

Becky L McCoy (00:01):

You're coming out of a seasonal depressive episode, getting back to what, you know, as normal life and a global pandemic hits. You're trying to figure out how can we live in a community when we're all so isolated. This is Sucker Punched. Today I am welcoming Jessica Kantrowitz to the podcast, and I'm really excited to have you here with us.

Jessica Kantrowitz (00:32):

Hi, I'm excited to be here.

Becky L McCoy (00:36):

Uh, so first I'm curious to hear about how the development and spread of COVID 19 has affected you.

Jessica Kantrowitz (00:47):

Yeah. Um, there's several layers to that answer. <laugh> um, the, the most basic one I would say is that it has affected me far less than a lot of people. I'm still able to do my nanny job. Um, I work part-time as a nanny three days a week and we, the family and I have just included each other in our little self isolation pod. So that part of my life hasn't changed much, which is great. Cuz I still have that income. I still get the snuggles from the kids and get to see the inside of a different house in a back a different yard. Uh, and then my, my other jobs are working at home jobs anyway. So, um, that hasn't changed much. Uh, and then on another level, um, with mental health issues, I actually had a really not really rough, but a pretty rough winter.

Jessica Kantrowitz (01:49):

I think I definitely experienced seasonal effective disorder. And so, um, my anxiety gets a little bit worse. The depression gets a little bit worse. It's just, I have trouble leaving the house, not for work for work. I can get myself out the door, but, um, for things that are on my own time, like going to do laundry or going grocery shopping or getting exercise, uh, it, it takes, it feels like I'm pushing through a wall to get outta the house when, um, during the winter. So for me, when the pandemic started, that was, that was right when that was ending. So I actually feel a lot better now than I did before. My mood is a lot better in general. Um, but of course it's sort of continues the isolation that I was feeling over the winter, cuz I, it was hard for me to get out during the winter and now it's not safe for me to go out and socialize.

Jessica Kantrowitz (02:52):

So that's an sure aspect of it. My parents are in the higher risk category. They live up in New Hampshire where thankfully, um, things aren't quite as bad as here in Boston, but um, I, my dad has a degenerative illness, degenerative muscle illness. So he's very, um, you know, besides his age, he's in a higher risk category in my mom because of her age. So I've been really worried about them and um, struggling to process, you know, anxiety for them and helplessness to do much about the situation cuz I don't live close enough to really help them in any tangible way. So

Becky L McCoy (03:37):

Sure. What is, um, what has it felt like, like in your mind in your body? Um, Hmm. Maybe just generally, but have you noticed, are things similar or different to like when the anxiety and depression are, are really, really present?

Jessica Kantrowitz (04:03):

Yeah, I think, um, for me it's kind of the opposite because when the anxiety and depression are bad, there's something internal preventing me from doing the things that I would want to do. But this is, you know, my, my internal energy will actually say like, oh, let's go out for a walk or let's go, you know, see friends or even just go to the store. Um, but then there's an external stop and I have to think about the safety issues and you know, whether I will actually enjoy that activity and a mask.

Becky L McCoy (04:41):

Right. That's really interesting. So, um, yeah. Have you discovered, so you said like when depression, anxiety are, are more present, I don't ever say not present cuz does that really ever happen? <laugh>, you know, right. Those of us that live with it. Um, but when it, when it's less present or kind of just in the background, um, you have these internal like instinctual fears that, that wanna hold you back from doing things. Um, have you noticed there are things that you are afraid of or ways that your body has expressed fear with the pandemic?

Jessica Kantrowitz (05:27):

Hmm. Uh, yeah, I think my first instinct was to again, talk about my parents because I think that's where a lot of my anxiety has been focused mm-hmm <affirmative> and um, but I think the way that it has affected my body, one of the ways is, um, through food and through mm-hmm <affirmative> like, I think that was the most, one of the first reactions to the pandemic was like, oh, do we need to, you know, stock up food suddenly there's no toilet paper <laugh>, you know?

Becky L McCoy (06:02):

Sure.

Jessica Kantrowitz (06:03):

And, um, I have some history with E I don't know if, uh, I've never had a diagnosis of an eating disorder, but I'm pretty sure I have one or have had different points in my life. And one of the ways that I manage that is, um, by, you know, stocking healthy food and not, not, I don't have a lot of extra, you know, <laugh> food in my pantry, in my freezer and everything. Um, so at first it was like, okay, I have to, I have to buy all this food, but then I can't eat it cuz I need it. Mm-hmm <affirmative> for, if I get sick for, and can't leave the house for two weeks. Sure. That was very disorienting. Uh, and then yeah, just trying to understand, um, the, at the time of year that I would naturally be getting outside more and getting more exercise and going to the gym more, I can't do those things. And so again, it's kind of that continuation from the winter of like, okay, we're stuck in this situation where food is dysregulated and um, exercise is dysregulated. So have to learn to, to balance that and live in this new normal.

