

TELL ME WHAT HAPPENED

Season 5 - Episode 5

One Hug, Two Lives Changed

Disclaimer:

This episode contains discussions of mental health and suicide. Information about resources for people dealing with these issues is available in the episode description.

Torah Kachur:

Maddie was in her first year of high school.

Maddie:

I'd just started school and the stress from the new setting, the new people, it was very overwhelming.

Torah Kachur:

She was also being bullied about her weight.

Maddie:

My self-esteem, my mental health went downhill.

Torah Kachur:

And then the Covid 19 lockdowns started.

Maddie:

And I think all of these things happening in one go was just a lot for a child to go through. And I don't think that was fair.

Torah Kachur:

One morning she woke up and decided suicide was her way out. She walked to a bridge. Climbed over the barrier. And looked down at the traffic below.

I'm Torah Kachur. This is *Tell Me What Happened*, true stories of people helping people, an original podcast by OnStar. In this episode, the danger isn't a flooded river, or a grizzly bear, or a house fire.

The danger in this episode is depression — a mental health condition that if untreated — can lead people to horrible outcomes including addiction, violence, and suicide. This is the story of Maddie, a teenage girl who needed help, and got it, from a stranger.

As a young girl, Maddie had a strong creative streak.

Maddie:

I was very artistic. I enjoyed art and drawing and cooking lessons a lot back then.

Torah Kachur:

She was a freshman, just starting high school in a small town outside of Birmingham, England.

Maddie:

I like English as well, creative writing. That was a good part of me.

Torah Kachur:

...“a good part” — but Maddie didn’t see all the parts of herself as “good.”

Maddie:

I guess I lost myself on the way, but I think from the age 11 to 15 was a very hard struggle. I was being bullied due to being a more bigger child back then. Everyone would pick on my weight and how I looked and it just, it kind of knocked my self-esteem down and that’s kind of what set my mindset to a dark place and it led me to nowhere but I was in a very deep depression.

Torah Kachur:

She switched to a specialized school, one with programs to handle students with special needs or mental health issues.

Maddie:

It was a more suited place for someone like me. And that’s when I felt more comfortable, the bullying had stopped, but I wasn’t happy still. I was still struggling with my own mental health.

Torah Kachur:

Through it all, her mum was there by her side. Always her strongest advocate.

Maddie:

She picked me up and she fought for my help.

Torah Kachur:

She also started therapy.

Maddie:

It was really, really difficult for me to open up to people because I didn’t feel like I could trust many. So I kept everything to myself and I bottled it all up inside.

Torah Kachur:

And then the COVID 19 pandemic hit.

Maddie:

During lockdown I was stuck indoors for just about a year. I didn't go to school for a year, it was like torture. It felt like I needed to go out, I needed to leave because being stuck in the house, it's not the best thing when you're stuck in your own head with your own thoughts. And I struggled really hard with that and, I'm guessing many, many other people did, which is understandable. You don't want to be on your own and being on your own it leads to very dark mindset.

Torah Kachur:

That dark mindset came to a head on a Thursday in June.

Maddie:

I woke up and everything felt like different. Like I didn't feel anything. I felt completely numb and I knew I didn't want to fight anymore, and I thought I'm gonna do what I need to do and it will make me as a person feel better because I won't have to deal what I have to deal with every day.

Torah Kachur:

In the middle of the afternoon, she puts on her shoes and a light jacket.

Maddie:

I said to my mum that I was going out. I said I'll be back soon and I'll see her soon. I didn't plan to come back. That was my goodbye to my own mum.

Torah Kachur:

She walks for about half an hour with no specific direction in mind. But she ends up at a bridge — a highway overpass.

Maddie:

I knew where I was. I knew what I was doing.

Torah Kachur:

For five minutes she stands perfectly still, watching the cars zip past. All those people, all with some place to go, somewhere to be.

Maddie:

Then that's when I decided to climb over and stand on the opposite side where I wasn't supposed to be.

Torah Kachur:

Standing there on the far side of the barrier, she looks down. Below her — is a thirty-foot drop to a six-lane highway.

