

Episode_19_Erin.mp3

[00:00:01] 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.

[00:00:19] 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.

[00:00:40] You know rock bottom is a tricky question for me.

[00:00:45] Simply because and this isn't to be overly pessimistic it's just been my experience of like oh things can get always get worse.

[00:00:55] And so but they get worse in different ways. So of course I had what I would call my physical rock bottom which would be like. Waking up at a hospital confused and in pain and. You know. That yeah. That was those that was a rock bottom. But then there is also.

[00:01:17] There is one moment that that does stand out to me and that was it was years after the accident. I was. I had you know worked hard to graduate from college. Like actually do pretty well. Especially considering my injuries. And I had moved away I was working in clinical research. At that time. So this one particular night I remember I. Was attending some graduate classes at Johns Hopkins which I was you know was proud of being able to do that but they were they were really tough.

[00:02:05] And I was also working full time managing my first clinical trial. That was also kind of challenging. Anyway I was really really overwhelmed and I think. All the. You know I'd had a.

[00:02:24] Relationship break up. And actually it had been that same relationship that I had been in years ago that. When I was in my car. And I'm that. Bad guy and I had stayed together for some. Number of years. And. Anyway so. The relationship had ended I was under all this stress and I I was.

[00:02:47] Telling myself all of these like absolutes like I must get these grades I must do this stuff now. You know I had all these beliefs about like what I needed to do in order to like not be a failure. And I was also Oh just for bonus I. I had a well what I now know is rheumatoid arthritis but at that time was an undiagnosed chronic pain condition that people kept telling me I was just nuts. And it's like no my bones are deteriorating you assholes. So anyway I was in a lot of physical pain and. I just you know I just remember like I had had passing suicidal thoughts but this particular night I was starting to get very. I was starting to go more into the planning stage you know leaving me. The simple ideation for.

[00:03:48] A more like oh what am I going to do with my what. What about my golden retriever. How can I make sure that she's taken care of. Like well how could I do this. Well OK well if I leave a key in the mailbox and I call this person like I was making all the plans. To make sure like I was just. I was really worried about my golden retriever. She probably saved my life because I was like oh I don't have anyone when there's no one here that will support me like Who will take care of her.

[00:04:19] Yeah. So I mean I just felt like. I think at that time I was sort of experiencing a lot of social isolation. You didn't have. Much family support. It's.

[00:04:34] Pretty. I. I was living away from. Family and old friends and. Yeah. So. That was really a bad night. And I did end up. Deciding not to in my life. And was like well I'll just be a failure instead and all. Which is what I told myself at that time. That was my distorted thinking and I was like I'll just. I. So I dis enrolled from my graduate classes and I knew I would that was going to be a huge disappointment too. Well really honestly they're only like a couple of people I could. Think of that gave a damn but I.

[00:05:24] Didn't want to.

[00:05:26] It was just it was a big blow to the ego. I'll say. Well that assumes I have an official diagnosis. So I probably symptoms started when I was a teenager but. I don't think anyone.

[00:05:51] Give me anything close to an official diagnosis until I was like in my mid 20s. Erin.

[00:05:58] Traumatic brain injury and depression.

[00:06:09] Okay so this is a fun story. So I was a sophomore in college and I like to say I was a real hot mess. So I was in some ways you could say having a somewhat typical college experience and that I was constantly in crisis. Just meaning that I I was drinking too much being irresponsible squandering opportunities all of that good stuff. I was actually in the music school and definitely squandering that opportunity not practicing like I needed to be. Anyway. My irresponsible behaviors got me. Sort of in a little bit of I hate this phrase trouble. I will say so I found out I thought I had a boyfriend. He was a good guy. He also like me had some had had some issues with alcohol and. Anyway Actually I broke up with him because he started drinking again. Even though I was still drinking I just thought it was a problem for him. So I broke up with him. Then I found out I was pregnant so we got back together and a couple of weeks later I was just really really distressed about being pregnant because well when I was in college and I had been raised in this very very catholic household like very anti-abortion like I remember being a little kid going to like those like protests. Like people carrying pictures of fetuses and stuff. But I was on the same side as them when I was like 8. Anyways I was like Oh I even though I was ok with abortion as a general concept. By that point I'm like ok with other people having one. I was like I had I didn't think about I could or I didn't think I wanted to do that anyway so I was just. I was not in a good place and I was really distressed. I only noise. So one day I was leaving choir practice and my next memory is about. About a month later and I was like in a different city and I was like in a crap ton of pain. Like a lot of pain. I was really really confused and I couldn't really communicate or move or. Do anything. I wasn't even breathing on my own. I had a tube in my throat so I could breathe. And what had happened was I had been in a really bad car accident in which I had a traumatic brain injury is a very severe type of injury. So I'm I'm really lucky in some sense. And I had a miscarriage and I'd had my pelvis and a lot of my left side of my body was crushed. And so that explains the severe pain so I had while I was in a coma they had actually done like a 14 hour surgery to repair my pelvis. And they just kind of left the rest of the broken bones there like she's really going to die anyway. Waking up from a coma is not like the movie is usually it's a very very gradual process and there's different stages of a coma. And I went through a lot of like agitation which is one of the stages. I was so bad they had to put my room right across from the nurses room because I was like pull out my IV's pull out my tracheotomy press the nurse call button constantly so they tied me to the bed. I had these like fuzzy restraints.

