

Episode 207: “Surviving Suicide Loss - This Is Hell But There Is Hope Ahead”

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

KAITLYN PARTIN: Sometimes you just have to have someone say, “This sucks. This is really hard. This is hell.” But to let you know that there's hope ahead.

LINDSAY KOLSCH: You're listening to the To Write Love on Her Arms podcast, a show about mental health and the things that make us human. Each episode we'll be talking about the things that can often feel hard to talk about, like depression, addiction, self-injury, and suicide. We'll be sharing stories and exploring big themes like hope, healing, and recovery.

LINDSAY: We hope you will connect to these episodes in a meaningful way. And maybe by listening, you're going to find that it's easier for you to talk about your own experience with the people in your life. So maybe you struggle or you love someone who is struggling. Maybe you just want to learn more and hear from people who are generously sharing their stories with us. No matter who you are and why you're listening, we want to thank you for being here. You're in good company.

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LINDSAY: I once heard someone describe that losing a loved one to suicide was like living through an earthquake. Yes, there is immediate destruction and loss, but the effects of the earthquake are largely felt in the wake of the ground-shaking, life-altering event. And according to statistics, every single suicide directly affects at least six people. If the suicide loss occurs in a school or workplace, that number skyrockets.

That's why today we want to talk about the experience of losing a loved one to suicide. We hear too often from supporters that they became active and vocal in this movement because they too have lost a loved one to suicide. Today, you're going to hear from one of those people, Kaitlyn Partin; she lost her best friend Brittany to suicide.

In just a few days on Saturday, November 23, we'll join people around the globe for International Survivors of Suicide Loss Day. This is a time set apart when we create intentional space for the friends and family of those who have died by suicide and to join together for healing and support. We'll share a bit later on in the episode some ways you can be involved in this day as well.

Before we begin, we hope that you'll take a second to just check in with yourself. If a

conversation about suicide or loss from suicide could be upsetting for you, we encourage you to take your own mental health and healing into consideration. We want you to do what's best for you, so that might mean taking breaks while listening, listening with a support person in your life, or not listening at all.

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LINDSAY: Today, I'm really grateful to share a conversation I had with our guest Kaitlyn Partin. Kaitlyn has been a dear friend of mine and TWLOHA's for many years. She served on staff at TWLOHA from 2010 to 2012. And it was in this season that Kaitlyn experienced the devastating loss of her best friend Brittany to suicide. As her journey has taken her on a variety of career paths, Kaitlyn now lives in Northwest Florida with her family and two young boys, and she's pursuing her Clinical Social Work license.

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LINDSAY: I would love it if you could kind of just tell us a little bit about about your friendship with Brittany. How did you guys meet? And I'd like to kind of start the conversation there.

KAITLYN: Sure. So, it's so interesting to think and try to pin down the moment I met Brittany because she very quickly became part of our family. So she was one of the only friends I've ever had that truly felt like a sister and was at our house really constantly and was just integrated into our family life. So I moved to Florida the summer before my junior year of high school. And prior to moving, I was very, I don't know, I just was really always active in extracurricular activities and was like a straight A student and was always involved in all of the activities. So I felt like I knew everybody at my school. And I just really, I was the kind of kid that really loved school. And so when I moved to a new high school in a new state, it was really hard. It was really hard to have so many people who were friendly at school, but no one really needed a friend, you know? No one really needed another friend in their friend group. It was hard because no one was overtly mean or cruel. It was just the weekend would come and I wouldn't have anyone to spend time with and it was just really, really like a contrast to the life I had lived. And I'd moved before; so it was my first move, where I felt really alone. So when I met Brittany, she was a grade behind me in school, and she was a member of the church I went to so she was in my youth group. But we, I think we met on some sort of church-related, I don't know, some kind of activity on a bus.

KAITLYN: And we both were working on AP chemistry homework. And so we kind of connected over needing to have like a study partner for our class. And we were both into like, I don't know, alternative music. And I don't know, we just had different, we had different tastes. And it was like a relieving thing for me to find someone who felt similar to me. And even though I'm a lot older than her, you know, like I was a grade ahead, but I was kind of older for my grade. So I was about two years older than her. But we just became fast friends. She was one of the first friends for me that was someone who is really bold to like, challenge me and kind of call me out on some of my stuff. So, yeah, really early on, we just were, kind of had that kinship like a like a sisterly friendship or connection that was not surface level and was really deeply challenging.

LINDSAY: Yeah, and for people, you know, who never had a chance to meet Brittany, how would you? How would you describe her personality? Like, how would you describe her as you met her in that season?

KAITLYN: I would say how I met her and how most people when they speak about her and remember her, they talk about her big, bright smile. Her really, really, really curly hair, her bouncy, curly dark brown hair, her dark eyes. How extremely intelligent she was. Very, very intelligent, very perceptive, her, like, fervor for the unjust, for people who were in need globally and locally; she just couldn't stand for inequality. She was passionate about her faith. She was passionate about her friends and who she loved. And she was really, she just sought to, to make sure everyone around her felt loved, like deeply loved. And you know, I think almost to a fault. Like I said, shortly after her death, like I really think one of Brittany's biggest struggles was for her, her own identity, to her own sense of self-love, or even that she was worthy of love. And I think so much of that was we could've seen in her life that she was just so...she really wanted everyone to feel like they had a place to belong, and that they were loved. And they had, that they had worth. And I think that was a big struggle for her to, to know that identity herself.

