



Nadya Tolokonnikova: When I feel like and do something to change the situation in the smallest way, I'm not depressed anymore because I already feel like a person. I feel like someone who has a voice, and power to change the situation. In that sense, activism for me is healing.

[music]

Lily Cornell Silver: I'm Lily Cornell Silver, and welcome to mind wide open my mental health focus interview series. Today, I'm talking to Nadya Tolokonnikova one of the founding members of the Russian feminist protest band, Pussy Riot. Nadya speaks of her experiences in prison, the importance of political activism and how to take care of yourself while fighting for what you believe in.

Thank you so much for watching and I hope you enjoy.

Nadya, thank you so much for being here. I just want to say I admire you. I took a class in high school on protest music and political activism, and I actually wrote a paper about you. I wrote a paper on Pussy Riot. Getting to interview you today is so exciting. I would love to start just by asking, how have you been coping in quarantine?

Nadya: Well, not so bad actually. Having in mind that is a tragedy of global pandemic, I personally survived it like we're going through it quite well. Because I had a chance to focus on things that I didn't have time to focus on before, like starting from my mental health to just learning new skills, including technical skills, like recording vocals. Before I was like, I'm not sure if I can do it, maybe there are professionals who can do better than I, but when you're just confined in four walls, you don't really have much of a choice. It pushed me outside of my comfort zone in a weird way.

I've been developing. I couldn't see that I've been enjoying it because definitely it's really difficult times for all of us, but it definitely pushed me outside of my comfort zone and made me learn new things. What about you?

Cornell: Definitely same boat. I think the weight of the pandemic itself is so intense especially everything going on in the US has been a lot to deal with mentally, but personally definitely needed a little bit of a break from day to day life. [chuckles] It has been helpful for my mental health in that sense but difficult on other fronts. Just to jump right into it, I have had other musicians on this series and we've talked about the impact that art has on mental health but not as much about the impact that art has on activism. I'd love to talk to you just about that intersection between art activism and your own mental health.

Nadya: Well, art to me is in itself a coping mechanism, because art for me is the best psychotherapy. Since I was released from jail I'm kind of fucked up. Well, I was diagnosed with depression and PTSD after I was released from jail and for a good year, I didn't even go to doctors because I was one of those people who thought, "Oh, I'm strong. I can do by myself. Depression it's not about me. Maybe I'm just

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having bad moods." For a year after prison, I was rejecting that it might be happening with me.

Then I went to doctor, the doctor was neurologist, not even a psychotherapist or psychologist. My doctor was like, Hey, we made all the tests and you're fine. You're good. Your body working well. There's something in your psyche like there couldn't be- should be something different, somatic. No, it's not somatic. They said it's psychological reasons. Anyway they diagnosed me, and since then sometimes I'm going through remission, sometimes it's getting harder, but definitely art was really, really helpful to me to get out of the prison.

I've been working in psychotherapists, but it was like-- I don't know. It was not as helpful. I feel when I'm working with my problems through art, I can help myself and other people as well. For example, few years ago, I was not cautious enough and I ended up in psychologically abusive relationships. I've been in them for one year and a half and I got out of there completely destroyed. I was not myself. I forgot who I am. I forgot that I'm a feminist, I'm an activist that I have value. I forgot all the good things about myself because that person made me think that I'm just nothing and he can do whatever he wants with me.

Getting out of there, as soon as I gathered enough energy to break up with him, I got out of their relationship, and I wrote **[unintelligible]** about abusive relationships and domestic violence and immediately I felt more better, because it was like, "Oh, I can actually work on my own trauma and I can help some other people too, who might be going through the same thing."

Cornell: Amazing. I think art is like the most powerful tool in that way possible, no matter what language you speak, no matter what your background is, it just transcends all of that. Anyone can connect with you on that level, through your art. Just to backtrack a little bit for people who may not know you or know Pussy Riot, how did you end up in prison?

Nadya: Well, I performed a song in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, and it's not your normal cathedral. It's more like a trade center. We call it Trade Center of Christ the Savior in Russia, because they have luxury shops where I can buy gold and stuff in that cathedral, and there's even a carwash not for a normal cars, for VIP cars. This is a really awkward place.

