

listenN: Today in episode seven, I'm talking with Erika Nielsen, professional cellist, mental health advocate and author of the book sound mind in which she outlines her bipolar journey and story of hope, healing and transformation, be it music, mental health, or facing the struggles of being a professional freelancer. Erica has navigated the turbulent waters of all three and is helping change the narrative around mental health and wellness.

listenN: Hi Erika, welcome to listenN.

Erika Nielsen: Thanks Brian. I'm so, so honored to be on the your show and uh, really excited about it.

listenN: Yeah, I've really been dying to talk to you about music and how music came into your life and how it developed, you know, in those early stages. Cause I'm always fascinated about with people that are professional musicians. I'm, I'm in awe.

Erika Nielsen: Oh, good. Terrific. Well, I'd love to tell you about that. You know, a lot of professional musicians grew up in a, in a musical home, and that's, that's where it began. So my mother is a musician and still is. She, when I was a little girl, she would teach, from home lessons in our apartment. At the time we were living in Lahr Germany and she would teach a saxophone, clarinet, piano. And so I lived in a home where the music was part of my atmosphere. And for some families that atmosphere is hockey. And for some families, that atmosphere is playing chess. And for me it was music. And, so she was my first piano teacher and then I played it. I played a year of Suzuki violin, but I heard the cello in our local symphony. And when I heard that cello play, I think it actually, the first time I heard the cello was, watching Yo-Yo Ma and Sesame Street in the late eighties. It just blew me away and I knew that not only did I need to play that instrument, I felt like I, I was that instrument.

listenN: And this is the part where I'm dying to find out. Okay, so, so many musicians talk about, oh, I grew up in a house with music or I was exposed to music. But not everybody who grows up in a professional athlete family or in a, you know, a mother or father who cooks really well becomes that profession. And, so what is it about music that being around it or surrounded by it permeates into you. And then when you say, I want to do that, or I knew I wanted to do that. Did you know as an adult, can you look back and go, you know, that I know that was it.

Erika Nielsen: I think when you're a very young child, I mean, you don't know that it's going to be it or this is what I will do with my career. You don't have a concept of that. But children are very naturally musical, rhythmic, artistic beings. And, I'm very fortunate that I got to be a musical child and I got to tap into that. It wasn't taken away from me. It was, I got to have that. But as it became sort of part of my, part of my life, part of what I did in elementary school and then in high

school, I mean, what happens, I think for a lot of teenagers is they're developing their identities and I developed mine around playing the cello and being a cellist. And that felt, um, something clicked around the eighth grade where I felt like this is not only what I want to do, but who I am. I must continue this way. I now am taking this very, very seriously and I can't imagine not doing it.

listenN: Yeah, it's interesting. Now, do you spot that in your students? Like, can you see that?

Erika Nielsen: I do, it's actually getting quite exciting. I'm old enough now that I've had some students, I actually had one this morning. I've had some students for 10 years or more that I've raised from a six or seven year old to now 17, 18 year old. And I noticed that same shift happened for them when they are about 13, 14 and at that point I love to send them off for a summer at a national music camp where I'm on faculty now. But I've been sending my students there for years and then they get the opportunity to be with other like-minded students and they find their tribe. And at this point either music kind of becomes something they embody or it becomes something they, they decide, you know, I'm going to focus elsewhere. And many of my students have kept it and a few of them want to study very seriously in an university. I know how hard it is. I'm very realistic, but I think you have to follow that plan A dream and try and try your hardest and we'll see where it will take them.

listenN: So you sort of said a couple of things there and you know, and part of the reason why I'm deep into this is because, you know, I have children, they're 12 and 14, but you know, we're kind of dancing around the music thing, but we didn't dive in. Right. And so I'm just wondering, you know, did we do something wrong? You know, that feeling of, as a parent, you're always asking that question to yourself. But so you said, one thing was it wasn't taken away from you because you had a musical mother. She didn't, you know, it's not like, oh, you're going to be a musician, you're going to be an artist. You're crazy. You know, be a scientist, be a doctor, be a lawyer. So, it wasn't taken away from you.

Erika Nielsen: A little bit about that. It was, I would say it was valued as being just as important as other things as my school studies. It was valued on a same level of importance and whereas, I think in some other families they may think wouldn't it be great if you could strum a few chords on the guitar, but they see it very much as extra extracurricular. Just something for fun. We saw it as fundamental, which is very different now. That said, I was not raised to be a professional musician. In fact, quite the opposite, you know, as I was starting to make career decisions in high school. My mom who is a professional, uh, she was an elementary school teacher, first a supply teacher then full time and then became a principal. You know, my stepdad had a full time job as an engineer.

Erika Nielsen: They valued, I'm doing air quotes, real stable careers. Not that being a musician is not that, but you know exactly what I'm referring to. And they tried to sway me. I remember when I started to get very serious toward, I remember the

words being, you know, you could have that full time stable job with all of these benefits and you could have your summers off and your evenings free and then you could play all the music you want. And of course not. Of course I wanted to defy my parents. But that just made me work harder and I thought, no, it's not good enough. I take this more seriously than that. It's not enough for me to do this for fun.

listenN: Well that's an interesting thing that, you were defying your parents who were, you know, one of them was very musical. And so it's an interesting concept that, that it pushed you more into music than maybe somebody who didn't have parents who were musical and was trying to stop them from doing music.

