

87. Mental Health and the Holidays with Jennifer VanOrman – Episode Transcript

Leah: Welcome to Her Story of Success, a podcast featuring stories from influential women trailblazers and business leaders who have defined & pursued their own versions of success and fulfillment. We hope these stories, lessons learned, and celebrations inspire you to believe in yourself and enjoy your own journey a little more. I'm Leah Glover Hayes, your host and CEO of Her Story of Success Women's Business Collective.

I wanted to do something a little different for our Thanksgiving episode, and that's why I'm so excited to be speaking with my therapist, Jennifer VanOrman, today. Jennifer is a licensed marriage and family therapist living in Nashville, and she's been an incredible resource for me as I work through some of my trauma and the struggles that come with owning my own business. I want to talk to her today, because I know that the holidays can be such a difficult time for many people.

Jennifer's going to share some advice for how to best care for yourself during this time of year, but she's also going to tell us some practical strategies for being kinder to ourselves all year round. If you learn something new from this conversation, then I encourage you to share it with a friend or family member who's also interested in improving their mental health.

I hope you enjoy this conversation with Jennifer VanOrman!

Well, Jennifer VanOrman, welcome to Her Story of Success. We are excited to have you today!

Jennifer: Thank you. I'm excited to be here.

Leah: Yes. And welcome, especially, because I am excited because you are my therapist, and we are talking about mental health, emotional health, and how to take care of yourself and allow yourself what you need during the crazy holiday season.

Jennifer: Yes, which I think is going to be especially crazy this year, given the fact that it's 2020 and we're in the middle of a pandemic. And that just adds another layer of stress to an already stressful time.

Leah: It for sure does. Well, I'm excited for this conversation, because the holidays are meant to be exciting and fun and a time of relaxation and kind of some the recoup and getting back to what you need to move forward. But I know sometimes that isn't always the case, right? Like they can also be very stressful, very painful, a reminder of lack or what's missing in your life. So I wanted to have this conversation in this point of view of, the women that listen to this podcast are like me, right? We're busy. We either run our own companies or we are at a level of success in our careers where we have some miles behind us and a lot of where we want to go. And you and I have been working together for a little bit now. So I really wanted to have just an open conversation that the woman listening can just feel a place of understanding, right? Like we're kind of all in this together. And to allow herself to be honest about where she is and how to deal with whatever those emotions are that are going on. So from your point of view, maybe around the holidays, what are the conversations that you're having with your patients and what are the things that you see, that a lot of times women deal with that you are passionate about helping them see or really be honest with, deal with and not just try to quote unquote move forward?

Jennifer: Yeah. So this happens a lot, this time of year, I start getting countless requests for sessions specifically to deal with the holidays and fear and anxiety that people start having months ahead of time around, "I've got to go home," or, "This is the first year since my spouse died," "This is the first year since my one of my parents died." "This is the first year since my divorce." Or just, "This year is going to be like every other year and every other year is historically pretty stressful." And what you were saying about the holidays are supposed to be a sweet time, you know, honestly I don't think that's most people's experience, and I'm sad to say that, but I just think it would be better to kind of normalize from the beginning that most people's experience at the holidays tends to be a lot of hard with some moments of beautiful.

Leah: Wow.

Jennifer: Instead of all beautiful with moments of hard. And so your expectation can be a little more realistic. But one of the biggest things I think about the holidays and

people traveling home, or family traveling to you, being with your family at the holidays is number one, Remember that you're a grownup.

Leah: What do you mean by that?

Jennifer: Well, what I find, especially at the holidays, and especially if we're traveling home, whether it's the home we grew up in or a different home, but if we're going to be with our parents around the holidays, we tend to click back in to child mode. We go home and we take on that role all over again of, "I'm a kid at home with my parents," and we forget

Leah: No matter how old we are.

Jennifer: No matter how old we are, we forget. It's so funny because people will come in and there'll be like, "I mean, I got there and it was so hard and it was so stressful, and their house is dark and depressing and dirty or cluttered or whatever it is." And I'm like, "Okay, well, why don't you go do something." And they're like, "What?" "Like, why didn't you leave? Why didn't you, why didn't you get in your car?" And I mean, we forget that we can do that. We forget that we're grownups now with grown-up resources when we go home. And so we can actually learn how to take care of ourselves when we get there, instead of clicking back into this, "I'm a kid. I don't have any choices. I don't have any power." So that to me is one of the biggest reminders, like just kind of a mindset to get yourself into is, "I'm a grownup."

