

Transcript for Episode 310: “Jamie Agresta: Dealing With Thoughts of Suicide and Finding Purpose”

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

JAMIE AGRESTA: Invite people into your pain. I think when you are in these dark places, you want to believe the world is against you and that people don't care enough to want to be part of that or help you. But you are more loved than you could even imagine right now, and I promise you, if you are just willing and able to open up just a little bit, it would make a world of a difference.

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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 everyone, this is Chad Moses, TWLOHA's Director of Outreach. Today we're continuing the #WorthLivingFor conversation in honor of World Suicide Prevention Day on September 10th. This annual campaign is all about helping people stay and making it easier for people to get help—which has to include creating space for people to talk candidly about their experiences with suicide and thoughts of suicide. In 2018, it was estimated that 1.4 million people made a suicide attempt. We also know that 10% of Americans have had suicidal thoughts. So as friends, family members, or even as someone who may experience suicidal thoughts in their own life, we want to highlight a conversation that will help you be better prepared for and engaged in a topic that can be difficult to address.

So today I'm grateful to share the mic with Jamie Agresta, a mental health advocate and a TWLOHA Blog contributor. Jamie has firsthand experience with suicidal ideation and has contemplated attempting suicide. She's here today to help us better understand how those thoughts manifest, where she's found hope along the way, and what she would say to someone who finds themselves in the dark headspaces, struggling with intrusive thoughts.

And before we begin, we do want to add that if you're struggling and a conversation of suicide and suicidal thoughts might be difficult to listen to, we encourage you find a friend to listen with, or perhaps consider skipping it for now. That's okay. There are a lot of other ways for you to be part of this conversation, and your well-being is our biggest priority.

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CHAD: So here with me today, we have our friend and blog contributor, Jamie Agresta. And it's really an honor to connect with her here. She's written some of our favorite blogs over the years, and we're thrilled that she has decided to lend some time and space to add to the conversation for National Suicide Prevention Week and World Suicide Prevention Day. So Jamie, thank you so much for joining us.

JAMIE: Thanks for having me, Chad. I'm happy to be here.

CHAD: Absolutely. First things first, where are you calling from? Where are we talking to you at?

JAMIE: I am calling from Michigan. I'm about an hour north of the Detroit area.

CHAD: And how did you first get connected with To Write Love on Her Arms?

JAMIE: Several years back now I was just looking for a community to be a part of. I felt really alone. I didn't feel like I had anyone to connect with in my life that really could understand what I was going through. And luckily, I ended up coming across the blog. I really connected with it and some of the stories, and that was a huge part of my healing and maintaining some wellness after those dark periods.

CHAD: That's really cool how what drew you initially to our site is something that you've been able to contribute to. It's just something really beautiful that you get to pay it forward on some level.

JAMIE: Absolutely. That does feel really good.

CHAD: So in your dealings with us on the blog, and in some conversations, you've shared that you're someone who has dealt with thoughts of suicide and that you've even considered making an attempt. Would you be comfortable talking a little bit about that season of your life? How suicidal ideations first showed up in your life, and I guess looking back, was there a sort of tipping point or a moment where you found yourself feeling hopeless?

JAMIE: So for me, these thoughts and ideations started when I was younger, like middle school. I think the first time I really realized that I was having these thoughts and I needed help, I needed to talk to somebody, I was like 14 or 15 years old. From that time, I would say these dark periods would come in waves. It wasn't just constantly dark. I had some periods where I would go up a little and then get back down really low and then come up. So I wouldn't say I was ever living my life to the fullest of what I would have hoped or what I would have wanted to. And a lot of the time it just felt like I was just doing okay or getting by and not really living my life. I did lose a friend nine years ago. He did take his own life, and that really hit me hard and made me want to, not only for myself—I wasn't really open about my experience at that point. I still kind of felt the stigma of it and ashamed of it. I didn't want to talk about it. But that gave me, all the

cause and opportunity to get involved in the mental health community and do charity events, and speak up about it in honor of someone else's memory and someone else, even if at that point, I couldn't do it on my own terms for myself. Stuff like that, I mean, it really did help. But when I would spiral, going through these periods where I would spiral, honestly it wasn't always a big event like that. It could be a smaller setback. A fight with a friend. It could be a bad grade on a test and then kind of spiraled into more and more like, I'm going to do bad in the class, I'm not going to get the degree, stuff like that. It wasn't always big things, and sometimes I feel like it wasn't even stuff that was really tangible that I could put a name on or an emotion on. It was just, I started to feel bad again. And I definitely was no stranger to the seasonal affect. I mean, for me, that was very real. I definitely took an extra dip in the winter, like many people do. I would get into these places and I just felt like I couldn't maybe process things the way perhaps, a healthier-minded individual might be able to. So after swirling and going in these circles and being on the roller coaster for many years, I went like four or five years ago now, and it was actually on New Year's Eve. I was very much in that state of mind of wanting to end my life. I was just over the spiraling, I was over the circles, I was over constantly struggling with my own self-esteem and self-worth. And for people looking at me and thinking I had no reason to, but it's like, they had no idea what was going on on the inside. This is even after trying to seek out factors for help and therapists, and I felt like I wasn't finding the right one or someone that cared, or maybe it just wasn't ever going to work for me. Maybe there wasn't that hope. But I just felt like I had nothing left to give, and I just didn't have the energy to fight for it anymore. I think on New Year's Eve people put a lot of emphasis on that. It's like, another year coming to the end, and what have you accomplished? What have you done? And that year just really, really got to me.

