



## Episode #PLACEBO: Therapeutic Ukuleles, Therapeutic Penguins, Therapeutic Yarn

Recently, I asked listeners about the strangest they've tried to treat depression that actually worked. And I heard some strange things. And some really cool ideas. Things I never thought of. So, hooray, we're having dialogue. We are pooling our resources and helping each other.

Emma Palmer is a high-school senior in Tulsa. She got hit with depression around age 12. She says it hasn't been that severe but it flares up in times of stress. And in case you didn't know or forgot: high-school is stressful.

"And I'm actually a cellist, so I play cello and I've been playing for about six years now."

She's serious about cello. Plans to major in it when she gets to college. And cello is a beautiful instrument. But it's not necessarily an instrument to brighten your day. So Emma, on impulse, reached for a different one.

"So, last summer, I, just on a whim, decided to buy a ukulele. I got this little guy and ever since then, and I don't know why, but whenever I'm in a depressed state (I get anxious a lot), or really down, I pick up my ukulele and somehow for me there is this tone quality in it where it's hard to be sad while listening to this happy, peppy music."

Now it's not zip-a-de-doo-dah that she's playing here. The songs she prefers are not happy songs. She favors contemporary alternative music where the melody might be sunny...

"...but a lot of the lyrics can be more depressed. So there's this tension of *this song sounds happy, but when you listen to the lyrics, it's down to earth.*"

So part of the relief from depression (and let's be clear: the uke isn't a cure for depression. If it could cure depression, we would all have prescriptions for ukuleles), part of the break from the disease is that it's a break from routine. Unlike the cello, for Emma, it's ok to not be great at ukulele.

"I mess up all the time. I can hardly play. I have a couple cords I have memorized, but there's that tricky E cord. Whereas with the cello, if I make a mistake it's triggering all of those "Ah! I messed up!" spiraling into those self-deprecating thoughts."

The whole plan here is pretty ingenious. She's created a sort of pairing of her own life, where the serious cello is replaced with the comparatively whimsical ukulele. It's like replacing your boss with a cartoon duck.

"I have a song here pulled up. It's Death Cab for Cutie's *I Will Follow You into the Dark*."

"That is not a happy song!"

"No! But on the ukulele, it sounds kind of happy, somehow. For me. Maybe my definition of happiness is morbidly off-kilter. Ok. Here we go... <sings> *Love of mine, someday you will ... I messed up already! Ok. Take two...<sings> Love of mine, someday you will die. But I'll be close behind and I'll follow you into the dark. No blinding light or tunnels to gates of white. Just our hands clasped so tight, waiting for the hint of a spark. If heaven and hell decide that they both are satisfied, And illuminate the no's on their vacancy signs. If there's no one beside you when your soul embarks, Then I'll follow you into the dark. In Catholic school as vicious as Roman rule....*

"I think it gets me out of that headspace for a little bit. Where everything seems to be a darker tone. The time when I'm playing, I'm not seeing the world so much in that color. Or in any color at all, because I normally have my eyes closed. But it's a pure moment of relief. It's a good way to be like "Ok I have all these problems and feelings of depression. The world is falling apart." I go play my ukulele, I come back, and it makes it easier to live through another day.

Emma Palmer in Tulsa Oklahoma.

Ok, Emma makes music in Tulsa. Meanwhile, in the city of Poole on the southern coast of England, Wendy Tarpley Nadler has a pretty different approach.

"I was diagnosed with bi-polar disorder about thirteen years ago. It's been a long journey. And I find depression for me, the symptoms change over time. Sometimes it's anxiety. Sometimes it's just feeling low and needing to lie around in bed. And sometimes I just feel like I need to do something. And it gets me out of feeling rough."

A couple years ago, her husband Josh sent her a link to something called *Penguin Watch*. Scientists have all these pictures of areas where penguins may be. And they ask ordinary people, you and me, to help them to help count all the adult penguins, chicks and eggs. It's part of a larger network of similar online projects called Zooniverse. And there's all kinds of things you can do: decipher Shakespeare notes, spot things in outer space. One of Wendy's favorites is *Snapshot Serengeti*, where you try to spot and identify animals in Africa.

"You basically identify things based on satellite crowdsourced photos. So for the ones that identify things from the Hubble Telescope, there are millions and millions of photos of galaxies all over our universe. So for that one, you identify galaxies. And for *Snapshot Serengeti*, you get to identify African animals. They have great guides as to how you can identify those, all the way

down to the different kinds of rumps on various kinds of gazelles. It's easy to use. And it makes me feel very productive. Like I'm helping someone do something."

"And what does this do for your mental health? It doesn't cure anything I can imagine. But what does it do therapeutically?"

"I think for me, it helps me to get over the hump of feeling ill and feeling like I can't get out of bed. My husband says when I'm going through a depressive episode, he says 'well you can have a couple of days in bed, then it's time to get up and do something.' And it really helps to have this productive outlet and this thing that still helps me be a part of something. I guess it helps my anxiety as well because it's just mindless clicking sometimes. Particularly with *Snapshot Serengeti*, you have a lot of pictures of just random grass. Because it's a motion sensor camera. So you have lots of grass that's been tipped off by a bird or something. So I don't feel bad if I mess up, because other people are checking things. It's just way to help me feel like I'm a part of the world even when I'm lying in bed for a few days."