LINDSAY: You mentioned that she was willing to kind of call you on your stuff. And I love that. I mean, I think that's a terrific quality for a friend to have. But I wonder when did you know that that Brittany was struggling like with mental health?

KAITLYN: In high school, I first became aware that Brittany might have had something going on beneath the surface when she would tell me about her relationship with her dad. Her parents were divorced when she was very young. And she lived with her mom and her stepdad and her younger sister. And every so often, I would ask for stories about what her dad was like or what life was like going between two households or visiting her dad because my parents were married and were not, we didn't have an

experience of divorce. So I had a couple of experiences with her that surrounded disappointment in that relationship. And I think that's when I began not to think that she was struggling with mental health, but I really began to become aware of a profound sadness that she had in her life. That was like an undercurrent to, to a lot of disappointments and frustrations that maybe she wouldn't, wouldn't make aware. And so in high school, there were a couple of she, she was really good at, the word wasn't, it's not deceit or lying, but she was really good at covering things up in order to protect you.

KAITLYN: I think she would be burying them or she would be very, very conscious that she felt a certain pain or felt a certain way. It would come out in poetry. She was really prolific. And she was an amazing poet. And she loved, she and I loved music. So we would dissect music lyrics, like all day long. It was a hobby we had.

LINDSAY: What was your favorite song?

KAITLYN: Oh my gosh, for example, I don't even remember the name of this album, but the band May had this album...Was it called "The Afterglow"? I think, I don't remember. It's like, so bad. But we, we had a band field trip, and we listened to that album, oh my gosh, like, front to back, front to back. Every lyric we would dissect. And we loved like, As Cities Burn, and we loved Norma Jean. And we loved, I don't know, we just listened to so many, like, kind of emo and then like, hardcore, anyway, but we loved the lyrics we, like, would just sit down and read them and be like, that is so, that is what life is like, you know? Like, these lyrics are what is real and true in the world, like someone's capturing how we feel. You know, because when you're a teenager, you don't always have like, a language for what you're feeling.

KAITLYN: And so music lyrics were so vital for us, and just our discussion of how we felt. So some of that came out in our discussions of music, our questions about faith and about God and about our experiences in the church. Like, we just, we had so many similar questions, but I would, I would say that some of those conversations felt, had like kind of a sadness to them when it came to her experience. And so we kind of took turns caring for each other. And I kind of saw my way of caring for her as reminding her that, like, what was true and that she was loved. And I don't know, I just, it never really seemed like it was something dangerous, or something really serious until we went to college. So we went to different colleges. And we kind of kept up through text and just phone calls. And, you know, social media platforms were kind of just becoming more developed in that way. And—

LINDSAY: Because this was this is back in 2000—2008?

KAITLYN: Gosh, yeah, we met. I graduated in 2005. So we must have met in like, 2003. She graduated in, was it 2006 or seven? Oh my gosh, she might have been, I don't remember anymore. 2006, I think was her graduating class. She was smart. She was in all my classes. But she, you know, she was a younger grade than me. But anyway, so yeah, 2006, between 2006 and 2010, we just lived a lot of life together. And I would come home every summer, we'd reconnect but it wasn't until...2010 is when I got the phone call from her completely out of the blue that was very overt, like, "Hey, I'm not okay. And I'm actually not okay to the point that I'm going to leave school on like a medical leave, or I need to..." It wasn't even she was leaving yet. She was... Before she left school, she called me and said something to the effect of like, "I'm, you know, I'm not, I'm living a lie. Nothing that I do is good." Just things that came out of the blue for me, I'm just like what, you know, you are very involved in...she went to a school that had like a Christian affiliation. So she was involved in different ministries in different capacities at school. But when she called me it was like, "I need to admit something to someone." And it was this context of, like, "I'm a fraud. Nothing I do is good. Everything I've lived is a lie." I mean, it was completely out of the blue and really confusing.

KAITLYN: Because, and I do think because she was so intelligent, what I think she might have meant is like, I don't have, you know, I can show up and I can, people can think I'm doing something but it doesn't take a lot of effort for me to complete this project. So I'm not really completing it, I'm just...I don't I don't know, she wasn't really clear. It was just like, "Everything I do to this point has not been true. And I need to come clean." And I I kind of was like, "Well, I don't know, you know, what you're really talking about, I think you're being hard on yourself." But that phone call began this series of like bringing to light things that were really going on. So it brought to light her misuse of prescription medication. And it brought to light, some of these addictive behaviors that had gone unknown to any of us for years, that in hindsight, certain moments in time that felt really out of the blue and not connected to anything else, we were like, oh, I mean, for me, I thought, "Oh, okay. That's why there was that comment about like, where the liquor is in the house, or that's why there was the comment about..." I don't know, it just became, if it kind of gave some context to what she was saying when she meant to say that she was being deceptive or that things weren't true. I really just think because she was personally struggling for such a long time to cope with this feeling of emptiness or disappointment or sorrow. And she had tried a lot of ways to numb for a lot of years. And because of my age, at the time I don't think I had the awareness of like how significant the problems were when we had a glimpse into them or a clue into them, you know?

LINDSAY (narration): After a phone call from Brittany, Kaitlyn soon realized just how much her friend had been struggling.

KAITLYN: It's hard to remember exactly the timeline in which everything occurred during that month, which was February of 2010. And she ended up dying in May of 2010. Personally, I was, you know, I had a job and I was working, and I had just started dating someone for the first time after years of not having a relationship like that. So I was already navigating a lot of my own feelings and things being really new and kind of scary, myself. So all, that whole time of my life just felt so intense. I was studying for the GRE because I wanted to go back to grad school. And I was feeling challenged at work in a new way that I'd never felt before. So everything just felt really tough.