Becky L McCoy (07:24):

Sure. Are you seeing, um, that there's a, there's a certain group of people, um, that is impacted by the, or, or community of people, uh, impacted by the virus differently. I know specifically you just released a book on living with depression. Um, mm-hmm <affirmative> and I can only imagine that you're already thinking about those readers because you're releasing the book. Yeah. But, but they're all, there's also this external, um, thing happening that can complicate depression to begin with.

Jessica Kantrowitz (08:08):

Right. Definitely. Yeah. I think about that a lot. Um, I can't speak specifically to going through a major depressive episode during the pandemic, cuz I'm not right now. Um, but I think about, you know, people who are and who are already experiencing the isolation of depression that makes it so hard to reach out, um, to the resources that you need. And uh, yeah, just, I, I think the anxiety and, um, you know, negative thoughts that go along with depression must be worsened by the general anxiety and the air. And you know, when there's a, when there's a tangible reason for the negative thoughts that you're having, like, oh, it's not safe to leave the house. Or, you know, even of a thought that crosses my mind a lot is what if I make a mistake and I'm responsible for somebody's death, you know? And I can imagine if the depression were bad, that that would be a really disabling thought. So yeah, my, my heart has been with my fellow sufferers of depression during this time.

Becky L McCoy ([09:30](#)):

Yeah, sure. What are, uh, some of the realities for you of living in a global pandemic, you mentioned that your, your job doesn't really change, um, that how you approach food has had to take a little bit of extra thought. Um, what are some of the other realities for you in your life?

Jessica Kantrowitz ([09:55](#)):

Yeah, well, um, you know, I spent, I wrote my book about, um, a, a major depressive episode that I had in my early thirties and it took a couple years to work through that and then a couple more years to figure out some other stuff in my life. And so, um, I've always wanted to be a writer, but I'm 46. I just turned 46 and I'm just sort of getting started on in that career now. Uh, and I had in December of 2019, I just had this like inspiration or idea, or I don't know that I was, I was like, you know, I think I can finally stop living in survival mode and maybe make my plans less out of desperation and more out of what I really want out of life. And so I was really excited about it and I drew up a whole like plan monthly plan for, um, how, what I was gonna do with my, my writing and books. I was gonna pitch and books I was gonna write. And, um, I was gonna move, um, then get a pet. <laugh> all these really big things.

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

Yeah, of

Jessica Kantrowitz ([11:11](#)):

Course, as, as all of us have, um, experienced this year, those plans have to a large part, had to be set aside. So it's really just kind of in waiting mode and it's, it feels extra sad, I think because I've been in waiting mode for two decades already, but, um,

Becky L McCoy ([11:34](#)):

Can you, can you talk more about that? Just the, what that waiting is like,

Jessica Kantrowitz ([11:42](#)):

Well, you know, besides the, um, depression, which I've had my doctor, uh, diagnosed it as, uh, DYS stomach depression was major depressive episodes. So that means, like you said, there's, there's not often long stretches of time where I don't experience a little bit of depression. That's DYS stomach like mild depression, but then throughout my life, there were also these really big times of major depression. So that's been going on and I've also had really bad chronic migraines since I was a kid. So those, those two things have really, um, and on top of that, it's been, it's been really hard for me for, for some reason, for several reasons, maybe to identify those as limiting factors in my life, instead of just,

yeah, I have to understand that. Yeah. Instead of saying, what's wrong with me, why can't I just get an a, this semester, like I did last semester, or why can't I do this job even though, you know, I seem perfect for this job or, you know, the, it took a lot of time and work for me to say, oh, it's because I feel awful today emotionally.

