

Episode_18_Gretchen.mp3

[00:00:02] Please be advised we will be discussing subjects that may not be suitable for all audiences and will include subjects that some will find challenging traumatic or triggering.

[00:00:16] Welcome to You Don't Fight Alone a podcast sharing the stories of those of us successfully living with mental illness and how we got here.

[00:00:33] In 2009 I went through a breakup. That was. Probably precipitated upon my mental illness.

[00:00:41] And I. Was just devastated. I have been dating a neuroscientist.

[00:00:48] And I felt like if a neuroscientist gives up on you there is nothing or. So I became incredibly suicidal. And eventually I talked to a friend and said. I think you need to be in the hospital. He took me to the E.R.. Checked me in. And I agreed. That.

[00:01:15] Inpatient unit agreed to undergo shock therapy. That was the start of 10 I'm sorry twenty two treatments and shock therapy. That was pretty hardcore bad time. My name is Gretchen.

[00:01:35] And I'm diagnosed as bipolar disorder.

[00:01:42] I was depressed as a child on my eighth birthday. I stood in front of a birthday cake surrounded by family and friends. I had just eaten my favorite dinner and I was standing there in front of a cake with the candles burning and they were all singing and I blew out the candles and I wished to die.

[00:02:05] And I think that's when I realized there was something very wrong with me. I didn't tell anyone though because I didn't realize that not everybody felt like they wanted to die. So I struggled along until I was 14 and at 14 I attempted suicide. I thought that what was wrong with me was that I was just unable to cope the way other people could. I thought everybody felt that way. And I just was less able to handle it. They were. And I sincerely wanted to die. I used to daydream that I would be hit by a bus or a car or there would be some terrible accident.

[00:02:54] That would take the decision out of my hands.

[00:03:05] Right. It was just after my 14th birthday and I was.

[00:03:11] I'd been swimming all summer on a competitive team but that was over. So I suddenly had nothing to do and I was babysitting my brothers and sisters and cousins and it was really stressful for me. And one afternoon they just wouldn't listen to me and I thought.

[00:03:32] Okay I'm done. And I took a handful of Tylenol. And they caught it really quickly and they took me to the emergency room and went through all the things that happen after you take a handful of Tylenol and and then started me in therapy.

[00:03:51] I don't think they knew how to handle a child who was grappling with the things that I was grappling with. I think that they were doing their best to be loving and they were good parents. They were kind they were loving they they really were trying.

[00:04:07] But what I really needed was a psychiatrist and they didn't know that and I didn't know that.

[00:04:15] So when the local mental health center recommended a therapist that's what they did.

[00:04:32] I was very unstable. I had very unstable relationships. And I was very. Mercurial my moods were all over the place. It was diagnosed as depression first for a long time and they would put me on an antidepressant which can cause mania in someone with bipolar disorder.

[00:04:56] So I would be put on an antidepressant and I would feel better but I was really actually experiencing mania and my life would crash after that and then I would think I was depressed again and they would switch me to a different antidepressant and I would become manic again and I would crash and eventually someone put two and two together and realized that I had bipolar disorder.

[00:05:20] So I was still struggling to have a normal life. I was still trying to work I was still trying to have a career. I was still going through that cycle of depression and mania over and over and stumbling over it every time it came up. I was pushing the people away from me who left me. I was being horrible to people. I was emotionally a monster sometimes I could be manipulative I could be just rotten.

[00:06:03] And I can't blame anyone who walked away for walking away. I was being awful sometimes at the same time. I was trying so hard to be.

[00:06:16] Just to exist in the world I was trying so hard. And I felt like I was spinning and spinning and not going anywhere.

[00:06:26] And I was still looking for the world to save me. I still thought that if I found the right medication if I found the right person to support me if I found the right rhythm in life if I found the right job that I would be fine.

[00:06:43] And that was just never going to happen. So it was a lot of chaos and it was a lot of a lot of awful. There were a lot of days where I thought about suicide. I've attempted suicide three times in life. And I've been hospitalized five times and most of them were in that period. I was no longer a threat to myself in the hospital.

