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Des: Tell me your name, how old you are, what you do, and your story, as you see fit to tell.

Chris: My name is Chris. I actually just had to think about how old I am. I am 32. I work with the American Association of Suicidology. I've been involved with suicide prevention for about ten years, well, over ten years now. About my story? Well, it's going to be really hard not to joke about a lot of things.

Des: You can!

Chris: I'm just saying. I mean, obviously, you know that how I handle a lot of this with people is with humor. We both do. So, yea. I wouldn't say it necessarily starts with my childhood, although, there is definitely a component there. My mom and dad split up in a pretty intense way when I was really young. There was a domestic violence incident. If people want to go read my dad's story, they could hear more about that. So, I grew up largely with my mom. She was a really strong, independent, single mother. She did a lot to keep us housed, and fed. She did a lot to keep us in a place where we weren't wanting for a whole lot. Unfortunately, I think this happens with a lot of people, I wouldn't necessarily say we were poor, but I knew we didn't have a whole lot of money. My mom never really let on to that, it wasn't ever really super obvious. We had a lot of hot dogs. We had a lot of ramen noodles. We had toast for breakfast. But it never felt like we didn't have stuff. That being said, I think that's with a lot of people who grow up in that level of socioeconomic class. We had a lot of fast food. There was a lot of junk food in the house. And that was all throughout growing up. Even after my mom got remarried, our habits were still pretty unhealthy. So, growing up, my weight was always an issue, from the time I was about 7 or 8. As I started getting older, and as my weight started becoming a bigger issue, I started combining that with my emotional health. It was more like I didn't feel like I was in place with my peers, or I didn't feel like I could do the same things that they could do. For instance, in grade school there was this one time that we went out for recess. And my best friend at the time, well, he's still one of my best friends, but he is much smaller than I am, well, he was much smaller than I was at that point. I went to pick him up, or I went to tackle him or something. I don't exactly remember what the deal with. But we were out on the field at recess, and he got the wind knocked out of him because of how big I am, or rather, because of how big I was. So, I got verbally reminded in that moment, from a few different people, that I needed to recognize how big I am, and that I shouldn't be rough housing with people who were much smaller than me, even though we were roughly the same age and we were in the same grade. I still remember that. It's one of those things that's always been there. So, my weight has always been the thing that has separated me from the rest of my peers. Obviously, in grade school and then in high school, that become much more amplified. It didn't lend to a lot of confidence growing up, so I was a very shy kid. Then, in high school is where it really hit its power, that's when it felt like something had hit the accelerator pedal. I was a sweaty fat kid. I was a marshmallow in high school. There were many number of times that I could talk about here when somebody pointed out that I had sweated through my shirt. So, I stopped wearing grey. I stopped wearing solid colors in general. I wore a lot of black, a lot of dark grey, dark blue, and those kinds of things. That way, if I did have an issue, it wasn't super obvious. There were a lot of comments about how I smelled. So, I became pretty obsessed with cologne,

as a counterpoint. And luckily, in high school, everyone smelled like axe body spray, so it wasn't so off, or super out of character. It was really bad. So, there was a lot of stuff that just continually lowered my self-esteem. I started dating a girl in my junior year, who I felt at the time was completely out of my league. It was my first real relationship. I experienced all of my 'firsts' with this person. And then, in the next year, well, we dated for about a year, or maybe for a year and a half, but I think it was closer to a year. Then, in my senior year, there was a really messy break-up. It was really bad. There was some infidelity. There were a lot of trust issues. Luckily now, and even directly after that, it helped me learn a lot of lessons that I don't repeat. There were some things from then that I've never repeated, thankfully. But, it was really messy. So, that, combined with my continual self-esteem issues, and my continual urge to tell myself that I wasn't worth being around, I was feeling isolated a lot more. I was trying to stay away from my friends. I was not really talking to people about anything that was going on. I didn't tell my parents anything. I didn't let on that anything was wrong. But there was just this constant feeling in my gut, or in the back of my head, it was like this combination feeling that was basically saying to me, 'you don't need to be here.' Or, 'if you weren't here, think about how many people would get pissed off.' So, it started to get to a point in the latter half of my senior year where I would be driving home. We lived on a cul-de-sac that had this weird curve in it, and beyond the curve there was a kind of cliff that went down into a ravine. It was an undeveloped part of the neighborhood. Everyday, coming home, I would be driving home, and I would be thinking to myself, 'what if I just plop right off that cliff? What if I just do that? That'll fix everything.' 'I wouldn't have to feel what I'm feeling right now. And at the same time, I could potentially piss a lot of people off.' I thought, 'I could make them see,' and it was like I was holding my fist up in the sky. Like, 'you'll be sorry!' So, that started, and then that escalated for the better part of two or three months, which was relatively quickly, in the scheme of things. It became so intense. It wasn't just when I was driving home. It was all the time. I had started cutting. I had started self-harming by that point. I was trying to make things as well, I was very dumb about a lot of this. That's not to say that people who can hide their cutting are smart, or stupid, depending on how you want to look at it. But now, looking back, I'm like, 'wow, I was being a total adolescent.' So, yea, anyway, I had started self-harming. I was trying to hide the cuts as much as possible. They weren't ever really too severe. They generally weren't ever really serious cuts. It was a lot of scraping, and then some deep scraping, and that kind of stuff. But my best friend saw it, he saw one of the marks at one point and he said, 'dude, are you cutting?' And I was like, 'nah. What? No.' I made something up like, 'I just slipped and my keyboard cut me, ' or something. Like, 'my trapper keeper cut me!' Ha. It was total horseshit. And, he obviously knew. He gave me that, 'oh, come on, man,' look. It was this half-disappointed look that also said, 'why are you lying to me?' It was that kind of look. So then, I generally stopped after that, however, the next time that I tried it, I cut way too deep. So then I panicked. I hardcore panicked. It was right before, well, I wasn't alone at the time. I wasn't by myself. My mom and stepdad were home. They were getting ready for dinner. I was in the downstairs bathroom. I totally fucking panicked. And then they were like, 'hey, dinner is ready.' And I was, 'Jesus Christ. Mother Fucker. What the hell am I supposed to do now?' So, I quickly put something on. I quickly wrapped in towels, as best I could. I was sitting there trying to tie up this mother fucker with only using one hand. It didn't make any sense. Then I found a hoodie sweatshirt to put on. Then I just powered through dinner and kept the towels as close to my body as I could. Luckily it wasn't so deep that it hit anything, but there was a good chance that something bad could have happened. But luckily that didn't happen.

