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**Lily:** I'm Lily Cornell Silver. Welcome to *Mind Wide Open*, my mental health focused interview series. Today, I am talking to Alexi Pappas, Olympic runner, writer, filmmaker, and actress. Today, we're going to be talking about our similar experiences, losing a parent to suicide, her struggles with depression and suicidal ideation after the 2016 Olympic Games, and what taking care of ourselves looks like now. Thank you so much for watching and I hope you enjoy.

Hi, Alexi. How are you?

**Alexi:** Hello. I am great. How are you?

**Lily:** I'm good. It's so nice to meet you. It's so nice to speak with you. I'm so excited.

**Alexi:** Thank you for having me. I love your setup. You're like inside of the moon, or is it a moon behind you?

**Lily:** [laughs] It is a moon. When I put it there, I was like, "Oh, I look like I'm in the DreamWorks logo or something." [laughs]

**Alexi:** Oh my gosh. Yes. I love that. If anyone's trying to imagine it, it's as if she has an emoji of a beautiful moon just off to the side of her head and it is lovely.

**Lily:** Thank you. Let's just start by talking about the obvious. You're a woman of many talents, including Olympic athlete, but writer, filmmaker, actress. I would love to just start by hearing about how you were inspired to pursue all these different paths and what was instilled in you to make you feel like you can pursue all of these paths? It's incredible. It's so amazing.

**Alexi:** I think very much the way that things have unfolded for me is always knowing that if I wasn't following my gut or my instincts, things would not work. Meaning, I could never quite force myself to do something that I wasn't wanting or felt energetic about doing, besides homework and the things you have to do when you're growing up. I always had an interest in writing and in performing, and that really came about first and earlier on. I was an athlete throughout my life, but the running really didn't take off until I found a team that I enjoyed running with, which wasn't until college.

It was after, I think my writing and performing itch began. I think some people look at an Olympian and it's hard to imagine that there was ever any other kind of dream. But the truth was, for me, I didn't know that the Olympics were even a possibility, so I had a lot of other passions. Then the Olympics became more possible and I knew that doing that would inevitably help me in all areas of my life. It's an experience. It's not been so much like, "I want to do all these things." It's more, these opportunities



came about and I had interests and I thought that I would be better served if I answered to the ones that felt inspiring to me rather than focusing on something that I wasn't truly excited about.

I guess the answer to your question is, I don't think somebody has to sit down and be like, "I want to be a multifaceted person." I think they just have to listen to what they feel like doing. It could be one thing, it could be three and it can shift. I think that's the takeaway there, is that we don't decide to be multifaceted. I think we are compelled to when we follow it and try and see them all as supporting one another.

**Lily:** You've been really open about your struggles with depression and suicidal ideation, especially after you competed in the 2016 Olympics. I would love to start just by hearing from you about your experiences with mental health and how that manifested for you.

**Alexi:** I feel like mental health has always been the thing I'm most aware of, and also the thing I was least educated about growing up, because my mom took her own life when I was almost five, I was four years old. From a very young age, I was around that kind of energy and saw someone who just was not able to find the right help to get better. At the same time, it was during a time when mental health wasn't in the conversation and it was a really silenced thing. I was never really talked to about her and about it, so I just came up with my own assumptions about mental health, which were a patchwork quilt of what people told me.

What I was told was that my mom was unhelpable and was so sick that she had to go, and she just had to do this. It was a really sad way to grow up because, of course, you're 50% your mom, and her brother took his own life and her mom's mom had some challenges. I was scared of, what if I ever felt something that reminded me of what she might have felt. Does that mean that I have to die? That's terrifying. I grew up just wanting to be everything the opposite of my mom because I didn't want to be in the territory of risking that I might have to die. Sure enough, I think when we fear something the most, it often comes true.

I also think post-Olympic depression is something that everybody goes through, every athlete, regardless of winning gold, getting last. It is a huge peak in your life. It makes sense that there's a bit of a dip. I think where we diverge in terms of a healthy way to approach the dip versus what I experienced, is if we can recognize that there's an adrenal fatigue associated with chasing a big dream, we can give it the time to come back. I imagine it like a marshmallow being squeezed really tight. If you let go, it might come back. I, on the other hand, was very in denial that I was experiencing any kind of depression because I was afraid of what that might mean. I denied it and just tried to press on and that's the best way to make it worse.

