

Episode 2

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Kate Hi, and welcome to Weird Times, a podcast about mental health during COVID-19, brought to you by Hard Feelings.

I'm Kate Scowen, the founder of Hard Feelings and a social worker in private practice. In this podcast, we're going to talk about mental health, and specifically about mental health during Covid times, or what I've been simply referring to as weird times.

We want this podcast to be a space that builds community, with compassion and care for what you are going through now. It's not meant to replace a therapy session but we hope it can help you in other ways by providing information and insights, and by sharing stories of how others are struggling and coping.

Today, actually, in response to a listener's request, we're going to talk about coping mechanisms during COVID-19. Specifically, we're actually going to talk about using words.

There's lots of reasons you might be feeling overwhelmed right now. And there are just as many reasons that you may not be able to express what it is you're feeling and needing. Words help us communicate our pain and desires, and they help us get our needs met. Words are powerful.

At some point we've all been hurt by someone words, hurt others with our own or been moved by the lyrics of a favourite song. Right now, while the world is extra weird and confusing and the power of our words is a pretty great hammer in our coping toolkit.

Ronna Bloom is joining us to chat a bit about using words as a tool for coping during these weird times. Ronna is a poet and a psychotherapist. She is the creator of the Poet in Residence programme at Mount Sinai Hospital, and the Spontaneous Poetry Booth, where she offers personalized poetry as a prescription for wellbeing. Ronna's work is grounded in the idea that poetry can be healing. When a poem works, it can reflect an experience that has not yet been articulated.

Ronna Thank you. Thank you for having me, Kate.

Kate Thanks for joining us. How are you doing in these weird times?

Ronna Oh, changing.

Kate Changing. Nice.

Ronna Changing. It sort of feels minute by minute. You know, you could have asked me that this morning and I would have said one thing and now I feel another thing. And you know, when we're done, I'll feel all sorts of other things. So, I mean, I think that's always true, but now it feels especially intense and weird.

Kate And I think we're noticing it more, right? Our feelings. Yeah. Emotions, feelings, words, bodily sensations, responses to all of it. Cause it is such a weird time.

Ronna Yeah. Everything's heightened.

Kate Everything's heightened. That's a good word. Everything's heightened. So Ronna, tell us about the power of words and specifically the power of poetry. This is, you know the world that you live in and words are the tools of your trade. So can you talk a little bit about what you see as the power of words being and, and the power of poetry?

Ronna Yeah, yeah, I can. Even, just a little bit, a little bit ago, you asked me something about how I was feeling in this time, and I said, everything is heightened. And you said heightened - that's a good word. And sometimes there's just a word that lands that really touches something. It captures something. It's like, yeah, that's the word and it is there's something satisfying about that. I think when you hit the word that actually means what you feel. That's simply in words. And then of course when you string them together in sentences, they can be pretty strong, positively and negatively and in poems. Well, rather than talk about the power of poetry, I thought maybe I would just read you a poem.

Kate That would be fantastic.

Ronna A really short poem.

Kate Ok

Ronna It's a poem by Hafiz who was a 16th century, I think, 16th century Persian poet.

"I wish I could show you when you are lonely or in darkness. The astonishing light of your own being." I'm going to read it again. "I wish I could show you when you're lonely or in darkness, the astonishing light of your own being."

Kate That's beautiful.

Ronna Yeah. Right?

Kate And powerful. And moving.

Ronna Yeah. Now let that in for a minute because it, you can feel it in there. I think for me, what happens with that poem is there is this intention, this desire on the part of the person speaking, the wisher. Like, is so full of wanting to show the other person how much, how much, what they see - the wish. And then the other person being lonely or in darkness and you feel lonely and a darkness. I can actually feel it kind of coming over me like a cloud. "The astonishing light." Okay, I'm with you in the light, but "of your own being." It's like a whole light bulb in my body goes on. It's like the whole thing radiates out of me. It's so much, it's me and it's bigger than me. And I think that's what poetry also does is it gives me a place to rest that's me and bigger than me. Like I can rest in it.