[00:07:12] But unfortunately in our system as soon as you're no longer a threat to yourself they send you home and there's no follow up there's no support there's no there's nothing.

[00:07:28] You just go back to struggling the way you were and it wasn't working then and it didn't work again and again and again. It was a cycle that would have never ended if I hadn't found DDT and my lifestyle changes. So I coincidentally found a DV t class.

[00:08:05] Right after shock therapy and that. Was.

[00:08:11] Mindblowing for me because part of the premise of DVD is that you accept that you're doing the best you can and you need to do better at the same time. And that was incredibly true for me. I was doing the very best I could and I still there were still things I could do that would be better. And once I accepted that. And forgave myself for not being

perfect. And allowed myself to stumble through learning how to be better. My life started to turnaround. I felt like things were happening to me and I had no control over them. And that everything that happened to me made me feel a particular way. In truth my interpretation of what was happening to me made me feel a particular way. And once I learned to control my interpretation.

[00:09:08] I was able to control. My perception my moods in my life. I think the most profound change was that I started to look. At my own thought processes for cognitive distortions I started to look for example. I would send a text to my friends all of them a group text and nobody would respond.

[00:09:35] And my first thought would be well they all hate you now. They obviously hate you now when in reality they were busy. They had their own lives. They didn't get it. There were millions of options other than they hated me.

[00:09:49] And once I started to look at life instead of it's all about me and starting to look at it as. I am a part of a. Big circle. Once I started to learn to identify my own cognitive distortions I was able to calm down and control the way I reacted to things.

[00:10:14] Instead of assuming everyone hated me and spiraling into suicidal thoughts I could call them and ask if they're OK. I could just assume that they're busy. I could find a different friend to do something with. Once I learned that it's not what's happening to me that's making me feel the way I feel.

[00:10:37] But my interpretation. Things started getting better.

[00:10:42] Accepting that the drugs that I was gonna have to take weren't going to be perfect. That they were gonna have side effects that were uncomfortable and that made me fat.

[00:10:54] And it made me sleepy.

[00:10:57] Also giving up alcohol.

[00:11:02] Living a healthier lifestyle eating better getting more exercise sleeping better hours managing my stress and stimulation levels.

[00:11:14] I don't think there was one breakthrough. I think there's a pile of things and everything makes my life more stable. And I guess that's a breakthrough in itself. That there isn't going to be a quick cure. In the past before I figured this out. I was emotionally very.

[00:11:40] Very vulnerable and very excitable.

[00:11:46] Someone could say something to me and I would fly into a rage. Or even if it was very innocent I would fly into a rage. Someone could look at me the wrong way and I was furious or sobbing.

[00:12:03] People could. Could inadvertently crush my day without trying without meaning to. I was I was a bomb. And anything set me off.

[00:12:17] I'm much more able to look at the world and step back and manage my own emotions. So.

[00:12:37] This is still controversial in the field of psychiatry. For me Light plays a huge role in how I sleep. If there is a crack of light coming into my room in the morning it wakes me up. So my bedroom has tin foil on the windows. It has metal blinds over the tin foil and it has blackout curtains over that. And I sleep with a mask that cuts out light and because of this I'm able to sleep eight hours every night.

[00:13:14] Before I would cycle in spring into mania and then in winter into depression almost every year. And now that does not happen as much. There was a mourning process. I felt. Like I was giving up life for a while. My friends were still relatively young in our mid thirties and they were still going out dancing into trivia night and I felt like giving all that up was giving up. The things I enjoyed I felt like I was trading in a fun life for a stable life and I felt like it was an unfair trade and I really had to mourn that.

[00:13:56] I cried about it. But once I got more stable.

[00:14:04] I realized I could occasionally go out I could occasionally stay up late and watch a movie especially if I could sleep in a little. The next day I learned that there is a threshold a variable sleep that I can handle and as long as I don't cross that threshold I'm OK.

