

Alisha Mays: ADHD, poverty & food insecurity

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SPEAKERS

Alisha Mays, Katy Weber



Katy Weber 00:00

So yeah, so I guess you're relatively newly diagnosed at the age of 31. Correct. So why don't you tell me about kind of what was going on in your life that led to you thinking maybe I should look into this ADHD thing and kind of what was leading up to your your diagnosis?



Alisha Mays 00:19

Okay, so it's kind of a long story, I think, most people. So it started with sleep, right? So sleep is like foundational, because I've had so many problems in my life with sleep, sleep has been like, the bedrock of my anxiety for so long. So I was about to start a PhD program. And I was just thinking about all the work that I would have to do over the next several years. And I went several days, just not being able to fall asleep. And that's been pretty consistent throughout my life, it's been pretty hard for me to sleep at night, because I'm always up at night thinking and worrying and, and finally, remembering that I forgot to give a table some ranch as a server. And it's been, it's been really hard to sleep at night. And so I was, I was really struggling. And I had to go to my psychiatrist appointment, because it had been, you know, several days, and I was not able to fall asleep. And I go in, and at this point, I think I'm 27 or 28. And she says, I think that you're bipolar manic right now. And I'm like, oh, no, really. I've never like had this happen before where I'm awake for several days at a time. Is it possible that I'm bipolar manic right now? And? And she's like, Yeah, that's exactly what's happening. So she puts me on some bipolar medication. That makes me feel verifiably insane. Oh, yeah.



Katy Weber 01:49

What was it doing? Can I ask?



Alisha Mays 01:51

It made me feel like my heart was beating faster and slower at the same time, and my

thoughts were just so like, even more delayed than, than typical for me, it was just really hard to formulate a thought. So I kind of lost hope in therapy for a while and went back and was like, you know, I totally disagree with your diagnosis. And she's like, Okay, well, here's some anxiety medications. So fast forward. To several years later, my husband and I get a divorce, which pushes me back into therapy, right. And so I'm explaining to her, you know, all of these things that have happened in my life, and she's like, Have you ever considered for a moment that it might be ADHD? And that was like a



Katy Weber 02:37

new therapist, right? Not the same one who diagnosed you with bipolar, manic okay.



Alisha Mays 02:43

Yeah, right. So totally new therapist. So she's like, Have you ever considered just for one second that ADHD? And I was like, Um, no, never. Um, I live in Kentucky, where were childhood. Childhood ADHD diagnosis are pretty prevalent, right? It's one of the most prevalent places in the country for children to be diagnosed with ADHD. And so I had this like, formulation in my head, as we all do, that ADHD was what little boys who were very rowdy were diagnosed with. And I was like, no, never for five minutes. And she's like, Okay, well, I can't, you know, put you on any medication for it, because she was a licensed clinical social worker, but she's like, I highly recommend reaching out to a psychiatrist or someone that can help you with it. So it took me a year to get into psychiatry from that point, and here's why. So I would schedule the appointment and then I would forget that I scheduled the appointment and then I just, I mean, I don't know, of course. And then, I mean, it just took me so long to even schedule the appointment in the first place because I was like, I need to do this and I know I do, but I just don't want to do it. And then it took me I think four canceled appointments like I would like call and cancel like five minutes right before because five minutes. Or I would just totally forget that the appointment was real in the first place because it was on a peak posted somewhere in my bedroom right now. But I finally finally got in. I was able to stick to it only because I was like okay, I'm flunking out in my Ph. D program at this point, opening my laptop gives me severe anxiety. I have got to get help. Like we're to a point right now where I'm spiraling. I'm about to get fired. Not good. So I go in. And the diagnosis process was I mean, it was it was fairly simple. It wasn't the monster that I made it out to be in my head. And that was now about a month ago. So this is all still pretty fresh. And I've had like my psychiatrist diagnosed me and I've gotten back into therapy again. Yeah, so I'm right there at the beginning of the process, and falling in love with finally knowing what



Katy Weber 04:58

it is, isn't it just so Like, it's so difficult to articulate to other people how mind blowing it is, when, when you get this diagnosis and you start connecting the dots, especially when you've been kind of had this misconception about what ADHD is, and what it looks like, and, and these seemingly random struggles that you have throughout your life that all kind of tied together. And, and yeah, and so it doesn't I mean, it's it's unfortunate that you had a medical provider who thought, bipolar manic because I've talked to so many people, so many women and I

myself thought I was bipolar before I received my ADHD diagnosis because of, you know, the things that you were talking about the like obsessive thinking and, and manic energy. And yeah, I mean, there's such, so many kind of parallels and overlaps. Yeah, so Wow.

A

Alisha Mays 05:55

Oh, yeah. She had me pretty convinced to she was like, So do you ever just go shopping randomly and spend money? And I'm like, oh, yeah, like all the time. Like, I like love going shopping. And I didn't realize it's because I was chasing the dopamine. Right? So it was really easy for me to just hop on Amazon when I'm feeling very under stimulated and buy something that's gonna make me happy. But it wasn't like I was blowing my entire life savings on a yacht to cruise around the Atlantic. It was just like, oh, yeah, I could totally use that new skirt. It's gonna make me really happy right now. Check me really convinced. And then I was like, huh, some of these things actually don't make sense. Because this has been a problem consistently. Like, it's like, I don't have episodes, this is just who I am.