KAITLYN: But I remember a phone call that was a little nebulous or uncertain that, where she was just talking about how she had let everyone down, that things in her life were a lie, things that didn't really have a lot of real context. And then, a couple of days later, I got a phone call from her where she had told me that she tried to overdose. And it just felt like it came out of nowhere. I didn't, I don't think I even really knew. I just didn't have even like clinical knowledge at the time, like I was working in, in awareness and education with *To Write Love on Her Arms*. But to actually know someone who had a personal experience of an attempted overdose, like having the real story with someone I knew, that it just felt like this infusion of like data and facts and knowledge, but then having it land with a real human that I knew was really confusing, like a really difficult thing to comprehend. Because she wasn't in front of me, she was still states away at school.

KAITLYN: Even as I talk about it now, you know, as I tried to prepare for this podcast, I was trying to position myself back in what I knew then, and what things were like then. And to really try to remember what they were really like versus the way we kind of form stories, even around our own lives. And so I think there was even a detail in which she said she wanted to die. I don't think she said "I want to kill myself." But it was like, I just want to die. And again, I don't know how much of this is like fabricated in my memory or what is real. But I had a sense that she wanted something to stop. But then when she did have this attempt, with some of her, it was just some of her medication she had laying around, I think. I don't think it was anything she didn't have on hand. So it was just like this cry for help.

KAITLYN: I have this moment in my memory, where I specifically remember sitting on our porch, and the information coming from her and talking to her mom. I felt myself

take on a version of myself, if that makes sense? Like, I stopped feeling how I was feeling and I started thinking, "Now it's time to help solve this problem." Or I should know what to do because this is what I've studied. And this is what my job is. And I should know how to, I should know what to do. I know the next steps. I know how to connect someone to treatment, like, this is what I know how to do so I think I'm just going to do it, you know? And I'd never done it before. I've never done that, like, professionally. And we had talked all the time about connecting someone to help to, like, theoretical or like to portals or to, to insurance providers or, or reaching out and calling a therapist and trying to get in to see somebody but for me to have to navigate how do you help someone find a place in an inpatient facility? Or how do you help someone who has made an attempt to end their life? It was just so hard to comprehend for me at the time.

LINDSAY: Yeah, were you working with her family at that point? Like were you, were you playing that role in between, directly with her or with her parents? Or what did that look like?

KAITLYN: When I spoke with her, I remember being very encouraging, like, this is, she either she told me what the plan was or her parents had told me but either way I was, I was there to kind of be a cheerleader. And I would put on a really brave face. And, and I would say things like, you know, "You can do this, like, we're here to support you. We're going to work with you every step of the way." Like, I remember having this lump in my throat when I would talk to her and have so much emotion that I was trying to mask because I thought that I needed to at the time. And I would get through these phone calls and then just fall apart, like, feel completely crushed. Like whether it was anxiety or overwhelm or just the reality of the situation would feel so heavy, like almost palpable on my body. I don't know if anyone knew that that's what I was feeling. Because I would just, I thought, "This is what I have to do." Like this is a serious thing. And I need to show up for her because she's not doing well, she's not in a good place.

KAITLYN: And then when I would talk to her mom, in a lot of ways, I felt like she was asking me what to do or if they were making good choice, you know, the right choice. And of course, back then it was just, you know, we will see what's available to us through our insurance providers. And we're going to look into this. And we're going to choose a good facility, and read reviews and talk to professionals. And I know they were doing all of that I wasn't doing the pieces of trying to find a good place. But I know that they were doing that together. But I think that they would reach out to me and talk to me for support maybe or just still keep me involved. But I think I kind of conceptualized my role in that as someone who needed to be really brave and really positive. And I had to

kind of put into practice what I had said I believed to be true that, you know, hope was real and that there was hope for this.

KAITLYN: So I thought like, I think a lot of me thought this is going to be a blip in her story. And this is what we do when someone struggles and then they're, they get better like then they're safe. And we're good. Because there was such a like sense of security when she went into inpatient treatment, it was like, she's somewhere safe. There's people watching her; she's doing the hard work. She's protected, we can't even talk to her most days, like she's, she's going to be good. Like, this is what she does. And, and I knew about relapse, and I knew about all that stuff kind of conceptually, but to actually walk through someone, or with someone, through a situation where they go into treatment, they discharge, and they have great things, everyone has great things to say about them. I had even driven down and visited her in her treatment facility. And everyone, of course, because of the person she was, it was like everyone loved her and she was a bright light to everyone. And everyone wanted...she had she had all these like conversations with everybody in her treatment facility. And I just, I kept thinking like this is, we're going to be good. Like, she's gonna go through treatment, and then we're good. We're gonna be on the other side of it. We're going to be in the clear.

[music playing]

If you are a survivor of suicide loss, or you support someone who is, we encourage you to join us on Saturday, November 23 for International Survivors of Suicide Loss Day. You can participate by simply reaching out to friends or family. But you can also find a Survivors of Suicide Loss Day event in your community by visiting our friends at American Foundation for Suicide Prevention at their website: afsp.org.

And if you live in and around the Knoxville, Tennessee, area, we invite you to join TWLOHA for a free event at the Parkwest Medical Center. TWLOHA founder Jamie Tworowski will be speaking, alongside suicide loss survivors. The event is free to attend and will run from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. We encourage you to RSVP for the event at our website: twloha.com/events.

