

Ali Schultz:

Liz and Mollie, it's great to have you back for our trifecta episode, it feels like, on *Big Feelings*, and, today we have some really big feelings to cover. As we talk about despair, so many of the facets of it. Mollie, do you wanna, do you wanna take us there?

Mollie West Duffy:

I'm gonna talk openly about a really difficult period in my life and it's still difficult for me to talk about it in some ways. But it's I think, really important that we do talk about it. I think there, there are so many stories of people having suicidal thoughts and, and acting on those thoughts, and I think those really important stories to share because those are really hard and horrific stories. And I also think it's important to share stories of people who don't act on those thoughts.

There are many people who have these thoughts and don't act on them, and yet, so often, that never gets shared because they're okay, thankfully, and they're alive and, and ... But, what that means is we don't always know how common they are.

So for me, I had never had any history of depression let alone suicidal thoughts. I went through a difficult time period in 2019. Our book had just come out. I was really burned out with dealing with that. I was dealing with some chronic injuries that were just really not going away, and I had just moved across the country. I was really lonely. I was working for a job that was remote before an- anyone else was remote. So, I was the only person who was remote.

I was dealing with some infertility, and everything just sort of snowballed. I stopped sleeping because I was having so much anxiety, and when you stop sleeping for a couple weeks, things get really hard. (laughs) Emotionally. And it just got to the point where I was like, I don't really wanna keep waking up each morning. I couldn't see how it could possibly get better. My doctors didn't know what was going on and they were like, "You shouldn't be feeling this pain." To the point where some of them didn't believe me, and some of them were just like, baffled.

I didn't know how I would get out of feeling the anxiety and depression, how I would work through the infertility issues, or how I would make friends. And when I started having those thoughts, they were really scary, because I had never had the thoughts before, and I had never talked to anyone about having these kind of thoughts. And so I immediately was ashamed of them. I, I thought, how will I ever go back to being quote-unquote, normal now that I've had these thoughts? Like, you know, is this now, this is who I am for the rest of my life and I'm always gonna, you know, have these thoughts.

So, I kept them inside for a long period of time. They just kept getting more and more intense, to the point where at the lowest of low, there was a period of time where I was like, "Okay, like, I am having these thoughts so frequently about not wanting to be alive, that maybe I should take some action on it." Thankfully I didn't, but I had started to m- like, make a plan for how I might do that.

And I just really scared myself. And so, I, I opened up to my husband and to my therapist, and thankfully, they were really supportive and, you know, my husband, while saying, you know, "It's not okay that you're, you know, you're, you want to take action on these things. Like, taking action is not okay. You know, it's okay. It's, it, it's normal for you to have these thoughts and let's talk about them, and I want you to keep telling me about them."

And my therapist sort of, put in context of, like, you know, of course, it's, you know, we, we don't want you to take action on them. But, it is okay to have the thoughts, and that, like, she described them as sort of, looking over the edge. Like, looking over, like, okay, you know, do I want to be alive? Do I want

to take action or not? And, and I, and I scared myself enough from sort of, looking over the edge, and I was like, "No, I really don't want to do that. You know, it's not that I want to kill myself. It's just that I, I really, it's hard being alive right now, and I, and I don't see an end to this."

So, I met with the therapist, like, a couple of a week. , and I say that because I think for some people that sounds like a lot, but, but that's what I needed. Like, I needed to talk to her two or three times a week to have another checkpoint, to be like, "Okay, you know, it's Tuesday. I can talk to you again about this on Thursday. It won't be a full week before we get to talk about it again."

I went on medication. It took a couple of different tries to get on the medication that helped, and that's one of the frustrating things about going through that process, is like, it takes four to six weeks for the medication to check in. And at that time, things were so bad, that it was like, I was having trouble getting through, like, an hour. And so, to think about having to, like, wait four to six weeks, seemed like a really long time. But, eventually, after a couple of tries, I found a medication that was helpful.

And the other thing that really helped was reading about other people's experience of going through moments like this I couldn't read really anything else except for people's experience of going through despair and depression. I am a huge reader. I get so much comfort in reading, and so, it was, it was also really, a sign of how bad things were for me, that I, I just couldn't concentrate on anything else. I couldn't read fiction books. I couldn't read, you know, broader nonfiction topics. Like, I could, you know, barely do my work.