Katy Weber 06:39

Yeah, right. And I think that is really what why it feels so confusing to kind of go through and, you know, try to figure out what is connected and what is the cause. And you know, especially when so many of us are misdiagnosed with other mood disorders, and you're like, oh, wait, living a life undiagnosed, is kind of the trauma itself. When you talk about all of these mood disorders. So you had is it is mind blowing. So now when you when you were first diagnosed and really started looking into it, and I'm assuming hyper focusing on ADHD as we, as we do, and when we start connecting those dots, like, what were some of the things looking back in your life where you're like, holy crap, the signs were there all along.

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Alisha Mays 07:21

Oh my goodness. So I am on Tik Tok. I am 31. But I'm also very in love with tic tock I know my, my 19 year old sister makes fun of me for it. So I am very well versed in just typing in ADHD and then just falling down the rabbit hole of ADHD tic tock and it's so fascinating to see, to see how many things that I've just thought were personal flaws, that are just part of of me being just a little different in the way that I think like one thing that I've noticed that I didn't, that I hear kind of rarely, but but I'm still hearing is hyper focusing and love. So ADHD dating, I think is a little different than then, you know, neurotypical dating. When I first meet someone, it's just all dopamine. Although for me, all the dopamine is found in that new person. And I like to just push the relationship right along, because I'm like, oh, yeah, this is just making me so happy. And I hyper focused on this person. And then I learned everything about them. And at one point, I was, I was really convinced that I was narcissistic love bombing, because, okay, I'm like, hyper focusing on these people. And then a few months later, when the dopamine is gone, focus on something else. And all of those things that I was doing for that person in the beginning of the relationship, I'm not doing that anymore, because I'm focused on something else now. And so they're like, What did I do wrong? What's happening? And it's like, I don't know. I mean, I'm just learning how to knit, how to play the ukulele. I'm not as invested in like hearing your your family's history anymore, because I have to learn how to knit the sweater before.



Katy Weber 09:22

I have to be the fastest knitter on the planet.



Alisha Mays 09:27

And then I'll knit a sweater and it's like, Okay, interesting. Now, I'm gonna go buy a ukulele. These are real things that has happened in my life. It's like okay, so I so I did learn how to knit that. Totally done with that now, that's no longer making you happy. Now we're gonna go learn how to play the ukulele. So then I'll learn how to play a really cool song on ukulele and it's like, okay, that was great. Fun times. Now we're going to get really into comic books. Let's go. Let's compile the code. So my apartment is like an assemblage of hobbies of past lives. I just live in every corner of my place because it's it's, I don't know, like, I didn't realize that that was part of ADHD. But apparently I'm seeing a lot of people that that are kind of going through that. But you know, sort of on a more somber note, I think one of the things I didn't really realize was part of this, too, was I'm consistently feeling like you're too much for people. So my friends, throughout me, it's been kind of hard to make friends because I'm really awkward socially, I think, like, I don't really have a filter, and I'm just like, oh, yeah, look, let me say this right now I know that you were just talking that can wait, or have to get this out right now. And I'm always the last person laughing and the loudest person will laughing and I'm just like, the loudest person in the conversation in general. And so throughout life, it's been like, oh, like, we don't really talk to Alicia because she's too much. We don't want to like get her all wound up. There are things that I've heard or like, your way up here, I'm going to need you to bring it down to here. Because I do get very hyperactive sometimes I don't like I know that that's not like super common for women, I guess. But I tend to bounce off the walls every now and again. Um, and and it's it's really frustrating for people and I come off as a rude asshole if I'm being honest with you, because I just come off. Like, I have no regard for people in social settings. But, but I can



Katy Weber 11:36

No, no, I mean, I think this is a theme we talk about a lot. I certainly have had that experience where like, I come in hot like you said, like I hyper focus on people I you know, and even back in like middle school in high school, my friendships were like that where it would be like obsessively kind of bonding with somebody, and then doing something inadvertently to offend that person or anger that person or something, you know, like being either too much or, or just sort of like a bad friend, but not really doing it intentionally, or even understanding what is happening. And then all of a sudden, that person has dumped me. And sort of feeling like, what did I do, and it's still habits to this day where like, somebody will like unfriend me on Facebook. And I literally have no idea what I did. And it's so it's like, you just sort of you start really fearing relationships a lot of the way and like you said, like, you start to really kind of pull back from people, it's really difficult to trust relationships, because you can't really even trust yourself. A lot of the time. I think that was something that was so profound to me, Sarah Solden talked about it in her book on women with attention deficit disorder, how like, we can't trust ourselves. In a lot of situations, like you were saying, like, sometimes we blurt things out, and we taught him you know, sometimes we're super like on fire and really social and other times, we just want to curl up in a ball. And we have no idea how we're necessarily going to react in any given

situation. And so, you know, the combination, I think of not being able to trust who we are with people and in certain situations, and then also the chronically feeling like we have done something accidentally. And so we yeah, we pull away a lot for sure.