CHAD: I think what you summed up there is something that a lot of people can relate to. This idea of a lack of that vibrancy, a lack of that energy. The world is kind of drained of color in those moments. You've spoken up about this experience, and I know that you've been an advocate for other people's stories and going back to, I guess, how you related to us initially, finding us on the blog and then turning your experience into pieces of writing for encouragement. What kind of courage did that take in order to open up? And in what ways has that willingness to share really helped in your journey?

JAMIE: Honestly, that was one of the things that brought me back from a very dark place. When you deal with mental health issues and you're struggling and depressed and feel like you can't get out of it... For me, I really felt I was lacking. So, when I was feeling this way, and I was in these dark periods and dark thoughts, the one thing that would bring me a little joy was being able to help people. Like giving up my time or some sort of service for other people, whether it was big or small, that was just the only thing that really helped me. So when I was able to combine that with my love of writing and realizing that I could find and give a purpose to my pain, and use it to help somebody else who's struggling, who feels alone, who's feeling the way I do, and feels like nobody understands them or their story or their pain... For me, that was freeing. It was hopeful, it was light to think that I felt so powerless but I could find my power in

being able to give and help somebody else though this, and be the person that I needed when I was younger, to share the story to reach out, and to help create this sense of meaning.

CHAD: I think that's really cool. This idea that not only are you able to add some sense of perspective to some of these moments, these low moments in life, but being able to still acknowledge that historical you that was struggling, that felt like they were spinning their wheels that, like you mentioned, "What are some things that I wish I would have heard? Maybe I can still say those things to those pieces of me." I think that's such a gift. And I don't think altogether unique, you know, for people that have mental health challenges or struggle with seasonal affective or struggle with depression. Or maybe just this year has sucked. That on some level, you're allowed to acknowledge how tough it's been, but you're also allowed to extend some grace to yourself and work through it. I think writing, and you've shown that, writing can be such an instrumental tool. Has writing always been an outlet for you, or was this kind of a new source of life as you started taking steps towards your recovery?

JAMIE: Writing has always been an outlet for me, but I would say prior to finding my voice in that way, it was more journaling, venting thoughts and stuff. It wasn't necessarily writing for the purpose of wanting to share with other people or wanting to help other people. But I definitely feel like I came into my own with this, because like I said, I just can't really explain the way I felt after feeling so bad to just feel like I had found some purpose in my life and being able to write in this way within this community. I hope this thought helps other people, but to think that you could give purpose to all the pain that you've been feeling, all that you've been struggling with, whether it's in sharing, and I encourage anyone to share if they're comfortable with it, or when they're comfortable with it. But there is hope that other people out there struggling will find their purpose as well, and it'll make pain seem like it was worth it. It was for something. It was for something.

CHAD: And I think that's an important distinction. That finding a purpose for our pain, versus what we hear so often that everything happens for a reason. And I'm not here to play philosophy pong or anything like that, but I know for my life and and for many others, that phrase, "it all happens for a reason," it sounds nice and maybe it fits on a bumper sticker, but it doesn't always ring true. And for those that it does ring true, more power to you. But I think there is a lot of freedom in saying, "I don't know if this happened for a reason. But perhaps with community, perhaps with friends and family, perhaps with therapy, we can make a purpose for this." And that there's still a story that we're building on, that we didn't have to have the entire story in mind as we're engaging with different pieces of conflict and in different dark periods. But even the moments that you feel like you're out of words to write, there will be people to kind of carry on on your behalf right alongside you, as well. So I love it, and thank you so much for sharing.

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LINDSAY: Hey podcast family, Lindsay Kolsch here. We are just a few days away from National Suicide Prevention Week here in the US which starts on Sunday, September 6. And

whether you're just joining us for this conversation as part of our Worth Living For campaign, or you've been following along the past few weeks, we are so grateful you're here.

There is still time to get involved in the campaign as we work together to help prevent suicide and remind people that there is so much worth living for. One way you can do this by grabbing your World Suicide Prevention Day pack.

Each pack comes with an exclusive campaign T-shirt and instructions on how to get active in your community, both online and in-person. It also includes things like posters, stickers, and a set of postcards for you to send to those in your life who may need some encouragement, or a reminder that they matter.

