

## Episode 304: “Bianca Mujica: My Value is Not Based on Numbers”

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

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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.

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**CHAD MOSES:** Before TWLOHA became a non-profit, it was a story shared on Myspace back in 2006. From the very beginning, storytelling was the heartbeat of this movement. And so, to this day, we continue to share stories that give others hope and the permission to talk about their pain and their questions. We share to remind people that they are not alone and that help exists.

This summer, we’re excited to launch a new series on the podcast with the help of several authors who originally published their stories on the TWLOHA blog. While we love and value the written word, we thought it would be special to hear these honest stories of struggle and triumph read by the authors themselves. To give a voice to the words that have moved so many.

Our first story comes from Bianca Mujica and her experience with disordered eating. After you hear her story, we’ll dive a little deeper and Lindsay Kolsch from our team will chat with Bianca about her journey and where she is now.

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**BIANCA MUJICA:** My toxic relationship with food began when I was 14 years old. That year saw my first heartbreak, contributing to my already-low self-esteem and plunging me into depression. A few months later, my parents separated. A week after that, an aunt I spent my entire life with suddenly died. And just two days after that was Valentine’s Day, which I spent quietly feeling numb and hopeless and as far from love as possible.

So in the aftermath, I only saw one explanation for such incessant tragedy: I was to blame. Even without any legitimate reasons as to how death or separation could be my fault, I carried the weight nonetheless. I knew the people around me didn’t share this belief but I could not shake the thought that maybe if I was better, life would be better. The solution: stop eating.

I knew how unhealthy it was but in my mind, it felt justified—I needed to take up less space so I wouldn’t continue to burden those around me, and I needed to accomplish this as quickly as possible

to eradicate the heaviness overtaking me. My weight was the only thing I appeared to have control over, so it became my coping mechanism. In reality, this is what I thought I deserved.

I started lying to friends and family about what was happening, keeping it a secret by eating barely enough to prevent them from getting suspicious. The few times I ate (mostly to appease my family) led to me worrying that I wasn't skipping enough meals or making progress quickly enough or controlling myself enough. I knew I had an eating disorder, but I felt like I had failed at doing it "right."

I began obsessing over arbitrary but tangible things that I thought would give me a sense of accomplishment. If I comfortably fit into this one pair of jeans, if I could stay under a certain weight, if my stomach growled so much that it was in pain by the end of the school day, I had earned the right to feel proud.

But no matter how much I tried to "succeed" at this dangerous game, the pain from all the things that provoked my disorder did not disappear. I went through every day feeling nothing at all and everything at once, wanting it to stop, praying it would stop, not knowing how to make it stop.

It was about six months before my mom caught on and took me to a counselor. Although I knew my parents wanted to help, I couldn't stop feeling like I was only causing more trouble. I spent another six months tangled in the vines of disordered eating, knowing I had the resources to recover but still afraid of what the healing process might bring.

That fear subsided when I allowed those I was close with to show how much they love me, and why they do. The disorder became less powerful when I realized there is no wrong or insufficient way to suffer. The cruel, intrusive thoughts seemed more distant when I acknowledged that I don't have to justify my pain to anyone—not even myself.

It's been almost a decade since I returned to eating regularly and being proud of myself for it. My relationship with food still has room for improvement, but I have moved past feeling guilty about eating, about existing. It has taken active effort every single day to be able to say that, and I still have days when everything around me seems so chaotic that I am tempted to crawl back into the disorder's false safety.

And yet, even the deepest and darkest parts of my mind know that I am not a burden. The amount of space I require will never change that. Every cell in my body celebrates the fact that my value is not based on numbers and measurements. My worth is not dependent on meeting meaningless standards that say nothing about how I empathize, how I care, how I love.

And yours isn't, either. You deserve to exist in this world as you are, unconditionally and unquestionably. You belong here.

[music playing]

**LINDSAY:** So Bianca, in your blog, you write about this journey toward an increasingly unhealthy relationship you had with food. When did you realize that how you were interacting with food and eating was a cause for concern?

