

Transcript for Episode 305: “Elizabeth Wilder: When Depression Comes in Waves”
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: Hey friends, this is Chad Moses. We’re back this week continuing with a new series on the podcast. We’re listening to the voices and stories of several authors who originally published their experiences with mental health on the TWLOHA blog. We love and value the written word because TWLOHA started as just that: a written story of a real experience. So we thought it would be special to hear these honest stories of struggle and triumph read by the authors themselves.

The second piece we’re featuring on today’s episode focuses on a story from my friend and team member Elizabeth Wilder and her experience with depression. After you hear Elizabeth read her story, we will talk one-on-one about this journey and find out where she is today. One of the reasons we wanted to highlight this piece is because Elizabeth frames the ebb and flow, but also the daunting nature of depression, in a way that is easily imagined. Her words paint a picture that even those who have never suffered from depression can envision and understand.

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ELIZABETH WILDER: Last June I went to the ocean, a place usually filled with peace for me. But last June was different. I felt nothing. They say that depression can make you lose interest in things you once loved. And as I walked alongside the shore with my feet in the water, I knew. I knew that depression had engulfed me like an unforgiving wave. I couldn’t deny it. I couldn’t ignore it. Depression was knocking me down relentlessly, trying to drown me over and over again.

Day after day I attempted to extract myself from this grip depression had on me, but just like how the ocean comes back to the shore, I could not let go of this continuous and exhausting cycle.

Depression convinced me I didn’t deserve to be happy, that I didn’t deserve to feel like I had purpose. And I believed it. I let it take over me.

As distressing as it sounds, depression becomes comfortable after a while. It becomes safe. You adapt to the feelings of emptiness and nothingness; they become your new friends. In the darkest throes of my depression, I didn't believe there was an end in sight. I believed I would feel like this forever. I got so used to it that I even started to question myself.

Is it really THAT bad?
Am I actually depressed?
Am I actually drowning?

Eventually those questions started to eat away at me. I gave up. I cried. I screamed. I caved into myself. I wanted to be swept away by the waves. I felt shame and I felt guilt and I wanted those feelings to end once and for all. There was a minute I began losing sight of shore, a minute I thought I couldn't bear it anymore.

But another minute later, I resurfaced, gasping for air.
All it takes is another minute.

When I realized I couldn't tread water on my own anymore, I reached out. And when I did, my best friend extended a hand and helped save my life. One simple text and he was by my side, letting me cry into his shoulder and asking the tough questions and listening to the difficult answers I had never spoken to anyone before.

I allowed myself to express feelings of darkness without guilt or shame. I began to realize that I deserved love and to love, to live a life of purpose. I could tell he was scared when he left me that night, scared that the ocean was going to claim me as its own. But in that moment I knew I couldn't let it, whether I wanted it to or not. I had countless days ahead of me, days of pain but also of joy.

Last August I returned to the ocean with him. A summer had passed. It was a summer full of being open and honest about my depression with my friends and family. A summer filled with ups and downs, happy and sad moments alike. A summer of transformation. I ran to the shore with reckless abandon, letting the waves splash against my legs. I felt excited; I felt alive. I felt reconnected to the ocean, the warm salty air feeling like a friend once again.

I am not in denial: I know there are still waves to come. Good and bad. Waves I'll want to jump over, to conquer. And others I'll want to float under, to disappear. A wave when I drink a little more than I know I should. A wave when I step into therapy for the first time. A wave when the seas get rough and dark again. A wave when I realize the overwhelming support I have now. A wave when I tell myself over and over again all it takes is another minute. Another minute to fall out of love and back in love with the sand and sea breeze.

If you start to feel like you're trapped in depression's current, keep an eye on the shore. Remember that there is always a way back. And when a wave knocks you down, hold on. All it takes is another minute.

[music playing]

CHAD: So Elizabeth, you wrote this piece just about four years ago now and you know, that's a solid chunk of time. So I'm wondering when you go back and read these words and reflect on where you are now, what stands out to you?

