Melbourne, FL, for one of three terms. You'll work closely with the TWLOHA team, you'll get valuable work experience, live in community, and get to connect people to the message of hope and help. If you'd like to apply, we're currently accepting applications. And if you want to learn more, you can visit our website: twloha.com/jobs. You can also find that link in our Show Notes.

[music]

Jamie: Looking at where you are now, looking at the influence you have now, you know, I looked a few minutes ago: 768,000 people follow you on Instagram, 67,000 follow you on Twitter...and this can be traced back to a book that was self published in 2016. And so I just

wonder what, what have these last few years been like? And in a way, how has this happened through your perspective?

Najwa: The last three years have been...I don't think I've fully internalized the amount of gratitude that I have for people hearing me. Most people look at these pages and say, oh, this many people follow her. And I never look at these people as people who follow me or as people who are fans. I look at them as people who have allowed me to walk with them on their journey to find their voice, and they're walking with me on my journey to find my voice and have my voice be heard. So every time I connect with someone new, I feel so grateful that I went from this dark, dark place of feeling like there was literally not one person on this earth who could hear me or understand me or listen to me to have this many people say, I hear you and I, and I honor your struggle because I talk a lot about being sensitive. I talk a lot about things that people are afraid to talk about. So for someone to say, I want to read this and this helps me. Like I can't even explain how that makes me feel. It's not anything that money can buy. It's just an a timeless feeling that it makes me feel seen and heard, and it makes me feel whole. Does that makes sense? I know it sounds weird.

[Najwa laughs]

Jamie: No, I definitely relate to that, you know, through our journey with To Write Love on Her Arms and so much of what we do is based in words, is based in writing, is based in communication. And so I definitely relate to that. I'm sure you have a lot of people that reach out and they're inspired and they're back where you were years ago in terms of that dark place, in terms of maybe feeling small, feeling like no one sees them. They don't belong. Maybe they even love writing as well, but they don't have a platform. And, and so I wonder if, if you hear from folks in those places and what you end up saying to them?

Najwa: Every single day I hear from people either through messages, emails, comments. It's a daily thing that I get messages like this, and I have to actually prepare myself and say, okay, I'm going to go through my messages right now because I'm going to be reading so many stories of people who have found me through their time of struggle. And they're just opening up and saying...either saying something like, thank you for helping me through my darkness, or I'm in such a dark place right now and I'm in need of words that would help me. And my response is always, is there a need of words that would help them and you are not alone. And trust me, I understand what it feels like to be in your place. I fully get it, and I know that it probably seems like it's never going to end and that your life is going to be like this forever in this moment. Trust me, I know what that feels like.

Najwa: But you have to also trust that whatever power that is overtaking you right now, or it feels like it's overtaking you right now to make you feel like you're in such a dark space. Also believe that there is a power, but even more, more powerful and more illuminating than it that can also take over this period that you're going through. So I always make sure that I don't make a person feel not validated by what they're going through. Like I always make sure to not say

something that makes them feel that I'm talking from a place of having, you know, gotten to that point where I'm fully healed and I'm just looking down at them and saying, you're gonna get here so just keep waiting. I make sure I don't talk like that because I still freshly feel the struggle that it took for me to get to this place.

Jamie: Sure. That's beautiful. And thank you for sharing that. You know, you're talking about the beautiful things, the privilege of people sharing their pain, people reaching out saying that you inspire them. But I'm sure you see ignorance. I'm sure you see ugliness and hate, and I wonder how do you walk through those words that people throw at you?

Najwa: Yes. That definitely happens. Like I have people sometimes who say things like, oh, just get over yourself. You've been in pain for two and a half years. Like you should be at a point where you're healed, and they don't understand that it's not a switch. You don't feel pain or go to a bad experience and then heal one day and that's it. It's a constant struggle, especially if you've experienced a traumatizing event because people get triggered. I get triggered all the time and for me to always talk about what I went through in a way that would help lift others up, it also takes a lot of energy for me to do because I forced myself to go back to certain times that I, I would prefer not to, but my goal is always to be in touch with that pure struggle that I don't ever forget what it feels like to overcome something like that.