We went there with a really, really simple message. We wanted to protest against Putin because it was in 2012 and elections were coming up. Elections, if you can call them like that in Russia. We were protesting against the position of women in Russian Orthodox Christian inclusion because women still cannot-- Women still cannot be priests and basically, the whole religion revolves around a notion of a woman as simple creature whose job here is just to give babies and shut up. We didn't quite enjoy that.

We performed the song, and not even the full song we performed only 40 seconds of the song and we were thrown out of the cathedral by the guards. Then we just went

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away. We went home and after two weeks we were arrested and put in jail for two years.

Cornell: Wow. Oh my God. That's crazy intense. [laughs] That is very intense. I have your book right here. You wrote about in-

Nadya: Yay. Thank you for reading it.

Cornell: Of course. You write "Joy is my ultimate capital," and that you even found joy in prison. What did your mental health look like in prison and what were some of the joyful moments and what were some of the darker moments? How did you cope with your mental health?

Nadya: The same as in real life outside of prison. My biggest joy is my community, my friends, and my relatives in a way- like all the human connections and animal connections. I get a lot of joy from my hamsters. I'm really big fan of the book that's called *Lost Connections*. The book goes about both skyrocketing depression in our modern society. The reason of that is according to the answer is because we are losing connections with people around us.

We are so atomized and we experience joy and sorrow by ourselves. It's not how our species evolved. It's not natural. This is why we feel trapped. We feel hopeless, we feel powerless. The solution for that is to connect with other people.

It actually helped me a lot when I was in jail. I made friends with people who I wasn't supposed to make friends with. According to law, people who once served in law enforcement, they cannot be in jail in the same cell with people who did not, because it can potentially cause conflict. Breaking the law, my prison officials, they put me in the cell with this woman who is an ex-investigator and they wanted her to report on me. Basically she had to report on everything that I'm saying, what I'm doing and stuff like that. It was intense.

You're not just in jail, but you have a person close to you trying to pretend that she's your friend. Over the course of time, after like two or three months, when we came real friends and she told me about this story and she was like, the real reason why I'm here is this and that but because we became real friends, I cannot do it anymore. So I'm going to do the opposite. I'm going to tell you what those prison officials or the prison wardens are telling me about you. She became a spy that was on my side.

Obviously, it's like once wardens discovered that, they were really, really upset about that. She got in troubles but she felt like it was worth it because it's like she made an actually humane gesture, she chose friendship. I've seen people doing stuff like that. Risking their freedoms-- risking their ability to get a parole.

One person, she was about to get a parole, but because she was supporting me and she was a friend of mine, she had to stay in jail for a longer period of time. Because she was punished by prison officials. It was really, really dark moments, but at the same time, you realize how dedicated people are to friendships. They are willing to



risk their freedom to support someone they love. It was something that helped me to go through.

But at the same time hit me really hard, because they'd be asking about darkest moments, and the same moments were the darkest moments, because when you see people being punished for being friends with you, it's really intense because it's not you who are punished, it's the person who you love. It's so hypocritical. Honestly, just fuck those prison officials who would do things like that.

Lily: Absolutely. You said that you have struggled with PTSD and depression since being out of prison. How do you deal with that on a daily basis? Like, do you have practices or coping tools that you use?

Nadya: Well, exercises helped a lot. I used to be a person who was really, really detached from my body, because I was growing up in the city. It's like one of the northeast city on earth and it's really, really polluted-- small industrial city on northern Russia. Effectively, you cannot spend any time outside. I was growing up being a bookworm. All I knew was books, that's it. I was not even aware of the existence of my body. I was as idealist as it gets.

Lily: Totally.

Nadya: When I got out of jail and I got some recommendations from doctors like, "Hey, you really should start exercising because if you [unintelligible] from your body and this really affects your mental health." I was like, "No, that's not important. I can just choose something. I can decide, I'm strong enough to decide something that ideal in my head and it will happen." Then I realized this time that you really need to take care of your body to protect your mental health.

They are going together like Moebius strip. You cannot really separate mind from body, even if you want to. Goals are just stretches and even in prison, I was stretching a lot and it really helps me to go through it. I looked incredibly weird because-

-the prisoners around, they were smoking and drinking this like crazy tea, craziest strong tea that makes you even high.

I was trying to exercise, to run, to do pushups and that helped me.