[00:10:23] Yeah so I did go back to work and managed that I was still going to work and so this is actually an interesting story it's actually also how I got my diagnosis of depression although I knew enough at that point so I was working in psychiatric research. I knew enough to know that like oh I have depression for damn sure. I was like I was I had to diagnose other people like I like not officially because I was not a doctor but essentially I had to diagnose them. And so yeah. So I remember going back to work and one issue was that they just don't have any help for me.

[00:11:09] And this was my first clinical trial and I was like managing it all by myself. And I was like herding cats because I was the clinical trial was for folks who are dependent on cocaine and anyway it was a thing and I enjoyed talking with my my boss who the medical director and he was also like a I had known him for years and he was like a sort of an unofficial mentor to me. He was like Really. He wanted me to go to medical school. The whole thing was like I was going to go to grad school first and then go to medical school because I like to make things complicated anyway. And he was like. No you can't. Like he was he was disappointed in me like just as I knew he would be. No no you can't you can't do that like you know you need to be a doctor. All of these things. You know. Anyway what ended up happening was like I told him I like look you don't understand like this is what I'm dealing with. I have all this pain blah blah. And he's like well. And I was like You know I can't get any treatment. My primary care just keeps telling me I like to take Tylenol and are known to take Aleve and I'm like I'm taking so many I have like stomach problems.

[00:12:30] And he's like well I'll treat you which is not the best thing to do like for a psychiatrist to treat there but their employee. But at that point so not that is not an ethical recommendation. But he really he had the best of intentions. I don't consider him a shady guy. I just don't think that was like highly it. It's not what I would recommend.

[00:12:59] But yeah he did prescribe me. He was actually for my chronic pain but he prescribed me a psychiatric Med because I just got on a very very high dose of it. It was Cymbalta which you know hey that's definitely not the the go to med for R.A. but seeing as I couldn't actually get a diagnosis yet for my R.A. the Cymbalta was great for a little while and then it helped my pain. I'm eventually I. I also didn't sleep for like the entire time I was on it pretty much. So eventually I had to stop that medication but it sort of tide me over and helped me to be more functional.

[00:13:41] And I always like his explanation. I was like oh it's so interesting that this psych med is helping me with my physical pain. And he was like Well why wouldn't it. They're all the same. You know these neurons are all the same in your brain. You don't have like physical neuron physical pain neurons and then like old overhears your depression neurons like it makes sense that it would it would help that there's like a center I would hope and it did. And that's how I sort of tied it me over like I said and I was able to kind of move forward in the tiniest possible way in my life. Well while I was still on the Cymbalta that's when although I wasn't sleeping I was able to just think a little bit more clearly and make better decisions. And I. I finally just decided I needed to like take some action in my life too. I really needed to like meet people because I like just didn't have a lot of like friends or people I knew in the city where I was living. And that's when I was like I was looking for an acting class. I couldn't find any acting classes available immediately so I saw that there was improv and was like improv you gross. But I was like well who knows I'll just go and maybe I'll meet some nice friends and then I'll take a real acting class in the fall. But at least I'll meet some nice people or people at all.

[00:15:35] And that's exactly what happened. I went by the way our first improv class. Really fell in love with it.

[00:15:47] We didn't start out with games and stuff. We like went right into like scene work and I remember in that first class. That first scene I ever played. I played a cannibal and I ate my scene partner with a spoon and was like Oh this is for me.

[00:16:04] And I've been an improviser ever since. And you know all of that like.