[00:14:24] The ideal diet for me and the most stable diet for me would be mostly lean proteins and vegetables and fruits. However the drug I take is called Sarah well. And it makes me crave sugar. I've sat in the kitchen on the floor with a bag of sugar and a spoon in my hand and tried to eat it. And you can eat sugar. You know what you can't eat a bag of flour. I've tried that too so. Right. So Sarah Cole makes me want to eat the entire refrigerator including the handle. And I think that that is the biggest stumbling block. And eating well.

[00:15:04] But mostly I think it's just fruits vegetables lean proteins 90 percent of the time.

[00:15:25] For me radical acceptance was.

[00:15:29] Accepting that my life was never going to be the life I wanted. I was never going to be like my friends who are doctors or lawyers or accountants or computer programmers or anything else that I really wanted for me. I was never going to have that because my ability to concentrate is governed by my means my ability to study is governed by my means. When you're derailed every six months because your moods are out of control. You don't get to meet your goals. So for me radical acceptance was all about accepting that my life was not going to be the one I wanted. And finding a way to make a life that I could live with. I love my family. I have a wonderful family. They're all crazy too but they're wonderful people. I love them. I love my nieces and nephews. I love seeing them grow and change into adults who are wonderful people. I love spending time with my friends kids. I have two friends who have young daughters and I love spending time with them. Those are the things that recharge me sitting around talking with my friends going places with them hikes and movies and with my family and friends. That's what makes my life worth it for me. And it also keeps me in the world because I know that suicide is contagious and I know that if I choose that option it will be an option for all of them. I. Feel like. This entire journey.

[00:17:31] Almost unfolded.

[00:17:34] In a predetermined way like there was no way if Gretchen at 14 had found D.B. that she could have absorbed it. At that point I still believed that all of this was a pill away from being cured. And why would I put in that much effort if that pill was right around the corner.

[00:17:54] I think there was no.

[00:17:57] Way I could have benefited from DVD before I hit rock bottom.

[00:18:04] So I don't know that I could have said anything to her. That would have made the journey easier. Kill yourself before this journey because it's awful.

[00:18:17] And then the DVD takes over and rushes in and says No you need to tell her to hang in there you need to tell her that there is hope for her. You need to tell her that she can ask for help right now.

[00:18:32] You need to nurture her into becoming a whole human. This is really hard. This life is hard.

[00:18:44] And there are times that I actually think Oh today's a good day and I'm happy. And there are a lot of times that I think.

[00:18:54] I don't know if this is worth it.

[00:18:58] And it doesn't necessarily seem dependent on my mood.

[00:19:07] I think that.

[00:19:09] I honestly think that euthanasia should be available to people with mental illness.

[00:19:15] At at some point we should be allowed to give up. And I don't think I'm at that point yet but I can foresee a future as I age as I become less comfortable less competent less able to do my own laundry more full of aches and pains. I can see this becoming less and less tolerable.

[00:19:40] I've committed to living a natural lifespan.

[00:19:44] And I remind myself that often. But a.

[00:19:50] I don't know if I'll be able to keep that commitment as a.

[00:20:12] I think. If there's one thing that people who don't have mental illness could take from this.

[00:20:20] I hope it would be.

[00:20:23] To give people who do have mental illness a little room. To work it out. A little room to. To not be judged. To not be.

[00:20:44] A little room away from the. To just let us figure. And. I think if. Someone. Listening to this does happen. I think you. Can find a. Is OK. It may not be perfect. May not be what you want. But I think you can find. OK. And I think that can be good enough. I think that life would be a lot kinder to people with mental illness if they knew what we gave. Up. What we sacrificed. While we were through.

[00:21:33] For more information and to donate please visit Youdontfightalone.org.

[00:21:41] You Don't Fight Alone is sponsored in part by mentally chill an improv team talking about mental illness and how it's so hard but no one likes to bother anyone about it. Be prepared to be bothered. Find them on Facebook dot com slash mentally chill improv Instagram at mentally chill improv and at Voodoo comedy beginning this September. The You Don't Fight Alone podcast is a production of You Don't Fight Alone Inc. Produced and engineered by James Fisher and Keeton Leikam.

[00:22:11] The information presented by You Don't Fight Alone is not intended as medical advice. If you have mental health questions please talk to a mental health professional.