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LINDSAY: And so if it's okay to kind of touch a little bit more then about kind of going in that timeline, like, she goes to treatment, and she finishes treatment, and comes out. And what was like that immediate season like leading up to her death?

KAITLYN: So she, you know, graduated from the program, and she entered a Narcotics Anonymous and Alcoholics Anonymous, just like a kind of community in, you know, to celebrate recovery, just all the recovery opportunities that are, tend to be available locally, like the 12-step program. So I know she was in outpatient. I think she was seeing a therapist and having meds managed if those were involved, I believe, and yeah, so she was she was, attempting to reenter the job world a little bit. Because, you know, she had been in college and taking medical leave. I think she started to navigate 'what does life look like next,' like, I think I need to get a job, I'm going to be home with my family for a little while.

KAITLYN: And so yeah, she and I would chat pretty regularly. And I drove down a couple of times, or over, a couple of times, to attend like an open meeting, which means that they are open to people who are not, who don't identify as someone who struggles with addiction. So sometimes you can bring a family member or a friend. So I showed up a couple of those times to meetings with her and they weren't open, they were closed. So I just sat in my car while she was in a meeting. And then we would chat about afterward, like, what she was learning and we would kind of celebrate, like you have, you know, this many days sober. This is awesome.

KAITLYN: And so, um, yeah, I had such a had so much hope, like, Look at us. Now. Let's her now like, she went into treatment. She's X number of days sober. She's hopeful about the future. And there came, so the timeline comes up to the month of May, and she comes down to visit me at work and where I'm living, or, you know, you and I were roommates at the time. And I introduced her to my boyfriend who's brand new, and that's exciting. And when she was visiting me on that trip, um, I don't know the exact number of days. I think it was a week before she died. But in hindsight, I see all of the, all of the interactions as like her way of kind of saying goodbye to me, and I didn't have any sense of awareness that that was going on. But I still saw these behaviors like addictive behavior that would pop up.

KAITLYN: Like, I walked in and I saw her, like, using something that like wasn't, it wasn't like, an illicit substance. It wasn't alcohol, it was just, you know, 'oh, I didn't know you like smoke cigarettes. I didn't know you had like tobacco...' or just these things that felt hidden. So I started seeing things that I would bump into her. She's like, kind of casually asked me, "Hey, you want to go buy me pack of cigarettes?" And I was like, "Okay, I didn't. Sure. I guess." You know? And so I would have these kind of moments where things he know when you you walk up to someone or you find someone and something feels like it was supposed to be hidden? I had some of those moments with her that didn't feel very truthful, and I can't explain it other than you just get that sense

like something isn't...there isn't a lot of honesty here in like the way I've, I'm with you. Yeah, the week before she died, there were these like statements about wanting to meet the guy I was dating and...She had this really happy, hopeful sense about her. But it was more out of the blue, which I now know is a warning sign, which is a tricky one because you, when someone's doing well, you want to feel relief, right? But when they're suddenly doing well, that's not necessarily a good thing. And that wasn't a good thing with Brittany.

KAITLYN: And so, um, I don't know the exact timeline. But I learned later that her mom said that, prior to her death, like she had stopped taking her antidepressants. And so yeah, the days leading up to her death, I wasn't with her. I had visited her a week prior and things felt really good. You know, she said, things were great. Things were going really well. But I did see some of those habits interactions with her. I had, I didn't, I didn't want to ask the question like, "Oh, why are you doing that?" or "Why does this feel kind of like, shameful? Why are we interacting this way?" That doesn't really feel like something, you're asking me to keep a secret, but nonverbally, you know? So I had some of those weird interactions. And I didn't want to call them to light; I didn't want them to be...I don't think I wanted to see what I was seeing, too.

LINDSAY: Tell me a little bit about how you learned of Brittany's death?

KAITLYN: I was at work on a Friday. And I received a text message from her mom, that indicated that they didn't know where she was. And I had an immediate sense of the severity of the situation. But of course, because I was, like, my default mode in that time was: this is gonna, we're going to be hopeful, we're going to see this through. So I had this challenge in my mind that day at work to, you know, finish the work day, and have this like sense of, "Hey, we don't know where she is." That was alarming, but I don't think I wanted to give into the reality of that.

KAITLYN: I just wanted to get through my day I wanted, I didn't want to sit and wonder and worry, because she wasn't picking up my calls. She wasn't responding to my texts either. And I didn't want to sit in that I wanted to move over, I don't know, I just wanted to kind of move through the day. So I got through the work day, and she still hadn't been communicated with, with anyone in her family. And I left work and I was driving home. And I had one of the only times that I can really account for my life where I feel like I heard, like, the voice of God or I had like a presence where I feel like I really had a sense of, like, clarity. And I had this kind of sense in my spirit, I guess, is the way to say it. And I had a, just this, this recognition that she had died. And, and I was told, you know, or at least I felt inside myself, like, "She has died. It's going to be okay. Her

family's going to be okay, but she's not here.” And that’s all I had and, and so I thought, “Okay, well, I have a profound sense now that she's gone. Her mom doesn't know where she is. I don't know where she is. My family doesn't know where she is, she's not responding to any of us.” But I, but I had a sense of peace that it was, it was weird. It's like I knew something was wrong, but I didn't know the information yet. So I just kind of sat in an unknown space. And I tried to keep going through my day, which was such a difficult process to go about.

