

Catching YOUR Memories

THE PODCAST

WITH DIANE ATWOOD

A conversation with Marena Koenka, published July 28, 2022

Diane: Hey everyone, this is Diane Atwood, and you are listening to the *Catching Your Memories* podcast. Everybody has an inspiring story, a memory, an experience to share if only someone would ask. That's where I come in. In this episode, Marena Koenka talks openly and frankly about her mental health struggles. Now 23, she's been sharing her story since she was 16 after she attended a high school health class on mental health. She was hoping to gain some insight into why she felt so depressed and anxious. She learned nothing so asked the teacher if she could do some class presentations about her own experiences. After the third one, another student stood up in front of the class and said she, too struggled with depression and anxiety. Realizing that she wasn't alone and that by speaking out she might help someone else was a game changer for Marena. Since then she has become a regular speaker in Maine and Massachusetts, where she attended college.

In this Catching Your Memories episode Marena offers wisdom for all of us, whether we are the ones needing support or providing support. Either way, we all need each other. A warning: some of the things Marena talks about may be triggering to some people. For example, she talks about self-harming and about suicidal ideation. If you would prefer to fast forward over those sections, you will find specific time stamps in the written introduction. And now, let's meet Marean Koenka.

Welcome to the Catching Your Memories podcast. Thank you for agreeing to be here to share your story.

Marena: Thank you so much for having me today, Diane. It's a pleasure.

Diane: I'm curious right out of the gate why it's important to you to share your story.

Marena: Yeah, absolutely. It's important to me that people are having conversations about mental health. It can be so stigmatized. And I know personally, when I was diagnosed seven years ago with a couple of mental health conditions, I felt really scared. I felt really alone. I felt like if I talked about it with anyone, they were going to treat me differently, they were going to see me differently. So it's really important to me that we're having these conversations about mental health. We're normalizing it, and that way people can begin to reach out for help if they need it.

Diane: Did you suffer from mental illness of some sort all your life, or is it something that manifested itself as you became a teenager?

Marena: I think that it got worse as I became a teenager. There may have been some symptoms kind of growing throughout my life. I know in middle school is when I started to kind of show symptoms of obsessive-compulsive disorder, though I didn't know that that's what it was at the time. And then as I was in high school, it started to become more and more apparent, a

bunch of different symptoms. And when I was 15 is when it all kind of came to a head and I realized I was not okay and I went to see a professional and I received professional diagnoses.

Diane: Those symptoms of OCD, when you look back, how could you describe those?

Marena: Yeah, so I wasn't diagnosed with OCD until I was 19. But when I was in, I think, 6th grade, I started to become very obsessive about food. I was really, really scared of getting sick from food, specifically just like food poisoning. And so I would do things like pull the package of meat that my mom made out of the trash to check the expiration date after I already asked her what it was three times. I became a master at checking expiration dates. I would sneakily do it at friends' dinner tables because obviously, I didn't want to draw attention to myself and my obsessive habits because even though I didn't have a word for it, I knew that it wasn't, quote, unquote, normal. So, I would very sneakily like check a condiment label as I was picking it up or something like that. And I would only eat at restaurants that followed some certain set of criteria in my head that made them, quote, unquote, safe, things like that.

Diane: And did this happen gradually or did it just come out of nowhere?

Marena: A little bit of both. When I was younger, starting in like first grade, I began to get sick unexpectedly, and it got worse and worse. And it wasn't until I was in fifth grade that we realized that it was from food sensitivities, and the doctors weren't the ones to figure it out. It was because I did an elimination diet that I was able to figure out what was causing me to be sick. So, I think that becoming unexpectedly sick over and over, over many years kind of contributed to this fear. And then once I kind of knew what was making me sick, suddenly I needed to control something else, I think. And so then this is where this manifested.

Diane: Do you still deal with that?

Marena: A little bit. It's a lot better than it was. I try and do a little bit of exposure therapy for myself, challenging myself to eat at different places, to eat different things in a way that still feels a little controlled, a little safe to me, but it definitely doesn't control my life like it did. I don't drive my mom crazy when I'm at her house.

Diane: When you were showing those signs, was anybody in your family suspicious? Or did it just become kind of like the norm for Marena?

Marena: It kind of became the norm for Marena. My parents really didn't understand it, and I think that they were, I mean, my mom tried her hardest to be understanding and accommodating, but there's only so many times that she can reassure me. So, I think that she became a little annoyed by the whole thing. I don't think that anyone really had the vocabulary or the understanding for what exactly was going on. It was just like, oh, silly little neurotic behavior that Marena is having.

Diane: Now you're saying that probably you're around ten.

Marena: I think probably eleven or twelve.

Diane: So, you're around eleven or twelve, so you certainly don't have the vocabulary to be able to describe what's happening for you.