What really helped was, was reading about other people's experiences, especially people who had worked through these issues, had come out the other side, and were no longer having as intense thoughts, or, or no longer were having thoughts about wanting to kill themselves. And so that's what really motivated me to write about it, was because there weren't that many of those books and I, like, read them, and re-read them over and over again and they just provided so much solace for me in that moment.

So, I'll stop there. I know I've, I've said a lot (laughs) there.

Ali Schultz:

What do you think it was in those books? Like, what ...

Mollie West Duffy:

It was people just speaking really honestly about how bad it was inside their brains at the time. And yet, also writing about it after and having the perspective of seeing that's what was going on in my mind then. But, that's not what's going on in my mind now. And like, I was able to work through those things.

I remember listening to, there's a podcast called *On Being*, which I love with Krista Tippett and she has a whole podcast that's dedicated to depression. And there's a person on it named Parker J Palmer, who some, some of your listeners may be familiar with, he's in sort of, a similar space in terms of thinking about Buddhism and adult learning and all of that.

And, and he spoke very eloquently about some deep periods of depression that he went through where the only thing that he could do, was take walks by himself in the middle of the night, when no one else was up, because he felt like even just going outside in the middle of the day was too overwhelming. Seeing other people who were more functional than him, who were, you know, going about their lives, who might look at him and might judge him, was completely overwhelming. And so, the only time that he felt safe and comfortable going outside was like, at two AM when no one else was outside.

And I was like, "Yeah. I, I really get that." Because getting out of my space was really hard, and I just felt so off track and so low, that I was triggered by everyone else, seeing everyone else around me who seemingly was, were not having the problems that I was having. , so he was just able, I think, to articulate the, like, deep isolation, the loneliness, the hopelessness that I was feeling. And yet again, like, he came out it, and he's gone through several different periods of that, and, and it took time, but, but he did work his way out of that.

And, just having that as reassurance that this wasn't like, a one-way street, was really helpful.

Ali Schultz:

I'm remembering the image in *Big Feelings*, that Liz drew about despair and despair shared. You know, like, how big despair feels when it's shared, and then of course, how, how much bigger it feels when it's shared with, like, the wrong people. What I felt like I was hearing you connect with was, oh, I'm not alone here. Like, this feels like crap inside of me. Like, the depths of despair, like, a swirling vortex of no goodness, and yet, people have done it, and they've come out the other side.

So, it's like, you had a model, you know? Or something to connect with so that you didn't feel totally isolated.

Mollie West Duffy:

Yes. Exactly. I think there are spaces where we can find inspiration for coming out of this, like, deep, dark hole. Some people turn to faith. You know, it's interesting. I had never really been a person of faith at all and I still question a lot of things, but I had started, my husband is Jewish and we had started going to temple occasionally. And that was a space where it was okay to show up and not be totally together, and it was okay to cry and it was okay to talk about, like, really difficult things.

And you know, outside of therapy, and spaces of faith, and that, you know, support groups, there's not a lot of spaces where we have to talk about these things. And so, again, like, I just think we miss out on the fact that, that many other people have gone through them, or are going through them.

And so, that's why I think, you know, the books and the shared stories were helpful, and also, just my therapist saying, "This is way more common than you realize." You know, and she as a therapist sees that, because she has access to that, and she has conversations all day with people. But, I knew that I wasn't the only one. But, you know, I was like, "Well, you know, this feels so unique and so isolating to me."

I think having those worked examples is really helpful. The other thing, and I write about this in the book, is like, you never know what small words people are gonna say that really matters. So, there ... when I was talking to my therapist in one of my sessions, I said, "You know, I just wanna give up. Like, I'm so tired. I'm just so tired of trying. I have been dealing with this pain for so long. I have no energy left to fix my life. My life is a total mess. You know, like, I just kinda wanna give up. Like, that seems like the easier option, right now."

And she said to me, "That doesn't sound like the Mollie that I know. That doesn't sound like who you actually are at your deepest level." And I thought about that a lot because I was like, "Hm, like, you know, I guess if she sees that in me, maybe I can see that in myself." Another thing we wrote about in the book was, was a therapist saying to som-, to their patient, "You know, I would really miss you if you were gone."