KAITLYN: And so I had my boyfriend at the time, who is now my husband, he was on his way back from a trip and I...And he just showed up at my house. Like, he just came back early and hadn't told me he was coming back but showed up and said, “Hey, I think I need to show up today.” And I was like, “Okay, well, that's crazy. Because we can't find Brittany. And I'm pretty concerned. I think she's not here. I don't think she's around. I think she's in trouble.” And so we left the house, and we went to the beach, and we walked and I was so, I don't know what was going on. I was high strung. So I was talking a lot, I was talking really fast. I was not really feeling grounded in my body. We ate donuts and that didn't help because, like, I had a ton of sugar. And then we texted some friends and said, “Hey, let's meet up. Let's have some dinner.” And so we kind of went from one thing to the other because we had nothing else to do. We just had to keep going through the day.

KAITLYN: And we ended up at one of my coworker’s homes late at night. And Lindsay was with me, actually. And we showed up and we're hanging out on the back patio and in the backyard. And I got a phone call from her mom, or her mom's phone anyway. And I picked up the phone and it wasn't the voice of her mom, it was the voice of a friend of mine who I grew up going to church with. So when I heard another completely random person's voice on her mom's, on the line, other side of the phone where her mom’s, you know, voice should have been, I immediately knew that something had happened. And she said, “Kaitlyn, I'm sorry, you know, that Brittany is gone. And she's gone to be with the Lord.” Or she says something like that, like, “She's not here. And I'm sorry.” And my mind heard that as like, “Oh, I think she's tried to overdose and she's in the hospital.” Like I tried to process it like, “Oh, no, she, she tried this again. She's done this before. And she's fine. Like they found her somewhere. Maybe she wasn't responsive. But she's she's getting help” is kind of what I heard.

KAITLYN: And I had to ask her again, I said, “you know, well, what happened?” And I don't, you know, I don't want to become too specific. Just because I don't want people to be triggered. It ended up involving an overdose. But it was something a little more lethal

as far as how she ended up dying. When I found when I heard that news, it just did not register with me. I like fell to the ground. I don't remember if I was screaming or crying.

KAITLYN: I think people who are around me said they thought I was laughing because I just was making noises. I was responding, like, from the core of me. And I genuinely don't really know. But I have a memory of like watching myself outside of my body, like laying on the grass and crying I guess or screaming or whatever I might have been doing. And I might have been repeating something like "No" or "I can't believe this." I don't know. I just can't really remember what happened. But some friends came to my side and sat with me. And I told them what happened. And I really quickly I think went into shock. So I was driven home and all my friends worked alongside me to tell me like we need to pack some bags. You're going to go home to Jacksonville. You're going to get in the car, and we're going to get you there and I just kind of nodded and said, "OK, like, this is what I do. Now I go home, I think I'm going to go home now to my family. I think that's what I'm supposed to do next. I don't, I don't really know. But I think that's the next step." So it's just it's very hard to remember what it really felt like, because it was almost like watching myself find that out.

LINDSAY (narration): As Kaitlyn moved through shock and the early stages of grief, she quickly realized that she would need more support if she was going to be able to navigate life after this loss. She began to look for a grief counselor and other support groups.

KAITLYN: Shortly after her death, I started seeing a grief counselor. And I remember talking to him about her. And I don't even remember the way he phrased it exactly. But he said something to the effect of, like this demanded, she had a really big personality and a really big presence. And, and what, like an all encompassing experience this was for you, like, you got sucked into this experience. And you were, yeah, like, engulfed in it. Like this has covered how you wake up every day or how you go through your day; you think about this all the time. And you're still processing her, you know, her loss, or her death, has now left you with more space to think about this all the time. And he really acknowledged, it was, I don't even know, like when he said that, to me, it felt completely out of left field. Because I just shared like, who she was and how we tried to get her help and all this stuff. And then the first thing he says to me is like, "Wow, this is a lot you're doing." I had never had anyone respond to me like that, like, this is taking every ounce of your mental capacity and the way you go through your day and the kinds of things you feel you need to go through and the way you have to think about her death now, even so. You know, this is just a lot for you to have to carry. And it was really profound for me to think about how it impacted me.

KAITLYN: I think it was the first time I started thinking about oh, wow, what, who? What did I need during some of that time? And how was I coping or maybe not coping very well during the chaos, addiction and her depression really coming to a head.

KAITLYN: I don't know which one came first, I, because, you know, luckily, I knew some resources that maybe some people don't know, I connected through the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, AFSP, and I found like local chapters of survivors of suicide groups. And so when I was back at school, or ultimately when I returned to school after losing Brittany in order to complete my, my, my training and my, my graduate program to become a clinician.

KAITLYN: Yeah, I knew the context. And like the material I was learning was really, it had a real experience attached to it so I knew I needed to take care of myself. And I knew that I would read chapters in my textbook, and we talked about suicide, or we talked about, like, pretty severe depression or other areas in mental health that were really difficult, but they had her, they were attached to her, you know, and my experience. So I sought to, to just sit in a space that was neutral with people who were like me, and you know, even that it's amazing how much you have to fight against, or really equip yourself to challenge your feeling of like either of stigma and inadequacy because again, I'm showing up in these groups. And I was always the only person in the group who had lost a friend to suicide.