Des: I had an experience that was extremely similar.

Chris: Oh yea? I don't what that says about it all. Like, 'you should be comfortable?' Or at least, 'you should wait and be in a more comfortable setting?' I don't know what peace can come from that. Anyway, that was kind of eye opening. At that point, I was like, 'okay, I think I'm alright for a little while.'

The stuff with the ex-girlfriend though kept coming up. It kept coming up internally. The interactions I kept having with her kept retraumatizing me. It was definitely not a 'clean' break-up. There was a lot of trying to get back together. Then we were fooling around, and then not getting back together. And getting mad at each other. That went on for about a year and half, even after we broke up. Maybe it was even longer than that. There was a just a lot there. Every time something big like that happened, my brain would automatically go back to, 'well, shit. You know how to get out of this.' And, I never really had a plan. But I did think, 'there is enough around me where I could take care of this, and it would not be that hard.' We had guns in the house. They were not really locked up. All the ammo was around. For some reason, that was never a thing for me though; luckily my brain didn't go there. So, the next time that something big happened, I was in my dorm room. Fast forward a bit. It was my freshman year. I was still going through some of that stuff with my ex. I was on the 10<sup>th</sup> floor of my dorm room. As I put it now, I was 'super emo.' I was listening to all this stuff, and I was as emo as possible. I had a Xanga account, to which I would upload hardcore, edgy poetry. I remember this one night when I said something along the lines of, 'I'm sitting up here on the 10<sup>th</sup> floor, and I'm getting ready to jump.' And then I was like, 'you can stop me, or don't. Whatever. I don't care.' It was something along those lines. It was all very emo. It was very much like a cry for help. That was the vibe. I was sitting there tinkering around with the window, and there were those weird windows that didn't open all the way. So, I was sitting there trying to figure out whether there was a way that I could pop the thing open. I don't know if they've done anything since then to secure those windows. I think I heard that they did though. So, there was this weird window that opened up, but then it had that metal bar that held it in place, like it would retract and then come back in or whatever. So, I was sitting there, and trying to figure out whether there was a way that I could unscrew this thing so that I could get myself out of this window. And in the meantime, somebody responded on my Xanga. Well actually, a few people had. They were like, 'hey, don't do that.' There was one person in particular who I really cared about who said, 'hey, do you want to talk? Do you need to chat or anything?' And I didn't say anything back. But at that point I was like, 'okay, fine. I'll stop fucking around with this. So, my freshman year was really rough. I was living with my best friend. That was really cool, for the first few months, but then we started kind of getting on each other's nerves. So we started hanging out with other people. He was going into ROTC. So, he was spending time with a lot of different people. I was spending time with people on a different floor. When we did see each other, more often than not, it was to complain about something that one of us did, or something like that. So, I was really feeling really disconnected with that, and kind of discouraged. I was feeling like a huge portion of it was my fault, like I could have been trying harder. At that point, I felt like a lot of the stuff that he was bickering about made me feel like, 'you know what? You're right. I am fucking up.' That made me think, 'it would probably be really easy for me to just do this.' So, there was that relationship, and the fact that I was diving back into a depression in my freshman year, around trying to open the window, and all of that. It did not get any better after that. It was just down, and down, and down. There was a lot of stress from the new level of coursework. I thought I knew what the hell I was getting myself in to, but high school really did not prepare me. The stress level was exponential. And I was a really good student; I had had a 4.0 in high school. The expectations were always really high in our household. Even through college, to no fault of her own, Mom just held her standards really high for me. So, I had that expectation from home. And I got my first C in my freshman year. My first ever C was in Medieval Renaissance. It was like a 300-level history class. And I remember thinking, 'oh, this will be simple.' And then I wrote my first paper, and the guy just red-lined it. The whole thing was red. The feedback was like, 'I don't know what the hell this was supposed to be, but it's not a paper.' And that was a wake-up call. But, it was also just very, well, devastating. It was devastating to realize. It was that moment that everybody with imposter syndrome fears about. Like, 'you've been found out.' That was the moment where I was like, 'holy fuck. I'm not actually as smart as people think I am.' So, that went on. It didn't get any better. Luckily, my relationship with my best friend didn't waver