Leah: Yeah, I think that's a huge one. I'm going home as a grownup. And I'll just tell you some of the stresses that I have is especially as, as any of us get older, it's if I'm getting older, my parents are getting older, and if my parents are getting older, they're getting closer to needing more help or needing help that maybe isn't already accounted for. Or, you know, I want to see something change in either their home, their life, their whatever, that we have no ability to change. Like my dad is not going to become a different person. He's not going to take better care of himself. You know? Like what does it look like to help people? And I've done a lot of work on this, but when you're starting to have that conversation with someone that's super frustrated about

the things that they can't change, how do we take some steps to deal with that ourselves and what we need to do to take care of ourselves internally?

Jennifer: So there's two points that I tend to say to people a lot that deal with that question. One is, it is really helpful, sometimes I'll tell people, "Hey, your role this Christmas, or this Thanksgiving is I want you to go home, and you're the private investigator. And what I mean by that is I want you to observe, I want you to just sit and watch," because what we do when we go home, and you make an excellent point, is we get into, "If I say this this way, this time, it's going to be the time that they're going to hear me, they're going to have some insight, and they're going to change."

Leah: Wow. How many times have we done that?

Jennifer: In my experience, so much of the stress for adults going home is this idea that "I'm going to change my parents. This, this is going to be the year. They're finally going to ask questions about my life. This is going to be the year..."

Leah: Am I the only person that wonders when that's going to happen?

Jennifer: You are not, you are not. This is going to be the year that they're going to listen to my views on politics and they're going to go, "Wow, you make an excellent point. Thank you for sharing." You know? And so this idea of what would it look like to kind of just take a more neutral position instead of putting yourself back into the picture. One of my favorite stories a client told me, who came in specifically really to do work around her family of origin. She's an older woman who hadn't married and still hasn't married yet. And so she's still going home as a grownup, but single. And here's the other thing that I'll say about being single. In our culture, it's not okay to leave home, and by leave home, I mean, there's this emotional leaving of home that we have to do to be able to go home and it be successful. But in our culture in the South, and then you add in maybe a layer of Christianity on top of it, and you don't get to leave home until you get married. And I hate that idea. When we grow up and we geographically leave home, financially leave home and emotionally leave home, then we're a grownup. Whether we ever get married or have kids. Ever.

Leah: Right.

Jennifer: So sometimes I'll talk to my 37 year old single client, and I'll say, cause she'll be presenting challenges about going home and I'll say, "Hey, if you were going home with your husband and your child, would you have a hard time telling your mom that you don't want to go to this place with her, and instead you want to go to bed because, because you're tired?" And they're like, "No, I wouldn't have a hard time." But something about being 37 and single, you don't feel like you have that voice. So anyway, back to my story about my client. So she said, "I feel like what happened," after about a year of us working on this, this family of origin idea and how to go home and be more of yourself at home? She said, "I went from feeling like I was inside the snow globe, getting shaken up with my family, to now I'm on the outside of the snow globe. And guess what? The snow globe still gets shaken. It still is messy and it's chaotic, but now I'm on the outside and I'm not getting shaken with them." And that's what I mean about that observer role.

The other thing that I think is really important, and this is an emotional task, I'm going to say this as if this is something to cross off the list, but this is actually something that takes a lot of time and a lot of emotional work. But once we can grieve what our family has never been and will never be able to be for us, because we all have spaces, no matter how great our family is.

Leah: Oh yeah, we've talked about mine.

Jennifer: No matter how great they are or how not great they are, we all have the space in our family of going, "They are never going to be able to do this with me. We're never going to be able to have this conversation. They're never going to be able to accept this part of me." And if we can grieve that, then we can go into the holidays or into time with our family, with this mentality of, "I can accept what they're able to do. And I will be able to let go of what they're not able to do." Because in my experience, again, what we do when we go home to our families is whether it's for the holidays or just a random weekend during the year, we think, "Even though this well has never given me a drink of water before — I've gone to this well a million times,

and every time I raise the bucket up and there's no water there." We somehow believe this time is going to be the time that we go to the well, and we actually get a drink of water. And why do we do that? Why? It's so painful to get there and go "once again," versus this idea of, could we go into it going, I've never gotten a drink of water.

Leah: I'm going to bring my own water. Yeah, that's what I've started doing is like, you know what, I don't maybe it takes itself in a bottle of champagne. But I do think that like, when I look at some of the things that I've had to work on and, you know, you said to, to be able to grieve that you, you know, one of the things that I struggle with is, you know, beating myself up or saying, "Well, what I have isn't as bad as others." So I discount what my lack was, because it wasn't as bad. And then I don't grieve or deal with it because I'm like, "Well, at least I had X, Y, or Z," instead of allowing myself to be honest, to say, "Well, I missed this thing. This is something that missed and in my life." So for people like me that never allow themselves to grieve, because you feel like you have to just be grateful for what you had and you can't really say that you lacked anything because you had it better than other people. What does that look like? And then I want to flip it to the other side.