So it's productivity when you feel powerless. It's small and manageable and you can accomplish things. And that's comforting. It's like a video game where it's easy to win. But Wendy says, sometimes its more than just comforting.

"Occasionally, you would just flip through the next slide, flip through the next one, and that just occasionally you have this one amazing photo of an African elephant, which has always really excited me because I found them really beautiful. Once, I was really stuck, because I had just done loads of pictures of grass. It's always 'wildebeest standing,' 'zebra standing,' 'zebra eating.' And then one day, I got this amazing photo of...I don't know what they are called...a pack of elephants? A herd of elephants? With babies in the middle of them. And it just made my whole day."

"Wow. You are leveling up in this particular game."

Wendy Tarpley Nadler lives in Poole England. By the way, after talking to Wendy, I tried out *Penguin Watch*. It is so fun. Especially, when they bring up a picture with a penguin in it, and the site asks "Do you see any penguins?" and you can click the button that says "Yes". It certainly wasn't pastoral for me. It was very exciting.

Wendy's approach is more like knitting, which is a favorite past time of Jessica Bain of Ottawa, Ontario, Canada.

"It's relaxing. It's therapeutic. It's repetitive and it's fun. You get to not do a lot, but be productive."

Jessica had been knitting forever, but then she ran across a kind of guerilla faction of knitters.

"I had seen that people had been doing yarn-bombing, which is generally when bigger groups of people get together and conspire to sneak up on something cover it in yarn in the night. We'll do huge statues or entire trees, things like that. But I was social out of it, I was depressed and I

was down to work solo, so I started doing smaller tags, so covering sign posts and smaller trees, and hand rails and things like that. So I would knit a bunch and fill up my purse and head out into the night.”

Jessica makes these knitted...things. They’re not really scarves. They’re certainly not mittens. They look like clothing for as yet undiscovered space aliens.

“You sent me some pictures of some of these. They’re very colorful, I noticed.”

“Well I was doing them to not get attention to myself, but to have them be noticed. And it seemed appropriate that when I was in such a dark, dark mood, that you go out and you buy the brightest yarn you can find. You get it with glitter in it if you can. Just go for rainbows.”

So her brightly colored knitted thingies were soon peppering the streets of Ottawa.

“What did that do for you? How did that make you feel?”

“Well, at the time, I suppose it gave me a reason to leave the house which was not always an easy thing to do. But it was something that I found out later on (I just started doing it for fun), I started hearing people’s reactions to it and they didn’t know it was me that put them up. And of course it’s all over my town. And they loved it. They were saying ‘Where did this come from?’ and ‘Why did they do this?’ but they were saying it with a smile. And they were waiting to see where more would show up. And it was a very real way to connect with people and to see their smiles and to make them happy without having to be the face associate with it.”

“Like you get the benefits of social interaction, but you steer around the anxiety of it.”

“Exactly.”

“So that’s interesting. When you brought this up, I thought ‘Well going out and doing something silly and crazy and colorful sounds like what a person who doesn’t understand depression would prescribe to someone with depression. But it sounds like it works on a deeper level. It’s not so much the action of affixing these things. It’s the reaction that they engender.”

“Yeah, very much so. And there was even a handful of times, when I was doing most of them at night, there would be people around and they would say ‘Oh! You’re the one doing it!’ and I got a few random hugs which was not expected but really, really nice when you’re out all alone and you get such a positive feedback for doing virtually nothing.”

“Why were you going out in the middle of the night?”

“To attract less attention.”

“Ok, to avoid social interaction.”

“Yeah, in the daylight, people were more likely to pull over their car and say ‘Hey, what are you doing?’ and that wasn’t really a conversation I was prepared to have with a lot of people. So I went with the quieter, darker times.”

Jessica isn’t as active in the covert, nocturnal, fiber-arts movement as she once was. But she’s not retired.

“I still knit. I do more gifts now. I do more useful things. But I’d be lying if I said my car didn’t have about 20 tags, sitting in the back, ready to go when I need them.”

“Do ever get inspired and just jump out of the car and affix it to something?”

“Oh, yeah. Bike racks are the best. Because I also bike and I know that sometimes the older racks, if you put your bike up against it, it can scratch a little bit and hurt the paint. It’s perfect. If there’s a knitting cozy on your bike-rack, you’re never going to have damage.”

“You’re like a warm and comfy, non-destructive version of Banksy, but Canadian.”

“Kind of, yeah.”

Jessica Bain, patrolling Canada. Ready to strike. Yarn-fully.

People are creative, you guys. People are using ingenuity to address the problems that depression presents. In fact, keep the ideas coming of your strangest method to address depression that actually helps. Let’s do some more of these shows. It doesn’t need to be a cure, just something that helps. Find us on Twitter at THWofD.