

Episode 208: "Mental Health & The Holidays: It's Okay to Feel Something Other Than Joy"

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

CHAD MOSES: I think the only way to do the holiday season wrong is to go through it believing that you are utterly alone. Cause I can guarantee with 7 billion people on the planet, there's someone out there that knows your same anxieties, that knows your same questions, that can smile at the same things that, that make you smile.

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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'll 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: Hey friends, this is Lindsay Kolsch. This week people across the U.S. will gather around a shared meal to give thanks. But, we know that this time of year is especially difficult for so many people. It's a time when both joy and pain are amplified, and we were curious what was weighing on your mind and what challenges you needed support in facing. So, we asked you, our supporters, to share your thoughts about the holidays with us on Instagram. We received a wide range of topics and things that you wanted us to explore. So today, I invited Chad Moses, TWLOHA's Director of Outreach and Experience, to join me for an open conversation about these topics. We'll tackle themes like boundaries, loss, and how to navigate this complicated season. We that you're going to find comfort in knowing that however you feel about the holidays or the hurdles they may bring, that you are not alone.

[music playing]

LINDSAY: Welcome Chad.

CHAD: It's good to be back. It's a, it's fitting. I'm coming off of the time of extended travel and, uh, I think one thing that we think of often when it comes to the holidays is more anxieties surrounding more travel and what does it look like to uproot your life even just for a week at a time or a couple of days at a time. And, I think so much of it, about the holidays that is

welcome is that it's a change of pace. But so much of the difficulty is that it's another change of pace.

LINDSAY: Yeah. There's so much going on. Um, the day that this or the week rather that the episode is going to come out, it will actually be Thanksgiving in America. And from there it seems to be this sort of cascade of events that a lot of people feel like they get kind of sucked into. And so with that, we put it to our Instagram followers, like, what are the big themes? What are the things that are worrying you? What are the things that make you anxious? And so we've got so many awesome responses. I think the thing that stood out to me was the commonalities among a lot of people's responses. And so I do feel as much as there's a lot of hard stuff kind of in the mix with loss and dealing with mental health or dealing with, you know, maybe toxic relationships in your life.

LINDSAY: There was maybe some comfort to be found in that. Um, we're kind of all going through this, you know, I think every person has a different experience of the holidays or what holidays even mean to them. Uh, but at the top of the list, it was family dynamics. Um, then there's conversations about dealing with your mental health, as well as relating to how you communicate that to family. There's the harder topic: grief, missing loved ones. We had a lot of folks talking about being a survivor of suicide loss and what that meant around holidays. There's other things, Thanksgiving coming up, a big conversation with a lot of our supporters is disordered eating and eating disorders and how Thanksgiving kind of directly confronts that for them and how that shapes their experience of that holiday.

LINDSAY: But there are other things like trauma. And then some other good things, you know, like we want to get to sort of the meat of like what would it look like to kind of reframe these experiences and kind of go into them with some tools or with some ideas and ways to kind of support our own experience and kind of create that experience that will ultimately support us and each other. So I think where I'd like to start today and where it really was, I think the majority of the responses we got was this topic of family dynamics. Um, I'm actually coming back just now from a weekend with family. And so I had a bit of a, a taste of this, you know, it's not often that I get to see my extended family up there in the panhandle of Florida and we were gathering together for my grandmother's 91st birthday and we got to see, I got to see people I don't see often.

LINDSAY: And I was just reminded how if you're not doing life with people, sometimes it's, it's shocking or surprising that you're like kind of navigating different personalities very quickly. And what stuck out on this trip was normally it might just be the, "Hey, how are you?" And kind of given the quick update. But for me, I was surprised when I ended up asking an uncle of mine, just a question that I never asked him before about how he got into a specific trade. And he told me one of the most beautiful stories and I thought, 'Oh my gosh, like I, I, it's literally been 20 years you've been doing this trade. And I never once knew that about you.' And I thought, what a special experience for me. So going into maybe even the holidays coming up, I'm now thinking like, 'Oh, what, what could be my role in changing my experience of being

around people I don't see,' what could be my, the thing that actually adds value in a time that can kind of feel like, 'Oh, I don't know, I don't feel comfortable here.

