

Catching YOUR Memories

THE PODCAST

WITH DIANE ATWOOD

A conversation with Christina Erde, published on October 10, 2022

Diane Atwood: Hey everyone, this is Diane Atwood, and you are listening to the *Catching Your Memories* podcast. Everybody has an inspiring story, a memory, or an experience to share if only someone would ask. That's where I come in. In this episode, I have a conversation with Christina Erde, who has struggled with mental health issues ever since she was a child, beginning with crippling anxiety.

As she entered adulthood, she began to also experience serious depression. For many years, Christina's life was like a roller coaster. So, too, was her family's, as they tried to understand and cope with what was happening at any given moment. She's in a good place now, married for 16 years, and the mother of two sons, eight and 10. She was also recently chosen Mrs. Maine American 2022.

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Christina is a volunteer speaker and an affiliate committee member with NAMI Maine – The National Alliance on Mental Illness. She also uses her platform as Mrs. Maine American to help educate, raise awareness, and break the stigma of mental illness. In our interview, you will learn what was at the root of Christina's mental health issues and how she was finally able to become her own best advocate and then share her story in the hopes of helping others.

Welcome, Christina, to the *Catching Your Memories* podcast. I so appreciate that you're here today with us to share your story, which is pretty powerful.

Christina Erde: Thank you so much for having me today.

Diane Atwood: Absolutely. I'd like to start with right now. How are you doing? What is your life like today?

Christina Erde: I'm doing really well, definitely. I think my story has made me into the person I am today. Going through what I've been through was definitely difficult, but I've learned so much and am really hoping to be able to help others through sharing my story. So, that's my main goal.

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Diane Atwood: Okay. I was going to say, why are you sharing your story but you want to help others, but does it help you as well to be sharing it? Have you learned things about yourself as you go out and share your personal story?

Christina Erde: Definitely. Yeah. It's kind of neat because as I'm sharing mine, people feel that they're able to share theirs as well. So, kind of neat seeing similarities, but also some things that other people have done that have helped them in turn, I've actually used some of those things. So yeah, I think I've even found somewhat of a community with, as far as even in my support group that I'm a part of, especially. But even in other people that I've met, either through Facebook or wherever they've heard my story, and they've ended up sharing a little bit about themselves. It's just really helped me continue to keep going and continue on my road to recovery.

Diane Atwood: Well, let's go back to the beginning of your story. Where does your story begin?

Christina Erde: You know, I started struggling with anxiety when I was a child. I had a really difficult time separating from my parents, especially when my friends would invite me to sleepover slumber parties, I was way too anxious to

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end up going, and so I often would miss out on some fun things that my friends would be doing. And whenever there was a change in our schedule, it would definitely bring on a lot of anxiety, and so I really began to feel like somewhat of an outcast in my family, you know. Like, why don't my siblings feel the same way? And I remember my sister, I would have times where I couldn't sleep. My sister and I grew up sharing a room, and I'd wake her up and be like, you know, I just can't sleep, and I'm nervous. And she was just like, I don't know what to do or what to tell you. So, it was really hard, kind of feeling like the odd duck of the family. But as I grew up and right before I started college, my mom finally kind of helped me go see a doctor and talk more about it. I think for a long time she tried her best to help me herself. So, just realizing that I needed more help was a really good thing that she helped me do. So, I'm really grateful to her for that.

Diane Atwood: But it took all those years to realize that this was more serious than everybody thought it might be.

Christina Erde: Mhm. Yeah.

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Diane Atwood: Describe your family. You have siblings. How many of you are there?

Christina Erde: Yes, I have an older brother and two younger sisters. I'm a middle child, and then my younger sister, we're all two years apart, so the three of us grew up together, and then my parents had another, my little, little sister when I was in high school. So, that was like a whole new thing of, we had this new baby in the house and it was really fun, but it was also kind of definitely different. She felt a little more like a niece or a cousin or something than my sister. But she's 20 now, so as we've grown up, she's brought so much joy to our family. She's kept my parents young, as they say, and so, yeah.