enough of getting to the point where it didn't feel like we couldn't be best friends anymore. It didn't completely nosedive. We decided to live with each other the next year too. We finished that semester. Then, in the summer between my freshman and sophomore year, I was at home all the time, and I had to go back to the rules of living with my parents. That was just, I mean, I was like, 'I have just been free for this whole year! I could do whatever I wanted, and now I have a curfew again.' And so, it was a really weird transition back. I wasn't with my friends all the time. Instead I was alone for a lot of the time. I went back to being on my computer games a bunch. Not being around my people, not feeling connected again, and then it all came to a head around the 4<sup>th</sup> of July. By then, the fighting with my ex had become even worse. She had a gotten a new boyfriend around that time, so there was a lot of jealousy issues, there were a ton of self-worth bubbles that had just exploded all at the same time. I had told one of my best friends that I was going to go hang out with her. She lived out in the country, and I was on my way out there, and I took a detour towards the side of road. It wasn't necessarily one of those things where I was targeting anything, or where I was trying to pull off, but I was just like, 'I'm going to go as fast as I can, and whatever happens is going to happen.' It was around this really tight, 90-degree curve. I knew what was going to happen. I totaled my car. It was the weirdest experience though, coming out of that. I blacked out for maybe 10 or 15 seconds, something like that. And it was the strangest experience, waking up in my driver's seat, my foot was still pushing into the gas pedal, and I could hear the car still revving, and it was not moving. I was 5plowed into the dirt. I kind of had this realization, like, 'okay, oh shit, I'm still alive. Stop pushing on the gas pedal for a second.' Now, I look back at that, and I think that that was my 'take-a-break' moment (no pun intended), but, it was like, 'now it's time to stop.' So, I got out, and this guy was driving out. The only injury I actually had, besides being 90% sure that I had a concussion, was that I got a slice on my thumb from broken glass. My head broke into the driver's side window, and the glass cut my thumb. So, there was blood going down my thumb, and I got out of my car to try and start picking up the pieces out of the road so that other cars wouldn't hit them. That was all that was going through my head. I was in total shock. So, I was dragging this wheel and mount fixture over to the side of the road, and my thumb was bleeding, and I was also sucking on my thumb at the same time to try and get it to stop bleeding. Blood from my thumb was now pouring down my face, and down my shirt. So this guy pulled over and gets out and says, 'stop hauling that,' but then when I looked up at him, he saw all this blood, so then he was freaked out. He was like, 'oh my God! Are you okay?' And I was like, 'yes, it's just from my thumb.' I think I may have been slurring or my something, because he said, 'is there anything in the car that you need to get rid of?' And I didn't understand at first. I said, 'what do you mean?' And I think it was on July 4<sup>th</sup>, so, yea. And he was like, 'is there anything that you need to get out of your car?' And I had had an empty Coors box in the back that I had actually used to bring stuff in the house from when I moved out from college. I was using it as a storage box. I think he had seen that, so maybe that's why he was asking. And I was like, 'no,' and he was like, 'oh, great, okay.' And then I blacked out, entirely. I have no memory after that. I barely remember the ambulance getting there. I remember my mom being there for a split second. I remember telling somebody where my insurance card was. But I was relatively blacked out. Then, there is a whole bunch of follow up stuff that goes with that, but the biggest thing was that when I got back, and when I got settled in and things sort of stopped going at three billion miles per minute, my friend started calling me again and we started hanging out. And so he came over to see how I was and check in on me. Then more and more friends started coming out of the woodwork. I'm grateful that I didn't respond by being like, 'oh, this is what I have to do to get your attention,' but instead, I was grateful. I was happy. I was very grateful, yea. That's the only word I can think of. I was grateful that they recognized that I needed their support. All of that being said, I didn't tell anybody that I had tried to kill myself. Honestly, for a long time, I wasn't super convinced that that is what I was doing. For a really long time, I had talked myself out of thinking that that was a suicide attempt. Like I said, I didn't try to get into a wreck. That wasn't 100% my goal. But, when you're going around a curve at 90 miles per hour without holding the steering wheel, there's not a