LINDSAY: I feel stressed out about the downtime or I feel stressed out about the different relationships and how they interact and some of that.' And so that kind of primed me when I thought about our conversation to be thinking about that. But I think maybe going back to the harder part of that, we had a lot of people talking about boundaries. And I wondered if, if that's something you've faced dealing with boundaries and maybe even defining that. I think maybe we could start there like boundaries. I believe we had people saying like, people who asked too much or needed more from someone that they couldn't offer, the expectations. So I think when we talk about boundaries, I think what we'll be talking about is kind of feeling like you don't have a choice or feeling like you don't have control over what you experience or how you experience things.

CHAD: Yeah. I'm glad you unpacked that a little bit because that issue of control dynamics certainly came to mind even through the story that you're sharing with, with your uncle. So I think you brought up a, a really beautiful example and talking about how you found a new way to interact with a family member that has been part of your life for quite some time, maybe not on a frequent or consistent basis, but you found a new way not to control a conversation but rather welcome someone into a different sense of control for conversations. I feel like so often, you know, we're raised with this expectation that we can't talk about spirituality and we can't talk about politics and maybe that's for the best in certain circumstances, but I feel like those are inevitable pieces of conversation and thereby inevitable pieces of anxiety at any family gathering. We live in a day and an age where often you don't see or the people that you're sharing a meal with during the holidays is likely something different than, than the group of people you're sharing a meal with every other Monday through Friday kind of deal. I know that's the case for me. If you are a student at a college or university, that's certainly the case for you. Even if you are a student in high school, you aren't eating lunch with your parents, right? You're eating lunch with other groups of peers, of family that you choose, so to speak.

CHAD: So I think finding ways to honor our differences is important. But I think it's also important to find ways to learn and acknowledge, you know, different forms of, of common ground that we stand on. Um, To Write Love on Her Arms, we do it all the time by making kind of micro conversations. What's your biggest fear? What's your greatest dream? Where are you now? Is this where you thought you'd be five years ago? Is this where you want to be five years from now? I think there's a lot to be said about finding new ways to have conversations that challenge our, our normal. Your uncle probably doesn't think about his history on how he wound up in that job every single day. But man, what a gift to be able to walk through some of those memories.

LINDSAY: I would say for me there was a moment where I was like, 'Oh, how did you get into that?' And he goes, 'that's a long story.' I said, 'okay, tell me like, I'd love to hear it.' You know, I think it was even that simple. I did ask a question, but I could tell he would maybe not share

more if I didn't express interest in it. But I do wonder, let's go the flip side of that. There could be our ability to maybe pose the questions, be sort of taking ownership of the way we want to have conversations and what we want to talk about. But what on the flip side of where maybe those topics that you're not comfortable discussing, like how would you, how do you think somebody could help reorient or re navigate or set a boundaries? So, you know, that's actually something I'm probably just not comfortable talking about right now. I mean, is it that simple or is there, is there more to kind of work with?

CHAD: Well, I don't think that the heat of the moment is the right time to set that boundary. That can be the right time to react in a way that's conducive to self-care. But I think, uh, the benefit of having this conversation now in this podcast room and, um, you know, in the lead up to a Turkey Day dinner is, is that you can start to imagine how a conversation might unfold. This is a great time to enlist a sort of ally that's not someone that is going to a defacto agree with every opinion that you hold. People are nuanced. There's so many ways to look at so few issues out there. But I think finding someone that agrees with you saying, 'look, if we only have eight hours to spend together, let's not allow something divisive to, to take away from the joy of the moment of sharing the space together.'

CHAD: So can we parents, siblings, extended family agree, at the outset that, you know, we're going to avoid these pieces of conversation, that we're gonna in a sense, kinda change the channel of the conversation when certain topics are broached. Can you respect the limited amount of time that we have together enough that we find new, unique, more exciting modes of conversation. Can we take this time, not just to repeat something that we've already said, but can we take this time to break some new ground? And perhaps even learn something about each other.

LINDSAY: Yeah. I do love the idea of coming armed with like five questions you kind of wish you knew about the people in your family. So it may be something you don't, you'd like, what's, what's the best book you've ever read? What's the best film you've ever seen? If you're interested in something, what could be some ways to connect and make authentic connections with family members that have nothing to do with things that give you anxiety or give you, kind of just make you socially anxious. You know, like if it's something you're passionate about, you're probably going to enjoy the conversation a little bit more. I feel like that's something that is lost often in the catch-ups of the, and this kind of connects to the next theme that we were actually we heard a lot was the idea of these comparisons. So you're, you're gathering after possibly a whole year and life can look a lot different in that one year, but you might be gathering with people in, you know, your cousins or people who are in similar life stages or just families who may have specific ideas about where you should be in your life.

