

Becky L McCoy (00:00):

You're working in an inpatient psychiatric facility, then a global pandemic hits. And while your job is considered essential, you begin to have extreme fight, flight or freeze responses to all the trauma. This is Sucker Punched.

Becky L McCoy (00:26):

Today, my guest on the podcast is Kristina Harutoonian. Really excited to have you here today, friend.

Kristina Harutoonian (00:35):

I'm so excited to be here. Well, here in my room.

Becky L McCoy (00:40):

[inaudible] Podcasting, the O G social distancing.

Kristina Harutoonian (00:45):

That's right.

Becky L McCoy (00:46):

Um, so we're going to jump right in and I am curious to hear how has the development and spread of COVID-19 affected you?

Kristina Harutoonian (00:58):

Um, I think for me I had a little bit of an interesting time because right before all of the regulations and the safer at home, um, order took place. I had just gone through a breakup and it was like great timing. I had to drive down to Orange County to get my brother and then drive up. And then I was hearing about all this news and I think, um, I kind of had disbelief and shock in the beginning so I wasn't fully processing everything. And then, um, you know, once I got home and things slowed down, I remember I was driving to work and cause I was still, I'm still working cause I'm essential business in mental health, um, care. And, uh, I started crying and I was like, man, it's seven 30. Why am I already crying? Really, that's later, you know. Uh, and I couldn't, yeah, that's like for 5:30 not now.

Kristina Harutoonian (01:59):

Um, yeah. And I couldn't place like why, what exactly was going on? And I realized I was grieving and I read one of your Twitter, one of your tweets and it was like, Oh, that feeling you're feeling is grief. And I was like, Oh yeah. And so when I processed like all the loss and what was going on with COVID as well as the loss of this relationship I had for a period of time, that's, that's when all the tears flowed. But also I was able to like feel more in control. So, um, it's definitely affected my family and my cousin, we suspected she had it. She has a heart condition. So that was, she was in major quarantine. Um, but thankfully she's good now. Um, she was able to get meds and all that. And then at work I work in mental health. And so they were telling us that, um, there's 19,000 treatment facilities in Los Angeles and so that, um, could range from rehabs to any kind of mental hospital to, um, uh, residential treatment to outpatient or, or whatever. And they're all cutting down on staff right now to prepare for the massive influx that they suspect will happen after this passes. So, uh, it's just a lot mentally, I think to process for all of us. Um, and, and thankfully I didn't lose my job, but for the people that have, and I think that it's just, it's just really hard.

Becky L McCoy (03:34):

Yeah. So you mentioned, um, this one day just kind of bursting into tears and realizing it was grief. So what did that feel like in, in your mind, heart, and body? How did that, what you're calling grief manifest itself?

Kristina Harutoonian (03:52):

So I feel, I feel like my body goes into extreme fight or flight mode very quickly when it's grief that I'm touching on because, um, I, uh, experienced it the most when my mom died, but, um, my mom, she, uh, she was a Muslim and converted to charismatic Christianity when I was like six or seven. And so she was very much, um, the Christian role in my life for which I'm truly thankful she was the person who had gone to the street and evangelize with church tracts tell people that are going to go to hell. They need to receive Jesus. But now I can look back and be like, you know, that woman was just not afraid of anything, even though I don't agree, agree with her approach. Right. Um, but when she was sick, she, uh, she believed that she was going to be healed and because of that she chose not to do treatment for brain tumor.

Kristina Harutoonian (04:54):

So she didn't do radiation and chemo and she ended up passing away fairly quickly. Now looking back, I'm like, Oh, um, you know, my mom would not have done well as like a sick person for a long time. She was very vibrant. She would have driven us nuts. But, um, now obviously I was just still here, but, um, yeah, so for me the grief process and being and like sickness and being a Christian, it all took a long time for me to process that. And so when I experience some type of loss, I go into this, my body goes into, um, like a flight mode, an escape, wanting to escape mode. I get like elevated, uh, heart rate. I feel like, um, I'm going to have a panic attack and because I, my body thinks that I'm unsafe and my mind thinks I'm unsafe and so I have to remind myself I am safe, like I'm not in danger. Um, and that's kind of my immediate process. And then, you know, I go through, uh, what like the emotion of that I guess until I'm at like a baseline back to it's okay. Everything is okay.