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Alisha Mays 13:17

Oh, yeah, that's exactly what led to my, my therapist, thinking that I had ADHD was I, I went in, and like, I think that my exact words were like, my self trust is bankrupt. I can't depend on myself to wake up in the morning on time, because I'm either alone, I or, you know, people with ADHD have vastly different sleep cycles than the people that don't have ADHD. So, so waking up on time has just consistently been a problem for me. And, and showing up for things when my friends need me there has consistently been a problem with me and not being late to things even if it's dinner. I mean, a few times, my friends are like, okay, like, yeah, you relate, like twice in a row, whatever. But then after a while, it's like, every time we schedule a dinner, you're late, and then you get here and you just like spend the whole time talking and we can't get a virgin get a word in edgewise. And so, so yeah, like, there are those things where it's like, I can't even depend on myself like, of course, like, you know, it's hard to maintain relationships when you're just so so kind of wounded because you think I mean, pre diagnosis, I honestly thought that I was just a really shitty person. Like I've spent 31 years of my life thinking that I am just a shit person and that I am like, not to be trusted, really lazy. I will sleep through anything and I have no regard for important events in my friend's life. I thought that that was terrible friends and a bad teacher because it takes me longer to great thanks then it does, you know other other teachers across the university. And I just thought that I was just a bad person and that I really inherited all of these things is just tragic. personality flaws, not realizing that it was linked to something



Katy Weber 15:04

else. Yeah. Oh, man I know. And then you and then the first time you hear about rejection sensitivity, dysphoria, and it just hits you like a ton of bricks, where you're just like, Oh, my goodness, somebody is finally explaining what I have been feeling my whole life in terms of, yeah, that shame, you know, the shame that goes along with being kind of accidentally and as, like, you know, right. Like, you're really, it's that idea. It's so hard to articulate. And I think why it's so important for us to have conversations with each other, right? And why, you know, platforms like tick tock have been so meaningful to us, because so much of our so much of the shame around that is something we've been holding, without even realizing how private and you know, how we haven't been addressing it, or, you know, a lot of the times were just like, so we're just treading water. So we can't even like process, all of the shame that we're feeling around a lot of this stuff. And so we don't even stop and think about it until somebody says something like, yeah, you know, you know, tick tock video about like, you know, being a bad friend or something, and you're like, oh, yeah, it just floods over you, right? It's so emotional to be like, Oh, my goodness, somebody just said, something I didn't even realize I had been feeling

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Alisha Mays 16:26

or, you know, just saying that someone else, you know, kind of kind of goes through the same thing, like, oh, you cried for three days, when someone does something like that is slightly

critiquing, okay, me do like, I also am awake every night for like three days, just crying about it and thinking about it, and just not being able to let it go. And then I'm done. You know, it's, it's really, really hard. And then, whenever those critiques do come in, and I don't want to co opt language from, from ASD, but but I do like to use the word masking, because I think that that's the best way that it is, is described, when you do receive those critiques. It's, it's like, immediately you have to mask, like when your friends are like, oh, like you're being too loud, or like, Oh, you're doing this or doing that. It's like, I just shut down like it. And it becomes so like, catastrophic in my head that like I just shut down and I tend to push myself off to the side. And I've gotten really good at that. I have, I didn't realize how many masks that I have until I started watching ADHD tic tok and it's like, oh, okay, so the fact that I'm like, hi, why did you say even though I heard you, but I just need time to process



Katy Weber 17:43

cottard De Wolf did a video about that. Yeah. He did a really good job of that idea of like, yeah, no, I heard you. It's just like, I tell my kids, it's like it sits in the lobby for a minute before it makes it into the building.



Alisha Mays 17:56

I laughed so hard at that one. Because I'm be like Queen of point height. What do you say and like, people know that I heard them. And so my sister stopped responding. And she just like, gives me the second now to like formulate.



Katy Weber 18:11

See, that's such a great example of like, accommodations and how important they are right? Like, once you kind of can explain what is happening. And then somebody can say, all right, well, then I'll just help you out here. And then the cycle of shame is is disrupted. And that's what I think is so important for us is that understanding, like what is happening, and then being able to at least explain that, you know, like I always say, you know, ADHD isn't an excuse. It's an explanation. And that's as much for us as it is for other people, right? Because I think for us, we internalize so much of that, like, why am I not listening to? Like, I don't know what's happening.



Alisha Mays 18:48

Oh, yeah, not listening is definitely just another one of those like, Hallmark traits that I've that I've noticed that I have to so. So being in higher ed, obviously, like, we have to listen and being an anthropologist in general, like, our whole job is kind of interviewing people and listening. And so I have to think so hard about listening, and paying attention that like, I'm thinking about it so much that I'm like, I'm not thinking about the fact that I shouldn't be listening to you. And even I mean, I know that like, sometimes when we're wildly interested in things, we hyper focus, but sometimes even when I'm very invested in something and someone's talking, my mind is like not just in one place like at different places, like thinking about a million different

things. And I've noticed that sometimes even when I'm talking, my mind is not present. So I will like talk about something but my head is like, what the circumference of Santa Claus is belt. I think



Katy Weber 19:56

that was something that always fascinated me when I would read too much At night, right? Like, I could be reading out loud, Charlotte's Web. And at the same time thinking a million other different thoughts and having a narrative and even though like, my mouth is saying these words out loud, and like, it knows the intonation, and it knows how, you know, it knows, it knows the cadence and everything, like I can read it as though I'm actually reading it, and yet, I will have no clue what I have just read. And like, my kid would have stopped me and been like, is that true? And I, and then I would get, you know, busted where I was like, Uh, I actually have no idea what I've been reading. Like it just those sorts of weird quirks that that now through that lens of understanding, you're like, Wow, that is really fascinating how our brains work like that.



