

Stigma Silenced [Stories Spoken]: A Mental Health Podcast

Episode 6: Validation, and the Survivor it Created

Speakers:

Adam Potter (AP) - He/Him

Bailey Patterson (BP) - She/Her, Host

Jessica Austin, - She/Her, Guest

(Introduction Music)

Adam Potter

Welcome back to Stigma Silenced: Stories Spoken a Mental Health Podcast. This episode is part one of a two-part interview with Jessica Austin. In this episode, Jessica shares her story about the impacts of Munchausen by proxy and the effects of abuse related trauma on her life.

This podcast contains major themes of trauma, child abuse, self harm, medical abuse and suicide. Keep your own body-mind in consideration when listening.

Bailey Patterson

The views and opinions expressed in this podcast are that of the guest speakers, and do not necessarily reflect the views, positions, or opinions of The University of Kentucky, The Human Development Institute, or any related entities.

Jessica

My name is Jessica. I'm a non traditional college student. I'm 34 and I'm actually graduating this year, so it's an exciting time. I'm majoring in psychology and sociology, so I'm a dual degree, and currently I'm applying to my PhD in Clinical Psychology. My main focus is assessment and therapy, but I want to be trauma informed, so I want to do trauma informed therapy and recovery with adolescents. So for the longest time, I wouldn't accept the word victim, and I think that's really important to say, because they had to kind of move my therapeutic team kind of had to move into using the term survivor, and I wouldn't even accept that for the longest time. So it took about five years for me to accept the word survivor. And so that goes along with my mental health, because with the term survivor came a few diagnoses. I'm diagnosed with PTSD. Well, CPTSD, which is complex post traumatic stress disorder, a panic disorder, an anxiety disorder and major depressive disorder on top of ADHD. So I don't, honestly, I don't really use a lot of language, because I don't really talk about it a lot, and if I do talk about it, it's

just, hey, I survived this. And even that's uncomfortable for me to say to you right now, so I'm still dealing with that.

Bailey Patterson

Yeah, going into you mentioned that you received some diagnoses. Do you want to talk a little bit about how those diagnoses came to be? Like what was your journey in reaching those

Jessica

It's a little long, so you can do what you need to do with it. Growing up, my childhood wasn't normal, but I didn't realize at the time that it wasn't normal, and I probably didn't realize that until I was about 20 to 25 my mother used psychotropic medication and diagnoses in essentially, the term is "Doctor shopped" in order to get a diagnosis. From the moment, I was six, about five or six years old, and used the medication that they would give... because they couldn't ever come up with a like the right diagnosis, if that makes sense, they couldn't. It was constantly one psychiatrist after another, because it was fabricated, and so I constantly... I was constantly on a lot of different medications, and eventually something we really don't do now, but I was diagnosed, "diagnosed" with bipolar disorder at the age of eight. We really don't touch that now, until after at least 18. But back in the 90s, it was kind of this, you know, it was kind of being over diagnosed, and with it comes... oh, my goodness, I'm sorry... a very strong medication, lithium, and a lot of other different types of medication. And at the time, we didn't have what we have now, we don't have the gene site testing that determines what's best for your makeup, like the medications we... we didn't have any of that. So essentially, I was a guinea pig. And starting from an early age, that was my life. I had IEPs in school. I was placed in, sorry, I was placed in special education classes when I didn't need them, it was pretty embarrassing, but like now that I look back on it because my mother... we don't have a relationship now, but being in the field that I'm in, I know that she has some internal issues that will need to you know, that's hers to deal with, but she used it for attention, and it's a very complicated situation growing up like that, because the type of relationship you have With your caregiver is, how do I put it conditional? Um, so I didn't, as long as I was making her happy, I was on good terms if I wasn't doing what she wanted me to do with the doctors or the providers and saying what she wanted me to say, my life wouldn't be great at home, I dealt with physical abuse, a lot of emotional abuse, but to this day, honestly, I would I preferred the physical abuse over the emotional abuse, because I think the emotional abuse is what led to the diagnoses. Early on, when I was about 20 to 25 I just started realizing that I started becoming afraid of going and talking to doctors and telling them exactly what's going on with me, because I was kind of reaching out for help, because I was struggling with depression. I was struggling with self harm, in the sense that I didn't want... I didn't want to die, I wanted to stop the pain so but I was petrified to tell the doctors that that was happening because of my upbringing, you know, because as long as I was speaking, you know, I was telling the doctors that, you know, going along with her story, saying, you know, I was bad at home. I was... I was kind of "out of control" were her words, which, in reality, I wasn't. But in order to keep those medications flowing, in order to keep that attention coming, that it