And on World Suicide Prevention Day, which is **September 10th**, we're inviting you to get active online and wear your Worth Living For merch. You can purchase your WSPD pack today in the TWLOHA Online Store by going to store.twloha.com. And as a thank you for listening, we're giving our podcast family 20% off your pack, plus a special free WSPD gift, when you use the code `PODCAST20` at checkout.

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CHAD: I wonder if maybe we could go back to that period of time that New Year's Eve that you're referencing, and maybe even the days, weeks, and months after that. What did you find to be footholds in those moments of darkness? Did you have friends or family that were there to respond to you, or I guess in a more general sense, what did help start looking like?

JAMIE: I did, and I've always had—and I feel very blessed in that way—I've always had people surrounding me that have been very loving and very supportive and very kind even if they didn't necessarily understand what I was going through. I will say, you would be surprised if you were to open up a little bit to certain people, how willing and how loving and how compassionate some people can be. I mean, especially if it's family members, I would absolutely encourage anyone to at least try because you might be really surprised. But besides family and friends that were willing to let you talk and cry and, you know, do what they could to help me build this multi-pronged approach of finding doctors and medication and through diet and exercise to get to this point where I can maintain this wellness. To be honest, I've found a lot of comfort in spirituality and religion and prayer. That's carried me through a lot. Just something to believe in that's bigger than yourself and bigger than your pain. That was also the time, too, where I didn't necessarily instantly share it publicly. But you can do some of your best writing in your pain. Sometimes when you're out of your pain and you want to go back and write it, you might miss some of those details. So, to write in the middle of what I was still going through, I definitely captured some really raw moments. But for me, too, that was when the mental health and my story and my experience with writing started. That was really instrumental. I feel it was very much instrumental in finding a place of healing and being able to maintain some wellness.

CHAD: Yeah, I really like that language of maintenance as well. Navigating a crisis via suicide or any other one, that it's not a one-time event. This ideation didn't happen in a bubble. You mentioned earlier that there were a number of factors. Maybe there were some environmental factors with the school environments, and you also mentioned factors of brain chemistry with seasonal affective disorder. All that to say, practicing proper mental health maintenance, that is something that outlasts a moment of severe darkness. And I guess to that end with those tools that you implemented in those first weeks and months after that darkest period, do you still carry some of those tools with you, or are those still part of your daily rhythms?

JAMIE: Absolutely. Maintaining a wellness. You're never going to be cured—at least that's how, in my mind, I've rationalized it. So I've learned things that I need to do so I can be and maintain my best self. I did eventually find an amazing integrative medicine doctor. I found a wonderful therapist. With exercise and diet, I can just tell you it makes such a difference in my mood. The weeks where I have exercised three to five days a week and the weeks I have exercised zero to two days a week, I mean it really—even if it's just walking, it's these little wellness things. It's who you're surrounding yourself with. It's really creating a lifestyle. I really can't say any one thing, at least for me, that would be enough to maintain this really good place that I'm at now. And I would again encourage anybody else going through this to really kind of look for their own multi-pronged approach that works for them and their life.

CHAD: Yeah, I saw a tweet just today actually that said, “There's never a wrong reason to see a therapist.” So as you are caring for your body as you're caring for your mind, it's okay to continue to collect wise perspectives to help you be a more reliable narrator to your life. I had a conversation with another supporter on her podcast. Her name's Laura Lee Binstock, and we were talking about how you don't have to be at a certain threshold of pain in order to reach out for help. And at the same time, you're allowed to reach out for help even if you feel like you've got stuff under control. I think in many ways, suicide is the fatal results of a restricted perspective. That if you're only allowing your depression to be the leading voice in your life, then you're not getting the full picture. To quote another friend, our friend Levi the Poet who inspired our statement for this year's campaign. He says, “Remember that there are voices on the outside of your head, too.” And, you know, all this all this to say, Jamie, thank you for sharing your maintenance, your self-care strategy, because I'm sure that there's some listeners that think, “Yeah, well, I've tried this one thing and it didn't work so maybe help just doesn't exist for me.” No, you found one thing that isn't your cup of tea, but there's other things that are helping us tick. There's other things that are holding us together. And when you feel like you've run out of ideas, then rest on friends, rest on family, rest on therapists, rest on books, rest on podcasts to keep your mind going, to stay creative. Because even when it's hard to identify the things that are worth living for, it's worth living for the possibility that you haven't found or learned everything yet. That there is still more to learn through this. So to keep this going and to really, maybe address the listeners here in the same way that you've been able to address our blog audience, what is something that you would say to someone who may be struggling with suicidal ideation right now? What hope would you offer them?