[00:16:13] Dark energy and stuff that I have within my soul. I get to sort of express in a healthy way. On the improved stage.

[00:16:24] And yeah I've.

[00:16:27] So I would say improv was you know it's not mental health treatment by any sense of the imagination but it is for me the big difference was that I started to experience community and I want to say for it had been such a long time since I had experienced a true community because that car accident that I was in in college like whatever fragile community I had it had completely destroyed it. Like friends abandoned me. I couldn't. It was really hard to make new friends after that. So for the first time I was like I had I had my people you know and I even eventually got a husband out of the deal. So like it just kind of worked out. In addition to helping me find community what I found with improv was so the brain injury and the accident all the physical injuries had really destroyed my sense of identity because you know there was I was I was a 19 year old and like you know what is your identity like oh it's your talents Oh my singing you know you're your smarts so oh that was kind of messed up after the brain injury and then like your body. Well that was really fucked up after the accident.

[00:17:46] So my sense of identity was really really shit and what I found with improv was it allowed me to sort of reform an identity and also reconnect with any like creative instincts that I had previously experience experienced like I you know I was on the stage again. I wasn't singing opera but I was on the stage making up weird strange scenes with people and actually some of them were musical and I was sort of able to.

[00:18:22] Yeah just sort of like I think like RE is probably a terrible misuse of this word like amalgamate my myself. I think I just created that word I don't think it's a thing.

[00:18:38] So I reformed myself. That also sounds simple something I read something to myself. There we go.

[00:18:55] My breakthrough I think has been in the realization and this has actually come pretty recently that the realization that there is a need to be flexible in the tools that we use to help us cope. And what I mean by that is like sometimes what works for one problem at one particular time in life may or may not help in the future. And we sort of have to be willing to experiment. I don't know why I use the word royal we there but I need to be willing to experiment from for my own needs because at different times in life like oh meditation has been really helpful at this particular point in my life. But then down the road when I'm facing another crisis or suicidal ideation incident you know really what I need is like sort of some cognitive behavioral therapy to help me challenge those cognitive distortions and then maybe at another time what I really need is to hang out with my community.

[00:20:09] And then and feel you feel a sense of community and then you know at different times I've just needed different things.

[00:20:24] And so for me I have it's important for me to realize like nothing will ever get rid of like the the existential dread in my life. And that's OK. And I just like am learning to like oh yeah like I'm always gonna be me.

[00:20:46] I can I can you I can gain more coping skills I can you know find better tools but like at the end of the day like I won't ever make things perfect.

[00:21:01] But I really I just have to kinda. Use it try different things. Sort of like. Yeah add more tools to my toolbox to be a complete asshole about it. I hate that phrase but anyway it's a phrase a lot of psychiatrist use it.

[00:21:21] When my emotions started catching up with me. Well I would say it was a it was a gradual process and that probably also was for the best because.

[00:21:36] So my emotional maturity was really really affected from the accident. And I I don't know if you know that could be due to like the architectural changes that happened in my brain but also due to like my social and experiences after the accident I just.

[00:21:54] I didn't have like a typical college experience so that kind of delayed my social development.

[00:22:03] So I would say by the end of college which college took me a little bit of extra time considering the coma in the middle of college were towards the beginning. But anyway it took me a little extra time and also of course changing majors and stuff.

[00:22:19] But by the time I had reached like. I was taking like my cat and oh I also I lived in south Louisiana. I'd also and. Hurricane Katrina happened and that kind of. And I was trying to study for my cat. And.

[00:22:39] It was a whole thing.

[00:22:42] That's when I feel like all of the past few years I really started catching up with me in that I just was so overwhelmed like here I was with this like broken body broken brain trying to like pound all these like organic chemistry and what that wasn't the problem is the physics damn physics and like all these things into my head as well as trying to do like all my academic stuff.

[00:23:15] I was also gotten it into my head that I was like I'm going to try to start singing again. I was taking music classes again.

[00:23:23] I was like Yeah. Sometimes I make poor choices and that's when I was like.

[00:23:33] I just sort of was so overwhelmed and I was like but I was starting to feel again because I was I think I like was like Oh did I just cry. I think I just cried Oh God damn it.

[00:23:45] And now he's like from trying to do like musical performances again and like feeling all the all the feelings. When I would get up there and sometimes my voice just wasn't there for me and he would just leave and that would bring about a lot of emotion so it was easy to tuck my emotions aside when I was just trying to like memorize formulas but

when I had to like when I was trying to put myself out there and do like these like musical theater numbers and like I was trying to dance with a fucked up pelvis and hip then all this and saying with a fucked up voice and then go home and study like yeah I started feeling all the anxiety and the depression and all of those fun things. So that's when I sort of put med school on hold for a bit because I knew like I actually might need a break.