Najwa: And so when people write these comments, obviously sometimes I feel very angry on the inside and I feel...like I want to respond in a way that is very upfront and just say, don't talk to me like this, but I remind myself that every person who speaks this way has a certain kind of pain inside of them that they are trying to channel through. And sometimes that comes at them making a negative comment on someone else's struggle. So I remind myself that whatever I say and respond, if it's not going to help that person, then I probably shouldn't say it. I've learned to deal with that over time. Like right now, I'm very well composed when I read a comment like that and I, I quickly, quickly, quickly in my brain it's become like an automatic response that they must be going through something and this is why they're writing like this so I'm not going to say anything that's going to hurt them even more.

Najwa: If people say something that is hurtful towards someone else on my platform, I intervene for sure because I never want anyone who belongs to this community to feel like they are being bullied online. And if somebody says something or makes a comment that is inaccurate about mental health or about trauma or about healing in any way, I also do my best to respond in a very factual way to clarify some misconceptions. Because as you're well aware, a lot of people still don't understand how mental health really works. They don't understand what trauma really is. Some people don't even believe or are not convinced that these things exist. They think you're just complaining. You're, you're adopting a victim mentality and you're blaming life for everything that you're going through. And so it's very important to clarify those things. So that's my very long answer to your very short question.

[Najwa laughs]

Jamie: No, it's a great answer. You brought up, even specifically, the words mental health and I wonder, are those words you were thinking about five years ago? Do you think differently about them today? I assume you've learned a lot and, and certainly through your own struggles, but also I think on behalf of the struggles of the people who read your writing and hear your voice. I wonder just what your journey has been like as it relates to mental health, mental illness, not just for yourself but perhaps for your audience, your community.

Najwa: So I'm going to say something that might shock you, but growing up I wasn't even aware of the words mental health. That just wasn't something that I was aware of. We never talked about it in school. It just did not exist, you know? Feelings were, especially coming from my culture, feelings are weakness. You hide them, you shouldn't talk about them. And even up to the point when I came here, going to...I only did one year of high school so I never got a chance to be fully involved in any initiatives in school that even talked about mental health. So again, I'm not aware of this term. I'm just struggling and hiding myself and hiding my feelings. Going to university, same thing, because you don't get those kinds of supports, especially at a university level. I started learning about mental health when I became a teacher and I had students in front of me who were struggling and that's when I -

Najwa: It was like honestly, it was like somebody's pouring like ice cold water over me, and it all started to make sense when I started putting mental health into words and talking about it and researching about it and seeing it as an essential part of every single person's life, including mine. My whole life changed. I'm not shy or embarrassed anymore to talk about what I go through. Like during those years of teaching, I went through an experience of gaslighting, which for the people listening who wouldn't know what this is - it's when somebody gains your trust and then they start playing around with your brain and they start psychologically manipulating you and telling you, that never happened, you made it up in your head. If they called you a certain thing or if you created a certain memory with them and you really trust them and now they're looking at you and saying, I don't know what you're talking about.

Najwa: I went through that for like two, three years, and I completely defined myself through someone else's eyes because I trusted them so much. It was such a bad experience of being psychologically manipulated, that had I not known what mental health was and how important it was, I probably wouldn't be where I am right. I probably wouldn't be here today because it was such a horrible experience. So it was me learning about mental health over these years at the same time as me experiencing something that was directly related to my mental health that brought me to a point where I had bottled up all of this knowledge that I knew and at the same time bottled up the shame that I grew up with that was telling me, hide your feelings, hide what you went through, and those... my knowledge of mental health with that shame could not coexist anymore.

Najwa: And I was either going to submit to the shame and, and be quiet and just say, you know, maybe this stuff that I know about mental health is not true. Maybe I should just listen to this

shame that's pulling me down. I could have done that, but I chose not to and my, my knowledge and appreciation of mental health broke down that shame into dust and I just raised my voice and I said, I don't care anymore. I'm going to talk about what happened to me, whether people accept it or not and I'm going to heal from it and I won't be able to heal from it if I don't come to terms with it. So it's been such an empowering journey to shift and change and reconceptualize my understanding of mental health and the level of importance that I gave it in my own life. It's been incredible.

[music playing]

Jamie: I'm so impressed by you. You're, you're clearly so intelligent, so well spoken and I love that we're hearing your voice and I wonder who are some of the other voices that have helped you through what you just shared in terms of your journey as it relates to not just understanding mental health, but even maybe your own recovery and today some of the voices, some of the people who make up your support system.