Marena: Yeah, I had no idea, and it wasn't until seven years later, even after I'd been working with therapists for a little bit, that a therapist kind of pointed it out to me. And by then, I had kind of started to understand. She was like, what do you think this is? And I was like, it kind of feels like OCD. And she was like, yeah, I think that that's what's going on here.

Diane: And did you do behavior therapy for that? Medication?

Marena: I didn't. At the time when she diagnosed me, I did try medication for both that and the anxiety and depression that I had been diagnosed with. And also at the time when I was 19, I was dealing with a little bit of disordered eating, some restrictive habits. And so I did try medication at that point because I felt like that was way too many things for me to be trying to cope with without it. Um, the medication didn't really work for me. It increased my suicidal ideation and kind of made everything a little bit worse. And it wasn't something that I felt like I could stick out to kind of see if my body regulated to it because it was so intense. So, I went off the medication after a short period of time, and I didn't try another one until a lot later because I was just so scared of the experience that I had had.

Diane: So, your first symptoms were connected to OCD, but then gradually other symptoms became noticeable?

Marena: Correct. My anxiety and depression were the most noticeable.

Diane: And when did they start showing themselves?

Marena: About 15 years old. I was diagnosed right around my 16th birthday.

Diane: And what happened?

Marena: I felt, well, it was going right into Christmas break, so I was kind of go, go. I was very, um, academically driven. I was finishing up all the projects that you have right before Christmas break. And then Christmas break hit, and it was just like suddenly I stopped and I started to feel all these feelings that I'm sure were there, but I was putting off with all this work. And they were feelings of sadness, they were feelings of hopelessness, they were feelings of anger, and they were feelings of suicidality. And I was really confused. I had no idea what was going on. I remember googling how do you know you have depression? Symptoms of depression. The anxiety symptoms were being kind of overwhelmed in some social situations. Being afraid that everyone was only pretending to like me. The lunchroom was so

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overwhelming, so loud. It was just, it felt like the world was just too much for me. And it all just kind of came to a head then.

Diane: And that hadn't been the case for you before then?

Marena: It hadn't. I think I'd had some of the symptoms, being afraid that people were only pretending to like me and kind of getting a little overstimulated sometimes, but they were less, and I was able to just kind of push them away and ignore them until they all kind of came to a head. So, I think they built slowly, but then they became really noticeable.

Diane: And did your parents notice or did you have to talk to them about it?

Marena: I had to talk to them about it. The first conversation didn't really go very well. I approached them and I said, hey, um, I'm really not okay. At the time, I was self-harming and I was thinking of suicide. And I said, hey, I think that I have depression. I didn't quite realize the anxiety piece at that point. And I said I think I need help. I'm thinking about hurting myself. And I'm sure I didn't say it quite as clearly or eloquently. And I'm an only child, so my parents' sole focus was all on me. And I think they just got really scared. And my dad said you're not going to hurt yourself. You're being over dramatic. And my mom said why are you sad? There are so many people who have it so much worse. You have so many good things. And that, to me, is like asking someone why they're happy when other people have it better. It's not a comparison there. But I, did internalize that, and I did think, why am I sad? I've got a good family, I've got a community around me. I do extracurriculars, I do well in school. Why am I sad? And so not being able to name a reason for it made it feel really invalid and made me really doubt myself. But that being said, I was really lucky and my mom did come around. She didn't quite understand things for years, but she did help me connect to a therapist a few weeks after I told them.

Diane: So, what happened in that period of time between when you first told them and then you saw the therapist? Did you just keep going back to them? Were you persistent, or could she actually see how down you were?

Marena: I think that she could see how down I was. I honestly, something about depression is it messes with your memory. And anxiety, kind of being in that fight or flight mode can kind of also mess with your memory. So, a lot of my, I remember that specific conversation and I remember other very specific conversations, but the in-between times are sometimes kind of blurry because I was just sort of like, going through the motions of life, trying my hardest to stay alive. And so I don't have a super clear recollection of that time. But I do remember crying to her a lot. So, I assume that she just kind of saw that I was really struggling, and she talked to the community of friends that she had around her who other people have dealt with their children feeling this way. So, she was able to kind of get help and support in that way, which helped her begin to support me.

Diane: That's really critical. We don't stop to think about that, I don't think, that much. The family members, the close friends who they're scared, they see that something's wrong, but they don't have the right vocabulary themselves. They don't know where to turn to help. So, it's a good thing that she did herself have some community that she could turn to that she felt safe in, and to share her concerns out loud to other people. That's something you've learned by sharing your story.

Marena: Absolutely.

Diane: Talk to me a little bit about the self-harm. You were actually self-harming? What were you doing?