**Lily:** I lost my dad to suicide when I was 16. That's been absolutely a parallel feeling of knowing that mental health struggles are genetic and working so hard to actively not feel that way that I'm fixated on that feeling. Then exactly as you said, when you're in that mindset, you're thinking about it all the time, of course, you're going to gravitate towards there, and it's going to be on your mind. I appreciate you sharing

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that experience so much because I think it's for anyone who has parents or close family members that have struggled with mental health or with suicide, that's such a real thing.

I'm curious to hear more about what you understood about mental health as a kid because you said that it wasn't talked about very often, but what kind of conclusions did you draw, or at what point maybe in your young adult life did you realize, oh, she wasn't crazy and unhelpable, there were resources that she just didn't have access to?

**Alexi:** I guess I just thought that it was destiny or something because people talk about it that way. I think that's because they want to believe that there is no other way that it could have happened if it does happen. I was mad at her. I had a really evolving relationship with her where I didn't know actually how she died until seventh grade. I thought she died of smoking because no one told me and I just made that up because I knew she smoked and in the '90s, there were a lot of anti-smoking campaigns. So I was like, that's how she died.

Then my best friend told me in seventh grade. It was a little humiliating because I guess everybody knew. But I didn't talk to my dad about it because I thought that it would hurt him. If he hadn't told me already, surely he didn't want me to know. Instead, I was just really mad at my mom and I abandoned her grave and I was like, "I'm not visiting her anymore." All those petulant things you can do in seventh grade. I didn't really understand her until I went through my depression, because what I found--I was able to find these worksheets from her treatment while I was writing my book *Bravey*, I dug those up randomly.

I found a lot of the worksheets that were helping her with, these facilities. One of the most compelling ones that I think explains what I now understand is that they made her do this worksheet that was, I like myself from A-Z. There was all the letters of the alphabet. She was meant to write adjectives after all the words to describe herself. She was very, very sick, so she wrote things like S-selfish, O-over committed, words like that. Somebody in the clinic or hospital helped her cross out those negative words and write positive words like selfless and overachiever. Whatever words that you would rather feel.

The problem I saw with that when I was sick is that, when I was sick, I felt selfish and I should be selfish because I was sick. I couldn't force my feelings about myself to change, I needed to recognize what I was. I think what I learned is that all the care she got was trying to force her feelings rather than her actions. I learned that what they tried to do with her would not have helped me. And so she became very human to me, because I was like, "Oh, she just got really crappy help," just not great. I totally understand why this stuff wasn't helpful. I also understand why someone thought it might be helpful to try to tell someone to just snap out of it.

I think that just made her human. I never wanted to understand her in that way, in



terms of feeling what she felt, but that allowed us to become closer. I don't know what your journey has been like with that.

**Lily:** Totally. Honestly, so parallel, spending so much time being afraid of feeling those feelings, just with the stigma that exists around suicide in our culture, feeling like it's something that just happens to you that you don't have control over, and especially when that's something that you experienced with a parent, it's like, when inevitably, am I going to do the same?

**Alexi:** Exactly, inevitably, when am I going to-- Also, if you see photos of them, or you knew them before they were unhappy, mine was just in photos, it's kind of bizarre, because you're like, "Why are they happy? They don't know what happens to them." That's such a crazy feeling because you're like, "How could they not know? Do I not know?" Like, "What's going to happen to me? Did she actually know and those smiles are fake? What is the truth?"

**Lily:** Totally. No, it's so, so, so true. I spent so much time being afraid of that feeling, then when I was in high school a year after my dad passed away, I experienced suicidal ideation and it was, obviously, as you know, so scary. I wouldn't wish it on anybody, but it did give me an understanding of my dad and of his mental health struggles, and that, you wrote about this in your book, that he wasn't crazy, your mom's not crazy, he wasn't beyond help.

It was just that's what happens when your chemicals are that imbalanced or when you are sick, or when you struggle with mental illness, that even though logically you can know nothing's permanent and that there is help, that's just how your nervous system feels as if there's no way out. It was such an intense experience, but really it helped me understand for sure.