Najwa: It's very hard for me to answer that question because it's been difficult to find support and I'm thinking, I'm not thinking about now, I'm thinking about the time that I was going through everything. It was very hard to find someone who said, I honor your struggle and I understand you and I agree that you need to talk about this and that what happened to you was wrong. What I heard mostly was, it could have been worse so be grateful that it wasn't. Don't talk about it. People will think that something was wrong with you because going through a psychological manipulation, I know I'm getting emotional, but I always do when I talk about this...going through psychological manipulation makes you act and behave in ways that don't resemble you.

Jamie: Yeah.

Najwa: And so I started defining this new vision of myself as, as someone who was wrong, not someone that had some things that were wrong about them. I saw myself as a mistake altogether and to go through listening to these kinds of comments from anyone that I trusted, like it's hard enough to open up to someone about what happened to you. And to hear them say things like hide it, just don't talk about it, and prove yourself and other ways, that still made me feel like I wasn't...my soul and my struggle was not being heard. And so I had to start reaching out to other people. Like I, I started seeing a therapist and I, my therapist really, really helped me understand and see things for what they really were from an academic point of view and from a research-based point of view. And all of a sudden I was feeling like no I'm not crazy and, and I behaved a certain way because this was the only way that I could respond to what I was going through.

Najwa: So I started seeing my behavior as separate from who I was as a person. So I was no longer seeing myself as a mistake, but as a person who was trying her best to deal with what she was going through. So because of like my therapist and then a couple of new friendships that I created who really stood by my side and, and, and help give me that push that when I

finally said I'm going to share my story and what happened to me, I felt that I had these lights in my life that were, were guiding my way. Like I always felt before that I was walking on this road and the lights were turning off and it was at night and I couldn't see in front of me anymore. These lights that were turning off were the people, every person that I trusted with what I went through who didn't support me or who supported me in their own way of support that didn't fit what I needed. And those lights are just turning off and off and off. And all of a sudden you feel like you can't see anymore. And so these new people that I encountered along the way were those dim lights that made my path a little bit clearer to a point where when I shared my story, I felt like I could see ahead and everything just became clear.

Jamie: Thank you so much for sharing that. That's obviously vulnerable, clearly emotional. And I'm super honored that you would talk about it. And this is sort of shifting gears and a broad question, but what does, what does life look like today? Even maybe specifically what do your days look like today? You mentioned being a teacher who isn't actively or currently teaching. And so I'm curious and I think others would be curious just how you spend your time, what you're thinking about, what you're excited about.

Najwa: That's a great question. Before I answer that, I just wanted to say one more thing, like at the end of that road that I was talking about, another light in my way was honestly, every story I received from people who said, I'm going through what you're talking about and you're writing - thank you for putting a voice to my feelings. I started feeling like I was part of a bigger community of people and that I was not the only one and that also helped me feel supported and empowered to be part of this bigger community of people who are going through struggles that they don't want to talk about. So I want to appreciate those people as well. In terms of what my days look like, most of my days are spent on helping others see the light as I did, and sharing my story with people on my struggles and actually not my story, my multiple stories that make me who I am and hope to inspire and empower anyone who's struggling to come to terms with their own truth and with their own reality.

Najwa: And that takes place in multiple ways. Sometimes it's sharing a piece of writing on my social media. Sometimes it's making the short videos. Sometimes it's making a story that's as simple as saying, here's your reminder today that you are not alone or a simple tweet that says whatever you're going through, I'm sending you love and healing and I understand you. Sometimes it's planning an event where I'm going to talk about these things, but it's always centered on staying true to that struggle and to serving people who are going through that. A day like today for example, I woke up and first thing I did was I wrote in my journal, I wrote about a page and then I answered a few emails related to events that I'm speaking at in the fall. And then I'm talking to you right now and after this I'm going to see my sister for a bit cause right now that's a strong support source for me, my family. And then after that I'm meeting with a friend of mine who left an abusive marriage. I haven't seen her in awhile and I'm meeting with her just to show her my support and to see what I could do to help her. That's, that's one day of my days.

Jamie: That's a lot. That's a busy day. I wonder, what do you do for fun? Obviously seeing family can be fun, but I just wonder things kind of far from work and purpose - hobbies, free time...Are there things that remind you who you are and kind of make you come to life?

Najwa: So this part right here is at this point I would say my biggest struggle because I've been - and I'm sure you can relate to this - when you've been in fight mode for so long and you're constantly feeling like you're fighting a battle every single day, it's hard for you to just sit and relax and not do anything without feeling guilty. And this is where I am right now because I've been fighting for, I would say, I've been fighting for about four or five years to find my voice, to be heard, to let go of that shame, to prove myself in whatever way it was, whether it was as a teacher and then to prove that I had a voice through my writing. And then finally when I shared my story, I went through a lot of, a lot of negativity from the community around me and from people that I knew and so I was constantly putting out fires.