TRIGGER WARNING: SELF-HARMING

Marena: I was self-harming. I was doing a form of cutting myself. And it was to bring the mental pain that I was feeling into physical pain because that was something that I knew how to deal with. That's something that a lot of us face all the time. You fall down when you're a kid, you scrape your knee. You know how to kind of handle physical pain. And it's something that other people validate. So when I was in physical pain, I was like, yeah, this is real. But when I was in mental pain, I was like, maybe I'm making it all up. Maybe I am being overdramatic. So it was that, and it was also a way to break through kind of the numbness that I was feeling as well because I wasn't really feeling anything at the time.

Diane: But when you cut yourself, you could feel that pain?

Marena: Yeah. And it is, scientifically, it's a bit of an endorphin release as well. So I think that was part of it.

END OF TRIGGER WARNING

Diane: How long after you first told your parents before you did get to see a therapist?

Marena: I think it was probably about a month to, like, six weeks, maybe.

Diane: Okay. I was afraid you were going to say, oh, it was about a year, but.

Marena: No, I was very lucky.

Diane: Yeah. And how did that go for you?

Marena: I didn't like it. Oh, no. It was good in the sense that it was a weekly thing, so it was a routine, which was very grounding to me at that time because everything else was just kind of swirling together. Like I said, my memory wasn't great, my sense of time, it was just all one swirling mess of sadness and hopelessness. So, it was a really good kind of anchor to hold on

to. And it was helpful to talk to someone, but I felt kind of uncomfortable sharing with my therapist. And I kind of relate to the feeling of if you've ever stayed up late at night talking to someone, and you kind of share a lot of feelings and a lot of deep things about your life. And then sometimes the next morning, you wake up a little sick to your stomach and you're like, oh, why did I say that? That's kind of how I would feel after therapy. So, I thought that meant that therapy just didn't work for me. But it turns out that that therapist just wasn't right for me. So, I saw her for probably about six months, and then I stopped going. And then when I was 19, during that patch where I had disordered eating and I was diagnosed with OCD and everything, I was back to seeing her for a couple of months when I was home from college for the summer. But it wasn't until I was in college and I went to see a therapist in the counseling center there. And I was really lucky to get a good therapist, which is not often the case in college counseling centers. And I realized oh, wait, I really do like therapy. I just need a therapist that is a little sarcastic. Can joke around with me, can give me tough love when I need it, can ask me a lot of questions. I don't do well with the sitting in silence and looking at me, waiting for me to say something that makes me super uncomfortable, so I was able to figure out what I need in a therapist. And then since then, that's helped me connect to therapists that have been really helpful for me.

Diane: Wow, but you must have been close to 17 by the time you stopped seeing that first therapist maybe?

Marena: Yes.

Diane: So< you went a couple of years still experiencing symptoms and not having that kind of a support network?

Marena: Yeah, I did. I don't recommend it. I didn't have the tools or the understanding to kind of get the support that I needed. And my parents didn't have the tools or the understanding, and the school certainly didn't.

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And that's why I think having these conversations about mental health and sharing these resources and everything is so important. And even then, I'm 23 now, so even those, like a few years ago, the conversation was a lot less and I was still scared to share my story and that type of thing, so I just didn't know what was available to me. So, I just kind of went through life without those resources.

Diane: Now you have the gift of being able to look backwards and imagine what would have been better for you. So, if we could go back to your parents, how would you wish they had been able to react? And I want to say that I know you don't place blame or have any animosity toward them. You seem to understand they just didn't know. They did the best they could.

Marena: Absolutely. Yeah. It would have been helpful for me if they just sat there with me because there's nothing anyone can say to make it better when you're feeling this way. And I think a common trap that we fall into, and definitely a trap that my parents fell into, is wanting to fix it immediately, wanting to jump to solutions. I mean, think about the amount of times you've gone to a family member or a close friend just wanting to vent about something that happened, and they immediately jump to solutions. That makes you feel kind of invalidated. So, it was the same thing when I came to them about my mental illness. They didn't jump to solutions, however, they jumped to invalidating and to kind of trying to fix it by saying there's nothing wrong. And then later on, when I would be sad about things, they would try and immediately jump to solutions. So, what would have been really helpful was just sitting there, just being like, I hear you. This is really, really difficult. I am here to support you. I am here to help you. I might not know all the answers, but I'm with you. I'm not going to leave your side. You and I can figure out together what it is you need. It's okay if you don't know what you need right now, but I am here for you. We're going to work through this. Just kind of sitting with me, validating me, saying these feelings are valid. You are not alone in this. That type of thing would have been super helpful. And if it's

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right in the moment, seeing if you can get the person a glass of water, seeing if they're able to have like a snack or something because often those things can be really helpful and often we are not doing those enough. So yeah, just really sitting with the person and validating can make a world of difference.

Diane: And it probably can make a world of difference for you today too?

Marena: Absolutely.