whole lot of things that that could be. I realize that I'm talking a lot about the method. But I think it's important to understand that for me, as I mentioned earlier, there was not a plan or a method that I was obsessing over, or anything like that. It was more like, at any given moment, the feelings are there, and anything could set me off. When there was a moment of opportunity, I was ready. It was that kind of attitude. So, I don't know. I guess after that, things started slowing down. But, because I never told anybody that it was a suicide attempt, I never really got any formal therapy. I never really talked to anybody about what had happened. And, now I hear people talk about this a lot, and obviously this was definitely the case for me, but afterwards, everything went back to normal. A few days after the car wreck, I went over to my buddy's house to watch some UFC. There were a few of us guys there hanging out and watching this match. And one of the things that we did was spar afterwards. We would get down on the carpet and mess around, trying to wrestle each other. And so, I don't remember what the exact circumstances were, but something happened where the lights got turned off. Then one of my friends tried to fake-punch me in the face and ended up actually punching me in the eye, and I got a huge black eye. So, when I went to work the next day, my boss was like, 'oh man, I knew you got in a car wreck, but I didn't know you had a black eye! When did that happen? Was that from the car wreck?' And I was like, 'yea, well, maybe it just didn't show up from the other day,' or something, and he was like, 'oh, wow, you got hit harder than I thought.' And even that slight attention around, 'something is still wrong with you,' or, 'something happened to you,' even that was more than anybody else had said or done. It was just not really addressed in any sort of way. Everything kind of went back to normal. So, that was disheartening, but at the same time, it was up to me to say something. There was no way for anybody to know. So, that only took about, well, I guess that happened in 2006. It only took 10 or 12 years I think, something like that, to come out. I don't know why I held on to it for so long. Again, I think it was just the fact that I had talked myself into justifying it as something that it wasn't. And then, I was obviously starting to hear you talk, and having legit conversations with you and a bunch of other people who were suicide attempt survivors, and I was like, 'oh, huh, yea.'

Des: Yea, because you didn't admit it when we first met.

Chris: Yea, no.

Des: Then, later, you were like, 'oh, hey, about that.' And I was like, 'wait, what?!'

Chris: Yea. So, there was all of that. And then, well, I'm lucky that I had enough support, moving forward. I think growing out of a lot of the emotional-regulation stuff that happened in that 19-20 or 21 years old range was important. I mean, during that time, everything feels like a punch in the gut. Everything feels 1000% worse than it really is. So, growing out of that, and talking to more people really helped. I was really isolated, culturally, growing up, especially during that time. I had been having some existential crises popping up. I was losing my faith. I was losing strength in my faith. I was losing some other things that were generally important to me at the time, even though I'm ashamed to say it, like, my unwavering masculinity, an appreciation of my nation, and fake patriotism. So, there were a lot of things that I was holding on to from my youth. Being in college, and being exposed to different cultures, and being exposed to different people were really kicking my ass. So, it was culture shock on a different level. It was very introspective. I was like, 'I've been a fucking asshole for 19 years of my life.' Where does that guilt go? On top of that, I was potentially losing my faith, and questioning my faith more. There were a bunch of existential crises happening at the time of my attempt. And then, a few years later, a few years down the road, things kind of evened out. I'm a much happier person. I don't feel constrained by those prescribed ideologies. It's freeing to realize that you have the ability to mandate your own mission, or, mandate your own purpose. Something that another person tells you, or another

group of people tells you should be your purpose is horseshit. It's not their prerogative. I think that in that post-graduation zone is where I started seeing that. I also started realizing that everybody is faking it until they make it. Nobody knows what the fuck they're doing. You could be 92 and still not have it figured out. You could be the most famous professor in the world, and you would still have no idea what the hell is going on. I used to work with physicians who didn't know how to make a cup of coffee. There are just these things where it's like once you realize that expectations are meant to be set in a way that we can reach them, they should be attainable, and not based on any sort of higher level or unattainable crap, then it's really hard to be disappointed, and it becomes really hard to feel like you're worthless. It's really difficult to not be happy. And that's not to say that I don't feel those things every once in a while, but it makes it more difficult. So, yea, I don't know. And there was another big component: in 2009 I started volunteering at the crisis hotline where I lived. That was a big piece for me insofar as I started talking to people on the phone who obviously had previous attempts or were thinking about taking their lives or trying to take their lives. I heard so much of the 'me too' vibe anytime I talked to these people. I realized that there was a very core component to what they were experiencing and what I was experiencing; it's like there were thousands, or millions, of other people experiencing this every day. So, being on the phones was really helpful. I felt like I was doing good, but it was also healing me. It was also helping me realize that I wasn't alone, and that it's okay to feel like shit sometimes. And it's definitely okay to feel like you want to kill yourself sometimes. I'll just say that! It's totally fine! For me, I feel like it's not fine for me to try to kill myself. That's for me personally. I'm going to try and prescribe that for anybody else.

Des: Like, for you it's not an option?

Chris: Well, I wouldn't say it's not an option. I would say I don't want it to be an option. That's what I would say. But, I'm not going to tell other people what they can or can't do. I would prefer that everybody stays alive. I would prefer that we prevent as many suicides as possible. But, I'm also not in charge of other people's lives. I'm not in charge of how they live their lives. It would be unfair for me to tell them what they can and can't do.

Des: Okay. There are some pieces I want you to come back to. Specifically: masculinity, weight, sexuality, etc. I don't know if you want to go into that.

Chris: For masculinity, well, I was kind of beating around the bush with that. I was a misogynist, definitely. That was definitely part of the religious culture that I was engrained in as well. There's that whole Corinthians things about women obeying men, and that was just how it was. So, that's what my viewpoint was. Probably, I was what you would now call an incel. I had that total mindset, like, "I'm being a nice guy. Why don't I have a girlfriend?! Or, 'why didn't she appreciate that, when I did that thing for her? Why didn't she go out of her way to tell me how much that meant to her?'" It was just insane stuff that now, thankfully, I can look back and be like, 'that was fucking crazy.' So, that was the masculinity part. What was the other part?