**BIANCA:** Yeah, so I remember specifically the first day that I consider the beginning of the eating disorder. I was getting ready for school and I had this vanity in my room that was kind of short, which is really short because I'm really short. So the mirror was right at the level of my stomach. So that was really all I could see as I was getting ready. And as I was getting dressed, I just looked in the mirror and thought to myself, like, 'wow, I am fat.' And I wasn't. I was like 90 pounds as an eighth grader. But there was a lot going on. In my head at the time, I mean, there had been some pretty devastating family deaths. And my parents had just told me that they were getting a divorce. And it was a really tumultuous time. And so when I had that thought I, there was a part of me that knew this isn't based in reality or logic. But it was really easy for me to cling on to it, because it seemed like a really simple solution to making myself feel better about everything else that was going on. And it wasn't related at all. But my self esteem was already so low that I felt like if I could do something to make myself better, then that would solve all of the problems. And so I kind of knew from the beginning, that it wasn't the healthiest way to go about it. And I remember even researching exercise and diets and food science and the proteins and the fats and all that stuff when it began, but I think I did that more to convince myself that I had the education and therefore, it was healthy by default, rather than actually trying to pursue the healthy avenues. And I mean, my friends were concerned, the minute that they saw I wasn't eating lunch, but it was a lot easier to hide it from my family. And so I think, from the very beginning, I knew that it was something I had to lie about. And that also was a big sign. But at that point, I had already made the decision and so I just kind of pushed down the reasons that I should be concerned and convinced myself that it was the best way to go about it.

**LINDSAY:** And so you describe that, like you said, this simple solution like you are looking for relief from what you were facing, and this felt like something you could control or something you could do something about.

**BIANCA:** Yeah. I think that's so much of the danger about it is that you think you have control over it, you think that you can stop at any time, which is something that I hear a lot with addictions and other mental health issues, you think that you are the one with the power, but after a certain point, you have to realize that these thoughts, these illnesses, prey on those, 'I have the power' beliefs. And if you accept that, then you also accept that you have a problem. And at that point, it's really hard to face the reality that you have a problem and you do or don't do something about it. And so for me, telling myself that I was in control was a way of me not acknowledging the reality of the situation and allowing myself to continue.

**LINDSAY:** Do you feel like you knew where that message of you needing to look a certain way came from? Was there like a specific maybe magazine or TV show or something that informed you about that belief?

**BIANCA:** I grew up watching a lot of Disney Channel. And I never really felt like I saw anybody that looked like me. I remember from a very young age, thinking that being tall, blond, skinny, light skin, blue eyes was the epitome of beauty. I even wanted to change my name, because I didn't think that it was a name that people on TV would have. And so I definitely had this idea of what it looked like or what I should look like. I definitely would see the billboards, the magazines, the commercials. In my mind, if this is what people are putting money into, this is what people are selling in the stores, then this must be what I should want to be. And I don't think it was ever, like a really conscious decision to pursue that kind of look. But I do remember feeling like I needed to change and what I look like, what I was, was not what was widely accepted or desired. Yeah.

**LINDSAY:** So you talk a little bit in your story about your mom, connecting with you about getting help. Can you describe what that conversation was like, what you were feeling, what you were thinking about, and kind of just how that experience went?

**BIANCA:** Yeah, so there were several months where it was happening and she had no idea, nobody did. And she would get really frustrated with me because dinner was on the table or we were at a restaurant and I would say 'I'm not hungry.' And that doesn't fly in a Mexican American family. You can't say you're not hungry. In fact, if you say that they'll probably give you more food, so I had to figure out a way to balance it. But my parents still notice that there was something going on. And I don't think they knew how to say it. Because there was so much happening with the family that I think they felt like they would be causing more conflict or that they just needed to let me sort it out. I mean, I was a teenager, and I was going through a lot. So I think part of them felt like they should just kind of let me work through my emotions. But it got to a point where it was so bad that every single day I was in pain, because I just didn't have the nutrition to keep going. And part of me felt proud of that because I felt like I was reaching my goals and I was doing what I wanted to do. But also the mental anguish was so strong that I just gave up at some point. And I remember, my mom had just taken me to the dentist, and we were sitting in the parking lot. She was about to take me to school. And as we were about to leave, I just started crying.