Diane: So you did not have your own language back then to describe things. If you could have a conversation today with your parents being back to eleven or twelve years old, how could you have expressed yourself more clearly do you think?

Marena: That's a really good question and I'm not entirely sure. I mean, something that I did try a little bit later down the line to try and help my mom understand was I tried to go through my day with her and say I wake up and I immediately do not want to be awake. I immediately feel like this is too much and I just want to go back to sleep. And then I would say I go brush my teeth and I feel like this. And then I would go to school and I feel like this, overwhelmed and just really anxious and really alone in all of this. And I would go through step by step with my day and kind of the feelings of anxiety and depression that I was feeling in those moments. And it took many tries for me to get through my day without my mother interrupting me. But eventually, I was able to kind of walk through it and I think that was helpful to her just really describing my feelings. Something that I suggest, too, I work with NAMIMaine on their teen text support line, so, I chat with teenagers about mental health and mental health resources and I support them. And something I often suggest to them when they're talking about possibly approaching their parents about a difficult topic is writing their parents a letter. That way the parents can read all the feelings without interrupting the child. They have a chance to read it in private and maybe have those feelings of being scared and feelings that may come out

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incorrectly in front of their child. They have a chance to process those feelings alone so that they don't react in a harmful way, hopefully. And then they're able to think on it and then have an in-person conversation with their child. And so I think sometimes providing that little bit of space for processing can be really helpful and I wish that was something that I had known how to do when I was first going through things.

Diane: How's communication today?

Marena: It's getting better. My dad and I are still working on things. My mom and I have come a really long way, many fights later, but also many calm sit-down conversations of this is what I feel, this is what I need. How do you feel, Mom? What do you feel about that? What's your reaction to that? Can you support me in this way? This is what works for me, all those types of things and processing the pain that it caused me to not feel supported in the beginning. And therapy has really helped me build those communication skills that I need to work on my relationship with my parents and work on my relationship with my friends and all of that.

Diane: It seems to me that you're really in the driver's seat here, you're running the show and you have to be able to do that, right, but it must have taken a tremendous amount of energy on your part all these years.

Marena: Yeah, it's really exhausting and there are definitely times when I just want to say screw it. Like why am I trying so hard in all of these aspects of my life and trying to feel better? Self-care is so hard and I don't think, we romanticize it as like bubble baths and candles and stuff, but sometimes it's crying on your floor at three a.m.. Sometimes it's doing the really uncomfortable things, sometimes it's forcing yourself to have a snack. Like, sometimes it is not pretty, sometimes it's really difficult conversations and sometimes it's taking responsibility for the hurt that you've caused accidentally in all the really tough times that you've been going through. So yeah, it's hard and it's exhausting, but man, is it worth it.

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Diane: So did you also have troubles with communicating and with people understanding outside of your family?

Marena: I did, yeah. I had some close friends that were really amazing and supportive. I also had some close friends that I'm sure I hurt a little bit because I wasn't able to fully communicate my needs and I maybe expected them to be able to do things that were outside of the scope of what they could do at 17. I kind of expected them to be there for me more than maybe they were able to or I expected them to fix things more than maybe they were able to. And that was really unfair of me. And I've worked on those relationships and we were totally good and we've repaired things. But another thing is sometimes I would get really frustrated and really angry as a symptom of my depression, and mainly it was with my parents, but every now and then it was with that one specific friend. So yeah, there was definitely some miscommunications and my brain was very foggy with depression and it still often is, and so it was hard to kind of articulate things in the way that maybe I would have wanted to.

Diane: Are you saying that you were difficult to be around sometimes?

Marena: I'm sure that I was, yeah, absolutely. I mean, I was sad and I was really negative because my view of the world was so skewed and so negative that I kind of, I wasn't. Right now in my life, I strive to be a very positive force. Not in a fake way, I'm real about when I'm feeling down and stuff like that, but when I'm able to I just want people to feel uplifted when they're around me and feel just a lot of positive energy and sunshine and whatever. But back then I was very negative and everything just felt bad and felt like an attack, and just ick. So, I'm sure that I was not pleasant to be around.

Diane: And people who love you want you to be happy. So, like your parents, it would probably be easy to go into denial that their child feels this way. How could they feel this way, as you said, they did bring that up, but not really knowing what they could do. Probably there was fear if you were

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suicidal that you would harm yourself and they would feel like they didn't do the right thing ever, even when they tried. I mean, there are just so many layers to this.

Marena: Yeah, and I think they probably felt a blame to some extent as well. Like they were failures as parents, which is not true at all. But I'm sure that they probably felt like that. They felt like, oh, I could have prevented this and I didn't, or what did I do that caused this? Or something like that. So, yeah, there's a lot of blame going in all sorts of different directions and a lot of hurt and a lot of feelings of fear. And it can be really complicated. And that's why it's so important to know the different resources that are out there, which we can talk about at the end of the podcast. But there's a lot of external support which can be really helpful when you're going through something like this.