Des: Weight?

Chris: Oh yea, weight. That obviously went back and forth too. Those were generally connected. Because of my weight, I was made fun of all the time. People called me 'tits' a lot, just because of my weight. There was a lot of emasculation that went into that. There was some level of perceived, well, I don't know what the right word is. It made me feel like there wasn't, well, I felt like I didn't necessarily fit with men or women sometimes. Obviously, I didn't feel like a woman, but if I wasn't being accepted as a

man, then where the fuck did I fit? And, who was the right person to tell me that? So, that was always a tough one.

Des: Also, in the past few years, I know that you have lost a lot of weight. But I still hear you say some things. Like earlier you were talking about sweating through your shirt. So, it seems like you're still very aware of that. Years ago, I remember that you mentioned that you were sensitive about your chest, still. So, how did the change in your weight affect your self-worth? How does it feel to still carry some of that around?

Chris: It definitely changed for the better. Three a half years ago I started running and I lost close to 100 pounds. My confidence was the highest it's ever been. It felt great. But I still had leftovers. And the emotional impact of that, constantly worrying about how a shirt falls on you, where you're sweating and how bad it is, whether your stomach is going to look weird if you sit a certain way, constantly thinking about that, every single waking second, that doesn't just go away when you stop weighing that amount. So, that's still there. Like you mentioned, it's still there. I still have this hyper-vigilant sense of how I might be perceived by other people. 90% of the time people don't even fucking notice. But, when I'm worrying about something like that, or when I'm feeling that intense anxiety about my weight or how I'm being perceived by others, that's not helpful. I don't like thinking about that. I'm only concerned about how soon I can change out of my sweaty shirt.

Des: Right. It's still going to beat you down.

Chris: Yes, constantly. It's exhausting. It really is. It's very exhausting. And it's probably not something that's ever going to go away. I don't suspect that there will ever be a time when I'm not dealing with some level of that.

Des: Yea. What about sexuality? Do you want to talk about that, or no? We don't have to. I just imagine that it affects you.

Chris: Yes, it does. I've never really come out to anyone but you, though.

Des: Oh, really? Okay. I didn't know that.

Chris: Yea. It's not really been a thing. I've only ever had one homosexual experience. It was super hot. But, no, that's been my experience, and I haven't really gone into that. I'm like a fish that won't come out.

Des: Okay. What else? How about your dad? When did you find out that he had attempted suicide, and how does all of that affect your relationship w him?

Chris: I found out about one day before you found out. No, just kidding. Although, not really, when I found out it wasn't a lot earlier than that. I knew his story from when I was very young. My mom and dad both were not secretive about anything that had happened. They made a point to talk about that very openly, and they made sure that if I had any questions that they would be able to answer them. Although, I had never heard that part until relatively recently, like, within the last couple of years. I mean, I'm glad that he talked about it. I know how freeing that is. I know how that can really make things open up. Obviously, our relationship has been really good. I never lived with him, but I saw him quite a bit when I was growing up. I saw him several times a year, and during the summers, sometimes I

was with him for whole months during the summer. He has been my best friend for a long time. We've always had more of a best friend relationship rather than a father-son relationship. So, that's always been really great, even growing up. He's been a very powerful support to me. It doesn't surprise me at all.

Des: Right, and yet, you two both came out about it around the same time.

Chris: Yes, but it doesn't surprise me at all. It doesn't surprise me that he would support me in this, and then tell me, 'oh yea, that happened, this one time while I was in jail.' Like, 'oh, by the way.' I mean, obviously, we're already very close. It certainly brought us closer. We're able to talk about anything and everything anyway. So, it wasn't that big of a deal. It was cool insofar as it was nice to have something in common like this, even though that sounds weird. We can chit chat about it.

Des: Just have a chit chat about suicide, and stuff.

Chris: Yea. Chit chat about suicide 'n' stuff!

Des: Yea, it was such a weird experience to have you tell me about what happened with your dad when you were a baby, and then have him tell me.

Chris: You know what's interesting? I read his story, and I had heard about it, and none of it was surprising to me. So, I don't know what that says. I mean, again, I think I have to give a lot of credit to my parents for not keeping secrets, and not making weird, and not treating it like it was some deep, dark family thing for me to find out ten years from now, or 20 years from now, or when one of them dies or something. I don't know.

Des: So, talk about the good that has come from your attempt, and those experiences.