had to be that, but when, in reality, I was struggling with self harm and issues with my individuality and figuring out who I was, because I didn't get to have that normal adolescence that everyone else seems to have. You know, where they get to determine what they like, what they don't like, who their friends are, who their who they align better with. And I didn't get that because I was constantly missing school. I was constantly just... it was a battle. And so I think all that came in my... my middle 20s, because I hadn't had it, and I was struggling with who I was, and I just kind of collapsed one day, you know, I was really struggling with life in general, even though I shouldn't have, my life kind of slowed down. I was settled. I had bought a house, which is kind of out of the realm for today's world. And things should have been going good, but once they kind of got quiet, I broke and when I say that, I became very, very depressed. I felt like it's this type of anxiety where it feels like it's coming from within. You know, I the way I explain it to people is that I felt like not literal bugs, but I just felt like there was this crawling under my skin. There was one point where I was really struggling, and I ended up taking all my clothes off, crying in my bedroom with a towel on, and I remember thinking, what is happening to you right now? I remember feeling pain, like immense pain, and I just felt like there was no point in me being here, even though, at the same time it was like a battle, an internal battle with my own brain. Um, one side, one side of me is like, you're everything's going great. The other side was like, you just... you are worthless. You deserve to be... you know, nobody wants you in their life. You're a burden. And that was the moment it clicked. And I was like, I'm going to kill myself. Am I allowed to say that?

Bailey Patterson

Yeah, you can say that.

Jessica

Okay. And that was the moment I called and: I ended up getting an intake and out of there a place in Eastern Kentucky where I was living, and they got me in with a clinical social worker who I see to this day. And I walked in, I sat down, and she said, tell me what's going on. You know, like you started asking me the questions. And I said, Look, I'm going to tell you something, and you could put me in the hospital if you want to. And I said, I want to hurt myself. I have hurt myself. And she, after hearing my story, she was, why would I put you in the hospital? And it was that moment that I kind of felt validated. My pain felt validated. And I've worked with her for about seven years now. We've developed a really good therapeutic relationship, and she's... she's helped me through. A lot of hard times, but essentially you ask why, like, how it... how my past led up to this, and I think it was the loss of individuality, and it was essentially living in... it felt like captivity. Now that I look back on it, and I mean PTSD alone is really, really hard to deal with and live with, and then I have panic attacks too, and I mean little like, I still don't know all my triggers, and I think that's something that I struggle when I hear other people talk about triggers, you know, because it's become such a... a word that's thrown around on social media within the political atmosphere, and it's a real thing for a lot of people, and it's become so I don't know the word is just it's lost. I feel like it's lost its meaning because of what's

happened. And so when even I say triggers, I'm like, "Oh no. And what am I doing here" But I do. I have a list of triggers that I have to continuously add to so that I can not necessarily avoid but know what to work on still at 34. One is... I didn't even know it until it happened, I was in Kroger, and I was finishing up my grocery shopping. I was in self checkout, and a woman started yelling at her children, and because she had the tone of voice that my mother would use towards us, I guess that's what triggered me, and not necessarily me, my nervous system, to thinking I was in danger. And I was perfectly fine leading up to that, but at that moment, I started to shake, and I started to start to cry, and I felt like I needed to run. And thankfully, my boyfriend was with me. He finished it all up, and we got through the double doors of Kroger, and I just lost it. I was shaking, I was crying, and I had to really work with my providers to break down this situation that should be something that I should be able to go through. Do you know what I mean? I'm sorry if I'm talking too much tell me.

Bailey Patterson

Not at all.

Jessica

I don't know how to do this. I'm just going into a lot of stuff I have a lot.