Diane Atwood: And you mentioned that nobody else in the family had the same feelings of anxiety that you had. Even now, looking back at, say, grandparents or aunts and uncles, nobody else had these kinds of symptoms?

Christina Erde: My grandfather on my mom's side definitely struggled with anxiety and depression. I don't think he was ever formally diagnosed with anything but definitely went through some times where he experienced some dark times. I know my mom has told me. And then on my dad's side of the

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family, my grandfather also struggled with some anxiety. So, it's definitely within the family. I know, for my siblings, my little sister, the 20-year-old, she does struggle a bit with anxiety as well, and she's getting some therapy for herself. And it's really good that I can kind of help her through her transition into adulthood. I know that was really difficult for me, so being able to be there for her has helped. But until she was, I think, she was around the same age as me, I would say maybe 8-9 years old, I started to notice some things that I was like, uh, I remember struggling with that, so I would talk to her about it. At that time, I was in my late 20s, early 30s, and that's when I felt like maybe I can use my experience to help her. But up until then, no, I really felt like the odd one out of the family.

Diane Atwood: So what's that term? 2020 hindsight? The things we wish we knew. What do you wish as an adult now, that could have been a response, say, from your parents way back when? Like, what are some of those things that you've noticed in your little sister that your parents maybe didn't pick up on?

Christina Erde: Yeah, it's almost if you don't go through something, it's harder to relate to someone that is experiencing it. And I think because my mom doesn't struggle as much with it as maybe my sister and I do, it's a little bit

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harder for her to relate and be able to pick up on things. I know she definitely still picks up on a lot just through her own struggles. I think we all have mental health that we need to address and take care of our mental health just as much as our physical health. My dad and mom both, I think, at times struggle with their mental health, like we all do, I think. But I think it's a little bit more difficult for them to pick up on those signs because they might not have gone through it the same. I don't know if that makes sense.

Diane Atwood: So what are some of those subtle signs that now you pick up on and other people, like your sister?

Christina Erde: I noticed, especially when she would come over to my house and stay the night, she would start to get really anxious around bedtime. Where am I going to be sleeping? What she needed to have, certain things, certain ways. And I remember as a child myself, everything had to have a place, and if it didn't, I was very anxious about it. And so that's why staying elsewhere outside of my own home was so difficult. So I noticed that type of a sign in her, as well as just the need for controlling as much as she could around her. And it's very hard, especially, I think, as a child, we don't have much control because we're still growing and we need to look to our parents and other caregivers in our life

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to guide us and help us make decisions. We don't have as much control, and I think for some children it's really hard. I actually recognize a little bit of that in my youngest son, just for certain things, it's really hard for him to give up control. And that is a sign of anxiety. Just really trying to control your surroundings is, I think, something that I definitely pick up on in others now as a sign.

Diane Atwood: Is that something you could even pick up in say, a very young child?

Christina Erde: You know, it can be really difficult, especially toddlers going through that like terrible twos and threes. Is it that or is it anxiety? And it can be really difficult. And I think as children grow older, those signs will definitely become more prominent or you'll notice them more if they do struggle.

Looking back, my two boys were very opposite in personality. My older one is a lot more like my husband, very laid back, go with the flow. And my younger one is a lot more like me, likes to plan and likes to know what's going to happen. And so, looking back, comparing the two, my younger one really was kind of like, oh, is this his personality? Maybe he just has a stronger personality than my firstborn. As he was going through his toddler years of really being that

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stubborn, we would call him our wild one. He was just, he has a lot of energy. We did struggle for a little while of trying to figure out how to get through those toddler years.

Diane Atwood: I'm curious now about you. As you moved into your teenage years, did more signs of anxiety or different signs of anxiety become apparent? Did things become even more challenging?

Christina Erde: Definitely, I think they did become more challenging and also a little more easier at the same time. And I think that's because I was growing up and I had a little more freedom, so I felt a little more in control, which eased the anxiety. However, I didn't really know how to make, let's say, like, healthy choices of ways to cope with the anxiety. So, for a little bit of a time period, just kind of, uh, experimented with the wrong crowd and just was, like, wanting to feel accepted. And so it was a bit of both. And then going into college, that was, I think, when I really began to struggle with the transition into adulthood and what am I going to do with the rest of my life?