JAMIE: I want to emphasize this again because this is something that was huge that I always feel like I would shame myself for or guilt myself for, or feel I was being selfish. But invite people into your pain. I think when you are in these dark places, you want to believe the world is against you and that people don't care enough to want to be part of that or help you. But you are more loved than you could even imagine right now, and I promise you, if you are just willing and able to open up just a little bit, it would make a world of a difference. It could be the beginning of your purpose. I really believe that so much of that healing, if you're in a place or in a state where you're able to share any part of your story, I think that you would be able to find that so healing on multiple levels for yourself. And it just feels good to think that maybe you've helped somebody else. Maybe you've saved a life. In feeling like you've done that, maybe you'll save your own. It sounds a little silly, but you just don't know how much of an impact you could make on somebody's life by sharing your own unique story.

CHAD: We've really been conditioned to believe that we can talk about virtually anything except for issues of life and death. And just to just to echo Jamie's plea: Every part of your life is something that is worth sharing. I've seen it time and again, and I'm sure Jamie has seen it time and again, that even in the moments that you feel like are too dark to share, in sharing that, you often hear someone say, "Hey, me too." Or, "Hey, I thought I was the only one that felt that way." You can say to a certain degree, if you want to be super cynical, that misery loves company, but I think the reality is being human hurts sometimes. And looking at it on the other side of the equation. There is not one person in my life that I've lost to to suicide that's made my life any better. That is to say I would do anything to keep them around. I wish there had been that freedom to share even those dark parts, and perhaps that would have helped me process some of my darker moments as well. So to be one additional time that you hear this: Your life is something worth sharing. You don't need to be abridged or polished before you start that sharing. You as you are now are utterly worthy of an audience to your story. And to that end, Jamie, I want to thank you again for being such an advocate for these stories to continue. For modeling a sense of courage, but I think beyond courage, just honesty that we can still be works in progress, and that can still be totally enough worth sharing.

JAMIE: Absolutely. I'm so grateful for the opportunity.

CHAD: So the theme for this year for our World Suicide Prevention Day campaign is Worth Living For. And we believe that that encompasses, really, our belief that even when life proves to be difficult or heartbreaking, there continues to be so much that is worth staying around for, so much worth living for. So, Jamie, from your perspective, can you tell us what that statement means to you?

JAMIE: For me, that belief starts with, like I had mentioned in one of my blog posts, with just normalizing that middle period. Normalizing that period in life in your healing where you're out of the dark space, but you hear all these stories with this grandiose success and you have it all, or even celebrities that have shared on their platform, which is amazing, but you might look at yourself then and think, "Well have I reached this place of wellness? Have I done enough with

my life to justify getting out of that dark place?” And you want to look at that and sometimes it's hard when you feel like you don't have that tangible, worldly success that you can show off and say, “Hey, look at me. I was there, I was struggling, and now I'm here.” There's so much in life that is worth living, and you can have your own beautiful success story without all these big things. You, in the middle, where you're at. And to believe that your pain is very real, and your struggle is very real. You struggled and you won and you have this great purpose. Your life has so much meaning, you have so much to give, and so many people and so many lives you can touch with your own unique perspective. And that's what helped me so much is all these unique stories that I could say, “Oh my gosh, I felt the same way. I've never heard anybody say that before.” And it's just like it's an incredible feeling.

CHAD: And to end it on a personal note. Jamie, how would you finish this phrase? “I am living for...”

JAMIE: I am living for a better tomorrow. I am living to be a part of creating that hope and creating that community of suicide prevention, suicide awareness, and mental health where it wasn't there before. I want to be that change in tomorrow. That's my purpose.

CHAD: That's awesome. You are well on your way my friend. Thank you again so much for being such a loyal and consistent voice through our story, and we can't wait to connect down the road.

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CHAD: I'd like to say thank you once again to our guest Jamie Agresta for lending her voice to the Worth Living For conversation. And to our listeners, we know talking about something as heavy as suicide can be draining, so we hope you can follow up on this episode up with some self-care. Your well-being is important to us and you deserve to feel safe in this space. If there's anything you want to share or if you're looking for a little encouragement right now, you can email our team at info@twloha.com where we would be honored to listen and offer you some support.

We hope you'll join us next week during National Suicide Prevention Week for a very special episode featuring our gifted friends Said The Sky and Olivver the Kid. Our conversation will not only include talking about their lived experiences with mental health and this current WSPD campaign, but Said The Sky will also be premiering a brand new song called “Worth Living For.”

In the meantime, I want to remind you once again that if you or someone you know is struggling, you can use our FIND HELP Tool to locate free or reduced-cost resources in your area by going to twloha.com/findhelp. You are worthy of hope. You are deserving of help. Please reach out.

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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. 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.

Finally, if you've enjoyed this episode and you want to hear more, we really hope you'll subscribe on iTunes or wherever you get this podcast. And if you can do us a favor, we'd really like for you to write us a review.

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.