LINDSAY: And so this idea of when I'm with family, all I can think about are the comparisons that are either being put on me or the comparisons I'm using against the people in the room sort of thing. And so I wonder then, how do you, how do you approach leaving that out of the room? How do you, how do you kick that guest out of the conversation?

CHAD: That guest being this environment of comparison. Hot take incoming. Uh, this entire season in my mind exists for two purposes. Comparison and compensation, that there's a reason in North America and particularly in the States that we don't have many holidays in the summer. We have our independence day. I can't name anything that happens in August. Uh, why is that? But as we pass that optimal Equinox and as we approach the shortest and darkest day of the year, being that nether region between December 21st and 22nd.

CHAD: I think as a society, I think as a human race, we've had this needs to find something to celebrate in the midst of the darkest and coldest parts of the year. We've needed reasons to physically gather together to keep each other warm through remembrance or just through physical proximity to survive this time. And I think unfortunately over the years, minds much smarter and more devious than mine have found this opportunity to come together as a chance to distance ourselves from other people that we collect in our own family units. And we say, 'Well, at least we don't look like that family. At least we don't look like this family.' And you know, I think that's a false dichotomy that it's my way or the other people's way. But at some level you have to acknowledge that this holiday season has been radically commercialized. That it's easy to say—

LINDSAY: The sales start sooner.

CHAD: You know, but at the, if you take a step back and see the origin stories of these holidays that were coming together, it was always in response to a conflict. For my Jewish friends and family with Hanukkah, this holiday came out of, a sense of lack, you know, a battle was just had.

CHAD: And now do we believe that we're capable of carrying on with life as normal, even if we don't have all the tools to carry on. A community came together and said, 'yeah, now we have Hanukkah.' When you look at the nativity story, you have a family who by governmental decree has to leave the rest of their friends and family, go back to a home that they've never called home and somehow find community with some other strangers. When you look at a more naturalistic faiths, uh, when we identify the winter solstice as a turning point that, look, y'all, we've already survived the declining of days and now is when they start to get a little bit longer. These are all coming from this framework of lack of missing something, of wanting something better and working together to find that solution. So, that sense of comparison.

CHAD: This is not a reason to kind of shame yourself and saying, 'man, like it sucks that I feel this low when other people feel so, uh, so happy or, or vice versa. Like how can I feel so happy when other people feel so low?' I think this is a time for honesty, this is a time for taking an inventory and honest look at what we have, what we can share and the people that we can invite into that both for commiseration and for, for celebration. I think the only way to do the holiday season wrong is to go through it believing that you are utterly alone. Cause I can guarantee with 7 billion people on the planet, there's someone out there that knows your same

anxieties, that knows your same questions, that can smile at the same things that, that make you smile. And it doesn't mean it's always going to be the most evident. But I think you can take some solace in knowing that, uh, this is a season where the days will start to get longer. This is a season where, you can celebrate with people that you choose to call family.

LINDSAY: Yeah. I mean, I think that goes to the boundaries piece and it speaks to the comparison piece. We had a lot of people say, 'I can't be with my family and I, I do wonder, or if I am with my family, what I'm noticing is it's not what I want it to be, you know?' And so instead of going into the comparison game, I think the reframing of, 'Hey, this is how it is, but what, what value can still find here? Or what joy can I still find here?' I think the quote is "comparison is the thief of joy." And so if there is any joy to be found or if there's any, um, let's say the absence of anxiety and sadness, then comparison has to kind of go away a little bit and you being comfortable to say, this is just where I am. Like you said, it's, uh, it's an honest moment if we let it be and how people respond to you, that's not your job to, to monitor or to appease people how they're going to respond. Your job may be is just to be honest with yourself to a degree you feel comfortable, you know, and, and with those around you. And that's kind of where the boundary lies, you know, that's maybe a way we protect our integrity of how we go into these days.

CHAD: Yeah, and I, I think perspective is important that these conversations naturally wind up in the theme of self-care. And there's nothing that Lindsay or I can say to be prescriptive in your life on how to practice self-care. That's something that deserves to be discovered in the presence of friends and family and counselors and what I do for self-care might look totally different than, than what you do. I'm, I'm certainly not a professional mental health counselor, I'm hardly on my best days a professional human adult. Uh, however I have learned that my holidays and my, my mundane days are going to be more healthy when I include other perspectives into it. People that helped me reframe what it is we're working through.