Diane: And also when I think about your friends being teenagers, when you're a teenager, as I recall, it's been a few decades, but the world revolves around you. So, for your friends to have to step out of that world and be mindful of what was happening for you, I can see where it might be difficult for some of them.

Marena: Yeah, and they didn't have the understanding or the tools to properly support me and it wasn't fair to ask that of them. So yeah, it was just a lot of people not knowing what to do, even though there was still a lot of love there from everyone, but I couldn't really feel it. And everyone was just trying their best, but it's not something that you can just handle on your own or handle within your small community of family and friends. Like often you need a bigger community of support, whether that be peer-to-peer support or professional support. I think that would have made a really big difference if I had known that back then.

Diane: Did your school work suffer when you were in high school?

Marena: A little bit. Especially that first semester as I was getting diagnosed and stuff like that. I was a straight-A student. Up until then, I had, been told, you can't afford to get less than an A, because if I wanted to go to college, I needed to get that scholarship money. So, I worked very hard at academics, and I felt a lot of academic pressure. And I failed a test that spring, which was the first time that I'd ever come close to that. And it was really hard for me to understand some material, specifically, math was really hard. I remember before a math test, I was trying to study, and it just wasn't happening. And so I remember laying in the hallway with my friends, like, face down on the school hallway, really disgusting, instead of studying. And I remember going into my English teacher's room. She was absolutely wonderful. To this day, I owe her so, so much. I had a couple of English teachers that were really wonderful, and a science teacher that was really great. And I remember going into her room. We had a couple of weeks to read something, and I said, I didn't read this. And instead of being mad at me, she gave me some candy, and she told me to take a nap on the couch that she had in her room while she went to have a meeting. And then she came back and she read the entire thing aloud to me, stopping to make sure that I understood things, stopping to make sure I could answer the questions on the worksheet, and just walked me through things. So, if I hadn't had those really supportive forces in these teachers that just had such big hearts and went absolutely above and beyond, I think my grades would have suffered even more. And part of it was, honestly, I was hoping my parents would be like, oh, your grades are slipping. This is really serious. Part of it was like a cry for help. And then in college, my first semester, my grades weren't up to my standards, at all.

Diane: When we talked beforehand, you told me about something that happened. I think it was in high school, you took a health class, and you were hoping that you would gain a better understanding of mental illness. Can you describe that experience for me?

Marena: Absolutely. So, I was 16. It was the fall, so it was about maybe eight months after I had been diagnosed, and we get to the mental health unit in health class, and I hadn't told anyone but my parents and maybe one or two close friends at this point about having anxiety and depression. And we get to the mental health unit, and I was like, yes, this is when I'm going to get answers about my mental health conditions. This is when I'm going to feel less alone because we're going to be talking about them and talking about other people that have them. And I did not get that validation at all. I got kind of outdated, like VCR tapes of people awkwardly, like actors awkwardly talking about it. And of course, the class made fun of it because how can you take that seriously? It doesn't feel real or tangible or anything. So, it felt super unhelpful, and I actually approached the health teacher at 16, and I said, hey, next semester, could I maybe come into your class and speak about my experience? I don't really know what possessed me to do that since I wasn't open about my experience, but I did like public speaking. I had done a fair amount of it up to that point, and I really liked helping people, and I wanted to help people in the way that I wish that I had been helped. So she helped me develop a speech, and I went in a couple of months later to her health class, and I talked about my experience. And in the third class that I was in, a girl raised her hand during the question and answer period, and she said that she, too, had dealt with anxiety and depression for about five years and hadn't really told anyone up until this point. She told the entire class, and it was a very emotional experience for her, and it was a very emotional experience for me. And I did experience a little bit of bullying for doing these speeches and for being open about my mental health. But this experience made it all worth it. And I was like, wow, I can actually make a difference. And so from there, I did more speeches in my high school and I did speeches in high schools around the peninsula where I grew up. And now I do speeches with NAMI Maine and NAMI Massachusetts. They're *In Our Own Voice* presentations.

Diane: So the positive outweighs the negative. But it's unbelievable to me, I guess it shouldn't be but that you would be bullied. In what way?

Marena: Yeah. Again, I think it's just people not knowing how to talk about things. I think that the individuals that were bullying me had their own challenges, and they were probably frustrated that they weren't getting the support that they needed or weren't able to talk about it or whatever. At that age, a lot of bullying comes, at any age, really. A lot of bullying comes from jealousy, and I think that they were probably just feeling really alone, and they weren't supported, which is really terrible. And they needed the resources, and they were seeing me, and they probably thought that I was receiving all the things, the help that they wish that they were getting, which wasn't true. But I assume that it came from that place. I don't think it came from a place of malice or anything. I think it was just a lot of people hurting and not knowing how to stop that hurt.