And just that really helped that person. Even if just one person said, "I would really miss you." Can make a life or, or death difference. So, in these moments, it's like, you're so low that you're clinging

for any sort of hope, any sort of reason and sometimes if you can't give that to yourself, like, getting it from someone else can be helpful.

Liz Fosslie:

Mollie, I know you and I have talked about, and you write about this in the book, too, that, like reaching out to people who had been through something similar. So, this is different than reading about it. But, then actually talking to people, either friends or other people you identified and this came up in a conversation with a friend recently that I had, and I'd love to hear more, I don't think I've ever heard this, is, like, how you identified those people and then, how you even broached that conversation.

Mollie West Duffy:

Well, I'm really lucky to have two friends who are therapists. (laughs) So, that was like the, the easy place to start where I was like, "Well, I, they should be open to these conversations." But even that was really hard. It took one of my friends, we hadn't talked in a couple of months. She had no idea what was going on. I texted her and I said, you know, "Hey, we haven't cat-, caught up in a while. You know, do you have a few minutes?"

And so, you know, we, we chatted and I asked her to go-, you know, it's always like, who's gonna catch the other person up first. And so, I sort of, asked her to give me her update first, because I knew that once I started giving my update, like, that was going to be the major topic of conversation. So, she sort of gave me her update and I said, you know, "I am actually calling you because things have been really hard and you know, it's hard for me to share this with you, but like, I've been feeling really low. I, I, I don't know who to reach out and talk to about this other than, you know, like, my husband and my therapist. But, you know, I, I just have been feeling really low and I've been having really dark thoughts."

And she sort of, turned on her therapist, like a sixth sense, and she was like, "Okay, you know, like, what kind of dark thoughts?" And I said, you know, "I s-, I have been having thoughts where I don't really want to be alive anymore." And I started crying, and she, you know, was sort of, like, held space for me to cry and she was very accepting and you know, she was like, you know, "I hear that. , and is it okay if I keep checking in with you about that? Is it okay if I check in with Chris, your, you know, your husband about that? I want to make sure that, like, he has the, the tools and skills to like, be able to have some of these conversations with you. I want to make sure that he's doing okay." Like, so she just sort of, took control of the conversation, at a time when I was not able to.

And that's the training you get as a therapist or a social worker. She then said, "Is it okay if I share this with a couple of our other friends, who I think you would, you would want to talk to about this?" So that I didn't have to do that work, because every time I tried to share it, I would start crying, or, or get, you know, really scared of sharing it. And so, that's something that I think, you know, if you, if you're in a friend group, you can offer to do, is that, you know, is it okay if I let some people know what you're going through so that they can reach out and be supportive.

And of course, if I had said no, she would have respected that. But, so, I didn't have to do some of the catch-up and people just called and said, you know, "Hey, I heard from this person what's going on, you know, I really care about you. Is there, you know, what can I do?" She kept checking in. There were a couple of months when she would text me every, single day. You know, and it didn't require a response, but it was just sort of, like, you know, "Hey, here's, here's what's going on in my day. You know, what's going on in your day?" Or, you know, some funny moment or something like that.

And again, it was like, I was struggling to make it through an hour of time, and so, to get that message every day was sort of, like, okay, like, yeah, like, I'm still here. And like, I'm still getting your text message the next day. Like, I'm, I woke up today and like, I'm still here.

, and then, there were other people that I just sort of, knew were not gonna get it. And so, I either just chose to not be in communication with them, or I texted them, or had a short phone call that said, "I'm really, you know, I'm not meaning to ignore you or our friendship. But, I'm in a really bad place right now. I just don't have the capacity to connect in the same way, and I hope you can understand that and have patience."

And I think that that helped save some of the friendships that otherwise would have fallen away, because I, I didn't just go radio silent. Right? I said, like, you know, "I hope you can have patience with me, but like, I just can't show up in this friendship in the same way." So they understood to some degree what was going on.

So, yeah, it was, it was a mix of those things.

Liz Fosslien:

The checking in on texting, I think is, I remember reading that when you first wrote it, (laughs) and sent me a draft, and thought that was just such a nice thing to do and we touched on this in the, in our conversation around chronic pain. But, also speaks to this. It's a nice way to show up on an ongoing basis.

Mollie West Duffy:

Yeah.