LINDSAY: Yeah. And I want to mention that we did hear from a good number of people who it's not even necessarily an issue of boundaries or maybe even comparisons, but it was these spaces felt unsafe whether it was for, um, sexual identity, gender identity or whatever the issue was. Maybe it's life choice in some other category. They just felt that these were not safe. And so I do want to speak to that a little bit and let people know that if, if you're in that situation, we want you to have an ally. You know, there are resources available and maybe it's as simple as who's, who's in your community that you can reach out to and kind of have a text message going back and forth to check in on each other. Who, who in your family could be that ally, if not everyone.

LINDSAY: You know? So I think just wanting to acknowledge that that is, I mean, that breaks our hearts, you know, like we, we wish that was not the case for whatever the situation is. But knowing that is very much the situation for so many of our audience members and supporters here. So I wonder, Chad, if you would have any other words of encouragement?

CHAD: As a white CIS, hetero male, I cannot begin to speak to the anxieties that, um, that my LGBTQ friends and family are feeling. Whether you were just about to start that drive to the airport or whether you are just curious about who you can call, where, where is safety to be found in, in a environment that perhaps historically has not been safe. The only way for me to address this is anecdotally and say that, uh, one of the chief reasons I'm still on this planet is because of my LGBTQ family. That these were people that showed up consistently for me. I needed you. And I hope that you find that same care, I hope that you can find people worthy of your trust to walk through this in a way that doesn't feel alone. I know that our friends in The Trevor Project are standing at the ready. I know that this is a period of time where you see an influx of calls. So you will not be the only one calling. You will not be the only one texting. And that is heartbreaking. Yet I hope that feels validating of your experience.

LINDSAY: Just reiterating The Trevor Project offers—just for anybody who doesn't know or isn't familiar with it—they offer a toll-free telephone number and they offer, that's the Trevor lifeline that you can call. And we'll make sure that those get in the show notes. But we really would encourage people that, um, you know, you don't have to go through the whole day before you contact them. You can call them in the morning or, or text in with them. But we do hope that people know there are resources if they don't know a physical person, they feel they can trust.

CHAD: Yeah. And I think if at any point you feel like your, uh, your emotional health or particularly your physical health is in danger, just because as a holiday does not mean you have to stay in a place that is unhealthy. So if, if that is a concern of yours going into the season, I'd encourage you to start doing the research now. Start reaching out to friends in your geographic community and maybe even your online community, um, maybe even your own personal social networks, uh, but find those safe now. And for those of you that can be safe places, announce yourself now. So friends and family that might be walking into some hard places.

LINDSAY: Yeah. That's awesome.

[music playing]

LINDSAY: This movement started out as small as something could, an attempt to help just one friend. And over the years, it's grown to become something that moves millions of people toward hope every year.

And as we stand back in amazement about what we've been able to accomplish together—we want to say thank you. **We want to thank each and everyone of you listening right now.** Yes, that's you. Thank you for helping us bring this conversation into the place where your story is lived out. Thank you for sharing this message on social media, thank you for wearing TWLOHA merch, thank you for donating your birthday on Facebook or becoming a fundraiser,

thank you for getting active in your community and sparking authentic conversations about mental health. You represented TWLOHA on college campuses, in your workplace, in your community, and with the people you love like your friends and family.

You believed with us that help is real. This year, we were able to sponsor 2,600 counseling sessions and 4,320 hours of group counseling. We saw 48,000 searches of people looking for mental health resources through our FIND HELP Tool. And all of this points to the truth: that hope is real.

So as we look toward 2020, we are honored to continue to bring hope into dark places and to say to as many people as we can, **you are not alone.**

So as a small thanks from our team, we wanted to give you \$5 off any purchase in the TWLOHA Online Store. There's no minimum to spend and this gift is good until the end of the year. To claim your \$5 toward any TWLOHA merch, visit store.twloha.com and use the code **PODCAST5** at checkout. That's p o d c a s t and the number 5.

And again, we really can't say it enough: Thank you, thank you, thank you. We couldn't do it without you.

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LINDSAY: I want to talk a little bit about this idea that we had a couple people write about where, and again, I think it goes back to these comparisons, but the pressure to be put together and happy when I'm with family or having to fake a smile. The idea that perhaps if we are not happy, we somehow don't have value at these gatherings and that feels like a lot to carry. It feels like it's unfair. I mean, I think we've all sort of done that to one another and it doesn't even happen around holidays that happens in the, 'Hey, how are you? I'm good.' It's just that simple. I wonder if you don't maybe have to fake the smile in those moments. It's okay to perhaps just say, 'you know, I've been dealing with depression or you know, I've been having some challenges this season.'