Najwa: And now to just do something for fun, It feels like my brain is still so used to thinking so much....So I've been actually working with my therapist on a few strategies and she's teaching me a few things to do, like to just sit and meditate for 10 minutes a day or just take a walk. So I've been forcing myself to do these things, like very simple...even if it's just sitting on my balcony and staring out at the sky and not, trying not to think of anything, at this point that's fun for me. It's not, you know, going to a spa or going to the movies or you know, going on an extravagant trip. It's not that at all. It's literally being able to sit alone with myself and just be. So that's what I've been doing lately.

Jamie: That's good stuff. I relate to that a lot. I think I, especially early on in *To Write Love on Her Arms*, I thought I had to work around the clock to keep it going, to keep it growing, to keep it from falling apart and really just came to learn the hard way that it wasn't sustainable and had to learn about what it actually means to take some of the advice that we give and even that I give and you know, it's a bit of a buzz word or a buzz phrase at the moment, but self-care, you know, is it real, does it matter, do I need it? And, and so I totally relate to some of what you're wrestling with right now.

Najwa: Yeah. Thank you for sharing that.

Jamie: Totally. I wonder, coming to a close, what's next for you?

Najwa: Next for me is whatever the world has for me. I am being true to myself and trying to honor every single part of me that I once thought was bad or made me weak, such as my sensitivity, my vulnerability, my ability to empathize with people. I'm being true to that and working on just loving all of those parts of who I am and the world just keeps opening doors for me just by being true to who I am. So I'm open to whatever happens next. My second book, which was self published, also in 2016, is getting republished. And my third book is coming out in March. So that's more of what's really next. But in terms of what's next on a bigger scale, it's

whatever the world has to offer, I'm open to it and I'm just allowing my soul to flow through this world and see what happens.

Jamie: That's amazing. Will you give us the second and third book title?

Najwa: Yeah. So the second book is called *The Nectar of Pain* and the third one is called *Sparks of Phoenix* and they're both books of poetry. *The Nectar of Pain*, I wrote it during one of my hardest times, like during, going through that experience of gaslighting and being made to feel like something was wrong with me or that I was a mistake and it's 311 pages of that, and it's very vulnerable. It's very deep and any person who was struggling through anything in life will be able to relate to at least a few pages in the book. *Sparks of Phoenix* is going to be similar, but it's going to be a lot more coming from a powerful perspective. *The Nectar of Pain* was coming from the perspective of a person who's struggling. *Sparks of Phoenix* is coming from the perspective of a somebody who was struggling and looking back and redefining those experiences and these struggles.

Jamie: Najwa, it's been an honor to talk to you, to learn a little bit of your story. Thank you for being so honest. Thank you for the way that you use your voice, not just today in this podcast, but just every single day, the way you encourage people, give people permission to be honest, to be vulnerable, to be themselves, to believe in themselves. I'm excited. I'm excited to keep following you. To keep hearing from you and just like you to see what's next.

[music playing]

Lindsay: Thank you so much to Najwa Zebian. If you'd like to learn more about Najwa, you can connect with her on social media or you can visit her website: najwazebian.com. You can also find those links in our Show Notes.

[over music]

Lindsay: We hope each episode is a reminder that you're 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 to our friends at Crisis Text Line. You simply text the word TWLOHA - that's TWLOHA - to 741741 and you'll be connected to a trained crisis counselor. It's free, confidential, and available 24/7.

Lindsay: If you enjoyed this episode and want to hear more, we hope you'll subscribe on iTunes or wherever you get your podcasts. And if you can do us a favor, we'd really love for you to write us a review. It will help more people find this podcast and the mission of TWLOHA. If you have any feedback or questions, please send us an email to podcast@twloha.com.

Lindsay: A big thank you to our friends at Copeland for the original music on this episode. The TWLOHA podcast is produced by Mark Codgen. Editorial support was provided by Claire Biggs and Jennie Armstrong of Lore de Force. And music assistance provided by James Likeness and Ben Tichenor. I'm Lindsay Kolsch. Thank you so much for listening.

[music playing]

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.

Lindsay: You can find more information about TWLOHA at twloha.com.