Jennifer: Well, when we employ this tactic of, "Well, but I didn't have it as bad as so-and-so," or "At least they did this," or if I had a nickel for every time, I've heard this, "They did the best they could." Those are all in my opinion, ways that we minimize our feelings, and that isn't going to be helpful. Because the only way that we're going to process the feelings is to give space for them and honor them. And so when we say those statements, it's really our way of saying, "This doesn't really matter. It didn't really hurt. I'm not really sad about it. In fact, I should be grateful for it, or I should be thankful," which should, any sentence with should in it, is where we're shaming ourselves, where we're telling ourselves what we should feel as opposed to dealing with what we actually do feel. And I, this is a Jennifer VanOrman quote that needs to be a t-shirt someday, **but we do so much more damage trying not to feel what we feel than if we would just feel it. So all the energy were using to try to minimize our sadness and our grief or anger or fear or hurt, we are actually working way harder and doing way more damage than if we would just sit down and feel the actual feeling.**

Leah: I love that. It makes me think too. And one of the reasons that I'm so passionate about people going to therapy, and we've talked about this, like, it is a matter of cost. I think everybody would go to therapy if they could afford it, except for, I love what you and I had talked about recently that, no matter where you are, there's something and there are a lot of insurances now that do cover it. There are a lot of ways to get free counseling to get started. So that's one thing, if you, person listening, if you have never been to a therapist, I want to encourage you to do that. And I will say in this experience, I looked for a therapist for at least six months, at least, calling people. Some people weren't accepting new clients, like a couple of people I'd get on the phone and what they helped people through wasn't really what I was looking for. So I'm going to say a couple of things. One, there's somebody out there for you. Two, it's easy to get discouraged if the first couple people that you call aren't going to work out. And I found you, Jennifer, through a girl in a mastermind group that I'm a part of, I was just was kind of in this moment of desperation, like "I'm looking for a therapist, I need somebody for this. Like I'm a business owner. I need someone that I can talk to about being a business owner, those frustrations. I also have been through a lot of trauma in my life. So I'm looking for someone that can kind of deal with me and all of these things that I bring to the table." And it was, Lauren Sykes, who is also a business owner, she runs a company called Design Ed, where she helps companies with hard conversations, like diversity inclusion and those things. But I will say like, it took me reaching out to my network to find you, and it took a solid six months of looking. So stick with it. But to me, the reason that therapy is so important is because, for the same reason that we were talking about earlier, like my issues that I deal with, sometimes I can't share with other people because they can't relate to it. And it's not about like, not sharing, but when you share something that you're dealing with with someone that isn't equipped to help you talk through it, walk through it, deal with it, it sometimes can be damaging and it might put you into a shame cycle because they might say, "Yeah, but at least your dad's alive or, you know what, at least you have a dad, or at least you weren't abused by your dad," because you don't know what that other person actually dealt with. Right? So sometimes when you're dealing with things, I'm not saying don't share them with your friends at all, but I'm saying like, there's a lot of things in our lives that we might deal with that need a therapist or, you know, a licensed therapist to help deal with. So in your experience, what are some of those things that you kind of recommend like, "Hey, these are some of these stickier

or sensitive issues that it would be better to go to a therapist with than maybe just your random friend?"

Jennifer: Well, I mean, I think everything, I don't think there's a category of, "Well, if you have these kinds of problems, that's how, you know." I think if you have any or have ever had any inclination of, "I would just like to know more about therapy. I would like to see what it's like. I would like to experience it. I think I could benefit from it." I would say absolutely, 100% go. Find a way, find a person who you can afford, you know, I think you bring up an excellent point. Whether it's with friends or with, I mean, there are some therapists that can do this, that can actually shame you and make you feel like you're too much, or they don't know what to do with you. Or could you just kind of tame that a little bit or, I mean, unfortunately there, there are some, I mean, just like any other industry, there are people that are good and there are people that are not good. And just because the industry is therapy doesn't mean that all the people that it attracts are gonna be good.