Jessica Kantrowitz ([13:00](#)):

And because my head is killing me and I'm nauseous from the migraine and dizzy, and I can't think straight, and that's not laziness or, you know, rebellion on my part. That's just the reality of life with chronic illness. Mm-hmm <affirmative> so that's one reason. And then another is, um, whether that was related to the chronic illness or not. I think I spent a lot of my life. I got a, I went to school for a master of divinity and then, um, it took me a long time to get through that, but I was doing, trying out various ministries in the meantime, um, in an in evangelical contexts and then got, um, graduated finally and got a job and, and even angelical organization, uh, and that, you know, looking back, it was never, those places were never a good fit for me. <laugh> and they were causing a lot of, um, cognitive dissonance and a lot of strain on my mental health and physical health. Um, but I think because I didn't wanna give up cuz giving up would be failure. And I was trying so hard to struggle through these things in my life. I stuck with them for a really long time. So that's, you know, that's something else that I I've recently owned and, um, started living more into who I really think God has called me to be, which is more of a creator and a minister, but in a different sentence, not within the confines of a, of a certain organization.

Jessica Kantrowitz ([14:46](#)):

I'm not sure if that answers, <laugh> your question.

Becky L McCoy ([14:49](#)):

Yeah, no, I'm just sitting here like, uh, yep. <laugh> like, I, I identify so much with all the things that you're saying. And so you, you've gone on this journey of this journey. That's like, so

Becky L McCoy ([15:10](#)):

Yeah. You know, you know what I mean? Like right. You've done, you've put in the work to really discover who God has made you to be mm-hmm <affirmative>, um, and, and figure out what that means in, in your life and in your work life and, um, just what you would want to accomplish personally and, and come to terms with the fact that you're, you live with chronic migraines and depression and mm-hmm, <affirmative> you make this plan and start really dreaming for your writing in your creative life. And then like, boom, <laugh> a global pandemic. You have to yeah. Just stay home and not do those things. And right. And I think sadness is such a great word for that.

Jessica Kantrowitz ([16:02](#)):

Hmm.

Becky L McCoy ([16:03](#)):

Do we often give ourselves permission to be sad?

Jessica Kantrowitz ([16:07](#)):

Yeah. And, um, you know, I wouldn't, I wouldn't want to glorify the pandemic at all and I don't wanna glorify depression at all, but, um, I think like here, you're saying we don't often sit with sadness or sit

with, you know, fear or other emotions and that's part of why it took me so long to figure out who I was and what I wanted to do with my life, because I would always push through them. I would always try to say, well, what's wrong in my life that I need to fix. Do I need to break up with a boyfriend that, that helped once that actually helped end the major depressive episode once,

Jessica Kantrowitz ([16:50](#)):

You know, do I need to move, do I need to do this? Um, but in the, in the time that I write about in my book, none of those things were really possible for various reasons. So I was, I sort of had to look inside myself and, and stay with those without depression and what it meant and what was exas surveying it. And I think, you know, it's potentially similar for many of us with the pandemic cause we can't rush to, you know, fix it in the ways that we're used to. We're just sort of stuck here with ourselves and have to pay attention to what's going on in our own hearts and minds.

Becky L McCoy ([17:34](#)):

Yeah. We can't use any illusions of control as a way to avoid

Jessica Kantrowitz ([17:40](#)):

Right.

Becky L McCoy ([17:40](#)):

The real emotional things going on. Yeah. How, how do you think that we can care for one another during this time?

Jessica Kantrowitz ([17:53](#)):

Yeah, that's a really good question. Well, I, I write about in my book, um, when my depression was really bad, this last time I, I felt, um, I said I was once and someone corrected me. So I'll say I felt very needy, but it, it wasn't the kinda depression where I would just disappear and not talk to anyone. It was the kind of, sort of anxious depression, where I was desperate for someone to do something, to stop the pain. So I was, um,

Becky L McCoy ([18:28](#)):

Yeah,

Jessica Kantrowitz ([18:29](#)):

Often emailing my friends or calling my family, you know, and just pouring out how, how hard everything was. And understandably, that was a lot for, for some of my friends and family to take. Um, so which is fair, you know, they, they have limited resources as well and they would set set boundaries, but the boundaries would feel devastating to me.

Becky L McCoy ([18:57](#)):

Mm-hmm

Jessica Kantrowitz ([18:57](#)):

<affirmative> so, um, what I, what I learned as I worked through it was that I couldn't overly depend on one or two people that I really needed to have a broader network of people. And I needed to know

specifically what they could offer me when I, when I needed help. So, you know, someone might be overwhelmed by me emailing constantly or calling in the middle of the night, but they are, they really care about me and they would be happy to, you know, run out and buy a bag of groceries for me, but someone else. Sure. Yeah. But someone else might be overwhelmed at the idea of going to the store to get groceries, but they're, they stay up late anyway. So they wouldn't mind a phone call at three in the morning or a text. So I sort of have, have, um, come to think of my friends as a team in that way. And as mm-hmm <affirmative> I think about the, um, show who wants to be a millionaire and how you have different, like

Becky L McCoy ([20:01](#)):

<laugh>. Yes.