Maddie:

That's when people started noticing where I was. And I could hear the cars beeping and the people shouting at me and they'd stop their cars just to shout and say like,

“Don’t do it.” And that life had a meaning. But I didn’t want to listen to any of them.

Torah Kachur:

Maddie is aware of everything around her — the noises, the voices, the wind on her face. And yet, none of it makes a difference. None of it is what she needs.

Maddie:

You don’t want people shouting at you and making you feel worse than you already do. You want to feel understood. You want to feel like you’re not alone. And that’s the main thing you have to feel in that moment is you’re not alone.

Torah Kachur:

A few people stop their cars and get out. Some pedestrians start to gather, but still she feels alone.

Maddie:

Everyone was just bombarding me with shouting and noise and I didn’t want that at the time. So it was very difficult and I felt very overwhelmed. That’s when I heard a male’s voice and that’s what kind of made me just notice it and I wanted to see who it was. I felt the curiosity and I felt I need to turn around and see who’s talking to me because if they’re directly talking to me. I’ll have to talk back. I need to tell them something and then that’s when I saw David.

Torah Kachur:

This is *Tell Me What Happened*, a podcast created by OnStar to showcase how important a human connection is when you need help. Every day when you wake up, you don’t know if you’ll be a person who needs help, or if you’ll be a person that helps someone else. It’s important to remember that it’s in all of us to be either one of those things every day.

David Johnson is driving home from work.

David Johnson:

It normally takes about 30-35 minutes to drive home. But this day took even longer because every which way I was going there was traffic.

Torah Kachur:

David works long shifts — up to 14 hours, and his drive home is his chance to decompress.

David Johnson:

I tend to either play loud music or rock music or something that fits in with how I’m feeling, or sometimes I just play classical music if I just really want to just de-stress quickly.

Torah Kachur:

Today he opts for some jazz.

David Johnson:

It was a nice, bright sunny day and I was thinking I'm finished for the day. All I've to do now is just go home, relax, and then it's a new day tomorrow. Let's see what it brings. I was in a kind of like a mellow mood at the time.

Torah Kachur:

He's about three minutes from his house, crossing a bridge when the traffic comes to a standstill.

David Johnson:

I'm the type of person that I'll give something 30 seconds, if I can't get through I'll turn around and go the opposite way just so I can like avoid traffic.

Torah Kachur:

But today, he doesn't do that.

David Johnson:

So I just put my window down and I shouted across the street what's going on and this guy shouted back that there's an incident on the bridge and that was it.

Torah Kachur:

For some reason — something he can't explain even to this day — David doesn't turn around and find a different route. Instead, he pulls off to the side, gets out, and walks ahead to see what's going on.

David Johnson:

The first thing that I saw was this ambulance and I thought they've got it under control. The two paramedics were standing on the road. Next thing I knew, the back of the ambulance door flew open and this young lady in a night dress jumped out and was screaming and shouting hurry up, hurry up for god's sake, effing hurry up I've got to get to the hospital.

Torah Kachur:

He realizes that the ambulance is just another vehicle caught in the traffic. Then, he notices a young woman standing on the edge of the bridge.

David Johnson:

All I could see was this young white girl with jet black hair, dressed in black. It was just like head and shoulders above the railings and she was holding on.

Torah Kachur:

He makes his way through the crowd.

David Johnson:

There's all these people surrounding her either giving her directions or saying things to her and none of it was working.

Torah Kachur:

David is a big guy — more than six-feet tall and broad. He sits down on the ground, trying not to be imposing. In a calm, clear voice he says three simple words to Maddie: “I feel sad.”

Maddie:

I turned around and I just froze. I was scared and I didn’t know what to expect. But I guess when I saw him, he didn’t look aggressive. He was a peaceful man and it’s like he actually wanted to help and he had that in his mind that he wanted to help me. He don’t want to cause me any stress. He don’t want to cause any more overwhelmingness.

David Johnson:

But when I says to her, “I feel sad.” I think that was the moment when things changed.

Torah Kachur:

For Maddie, David’s words cut through the chaos.

Maddie:

His aura and his presence was all I needed and I thought, Okay. I said, I’m safe he’s someone I can talk to, anyone else, no, because they’re shouting and they’re causing mayhem in this situation and I didn’t want that, but David was just standing out from the crowd.