Weirdly enough, I think prison was the first step to be aware of my body and how it affects my mental health. Its meditation. Unfortunately, I'm not that person who can sit and meditate. I'm too distracted for that, but when I run, I can focus on some thought like, I don't know. It's like running meditations, if it makes sense to you.
[laugh]

Lily: Totally no-- completely yea, yea yea. I definitely, I find meditation—I have totally the same issue where it's hard to just sit still and like empty my mind. So doing



things like walking meditations or swimming, or even playing piano for me is like meditation. Things like that are super helpful.

Nadya: Playing piano is awesome, yes.

Lily: [laugh] Absolutely.

Nadya: I used to hate it so much when I was a kid because my mom, she forced me to take piano lessons. I know I was hating my mom so much for that, but now I'm like, "Mom, I hate to say, but I think you were right."

[laughter]

Lily: I used to beg, I used to say, "Please, let me quit, let me quit." My mom was like, I know you could be happy one day." Now I'm very happy. Now I'm happy that I do it. [laugh]

Nadya: We're living in super distracted and super fast world. And sometimes we just don't have enough space within us to process our emotions. I found out that reading books and just actually-- there was no distractions with telling myself like, "I'm not looking on my phone or anywhere for at least an hour." Which is like a big fucking deal in our world. [laugh]

Lily: Yes, an hour or two.

Nadya: Yes. [laughs] Within this hour I read the book. Sometimes they take my thoughts and then I realize that they go deeper than I would go if I would allow myself to get distracted easily. Because this is our instant reaction in our world. In 2020, if we are bored a tiny bit, we're going to check our Instagram. It became so natural. I was like, "Wow, I actually forgot what actually solitude and boredom is." They're really valid emotions that we need to feel some times to go deeper within us.

Lily: Definitely. I wanted to bring it back really quickly to your mental health within political activism. Obviously, fighting against the patriarchy, fighting for your rights as a woman rights of all women. How does that impact your mental health like fighting for your own rights as a group, as a demographic? That's obviously very intense because it can feel-- I would imagine you feel pretty hopeless at times. So how did you take care of your mental health within that?

Nadya: The thing is sometimes I'm like, "Am I really a good person to make this kind of advice?" Because I find myself so mentally blocked at times, but I think I am because I'm going through phases and sometimes you find me I'm really low, but then I have these coping mechanisms to get out of there, so I feel like, "Yea, I can do that." Again, connection with other people and realizing that it's not just your struggle helps me a bunch because sometimes I feel trapped in something that I call Napoleon complex of an activist.

Which means I'm here, I have to solve all the world's problems.

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Because when you see a problem it's natural for us as humans to want to solve it. The next step should be like, "Oh, I cannot solve everything myself. I need find and build community. I need to reach out to other people and they will help me to solve this because I'm alone, I don't have capabilities and power to deal with this." Just be a little bit more forgiving to yourself in terms of-- Because sometimes you feel like, "Oh, I made this and that and they're going to work really hard, but it doesn't see that something has changed."

Then a little bit of historic reading can actually help because when you read about big inspiring activist figures, I don't know, like Martin Luther King, you realize that they were depressed at times and they felt hopeless at times, but then you see how much actually they achieved on historic level. You realize the price of changing history is big. If you feel like you want to be part of it, then it's okay to feel sad, that it's okay to feel hopeless at times, but then I guess it's important to realize that activism doesn't work according to capitalist ethics.

I wrote about this in my book because I see it a lot, especially in activists who just come to the fold- I don't know, like who were in activism like for a year. They still think that activism works according to capitalist economy, which means I'm giving you a dollar and it gives me an apple. Unfortunately, it doesn't work like that here. If we participated in 10 rallies, if you wrote 100 blog posts, it doesn't mean that things will change. Sometimes you can make one rally and it will change the course of history. Sometimes you can make 100 rallies and nothing will change. What I mean, it's societal processes, systemic changes, they don't work in linear ways. You just have to deal with it.

Do know Chris Hedges?