Leah: True. And therapists are, you might need someone for a season and need someone else for another season. I'll tell you. Like, I, um, went through some trauma when I was in high school and I went to a therapist with, with my mom and dealt with some things. And I just think that that was one of the saving graces in my life. I lost, I think I've talked about this on the podcast, but I lost, you know, my soulmate at 22. And so doing grief counseling and what I, what the counseling and the therapy that I went through then is totally different than the work that I do with you. A few years ago, I went to a therapist that when I was very much in a very seeking stage of my life in a very seeking season. And I went to her and it was great. And with you, I think we've talked about, I'm always going to be a seeker, but I feel like, "Okay, I've got a few of these things figured out, but I feel like there's, I'm this top, that's spinning, that's just like with no direction." And I came to you and I said, "Hey, I am a lot of personality. I'm a lot of things at the same time. I kind of have some things figured out, but I just need someone that can handle all that I am and help me put some pieces together." In some ways you help me pull some layers back. In other ways, you help me like funnel things down to say, "Okay, here's the direction that you want to go in." So if you're looking for a therapist, there's just so many different aspects. So, Jennifer is always open for conversation and so am I, but let's kind of keep this on the focus of, the

reason, I like the thing about the holidays, because you brought up, like when you go into anything with an expectation that's not met, there are so many things that can happen.

So maybe Jennifer, let's talk about this, whether it is the holidays or something where you're walking into a situation that you might need to either change your expectations or go into it. How can that relate, whether it's the holidays or something else?

Jennifer: Yeah, one thing I do want to say that that I think is just really, really important in terms of just a general thought about the holidays, that in my experience, a lot of people haven't ever thought about, which is this idea of historically, if you look back in your life and you think about every Thanksgiving and every Christmas that you've ever had, including all the ones that you had when you still lived at home, the ones you had in college, and the ones you've had in young adulthood and on and on and on. And for me, for instance, I come from a family of a lot of addiction and a lot of chaos and a lot of volatility and a lot of abuse. Well guess what happens at the holidays? If you're an addict, you use more, you drink more. If your drug of choice is some sort of drug or pill, guess what? You're going to take more of it at the holidays. Why? Because one there's this celebratory piece of the holidays. So if you're drinking, you know, the tendency is to drink more. I have specific memories of Christmas day, my dad being drunk in his chair by like 10:00 AM. 10:00 AM.

Leah: Wow.

Jennifer: He was there. He was there in body, but he was gone emotionally because he was impaired already. So even being a mom myself, I know, even though our family now is healthy and loving and peaceful, for the most part, the holidays represent a ton of stress for me. I become a crazy lunatic as a mom around the holidays, because I'm like, "I've got to get these gifts. I've got to get them wrapped. We're having people over, the house has to be clean. Well, guess what? My kids are picking up on that stress. So when you were younger, even if your family wasn't an addicted family, and you didn't have an alcoholic who was drunk in the chair about

10, and you didn't have people screaming and yelling, you still likely had a high level of stress. So there's this great concept that's becoming more and more popular, around this idea that we store trauma in our bodies. And so we have stored these feelings in our bodies around the holidays. And guess what the triggers are that start throwing those feelings out? Christmas carols, putting the tree up, it starts to get cold outside, it starts to get darker outside earlier. It starts, you start seeing the Christmas commercials. You start hearing the sounds and the sights. And so even if your mind, isn't thinking, "Oh, gosh, here comes Christmas. This is going to suck," even if your mind isn't thinking that, your body's going to start producing some of the same feelings that you always had around the holidays. And I would contend that most of us have a good dose of negative feelings stored around the holidays, regardless again, of what our family was, whether we were poor or rich, whether it was a loving family, whether it was a broken family, whether, just all the things.

And so I'm going to tell this story, it's very personal to me, but I think it speaks to this concept, it puts arms and legs to it. So for years as an adult, I hosted Thanksgiving for my family. I have much younger brothers, they weren't married yet. I was already married. I had a home, my mom had kind of got to the point where she downsized. So my home made sense. So every year, Leah, every year we're hosting Thanksgiving, I have two boys, one JR, he's now 24, I have a boy Jack that's 12. So JR was more high school-ish and Jack was the baby. So I get up every Thanksgiving and I just start freaking out for lack of a better word. So stressed, so overwhelmed, trying to make all these dishes, setting the tables, and I have a problem. This is, I will take responsibility, that I'm not just going to do it halfway. Like it's going to be beautiful. It's going to be amazing. So I put a lot of pressure. So by midday, I'm screaming at my kids. I'm screaming at my husband. And to the point that at one point, my oldest came to me and said, "Hey mom, can we not host Thanksgiving anymore? Because it's really not fun." And I just thought oh, my God,

Leah: It broke your heart, I'm sure.