Bailey Patterson

Yeah, well, thank you for sharing everything you've shared thus far. And there's no limit on how much you can talk. You're fine. But yeah, thank you for sharing that much that really that like, illuminates, like, a whole timeline of topics that are very pressing.

Jessica

Yeah, there's a lot, yeah, and it's, I think that's why I'm in the field that I'm in, because I've worked really, really hard to heal myself, heal, you know, stop the generational trauma, because with this type of abuse, it didn't start with my mom. You know, it had to start generations back. There's there's... there's depression, or there's something that is just, it's where it's, it's more than that. It's, it's hard to actually get those definitive answers, and I will never get those answers, and that's something that I've had to learn in this whole process. I think that's, I think that's something that a lot of people who are abused and it affects their lives deal with, is that they want that "I'm sorry", or they want that validation from their actual abuser, and that's something that most likely will never come, and that's something we have to learn to externalize in the sense that it's not our fault, it's their fault, and we need to be able to tell ourselves that and move forward and write our own story.

Bailey Patterson

Yeah.

Jessica

And that's something that I... I see a lot within my friends or within people that I help advise. There's a lot of people that seem to blame themselves for the abuse that they go through, not even just physical abuse growing up, but sexual abuse. And I've seen a lot with women, they blame themselves for sexual abuse, or it's just it's that internalizing the abuse, like what is wrong with me, not what is wrong with the person who abused me, you know, and that's been my biggest struggle thus far. Like to this day, I... I still mourn for a mom, not my mom, I would love for her to be different. Sorry.

Bailey Patterson

No, go ahead.

Jessica

I'm 34 and I still want to call my mom, but she's not there to call emotionally, if you know what I'm saying, I've even kind of self sabotaged in the sense that I will reach out randomly over the years, and recently I went to a conference to present research, and I was like, I actually kind of was weak, and I sent a text message, and I didn't get a happy response. It was more so talking about herself, and I hadn't spoken to her in about two years. So it wasn't... she doesn't know what grade I'm in in schools, or, like, what where I'm at in my education, she doesn't know where I'm at in my life. And she chose to talk about herself, you know, and it's that... that mourning, it's care about me. So it's led to, you know, the mate, probably the major depression, um, internalized guilt. For I'm saying this to you now, but for no reason, because I shouldn't feel guilty, but I feel immense guilt, like something is internally wrong with me, that I'm not capable of being loved by my parent, and that's what it did. I think that's what the abuse did.

Bailey Patterson

Yeah, thank you for sharing. You know when, when you talk about feeling like the guilt and tracing your journey with mental health back to abuse that you've been through, do you feel like that those experiences are embraced within community of other people who have suffered with their mental health? Or do you, do struggle finding community at all? Do you feel like that's not embraced? It's kind of a different experience? What... how do you feel around finding community and talking about your experiences with others?

Jessica

Up until college, it was really hard, um, and that's why I wanted to do this because it's, I think it's, it doesn't matter what age you are. I found that those in college campus who I've decided to open up to, because it's very hard to open up, they became some of my best friends, and I was able to find that community there, and it took me 10 plus years to find that community, and it happened At EKU, and it's just I started slowly, you know, I went to I went to school, and I was like, I'm not going to talk about

this. I'm, I'm just gonna let people get me, get to know me for me. I don't want any kind of back history, you know, determine, like, judgment, you know, you deal with a lot of judgment. And I started, I'm obviously in psychology, so the first time I spoke about my trauma, it was this very welcoming class on campus, and there was a very intimate class, because there was only about 10 of us, and it was actually introduction to interviewing, and so clinical interviewing, and it took one of my good friends to get up and talk about his autism. And you know, some history that he had with that, with his diagnosis, and I came home and I looked at my boyfriend, I said, "I think I'm going to talk to them about my past." And I did the next day, and I was shaking. And at the end of that class, I'm so sorry, but at the end of that class, my classmates, they all got up and they all came and we all hugged, and that's when I felt like unity in my trauma and not not everybody's trauma is the same, but or what they've gone through, and life's hard, but at that moment, I felt accepted.

Bailey Patterson:

Thank you so much for listening to this episode of Stigma Silenced. If you would like to learn more about our podcast and subscribe for future episodes, please visit our website at hdi.uky.edu/stigmasilenced.