Chris: The growth that I was experiencing during the time when I was answering the crisis like was big. It started becoming more passion than just reward. It was more than just, 'oh great, I get to feel good for going in and helping people.' It started to become a passion. And I realized that I was decent at it. So, I wanted to get more involved. I wanted to see how that could work. Shortly after, well, I had started working for another group still within the psych field, and the crisis line that I was working on got a grant to hire a suicide prevention coordinator for the state. So, I was like, 'oh, that sounds fun. That sounds like something I could do. I like talking about suicide prevention. I feel like I'm a decent advocate at it.' And then I got hired. And then a few years after doing that, which was basically going around the state and doing a lot of trainings and meeting a lot of people who, well, you already know this just from talking to people and going to different places, but everybody has a story. I mean, if you were in a group of 10 people, five of them would come up to you and tell you their life story. And that's amazing. To have that impact across the state, over and over again, was really, well, it fed that passion. Then, after that, I went to work for the Lifeline for about two years. Again, it was another great experience. And actually, I was working at the Lifeline when I came out about my lived experience. And I didn't clear it with anyone, and I didn't talk to anyone about it beforehand, so I was kind of worried about how that would come across. But, luckily everybody was really supportive. Everybody understood how big of a deal that was. At the Lifeline, I was able to work with crisis centers across the country. So, again, it was going back to what had sparked that passion for me, but on a way bigger level. I started understanding things at the operational level, and I was working with folks on programmatic stuff, and it was all sorts of different levels of really cool people working on really cool stuff while we were answering the phones of

people calling in who were in that same place where I had been ten years prior. And now I'm at this point, ten years into the work, and hoping that I know what I'm doing, to some extent. I will give myself 20% credit for knowing what I'm doing. That's what I'll allow, for myself. But, again, and this goes back to what we were saying earlier. There are definitely people in this field who know what they are doing. There are also a great number of people who don't know what they're doing, just like the rest of us. But, we are trying. And I know this sounds so flat, because it just lands flat to be like, 'we're trying!' But, we're trying. Sometimes I joke about this, even though I know I'm going to get in trouble for this later. Sometimes I joke about potential mottos for the field. And my favorite is, 'we're working on it!' 'We're getting there!' Because, we aren't. If anybody reads this later, we're not. No, we're not getting there. We're not really making a dent yet. But, I think that unfortunately part of this is because we're so new to this, and it has to be trial and error. The problem with that is that 130+ people die everyday while we're fucking around. So, I've had a lot of frustration, coming from the place that I have. I absolutely know that you feel this too. Coming from the place that I have come from, and knowing what I needed in that moment, and knowing that there are people bickering about meeting times, or who should be involved with what project, or whatever the case is, and there are all these weird ego-driven issues that are all gumming up the workings of the field, and I get very frustrated with all of that, because while all of that shit is happening, 10 or 15 or 20 more people may have died during that time.

Des: Yea. And then there's the other issue of how people with lived experience are discounted unless they have letters behind their names. But even then, if you do have that experience and you're a, quote, 'professional,' then you're encouraged to not talk about it. So, what the fuck is that about?

Chris: Yea. Well, it's interesting. I'm no different from this, but with a lot of people that I've seen, they come about their lived experience only to do so after they've already made a name for themselves. I think Stacey Freedenthal talks about this, that she only felt comfortable talking about it after she had gone through basically half of her career as a psychologist, and getting to a place where she felt like her credibility could hold up from whatever damage would come from coming out about her suicide attempt. I think that for a lot of people, that's what happens. I know for me I finally felt comfortable enough in my role to say something. There are a lot of professionals that have started doing that, or, have done it in the past. It's a strange foundation to set up, just to break it down.

Des: Yea, it really is. When we're saying, 'talk about it! Talk about it! Talk about it!' 'But if you're any kind of mental health professional, or if you work in suicidology, just fucking don't.'

Chris: Actually, yea, but then also, 'if you talk about, maybe other people will try to kill themselves. So, actually, don't talk about it.'

Des: The number of emails that I get from people who are like, 'I'm glad you're able to say something, because I'm not,' is astounding. How terrible must that feel? What is this internalized hatred? Oh, ugh. It's gross.

Chris: Yes. It's gross that they experience a culture around them that reflects that.

Des: Yea. And that it continues to be perpetuated. How do we break that?

Chris: I think, well, we have evidence that shows X number people of have thoughts of suicide per year. I think it's in the millions. Some people claim that they've never had thoughts of suicide. I call bullshit on that. I call that huge levels of bullshit. There is a moment in every single person's life where, even if it's

just for a split second, or even if it's not that serious, or even if they blow it off for the rest of their life, there has been a split second, at the very least where every single person has had the thought, 'oh, I could just end this.'

Des: Or, 'it would be better if I wasn't here.'

Chris: Right. 'It would be better for my family if I wasn't here.' 'It would be easier for everybody.' Or, 'this person wouldn't be mad at me if I were gone.' Whatever the case may be.

Des: People don't realize that that's even a suicidal thought.

Chris: Right, exactly. Could that be possible, that they don't even think of it that way?

Des: Yes. I think they don't know.

Chris: But, it's just so obviously.

Des: To us, yes. But, I mean, even beyond that, to not think about, well, to not do the thought experiment of what it would be like if you weren't here, or to not examine what 'dying' would mean. To me, that's a part of existence. How are you supposed to figure out what your purpose is, and what your meaning is, if you haven't thought about those things? So, when people say, 'suicidal thoughts are abnormal,' I'm like, 'but, are they?' I don't think they are. I don't think that at all.

Chris: Not to go to into the weeds, but Jesse Bering is an evolutionary psychologist who makes the case for it being an evolutionary adaptation. An adaptation doesn't carry any moral weight to it, but it's something that's genetically inherent to the human species, and plays a role based on predisposition, for some people. But, the fact is, all humans have the capability. Oh, and that's the other thing, right. We talk about how suicide doesn't discriminate. Everybody is susceptible. Whatever language you want to use. If that's the case, then how can we possibly say that everyone hasn't thought about it? At least in thought experiments, like you said.