Liz Fosslien:

You know when I've gone through difficult periods, I've also had friends who just texted, you know, every couple days, said, "Hey, how are you?" And then I agree, like, the, "I'm thinking of you, no need to respond." I think creating like, I'm here, but there's no pressure. I, I think often at least, and again, probably not to the same depth but when I feel overwhelmed or depressed it sometimes can be even hard to like, send off a text message.

And so, it's really nice then, to be like, okay, there's no obligation here. It's just completely, like, no strings attached. Someone's just saying hi and saying they care.

Mollie West Duffy:

Yeah, and Liz, you know, you, you shared this example of when your father-in-law was dying of cancer and your friend reached out. Do you want to share that story of like, people reaching out with specifics?

Liz Fosslien:

Yeah, I think often what happens, which is, again, people are well very intentioned, but they'll say, like, "Let me know if you need anything." Or, "I'm here for you." And it's, this was yeah, when I, when my father-in-law was kind of, in the last days of his life, and there, you know, it was just a completely overwhelming time. And I really appreciated all of those comments. But it was also, I had no idea how people could help me.

I just, it was completely beyond my capacity to come up with anything. , and then it almost felt, I don't want to say a burden. But it was, yeah, I was just like, I have, I don't know. (laughs) I just like, can't even think about this. I appreciate it, thank you.

And so, then what one of my friends who actually had been through something really similar texted me was, she just said, "Hey, I'm thinking about you. Here are three things that you can, that I can do for you at any point. You just text me the number and I'll do that thing. Number one, I will cook you something or bake you something delicious and drop it off. Two, I will pick up the phone and I will just listen to whatever you need to talk about. Three, I will just be here to text you. So, if it's two AM, if I'm awake, you know, if you say, hey this is me doing three. I will know that it's a real priority that I should be available to text with you for like 15 minutes or 20 minutes."

And it was so hel-, like it was just such a lovely text, , because I think sometimes that is what you need. You just need a lifeline. You just need someone who you know will pick up the phone and who you can just say whatever to, and yeah, then later, a couple years later when she was going through a, or a year later, she was going through a similarly hard time. I just said, "Hey, I just want to offer you the same three things." And then it was once she called me from her car and was just really like, sobbing, and was really going through it, and you know, and it wasn't, "Hey, are you around? Is it okay?" It was just like, , we both had already kind of, set this. You just text me the number two, I know what it means. I can be here for you.

So I think when you see someone going through something really hard, also offering concrete ways that you can help, and it doesn't have to be a big thing. It really can be, you can just text me at any point, and I get it and I will be here for you. I think that can be really comforting.

Ali Schultz:

That's really amazing, it just has a little structural setup. Because I remember in some of the moments where, where I, I felt like, I don't know like, my inner world was just shattered, and I was like, picking up pieces of my psyche on the bathroom floor, on some mornings. You know? And, through some of the medications that I had through, through Lyme treatment, were not great to live through, and I am not the kind of person who really had a lot of, spent a lot of time in kind of, the dark spaces of the psyche. So, for me to arrive there was just kind of, a shocker.

But I remember how isolating it felt. How alone I felt. How I felt like I was really in a box, or, almost like I was almost being nailed in a pine box to some degree.

Liz Fosslien:

Mm-hmm.

Ali Schultz:

Throughout treatment. But, in the, in the darkest moments, like, I couldn't even reach outward, because it took so much ... Whatever capacity I had, w- was really just around whatever core functioning I needed to do, whether it was like, moving from room to room, or getting myself something to drink. But, on the inside, it was just so dark, and so painful that reaching out was so hard. And so, to have a structure like that where somebody's basically saying to you, "Hey, just, just give me, like, throw me a little, throw me a little something, and I'm gonna be there. And we know the code." That's a really amazing move because there's nothing worse, I think, than being in that hyper-compromised space on the inside and having somebody kind of, in your external world, think you can function and reason and, and ask for your own needs the way that you could if you were 100% resourced. (laughs)

And you know, it was bright and sunny, on the inside. It's, it's not. You know, you're two totally different people really.