Torah Kachur:

Then David says something that surprises her.

David Johnson:

“Can I ask you a question?” And then I paused and I waited, and I waited and she says, “Yes, what is it?” I says, “If I scream, will you scream as well?” I said, bearing in mind, said, “I’ll scream like a little pig and a girl at the same time.” And she goes, “No, I can’t, I don’t want to.” I says, “Go on, just humour me.” And she goes, “If you scream first.” I said, “Okay.” And I screamed and she chuckled and then she screamed a little bit but not as loud as me. But I knew that was enough for her to engage and do something completely different than what she was thinking about.

Maddie:

Me as a person, I’m not very vocal but I thought, Give it a try and let this anger out whilst he’s there. And we just screamed and I think that let out anger, which needed to come out, and I know it sounds very, very random, but it really does help.

David Johnson:

And I just said, “Can I have a hug?”

Maddie:

I said to him, “Yeah, you can give me a hug.” And that’s what kind of switched my

mind. That hug felt so tight and needed and meaningful. I broke down in his arms and I told him, "I'm a child. I don't want to be here. I want to feel happy again. I want to feel like the old me." And he just held me tighter and tighter and that's what made everything just disappear in that moment. No one was shouting, it was just me and him.

David Johnson:

But then from then I thought, I haven't got a clue what I'm going to do next. Because my thought process only went up to that point.

Torah Kachur:

So, they just stand there, two strangers: A large black man in his 50's and a white girl in her teens, sharing a hug on the edge of a bridge.

Maddie:

I didn't know what I needed. But every minute, every second that he was holding me and reassuring me that I'm allowed to feel the way I feel.

Torah Kachur:

After a while, David tells Maddie his name. And then she tells him hers. They talk and even share a joke. Then together, they step over the barrier, to safety.

Maddie:

And I realised he's just saved me. He's just helped me climb back over and give life one more chance. And I think that's what meant the most in that moment, that he gave me a chance to live and to experience life the way I'm meant to.

Torah Kachur:

They were in each other's lives for about 45 minutes on a random afternoon. But their impact on each other was life changing. For David — it's given him a new purpose in life.

David Johnson:

I went back home, opened the newspaper up and I saw this advert for this mental health recovery worker job, and I said, I'm going for that. I can do that, I think. And I went for the interview that same week and I told them the story, and they gave me the job. So when Maddie sent me a text message saying thank you for saving my life, I said to her, "No, thank you." I've got a new job, I've got a new career, I've got a new direction, working in mental health.

Torah Kachur:

And Maddie, she also got a new life.

Maddie:

I'm very different. I've changed a lot mentally, physically, and I've grown as a person from who I was back then. And I'm a very more, I'd say, social person. So I'm a lot better than who I was.

David Johnson:

It makes me so proud that the second chance that she's got, she hasn't wasted it and that she is still so happy.

Maddie:

Back then, I was very fragile. Now I feel the strength and I feel strong enough to know that I can overcome certain things happening. I can overcome it and I can move on from it and I can fight against my own demons. I know I've got that strength from David, he gave me that strength that day and I've carried it with me ever since.

Torah Kachur:

Maddie also has a message for anyone feeling the way she did that day.

Maddie:

People who are struggling in silence, I want them to talk. I want them to find someone to confide in and to trust and don't bottle it up because keeping all these dark thoughts to yourself, it doesn't help, and it only ever builds up to your breaking point. But if anyone's struggling, just see what help you can get, whether that's in your family, your friends, possibly a stranger you've just met. Like, you never know who's gonna help you.

Torah Kachur:

Maddie was saved, but everyday, there are people who aren't. Ella Thomas was one of those people. She took her own life. Her brother — NFL player Solomon Thomas — and their parents, Chris and Martha, founded an education program called "The Defensive Line." Together they teach people how to identify youth at risk, and how to intervene before it's too late.

Martha Thomas:

We were doing a workshop, and a woman said, I came to your workshop today because I've heard you speak. And the day I heard you speak, I went home and I asked my son, are you thinking of suicide? And he said yes. And she continued on with the questions and he had a plan. And she said, he's been in and out of treatment since I heard you speak, mental health treatment. And it's hard work, but he's still here. He's still here because I asked him because of what you said.