Des: Yea, I don't get it. I also have an issue with the messaging that we put out there. We want to say, 'oh, it's an epidemic,' but then on the other hand we're like, 'nope, it's an abnormal response to life events.' And then I'm like, 'well, which is it?'

Chris: Well, the guidelines say not to call it an epidemic.

Des: That's true, but a lot of people want to call it an epidemic.

Chris: I know. We saw that today.

Des: But, even if we're not using such extreme language, we're saying, 'okay, well, 47,000 Americans die by suicide every year. This is a problem that we need everybody to pay attention to. This is a problem we need everybody to learn about. We need to have funding for this. We need to do research on it. But actually, it's abnormal.' So, if we're saying, 'you should care about it,' but then we're othering it, that's in conflict. What are people supposed to believe?

Chris: Right. I hadn't thought of that. I agree with you, 100%. I think everybody has at least momentary thoughts of suicide. As a species, we are predisposed to have that thought, at least one thought. There's not a chance that, well, what's that phenomenon where you look over the edge of a tall building, or a cliff or something? Have you heard of this? There is this phenomenon, and I wish I could remember what it's called. Some people, when they stand at a high ledge, even if they're not suicidal, they have a moment where their brain says, 'well do it. Just jump.'

Des: Oh, I've felt that a million times waiting for the train in New York.

Chris: Yes, right. It's a common thing that a lot of people experience.

Des: It's scary. I just have to step back. It happens even when I was just having a regular day.

Chris: Yes, exactly. So, people who are not even suicidal experience that. To go full-on Bill O'Reilly, how do you explain that?

Des: Full-on Bill O'Reilly? Haha.

Chris: Yes, that's my goal for the next ten years, is to end up like Bill O'Reilly.

Des: Yea, since we're talking about normalizing it, that's another message that we've gotten, 'don't normalize it, because then you're going to make people think it's okay.'

Chris: Our messaging in general is so shotty. We have only a handful of research articles that have any sort of clout about what's 'good' and what's 'bad' messaging. Otherwise, it's just intuition and good feelings. That doesn't, well, we can't rely on good feelings and intuition when it comes to cancer research. I'm not directly comparing the two, but when it comes to serious issues that we have in this country that we could look at, whether it's serious mental issues or serious medical issues or whatever the case is, it's tough to justify being like, 'oh, well, we don't really have any evidence that says this or that, but, we do it because it makes us feel happy.'

Des: Right. I think I do think that the cancer comparison is apt, in terms of the trajectory of public messaging and funding. I mean, we went from when you couldn't say the C-word in the 1950s, to then there were these women who had some notoriety in the 1960s and 70s who started talking about it. And now we have the fucking cancer industrial complex where Susan G. Komen is like 'give me all your money,' and 'let's wear all the pink!' in October, for awareness of this thing that everybody knows about, and everybody knows it could happen to them.

Chris: Awareness grinds my gears in general.

Des: Yea, but we don't have that part in suicide. The other example that comes up for me is HIV-AIDS.

Chris: Yes.

Des: It was kind of a similar, but then we started talking about it, and there was funding, but then it got othered, and now we don't really talk about AIDS too much. We think we've solved it. We've gone back to thinking, 'it only happens to some people.'

Chris: It's just a fix though. 'Nobody suffers from any of that, anymore.'

Des: No. So, yea. I consider the trajectory of both of those things and I think about how suicide will relate. It's like, how are we going to get suicide to the level of, well, maybe not the suicide industrial complex, but to a place where we can at least fucking fund the research. I mean, come on.

Chris: Right. We were talking about this a little bit ago. I've been working in the field for ten years. How long have you been working in this?

Des: About the same.

Chris: Okay. So, at least within the last decade, as I was introduced to the field, it was a common piece of knowledge that you don't say 'commit.' But, as we were just talking about, this is still brand new for a large group of people. The vast majority of people have not been exposed to that. I have no way to say whether or not it makes a difference in terms of the number of people killing themselves. I think for some people it has an effect based on their preference for how we talk about suicide and what it means for them personally, and that's totally fine. I'm not saying anything for that, but, what I'm saying is that this is something that was an established fact when I got into this field, and yet, there are still millions of people who are not going to give up on that colloquialism.

Des: Yea. I think that's what makes it feel like a social justice issue to me. It's really slow, and a lot of people think it's niche, and it's not.

Chris: Right. Can I ask you a question?

Des: Yes, that's fine.

Chris: How do you feel about suicide prevention getting lumped in with, well, for instance, NIH funds millions of dollars worth of depression research, and their justification for not supporting suicide prevention is that it's covered under the depression thing. How do you feel about that?

Des: It's infuriating.

Chris: How are we going to make any headway? Not everybody is fucking depression. All fucking depressed people don't kill themselves. So, how can you possibly say that that covers suicide?

Des: Right. I mean, we have anecdotal evidence, or, I certainly have anecdotes, that people who attempt didn't always have a diagnosis. I've heard plenty of stories where people were like, 'I had a totally normal life. I don't know why this happened to me.' So, that shot that theory out of the water.