LINDSAY: I think finding ways to tell our truth in these scenarios is important because the pressure to fake it makes you more alone. It will never give you more closeness. It will never actually build the proximity that I think people are longing for around the holidays. What if the moment you say things have been hard, someone gives you a hug that maybe you needed. So we don't know how that will all play out for everybody, but I do imagine that being honest to some degree, any degree, you can be honest, perhaps would be better than to, to pretend that it can't be any other way than a cheery rosey smile.

CHAD: In my family, we've been battling a terminal diagnosis with my mom for the past 18 months now, and probably only within the last eight months have I been really honest when people say, 'Hey, how's mom?' And I say, 'well, this is the state of things.' You know, you have

some people who in, uh, and their kindness, their almost misplaced kindness, they say, 'Oh, she feeling better.' Well, no, there, there is no better. And that's, uh, awkward and heavy thud in a conversation. However, once that reality has been stated, I'm able to progress the conversation. So this is honestly where we are and I know what the final chapter is gonna look like. And let's not pretend like this can be Christmas caroled away. It can't, but we can be honest with the time that we have. We can be honest with the lessons that we are learning. We can be honest about having people challenge me on, on how I'm using this time effectively.

CHAD: This kind of a Oprah-y language of speaking your truth was always just kind of a, a phrase to me until recently when I realized that speaking your truth does not mean you're always gonna feel right. It doesn't mean it's going to make everything go away. It doesn't mean everyone's gonna see everything from your point of view. However, you do kind of retain a sense of dignity in saying, this is how the world is in this moment. You listener are now invited to to help me navigate where we go from here. However, if we just walked through life saying that the answers that are are easy, and maybe that is a choice that you make, maybe it is far easier to give the quick simple answer and maintain dignity in that way. I guess what we're saying is both are correct depending on what context you're walking through, you can be utterly honest or you can practice self-care by sharing your story only with the people that you choose to share.

LINDSAY: Yeah, I think that's really an important part of this, you know, is to identify, maybe you don't have to tell every person at the holiday gathering what you're dealing with, but what happens if you leave and nobody knows or nobody can, can be invited into that in some degree.

CHAD: Um, yeah. You know, I think I've only been able to kind of navigate some of the, you know, harder aspects of quote my truth because I had practice, was able to, uh, to rehearse some honest answers in a place that felt safe so that I wasn't trying to navigate my own feelings and the feelings of people I'm sharing this story with in the moment. So practice, use friends and family that, that you trust as proper sounding board.

LINDSAY: Yeah, I love that. And I think, you know, I think I was wondering kind of as we were talking about this, some other examples came into my mind of, of people writing in talking about how they didn't think their family really even understood mental health or maybe didn't believe in these conversations, which is a little hard. I'm not sure we can solve that necessarily for them. But I would say to those people, don't carry the burden of having to convince them that what you are feeling is true and valid. Know that you can set those boundaries and excuse yourself if you need to or take some time away or say, 'you know what? Actually that's not a super great way to talk about mental health or mental health experiences.'

CHAD: Yeah. And I think, again, kind of enlisting people that you know, have your back, that know, and again, they don't have to agree with you to be sensitive to, to your heart. So I know that when one of these conversations, uh, pops up in the other room, I will smirk. I will audibly

sigh. And then I know that my brother will be across the table and say, 'I know.' And generally it's just that, that I know is disarming enough for, for that wave to pass. And then I go on to the next thing.

LINDSAY: So a couple of other themes that I want to make sure we get to that people wrote in about, a large number of people talked about the holidays being hard because of grief. Missing loved ones. So whether that's just facing loss during holidays or feeling things, frankly anything other than joy was kind of at the top of the list. And then obviously I want to also include some of our conversation touching on some survivors of suicide loss. But we just heard from people who had felt again that this, this season of holidays were meant for joy and family and all things to be right in the world. And I think the reality of everyone's experiences that not everything's okay, not personally, not in our communities, not in our states, not in our government, not in the world.