Jennifer: Because again, back to your initial point, this is not what the holidays are supposed to be. So here's what I'm getting at. So fast forward a few years, I'm sitting at lunch one day with my brother, my brother, who has a birthday, often around

Thanksgiving. And one of the years, his dad, who was my stepfather, sexually abused me when my mom was at the hospital having him. So my mom goes to the hospital to have my brother. I had never known what day that actually was. So we're at lunch, we're all grownups. Like I'm 40 years old. My brother's 30-something. And he says, "Well, you know, the year I was born, it was Thanksgiving day. I was born on Thanksgiving day." 40 years old, already a trained therapist, and it was the first time that I thought, "Holy shit, I was sexually abused on Thanksgiving day." Never, I had never made that connection before.

Leah: Wow. Do you think that pulls the trauma?

Jennifer: Oh my gosh, of course it did. Of course it did.

Leah: Wow.

Jennifer: Now, here's the thing. A lot of y'all are going to be like, "Well, so what, so, I mean, yes, that's good awareness and good insight, but what does that matter?" Every year since then, when Thanksgiving is a coming, I start going, "Jennifer, you have a lot of trauma around this day, and it has allowed this new practice of kindness to myself, this new practice of going into this day going, "Oh yeah. You're probably going to have some big feelings today, and you think it's going to be about how overwhelmed you are, that you're having your family over, and that's some of it, but you're having big feelings about a really big trauma, and that's okay. That's okay." And it has totally shifted. I'm not saying I don't still become a raging lunatic sometimes on the holidays or specifically on Thanksgiving, but I will say I now, there's not a Thanksgiving that goes by that I almost don't just give myself kind of a sweet hug around, "Yeah. This day holds a lot of old pain and history," and I can honor it now instead of just getting myself into this place of, I'm losing my mind going, "What's wrong with me?" on Thanksgiving. So that's the point I want to make to the listener is that. No, maybe you didn't have that extreme of a trauma on a holiday, but we all have triggers around these holidays. And I would encourage everyone to do a little bit of intentional seeking around, what are some of those holiday memories? What are some of those traumas? I wonder what does get released in my body? If this whole movement is true and that we have this trauma stored in our body, whether

we're aware of it mentally or not, what is getting released in my body, around the holidays? What feelings, what stored experiences and emotions?

Leah: I do love that you say, like, not, cause some people listen to like, "Wow, I have no trauma compared to what she did," cause right, we get into that like comparison mode. Right. And that is just an enemy of, and a thief of, so many things. But yeah, I do encourage everyone to kind of stop and do that because when I actually, when I think of Thanksgiving, this is going to sound a little crazy, but I think of naps. I think of like, I think the best naps I've ever had, but then it also makes me think of, it takes me back to being a kid, because for so long I was single and I was never the person that hosted. Cause I'm like, "Oh, I can't cook. I don't need to host." The one time I did host, my nephews and my in-laws always continue to bring up the one time that I yelled at somebody for using a spoon to stir their coffee. Cause I wasn't set up to host, you know, it was my husband and me and that was it. And so I didn't have enough spoons and I yelled at them and that's like, I'm like, "dammit, why is that the one thing that everyone holds onto that I yelled at my brother-in-law for using a spoon to stir his coffee, you know?" So it's just funny that like, we all have things that trigger us because immediately I'm like, "God, it reminds me of like, I'm not a real adult. I can't even host a holiday. I'm not set up for that." So I get so much shame about who I'm not and all the things it's like, "Oh my gosh, all my girlfriends that have kids have been hosting holidays forever. And I'm always going to someone else's house. So I don't feel like a real adult cause I don't host things and I don't desire to."

Jennifer: There you go. That's how the holidays are triggering feelings. Your big feelings aren't necessarily, or at least not that you're aware of right now, big feelings about what Thanksgiving was like, but now you're into your big feelings of, "I'm not a real grownup. I have a lot of shame about where I am in life, I'm behind everyone else." And then that rolls right into grief and loss, which is something you and I have talked a lot about with your story of, "I'm not where I'm supposed to be." That kind of...

Leah: I'm not doing enough.

Jennifer: Yeah. Those are all really big feelings that you are poignantly aware of when it is a holiday season, in a way that you're not at another time, so that's good

for you to realize, “Oh, the holidays are bringing up a lot for me. It just, it may not be in the exact same form that what Jennifer's talking about.”