Chris: Right.

Des: And then, we finally get the CDC to say the same thing, that more than half of the people who have died did not have a known mental health diagnosis. But yet, we still can't convince people that this is a larger issue than depression.

Chris: But, Des, isn't it like, 'anyone who is going to try and kill themselves isn't in their right mind,'?

Des: Right.

Chris: So, 'they have a mental health issue, it's just not diagnosed.'

Des: Oh, for fuck's sake.

Chris: Like, 'I have three arms. You just can't see the third one.'

Des: Haha. Certainly, if I were faced with homelessness, I would not be in my fucking right mind either because I would be panicking. I mean, life is life. And life hurts. And when shit hurts you want to escape it. Period.

Chris: A lot of people take drugs. A lot of people drink alcohol to escape pain. Some people try to kill themselves. It's a coping mechanism.

Des: It is. And, I think it's valid. It's a valid response to emotional pain. It's the response I want to have, personally. It's not the one I want other people to have. But it is valid. And I really don't think we are going to make any headway on this until we start looking at it that way, without being like, 'actually, no, you're just fucking crazy.'

Chris: Well, yea, you're bringing something up that's important. This isn't an issue of death; this is an issue of life. Until we stop obsessing about how people die and start worrying about people live, we aren't going to make any fucking dent in this.

Des: Yea. If there are no reasons for us to live, like if the world we're living in is actively attacking us, then I get it. I mean, fuck, when I was pregnant, I felt like the world was attacking me. I would go outside, and it was snowing. And I had this thing on my boobs, and it hurt. And I would be sobbing, and everything felt terrible. And I was having suicidal thoughts, and I felt trapped in my body. But then, I had a little person, and I couldn't even have that option for me. It felt hopeless.

Chris: That's a terrible aspect of it.

Des: People don't think about any of these things.

Chris: I mean, it's one thing to feel trapped, and as though there is no way out, when you're the only one responsible for yourself. But, feeling responsible, like, actually responsible, for another person's life? That's a whole other layer.

Des: Yea. We should be done soon. But, have you had anybody ask you about your kids? Like, 'are your kids your reason for living?' Or, 'do your kids give you a reason for living?'

Chris: No. No one has asked me that, thankfully. Well, Fred Stokes did say something recently, he was one of the guys we did the roundtable with. He said something at the press conference that resonated with me. It was that he attempted before his third child was born, and now, every time that his third kid does something cool, or when he's at his kid's game or something, he realizes that that could have never been. Like, he could have been gone with him. And that resonates with me. I've thought about that quite a bit, where, obviously not just in reference to my first kid but that my second kid would not exist

if I were not around. And, I would feel bad that I deprived the world of their joy, and what they're probably going to be capable of in the future. But, no, I've never had anyone ask me that, thankfully.

Des: Someone asked me that at an event once. And I was just like, 'that's pretty unfair.' That's just unfair, that just because I'm a parent now, I don't get to have a complex inner life. I mean, obviously my kids are amazing, but that doesn't protect me from emotional pain.

Chris: They aren't a panacea. They're definitely one of those things that I think about when I'm sad, or when I can feel myself edging towards depression, or even when I'm anxious. I mean, yes, of course, I think about them. They're one of the things on my safety list. But I don't know that I have a single reason to live, other than that I want to keep experiencing things.

Des: I mean, yea, it's so strange. My kids make me really fucking happy. But they're not IT, and I don't know that they could save me from feeling that kind of pain again. I mean, I don't know what it would take that could make me feel that kind of pain. I don't think that I will kill myself. But certainly, losing my mom, losing one of my grandparents, I would struggle. If Fel and I were to ever divorce, I would struggle.

Chris: Or, if anything were to happen to one of your kids.

Des: Oh my God, yea.

Chris: I think about that one all the time.

Des: I don't like to talk about that.

Chris: I know. Life is often fucky, and if we try to put up barriers to that, or expectations that we'll never feel a certain way, then all we're bound to do is disappoint ourselves.

Des: Yea. Any final thoughts?

Chris: Is this SBSM?

Des: 'You have two minutes!'

Chris: I don't know what else to say.

Des: That's fine. Are there any other things that we didn't cover?

Chris: I'm sure. The only thing I would maybe add is that, well, I've heard other people say this before, so it might come across as completely cliché. But, 'if you feel like you're at a place,' well, this has definitely been my case, even now, even when I feel especially like I want to try to kill myself, or like I really don't want to be here anymore, or I really don't want to feel a particular sensation of pain, or whatever, even now, giving myself just ten minutes, or fifteen minutes, or a full day, it can really make a big difference. I feel like a totally different person, just by giving myself some time to breathe. I really wish that somebody would have told me that when I was 18 or 19 years old. You don't have to do everything right now. And you don't have to please everybody right now. And you don't have to pretend to be somebody that somebody else wants you to be. And that if you give it long enough, you'll find yourself in a place where you're happy. Whether or not that's your goal, it might be a side effect. So, yea.

Des: Okay, we did it. Goodbye, audio. That was awesome. Glad we finally fucking did it.

Chris: Haha.