**Alexi:** It's sad because you're like, "Oh, that was totally unnecessary, they didn't have to die." It also makes you feel like, "Then nobody else, hopefully, has to either." It's wild when you realize you're as sick as they were, you're like, "Oh, we are the same for a little bit."

**Lily:** Which is the biggest fear. [laughs] That's the thing.

**Alexi:** Yes. I think the biggest thing is thinking that you know your future, that's the most unhealthy thought, because we just simply can't, but I was sure that I did. I was sure that I was never going to be happy again, basically. That's shocking, and, yeah. Well, how did you navigate out of it, or what did you do?

**Lily:** Long story short, for me, I have had the privilege of having access to mental health resources that my dad didn't have access to, especially when he was young and growing up, but having a mom that truly understood what I was going through and was very willing to talk to me about these things and very willing to provide me access to resources was the biggest game-changer for me. Then just being honest about it and having conversations like this and being able to say to my therapist or



say to my mom, I'm afraid that I'm going to end up doing the same thing, I'm afraid that this is an inevitability for me.

I'm so afraid of feeling this way and being able to admit that and have people tell me that's totally understandable. That makes complete sense, took a lot of that stigma and a lot of that fear away for me.

**Alexi:** It's amazing to talk to you because I actually don't know that many people who have felt these feelings this extreme. I know people with depression, I just don't know anyone who's had, I guess, what I had. I do feel like with this, it's interesting for me right now to be meeting someone who gets it because you don't want someone to look at you and just be like, "I hope you're well now. I hope you're okay." It's like, "No, we are." I don't know if yours is similar to mine where it was like a dip and then you could become okay again. Was your situation like that?

**Lily:** It was, it's definitely genetic. I've struggled with mental health my whole life, but for the most part, I went through that really intense period before I was able to realize what was happening for me.

**Alexi:** Exactly. I feel fine, but I also feel like I understand that if I'm not careful, it can happen and it's really nice to talk to someone or meet someone who just gets it but isn't delicate around me. I think that's it. You don't want someone to look at you and be like, "Oh, you poor thing." You want them to look you and be like, "I see you."

**Lily:** It helps. I think there's just so much stigma around mental health, especially in the US, but especially around suicide and suicidal ideation. I think once you've had that experience of realizing you can get through it and it's also not something that makes you a crazy person or something that-- Once you've had an experience like that where you've been open around it and you've received resources around it, you realize that.

**Alexi:** That's why for me to think about it as an injury was like a life-changer because an injury is something that-- some injuries can't heal. I understand there are some mental illnesses that you just have to manage. But for the most part, an injury is something that, first of all, it's not you, it's a thing that happens to you and there are paths and there's ways to approach it. It's not a choice. Obviously, you can, in retrospect, figure out like, "Did I put myself in a position to get injured or this and that?" There's ways you can learn, but it's a little less personal. That was really helpful is when I was like, "Okay, this is an injury."

**Lily:** I want to hear more about, for you, what that healing process looks like and how you accepted it was something you needed help with and you weren't pushing it to the side?

**Alexi:** I did not realize I needed help. I thought that honestly, I could patch together-- I was trying to basically go back in time. For me, after the Olympics, I moved to this altitude place in the mountains Mammoth where I used to train and I was trying to move there full time, change coaches, move up to the marathon, really know the



next move, and know it yesterday. What I should have done is paused. People do that after they give birth. I think I had adrenal fatigue and I didn't recognize it. I was just spinning out and I stopped sleeping. Then that just digressed because I was in denial that that was a problem.

I thought I had to keep going to get out of it instead of pause. My dad, I think, saw red flags and he made me get help, which required me to go back to Oregon, where I was living prior, and find help because there was no one in person in Mammoth, so I had to move back to the town I was in.

That was awful. It was so hard to get an appointment and I had to ask someone who knew someone to beg for me to get these appointments. I felt like I was an uphill battle to something that I didn't even think I needed. Oh, first, I had help from a life coach and that was absolutely miserable because she was like, "Go on a vacation."