Alisha Mays 20:45

Oh, yeah, it's, it's very noticeable in graduate school when you're reading, like texts from like, the 1800s. And it's like, oh, like my head would write would just literally rather be anywhere other than here right now. And so I can read something and then have to reread it like seven different times. Because I just, it's so hard to stay in that moment when you're when you're just I mean, I don't know, it's it's certainly hard to read during graduate school when you have ADHD and like, your primary job is like reading and listening to people. And it's like, those are the two things that are really difficult to do. So yeah, it's I don't know if there any other PhD students out there but I just like can totally sympathize with the difficulty. Well, this



Katy Weber 22:36

is something else I find fascinating, because you mentioned in your email to me that you never graduated high school. And so I'm always fascinated, because a lot of I would say the majority of the women I interview actually do quite well in school. I did not I did terribly in school. And I talked about the fact that like, a lot of the criticisms of my inconsistencies got me to the point where I just skipped school all the time, and I stopped going, and then I would get, you know, I would flunk and then I had to redo I, you know, I dropped out I had to go back and, and then the same thing happened again, in university, I was just I would stop going because I would get so overwhelmed by my classes. And I, I had would miss the cutoff date to drop the classes. So I would get apps and so that my GPA was destroyed and all of that stuff. So I'm curious if you know, but then I barely just just got my BA just to get it. Like I never there was never any point where I was like, I'm going to continue to grad school because I just felt like such a hot mess. So I'm curious. So like, backtrack a little bit like what did you what was going on in high school? And then how did you transition from that period of your life to them being you know, going on and doing your PhD?



Alisha Mays 23:48

Yeah, let's talk about how it's a roller coaster. Yeah. Yeah, it really is. So it's a GED to PhD with ADHD is like my autobiography, right? So, um, yeah, high school, you probably won't be surprised to know, I had an eating disorder. And I was I was anorexic for a really long time. So I come from a deeply impoverished family. And so I think that a part of my eating disorder stemmed from food insecurity and not having access to fresh unhealthy foods or just food in general to be honest with you. So, so that was definitely a key part of it. So So I suffered from anorexia, I was severely underweight I, you know, at various points, my health was just deteriorating. I could not focus in school at all. So I went from being in very gifted classes, and part of these like elitist like academic teams, and just very, you know, advanced courses, to not coming to class at all and being in court for truancy. And literally, just Leaving in the middle of class when I wasn't interested in like, it wasn't like I could just sit and suffer through it anymore, I would just get up and leave. And that's been a pretty common thing for me is like, if I am not interested in a course I cannot sit through it. And I know like, I'll just walk away. So I even left in the middle of taking my AC T's I had no interest in finishing it. So, I mean, it wasn't a difficult test. I just didn't have like, I, I don't know, I can't explain it. I wasn't in control in that moment. Something else was and I just got up and left. And, and so I



Katy Weber 25:32

just to like interject, I think anyone listening to this podcast will 100% Understand that impulse, just by the way, like, that's how kind of connected we are with ADHD, we're like, I absolutely understand that impulse. And I relate to that. So sorry. Just



Alisha Mays 25:49

I commend the people that are able to like push past that I cannot I just, you know that like DSM five language, it's like you're driven by a motor. Yeah, that was like one of those like motor moments. For me, it's like, she's gone. And that would happen very frequently. So that, that sort of just total disinterest coupled with, you know, extreme poverty and, and massive health issues from from an eating disorder. I went until my senior year, and I'd fallen so far behind that I was gonna have to take all these credit recovery classes and be in high school for another year. And I just could not stomach that I was in court for truancy. I was working full time hours in high school to help my family and to just have some money, and I had to pay back like a \$600. Fine. I'm like 525 an hour I think was like the minimum wage back then, for being truant. So yeah, that's kind of messed up about our our school system. But yeah, my family couldn't afford it. So I at 18, had to had to work full time hours to pay off a truancy fee. And I just didn't go back, I ended up going to get a GED, which helped me finish sooner than my friends, which I was really excited about. So I've got to get out a little bit early. And then I took several years off and did absolute trash work. Worked for like 18 Different companies in a year, because I could not keep a job. Because again, if I'm not interested in something, I just leave and it's like I don't I mean, try explaining that to you know, your your partner who's deeply depending on you to help pay rent, and you're like, Listen, I don't know why just put this other job. I know that we have no money. But I also just got up and left that one too. I'm sorry. Like, I have no idea what to say. And so I just thought that I had no respect for him or me or like I didn't care I spent so long thinking that and then finally went back to school almost flunked out, again, out of out of undergrad and then somehow made it to through a master's program with with professors that are deeply interested in like making sure that their students are really cared for, and appear hanging out with other PhD students. And I have no idea how I got here.