Mollie West Duffy:

You're spending so much of your limited mental capacity just trying to make it through the day. And as you said, like, feeding yourself (laughs) getting out of bed, taking a shower. For me, it was like, a big deal if I went to the drugstore. You know, let alone, like doing work or being creative or being supportive for friends. And it is amazing, like, I, going from being a pretty productive person to experiencing deep despair was very humbling. Like, what I could have done previously in a day, versus, you know, for that couple of month period that I, what I was doing, it was like, "Wow, I, you know, I have zero motivation, I am not really doing anything." and your friends, or the people who aren't, you know, in contact with you, may not know what's going on.

And so their expectation of you is like, "Well, of course, this person should be able to call me, or go out to lunch, or you know, do their work." You know, like, they, they don't always see the, the, the decline into that space. , so that's where I think, yeah, like, if you can let a few people into what's going on, it doesn't need to your whole extended family or friend group or colleagues, but you know, let a few people in so they know how bad things are, and they can step in to be helpful in some way and automate some of that, it is easier.

And that's why, you know, again, like, I just, I didn't need to catch my therapist up. My therapist knew exactly how bad things were. So, talking to her two to three times a week was really helpful, because I didn't need to like, prepare for it.

And then once this one friend knew, like, she knew how bad it was. And so, again, like, it was, it was less work to sort of text with her and be like, "Yeah, I'm having a really bad day. You know, it's been really hard this morning." Versus the energy that it would take to catch someone else up to how bad things were. So yeah, I think that's a good point.

And, you know, I think one of the things that helped me get out of it, I mean, medication, therapy, time, reading other people's experience. But also just setting really small intentions. And that's what we talk about in the book. It's like, one of the scariest parts about sliding into despair, is its like, well what is rock bottom for me? I don't know what it is, and like, you know, when you're sort of, going down into it, it's like, well every day is worse than before, where you're like, "I'm not having more suicidal thoughts, more frequently, more intensely. I'm able to do less work. , you know, I'm crying more times a day." Like, it's just like, it gets worse and worse and worse and worse. And you're like, "I don't know what the bottom is. I don't know when I'm gonna hit the bottom or what that's gonna look like for me."

And doing things that help pull you out of that, even if they are very small is the way to turn that around. So, for me, I mentioned going to the drugstore. I mean, it sounds like a small thing, but it was like, "Okay, I got out of bed today and I drove to the drugstore, and I bought myself something." Or, I took a shower. Or, I watched something on TV and I managed to not cry for an hour while I was watching something on TV. I mean, we're talking like, baby, baby, baby steps.

And those things do add up over time, and start to push back against some of the other really pressing thoughts, s- scary thoughts, and very slowly, you go from having ... I was having the thoughts, like, hourly, to like, a few times a day, to once a day, then once a week and like, you know, over the course of three or four months, things did get significantly better. They weren't all the way better, but they got a lot better, and then, it was like, another year or so of, of really like, slowly coming out of the depth.

And, that was the thing that I didn't know. Like, when I was in the, at rock bottom, it was like, "Well, how can I possibly turn this around?" And now, looking back, I can see, like, okay, it was these like, really small actions which do take a lot of energy. But over time, add up.

Liz Fosslien:

One of the things we write about in the book, too, Mollie, that I think you're s- like, speaking to a bit, is also, I think we all hold, often without even knowing it, just this idea of where we should be in life, and the path that we should be on, and I'm sure even now I have s-, plans that I haven't really articulated or I'm not conscious about for like, my next six months, my next year, what I want that to look like.

And so I think it's also, obviously, plans are great, goals can be very motivating. , but in those really hard moments or periods even, just accepting that, like, the most important thing is to get through it, and letting go of the pressure to have achieved a certain something, to be in a certain place because of your age, because of your privilege, because of your whatever it might be.

I think we often layer on top of the thing we're going through, I shouldn't feel like this, or what about this plan, what about this path that I'm supposed to be on? And then, Mollie, I know you write too, how, kind of having to, and this is, I think again, really goes back to issues around chronic pain, or when you lose a big part of your identity that you thought was sort of, fixed, and you would never have to let go of. It gives you a lot more empathy for people who are in different places, or who will eventually go through something similar, even if they haven't yet.

Mollie West Duffy:

Yeah, I think for me it was finding places to be and people to be around that it was okay for me to be quote-unquote, off track and I think the more that, you know, you, you work up into the years of your life, if you are so lucky, like, you realize lots of people get off track at many different times, and, and the idea of being on track you know, is not very helpful.