LINDSAY: There are, there are challenges we're facing. And a couple of years ago, our founder Jamie wrote a blog about his experience in Thanksgiving and, and he said 'there are things missing in every single room.' And I think what he was pointing to was that so many of us, I mean in any gathering of people, so this doesn't even have to apply to your family. Every gathering of people is going to include these complex stories and narratives where they've been touched by loss or they're in the process of loss. Like our lives are not immune to the bad, shitty things that we experience. And so if you're walking into this season and you're one of those people who has lost somebody who is no longer at the Thanksgiving table or no longer at Hanukkah or Christmas or any of these family gatherings, we just want you to know that it's okay to feel something other than joy.

LINDSAY: It's okay to miss that person. It's okay to even grieve on that day. We had a conversation with, um, a friend of ours, a mutual friend, Katelyn Partin, and she talked a lot about how as a survivor of suicide loss, how there's going to be a year of first, and I think this actually applies to any person who's lost anything. So whether it's a pet, a family member, a close friend, we walk through a year of firsts, the first Christmas or the first holiday, the first birthday without that person. And you're almost faced with the Herculean task of re-figuring out what all of that is supposed to look like and feel like. And so if you're that person who is facing the first Thanksgiving or even the 10th Thanksgiving and there's a seat at your table that's not full, we want you to know that it's okay to, to actually feel that, to not gloss over it or pretend that that's not a reality in the room.

LINDSAY: But what we would hope for you is that maybe there's a way to honor that reality and talk about that person at family gatherings. You know, at my grandmother's birthday party, I asked her if she had any birthday wishes and she profoundly said, 'You know, I don't have any wishes, but I sure do miss your grandpa.' And she just wanted that to be clear that like today was great and there's so many great, you know, family members in the room. But she was really honest with me and just said, 'I'm missing somebody here.' And I thought about how our stories or memories at that time can be a really like a healing balm so people know

that the name can be spoken, the name can be remembered. That person's, their life force, that they kind of brought so much closeness and joy, like now would be a time if you're in a place of healing where it's okay to honor that person, to remember them and to include them in your experience, even if they're not physically present.

LINDSAY: And I think that's, that would be a hope that I would have for people to allow that space for like, 'Hey, like we're thinking about, you know, we're thinking about grandpa today,' or 'we're thinking about your, your close friend that has passed,' or 'I'm just thinking about it,' but I think it's okay to acknowledge like this holiday is more than just joy. It's a remembrance. And we do this every year. So why not allow that to be part of it, if you can.

CHAD: When I think about this holiday season and all the greeting cards and that come with it, they say 'love, hope, joy, peace.' You know, all these words that are things that we, I think innately are hungry for, things that we wish we had. But we see the words so often that I think we're led to believe that we are without fail supposed to bring these things. I think the reality is love, hope, joy, peace, these are things that we take from the season. So when you're taking your inventory and you see that you have an excess of joy, bring it on out and make sure you've got a hefty serving spoon with it. Make sure you, you dole that out and make sure people are able to leave with some of that joy. Uh, if you take an inventory and you realize, man, I'm really feeling a lack of hope.

CHAD: If you are inviting people into your life during this holiday season, the more people there are, odds are the more hope there is going to be to go around. You get to fill up your plate. You get to perhaps even leave with, with leftovers. So all that to say that that really horrible dining room, uh, metaphor there is, is that you don't need to bring something in order to leave with it. That's what community is for. That not every member of every community is able to provide everything for everyone else. We all have are, are places where we're lacking and we all have our places, in our attributes that we are overflowing with. If you look around your life and you're like, man, I, I got no joy. I got no hope. I have no peace. Well, maybe have some honesty and sharing that honesty is going to enable someone else to take some of that honesty back home with them. That this is an exchange that you don't need to be, well you said it before, you don't need to be perfect or polished in order to be shared.

LINDSAY: Yeah. I love that. I want to make sure we talk a little bit now about some specific topics that people were thinking about. Thanksgiving being the week that this episode's going to come out. We're thinking a lot about our supporters and our team and, and people who have specifically struggled with eating disorders. We're going to actually be putting out a blog this week by Lauren Penna and I love she wrote and I do hope you'll get a chance to go look at it. But she specifically writes from that perspective and someone who's struggled with an eating disorder and what Thanksgiving means. A lot of people, if you are unfamiliar with kind of just even the experience of an eating disorder, you might not think twice about Thanksgiving being possibly just the hardest day of the year.