And I have no idea how I'm not the end of the of the program. No, and I'm finally finished with coursework. No. Because it's been, it's been really hard. It's, it's, it's really hard when you just don't trust yourself enough to go to class. And when you do get to class, you don't trust yourself enough to stay there. That's, yeah, that's, that's really put a lot of stress on my mental health. Because I just have no trust that I can even stay seated in class and just finish the lecture or do the homework or wake up to get there in the first place.



Katy Weber 28:55

Well, and I also found that no matter how many, you know, even when I was in the undergraduate level, I would still I would go to all the lectures, I would listen, I would take notes, I would study like I would do all the work necessary. And then I would show up for a test and just nothing, I just be a blank slate. And I think that was the other feeling of like that other mistrust. Which is like sometimes I can randomly explain the plot of a movie I saw in the 80s. But then other times, it was like I could Yeah, you know, have, you know, read an entire text and not be able to retain or explain any of it and really not understanding why that is or what the difference was, and then, you know, defaulting back to well, what is wrong with me? I must be a terrible person or, you know, I'm not trying hard enough or all those kinds of, you know, the internalized stigma that we end up piling on ourselves. Yeah.



Alisha Mays 29:51

Oh, yeah. That was such a common occurrence for me. It was it was miserable that and also I would get kicked out of lecture sometimes for being too loud and disruptive. So I was the person who was like cracking jokes really loudly in the middle of a giant lecture hall. And so I thought that I was just hilarious. Like, laughing I'm so embarrassed. I think that the younger people say it's cringy it's really trendy. But looking back on it, I was like, I thought that I was like this comedic genius, because that was the way that I would stay in boots was to make jokes about, like, what the professor was saying, and like, laugh at it and like, I would get kicked out Yeah, so so that and like, you know, of course, like, just the test process was, was really hard. Because it was, I mean, I would read something and it was just like, nothing would stick. You know, it was like, I was just staring at like these symbols, you know, like, like, these symbols that were supposedly formed words and paragraphs on a page, but to me like it was just, yeah, it's certainly hard to read and then like, actually retain that information



Katy Weber 31:14

Yeah. When I was diagnosed I think a lot of a lot of us experienced this when we're diagnosed. You know, it's like you start going, you know, it's genetic. So you go through your family tree, and you're like, yep, atsu was definitely had it. Oh, yeah. Go Fred. Oh, my God. Yeah. What a trade route. You know, it's like you just like go through? Have you know, what, have you talked to your family about this? And kind of what was the reaction? And are they on board? Are they supportive? Or are they just like, don't be ridiculous.



Alisha Mays 33:17

So I'm from Eastern Kentucky where mental health is just not something that most people talk

So I'm from Eastern Kentucky, where mental health is just not something that most people talk about. Even within like family household, it's just like, not part of like, our cultural capital to like, talk freely about those things. Not to like, not to stereotype the whole region, of course, but like, within my family, and a lot of families. I know, that's certainly the truth. And so, my parents know that I was recently diagnosed, and it's so funny that my mother is like, like, the poster person for ADHD. She certainly has ADHD. And she she was like, Okay, well, I guess that makes sense. Because, like, we had this, like, you know, long conversation about how it's not just for very high for little boys. And she's like, you know, you were kicked out a preschool for being too disruptive. You know, it's like another Yeah, really. And, you know, you did have some delays, like it didn't take you till third grade to learn how to tie your shoes and to skip and you didn't learn how to walk until you were to sew. So you definitely did have all of these delays. And, and when when you weren't interested in something you just wouldn't say you were just gone. And so even when we tried to homeschool you in kindergarten because you were kicked out again, for being too disruptive. We we had to sit at the kitchen table and you just would have zero interest in what was happening and you would like tap and drum on things and and just like get up and leave whenever she was like you know, I I didn't see that and I'm like really good. Don't say Did you not know? And then she herself, you know, I was I was actually just visiting her last night. And I'm very open with the fact that now I take medication. I'm not medicated today, because I forgot, right? That's the funniest thing in the world, like I forgot. So today I'm just being a loose cannon. But But I was I was, you know, a little bit calmer yesterday because I was medicated, and I go over there and I'm talking to her about something. And right in the middle of my sentence, she just like, interjects with this really random thought. And she's like, you know, really excited about it. And I'm like, okay, that that's what I'm like, This is it. Like, this is what people see. Because like, I was, you know, really calm, cool and collected. I'm still getting used to my medicine. So I feel like I'm just like, this, like, super chill person who can like think thoughts and do things. And she just, like, cuts in and interjects, and I'm like, yep. Yep, I see now. And she gets so like, excited about things. And she's consistently late. She was supposed to be here earlier this afternoon, super late. Just just like me, and he's like, you know, I think I might have been like, Oh, yeah. Well, I think yeah, I mean, I think that's one of the things about it being genetic is that so many of our families, this was just the norm, this was normal. And so why would they think this was odd behavior in childhood? Right, this is probably what they had done. And, and so they're, you know, it's like, I feel like half of it is just like clinically, not really understanding what is happening with children and kind of how it exhibits, you know, across the board, but then at the same time, parents who were just sort of like, oh, oh, Jimmy's just being silly, like, he just needs to be punished or whatever. I think it's just that idea of like, why would I think that this was a disorder of some sort, you know, this is just childhood? Yeah, they certainly don't think like, I don't think that my family would have you at, like, they have this very positive. I mean, like, although I just had mental health is like really stigmatized, like, within our family. ADHD is just not, it's not really like, I don't think that they would view it as a disorder. My mom just thinks it's pretty cool that she is really excitable and talkative. And just, you know, like, we're just known as being very loud. And we take up a lot of space, which is just like, cool feminist thing, right? Like, like those women, like, they just take up all the space they want, like, can't can't mansplain them, because they will not even want to talk. So yeah, it's a it's, it's not really needed. I don't think being a disorder to them.