But, for me, that meant being around people who were dealing with other types of illness, and pain, I went to our local pool, our community pool in Los Angeles, where a lot of people go for healing purposes, whether they're healing from some sort of injury or they're dealing with anxiety and depression. Like, just being in the water is very healing.

And so, I connected with a lot of people there who were totally on different life paths. You know, there's a, there was a woman who had never married, never had children, you know, always lived very independently, who I became very close with. , people from just tons of walks of life who I wouldn't have met through my work or friend group, and, and those were really nice spaces to be in. To be around people and not feel lonely, but also to not feel like, okay, everyone I talk to doesn't understand what I'm going through, or they're supposedly on track with their life. So finding those spaces and people to be with can be helpful.

Liz Fosslien:

I think what's, I've found really nice is also just intergenerational friendships and groups to be part of, which I think we have lost somewhat in the modern world, where if you live in a big city, everyone's you know, in, in a similar age group, life experience. And I think then, it's really easy to feel off track because again, you're holding yourself against people who are just in similar places.

So during the pandemic, my husband and I live on this little alley in San Francisco and we've become really, really close with a lot of people who have lived here and have lived here for, I don't know, 30-plus years. So they're older than my husband and I are, and I think in a city like San Francisco, which is

really transient, it's rare to have this sort of, deep-seated community of people. , and it's just been so nice. (laughs) Because you know, in the first year that my husband and I were dating we went to 17 weddings and just to be with people who, you know, some of their friends have gotten divorced.

Like, it, it's just a different, it just puts into perspective that people's lives take all these different forms. Things happen to people at very different times. And that's actually totally normal. , and so I have found it just really reassuring also to be around people who, yeah, I think are just, maybe more established in their careers or I don't know, are just like, yeah, it's not the most important thing in the world (laughs). You just need to chill out. Why are you freaking out?

One of my neighbors said to me ...

Mollie West Duffy:

(laughs)

Liz Fosslien:

...She said, "Everyone says that your 20s are terrible. But your 30s are terrible, too, because you're forced to make all these really big decisions and everything feels like it's gonna be the rest of your life." And then, as time goes on, you realize that it's not the rest of your life, and you, there's still all this potential for change and growth and new things to happen.

, so those have been just really magical friendships, that I find very comforting, too. But it's not, it's just a, it's a perspective that I think is really, really valuable to have. , and probably that my parents have, but I just don't listen to them. (laughs) So ...It's nice if someone else reiterates.

Mollie West Duffy:

Another thing I'll share about, you know, just despair in general. I think w- we see this happen, like, you know, when, when you hear about celebrities going through difficult times and you're like, "But, they're a celebrity. They have so much money. Like, they're famous. How could they possibly be dealing with this?" And I think to the outside perspective, so to people who didn't, who weren't very close in touch with me throughout that time period, things looked like they were going really well. Right?

Like, so Liz and I had written a book. It did really well. I started a new job. , I had moved across the country. I had stopped posting, I had stopped going on social media and stopped posting on social media. But, Liz and I share an account the, @LizandMollie account. So, that was still active, and so I think for many people it was like, "Wow, like, things are going really well for her." You know, like, why would they not be?

, and since the book has come out, and, and people have read this, they're very surprised that, like, that I went through this, and I've also been really surprised about people who have reached out to me, former colleagues, cousins who have said, you know, "Thank you so much for writing about this. I went through a really similar experience. You know, it wasn't exactly the same, but like, I had a period of deep despair in my late 20s." Or, "I am dealing with a chronic health issue that caused me to, you know, not wanna live and I, I had similar thoughts." And so, you just never know, and I know that sounds very trite, but like, you just really don't know what someone else is going through, by, based on what they're posting on LinkedIn, what they're posting on social media.

And it is, that makes it I think even more isolating, like, when it's like, well not only am I going through this thing, and it feels like, you know, I don't have a lot of people who are going through it with

me, but like, people don't even know that I'm going through it. , adds to that level, , of feeling disconnected.

And, and so, one of the things that, that helped and again, this sounds sort of, woo-woo, but I did a lot like, where I was falling asleep and I, in moments of, of like, deep despair, my brain kept cycling through like, you know, you're worthless. You shouldn't be alive. Nothing's going on track. You know, you're not being a helpful spouse. You're not being a helpful daughter or sister. You're barely showing up at work. You know, it's like, blah, blah, blah, keeps going.