Kate And it's also about like for me, when I hear that poem, I felt, I feel really kind of seen in ways that I don't often allow myself to be seen, right? That someone actually, if someone said that to me it would be, Oh, like there's a vulnerability to it, right? Like there's sort of like, Oh, you see me that way. But there's also such a warmth and almost sort of a deep appreciation of that someone's really actually maybe seeing me that I'm, I'm actually being seen in a way that's positive and brilliant and radiant and you know, in the inside. Cause often when we're locked in our darkness, it's really hard to see past that. It's really hard. People can say 'you're great,' whatever, but when you're locked inside your own sadness, your own trauma, your own depression, your own anxieties, it's hard to actually take that in. You know, the first word that struck me was the lonely piece, right? And I think we're all feeling a sense of loneliness and a sense of loss around what's happening right now. And the way those words are put together is really moving.

Ronna That's, that's the thing, it's how they're put together because you're right, it is about the, the content about the lonely, like that we are all struggling with some kind of loneliness now. Whether we're really alone or with people, we're inside ourselves in a lonely place. And, but if I say, 'Oh, I know you're feeling lonely and I think you're wonderful.' That has a certain impact. But if I say, "I wish I could show you when you're lonely or in darkness, the astonishing light of your own being," the power of that is, is the poem. And it's bigger than the words. It has the words, but it carries more. So the poem itself is doing a lot more work for us than the regular speaking, you know, the daily, the way I'm talking to you now.

Kate And what is that about poetry? Like, you know, there's so many words that, you know, when I talk about remembering the lyrics of a beloved song or a favourite song. There's things about the way we string words together, like you're saying that have a greater impact. Why, why is that? What is it about? Because poetry is not haphazard. It's a really a well thought out craft. Someone is really, it's hard to do in some ways.

Ronna You know, it is. It's a craft for sure. And yet also there are lines that I'm sure you hear coming out of your own mouth and, and for sure out of the mouths of people you spend time with. We hear each other's lines and we go, Oh my God, that's such a great line. And that line might be the beginning of the poem because it just captures something. So there is something about paying attention to our own language, our own metaphors, the things that kind of call us, but may become a poem and the poem then has its own kind of wisdom and its own structure.

It may later be crafted very carefully, but sometimes initially just as it's kind of pouring out of you, it just comes kind of, the words are just queuing up behind themselves and they're just coming out. So in some ways it's just letting, letting yourself hear the language that wants to come. And language is, it's the, there is this beauty of the language that you're describing and a rhythm. It's something about the beauty of the language, the rhythm as much about the content and the meaning. So that sometimes I find that even if I hear a poem in another language that I don't speak, I can feel something about it. It touches something. And even if I don't intellectually understand it because there's a rhythm in it, it is somewhere between speaking and music

Kate And there's a healing in that. I think for a lot of people. And a lot of your work has been around that using poetry and words and rhythm as healing. So whether it's as the poet-in-residence at Mount Sinai or the Spontaneous Poetry Booth where you were prescribing poetry for people as a sort of way to support their wellbeing and to move them in certain ways, right. There's a real healing that can happen. So can you talk a little bit about that, your experiences using poetry as a coping mechanism and as a, a way to heal?

Ronna So I have to admit that I rarely if ever say that I use poetry to heal because I always feel it's sets me up too much.

Kate Right. That's the big expectation.

Ronna Yeah. And I don't want to do that. And then, and then I don't know if it will be true. And all I really want to do is - something you said in there - to make an offering that I hope will fit with what they're experiencing and that will move them. You said move them, open them, shift something, something will shift in them that will make a change. Well I'll go back to you were mentioning the Spontaneous Poetry Booth. So the Spontaneous Poetry Booth is where I sit at a table with a sign that says the poet is in, like Lucy and Charlie Brown. People come over and I say, what do you need a poem for? And then I write it on the spot and then I give it to them. I read it to them and I give it to them.

Kate So do they just say I need a poem for grief or do they give you more information around that?