Katy Weber 37:47

That's cool. Yeah, that is great. That's one of the things, you know, my, my mother passed away before I was diagnosed. And as she's like, the one person I really wish I could have conversations with about this, because it's just so you know, you just spend so much time going

over, you know, my, I go over my childhood all the time, and my report cards and school and just, you know, so much of it and wanting to know, you know, there are times where I'm like, oh, yeah, she definitely had it, because she, you know, did this or this. And, yeah, so that's great. I'm so glad that they are open minded, and also see these things not as flaws. Because, you know, a lot of the time I think, part when you know, when people do go to their family and say, you know, I have I have ADHD, I'm getting diagnosed, and they're, you know, the idea of like, well, it's not that bad. It's just you just need to, like, apply yourself, right? You just, you know, it's not a big deal. You're doing fine. And you know, their first instinct is always to minimize, you know, what, what the struggle actually is in your own life as though it's somehow going to reflect poorly on their parenting or the you know, that it's, I think it's the same idea of like, they'll start to think it's their fault somehow. I think because I think one of the stigmas for a long time was the fact that ADHD was bad parenting, and I'm sure you know, when you're struggling in school at any age, right? How can your parents not feel like they are somehow to blame? I'm sure my parents did all the time.

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Alisha Mays 39:18


Yeah, I think I think so. When you couple he with with pretty intense poverty, which happens a lot. And it's, it was it was really hard to it was it was really hard to kind of pick up on those nuances. When there were just so many other daily struggles that had to be combated first, like it was really hard to like, think about, like, how was Alicia doing and her math class when it's like, Okay, how are we going to pay rent or like, how are we going to do this? And so yeah, it was I mean, I don't in any way, shape or form blame them at all. For for my late diagnosis, and I don't I mean, I don't hold anything against them because that know that, that they were just trying the best that they could with what they had and, and, you know, seeing that, like I was, you know, having a really hard time in math class and I consistently struggled here and there like, I stopped doing my homework for a while. I don't. Yeah, like, I can see how that would like, you know, sort of come second to like, how are we going to like feed for kids? And yeah, yeah, so it was, yeah, it's, it's really hard. And so I think that, that all the nuances that exist between ADHD and poverty, I mean, it, it actually makes me cry, like, just to think about, like, how, how prevalent they, they kind of are together. And, and these these, you know, life cycles that are just forever changed. Because, you know, ADHD often is comorbid with things like anxiety, and, you know, it's, it's people that that are really having a hard time with these, you know, mental traits that that, you know, have, have it more financially difficult. And I don't know, you know, like, what happens throughout the cycle? Exactly. But, but the relationship is just undeniable. And it's really sad.





Katy Weber 41:14


Yeah, that's really beautifully said, thank you. I mean, I think it's true. There is such in this, I think, across this country, you know, there is such a discrepancy between awareness of mental health and the importance of mental health. And then there's systems that can, you know, support, and they just don't exist, right. I mean, there's just like, I feel like, I live in New York State, I'm a middle class, you know, working person, I have insurance. And yet I think about like, the out of pocket expenses for mental health with my family are astronomical and and they're not even, you know, and I'm not even taking meds. And part of the reason I'm not taking meds is because they're so expensive. Even though I know that antidepressants were

literally pennies of pill. So I'm curious, like, what the when you when you said earlier that ADHD is very highly diagnosed in Kentucky and boys. You know, what's the follow up to that? Because I don't imagine that there's much follow up in terms of social services and medication.

 Aisha Mays 42:26
Oh, yeah. No.

 Katy Weber 42:29
Do what that diagnosis, is it just sort of like a label that's put on kids who are? Who are the you know, the Oh, misbehaving? Yeah,

 Aisha Mays 42:39
so so that is something like I'll be really vulnerable and share this, like, this isn't really like, like, I feel so guilty saying this. So let's see, in 2011, this is, according to the CDC, the National let's see, the prevalence of diagnosed ADHD in Kentucky was 16.6%. Nationally, it was only 11. So that's a pretty big gap. And I've seen some articles that say that this state has the highest highest prevalence in children. And so I grew up thinking, and I hate to say this out loud, but I mean, this is just like, what like, like my former worldview, I grew up thinking that ADHD was something that hyperactive little boys had and that their parents would go get them Ritalin, and I had heard of Ritalin at a very young age. And so I thought that it was just like this. This, you know, medicine, that is really mean little boys that I was exposed to in school would take to just calm down. And, and it was just part of like, our family, you know, sort of culture like oh, like, Well guess who put their kid on Ritalin this week? And, and, you know, it was really stigmatized and judged for what it was back then. Like, families would really harshly look at other families who chose to medicate their children. And yeah, like, there was just this, like, sort of superior parenting culture like, oh, wow, I would never, you know, put my children on anything like that, because I can handle my children or my children know better than to do this better this. So. So yeah, it's really stigmatized, and then there just aren't very many mental health services in that region. I don't think that can. I mean, yeah, it's tough.