ELIZABETH: So I wrote this, like you said piece four years ago, I had just finished up an internship with To Write Love on Her Arms. So I was coming off of a real incredible time in my life being an intern and coming to a lot of realizations about myself, and I felt compelled to write about it. And I don't think I had actually read the blog since then. And so reading it again, to prepare for this interview was really interesting, because a lot has changed. You come to a lot of realizations, and you're more honest with yourself about your own mental health, looking back. Even through this piece, I wasn't being totally honest with myself about where I was at. Yes, I realized I had a depression and I realized that that was something that I was going to have to take care of, at some point. But there were other pieces of my story that really hadn't come to light yet, or I was still kind of avoiding.

CHAD: I think you bring up a really important point there that as we live, as we grow, as we mature, and as we kind of develop a different relationship, even with ourselves, that inevitably we're going to see our journey, kind of through a different lens. So I guess I'm wondering, if you were to go back and rewrite this now what would be the biggest change?

ELIZABETH: What I wrote still rings true to what I'm experiencing now and what I've experienced. But I think I would write more about being honest with yourself in every aspect of your journey with mental health, whether that's depression or you know, later I found out that I was dealing with a severe substance abuse problem and it's just sort of not picking and choosing what parts of your mental health. You shed light on and just being more open about every part of you.

CHAD: Now you mentioned kind of co-occurring issues that you've struggled with, that you've battled, and that you've walked through. People here may remember your voice, if not through interviews, if not at the booth. But you've also written a bit about substance abuse, right? On our blog?

ELIZABETH: Yeah, several times.

CHAD: Which piece would you point someone to if they were curious about kind of reframing the conversation on substance abuse?

ELIZABETH: Yeah, I wrote a piece about sort of coming to terms with the fact that you might be abusing substances, which is a very hard thing to admit. It was sort of just a branch off of

this, this blog, you know, the depression comes to light, and you realize that the problems you've had with substance abuse, you know, stemmed from that. And so it's been really great to have the outlet to write about all of these different, you know, branches that I'm realizing along the way, are a part of my depression and have a big a bigger meaning to why I struggled the way I did and how I coped with it back then, whether it was, you know, unhealthy or not.

CHAD: So in your blog that you called “When Depression Comes in Waves,” you talk about how it can be easy to get comfortable with depression, to accept its influence and hold. For you, what are some things that signal to you that you're kind of slipping into that state of mind?

ELIZABETH: Obviously, everyone's signals are going to be different. But for me personally, if you know me, I'm a very sociable person, I thrive off the energy of others. So I know when I am retreating from other people that I'm sort of on that downward spiral toward the place I don't want to be anymore. So definitely, like isolation and just thoughts of hopelessness. Definitely a signal you're headed to that dark place again. And you kind of have to check yourself, like, ‘How rational are these thoughts? Who can you reach out to?’”

CHAD: Yeah, when you were talking about that in the blog, and even in this conversation, I was brought back to an event that I did with our friend Denny. And I remember a question coming from the audience saying, you know, ‘What do you do when depression kind of feels like your only friend?’ And that it struck me as a really interesting question, because I think it really pointed to the narratives that depression weaves for us and you think about friendship, these are people that we trust to give perspective to our lives. So the danger here is what happens when an unhealthy perspective has the loudest voice.

CHAD: So building off that, what in your experience would you offer as kind of a counterbalance? Where do you run to to get some additional perspective to kind of balance out whatever it is you're walking through?

ELIZABETH: Like you said, depression can become your best friend and it can lie to you and tell you that, ‘This is the way things are going to be. This is the only way you know, so sorry.’ But you really have to be able to combat those lies and really focus in on, at least for me, one person, that can be your go-to person when those thoughts are coming back when depressions like, ‘You can't cut ties for me. This is like it for you.’ It's really just honing in on one person that you can trust with those thoughts and really be able to say, ‘Depression has its grip on me again.’

CHAD: You do reference having that friend to reach out to. And I think it's one thing to say, ‘Hey, if you're going through a rough time, ask for help.’ But what does that process look like? What did it look like or sound like to practically reach out for help from your friend?

ELIZABETH: Yeah, so it's definitely. It definitely takes time to realize that you do need to reach out to somebody else, that you can't do it alone. And I think it was this internal battle of

choosing to expose yourself really to someone who may not know your situation, may not know how you've been feeling. And so it's just this endless back and forth between you and your depression. And ultimately, you have to choose you at the end of the day.