Diane Atwood: So going into college was a challenging transition for you. And, of course, the security of your own home, your own room, your own bed has

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suddenly been taken away from you. And on top of that, though, you were probably excited about being on your own.

Christina Erde: Yeah, that definitely was part of it. And I think the feelings of, the overwhelming feelings of what am I going to do with my life sort of took away from the excitement of, I think, what most people experience as they're starting college. And so that definitely was a little difficult.

Diane Atwood: You mentioned that your mother had taken you to a therapist or found a therapist for you. Was that before you went to college or when you were in college?

Christina Erde: That was right as I was starting, yeah. So I did a semester of college. And during that first semester, I just really struggled. And so that's when I went to the doctor with her. And that was the first time I was prescribed some medication. And so that began my journey with medication and therapy. I think I saw my very first therapist at that time as well.

Diane Atwood: Can you describe what it was like for you that made her want to take you to the doctor? Were you having symptoms that you'd never had before?

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Christina Erde: I think I was just at a point of desperation where I just, like, I feel so crummy that I need something to help me, and I don't want to feel like this and live like this. So, I think I definitely was at a point where I wanted help, and so I was really looking forward to figuring out what was going on. So, yeah, that definitely played a part in that.

Diane Atwood: And what do you mean about feeling so crummy?

Christina Erde: I had just such a hard time getting out of bed, eating. I just was sad all the time, and I didn't know why. I just thought maybe I'm just overwhelmed and stressed with college, but it just was just all these emotions, and I felt like I could never catch a break. It was always feeling like I had to put on a smile when I was out with friends or family members, but inside I was just a mess and not happy at all. So it just felt really trapped, like a trapped feeling.

Diane Atwood: Okay, so you were describing that as a child, you are often anxious, but were these new feelings for you, the feelings of depression?

Christina Erde: They were, in a way, I think mainly because compared to when I was younger, growing up, it was more they didn't linger as much. I kind of had times where I would be anxious, but then once I got back into my routine and

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growing up, I definitely had a routine with school and the church I was involved in. So, that kind of helped stay on track. But being in college and kind of more on my own, I didn't really have that family routine to fall back on. It was more, you're on your own, and you got to figure it out.

Diane Atwood: So, your feelings of anxiety were really up, but it led to you feeling really down? Yeah. Seeing that therapist and being put on a medication. Was the medication for depression or anxiety, or was it for both?

Christina Erde: It was for depression because I was feeling more of the sadness and lack of joy and all of those things that used to make me happy didn't anymore. And I just really felt more of those feelings that what we focused on first was the depression part. So, that was a medication to treat depression at that time.

Diane Atwood: Did the medication work and did the therapy work? And I guess I'll add, did the combination of the two work?

Christina Erde: Right. For a little while, I think they did. Definitely nowhere near what I really needed to fully get back to myself. I think it was more of almost like a Band-Aid. Like, here, we're going to just patch you up and get you

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going again. I don't think it ever really got to the root of what I was really dealing with.

Diane Atwood: Did you live at home when you went to college?

Christina Erde: I did, yeah.

Diane Atwood: So kind of a Band-Aid. But you were able to move forward and graduate, or were there ups and downs throughout your college years?

Christina Erde: I ended up just doing one semester. I was dating my husband at the time, and we were planning our wedding for, let's see, I was doing the fall semester, and we were planning our wedding for the following summer. We ended up getting engaged during my first semester of college, and he was in remission for Hodgkin's lymphoma, and he ended up having a relapse that January. So, we ended up deciding, let's get married now so that I can be with you and walk through this with you. And so instead of, our wedding was planned for July, we ended up planning our wedding in two days, and we got married at my parents' house in the living room in February. So, I ended up not going back to the college and just kind of went into caretaker mode with him. So, that brought on a whole new level of anxiety, and it almost distracted me

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from myself, and it just kind of brought on a different type of anxiety. But long story short, he's been in remission for coming up, I think, on 15 years, and he ended up having a stem cell transplant. And so we walked through about two years of that together. Through that time, like I said, I was in survival mode of helping him, so I didn't neglect myself, but I definitely put myself on the back burner. So, once he got stable, I probably, I don't know, very gradually within the next few years after he got stable, sort of fell back into the anxiety and depression that I was dealing with.