Leah: Right. Man, if you're listening to this, just send me an email if there's anything that pops up that you're thinking about. We're going to have this on, obviously it's on iTunes and all of those. Just leave a comment. I know that Jennifer and I would love to follow up with anybody that's like, “Yes, I have that big feeling, or here's the big feeling that I had.” And one of the things with Her Story of Success is it's about seasons and it's about, I think you used the word space, and understanding that things in our lives do take up space, and when we ignore them and when we try to push them aside, and Jennifer's caught me doing that a few times, it's hard to move forward when you're not being honest about the things that are around you and that you're not dealing with. So I think that's one of the reasons I wanted to have this conversation is like, how can we allow more people to be honest about where they are? Because sometimes the things that's holding you back, you don't even know exist in your life.

Jennifer: Yeah. I have this great story of a client who came in and, like you said, so often my clients come from word of mouth, because you run into a girlfriend who says, “Yeah, my therapist is great. She's really helped me. And, and we all think, ‘I want to go talk to her.’” And so this one particular woman came in and she was like, she was not in a crisis. Didn't really even know why she was coming in, but just said, “I definitely have anxiety. And I would like to work on that.” So I approach her like I approach a lot of clients who come in with anxiety and say “Anxiety is about fear. And so where did you learn to be afraid? Let's go back and look at your life and see how you learned or how your body learned to be afraid.” So next thing you know, she starts saying, “Wow, well, there's a lot of trauma in my childhood. I didn't think it had anything to do with my life today.” And I said, “Well, here's what I want you to do. I want you to go home and I want you to write down your 10 most impactful events in your life.” And I want you to know that this woman came every single week for six months. Sometimes we processed half of an impactful event. Sometimes we processed one. Sometimes we didn't process any. But we went through every single one of those 10 events, and she was carrying so much that she had no idea that she was carrying. She's married, she has kids, it was impacting everything about her daily

life. And she had no idea. No idea, and basically kind of stumbled into my office, having no idea, which is also just, you know, you don't always have to go to therapy, knowing exactly what you're supposed to deal with. Sometimes it's just, I have the sense that something's not right. You know, that's my job. That's why you're paying me money, is for me to help you know what you're carrying around.

Leah: Yeah. I want to get people a little bit of insight into you and me. So I'm giving you permission to talk about some of the things that you and I have worked on together that you've seen me deal with. That's relevant to this conversation. Like this is, this is full transparency. Like this is my therapist and me talking about the stuff that, that Leah's dealing with right now. Because you've already seen a little bit of growth, right? In the times that we've met. But I'll tell you what I came to you for was, you know, I'm a business owner and I have so much fear about not being able to rise to the level that, that little girl in me that had all of the ambition and big girl dreams. I know that as an adult, there's so many things about who I am, that I'm not enough to become what I aspire to be, or like what quote, unquote, like, to fulfill my purpose. And so these are the conversations that we're having is like, where is that coming from that I'm not feeling like I'm enough? And those are some of the things that we're working on.

Jennifer: And what does that have to do with your childhood? Like you didn't just walk in and...

Leah: I wasn't taking it back to my childhood.

Jennifer: Yes. You already said this earlier. You have this great coping skill, but it also has really been hurting you, around, "Well, I mean, it wasn't that bad," or "No, I'm fine. I'm fine." Or, "Yeah, I'm sad about that. But so many other people are sadder about other things." And all of that has been an excuse to just not feel what you needed to be feeling. And to not, to use my word, honor it.

Leah: Right, because here's a small example. So when I was in sixth grade, we were outside at church playing softball or something, and somebody slid into my ankle. It broke at that moment. And my brother came and picked me up and carried me off

the field. And he was like, "Don't cry. Do not cry. There's no need to cry. You're totally fine." And so that's like the coping mechanism that keeps coming up is like, "I'm fine. I don't need to cry." I'm five, two. I think that he saw I'm such this small person and he was a boy that got into fights. So his purpose was to help me be able to take care of myself, because he was afraid I would get picked on him. And so he's always like, "Be tough. Don't let people know that you're weak, because you're small, you are going to get hurt. You're going to get beaten up." So, I mean, till this day, the only time I can cry is, honest to God, if I'm on my period, other than that, like I just. I'm not emotional. I'm like, "I'm strong. I've got to be strong for people." So for me, that is part of that coping mechanism is like, "Nope, I'm okay. I'm tough. I don't have it that bad. I can get over this. I can stand firm and move forward." Right? We were a poor family. I was the smallest person in, I think, my school, you know what I mean? Like I played basketball and I was small, so I was always having to prove myself to other people. But mostly I think I was trying to prove myself to much.

Jennifer: Yeah. And I would say that that very statement is the same thing that is what brought you in to see me. "I'm not proving myself enough, even in my career right now." And you and I have talked a lot about this idea of how much. This is so common. You, you by far are not the only one who struggles with it, but how much we tend to expect from ourselves and how hard we are on ourselves. I see so many people, are so much harder on themselves than anyone else could ever be on them.