Then I felt like I should go on a vacation. She was like, "Just relax. That's all you need is a weekend." I was like, "The thought of going to the beach and just laying sounds like death." Everything [crosstalk]--

**Lily:** Being alone with your thoughts. That sounds awesome. [laughs]

**Alexi:** Or doing something that's supposed to make you happy and you know that it won't. That was the feeling. I kept trying things like that where I was like, "People are supposed to be happy at the beach, well, I'm not." It makes you feel more alienated. Eventually got the real help and met one doctor who I did not connect with at all and she was very disaster oriented--I don't know. She thought I was going to die and I was like, "All right."

**Lily:** Which you don't need to hear. [laughs]

**Alexi:** Yes. She looked at me as if she was very concerned. I think you don't want to be looked at in that way. You want to be looked at as though you're very seen. Then I found a doctor, Dr. Arpaia who was just the most-- I knew he was my person. I started going to him as if it was my training, three times a week, intense. I did what he told me. We learned what was useful and what wasn't. He taught me that my brain was a body part and it could get injured. He also helped me understand I was objectively sick or injured, it wasn't a choice. He was like, "You are sick, and you can get better."

Then he taught me that actions change first, then thoughts, then feelings in that order only. That was honestly the epiphany and that's where the conversation about my mom comes full circle where she was trying to force her feelings and being guided towards that. I was being told the opposite, which is to focus on my actions. I started thinking about myself as someone with a broken leg or a Crock-Pot soup, whatever resonates with you, but if you have a broken leg, it's going to hurt every day for a long time and it doesn't mean you're not healing.



If you're making a soup, the vegetables are going to look pretty whole hard and not soup-like for a long time, but the soup is cooking. I thought of myself as that and I just committed to the process. It took months, but I knew-- I started to become less surprised that I was sad every day. I was like, "This is normal. My leg is still broken, in my brain." I felt I was on a path, and that I wish for everybody who has these challenges.

**Lily:** I wanted to bring up too you recently partnered with the wellness app Monarch that connects people with therapists. I wanted to hear a little bit more about that and the importance of accessibility to resources for you.

**Alexi:** What I like about what they offer is that, the parent company, SimplePractice, is a company that doctors use for their own internal work. They have a reservoir that exists. It's almost like this Monarch company has piggybacked and been created to connect people with these doctors that are already thriving and good doctors. It's really user-friendly, which I know is such a weird-- I feel like it's something that my invisible mom would say, "It's user-friendly." How important that is when you're sick is so important and they're very thoughtful. The images on the website are all sketches, they're not real pictures.

I feel that sometimes when you're sick, you don't want to see yourself in other people because you do. You just make a lot of things up when you're sick. I feel like the experience there is something that is most likely to help someone in need find help, use their insurance if they need to. It's just a resource that I didn't have. I think it would have made things a little easier for me because I was a well-connected Olympic athlete and it was really, really hard to get an appointment. I can't imagine if someone is in need and they don't have resources, people, or favors that they can ask.

**Lily:** Especially when you are in the throes of that, the last thing you want to do is try to navigate this impossible system. What is something that is giving you hope right now?

**Alexi:** Well I think the Osaka situation if I had to like say today because I feel like yesterday was a big day for that. It's hopeful because it's getting the kind of attention that it should. I think it's inevitable that something shifts. I think it's that.

**Lily:** I feel the same way. It's been really amazing to see that at the forefront of conversation and see there are always going to be people that don't understand it, to see so many people advocating and supporting and wanting to utilize that for a tangible change moving forward is super amazing. Thank you so much for being here, Alexi. It's so lovely to meet you and amazing to connect over the crazy shit. [laughs] You're so inspiring to me. It's just been super profound.

**Alexi:** We're in the dead parents club together, which is such a terrible-- I had actually a couple of friends in high school who lost their moms and one of them was like, "It's the dead moms club." I was like, "That's very sad and sweet."



**Lily:** What are you going to do if you can't find the club? You got to have a club.  
[laughs]

**Alexi:** Yes. I'm here, you have my email, and thank you.

**Lily:** Thank you so much. We'll talk soon.

**Alexi:** Talk soon. Bye

[music]

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