Diane: And you can't reach out and help everybody.

Marena: Yeah, exactly. As much as I wish that I could.

Diane: Yes. But this experience in general brought out some things for you in terms of realizing that sharing your story publicly could help other people as well as to help you?

Marena: Yeah, absolutely. It was so powerful and it was so healing, and it still is to this day. Every *In Our Own Voice* presentation that I give helps me just a little bit, and it also helps connect me to a community of people who are feeling similar ways to me. Everyone experiences these mental health conditions differently, but there are a lot of similarities and we can understand each other. And I connect with people of all ages. There's people in their sixties that have felt the way that I've felt, and they are still here and they have been able to lead a fulfilling life, and that gives me so much hope. So, being able to do these speeches has been truly life-changing.

Diane: When you went away to college, did you continue giving speeches or did you take a break?

Marena: A little bit of both. I continued to give them mainly in the high school that I went to. So I would come on my breaks and give a speech in the fall semester, in the spring semester, to each of the class periods. So, I would do that a little bit, but I wasn't doing as much in the surrounding area high school, just because I wasn't there to have the time to do it. And then at the end of college is when I got connected to NAMI Massachusetts.

Diane: Okay. Did you go to college in Massachusetts?

Marena: Yes. I went to college in Worcester, Massachusetts, at Clark University.

Diane: Okay. Now, we've talked about the fact that you went for a couple of years without seeing a therapist and just kind of trying to take care of yourself, and you certainly seem pretty good at that. But you did end up seeing a therapist while you were in college that you connected with. Is that because you started not being able to take such good care of yourself? You mentioned disordered eating.

Marena: Yeah. I was like, wait, I really do need help. I'm ready to try talk therapy again. I think that was a big part of it, was because I didn't like it the first couple of times that I did it with that one therapist, I wasn't really seeking it out because I thought that it wasn't for me. And I'd heard some people just don't like talk therapy, which is true. It is true. It does not work for everyone, but it does work for me. I just didn't quite realize it. And I think it took me a little bit to get connected to her because I was still kind of getting my footing in school and kind of getting an understanding of the resources that were available to me. So, I didn't quite, you know, it takes a lot to reach out and try and make an appointment. Especially when you're dealing with mental health conditions, a small thing like that can be so hard.

Nothing is harder to me than answering emails. And, man, my inbox is always full of them because I run my own business and have multiple jobs. So, it's a very common occurrence in my life, and I have to give myself a whole pep talk to answer them. So, yeah, just reaching out in itself was hard, but I reached a point where I was like, I need extra help. I am ready to try this again. And I also understand these resources that are available to me.

Diane: Well, I'm going to have to ask you about your business, but first, I want to finish college. So you saw the therapist. What's the disordered eating that you experienced? And are you okay with that now?

Marena: Yeah, I experienced a little bit of binge eating when I was in high school, to the point where I always had food in my hand. I remember I was a stage manager for a play, and I needed to move a piece of set and I had a cookie in my hand. And I remember my director yelling at me because you cannot move set with a cookie in your hand. But that's how much, I always was trying to eat snacks and stuff because it was giving me that little hit of happy chemicals in my brain. So, I had that for a little bit. And then when I was in college, when I was 19, so I was going out of my freshman year. So, it was the end of my freshman year. I believe I'm doing that math correctly. I started to get really anxious, and I started to restrict my eating as a way to feel like I was in control of something. I didn't realize that's exactly what was happening at the time, but looking back on it, it was very clear that it was a form of control. And then as I started to lose weight, it became about body image, and it became about body dysmorphia and not seeing my body as how it actually looked. Then it became a fear of gaining any weight. And so I dealt with that pretty seriously, I would say, for about six months. And that's when I was also working with a therapist, the therapist that I didn't really connect with. And then I was in kind of quasi recovery. I thought I was doing better and eating more, , eh, not great. And I definitely still had all those body image issues. And then in the spring of my sophomore year, I started working with the therapist at college that I really liked. And she was able to

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kind of help me work on recovery. And that's when I really started to take those steps. And I would say it was like a two-year process of really trying to recover and choosing recovery every day. And I would say now, often people, when they talk about eating disorders, they use the language of remission rather than recovery, because often those thoughts are still kind of in the background. Sometimes they flare up, things like that. So I would say I'm in eating disorder remission. I have a pretty positive outlook on food. My body dysmorphia has lessened. I have a pretty healthy relationship with my body. Though I definitely still have my moments, and especially when my anxiety flares up, I have my moments of trying to restrict, but I feel like I have the tools and the support system I need around me to kind of work on that as soon as I feel it coming up.