Becky L McCoy (06:13):

Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. That feeling of panic, your body is yelling that you're in danger, even though there's no like, bear chasing you up a tree or.

Kristina Harutoonian (06:27):

I sure feel like it.

Becky L McCoy (06:29):

Yeah. Right. No. Um, but on the other hand, it's not like there is nothing to fear. Right. A global pandemic like is a thing that's scary. So what are some of your fears?

Kristina Harutoonian (06:47):

Um, I fear a lot for people who don't, um, have the resources to be safe. So, uh, you know, I work with women who come, a lot of them are young, 18 to 25, and they are diagnosed with PTSD alongside other personality disorders often. And they come from, um, an attempted suicide, uh, attempt. And uh, so that's why they come to treatment and that is costly. But also insurance covers it. But now there's this issue with insurance and, um, you know, being isolated is the worst thing for someone with a mental

health struggle or diagnoses or however you know, you identify, uh, being isolated or losing a job or not having the means to provide for themselves is something that can cause very, um, it just can, it can make their lives very hard and unbearable. Um, they, it can feel invariable for them. So I really fear like, Oh, these, these vulnerable people as well as women who are in, um, you know, abusive households. Uh, families who's, um, the, they lost their jobs and they have to provide for their kids. Th the fears for me are more related to like the vulnerable population where I was, I was scared for my, my cousin. Um, I was scared for myself, but I think I felt less afraid for myself than for people I knew who were more vulnerable because at some point in my life I would have been more vulnerable like a few years ago, mentally, you know. Um, yeah.

Becky L McCoy ([08:43](#)):

Have you, has this affected like your own mental health?

Kristina Harutoonian ([08:50](#)):

Yeah. Uh, definitely, um, I think there's a level of anxiety that is ah kind of hovering, so to speak, that, um, sometimes I don't know where it comes from and I have to remind myself that, uh, it's most likely due to the fact that we're in a global pandemic and everything has changed. Um, so that definitely has played a lot. Um, but I'm thankful because I spent a long time trying to figure out my own emotions and tools to like deal with distressing emotions or, or like distress tolerance. And I think that I'm so thankful because I think everyone could, um, use these tips and tools and I wish I had known them earlier, but I'm thankful now, but that's helped my mental health a lot in this current state, I think.

Becky L McCoy ([09:49](#)):

What are some of the realities for you living in the time of a global pandemic?

Kristina Harutoonian ([10:00](#)):

Um, my dad lives in England and he is, uh, I'm closest with him. I lived with him, um, after my mom died for a few years, uh, when I struggled with very heavy depression and panic attack stuff. So he is a very important person in my life and he's in England unable to come get back here. Uh, right now. Um, he's there on a contract work and he has to stay there. He was supposed to come back, but now I, it'll be longer. So I'm sad that my dad who is older is not here. I get worried and I call him all the time. I'm like, Hey, but the joke is he's healthier than all of us. He's like works out all the time. Yesterday he's like, he goes, I'm a obese. We're like, what are you talking about? And he's like, I just, my stomach area, I only ran four miles. Or like, you're, you're a psycho. I stood up from bed today and that is my workout, you know, like, um,

Becky L McCoy ([11:01](#)):

that's half a squat.

Kristina Harutoonian ([11:03](#)):

Yeah, there you go. Exactly. I'm like, I walked from my room to the kitchen and got seven steps in. That is doing a lot.

Kristina Harutoonian ([11:13](#)):

Um, so I'm sad that, uh, he's not here. I'm currently living at my aunt's house, so I moved. I probably will move out of my apartment. Um, it just is expensive and just this seems right. And then my brother, I have a younger brother, so he's here. Um, financially, uh, I just have to work harder to provide, um, you know, for myself in this time, my job is fairly stable. They've cut right now some stuff just to prepare, but, um, that's, you know, these, these are just like the realities I guess that you're like learning to cope with. I can't [inaudible] Like I love, I got into the groove of performing standup, which I had never done before. And then I started to really like it and do these shows and those all got canceled. Um, but that's okay. Like I'm, I'm sad that I don't get to do that right now, but, um, yeah, it's okay.