Ronna It's a great question. It's really important because you know like three people could say I need a poem for grief and they would be very different poems, right? There'd be very different needs and different moments. Somebody may have lost their dog, somebody may be feeling the grief at the world, someone maybe just broke up with a partner. The grief is different. And so I want to ask, and it is a really interesting moment cause I'm sitting down with a stranger and they might think, Oh this, this is a stranger. She can't really be interested in what I want so I better be quick. And then I try to slow down and say, well what is it? You don't have to make sense. It doesn't have to be articulate. I kind of coax a little bit, encourage them to say more about what it is - all the things coming in. And then when I get the whole picture from what they say, the content and what I experience of how they seem to be feeling. I say, well, when I

get the first line, then we'll stop talking and I'll just write it and then I'll read it to you and we'll see what happens.

And I say to them, good or bad, you get what's coming in order to be able to write that, I have to really get out of the way of trying to make it anything like just to really, really hear what's coming. As much as I can, as widely as I can. And then when I read it to them, it's like a moment of with somebody where you know; like I know it either hits or it doesn't hit. Like, you know, if you're with a client and you can see in that moment, everybody can feel, Oh, that, that touched me. Like a treatment. If it is a medical health treatment, you know, if the treatment works. So we see that and then I give it to them. And the other version is what you mentioned is the prescriptions where I have RX for poetry booth where I sit and I have prescriptions already on prescription pads and some of them are poems I've written and some of them are homes by Langston Hughes or Emily Dickinson or all kinds of well known poets. And I look for the poem that might fit that person. And so in both cases I'm trying to very much listen and offer something that I think will articulate for them maybe what hasn't, what they haven't said yet. What hasn't been said yet. And that can be a real relief.

Kate And I love the idea too of the Spontaneous Poetry Booth when you're writing a poem for someone specifically the collaborative process, which almost is in in a lot of ways like a therapy session, right? Or a therapeutic, you know, exchange where you're engaging the person in the process.

Ronna You got it. It is entirely like that. It is so, and yet, and yet it is so seemingly innocent because anyone can sit down and I'm not saying I'm doing therapy, but it is a very collaborative and so yeah, I'm very careful and I'm very appreciative. I think it's such a risk that we both take in a way they come and be vulnerable to a stranger and I don't know if I'm going to have anything

Kate Right? Like every therapy session. Like you said, not that you're doing therapy, that's sort of, that's how it goes. And it's kind of similar to it sounds like too when you think about collaborative note taking in narrative therapy, right? That sort of, let's write this note of what happened here today together. You know, a copy for you to take and a copy for me to hold or maybe not even for me to hold, but it's yours. What happened here today is yours.

Ronna It's exactly like that. I mean, it's wonderful to talk to you because this work really came out of my work as a psychotherapist on one hand and as a poet, writing on the other hand and seeing the sort of connection of those two things. And right now though, I'm not practicing as a psychotherapist. All of that information and learning and love is fueled and funneled into this. So that's, that's one way for people to experience the power of poetry is to receive a poem written or a poem that they have in a book. But the other way that I work is to find ways for people to write their own experiences and to express. And that is as powerful, just a different way, in a different moment, and a different need.

Kate And I think, you know, poetry in some ways - maybe this is just my experience - but it gets a bit of a bad rap. People are like, I don't really get poetry. I don't know how to write. I'm not a poet. I can't write a poem. You know, roses are red, violets are blue, maybe. How do I? You know, there's I think some fear and stigma around poetry.

Ronna Absolutely. Absolutely. A hundred percent. People have a lot of barriers to poetry. Even if they willingly are coming to a workshop. I always ask at the beginning of a workshop - and I sort of do a tongue in cheek, I joke - who here has poetry trauma.

Kate Right! Grade seven poetry trauma.