Diane Atwood: Had you been on the medication that you were prescribed when you were in college all that time?

Christina Erde: I was. It's been such a long road, but I think I would end up for a while, starting the medication and then end up going off of it when I felt better. I think while I was going through that with him, I think I had stayed on the original medication, and that, I think, is what essentially probably really helped get me through that. And then I got to the point where I'm like, okay, I feel pretty good. And I think just the stigma around medication, and if you take a medication, you must be this. And I always tried to be like, oh, can I get off this now? And I'd go to my doctor and say I'm doing really good. And so it was

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always, when can I get off this medication? And it took me many, many years to finally accept the fact that this medication and therapy together is helpful, and why mess with a good thing? And so, yeah, I definitely would go off and on. So that essentially, I think, made things a little more complicated.

Diane Atwood: Well, that's quite an experience for the two of you to go through. I'm so happy to hear that he's been in remission for so long. That's wonderful.

Christina Erde: Mmmhmm.

Diane Atwood: So, you went on and started a family?

Christina Erde: Mhm.

Diane Atwood: And did things go smoothly with both births in terms of your mental health?

Christina Erde: With my firstborn, I suffered from pretty severe postpartum. I think because during my pregnancy I had ended up going off the medication that I was taking at the time. With my two pregnancies, I felt great. And I think talking to my doctor after that hormones play such a big part in mental health as well. That during pregnancy there's so many different chemical things going

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on and hormonal things going on that it ended up stabilizing me for that time. And then after my firstborn son came, I just basically hit rock bottom. I was recovering physically and it was so much to handle mentally that I don't even the first year I have such bits and pieces because I was just every day trying to survive and I think the expectation of new mothers too, this is such a happy time, and I can just remember thinking, why am I not happy and joyful right now that I have a new baby and that we've wanted for so long? It took us about seven years almost to even end up having him. And so there's all these feelings of guilt around why I didn't feel the way that I was supposed to feel. So, I ended up going to the doctor again and getting back on the medication that I was taking before and it never really stabilized me. There was another antidepressant or anti-anxiety and those medications just never really seemed to get me to a point of true stability because of the root problem that hadn't really been discovered yet.

Diane Atwood: And then when you had your second son a couple of years later, did you have a similar experience?

Christina Erde: I did. It was similar, I think because I had been through it and was a little more prepared, routine-wise, and knew what to expect, it wasn't as

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hard. I think what made it a little difficult was having to take care of my toddler and a newborn. That was pretty stressful. However, I did end up working closely with my doctor and therapist throughout the pregnancy and after of what medications were safe to take. And so I think being proactive really did help in the long run. But again, there was always that root that we just hadn't gotten to.

Diane Atwood: So you've mentioned this root cause a couple of times.

Christina Erde: Hmm.

Diane Atwood: You do get to it, don't you?

Christina Erde: Yes.

Diane Atwood: What happened?

Christina Erde: My youngest son had just turned four, and I had been feeling pretty good for a couple of years. As the boys were growing up, things were getting a little easier as far as taking care of them, and I began to feel a lot better. And because of that, I had ended up again, weaning off medication, not seeing a therapist, thinking again, I got this, I can do this, and be a

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quote-unquote normal person. Um, without realizing it, I fell into a manic episode where I experienced psychosis for the very first time. I do remember that first time I went to see a doctor with my mom back when I was in college, a doctor mentioning bipolar, not diagnosing me at all, but just kind of going through different symptoms and types of mental illness. But I wasn't diagnosed. So, when I began experiencing these symptoms, just feeling euphoric and really kind of starting to exhibit some characteristics that my family began noticing. Something is not right with Christina, and they weren't really sure what to do. So I do remember one incident. My son had just turned four, and he had come in one evening. He couldn't sleep. And so he said, oh, I'm thirsty, mom. So, I ended up taking him downstairs to get him a drink of water. And I did not realize at the time I really wasn't sleeping much. My mind was just go, go, go all the time. And I just felt like, I have so much energy. I want to do this and I want to do that. And I just would clean the house and was doing so much things at once. So I had all this energy, and I took them down to get a drink, and it was probably 2:00 a.m. And since I had all this energy, I was like, do you want to play? And he was like, okay. So we're downstairs playing. And my husband came down and was really confused, thinking, why are you up at