CHAD: Now in that process of choosing you and leaning on other friends, did any of that kind of evolve into seeking professional help, finding a counselor to help walk you through this?

ELIZABETH: Yeah. So actually, at the time that I wrote this blog, I had not sat down with a counselor yet, but I think it was the catalyst for me initially reaching out to my first counselor, because in the blog, I think I mentioned, you know, there will be a way when I sit in front of a counselor for the first time, but I hadn't taken that step yet. And that was really a big part of my story and why I could be so open and honest with my feelings because I had this unbiased opinion sitting across from me and so, I can really think this piece of writing for my first experiences with a counselor.

CHAD: Well, I love what you're saying about how you wound up sitting with a counselor, but it started with writing and I think that shows that, you know, one method of seeking help is not a light switch, but it's it's kind of a dimmer, that, that you can see take the time that you need to share your story in a way that you feel is responsible, in a way that you feel respects your journey. Obviously for crisis situations, we recommend getting professionals kind of keyed in as soon as possible. But here is time. We have time to figure out the next steps and we have time to figure those out together. And I love that you, keeping water as a metaphor here, you started just by dipping a toe in, you know? 'What would it look like to sit with my feelings long enough to write through it? What would it look like to talk to a friend? What would it look like to talk to someone else?' And yeah, just so thankful to have a paper trail of that journey. It's so awesome.

ELIZABETH: Yeah.

CHAD: So you mentioned how depression comes in waves and knowing that it may very well return a little bit later in life. How do you, if at all, prepare for that possible recurrence of something that's so challenging?

ELIZABETH: First of all, being real with the fact that there will be those waves, because it is a constant in my life. And I know it's something that I'm learning to live with, especially with the added aspect of sobriety. So those two things go hand in hand with each other currently, and it's really recognizing how they coexist in my life, in my brain.

ELIZABETH: It's inevitable that there will be recurrences of depression in my life. And knowing that, obviously I can better prepare myself for when those waves come. Whether that's having a list of people that I can reach out to when I realize things are getting bad again, or having my counselors phone number, so I can call her or text her once I realize those thoughts are coming back. And I think having people on the frontlines for you is so important, people willing to fight

for you in those moments where you don't feel like you can fight for yourself, is really key for me, personally. And I know it can be challenging to find people like that in your life, but I definitely would recommend seeking those people out and using the energy to find those people who can almost even detect when you're when you're slipping, or they can tell when things are getting rough again.

CHAD: Now, to bring this a little bit outside of yourself, what would you say to someone who read your words and say, 'Man, that sounds so familiar.' What would you say to someone who's hesitant to ask for help?

ELIZABETH: I think it can obviously be really hard to ask for help. It took me years to finally admit that I did need something more. And even when I was honest with myself and my family, I was met with hesitation, but I encourage people to not let that defeat them. If somebody doesn't believe you or if someone's not willing to help, then they are not the person for you. And there are people out there willing to help you find a counselor, willing to simply listen to you. It might take multiple times, repetitively telling people that 'I am struggling, I do need help,' before you find someone who is on your team, but that's okay. It's a process. It's not going to be fixed overnight. But you do have to make that first step and dip your toe into the water before any change will actually happen.

CHAD: Well, Elizabeth, thank you again so much, not only for for writing this not only for sitting down with us, but I count it an honor to sit across the room from you, to work events with you and really see that these stories don't happen in isolation, but that you are someone that that really inspires me to, to live out your truth, that if it's worth writing out then it's certainly worth living out. So from the bottom of my heart, thank you for taking this time and thanks for sharing with us today.

ELIZABETH: Thank you. I appreciate it.

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CHAD: We want to thank our guest Elizabeth for sharing this part of her story with us and for her willingness to talk about her experience with depression. To read Elizabeth's words in their original form, and the stories of so many others, we invite you to visit twloha.com/blog. We'll also have a link to the blog in our show notes for you. If you're interested in writing for our blog, you can send a 500- to 900-word submission to us at blog@twloha.com.

And if you or someone you know is struggling, remember that help exists and it's okay to reach out. By going to twloha.com/findhelp, you'll find local, affordable mental health resources that are available in your community.

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. 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.

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.