[00:24:44] And you know the break just turned into forever you know.

[00:24:51] So sometimes I do wish I had just pushed through but but who knows I might have gone to med school and just completely fallen apart there. So there. So yeah I would say it started then but then by time I was like You know I had moved away and working and research I think I spoke. That's when the suicidal ideation started and I just really like the end of my long term relationship. That you know that really impact of things. And yeah. Some of that stuff.

[00:25:44] I wasn't a happy kid. I mean I'm not.

[00:25:49] I want to also. And if you can include this I would appreciate it. I want to acknowledge my privilege in all of this. I was not you know I. I did come from privilege in the sense of like you know I have white privilege and I had economic privilege and so because of those things though I was unhappy I always felt like why didn't know about white privilege when I was a kid. What am I talking about. But I I always felt like well I'm not being like like I would see on TV like traumatic things happening to people. And I'm like well that's not happening to me like. You know so I always kind of discounted it like whatever mood experiences I was having and. You know I.

[00:26:44] Met my parents. You know they they.

[00:26:46] They love me and they you know they have certain ideas about you know.

[00:26:56] What people should do. There's a lot of a lot of sugars and shut ins and authoritarianism and that probably also ties in with the Catholicism. They're very very religious. And I think they have like sincerely held religious beliefs like I think that is something that they truly believe in.

[00:27:27] So I was the youngest of five children and I was the youngest by a lot. So my I was I was the accident I have four much older siblings than me. So in many ways I was kind of like an only child. And that is where my deep well of socialized relation comes from. Who knows. It's probably related right. So can I just remember being kind of like a fearful child. But then like if you if I would ever like mention it is comfort or fear or sadness about something. Usually I was like well you shouldn't feel that way. You know you're so lucky or you're you know don't you shouldn't feel sad or you know whatever it was like whatever I was feeling was not appropriate to being to be felt.

[00:28:16] And you know I think that's probably just what they truly believed. And but needless to say I also. So although I know it's a risk about like you know my parents could one day Listen to this. But yeah they're real awkward people.

[00:28:37] So I didn't learn good social skills from them like real bad social skills and I carried that with me and so I think that I was such like a weird little child with bad social skills that I just I always had a little bit of trouble making friends and kind of oh I've carried that into adulthood.

[00:28:59] But.

[00:29:04] So yeah I will say Sorry I just was sort of probably a little bit of an angsty teen a lot of an angsty teen. How about that.

[00:29:14] And you know I would sort of at different times like experience like fun going out and feeling like oh I have friends and then you know the next day I would feel like I have no one no one cares for me and I like to also be dramatic and read Jane Austen.

[00:29:44] Well so what I would say to my younger self would be.

[00:29:55] The world is much. Larger than you think it is. And you have so many more options than you're being told right now. Like you do not have to just like marry a man have babies you know do this one particular type of life you can pursue. Creative things you can you know things are not black and white. There are many shades of gray and rainbow and all of that fun stuff. And you should explore all of that too. The other thing I would say to my younger self is I would somehow drive home the importance of community and relationships with others because everything that I was taught was just about like sort of bootstrapping. In terms of like you know the need to be self-sufficient. I don't think that's like. There are some positives to that like I did develop some inner strength and such but I also like suffered a lot more than I needed to because I didn't have good relationships with friends with with other people. And if I could somehow like teach my child self like hey this is how you can relate with other people and you don't you know it's fine to be a little weird but also we can also like you know.

[00:31:33] Try to make friends. That's a good thing too. I would. Do that. When I when I think about you know what what I would say to someone dealing with depression and maybe some suicidal ideation it's a little challenging for me to come up with what I would say because I think the first thing that I would need to do is listen.

[00:32:12] To a lot of times. That is. A really key part of helping someone heal is really. To listen. To give empathy. To give resources. If that is what is needed.

[00:32:36] To. Provides space. For someone. And so. If I. If I'm really trying to consider what I would say to someone. It's hard for me to. Just come up with a. Sort of a. Blanket piece of advice. Because I think my first choice would be to listen because I know that. That's often what I've needed. Is to have someone to listen.

[00:33:28] For more information and to donate please visit youdontfightalone.org.

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