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2:30, playing? He's supposed to be in bed. And so I just remember thinking, well, if he wants to play and I'm not very tired and he doesn't seem tired, those were little things that began happening that really made my husband question what was going on. So, yeah, those types of things. I was going out with friends, staying out really late, coming home late. My husband thinking this isn't really like her. And then my sister, who I'm really close with, started recognizing some of the other signs when I would talk to her. Because I had all this energy, I would just talk nonstop, and she would try to talk with me, and I just kept going. She said it was like talking to a wall. You just kept talking. And even if I tried to say something, you just plowed on through and I couldn't have a conversation with you. So, those are some of the signs that my family started to recognize.

Diane Atwood: And you mentioned that you weren't sleeping, but you thought you were sleeping?

Christina Erde: Yeah. It's funny because even remembering, I think my perception of time began to be really distorted. And because I just had all this energy all the time, it was hard for me to end up sleeping. So, I think I would

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end up laying in bed, but my mind just going, going, going, and not really ever shutting down.

Diane Atwood: Was there an incident that sort of, um, crossed the line, let's say. I mean some of these incidents sound like they did cross the line, but was there one that really stood out?

Christina Erde: Yeah, my husband and I had done foster care before we ended up having our children. So we had a foster son that we had previously fostered that needed some help. So we had him come stay with us again when the boys were younger. And this is right around during the time that I began to fall into that manic episode. So he had stayed with us for a couple of months and then had ended up moving on. But during that time, I got into the habit of locking the door when I would go into my room or to change or use the bathroom or whatever. So one morning was getting ready, we were going somewhere and I was getting ready, so I ended up locking the door and I thought, I'm going to take a nice bath and relax. I opened up this bubble bath and it smelled amazing, I think because my senses were so heightened from the mania, so I ended up pouring a little bit in, and then it just smelled so good that I was like, I'm just going to dump the whole bottle in. And so my husband, I think, started to smell

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this intense lavender whatever smell coming from the bathroom. We had a nice jacuzzi tub. So I'm turning on the jets and all my senses are just heightened. I can remember thinking, this feels so great. I bet I could breathe underwater still. I have the superpower that I think that people can breathe underwater. We just don't know because we're afraid to do it or something. That was what was kind of running through my mind. So my husband smelled that intense smell and was thinking, what is she doing? We're getting ready to go somewhere. She doesn't usually take a bath at this hour. And so he tried coming in, but the door was locked, so he got really nervous. And I don't remember him banging on the door. I don't remember hearing that at all. But he said he was banging on the door trying to ask me to come open it and what was going on. So when he finally did end up getting in, that's when he found me trying to tell him that I could breathe underwater. And he kept saying, you can't breathe underwater. So that's when he got really scared and ended up calling my sister and asking her to take me to the hospital. I remember my sister coming over and trying to help me get dressed. And I was just kind of like, what's going on? And going from feeling really scared to feeling like, oh, this is really fun. I get to spend the day with my sister. I think I thought we were going to go shopping or

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something, and I just was completely disengaged from reality. It was November of 2017 that I was admitted to Spring Harbor Hospital and ended up staying there for almost three weeks and was diagnosed with bipolar and finally began to stabilize on some of the medications that I started. It was still really confusing trying to piece out why I was even there because it did take quite some time for my brain to stabilize. And even after being discharged from there, it was right before Christmas. I actually was there for Thanksgiving, so right before Christmas, I was discharged and came home, and people, friends, and family were bringing meals over and just kind of trying to be there. And I still was confused as to what even had happened. So that was really difficult to understand and explain to people. After coming home and trying to get back to normal, I fell again. Usually with bipolar, what happens is, from a manic high, then you can dip into these really low depression lows. So that's exactly what ended up happening to me as I began to just really feel that sadness and that anxiety come back and struggle to function daily, struggle to take care of the kids. I just felt like I really had no purpose. And so when I did get discharged from Spring Harbor, I was left with a list of medications and a therapist. So for the next year, it was basically trying this medication, that one's not really