Becky L McCoy ([12:24](#)):

How do you think that we can care for one or another? Um, or what does compassion look like during this time?

Kristina Harutoonian ([12:37](#)):

Um, I think, I think we're all a little, I'm hoping um more thoughtful of other people's, like where they're at. So, like today I had to call the bank and, um, I was talking to the lady and I'm like, Hey, like I have this charge, I don't know what it is. And you know, normally I, I truly do not care about the person from Bank of America on the phone. I'll be honest, like, it's not really like big concern of mine. I just want to get the phone call done, you know? Um, and, and then in the end she's like, is there anything else? And I was like, Oh, I just thanks for working today so that I could get this sorted. And she's like, thank you. Are you, are you safe? I'm like, yeah, I'm safe. Are you safe? You know? And, and it was this nice little check-in, like someone, a random person just checked in real quick with me.

Kristina Harutoonian ([13:39](#)):

And, um, I think being mindful that everyone is suffering to an extent with this, some more than others and checking in with yourself and, um, with someone else like goes a long way. So I hope, I hope that lasts. I hope that we don't forget that this did occur when we're out of it. And, um, and it's kind of a reminder for us to genuinely respect and, um, value our life, other people and the earth. The earth is thriving without, with us. Like not, you know, I've been everywhere. Yeah. It's crazy. Especially in LA. The smog has, is not here. It's not.

Becky L McCoy ([14:26](#)):

Wow.

Kristina Harutoonian ([14:26](#)):

Yeah.

Becky L McCoy ([14:30](#)):

Do you think that there is a way that we could like flex or strengthen our compassion muscles, um, that like you said, when this is over, are we gonna forget what it's like? Um, do you, so do you think there's a way that we can show compassion and kindness to each other that creates a permanent shift in how we relate to each other?

Kristina Harutoonian ([14:58](#)):

Um, I think, yeah, I, I would say I guess it starts with ourselves, right? So I am compassionate with, um, the mental health advocacy community or I don't know how to say it. I'm not always as good with my words as I am with writing, which I'm sure like you,

Becky L McCoy ([15:23](#)):

I know I'm the same way,

Kristina Harutoonian ([15:26](#)):

but, um, I have understand the, the, the pit of depression, like what that feels like at its lowest. So my compassion extends a lot more to people who I know, um, have depression or going through it, um, or, you know, uh, and because I can relate. And so the thing about this is we're in a global pandemic, so there's a level where all of us can relate to each other because we're all dealing with this, which is kind of nuts that it's on this global level. But with that then comes this ability for us to have great compassion for someone. Cause they, you know, if you, if, if you talk to someone, they're like, I'll ask my job from COVID 19 coronavirus pandemic scare. Um, you'll, you'll be like, Oh my God, that was a crazy time. Like, you know, you, you have a level of understanding. So if we can practically put that into place with helping people with their needs, you know, be it material or um, emotional that, that I think is what, um, compassion can look like after this or during this too.

Becky L McCoy ([16:43](#)):

You mentioned that, um, you have certain tools or coping mechanisms that you have used in times when depression, panic, anxiety have been really heavy and challenging. What, what are some of the, those tools that you would encourage people to use? Uh, if, if all of those feelings, if this heaviness is new to them.

Kristina Harutoonian ([17:19](#)):

um, yeah, I, so a lot of the therapy that I'm trained in that I use with the clients at work, um, is called dialectic behavior therapy, um, or dialectic therapy. And there's, you know, they have cognitive too, but, and other ones, but I particularly am trained in this and it's holding two truths that could be seen as opposite at the same time. So it's like you can be scared and still do something or you can feel depressed and still work out or you could feel tired and happy at the same time. Um, so it doesn't need to be black or white. And I think, um, with the heaviness of all of this, the first thing is to acknowledge and validate that it is normal to feel that way. Um, you don't need to try to feel any different. It's just feel, feel that, and then, you know, um, these tools help us learn how to navigate those feelings so that, um, we move through them in a way that is healthy and helpful for us and for other people.