KAITLYN: I was sitting with mothers who had lost children, and spouses who had lost, you know, husband or wife, or a child who lost the parent. And I never encountered someone who had lost a friend, it was like a relative, it was always someone who was like a blood relative. Or someone who was like a part of, you know, a nuclear family. And so I had to really fight through that. I had to show up and say, "I know I need this, this I'm, this is real for me too." She felt very much like a sister to me, this was a loss and even if she hadn't felt like a sister, this was something I needed to navigate. So I showed up anyway, and I did my best to contribute. But I did have to really fight against that, like internal voice, like, "Why are you here? You know, this isn't, this is not that big of a deal for you." And it is. It's so, it's a big deal. So I found relief that way. And just early, early on. I mean, I called like a local Hospice, I didn't know where to go, I just was like, where are grief counselors, I guess, at Hospice.

KAITLYN: And they were more than glad to sit with me, they were incredibly helpful to sit with me during those times. But I had, I had previously established with an outpatient, you know, like a counselor as well. So I saw her for a few times, really saw a

couple of different resources. Anywhere I went, I tried to set myself up with someone. So I'd already have all established relationships in case things got really tough. And I'm glad that I did because it really helped me navigate a lot of those feelings. It didn't allow me to repress them, and kind of move through them and really experience what comes after you lose someone because so much happens. It's like a marked point of it before and after. And it's all new.

LINDSAY: Yeah. Can you talk a little bit more then about...I'm just wondering, like, how has that grieving process changed? Because I do think, you know, you get the sense, or just as maybe anybody experiencing grief, like, the first year they say is the hardest, and people are kind of checking in and showing up. But I'm just kind of wondering, like, for the people who are wondering, like, what comes after you get through just that utter hell of a year. You know, like, what comes after that? And like, I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about maybe milestones or how things change or don't change or like what you've had to kind of think about in those seasons?

KAITLYN: So the first year, some people call it the year of firsts. And that's, it can be, it's obviously significant things like major holidays, that people's birthday, but it was also these little things. The first year after she died, I would walk out of my house and see a bird building a nest on a branch and start to cry because I, it was like, the changing of a season like spring like time is moving on. Seasons are changing. Birds are building nests in a tree. I mean, it just sounds so...not ridiculous, but it does sound so interesting and unique that something like that can just devastate you for an afternoon because you see life happening around you.

KAITLYN: And there's there are these little moments that remind you that there is not life for this person anymore. And it just hits you in the gut. So the first year is a lot of gut punches. It's a lot of, "Hey, I need to step away from work. Or I might need to step away from this thing I said I would attend or I might need a minute to compose myself." It's important to tell people like I might become sad, at the drop of a hat. And I'm going to need a minute to, to maybe either step away for the evening or for the day, or to compose myself or to talk about this. And so I had to ask for space; I had to ask for help a lot that first year. It helped for people to be aware when major things were coming. So letting them know, "Hey, her birthday is this day, this is the day she died, these things are going to be harder for me I think," and you kind of get a sense of dread or fear or nervousness or whatever it might be, sadness, as it closes in on that time period. And then you move through that first thing. And it's the first time without them. And so you kind of go little by little through the first year.

KAITLYN: And I would say that for me, the first three years had a lot of that, like, had a lot of that sense of anticipation leading up to every big date, every marked date that had felt that way, the year prior I kind of knew and they were coming, you just kind of feel it in your body, it's coming, it's coming, I don't know how I'm going to react. Will I be sad? Will I not? So it's really takes a lot of your time takes a lot of your mental energy. And then the years that went beyond like I would say after your four or five, I could approach some of those days, probably better know how to better equip myself, surround myself with the way I needed, the kind of support I needed on that day, or either stay busy or the opposite, cancel my plans. Like I knew how to really, I had some life experience to go off of so I knew what I might need to feel. And I might know, and I knew they might it might change. So I became more comfortable talking about those things and asking for what I needed. And then as the years went on, yeah, as we're closing in on 10 years, people begin to know that that's your story if you, if you let them into part of the healing process for you. And so then you're invited into spaces of...to console others, or at least to share what that's like to help somebody else. And so you're given that opportunity and you can take that or not take that. And so for me, I've really found comfort in being an advocate for someone who is navigating loss or a hard time.

KAITLYN: And not just professionally, there's a way to do that. But I like doing that as a friend. I like doing that just as I am. And to be able to respond without watching my face or just be with them in a moment, it's been really beautiful actually to like to go through other hard times in my life and to choose vulnerability or transparency in the midst of them instead of feeling like it's something that's a shame, like shameful, or you have to hide it, I've just chosen to be open with struggles. And that's opened me up to other people feeling safe to approach me. So I would say that over time, and almost a decade later, I am honored to be someone who people recommend like, "Oh, if you're dealing with this, you need to talk to Kaitlyn because she knows what it feels like. She knows what grief is like. And she's, she's just willing to sit with you in it and talk about it and, and not have to try to wrap it up for you in a neat little bow." Because sometimes it just sucks. You know? Sometimes you just have to have someone say "This sucks. This is really hard. This is hell." But to let you know that there's hope ahead and like it doesn't look the same for everybody.

LINDSAY: How do you feel like the experience of being like a survivor, I think that term survivor of suicide is one that's kind of hard for people to one understand just like any, like, just kind of the term survivor and but I wonder what you like how you've understood why that term is used?