Leah: And it's funny, because I don't feel like I am. Because I'm that person, like so many people will be like, "Well, I'm going to do what I said I'm going to do because I said I was going to do it." And I I'm not that person. I'm like, "No, I'm not going to do something because I told you that I would, when a situation has changed," do you know? Cause I think that I'm like, "Well, I'm not hard on myself cause I'm not going to make myself do something just for the sake of doing it." You know, because someone has this like, "Well, that's integrity." I'm like, "Well, that's integrity to you. Integrity to me says that I don't want you to do something with, or for me, just because you said you would, right? Like if you decide not to, what if I find somebody that is going to do that for me, or with me, that's even better than you because you don't want to do it. And they're excited about it." Does that make sense? So when you say I'm hard on myself, I'm like, "Well, I'm really not that hard on myself." Cause that's what I say. Right? Like

the things that I've said like, "Well I'm lazy." I go so negative and I don't even see that that's me being hard on myself. I'm like, "No, that's just me being honest."

Jennifer: Right. Yes.

Leah: And I'm like, what? Why do I think that the bad things are the honest things? But I'm the first person to be someone else's cheerleader and be like, "No, you can do it. You're amazing." While I build up everybody else. And then I'm like, "But I'm not good enough."

Jennifer: Yeah. I mean, almost every mental health issue that I know of could be fixed by kindness to self. And I'll just say that again, because I think it's really profound and true. Almost every mental health issue that our world knows could be fixed by learning to be kind to ourselves.

Leah: Well, let's talk about what that looks like. What does it look like to be kind to yourself? So for me, when I'm beating myself up being negative, what are some of the steps I can take to start to be kind to me?

Jennifer: Well, in my opinion, everything starts with awareness. And so first I think we have to listen. It is so amazing to me, how we all have these inner voices in our head, but we have never stopped and really been intentional about, "What is that voice saying to me?" And I'll even have people write it down. Like when we're in that place of being hard on ourselves or beating ourselves up, or, what is the voice actually saying to us? You know, mine can depend, mine can be, "You're not pretty enough. You're not smart enough. You're not skinny enough. You're too much. You're too difficult. No one's ever gonna love you." Like I have had to do a lot of work to first capture what that voice is saying to me, because if you really come down to it, it's all lies. It's all a lie, and you can't counter a lie unless you know truth, but you can't know truth if you don't know what the lie is saying.

Leah: Wow.

Jennifer: And so a lot of times that's where we start is just the awareness of. I call mine, a lot of times it's a parade, it's like just one thought after another goes by. And it's been really good for me to start to watch the parade, observe the parade and see what it's saying, because then I can kind of counter it and engage it and fight it a bit. But before, it just went on and I didn't even know it was going on.

Leah: For me when I see you say, "Okay, I see the lies." And then how do you flip that into the truth? Well, "Oh, I'm not pretty enough." Well, I mean, "But yes, you are. Look at your eyes, you have beautiful eyes, your hair, it looks like golden perfection.' So I guess I'm asking, do you say, like, that's not how that's not true, like for me, so when I say like, "I'm lazy," I'm not lazy. I am a very hard worker when I believe in what I'm doing. So what I can say is like, that's not laziness. It's your body reacting saying, "Stop. This isn't something that you're supposed to do. So recognize it and see what needs to change or shift for you to be able to give it all that you have?" Because everyone that I ever say like, "Oh, I'm lazy." They're like, "Leah, you will walk through fire and a wall. You are a hard worker. You will work..." I will work 16 hours. So instead of allowing myself to say, I'm lazy, like, no, what is this warning that you're trying to give yourself that says, "This isn't the work that you're supposed to be doing."

Jennifer: The last client I just saw before I hopped on here is grieving the loss of a husband. And she said probably five times in our session today, "Am I just being lazy?" And I was like, "No, you are grieving. And your body is telling you that you don't have anything left. That's not lazy." So, yes, but here's what I will say that is important, is you can't just come up with total BS. Like "I'm not pretty," you can't just go, "Oh, I'm Miss America" if you're not miss America, because we're not going to trust things, unless they're true. And so we have to come up with things that feel authentic and real, but things that can counter the lie.

Leah: Oh, that's good. That's important to use the word authentic and honest, and it, at the end of the day, they're your feelings, right? They're your things. And having to find something that's authentic to you to be able to counter that with. So I want to go over just a little bit more advice. So that's like, okay, when you start to tell yourself something. A little bit of advice for by practicing self-care during the holidays of

dealing with family tension, stress of traveling, seasonal depression, kind of all of those things.