 Katy Weber 44:33
Yeah. And that's, I mean, that's another theme. I feel like I explore a lot with women. When we talk about like, what was available to you growing up right and, and so we do we do talk a lot about so socioeconomic status and race and the ways in which the stigma affects people based on like pre assumptions around behavior of children, right. And so like, a lot of children who are visible minorities are dismissed by their teachers, as you know, if they have behavioral issues, it's like, oh, that kid is jail bound or whatever. You know, like there's so many ways in which we stereotype children who before they've even had a chance for service. And, you know, I guess it also goes to show like why boys are viewed as disruptive and girls are, might even be exhibiting the same behavior, but they're almost give it a pass. Like, I think there are a lot of the time, a lot of times where girls are, you know, work harder to be more well behaved at a younger age. But I've also interviewed women who were like, No, I was doing the exact same

thing as the boy next to me, it's just he got in trouble because he was a boy. And so there is almost that, like, you know, the, the so fascinating, I'm sure as an anthropologist to like, you could probably go on and on about, like, how fascinating it is to talk about like gender, and race. And, and, yeah, and socioeconomic status, and how we are like diagnosing children, and how that's affecting your entire life in terms of like, I feel like people who have had proper accommodations at a very young age, they don't live their whole life with that mentality of like, what's wrong with me I am flawed I am that, you know, they don't view themselves as being personally flawed the way that many of us entered adulthood feeling and how like, that absolutely affects your entire self view and your narrative. And a lot of kids who received you know, even just like a simple dyslexia diagnosis are treated very different are, you know, they've sort of view their relationship with learning or, you know, their relationship with like, Help, is very different. And so it's always fascinating to me to think about, like, how, how similar and yet how different our experiences are, based on, you know, where we lived, and what we what was available to us. And it's, yeah,

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Alisha Mays 46:56

right. I mean, I feel like like, you know, this, this region in particular is, is just marked by structural violence. And, you know, resource extraction, especially like out in Eastern Kentucky elk out, like out towards, like the Appalachian Mountains. And it's just really difficult to see. To see just kind of how how I don't even know how to how to say it. But yeah, it's, it's, it's certainly difficult. Especially like, when when you're poor, I mean, and I'm gonna get emotional. But yeah, it's hard. It's hard because then you just sort of grow up with like, this mentality of like, I don't fit in with the world. And so like, I I had so many different suicide attempts, because I just felt like I didn't, like I search so hard for a place to fit in, but I just, I couldn't find it. And, and it was like, you know, I can only be prescribed Zoloft and Wellbutrin sometimes like it, but it just wasn't working like I, I wasn't working like I didn't fit in with this like very. Calvinistic work hard and good things will come to you kind of like mentality of like, oh, well, I, you know, you're fine. As long as you're working really hard, because I couldn't work really hard. It was, it was harder for me, right? And so like, I was cast into this, like, undeserving poor net, like there is like this. Like, there's this group of like, you know, those who are poor, but are very deserving, and the undeserving for who are like lazy and morally corrupt. And I feel like that's kind of like, you know, where I was just passing society, because if people thought that I was lazy, I couldn't stick with a job. I was flunking out of school I was, you know, homeless at various points. I got married twice, both times. Because I mean, really rooted in the fact that I was terrified of, like, finding places to sleep and, and, you know, it was, it was hard, and I just went through so many different challenges in life that feel like didn't need to happen. And had I had the mental health support very early on wouldn't have happened. It's, it's been Yeah, it's been hard. I mean, it's, it's something that I think that needs to be immediately addressed. Because it is serious. I mean, there were so many times where I literally didn't want to be alive anymore, because I didn't feel like I fit in. And, and I mean, I just I will never forgive the system for that.



Katy Weber 49:52

Yeah. Yeah, I think you Wow, that you you covered a lot and I appreciate how Well, you've been articulating the this experience and this. You know, the, I think a lot of it does have to do with like, the Western Protestant mentality of you know, of this, like idea that independence and capable ness is a moral virtue and that if you ask for help you are morally flawed. I think that's

deeply ingrained in our system and in our psyches. And I feel like that could be a whole other episode. Yeah, but yeah, it really is. I mean, it's so gosh, it's so overwhelming, and it's why I will never tire of hearing everybody's story and how, you know, the, how emotional it is, and like, how do we even begin to really start to articulate for other people what it feels like, to go through life undiagnosed, and, or even diagnosed. I mean, that's the other thing is that I've, you know, I've spoken to women who were diagnosed in childhood and still experience a lot of these same, same issues. So it's now now, just to like, I want to be mindful of the time so I wanted to kind of shift a little bit to like, now you since you've been diagnosed, and you're in this Ph. D. program, like how has it shifted your thinking about your how deserving you are to be in this, you know, in the room, you know, and and it's must like, I feel like for me, it's been, it's so radically changed how I view myself intellectually. Right. And so I imagine there's, you know, it's been opening up a lot of windows for you, like, airing out some of the, some of the shame, right, and I mean, how has, how has your thinking been shifting? I know, it's really still early on. But can I