**BIANCA:** And I asked her 'Mom, do you think I need to lose weight?' And she looked at me with so much fear and sadness and confusion like I could tell that she was stuck. She didn't know how to help me. And I worried that part of her felt like she had failed as a mom. She probably felt like she should have noticed the signs, but it was a really hard conversation. Because I felt a lot of shame for even bringing it up. I felt like I wasn't strong enough to keep doing it on my own. And I know that's not the case in any way. But the disorder preyed on the loneliness and the silence, and me isolating myself. And that's how it got stronger. So by me telling my mom something, it helped me in the long run, but I still felt like I was held captive by the disorder, so bringing it up to my mom felt very conflicting. It almost felt like a failure in some ways. And it took a lot of me convincing myself that I made the right choice. And then a couple days after that, my mom and my dad had been talking about what to do and how to go about it. And there was this concert I really, really wanted to go to. And so they told me, 'You can go to the concert. And you can even take some friends with you, if you promise to go to counseling.' So, I felt betrayed by that and I felt really upset. But I wanted to go to the concert. And I thought maybe I'll just do it a couple times, and they'll be satisfied. And I ended up going to that

counselor for, I think, a year and a half. And I mean, it really opened me up to the world of counseling. So I'm glad that was their solution. But at the time, it was really, really hard to accept the help from them.

**LINDSAY:** Well, what comes to mind when you think about that experience with counseling, like, what are some of the things that stick out to you in the process of unpacking eating disorders and just what you were going through, the grief that you were dealing with, and the other issues that were sort of part of the creation of the eating disorder?

**BIANCA:** I remember when they told me that I had to go to counseling. I immediately thought, 'I don't want some person to look at me and hear what I'm saying and tell me I'm crazy.' And I think that was the fear talking. That was the resistance to help. That was the disorder telling me, 'You don't need this counseling, just keep doing what you're doing and you'll be fine.' And so I was very resistant to it at first. But as I started going, I felt like it was okay to open up. It took me some time to reveal more and more things. But my mom actually went with me to the first counseling session, so the counselor had a pretty good idea of the foundation that I was going in with. And that helped me kind of be able to talk about the underlying issues that led to me feeling the way I did and me doing the things that I was doing.

**BIANCA:** I think the counselor and I weren't a good fit at first. But we still had a pretty good relationship and where I live, there's not a lot of mental health options. So I think given what was available, or what was available to me, it was really fortunate that I was with somebody who was willing to listen to me and was able to give me some advice. But sometimes I felt like, like the things that she was saying, didn't speak to me as a 14 year-old, who was having a lot of family problems and was internalizing them all. And I learned that as I got older it's okay to try different counselors, it's okay to try different methods of counseling, it's okay to look for what's best for you in terms of that help. And so I have seen a lot of counselors, a lot of them through my university. And ever since then I have had amazing experiences with counseling. I genuinely love it. It's one of my favorite things in the world. When I'm in that space, I just feel so seen and heard and safe. I feel like I can say, the deepest, darkest, most worrisome parts of myself and not be judged for it.

**LINDSAY:** So what helpful tools or things have you come back to when you find yourself navigating times of grief or sorrow or, for instance, like the current state of COVID-19 in the world that we're in today? Is there anything from that experience that you've kind of taken away to help you now?