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working well, let's try this medication. And then going through therapist after therapist to try to find one that I got along well with, and that worked for me. So after about a year, I finally was talking to a friend who told me about a psychiatrist that specialized in bipolar disorder, and maybe he can help you with your medication, trying to get that worked out, I ended up contacting him and really got along well with him. I loved how he explained things. He was really good at that, and he really knew each medication and more in-depth than anyone else I'd ever talk to. Any other medical provider. So then I ended up starting a different cocktail of medications, and I also found another therapist that specialized in anxiety and OCD. I thought I don't think I've ever really struggled with OCD, but she basically helped me discover different ways that I had struggled. And because it's such a wide spectrum of different ways of struggling with OCD, so she helped teach me about that. So I slowly began to really understand my diagnosis and then get to the point of accepting it, which definitely didn't happen right away. It took a year or two to really get to that point.

Diane Atwood: And also you've described over many years that you would start to feel better and think, okay, I can get off the medication, I don't really need a

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therapist. But at this point that you're talking about, you finally realized, it seems, that you definitely had to have a treatment plan, and you had to stick with it?

Christina Erde: Exactly, yeah.

Diane Atwood: So you took control, you became your own advocate, maybe?

Christina Erde: Mmmhmmm, definitely, yeah. And that was the turning point, really, for me, was that. Was realizing that I need to advocate for myself and accept this and work towards where I want to be, get to where I want to be. And with that team, my psychiatrist and therapist, and even my primary care physician, all working as a team as well, just really I felt like, okay, I have this team behind me, I need to be involved. Because I think for a while, I had felt this doctor should know what I need or this. But until I began to really understand it for myself, I couldn't really explain what I needed. So it's working all together that really can have the best outcome.

Diane Atwood: Well, so you had multiple diagnoses, but at the core was the bipolar. Could you tell us what are your diagnoses?

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Christina Erde: So I originally was diagnosed with generalized anxiety disorder and then depression. And I think I was never really diagnosed with OCD, but I did receive some therapy and treatment for that, which really has helped. The official diagnosis that I do have now is the bipolar disorder. So, after accepting that diagnosis, I went out and read books and started to research about it and get to know how to live with it. And I think that all of those things, in addition to the medication that has helped stabilize me, is what essentially has saved my life.

Diane Atwood: And it's been a couple of years now?

Christina Erde: Yeah.

Diane Atwood: So what are your coping mechanisms and what are the things that you have to watch out for?

Christina Erde: I definitely have to keep track of sleep. That definitely can be a trigger. If I start to not sleep as much, that can affect how I function, even in terms of feeling those mania symptoms, because I do still sometimes feel a little more energetic than other times. Like, there was a time about two years ago that I was starting to lean towards the whole I've been doing well, It's been

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a solid year on these medications. I'll talk to my doctor, and I won't wean off anything without a physician's approval, and I'll do it the right way. So I did start to wean off of one, but because I was really vigilant about keeping track of how I was feeling, I ended up catching myself feeling those symptoms, coming back on of the mania, and then going right to my doctor and saying, okay, no we've got to go back to that dosage. So that was a time I felt really proud of myself for catching that. And my family saw it, too, but they did their best to try to gently say, oh, you might want to check things out. And for a little while, I was like, oh, no, I'm okay. But I ended up getting to the point where I was like, no, you're right. And so I think in addition to that team I have behind me, I have my family and specific friends that know about my diagnosis and know the signs to watch for. So one of the things that I do is, especially my husband, if he says, I've noticed you missed your medication yesterday, you need to just be aware of that. Rather than get defensive like I have in the past I'm like, okay, you're right. So having those people hold me accountable is part of what helps.

Diane Atwood: And they hold you accountable, but you've given them permission to do that. Yes, Which I think is important because family members,

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oftentimes they do things out of love, but they don't quite know how to approach in a way that makes you want to act positively. Does that make sense?