Jennifer: So I wrote some things down. One thing that I think is really important when we go home, this is going to sound crazy, this applies specifically, if you're going home, always have a car, have your own car. Like that sounds simple and silly, but that is part of what I mean about reminding yourself you're a grownup. If you can go, "Wow. Things are getting really tense. I'm going to get in my car and go for a drive. And I'm going to call my best friend back at home and remind myself that I am actually a grown up and I'm not a kid who's come home to live again."

Leah: That's awesome.

Jennifer: My first husband passed away and I used to vacation with his family every summer. And the first few years it was brutal because I'm like, we'd been married five years. I barely know these people, myself, and here, me and my son are vacationing with them. They're not my family. And the one person that brought us together isn't here anymore. I always had a car, and every day, I kid you not, I forgot something at the grocery store and I would have to go get it.

Leah: That was air quotes.

Jennifer: Yes. I sarcastically forgot something at the grocery store and would need to go get it, because it made me feel like, "Okay. I'm a grownup. I have my own power, my own resources." The other thing that I see us do a lot when we go home, is we stop all self-care, or when people come to us. So let's say we exercise every day, or we do yoga every day, or we journal every day, or we just have some mindfulness routine that we practice every day. Guess what we do at the holidays? When we travel, or if they come to us, we stop doing it.

Leah: That's so true.

Jennifer: So the things that help us be okay, we're not doing anymore. Don't do that. Don't do that.

Leah: Wow. Take your journal with you.

Jennifer: Here's the other crazy thing is we think, "Oh, we can't, because we're supposed to spend time with this family. We're supposed to be spending good time with the family," but here's the thing. If you're not taking care of you, and you're not full, you don't have anything to offer them anyway, and you're going to end up presenting them and hating them before the visit is over. So go ahead and take that hour. Go do something good for you. And I guarantee you the other five hours that you're with them are going to be more enjoyable.

Leah: Better. Yeah. I love that. Ooh, that's good.

Jennifer: Another practical. This is, we can end on this one, if you want to. I could probably go on, but leave you and them wanting more. Leave you and them wanting more. Underestimate your visit, underestimate how many days you want to be with them, or you want them to be with you. One of my clients said to me, she went home recently to Memphis and she said, "I stayed two days. I could have stayed longer. But it was really good to leave it two days because I still liked them and they still really liked me." So, you know, what, if you know, five days at home is too many, don't go home for five days. Again, you're a grownup. You don't have to.

Leah: Yeah, you don't have to spend every day with them. My husband and I will do that. We'll leave on a Saturday, or we'll take off Monday if we're going to leave Sunday sometimes because we just need to like, have some of that, like just some us time and it not just be in a car. I love that.

Okay. So last question I always ask people is how do you define success for yourself today?

Jennifer: Living and feeling out of my full heart, possessing a full, healed heart that I bring every day to the action of crafting a beautiful life for myself.

Leah: Dang. That's beautiful.

Jennifer: And we didn't, we didn't get to talk about personal stuff very much, but, I'm not married. I'm 50. I really may never get married again. And, so like, who's going to take care of me someday if I get breast cancer in five years? So I spend my life, and I'm not joking, really working hard to invest well in people and love people of all ages. All, I mean, some of my closest friends are my five-year-old neighbors who come to my house for my snack basket, even though I have my own kids too. And my son gets really jealous, because he thinks that I like them more than I like him, which isn't true. But, so I'm investing in people from five years old to 75 years old, all in between, men, women, married, single. I want to love well, and bring my whole heart to relationship with others. And I just, I'm never going to be alone.

Leah: I love that.

Jennifer: I'm never going to look up and be like, "Who's going to be there for me?"

Leah: I love that. I love that you're there because I mean, we all know people that are married, have multiple kids, what seems like full lives. And they are so alone, they feel so alone.

Jennifer: 100%

Leah: Being surrounded by people. It's internal.

Jennifer: 100%. It has nothing to do with what you have in life and what you get in life. I have kids. I've had two marriages. I have an amazing career. But I've had to work really, really hard at pursuing healing for my heart so that I can bring my whole heart to life. And it's, I've never been happier in all my life ever. I anticipate saying that 10 years from now, that I'm even happier then.

Leah: I hope so.

Jennifer: And I, I don't like the word happy, but I mean, peaceful content.

Leah: Right, right.

Jennifer: It is well within me.

Leah: It is well with my soul. I love it. Well, thank you so much for joining us. This was great. I love talking to you professionally and on here.

Jennifer: Thank you.

Leah: Absolutely. Thank you, Jennifer.

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