LINDSAY: It's a holiday designed at least in America to be a meal and a large meal. And if you are struggling with how you consume food, you have a large audience now and, and so it's, it's kind of, she refers to it as a minefield. And so she talks about the, the struggles where the narrative and the conversation so often is focused on food or the lack there of, meaning the dieting that's going to happen after food or the exercise that's going to happen after the meal to burn it off. You know, like all of these pretty unhealthy ways that we actually talk about our bodies and how we nourish our bodies, how we treat our bodies, and how people in eating disorder recovery or people who are in the thick of it, they, they fear they're going to be found out or they fear they're going to be judged or they fear even the process of nourishing their own body.

LINDSAY: And so I just want to say that we've got some really awesome allies in this conversation. We look a lot to our friends at NEDA, the National Eating Disorder Association. And we often look and follow their cue on some of the resources they put out. They put out a great, usually a couple of different blogs as well, but they all sort of speak to the same thing that, you know you can have kind of a plan going into this season. Know just like we've already been talking that this might be a really hard day. When you even get to November, you are already thinking perhaps about this day. And so the anxiety that it builds, we are hoping that you have a support system, whether it's your actual counselor and nutritionist or it's a friend or it's a fellow person who just knows that this is a hard day for you.

LINDSAY: And this blog recommends a couple things and I think it's worth talking about a little bit, but she has three suggestions: have an escape, have an ally on hand, and take your time. And I think those three things are actually really powerful. Having is having an escape, we talked about that being, taking your time away. Like, really I need, I need to maybe step out or you have something else that you're kind of thinking about or focusing on. Having an ally on hand, we talked a little bit about that and I think it applies to pretty much all of these conversations we're having. Having somebody who can be like, 'Hey, you know, like, that's okay, take your time.' Or 'Hey, it's okay.' Um, that could be someone you text. It doesn't have to be in the room. That could be our friends at Crisis Text Line, frankly, if that needs to be your ally.

LINDSAY: And then last piece, which is just take your time. If you're in a, I know a lot of families do Thanksgiving differently, but if you're in a buffet line and you need more time to think about the choices you need to make to protect your, your body and your recovery, take it. You don't have to zoom through any line, you know, maybe choose to go last or to go first and, going in knowing that, that you deserve to get to take that time, like this is such a challenging moment, but having these things kind of in your back pocket or the things you're already thinking about, maybe we'll make it just a little bit easier for that day.

CHAD: Yeah. And we've, over the past year, To Write Love has published a little worksheet on a self-care plan.

LINDSAY: Yeah. Yeah.

CHAD: Take the time to develop that self-care plan and then I would encourage you to take the time to share that self-care plan with someone else. Make sure someone else has the exact same copy of that plan so that when your brain starts to get away from you, you can tap them on the shoulder and say, 'Hey, can you remind me what step three is?' You know, and, and work through this together that again, at no point are you expected to get through the sacred days or the mundane days alone.

LINDSAY: And I would mention that, you know, we didn't hear from just people who are struggling with eating disorders, but we, we also heard from folks who were saying like, something traumatic happened during the holidays and I'm dealing with PTSD or I'm just dealing with trauma, big T trauma. Or I'm dealing with my, my anxiety gets higher. Seemingly, if it's social anxiety, obviously gatherings or gatherings of any size could kind of increase that. But there's also things like change in the weather, so Seasonal Affective Disorder and how that impacts mood. I feel like in general, what I think we're saying is that the holidays don't mean that your experience with mental health goes away or, and, and often it feels like it exacerbates it. Like it feels like it heightens it because you have, like we were talking about change of literally almost everything that keeps you grounded, your routine, the weather.

LINDSAY: You're traveling, like there's so many different things that can just change. And so I love this. Our friend Whitney said, she's like, 'when I wake up, I gotta take a quick inventory and I got to know, okay, I'm going to be a little bit more tender today cause I didn't sleep last night.' And I mean, sleep is a huge part of this, right? So just anything that's gonna change or disrupt your biological rhythms, maybe give yourself a little grace and say, 'you know what? This actually might be a little bit harder to deal with so and so today because I'm feeling a little raw or I'm feeling a little tired.' And so how do we just work that into, like you said, the self-care part, but then also setting the boundaries part. And obviously I don't do this perfect. You don't do this perfect. Nobody does this perfectly. But I think us being aware of how the holidays impact us gives us an opportunity to do better at caring for ourselves and the people around us. And so maybe that's even just the goal of the holidays is to not give the perfect gift. It's really to just be present to ourselves and to those around us and let that be the main hope for the holiday or the holiday season.