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Alisha Mays 51:50

Yeah. So we, I am still very much in a grieving process right now, with this whole situation, because, you know, I'm consistently reminded, like, oh, but like, Yeah, you were just diagnosed ADHD, but you're doing so good. Like, you're in a Ph. D. program, and like, you've made it through two divorces, you 30 And like, you're like thriving right now. And it's like, okay, yeah, yeah, yeah. But like, Do you know what it's been like, on this journey, like, not to ever endorse medicine, because all bodies are different. It just so happens that my medicine and my body works very well together. And the first time I actually took the medicine and, and the therapy therapy is important to I'm very much treating it right now. Not just medicine, but with so many other things like the podcast and therapy and support groups. And so I just remember thinking how quiet my head was, and and just how it took zero spoons and what like Spoon Theory, like how many spoons does it take to do something, how it took zero spoons, to respond to an email, and I didn't want to like sit in the floor and cry. Just because I got an email, I didn't have to think about writing the email for an hour and, you know, finally doing it. It was just so quiet in my head, and I could just do things so effortlessly. Of course, I still get distracted, but then I can get back to work. And it's been so amazing on this on this very new journey for me. But also I mean, it's it's just really hard to grieve the person that I think I could have been the person who could have finished high school the person who definitely did don't need to go through two divorces before the age of 30 The person who, whose whose life could just be so much more organized and I you know, could have maybe done something really good because i i only study food insecurities and maybe I would have come up with a new policy by now. Had I been diagnosed sooner, I don't know. So I suppose I feel like as far as me deserving to be here, I feel like everyone deserves in life to get whatever it is that they want. I don't think that I have any more ability or any more claim to the pie than anyone else. But it certainly made me want to fight harder. And it certainly made the days when I'm like I'm quitting this PhD program I'm done. I'm out I hate this. I just can't even think about grading another paper or writing another article. It certainly made me on those days we will we will finish this program because there is going to be one undergraduate student out there in the future who is who is going to be just like you were and they're not going to want to do anything and they're going to be tired and are just going to want to give up and and they're gonna really blame themselves for their poverty and their and their mental traits and characteristics and you're gonna be the professor who comes in and like no, I believe in you submit that assignment late I don't care as as long as you get it to me. And so that's kind of what keeps me going right now. I don't know that I

deserve to be here. But But I certainly will fight to be here and fight for a better system in general Add for my state. I think that Kentucky has a long way to go. But I've got my I've got my gloves on and ready to



Katy Weber 55:09

fight. Now, if you could rename ADHD to something a little less disorder, he would do you have something you would rather call it?



Alisha Mays 55:23

Yeah. Okay, so I wrote down two things. So the first one is serious. Okay, so I thought attention variation and executive function variability spectrum. That is gross, I know. But I think that there's a way to make it spelled F E Y ve s like faves, you will just have to like rework that. But like I like the words, variation and spectrum of that, because I feel like not to co op ASD language again, but I feel like it. I mean, there is just so there are so many differences within ADHD people. That is a spectrum, right? I mean, everything's a spectrum. gender is a spectrum life is a spectrum, everything. So I think that the word spectrum is has to be included. And that's my, like, serious one. And then my funny one, because I feel like you need to just kind of show like the two parts of me right, is the number 80 with HD like high def, because we have 80 things going on in our head and high def all. So that's my funny.



Katy Weber 56:27

I love that. Yeah, I think Connor DeWolfe has at HDS where it's literally just HD at times on a sweatshirt that he sells that in his merch store, which is great, because it's like, we are the only ones who would get that joke anyway. So we love inside jokes. Eight. Yeah, that is awesome. It's true. Oh, that's good. I like that I really, I think executive function really needs to be brought to the you know, rise to the top in terms of attention issues. And especially for women, I think executive function is really where you start to understand the the, the depths to which something as simple as dopamine deficiency can really sort of affect all of these, you know, all of these pockets of your life in ways that are just so profound. Well, that so that is great. I'm so glad we had this conversation. And I know that there are going to be so many people who are going to listen to your story and be so appreciative of, you know, sharing your journey. And I mean, I think that's how we are learning about ourselves and really kind of learning and changing the face of ADHD is sharing our stories. So I'm so glad that you've been able to listen to other women's stories and through the podcast and that they've helped you and that now you can kind of go full circle and share your own.



Alisha Mays 57:54

Yeah, that's one of the things I do as an anthropologist so I share stories for social change and so part of the way that I try to you know shape food policy is I share my story of what it was like to grow up in a really food insecure household with like our governor, and like our State Ag Commissioner, and things like that, and I try to get other people to share their stories of hunger

to to help combat you know, food insecurity in the state. So, I am a huge storyteller. I love love storytelling. And so I was immediately like, Okay, this is my podcast with this. I'm obsessed with this. I've been hyper focused for so long now. I'm like, all the time to watch.



Katy Weber 58:38

Yeah, right. Well, from GED to PhD, ADHD on the side, I love



58:46

it.