Lily: Mhm [nods yes]

Nadya: He's so fucking amazing. Unfortunately, not a lot of my American friends know him because he doesn't have access to big TV channels and mainstream media don't show him. I think he's the biggest philosopher of our-- like one of the biggest philosophers, political philosophers, of our age. He taught me that you have to keep making stuff as an activist just because of moral imperative, not because you actually expect that-- just lower your expectations. Maybe sometimes-- [laugh]

I don't know-- It's really a difficult issue because maybe some people might find what I'm saying right now depressing because they will be like, "Yea, why would I even start being an activist if I cannot expect it works right away?" But I feel like we don't have to expect it to work. For example, in 2012, after seven, eight-- after five years of activism, I felt like I totally did not achieve anything. I've been working hard for five years, I spend most of my time, not on my education, not on my work, not on anything but on activism. Then I just ended up in prison, Putin was elected for the third time as president. I felt totally defeated. I felt like, "Fuck. It's like all work was wasted."



But looking back from 2020, and actually talking on daily basis with all those amazing young queer feminist activists from Russia who tell me every day that Pussy Riot case and Pussy Riot's actions were something that actually helps them to become activists. Partly because of our actions we have right now, a lot of young people who are identifying themselves as feminists or queers or who are not afraid to say that they're gays. I feel like, "Wow." At times I felt like I'm totally defeated, but actually we did achieve a lot.

Lily: I think that's so important to talk about right now. I was really excited to talk to you because I think, with all of the structural racism and systemic racism that's coming to light in the U.S., it's super important to talk about what the impact that activism can have on your mental health, because it is, as you were saying something that can feel really overwhelming and really defeating and depressing at times.

Nadya: Just believe that sometime in the bright future, maybe not tomorrow, maybe not next year, things will change, but you have to push really hard today. We don't have another choice.

Lily: Definitely, and in that vein, you wrote your book in 2018, right?

Nadya: In '16. Oh no, '17. I forgot myself, in '17. It happened right after Donald Trump was elected.

Lily: Right. Okay. That was what I wanted to ask because you write about Trump in your book. Wondering now, if you would say anything differently and what you think the importance of this upcoming election in the U.S. is.

Nadya: Well, regarding Donald Trump and this year, I'm not American, so all I can do is just do advice, I guess. Vote against Donald Trump, whatever it is for you. I'm not endorsing anyone who is running for president right now, because I don't feel like it. But I feel it's crucial to vote against Donald Trump. Because I'm so much with Noam Chomsky on this. I feel like Donald Trump is one of the most dangerous politicians in our history.

Looking right now and what's happening in California, we've seen those pictures from San Francisco. It's absolutely terrifying. It looks like apocalypse, those orange skies and fires. Looking at those pictures and saying that climate change is not happening makes you an evil person. That would be the right thing to say. We just got to get rid of him. Also as a Russian, I have to tell you that United States has big weight on policies of other countries.

Vladimir Putin, my president, who is not really my president, he points at what Donald Trump does a lot. He points at him-- when Donald Trump makes the most outrageous evil shit. Putin points at that, and he's like, "Oh look, he does it." It means that I can do it too. That's not damaging only for the U.S., it's damaging for all the world because we are all living in an interconnected society.

Lily: Absolutely. I mean, just politics in general have-- as you know better than anybody have weighed so much on my mental health. I see the way it weighs on the mental health of the entire nation and having someone like Trump or someone like Putin in office is only adds to the depression. Only adds to that existential crisis feeling.

This question is from my teacher, Darren, who taught me the class about you and Pussy Riot. I asked him if he wanted to ask anything. I was like, "Do you have anything you'd want to say?" We were both wondering if there was ever a point for you where you felt like you had to back off of your political activism in order to take care of your mental health. I mean, I know your daughter was four when you went to prison, right? Taking care of your mental health, taking care of your daughter, your family, was there ever a point where you felt like you had to step away and was that difficult for you?

Nadya: Well, for me, activism is a tool to working my mental health-- it was weird, but look, the way I function is when I read the news and they're depressing, most of the times, [laugh] I feel like I have to do something about this. I feel like, what is the depression? Depression is learned hopelessness and helplessness. When I feel like doing something to change the situation even in the smallest way, I'm not depressed anymore because I already feel like a person. I feel like someone who has voice and power to change the situation. In that sense, activism for me is healing.

Lily: Amazing. There's a quote from Gloria Steinem, where she says that depression is anger turned inwards. I think that's how amazing of activism as a tool, because I am sure we all experience a lot of anger towards how things look in society and in our government right now. Being able to externalize that and turn it into political activism is kind of a way to counteract that depression. I totally hear what you're saying.