Ronna And everybody half the people kind of give these sheepish grins and even if they were willingly there, internally, there's some part of them a little bit afraid. Not everybody, some people are excited, but they're a little bit afraid of something. And I want to have that out before we begin. What is it that, what was your experience or what is your stigma about poetry that makes it intimidating, daunting? I'm not interested. I'm a bad poet. Like, and people's then just say a few things that release that in the room. There's always somebody it's usually grade seven - you know, I was told to analyze this poem and I felt dumb, or my poems were criticized even though I loved all. The thing that causes me the most pain is when someone says, I loved writing, but my teacher criticized me. I mean, that just kills me. That I feel is just unforgivable to squelch that kind of love. And it's really about sort of lighting a fire under it again. But all that is there in the room before people begin. All that criticism and fear and judgment of their own work. And so I try to find a way to open the space that they can write without, with as little impediment as possible to whatever matters to them or whatever is alive and hot and true. And so what I do - and I want to offer this now to you and to your listeners who are listening to us right now - is I give five rules for writing. Do you think people will be interested in that?

Kate Absolutely. Yeah. I want to hear them.

Ronna Do you want to hear them? Okay. So here are the five rules for writing and I will acknowledge that the first four rules come from the writer Natalie Goldberg in her book *Writing Down the Bones*, which was a book that she wrote in 1986 and it's a very, very useful book around writing practice and writing exercises. And if people want to order that they might be able to get it eventually out of the library. These are her four but I add one at the end, which we'll talk about. So here they are and you can write them down. 1. Don't think, don't think. 2. Keep your hand moving. 3. Don't censor. 4. You are free to write the worst crap possible and 5. You don't have to share. What would happen if I didn't give you that fifth rule? Like what would happen in terms of the other rules?

Kate It would be hard to not censor. It would be hard to be okay with it being crap.

Ronna Yeah, yeah, exactly. So it's really, really essential to know that part. And you know, these rules sounds simple, but they're quite hard. Because we have so many filters on our experiences - what we're allowed to say, how we're allowed to say it, how real we can get, how

ecstatic, how wild, how angry, how excited, how sad and what way we do it and how grammatical and all that. And so it can be very hard to go with these rules. But I really encouraged as a practice that you'll, you know, keep fun of going - Oh there I'm judging myself and just kind of keep going knowing that you don't have to share it with anyone. But it doesn't mean you can't share it with anyone because after you've written things, you might think, Oh, I kind of liked this. I kind of do want someone to see this, but the point really is to create the space in a notebook or wherever you can, that is your space to write. That is just yours to be able to express the whatever you're going through right now.

Kate And I think now too, you know, when, um, a lot of people have been talking about what it's like to have to self isolate with people - family that they wouldn't normally have to be confined with or partners or roommates, friends, whatever. And that there's a lot of irritation coming up. There's a lot of frustration about how people are living together and you know, compounded by the weird times that we're living in, the unpredictability in it. I feel like there's a way that perhaps as a coping mechanism, being able to find a quiet space, so whether it's, you know, in your room, but now maybe in the park and to have a notebook and to be able to start playing with words and writing things down that can help you kind of process how you're feeling and trying to figure out what it is you need, what you maybe need to articulate or maybe just what unspoken boundary you need to set with a roommate, um, in a space and to sort of feel less stressed and less overwhelmed. I think that that actually as a coping tool right now, first of all, it's free, right? Except for maybe the pencil and the piece of paper. You can write it on your phone as well, that there's, it's very accessible for a lot of people. Whereas, you know, talking about how poetry maybe has not felt accessible, but if you're not sharing it and they're just words and you're writing them down and they're just for you, there's a real accessibility in that.

Ronna I think so too. It's very true. And it is free and it's available. It's right there in your hand. In terms of finding out what you need - or, what, you know, as you said, if there's a boundary to set or what you need or what you're feeling, - those things may come through the writing. Cause sometimes you're in such a state in the writing that the writing is kind of like a chaos. It feels kind of like a childhood word of my mishkabible. Like it's just too, it's too, but, that needs to come out. I think of it as a pipeline of emotion. Like we get, we open the pipeline and then all the feelings come rushing out like water and you can't really choose, okay, which, which feelings am I going to get? You get it all or else the tap is off. And then you let them pour out for a while until the flow kind of quiets down and then you can begin to see in the flow, Oh look here, this is actually a need. I keep repeating this over and over. So sometimes it's through the writing process that you find out. It takes a little bit of time for it to move through for you to see what's in that stuff that's coming out. Sometimes there's just one line that you've written after pages that you go 'that line, that line is really, really what I need now!'