Diane: So what you mean by that is, you know what you might need to do in a moment, to what? To not to reverse your thinking but to what?

Marena: Yeah, to just kind of push myself and challenge myself. I'll catch myself thinking like, oh, you shouldn't eat that, because XYZ and I will just be like, no, you're going to eat it. And I mean, some days I'm not able to push myself in that way, but when I'm able to, I really try to. And I find that if I keep doing that on a consistent basis, it gets easier and easier. And obviously, I do not want to say that it is as easy as just telling your brain, no, it's absolutely not. It took years of work and work with a professional, but now I'm at the point where I'm able to challenge those thoughts and also understand where they're coming from. Like, oh, they're coming from a place of anxiety. Let's do what we can to work on this anxiety and do the self-care that you are able to eat.

Diane: So you still deal with those diagnoses that you got when you were a teenager. Now you know what to recognize and what to do really early on? Have I got that right?

Marena: Yes, I still absolutely deal with them. I still have periods that are worse than others. I still experience suicidal ideation quite often and other symptoms, and it's still a weight on me, it still affects a lot of my day-to-day life. But I have a lot of tools and a lot of support around me. So, if I start to notice I'm sleeping way too much, that's a sign that I'm becoming really depressed. And so I try and connect with my friends because something I do is isolate when I'm feeling really depressed. So, I try and get those connections. I try and get outside, get some fresh air. I try to move my body in a way that feels good. I like to walk, I like to dance around my room. I like to go indoor rock climbing. That has been an absolutely huge positive force in my life the past, like, six months when I first picked it up. So, I try and do those things. I try and make sure I'm eating and drinking enough. If I start to notice that I'm eating less, that's a sign that my anxiety is getting a little bit higher. And so I'll work on those self-care things. I'll stretch. I'll try and journal. I will cry if I need to. I will call my mom and I will say, hey, I'm not doing okay. I will talk to my therapist and we can come up with things together as well. So, yeah, just pulling different tools out of my toolbox. And sometimes the only thing I can do is brush my teeth and go to bed. And that's the self-care for the night. But sometimes I'm able to really do all the things and kind of reset myself.

TRIGGER WARNING: SUICIDAL IDEATION

Diane: Can you explain to us what is suicidal ideation?

Marena: Yeah, absolutely. So for me, I've gone through periods where I've been very suicidal, like, actively really wanted to kill myself. But there are also periods where I just kind of think about it in a passive way. And suicidal ideation is not always passive. Sometimes it can be very active. But this is just me and my personal experience. So for me, sometimes my suicidal ideation is very passive. So, it's kind of like I don't have a plan and I'm not actively trying, but I have thoughts of dying. I have thoughts when I'm

driving of what if I just crashed my car? Or what if I just did blank? And for me, it is a way to — this is hard to talk about in the sense that because there's so much stigma around it, it can definitely be misinterpreted. So, I definitely encourage everyone to kind of do their own research and not jump to any conclusions about the things that I'm saying, and again, it's just my experience and suicidal ideation and suicidality are very serious. But for me, sometimes my suicidal ideation is a form of escape. The world is too much, and it would just be easier to not be alive anymore. If I have a responsibility that's causing me a lot of stress, I think, well, I could just kill myself and not have to deal with it. So, in some ways, it can be a form of comfort for me and for some other people that experience it, which probably sounds very backwards, but it's just a way out, and it means that I have control over something. Even if it doesn't feel like I have control over anything else in my life, I have control over this one thing. And so, yeah, often I'll just walk through my life and I'll be like, wow, this is overwhelming. I could kill myself. So, that's kind of how I experience it.

Diane: But you don't actually feel like you want to?

Marena: Most of the time, yes. Like I said, I've definitely gone through periods where I do want to or I do want to for a moment, but it's not like actually. The suicidal ideation part of it is less like actively wanting to die, and it's more just like not wanting to deal with what's in front of me because my brain is so overwhelmed at all times that even the smallest tasks feel monumental.

Diane: So, in your case, how should people react if you tell them that you're feeling like you're feeling?

Marena: Well, I think that suicide should always be taken very seriously. And I think that if you aren't trained in risk assessment and stuff, it's not your job to ask me do you have a plan? Do you whatever? Like, if I were to express the suicidal ideation to someone in my life who doesn't, there are a couple of

people that also experience it in the same way that I do, and they get it, and we can kind of talk about it, but always they make sure, like, are you okay? You're going to stay here, right? And I'm like, yeah, I'm going to stay here. I'm safe. I always tell them, like, I do my own self-assessment. I am safe. I am not going anywhere. But if it were an outside person, the right thing to do would be to connect me to a crisis resource. So, that's just like, if someone in your life expresses this, even if they express that they're okay, depending on how much you know them and how much you've had this conversation, the crisis lines can be super, super helpful. And when I'm on the teen text support line, because I'm not trained in risk assessment, I connect them to the crisis support line.