LINDSAY: I want to hear from you though. People did talk about the change in weather. Um, I know you've talked a little bit about Seasonal Affective Disorder. Um, it's, the acronym is SAD.

CHAD: Yeah. Which I think is the shittiest acronym ever. Like it's, it's so silly and so trite. There's times that I wish I could feel sad during my struggles with Seasonal Affective Disorder. I feel like it's almost this cataract of the soul that it, it taints everything that I see and everything I feel. And it creates this kind of air bubble around me that that makes hugs feel a little bit more distant. It makes conversation a bit more sluggish. It, it affects literally everything about my

day. And I hate that it's called, sad. For me, it's turned into, really humbling, uh, excursions into honesty. I'm sure my, my wife dreads having to ask me, like, it kind of is it, is this the time where you feel down? And I have to fight back, shame in saying yes. But at the same time by me acknowledging, uh, her vulnerability and, and asking the question of her going there, I can honor that bravery and with, with my honesty. Despite all my efforts, um, I can't push the earth back into a proper axis. I can't pull time closer to me. I can call my senators and see if they can do away with frickin' daylight savings time.

LINDSAY: I heard they were trying.

CHAD: Yeah. Man, the sunshine state, get real with it. But at the same time, like, I just had a conversation with Becky, uh, our editor two hours ago said, 'Hey, update, I'm writing.' And she expressed pride in that. And, uh, and that felt good. And I don't have more than a half a page right now, but Becky knows my life and my struggles with seasonal affective. And she knew that this is going to be hard for me to write about. And because of that her, her pride is not in the product. Her pride is in the process. For me it really comes down to a conversation of when life shifts from being, absorbing into observing, you know, for something to be absorbed, it means that there has to be another party involved. There has to be at least two things and, or the two things come together and, and to becoming something completely different.

CHAD: But now during the darker and colder times of the year, I find myself just observing, I find myself separating and almost kind of segregating myself from the more joyous parts or the more normal parts.

LINDSAY: It's like hibernation of your soul.

CHAD: Yeah. Yeah. My soul is a bear. Um, and I just spent so much time nourishing myself and now it just wants to shut down. Unfortunately, there's a bigger part of me that doesn't want to, my brain and my heart are, uh, are rivals during this. But I've learned that this observing stage of my calendar year can be useful. I can learn and anticipate the things that I can't wait to see again. I just, something I discovered today is how much I really appreciate holiday music because it is a community event. You get harmonies. So yeah, we all have our favorite cousin or our favorite neighbor that is the, the kick-ass soloist, you know, during the Christmas play. But the beauty of, of this music and the beauty of the Hanukkah dances and the beauty of Kwanza celebrations is not in the soloist but in, in the harmonies of the chorus that make a wall of sound, that make a sea of, of moving bodies, that make something that is still, something else that's completely full of, of movement and nuance. I have to observe that right now because my body does not afford me the energy to partake in it, but I know with seasonal affective disorder that there will be a turning point. And I can look forward to that and, and the days that it's hard to look forward to it, I have enlisted a team around me to, to be proud of my micro progress, and to, uh, to smile on my behalf or to intervene at family dinners on my behalf to make sure that I can be as present as I can be.

LINDSAY: Yeah. Thank you for sharing that, Chad.

[music playing]

LINDSAY: Thank you again to every person that helped inspire this episode. Thank you for trusting us with your struggles, your questions and challenges as we approach the holiday season. We hope that as you listened you were reminded that you are not alone. No matter what you're facing this time of year: be it grief or trauma, eating disorders, anxiety, family dynamics, acceptance of sexuality or identity, please know that help is real. You are worthy and deserving of it.

In our show notes, you're going to find numbers and links to the resources and blogs we mentioned throughout the episode for things like The Trevor Project, the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, and NEDA. We also invite you to use the FIND HELP Tool at TWLOHA.com, where you can locate local mental resources. And, if you're struggling right now, you can always reach out to our friends at Crisis Text Line by texting the word TWLOHA, that's T W L O H A - to 741741. You'll be connected right away with a trained crisis counselor. The service is free and available 24 hour a day, 7 days a week.

We also want to say a huge thank you to Chad Moses, TWLOHA's Director of Outreach and Experience, for taking this time to share his personal journey with Seasonal Affective Disorder. Chad has been serving our Music and Events efforts since 2008. If you want to see Chad on the road or book him as a speaker, check out where he'll be at twloha.com/events. Or contact our team at info - I N F O - @ twloha.com.

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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.

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.