KAITLYN: Sure, I agree. I think that because of so many other illnesses that have the survivor term attached to them, it seems to indicate that the actual person who struggled and made it to the other side or is quote unquote battling something or journeying through or whatever language people like to wrap around, especially if you talk about something like cancer. If you are someone who has gone through breast cancer, for example, and come out the other side of a diagnosis or have a period of chemotherapy or what have you. And there's you're seen as a survivor, right? And when it comes to suicide, the term survivor of suicide loss, I think, is really the, is the term that is most commonly used and or a survivor of a suicide attempt. And so there can be like an indication made for many people involved in that circle of just the way that it touches so many people in a very unique way. So, personally, being someone who's a survivor of suicide, you're left with the, you're left with the questions. And you're left with having to navigate what you do, what, what comes next. Like you are surviving, you're, you're in the wake of this experience.

KAITLYN: Whether you happen to know about it before their death, or you were completely unaware of the struggle before someone did die by suicide. In the wake of someone's death, you're left with so many questions and versions, that you have to navigate with yourself. And it's really the beginning of it's the beginning of a journey that you can really choose to surrender to or you can choose to be angry, or have a really, a response that feels really permanent, and honestly prevents you from moving through that experience into a place that's healthy and really helpful. In order to process what really happened for you, because you're, as a survivor, it's like this was a real thing that you are intimately you are wrapped up in. And if you feel anger, but choose to just feel the anger and just sit in the anger, you will be angry, potentially, for years. And to not let that anger, serve its purpose and be honored and ask yourself why you're feeling it. I don't know, I just I've known so many people on the other side of a suicide loss, who, because they don't really want to admit that they were part, that that it impacted them too, have come up with come up against a lot of challenges personally in being able to move through that experience and be able to find purpose in it for themselves. If that makes sense.

LINDSAY: So not only are you facing grief, like a tremendous loss, you're kind of also battling, or maybe battling against, like, sort of the stigma that surrounds a death. And I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about, how maybe you faced it? Or did you did that ever come up in this situation?

KAITLYN: Yes, so much, especially in, at least personally speaking, in the communities of faith. And in light of ever-present example after example of leaders in the Christian

church or in various areas of like religious influence, that also personally struggle. I mean, stigma is, it's everywhere. And so not only do you have to grieve the loss of someone you loved, and you happen to have like a more keen insight on them, who may have known them, not everyone, but you know, their family and their closest friends, you have a perspective of the struggle that is a little more raw, a little more intimate, because you happen to be privileged to kind of sit with them through the painful moments. So not only are you navigating the loss of who that person really, really, truly was, and really knowing what they're up against. And really feeling like this was really tough for them.

KAITLYN: This struggle, felt like too much to carry. And I understand the choice, whether, I don't agree with it, but I understand whether this was well thought out or impulsive or whatever, but the ache and the desire for it to end, I understand how real that is. But then to battle people's comments, or to weather the comments of people who don't know what to say so they try to say what they think they need to say. And but it's wrapped in this, like, it's wrapped up in, in stigma. And it's, it's like to try to not blame, to try to not validate the reality of like someone's mental health concerns or the reality that mental illness plays in someone's life, to try to trivialize it or over spiritualize or undermine, like, we didn't try hard enough, or no one tried hard enough, or all of it, all of that stuff is so...It can feel so infuriating. For someone to approach you or me, someone approached me in a period of grief and I have, and I just found myself nodding my head, like, I'm hearing you talking to me, what you're saying is either profoundly insensitive, or and you don't even. And the thing is, is most people don't even know that they're being insensitive, because they don't, no one wants to show up and say, "I don't know what to say." I mean, I've even said that I don't even know I don't want to show up and not have something to say something, we come up with little things to say, like, that are so stupid. And then you have to be the person that is the recipient of these comments that sounds so stupid, and you're just tired.

KAITLYN: It just makes you tired. Because you're just so sad, and you miss them so much. And you're angry that it couldn't have been different. And you're angry that nobody knew how bad it really was, or whatever, so many so many things you didn't didn't pay attention to this thing, and you didn't see this as a sign and hindsight's 2020. So you're already just wrapped up in this overwhelming experience. But then the stigma is so real, everyone seems to have an opinion about why things ended the way they did. But I don't know, I feel like unless you really have a close relationship with that person, or an understanding of the reality and the difficulty of navigating suicidal thoughts. I just, I don't know, and you can't really, you also can't blame people for not knowing what they don't know, you know? I think people really do try to do their best. But without, without

trying to learn and trying to listen to one another. And still trying to have something to say it can be so harmful, you know?

KAITLYN: But time gives you a different vantage point. And it gives you different, like, real life experience to kind of test and weigh against your own fears or anxieties about what it could be when you move through them, you've got a little bit of like data to work with to know what something will really feel like, and it allows you to be that kind of bold person for somebody else to which is really great, I think.

LINDSAY (narration): Kaitlyn also shared a bit more about what she wished she had known when she was in the midst of finding ways to show up and be support of Brittany.

KAITLYN: I didn't know it was okay to scale back to care for myself or to know my own limitations. And so I would wake up with this feeling of, like, pressing, just weight of anxiety or weight of responsibility that anything I did, or anything that I did or didn't do, would have this like profound impact. When in reality, you know, a lot of I, you know, we just try, those of us who are with someone, a family member or a friend, who are struggling with suicide, we have, like, a limitation in what we can do. And that's not something that's hopeless, it's actually something that's hopeful, because we, we can do the best that we can do. And we can do what we know how to do at the time.

