



**Jen Kirkman – best-selling author, top-notch storyteller and Chelsea Lately panelist**

Jen Kirkman is a New York Times bestselling author. She’s also been featured on a bunch of TV shows doing comedy. She’s a writer and regular panelist on Chelsea Lately. And she’s made some very entertaining appearances on the Comedy Central series Drunk History. A lot of Jen’s comedy is built around storytelling. Oftentimes her stories are about the embarrassing things people want to lock away. But Jen is able to take something that happened to her and make it funny, shared and familiar.

“I had started having panic attacks when I was 8 or so. They were always closely associated with a trauma. The first one I remember was directly related to the movie *The Day After*. That’s a movie about a nuclear war and what happened the day after the bombs hit. I watched the movie with my family and then my class went on a field trip soon after. We went to a place where actors pretend like they are in the 1600s. I heard a plane fly by really low and I just did a duck and cover. My palms were sweating and I felt like I couldn’t breathe. And I yelled at one of the pilgrims, ‘Drop your act! We’re under attack!’”

As Jen’s panic attacks became more and more frequent, she also began to show subtle signs of depression.

“When I was 13 my friend played me a song by The Smiths called ‘Asleep.’ It basically sounds like a lullaby for someone who just wishes to die in their sleep. And I remember really relating to that. But if you would have asked me then if I had depression, I would have said no. Nobody talked about depression. So to me, having it meant you were a crazy person in a strait jacket in an institution. I would have said, I don’t have that. I just feel awful all the time and can’t get out of my own way and everything seems dark.”

Jen got by like this as her teen years went on. She coped. She was able to deal. At least for a while.

“There was a lot of trauma graduating college. It was like, ‘Well, what I do now with my life?’ And the panic attacks started getting bad. Like, afraid to get on the subway and constantly running out of buildings thinking they were about to explode. It got to where I couldn’t go anywhere. I was just fleeing from terror. It was full-blown panic disorder. And when I would have major depressive episodes, I wouldn’t panic because I was so low. So the depression was almost a comfort to me and I welcomed it.”

But Jen still didn’t think she was clinically depressed. In fact, she finally went to see a therapist only after she went through a romantic breakup. She thought it was the reason she was sad.

“This therapist taught me a lot. I learned the panic attacks were a coping skill. And that I could let go of the string and I didn’t have to continue that pattern. She gave me mindfulness exercises to do to stay in the moment, and told me how to practice them. I found out I had just been thinking a certain way my whole life. And that my brain needed rewiring.”

Jen said seeing a therapist helped her overcome the self-hatred she had developed. But, she said, it didn't cure her depression.

"I remember I used to hate Christmas. Every year I hated when stores were decorated to the 9s like Christmas. And when holiday music was playing everywhere and everyone was happy. And then one year my therapist gave me Prozac. And I just remember one day not minding the Christmas music. It wasn't so extreme that I was dancing in the street. All I did was not feel bothered by every single little thing. Life had been driving me nuts. Every second of it. And the Prozac was life-changing. I had been under sea level and it brought me up to sea level. It did not bring me above it. I was not happier than anybody else. I was just finally able to cope."

So Jen discovered she was a person with depression. And she discovered some treatments that worked for her to manage it. But when did she discover she was funny?

"So it didn't dawn on me that I was funny until I was in college. I was a cranky little 20-year-old girl-thing who just chain smoked on the front steps of her dorm. My friend had a video camera and she would just tape me and laugh at me going off on people. Like, if there was something going on like a drum circle that annoyed me, I'd just rant. And my friend would be like, 'You're funny.' I was like, 'How could this be funny? I'm so angry.' I was so dense."

Later my best friend wanted to audition for a comedy troupe. So I went with him to offer moral support and the people there told me to join in, too. I ended up getting in and he didn't. Oops. And this comedy troupe ended up being perfect for somebody who wants to be serious but doesn't quite think that they're funny. The only thing it did was spoof Edgar Allen Poe material so it was perfect for me. And I slowly went, 'Oh, I like this.'"

So Jen packed up her clothes, her books, her furniture, her depression and her panic disorder. And she moved to become a comedian. Since being in Los Angeles for 15 years, Jen has had a long-time therapist who offers advice that fits *her* really well. She talks for a living. She's a best-selling author. She's all about words. So it's talk therapy that works for her.

"My therapist has told me to use my creativity to soothe myself. He says, 'Make up a story in your head. Talk to your panic.' So now my panic is like a passenger in my front seat who's always there. The passenger never pipes up unless I'm about to get in an accident. And then he has terrible ideas about what to do. So sometimes I listen to him and I spin out. Or I go, 'Great idea. But we're not doing it.' And then I move on."

So does Jen think there's a connection between her depression and her talent as a comedian?

"Having anxiety is all about anticipating. You're always disaster-casting or catastrophizing. And that's kind of how the mind has to work for comedy. You always have to be one step ahead. I think my brain was suited for comedy since I've been naturally wired to think 'What if?' all the time. I'm able to plan multiple ways to take a joke, depending on how the crowd reacts. But I've learned how to only think like that for my job. So I've kept my wiring that way for where it's good. But I've let it go in other areas of my life where it doesn't serve me."