Torah Kachur:

How does that make you feel, you know, considering all the work you put into this organization and doing that day in, day out?

Martha Thomas:

That it's worth it. Because it's hard work and it's certainly, you know, work of passion and love. And to hear that makes me, makes us all feel like we need to keep going and what we're doing matters.

Torah Kachur:

How big is this problem in the U.S.? What scale are we talking about?

Martha Thomas:

119 young people under the age of 24 die by suicide every week. That's two-thirds the size of a Boeing 737. And we tell people if a Boeing 737 was going down once a week, Congress would stop air traffic. That's just under the age of 24. One person dies by suicide every 11 minutes.

Torah Kachur:

Wow. For those who have young people in their life, what are signs to look for that they might be struggling?

Martha Thomas:

You know, it could be giving away possessions. It could be irritability. It could be withdrawal. But it could be something totally different. So too much sleep, too little sleep, but really noticing a change in behavior and then asking the person about that change in behavior.

Torah Kachur:

Starting that conversation about mental health can be really hard. You don't want to be overwhelming someone with questions. So what do you find is the best way to connect?

Martha Thomas:

To ask a question and to listen for an answer. You know, the power of listening is undervalued. But if you're asking someone how they really are, our son tells a story the year after our daughter died about someone saying to him, "Hey, Solomon, how are you doing?" And he said, "Fine." And he said, "No, man, I mean, how are you really doing?" And he said he just started to sob. So, if we really listen to people and not try to fix them, not try, you know, to tell them, if you just do this you'll feel better, but to really just listen and then to connect over what they're saying, ask them more questions. We always tell people too that asking the question, "Are you thinking of suicide?" is not triggering. There dozens of studies that show that that is a safe question to ask. And it may even cause the person who's being asked to find relief.

Torah Kachur:

Is there any other specific language we can use, or language to avoid?

Martha Thomas:

Umm, certainly we always say using the term "commit suicide" is very dated and implies a crime. You wouldn't say that someone was committing cancer. You wouldn't say that someone had committed a broken leg. Also, talking about the means can be a trigger. So we want to make sure we don't talk about the means of suicide or not saying it was a successful suicide, a completed suicide.

Torah Kachur:

Generating these conversations can be especially hard with a teenager. They can be very introspective. I know from experience, asking a high school aged kid at the dinner table "How was your day?" you are lucky to get a one-word response. How can I get them to open up? To talk more?

Martha Thomas:

Umm, first of all, leaving time, leaving a pause, because young teens don't like the pause, they don't like the silence, it makes them nervous. So if you give it a little space, a lot of times they'll start talking. You know, and again, it's listening, right? You know, and listening and setting aside your judgment. You know, what may be very triggering and traumatic for a 13-year-old sounds ridiculous to a 40-year-old. But if we let them pause, you know, not judge it, not say, that's not that bad. You should try being an adult or, you know, something like that. Just talk more about how it makes them feel.

Torah Kachur:

I want to share a couple numbers for people who might want them. If you want to text — you can text to 741-741 – that's the Crisis Text line. And 988 is a hotline you can call for mental health issues. That's available anywhere in the U.S.

Martha Thomas:

And, also, you can call 988 on someone else's behalf and get resources. So you don't have to be the person in crisis, nor do you have to wait till there is a crisis. You can call when things just aren't going right and you have questions and concerns.

Torah Kachur:

Thank you very much Martha.

Martha Thomas:

Thank you so much for having me, Torah.

Torah Kachur:

That's it for this episode of *Tell Me What Happened*, true stories of people helping people. We share a new story every other week, but if you are in the mood for another one right now. Scroll back in time to one of our earlier episodes. On behalf of OnStar, I'm Torah Kachur. Please be safe out there.

Disclaimer:

If you or someone you know is dealing with thoughts of suicide call the crisis hotline at 988 in the United States and Canada, or 111 in the UK. Additional resources are also available via this episode's show notes. Take Care.

Find more episodes of *Tell Me What Happened* at [OnStar.com/podcast](https://www.onstar.com/podcast).