KAITLYN: If we're brave enough, to show up with our whole self, or just what we know and who we are, and we can show them the impact that it might have on us as well, I think that that is more helpful than trying to put on a brave face and think you have to be the one to solve it. Because you really, it's not a responsibility for you to carry; it's not a weight that you need to be bearing. And it's more destructive for you personally, and as ultimately, possibly as a suicide survivor, or someone who loses someone to suicide, if you have had that identity that you've owned, like this is your job to fix or your responsibility alone, then the impact of someone's death would, could crush you. So there's just this such an awareness that we are, we all have limitations, we all have a responsibility to be honest and to own what we're feeling at the time and to be genuine in our expression of care or love. And really, that's that is a good gift to give to someone. Even to say, "I don't know, I don't know what to say right now. I don't know, I'm not even sure what I'm feeling, but I'm feeling scared." All of that is more valuable than trying to say the right thing or trying to be a version of someone that you're not, I think.

LINDSAY: When you go back to who you became in that season, like do you have a sense of what tools like you thought you had?

KAITLYN: So what I didn't have at the time that I now have, is a personal awareness and experience with someone wrestling with a really hard question that feels scary and dark and is honest. Back then I had heard countless stories of people who are struggling, but to have someone you know and love, in real time telling you that this is their current reality. I had to, well, I didn't have to, but I didn't understand the severity of what that is for someone. And I didn't also understand the transience or like time, that it has a time in which it feels that way. And that it ebbs and flows.

KAITLYN: I thought that it was going to be like a thing that was a period of time, and it would never happen again. Or that we could, I don't know, I don't know what I what I knew. But I just thought that if we could just say the right thing, or if I could just do the right thing. And I, but I didn't want to really sit in it, like I tried to be present with her in it. But now I have such I have a greater confidence to really meet someone in that place. And know that talking about it, even though it's scary, is so helpful. And so beneficial because we have a greater understanding of what's really happening, you have a greater ability to walk with them alongside them to the help that they need, rather than feeling like you're kind of temporarily putting a bandaid on it, because we talked about it, I personally feel better, they must feel better. I mean, it's the truth, creating a space where truth can really come out is so valuable. And I didn't know how to sit in the hard, in the thick of it. At the time, I don't think I really knew how to sit with it and not be really terrified by it.

LINDSAY: I want to ask you a question that we kind of end up normally asking at the end of sort of our time together. And you've touched a little bit on it. But if you are sitting with somebody, or if you want to talk directly now to somebody who was kind of in that place, whether it's the first year or second year, or third year after a loss, like, what would you say to them as a way to encourage them to continue fighting for their own story in the midst of this loss? What might you say?

KAITLYN: I really thought about, because I know you ask this question, I wanted to just know what to say. And there are so many things I would say, but one of the biggest things I will say to you, if you're in this season right now, if you've weathered, like a loss of a loved one by suicide, or you're in the thick of not knowing what's going to happen with somebody really profoundly struggling, all of that is painful. And I would like to say that, I promise you that as you continue to live your life and as you continue to honor the person you love, the amount of pain you feel will lessen, you will, you will always be aware of that pain. And you'll always be, you will always reserve a place of love for that person, but the way that it feels all encompassing or overwhelming, or like that's all you can think about will not be that way forever.

KAITLYN: And that it is worth you taking the time to take stock of what you feel. Not letting yourself feel what you're really feeling makes this process longer than it needs to be. Not that you ever move through it and not that it ever goes away. But it's so much harder to hold tightly to anger, or frustration, or sadness without really asking yourself, you know, specifically what makes you sad, what you're sad about, what you're angry about, or honoring that you are angry. Refusing to ask questions and be kind of curious about what you feel makes this so much harder. And it can feel scary to look fear or anger in the face, in your own life, and, and really ask what that is for and what purpose it's serving. But there is freedom on the other side. And there's a deeper sense of who you are actually on the other side, too. So it's not, the closeness of the pain is not forever. And the way that it feels like it's arrested, has arrested your own life, or stopped you in your tracks is not forever. So waking up every day, and being present to what you feel and moving through that is it feels like a lot and it is a lot, but it's not forever. And it does change over time. And it does add value. This experience that you've had adds a lot of value to your own life; it can be made purposeful. It can, there can be beauty on the other side of something like this actually. And yeah, there's there's just a lot of hope around it. Even if you don't feel it. There's a lot of hope there.

LINDSAY: Kaitlyn, thank you so much for sharing that. I think the things you've shared are really honest, and like a really healthy way to look at something that feels impossible. It just feels impossible to move through something so significant as the loss of someone you care so deeply about. So thank you so much for taking the time to be here today. Thank you for sharing your story. And yeah.

[music playing]

LINDSAY: We know these things can be hard to talk about, which is why we'd like to thank Kaitlyn Partin again for sharing her story with us today. If you've lost someone to suicide, we hope this conversation made you feel less alone. We also hope this episode will encourage you to open up to someone in your life so you're not walking through this by yourself.

LINDSAY: To find additional resources for survivors of suicide loss, we encourage you all to visit our friends at American Foundation for Suicide Prevention. Their website is afsp.org. And if you need to connect with somebody right now, please know you can always text our friends at Crisis Text Line. Text the word TWLOHA (T W L O H A) to 741741. You'll get connected to a crisis counselor. It's free and available 24/7.

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

[music playing]

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LINDSAY: A big thank you to our friends at Copeland for the original music on this episode. The To Write Love on Her Arms podcast is produced by Mark Codgen, with editorial support by Claire Biggs and Rebecca Ebert. Music assistance was provided by James Likeness and Ben Tichenor. I'm Lindsay Kolsch. Thank you so much for listening.

[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. You can find more information about To Write Love on Her Arms at twloha.com.