Christina Erde: It does. Yeah. It definitely does. It is hard because I've had times where my mom will call me every day and just be like, how are you doing? It's always, I think, really hard, especially with mental health or mental diagnosis. It's invisible. You can't see it. It's not like you're trying to help someone with a broken leg, like, I'll come over and clean your house for you, or I'll do things that I know you can't do right now. The person is able to walk, able to live, but they have this condition, where I can imagine it being really difficult for some friends and family members of loved ones that do have a mental health condition know how to help them. But some of the things that people have done for me that has been really helpful is just listen and not try to be a problem solver all the time. My side of the family is very like, let's just solve this, figure it out and move past it. But sometimes you just can't. You just have to just be there. So, yeah, I think one of the things that has gotten me to where I am today is that my family and certain friends of mine just they don't give up. I have a friend that will call and check in periodically and just be like, I'm just here checking in. At first, I was kind of annoyed. I was like, oh, I'm fine. But

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knowing that she's not going to give up in the times when I am not doing fine, that comes back and I'm like, okay, she's there. I know that I can count on her.

Diane Atwood: And it sounds like you and your husband have a very strong, supportive relationship.

Christina Erde: Yeah, we definitely do. He's a saint. I mean, the stuff that he's had to put up with, I'm like, oh, uh, you're a pretty good guy, so I'm going to keep him.

Diane Atwood: Well, so you're doing really well in this moment. And in fact, we have to congratulate you because you were chosen Mrs. Maine American recently and you're on your way to Las Vegas later this year.

Christina Erde: I am, yeah. I entered an agent this past October after talking with a friend, that I met on Facebook and I thought, huh, this is something that I've never done. And I think for a while I've been wanting to get involved with an organization that really helped my family during the time that I was going through my hard time, and that was NAMI, the National Alliance on Mental Illness, who has a chapter in Maine. NAMI Maine. They have some classes for families of loved ones that struggle with a mental illness to take to learn more

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about how they can help them. So that's what my family did. And even the resources that NAMI has given me personally, I really was thinking, uh, it would be really cool if I did this beauty pageant and was able to have this as a platform to bring awareness to mental health, to be able to share my story, to be able to help advocate for mental health through working with NAMI Maine. So I've been able to have some really neat opportunities through that. I actually took a course a couple of months ago to be able to share my story at various venues or schools. So I actually shared this past spring at SMCC in one of their psychology classes. And it's really neat how sharing my story brings some healing to me and helps remind me that recovery is a lifelong process. It's not like you go through something and you're recovered and it's over. I really realized that it's a daily thing that I have to choose to continue and to keep going with my treatments and seeing my therapist and staying on top of my mental health in order to continue living a fulfilling life.

Diane Atwood: So your family went to NAMI and participated in some of the support programs for family members, and then you became involved and they helped you put together your story so you could present it to the public?

Christina Erde: Yes, exactly.

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Diane Atwood: Is that then your platform as Mrs. Maine American? You talk about your story and trying to get people a better understanding of what it's like to live with a mental illness to help remove the stigma?

Christina Erde: Yes, all of it. Yeah, for sure.

Diane Atwood: Well, good for you. We're going to have to wind up now, but you've given us all kinds of wisdom. Great. As well as a deep dive into basically your soul. Any final words that you would like to leave people with?

Christina Erde: I would say never give up. Never give up on yourself. And if you have a friend or family member struggling, never give up on them. Because no one is a lost cause. And no matter how long it takes, there's always hope. And there's so many treatment options and things available, resources available today that I even know, like, 2030 years ago weren't available. And so, yeah, never give, up.

Diane Atwood: Thank you for that advice and for sharing your story with us. A remarkable story, a remarkable woman.

Christina Erde: Thank you. You're welcome.

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Diane: That brings us to the end of this episode of the Catching Your Memories podcast. Many thanks to Christina Erde for sharing her story with us.

If you would like to learn more about NAMI Maine and the services they offer, visit their website namimaine.org, that's n-a-m-i-Maine.

If you would like to read a transcript of this episode or leave a comment, go to CatchingYourMemories.com/podcast.

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