Jessica Kantrowitz ([20:03](#)):

Yeah. So my friend Gina is my, my phone, a friend or my text, a friend, and she's always up for, you know, getting a, a text and she'll even if she doesn't respond, I'll know that she's praying for me. Uh, and then I have, I have other friends that I can reach out to in different ways or, you know, so I, I spread it around <laugh>

Becky L McCoy ([20:25](#)):

Yeah. So,

Jessica Kantrowitz ([20:26](#)):

And that makes me feel more connected as well.

Becky L McCoy ([20:29](#)):

Sure. And that takes a little bit of work too. Right. Like some strategy to figure out where people's boundaries are and, um, right. And fit. It's kinda like doing, making a puzzle.

Jessica Kantrowitz ([20:44](#)):

Right. Exactly. And then, then, you know, I know I have to remember that I am lifelines or can be lifelines to other people, but one way to help them with that is articulating my own abilities and my own boundaries, you know, to say, here's something that I can do for you, but here's something that I can't, and then they, then they know how to reach out in a way that, you know, don't you

Becky L McCoy ([21:11](#)):

Think we could like achieve world peace if we all just had that <laugh> conversation with everyone that we know <laugh>.

Jessica Kantrowitz ([21:21](#)):

Yeah.

Becky L McCoy ([21:22](#)):

Oh,

Jessica Kantrowitz ([21:22](#)):

I mean, literally we're all just so, um, hurt by each other all the time, but we're all doing our best, you know? <laugh>

Becky L McCoy ([21:34](#)):

Yeah. And we just we're so hesitant, we don't wanna hurt people's feelings, so we don't wanna set boundaries. Right. But if we set boundaries, like you said, you just painted this awesome picture of your friends are helping you in ways that they feel like they can truly help you. Mm-hmm <affirmative>. Um, and, and you're not asking them to do things that they're uncomfortable with, but you have to have those conversations beforehand. You can't just kind of like shoot in the dark and, and hope that they're not, you know, you, you can, here's what I'm trying to say. I'm gonna, <laugh> be all the way around the Bush before my brain gets there. Um, you, when you ask a friend to help in a specific way, you can ask confidently that you are not asking them to do something that they're uncomfortable with.

Jessica Kantrowitz ([22:32](#)):

Right.

Becky L McCoy ([22:34](#)):

You're not wondering cuz I know when I haven't put those people in, put my team in place, I get afraid to ask for help at all, because I don't, I don't know whether or not someone will set on boundaries with me. Right. But if you have those conversations ahead of time, when things are okay, then when you go into that depressive episode, you can really trust that your friends have already told you the truth about where their boundaries are.

Jessica Kantrowitz ([23:07](#)):

Yeah, yeah. Definitely. Although it's not, it's not a static thing. Like it could it sure. Flex and change over time as well. If, if they're feeling better or worse or you're feeling better or worse and you know, what, what you're able to do

Becky L McCoy ([23:26](#)):

Sure

Jessica Kantrowitz ([23:27](#)):

Can change. But yeah, it's amazing what honest conversation will do. And also being honest with yourself, you know, I, I don't know if you're into the engram, but

Becky L McCoy ([23:40](#)):

I'm oh yes. <laugh> yeah.

Jessica Kantrowitz ([23:42](#)):

What number are you?

Becky L McCoy ([23:44](#)):

I'm a one wing nine. So for non any grand people, that means I have this very strong need to be responsible. Um, but then I have this little side piece of like wanting to make peace and not have any conflict.

Jessica Kantrowitz ([23:59](#)):

Yeah.

Becky L McCoy ([24:00](#)):

What are you

Jessica Kantrowitz ([24:01](#)):

Interesting? I, I am a four with a five wing mm-hmm <affirmative> so fours are creative, um, independent. They don't like to be like anyone else. Um, but they also often feel left out and lonely. So it's a, it's a paradox. So it took me a long time to be honest with the fact that, um, with myself about the fact that I was really like dwelling on ways that my friends had hurt me or ways that my friends weren't being there for me, that I, that I wished they would.

Becky L McCoy ([24:35](#)):

Mm.