Nadya: While it's important to care about your mental health, it's important also not to think about yourself 24/7. Sometimes when you are depressed, that's what you tend to do and then start to harm you. So activism pushes you outside of this upwards, downward, spiral. It makes us think about other people and how you actually can reach out to them and help them. When you help other people who think about something else rather than yourself-- Being distracted is a really helpful thing when you're depressed. Also helping other people makes you happy.

Lily: Yea, that's like one of the biggest tools, is to step outside of yourself. What is something that's giving you hope right now?

Nadya: What gives me hope is that I see young people all around the world becoming more and more politically involved and politically aware about important things like climate change, like feminism, like queer issues. This is something that definitely gives me hope. This is something that I could not see coming 10 years ago. 15 years ago when we started our activism, we were doing what we did 15 years ago. Thinking that the role remain just-- it's just a tiny amount of freaks who are trying to oppose to the majority who will be conservative.

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Seeing that it's pretty different today. In 2020, I see that majority is becoming more aware and more progressive. I'm really hopeful about our future. Again, we need to act really fast because things like climate change, it's not going to stop unfortunately and give us time to think. We don't have time to think. We just have to act on certain things. I'm positive about the future, but also I know that we need to start being more involved in activism. There are a number of pressing issues that we need to address right now.

Lily: What you said about climate changes, I think rings true for many issues. These days is like there's no more time. There's no more time to wait. I think for our generation, especially, there's a lot of weight on our shoulders. I know your daughter is young too. She's growing up in that generation.

Nadya: My daughter is 12 and she's amazing. She gives me a lot of hope because I was not preachy with her. I was trying not to be, I was cool. I mean, I am cool. I'm like yea, you can choose for yourself. I just give information to really support what I'm doing, to support Pussy Riot. She is aware of what's happening in her country, she's aware of- there was this poisoning of a famous Russian politician, Alexei Navalny. Who has survived- he's in a critical condition right now. She talks with me a lot about him and she talks with me in depths about all the issues and I'm impressed by that. I'm really confident that there are good amount of young people to who we can pass our planet.

Lily: That's what I have seen in Seattle there's a lot of Black Lives Matter movement stuff happening just in my own city, in my own neighborhood and seeing how much of it was being run by people my age or people younger or slightly older than me was really hopeful and awe inspiring and good to see. I feel the same way that our generation where things are in good hands right now. [laughs]

Nadya: Also another thing about age, I remember when I was 16, 17 and I was telling people around me that I'm an activist and care about this and that, then nobody treated me seriously. They were like this **[unintelligible]** shifting, it's so really difficult for young especially girls because nobody treats us seriously. Just yesterday I was thinking about the issue, basically, the life of every woman is weighed in two parts. At first, to tell you that you're not big enough, you're not grown up enough to care about things and be angry about stuff because you're stupid as they think.

The second part of your life is when they tell you, "Oh, you're too old to say things like that." I'm slowing going to the second part and I'm already getting these comments, I'm 30 but I'm getting these comments like, "Why do you act like your 15 years old, why are you so angry about certain issues, why are you so radical? At this point of your life, you have to be happy about your kid and cook." [chuckles] Sexism is attacking us. I feel like things are shifting slowly, it's more comfortable for young people to be activists, and is not so normal to bully them for their age as it was when I was 15.



Lily: As a young woman in my own experience trying to create conversations about mental health and talking about the importance of voting and talking about the importance of racial justice, I receive similar backlash like, "You don't, you're just a girl how could you possibly know about what you're talking about? You're a young woman." It's like, "I probably know more than you."

[laughter]

Nadya: Definitely.

Lily: it's just, totally. I totally get that.

Nadya: Fuck them, really. You're smarter than they are for sure because they say outrageous stupid stuff like that, it means that they're stupid not you and not me.

[laughter]

Lily: Exactly. Thank you so much for being here. I've been so excited about this for so many days. Everyone I know, "Oh my God, you'll not believe who I'm interviewing?" Thank you so much. I admire you so much and your activism-

Nadya: Thank you.

Lily: -is absolutely something I strive to achieve. Thank you so much for being here.

Nadya: Much loved you and it was really amazing to talk to you.

Lily: Thank you. Amazing.

[music]

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