Kate I like that. And I, you know, it's sort of picking out what, you know, the three words that you said a little earlier that have stuck with me 'alive and hot and true.' You know, what, what keeps coming back for you that's alive and hot and true in this moment. And see that a little more clearly.

Ronna I think you've just given a writing prompt to all of us just now where any of us who want to try and write after, after listening to this, could go and pick up the pen and go, what's alive? What's alive and hot and true for me right now? What's hot for me right now? What's true for me now, right now? You know? And those would be really great prompts to just go with the five rules. And don't think!

Kate So there we've started something. Maybe we need to set, you know, intentions to sort of attend to ourselves that way and, and think about those things as we, you know, are, struggling together through all of this and trying to find better ways to cope or ways to cope that actually feel comfortable for us, that we're not losing our cool or not getting into conflicts or not feeling oppressed by our own feelings. So being able to kind of sit with what is alive and hot and true. That's so great. Yeah. So thank you. This is all so informative but also inspiring to me. I think I'm going to be writing more poetry as a result for sure. And, you have a lot of offerings that we're going to direct people to after - events and workshops. But I'm just wondering if there's any final thing that you'd want to, you know, let the listeners kind of walk away with as they maybe walk through a door to the world of words and poetry during Covid as they navigate this whole new era that we're living in.

Ronna Well, actually, what I'd like to do is offer a poem that I wrote on March 13th. So it was just two days after the pandemic was declared. "Dear heart, this is not a normal time. So forgive yourself for not being normal. You never were. Now you have a good reason and company." I think the other thing about this poem, which is the sort of secret kicker that I kind of love maybe even the most is that "you never were," is that nobody is normal and nobody ever was normal. And there is some strange thing - if there can be positive things coming out of this time - it's that there is more room for vulnerability as a human experience rather than an aberration. And there's more room for the fact that we are all not, there is no such thing as normal.

Kate And that we have company.

Ronna And we have company, right? You have good reason. Everybody is feeling this way. You're not alone.

Kate And I think the idea of, you know, the word normal, is complicated for a lot of people. And, and I think all of us in our own ways quietly walk through the world feeling maybe not normal, and which alongside that goes with, Oh, then I'm not right or there's something wrong with me, or there's something broken in me that needs to be fixed. And I think we see that a lot in psychotherapy. People who feel like, you know, they come in and say, this is, I'm not normal, there's something wrong with me. So that poem for me is just a way of accepting and embracing that and just kind of declaring it and saying, here it is. Here we all are together. And maybe it took this super weird time to reveal this. But here we are, all being not normal together. And again, just a great demonstration of how words alone, but also strung together with rhythm and also just read beautifully by you. There's a lot just to get to listen to you read a poem, it can really be healing. So thank you so much for joining us today and chatting with us. I

know for myself, this has been, like I said, inspiring and I hope it has for the people listening to and hopefully a little bit of fun for you.

Ronna Oh, really wonderful for me. It infuses me to talk about poetry and to talk about poetry with someone who cares about people and listeners and words and language and I'm really happy to do it. Thank you.

Kate Thanks for listening today. If you want to learn more about Ronna's work, take a course or attend an event, you can find her at ronnabloom.com

To learn more about Hard Feelings, you can find us at hardfeelings.org or on Instagram and Facebook @hardfeelingsto.

If you or someone you know is in crisis, check the resource list on our website for some places you can connect with in Toronto, or reach out to your local distress centre or helpline.

We hope you will send us your questions to include in future episodes. Let us know what you're struggling with and how we might be of support to you. We're in this together and we're here to help. You can reach me at kate@hardfeelings.org

Weird Times is produced and edited by Arij Elmi.
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Please note that this podcast is meant strictly for informational purposes and is not a substitute for mental health care from a regulated health professional.

Stay tuned, stay well, and stay home.