Kristina Harutoonian ([18:33](#)):

Uh, I used to just like lash out at people and be like, I don't know what I'm feeling and I'd be like, I'm angry or I'm sad. You know, I'd cry. And like the whole foods aisle, I remember once, cause they didn't have like the nuts that I wanted. And I was like, why don't you have the nuts? This was right after my mom died and I was like, wow, like what is going on? Um, so some of the things, um, are to acknowledge, like once you validate and acknowledge this is the way I feel, you can write it down. Um, you can journal it just to get what is in your head out so that you can feel more in control. Cause now you know, Oh, this is what's going on in my mind. Maybe I should have a little mercy or grace on my body.

Kristina Harutoonian ([19:14](#)):

Um, and myself right now. Um, some of the things that you can do, um, if you're feeling anxious is to focus on something that is, um, like coloring a crossword Sudoku. It amazingly, this really helps, like it distracts your mind and basically it takes you from an elevated emotional level, um, which we called emotion mind back down to wise mind. So you're trying to just get back to baseline, but while acknowledging that everything you're feeling and going through is normal, um, and then journaling is what I have found to be the most helpful just right. Without caring what you're writing. Just write and write and write. It's funny because I can write and write and write. And then now when I'm told I have to write something to try to sell something, my brain just doesn't want to do it. You know, I'm like, when it's free reign, I'll do it.

Kristina Harutoonian ([20:14](#)):

But that's something else. Um, yeah. And then, uh, definitely reach out. I think that feels really difficult because sometimes we're judgmental on ourselves that we shouldn't feel this way. Um, and we say that there's no should that you, um, there's only like what you can do. Uh, what I have found really helpful is to write down the facts about something so that, um, I stop assuming things. So like the facts about COVID that you actually know for your life right now. I'm like, you're safe in your house. Uh, things like that. And then, um, what makes you feel happy is like things that you want to do. So for me, if I'm very stressed out, I'll turn on the TV and watch the Real Housewives and I just do not care what anyone thinks. And, and I just watch it cause it's mindless. I don't care. It doesn't require, you know, and they seem crazy, so I feel normal, but you know, it's whatever it is for you and that's fine.

Becky L McCoy ([21:24](#)):

What is one way that listeners could practice resilience and endurance?

Kristina Harutoonian ([21:30](#)):

Ultimately you will get through what you're going through right now because life is continuous. There's something greater than you or I, whatever it is that you believe in that has the world going around in a circle in this giant universe and we're just these people on this thing that is somehow continuously moving. So people who have gone through difficult times, they move through because they have the capacity to, and it's, it's, it's, I don't know how to say it in this like romantic way other than if you're going through it, you will get out of it and you will be able to tell that story because that is your story and that story is needed. It is so needed. I tell the girls at work who feel like, uh, the clients who feel like they've lost everything and they have no hope or whatever, it's like to see them go through 30 days or 60 days of whatever treatment and they are, they have the tools and resources and believe a little bit in themselves.

Kristina Harutoonian ([22:48](#)):

They go on and they do so much and it's like I believe in all of you that you will, you just gotta show up for yourself in the in the smallest way possible. And if that just means waking up and saying, I got up today and I'm going to take a shower and that's what I'm going to do. Then that is you showing up and that is you being resilient and getting through it and the more that you believe in yourself, like with the baby steps, I think it's the way to like get through and at some point you'll look back and be like, wow, I'm out of that or I'm, or it may be something that you live with your whole life, but your mindset and perspective has purpose that is bringing you through in a greater way. That is like even spiritual to an element where like, you know you have a bigger purpose to impact others.

Becky L McCoy ([23:47](#)):

You can find Kristina online at her website, theDTRblog.com or on Twitter and Instagram [@theDTRblog](#). Check out her YouTube channel, the DTR blog. You can find me anywhere on social media [@BeckyLMcCoy](#) or my website, BeckyLMcCoy.com. Please share this episode with a friend and subscribe to Sucker Punched and leave a rating and review in iTunes or wherever you listen to podcasts. Let's continue to be resilient together.