And, I think one of the things that helped me was connecting to like, a deeper or broader sense of the suffering in the world. So, it's like, you know, how do I have the strength to go on when I have no strength? You know, where do I turn to for patience to keep going with my life when I've totally run out of patience, and the end is nowhere in sight? And somehow, like, connecting on a deeper or spiritual level to other people who are suffering in the world, even though I didn't know them. So, other people who were sick or other people who were living on the streets or dealing with other crises. Like, I would sort of tune in to them and feel a connection across the world, and feel less alone.

And I know that sounds strange. , but, that was very comforting and I would do that a lot of the nights when I was, like, having trouble falling asleep. , so I, you know, I think you can find a sense of that connection even just beyond the people in your own community.

Liz Fosslien:

Yeah, I like that you frame it as connect, 'cause this is also in the book, and Mollie, I think is something your friend said to you, where she said, "Suffering is suffering" and so it's a nice example of finding that connection but without using as a way to make yourself feel worse. Of these people who have it so much worse than I do, how could I even be feeling badly? And I think this goes similarly to what you were saying about people's perception of us. , yeah, I just, I've come back to that a lot. That suffering is suffering, no matter where you are.

And I think a really important step to feeling better is removing that layer of, I shouldn't be feeling this, because that, that's just suppression and it's not really helpful. Like, you feel what you feel. Sometimes it's situational, and sometimes it's just your brain chemistry is firing off, I don't want to say the wrong thing, but it's misfiring. And that's gonna make you feel terrible even if your circumstances seem really wonderful relative to someone else's. So, I think that's also really, a really important message for people to hear.

Ali Schultz:

I think the word humanity kind of keeps popping into my mind. , over the last few minutes, as, as I've been listening to you kind of, talk about this, especially in terms of we all have this perception of you know, the person next door, or you know, our friends, or our colleagues or the celebrity, the latest celebrity in the news. Right? And at the core, behind, behind all the, the glossy pages and the headlines and all those kinds of performative pieces and the projection screen, you know, there's a real human in there. And, yes, suffering is suffering. And on many levels, like, we all have it. And, chronic pain, the depths of despair, like, it's like the super leveling experience where, like it pierces through, kind of, all the superficial layers in which we connect with each other.

Or think we connect with each other. Right? Or see each other even. And yet, to be able to see someone, or be with someone in that space, the same way, you know, your friend, Liz was giving you that really awesome, like, text structure of choose one through three. I'm available for any at any time. Right?

Like, to be able to be with someone in that space is to kind of cut through, so much, kind of, droughts and to really connect with, I think, just the core of being human. But just to be with someone. , with zero expectations, no guilt, no obligations, no shame, no blame. None of that. It's just like, here I am. I feel like extreme crap right now. My life feels like it's a melted pile of goo. , and just still have someone be there for you and to say, "Hey, I see you. I know you're not this. But here we are."

And sometimes that is all you need.

Mollie West Duffy:

I think we put a lot of pressure on ourselves to show up as valuable and, you know, this touches on a couple of other topics. But, I really struggled with like, well, why is my worth living if I don't feel like I'm being a good partner, or a good friend, or a good family member or a good worker, or you know, able to do the things that I used to be able to do.

And that I think is how friends can really show up, which is like, no, like, even without all of that, I still want to be your friend, and this is a phase of our friendship and you will be there for me later when I'm dealing with this, just like I'm here for you. And there are lots of ups and downs.

Liz Fosslien:

What came to mind was, I remember ... So, I for context, grew up in a very emotionally suppressed household, where any big display of emotion was, it essentially didn't happen. And on the rare occasions it did, it was very destabilizing and terrifying.

, and so, I, I would say in my early 20s, both at work but then, all-, in my personal relationships as well, kinda going back to what Mollie said, where we feel like we have to show up as valuable. I really thought I had to show up as perfect, as I, you know, I could never show that I was anxious. I just always had to have everything put together, and that was why someone would love me.

And truly, one of the most transformative moments was in my late 20s and I was dating someone when I lived in New York, , and I remember one night, I had a complete panic attack. I mean, I was just, like, freaking out. I don't even remember what caused it, but I was in my opinion, at the time, the worst version of myself. And I could not calm down.