**BIANCA:** I have always gone back to art. That's been something that I have relied on for self expression and coping since I was a kid. So that's something that's really helpful to me, whether it's a coloring book, or just testing out markers, any thing that I can use to get some sort of creative expression really, really helps me. I also find that writing and journaling, especially, have been really good for me in terms of reflecting on the things that I'm struggling with. And I find that when I do journal, I am able to go deeper into my thoughts that I couldn't when I was just thinking about it. So, that has helped me look at things from a more hopeful point of view. I've also started practicing mindfulness and meditating. And that was something that I actually learned in counseling. And I've

had that habit for a couple years now. So I try to meditate, especially when I'm falling asleep and the thoughts are racing, I use that and it really calms me down. As soon as the meditation starts, I instantly feel like I'm able to breathe easier. And I've also learned just to be open with the people close to me, it's really hard sometimes to feel like you can be vulnerable, even with the people that love you the most, but I always feel better doing it.

**BIANCA:** I always end up having a really helpful conversation with somebody that I know cares about me and wants to help me get better.

**LINDSAY:** So, what would you say to someone who is struggling with disordered eating or an eating disorder? What advice might you give them? If you could talk to them right now?

**BIANCA:** I think the thing that we, as a collective culture or society struggle with a lot is not understanding that eating disorders are as real of a mental illness as any other mental illness or any other medical condition in general. I've definitely heard people say, like, 'if you want to be skinny, just eat healthy and workout' and so to anybody who's struggling, I would want them to know that whatever they're going through, whatever part in the process they're in, their struggles are valid. And they don't have to prove their pain or their experiences to anybody, not even themselves. I would want anybody to know that wherever you're at, you're enough and you deserve to believe it. And if you don't, that's okay. But also, you don't have to do it alone.

**BIANCA:** And there's people who want to help you. I've also learned that I don't have to recover all at once. I don't have to go from not eating to suddenly eating three meals a day with all of the food groups. It's just not realistic for somebody who struggles with it. And even years later, I still struggle especially now where I don't have a routine of staying home all the time. I struggle with finding that structure that helps me eat regularly. So I think finding small manageable ways to work on that, if it's just starting with something small in the morning, or reminding yourself that it's okay to have a snack throughout the day or that it's okay if you don't know the calorie count of this one meal you had. Those little steps, eventually they add up. And as you're taking those small steps, it's important to be patient and kind with yourself because this is hard. It's really hard to work against yourself and work against a part of you that is really strong and can be really overwhelming. And so if it takes time, if it's painful, if it feels like some days you just can't do it, it's okay to just not be at your peak of recovery every day.

**LINDSAY:** That's awesome. Well, thanks so much, Bianca, for taking the time to talk with us today. And for sharing the wonderful and beautiful story that you wrote, titled "My Value is Not Based on Numbers."

**BIANCA:** Thank you so much for having me. I'm just honored to be able to share the story with other people. And I hope that somebody will hear it and see that maybe they don't have to be going through this.

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**CHAD:** We want to thank Bianca once again for sharing this part of her story and for being willing to talk about her journey with disordered eating. You can read her words in their original form, and the stories of so many others, at [twloha.com/blog](http://twloha.com/blog). If you're interested in writing for our blog, you can send a 500- to 900-word submission to us at [blog@twloha.com](mailto:blog@twloha.com).

And if you or someone you know is struggling, know that help exists and it's okay to reach out. By going to [twloha.com/findhelp](http://twloha.com/findhelp), you'll find local, affordable mental health resources that are available to you.

As always, thank you for tuning in and listening. We're glad you're here.

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

If you're struggling right now, know that it is okay to reach out and that there are people who want to help. Part of our mission is to connect people to the help they need and deserve. You can find local mental health resources on our website [twloha.com](http://twloha.com). That's T-W-L-O-H-A.com. And Click FIND HELP at the top of the page.

Or, if you need to talk to someone right now, you can always text our friends at Crisis Text Line. Simply text the word TWLOHA—that's T W L O H A—to 741741. And you'll be connected to a crisis counselor. It's free, confidential, and available 24/7.

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It'll help more people find this podcast and the mission of TWLOHA. If you have any feedback or questions, please send us an email to [podcast@twloha.com](mailto:podcast@twloha.com).

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 Lindsay Kolsch, with editorial support by 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 non-profit 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.