END OF TRIGGER WARNING

Diane: So, I'm going to imagine that I'm in a situation and somebody has told me that they're feeling suicidal, and I want to connect them but they don't want to connect. Should I connect?

Marena: Yeah. There are some times when that can be helpful. Again, it's definitely a case-by-case basis, and it depends on your relationship with the person and how well, you know, are they actually safe? If you're able to physically be there with them and make sure that they're safe, maybe you can take a beat and try and sit with them and see if you're able to support them in that way before pushing crisis. Or you can ask, what are you afraid of for calling crisis? Like, is there a way that I can support you while you call them or while you text them or something like that? It's definitely very nuanced and case by case, and it can be really overwhelming, and it can be really scary, and you don't want the person to feel like you're just passing them off or whatever. But my go-to is always to be like, I care about you. I'm concerned about you. I want to get you the best support possible, and that is not me right now. So, can I help you connect to this? Can I call them for you? Can I sit there or I guess with the texters, I'll be like, I'm here, on this line

with you. You can talk to me until you get connected with them. Like, I'm here with you in that sense, so.

Diane: Another question I wanted to ask you about support. When you call your mom these days and say mom, I'm not doing really well, what do you want from her?

Marena: I just want her to listen. And we've gotten to a point in our relationship where she knows that. So, she will sit with me and she will say, yeah, that's really hard. I'm really sorry that you're feeling that way. Oftentimes she doesn't say a lot. She sits with me, she listens, she validates as best that she can. And something that's really helpful is when we get off the phone, she'll often send me a text. Sometimes it's just a heart. Sometimes it's like, I love you. Sometimes it's I hope you get a good night's sleep or something like that. But I really like words of affirmation. And so just knowing that she's there with me, far away, but still there with me and kind of sitting with me is really helpful.

Diane: That's lovely. I'm glad that you have been able to get to that point with her.

Marena: Me too. Took a lot of work.

Diane: Before we say goodbye, you have your own business. What is it?

Marena: Yes, I have my own photography business called Sunset Ridge Photography. I started it when I was 17. So, just as I was getting out of my senior year in high school, I was taking senior pictures of my friends after I had taken some photography classes throughout high school. And I did it a little bit in college, I worked for the yearbook in college. I was the club president of the photography society. I minored in photography, so I gained a lot of experience there. And then since I've graduated, I've really put a lot of time and effort into my business. And it is now a part-time stream of income, and at some point, I hope to make it a full-time stream of income. Right now

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I have many other jobs, and I'm happy just kind of having all of them, so I'm not really actively trying to make it a full-time thing right now, but I am having a lot of really amazing photography opportunities. And when I have a camera in my hand, I do not feel anxious and I do not feel depressed, and everything just feels okay. I also work for NAMI. I do the *In Our Own Voice* speeches. And then I also work on the team text support line.

Diane: That's when teams send text messages and you respond just via text. Okay. And I'm going to ask you one last question. Would you like to wind up with some final words of wisdom?

Marena: Sure. I mean, just like I started with, having those conversations with people close to you is so important. Just checking in with the people that you love. Hey, are you okay? Is there anything I can do to support you? I'm here for you. If there's someone that you know with a mental health condition, something that can be really helpful is when they're doing a little bit better, is having a conversation with them about what is helpful to them when they are in kind of a tough period. Because often when we're in those tough periods, it's really difficult to articulate what we need. And sometimes we do not even know what we need. But it can be easier to have that conversation when we're in a better place. And that way you can feel kind of equipped to support this person. And always it is important to make sure that you are checking in with yourself and you are taking care of yourself and not overextending yourself to support others. Your first and foremost, responsibility is to be okay. You can't help others if you're not, um, okay. And also, it's just an important act of self-love to take care of yourself. And there are so many incredible educational resources out there on social media sites and articles and books and all of that, podcasts, depending on what works best for you to consume media and to learn. I really encourage everyone to listen to the voices of people who have mental health conditions, because that is how we learn, and that is how we destigmatize things as a society, and that's how we are able to help ourselves and help others.

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Diane: Well. I am so grateful that I got to have this conversation with you. Thank you so very much for being so open and honest.

Marena: Thank you so much. It's been an absolute pleasure to speak with you. Thank you for this opportunity.

That brings us to the end of this episode of the Catching Your Memories podcast. Many thanks to Marena Koenka 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.

You can reach the NAMI Maine Teen Text Support Line by text at (207) 515-8398

And you can call or text the Maine Statewide Crisis Line at 1 (888) 568-1112.

For information about Marena's photography business visit sunsetridgephoto.com.

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This podcast was created, produced, recorded, and edited by me, Diane Atwood. Catching Your Memories, the interview of a lifetime.