And I remember waking up the next day, and I was just, I really was like, okay, that relationship is over. , you know, there's no coming back from this, and my boyfriend at the time, yeah, he just, came over the next day, acted like nothing was wrong, and I was floored. And then, he said, "You know, that's just a part of you. We all have panic attacks. It doesn't negate everything else that I like about you. You probably could see a therapist, and there's some things you could do, (laughs), to feel better, that I want you to do, just for you." But, it hadn't even occurred to him that we would not be dating after that.

And to me that was, like, transformational. That it was, a, a moment of who I was, as opposed to destroying every good part of me, which is how I was seeing it. , and I, and I think that, I just still think back to that, and now, I try to do that for friends. And in my, you know, with my husband. , it is, it's so powerful to have someone, and not only powerful, but reassuring to have someone say, "Yeah, you know, this probably isn't you at your best." They don't sugarcoat it, or yes, you're feeling terrible, , and I want to be here to help you. But, you're still all these other wonderful parts of yourself. Those still exist, and this is the whole of who you are, and I'm just here for the whole of you.

I think is just, it's like, we so rarely get that message, that it's really life changing when we do.

Ali Schultz:

And I would say that, that level of , presence and being without needing anything from each other, is , so healing. For both parties. You know, because it is the, "I am here. And you are there. And here we are. But we're all okay. I don't need anything from you, you don't need anything from me."

Mollie West Duffy:

Mm-hmm.

Ali Schultz:

We're just okay, with each other. And even something, it seems so simple, is that can be so profound.

Mollie West Duffy:

Hm.

Ali Schultz:

Especially if our nervous systems haven't known that growing up. You know? And we've known the alternative, where we always had to perform. We always had to be doing something for something else, or saving someone or being emotionally available for someone, whatever, I don't know, the pattern was in the family dynamic. But, but to just be, and to be with someone is, I think it's so healing.

Is there, is there anything else that we feel like we want to touch on, to kind of, wrap up?

Mollie West Duffy:

I would love to end by just saying, despair actually was not clinically defined until 2020, so there are seven indicators of despair. Feeling hopeless, having low self esteem, feeling unloved, worrying frequently, loneliness, helplessness and feeling sorry for one's self. And so, some of those do overlap with the diagnostic criteria for major depression or generalized anxiety disorder. But, the last three, so, loneliness, helplessness and feeling sorry for one's self, are not symptoms of any other psychiatric disorder.

So, despair involves feeling depressed and anxious and then piling on hopeless, lonely, unloved, helpless, sorry for yourself. And that really pushes you into the intensity of despair. Depression is really hard. , and despair takes depression and like, ratchets it up, a little bit.

If you are experiencing despair, or suicidal thoughts, I just want you to know that it is possible to work through those thoughts. I am a living, breathing example of that, and it does take a lot of work. As I mentioned, therapy, medication, time, small actions. But, it's possible, and then, the other thing is, if you have someone in your life who is in the middle of that, to not worry about bringing it up. Right?

So, sometimes we think like, we're gonna plant the idea of, in the person's head. And the person's already thinking about it. If, if they brought it to you, they're already thinking about it and you're not gonna make them think about it more. , and, and really the best thing you can do is, is be open to talking about it. Of course say, you know, I, it's not okay for you to take action on this, and make sure that they're getting the mental health support that they need. But, to, to make it an okay thing to talk about.

You know, as long as there's no imminent danger, , to just say, "I want to stay in conversation about this. Is it okay if I keep checking in with you about this?", can be the most helpful thing to do.

Ali Schultz:

Thank you for that. I'm so glad you made it through. I'm so glad you're here.

Mollie West Duffy:

Thank you. You too.

Ali Schultz:

I know this, this topic isn't the brightest and the sunniest. But, I think, talking about it just helps us normalize it, because as, as you said, it's, it's not that these feelings aren't under the surface for a lot of folks. They're on the surface for a lot of folks, and I love that we just kind of dove in and gave it some good air time because I hope it helps other people feel less alone.

Mollie West Duffy:

Well, thanks for letting us talk about it.

Ali Schultz:

Yeah.

Liz Fosslien:

Yeah.

Ali Schultz:

Thank you both.