Jessica Kantrowitz ([24:35](#)):

Um, and to let go of that and say, you know, it could be hurt because ever since my friend Jill had her son, she hasn't wanted to talk on the phone much anymore. And that used to be a really helpful part of my life to have regular phone conversations with Jill, but sure. But I know that she's doing her best and her circumstances have changed. And I know that she loves me. So mm-hmm, <affirmative>, I've tried to shift my thinking from what people aren't doing in our, in my friendships to what, what they are offering and to accept the, their love in the way that they're giving it to me.

Becky L McCoy ([25:22](#)):

Do you think that if we kind of flex those compassion and love and helping muscles, um, that it'll change the way that we all view our neighbors or our friends? Um, the people around us, even when the pandemic is over.

Jessica Kantrowitz ([25:45](#)):

Gosh, I hope so. I think I, I hear a lot of people talking about that right now. Um, die Mayfield. Her book just came out, um, talks a lot about that, uh, about neighbor love and you know, the responsibility that we have to each other.

Becky L McCoy ([26:04](#)):

Mm-hmm

Jessica Kantrowitz ([26:04](#)):

<affirmative> um, Caitlin Curtis, I just read her book. Native has a lot of the same themes. Um, I would hope so. I mean, a lot more is happening than the pandemic right now. Right. There's riots as we speak going on in Minneapolis. And I think people are, are realizing things about our country that many of us knew, but many of us are, are new to those realities. So I really hope that this is an opportunity for, for us to understand each other better as part of part of the community and as neighbors and not as, you know, my needs are the most important and my, my wealth is the most important. And, but to really see how my life and my decisions affect others around me, I try to be hopeful about that. <laugh> and

Becky L McCoy ([27:06](#)):

Not, yeah, yeah. Can be really hard some days.

Jessica Kantrowitz ([27:08](#)):

<laugh> yeah.

Becky L McCoy ([27:11](#)):

Yeah. How would you encourage resilience and endurance in people right now?

Jessica Kantrowitz ([27:20](#)):

That's a good question. I, um, I've been thinking a lot about how the things that besides therapy, besides medication, um, and, you know, seeing your doctor regularly, the things that are helpful for many people for, in caring for themselves through depression are lifestyle. Things like, um, exercise can be one of them or having a regular routine in the mornings and evenings or, you know, um, meditation can be really good and almost to the, almost every single one of those is harder right now because of the pandemic. It's harder to, the gyms are closed and you know, at least here in Boston, the streets are

Speaker 3 ([28:07](#)):

A bit crowded. So it's harder even to get out for a walk, um, for exercise, it's harder to, um, get

Jessica Kantrowitz ([28:15](#)):

Out and see friends. It's harder to concentrate.

Speaker 3 ([28:18](#)):

So it's harder to do things like

Jessica Kantrowitz ([28:21](#)):

Meditation if you were doing

Speaker 3 ([28:23](#)):

That before.

Jessica Kantrowitz ([28:25](#)):

Um, so what I think is that first of all, we have to stop feeling, um, ashamed of ourselves for not being able to do those things. Cuz I think with depression and with migraines, I ended up, um, and still can, besides the, the pain of the depression and the migraines, I would feel guilt because I wasn't doing the things that I felt I should be doing to take care of myself for the depression and migraines. Uh, and so letting go of that guilt and that shame was a really important process, part of my process of healing. So I think, I imagine that a lot of people who have lost those lifestyle changes and coping mechanisms that help with mental illness are feeling bad about it as well, feeling guilty or, you know, and so number one, stop feeling, <laugh> stop feeling bad about that. And number two, do the best you can and look for ways that you can modify those things. Like maybe you can't go for a jog every day like you had been doing, but you could still get outside and sit in your yard or sit on your porch for a few minutes and you know, feel the fresh air and the bird song. And maybe you can't meditate every morning like you were,

but you could still, um, every now and then throughout the day, put down your phone and close your eyes and take a few deep breaths and just trust that that's enough, you're doing what you can. And that's enough.

Becky L McCoy ([30:02](#)):

Jessica Kantrowitz is a writer and theologian living in Boston, Massachusetts. She writes about theology, culture, social justice, and chronic illness, including her own struggles with depression and migraines. You can find her at her website, JessicaKantrowitz.com on Instagram [@JessicaFaithKantrowitz](#) or on Twitter [@JFKantrowitz](#) check out her books. They're all linked in the show notes and make sure you get to know her cuz she's pretty awesome. You can find me Becky L McCoy on my website, BeckyLmccoy.com or on any social media [@BeckyLMcCoy](#), please leave a rate rating and review this podcast and make sure to share it with everyone that you know, really looking forward to next week as we start the new episodes and the new series of sucker punched. See you then.