Erika Nielsen: Well, and maybe if they had pushed me to be a professional from the beginning and pushed me too hard, I would have been turned off by the whole thing. And I know that happens to a lot of musicians where they're pushed too hard by the family and by their teacher and they just want nothing to do with after that. So it's actually, I'm noticing this as a teacher, it's such a delicate balance between challenging a student, encouraging them, making sure all doors are open for them, but not turning them off the instrument and having just the right amount of challenges without too much pressure and all of those things.

listenN: Yeah. So you had mentioned that it wasn't taken away and then you talked about it being a fundamental, and so now in the, in the part of the world that we live in, you know, in the education system, things like music and art and drama and things are being taken away and not seen.

Erika Nielsen: It's horrible to watch. I'm actually a little optimistic about that. You know, I mean here in Toronto I see families all the time. They're trying to decide, Oh, what art school should I send my child to? When I grew up in Kingston, Ontario, there were, you know, six high schools. I didn't have the luxury of choosing the most artistic high school to suit my wonderful interests. I went to the local jock and cheerleader high school and I became a professional musician without taking a single course in music in high school. I did it all extracurricularly and it's very sad that funding is being pulled from school music programs, But I think if there is family support there on the students that really want to do it can pursue it extracurricularly.

listenN: You know, I really wanted to talk to you at the start of our conversation around music, right? Because I feel like that's just such an important aspect of who you are and your journey and also how hard you've worked.

Erika Nielsen: Oh yeah. I can't emphasize enough the hard work part of it. I mean, there isn't a fast track. You know, at some point, natural talent only gets you so far. I remember in my learning, um, the people I remember being told, you know, that those are my peers that had natural ability, so did I, but at some point they will lap you in terms of working harder and you know I couldn't get away with not working hard. I wasn't the top prize winner. I wasn't, you know, but I worked, I worked, I worked really hard.

listenN: And you know, spoiler alert, we're going to talk a lot about your book. But in your book you talk about the moments in your teenage years where, you know, you wouldn't necessarily practice that much and then you would sort of like turn it on because you wanted to accomplish something or prove something or get something. Right. And when you are able to flux inside that gift where you can, Oh, I'm going to show up today. Right, what does that feel like when you're, you know, cause you're doing all that hard work.

Erika Nielsen: I see it in my students now that's a big lesson to learn on how to practice and do the work consistently. And of course you learn that lesson by having experiences where you didn't prepare strongly enough and it didn't feel good. You weren't comfortable, you didn't play your best and you know that you could have done better had you worked a little harder at it. You have to have lots of those experiences accumulate. Uh, I was working with one of my students around this this morning. We were reflecting on her recent performance and what went well, what did she wish she had prepared even more for? So that's a big, big lesson to learn and I think having a lot of opportunities, and little kind of goals along the way. You need many performances. You need many chances to try and see where's that sweet spot where you can feel really good about what you did.

listenN: The other thing that I wanted to ask you about when it comes to music is how do you prepare or how, how do you shift to perform? You know, I mean, as somebody who does a lot of different types of music, you're involved in a lot of different types of...

Erika Nielsen: ...and I'll say something about that. Last night I was performing Prince's purple rain with classic albums, live at the Brampton Rose Theatre. And tonight I'm playing Baroque Cello, the music of books deHuta in a Good Friday church concert.

listenN: Yeah. And I mean, now thanks to the internet and streaming and all these great documentaries are out there. You get these little glimpses behind, you know, studio musicians and professional freelance musicians, and you realize how incredibly talented these people are at just adopting genre or picking up here and doing different things. So can you talk to me a little bit about your process on how you get ready to perform at that? Like last night was it different than what's going to happen tonight?

Erika Nielsen: Well the process might be similar. I mean, when I'm preparing to play with a rock band, when I'm practicing for that, well actually, the preparation is very similar. I have my chart there. I make sure it's accurate. I listen with the recording, I listened to the album. I play along with the tracks, and make sure that my touch and my shaping and the groove that I'm playing matches the style of the music is as well as I can. If I have tricky sections, I mean they get more of my attention because I'm in the performance. You just have to go and it has to happen. And, I must say it went really well last night and I guess similarly for say a Baroque performance, I listened a lot to the music that I'm about to play. I

play along when possible. Um, but I've put a lot of work into understanding all of the different styles that I'm capable of working with, um, to work on. You know, I didn't just launch into playing Baroque music. I studied hard. I attended the Tafel Music Baroque Institute for two summers. I studied privately with Christina Mauler and Eleanor Fry did workshops. So, you know, I don't just dabble in many genres. I take each one seriously and it's important to me that I'm very good at what I do and what I focus on.

listenN: I want to talk a little bit about, um, we've talked a fair bit about music and I want to talk a little bit more about your unique childhood and I'm saying that, and I don't want to label it, but you did travel a lot. You were exposed to a lot of different things. How do you think that affected who you became today? Was that training to be able to be a freelance musician and fly all over the place and do all this stuff and you know, does that feel normal now because you had a very interesting childhood, you want to talk a little bit about that?

Erika Nielsen: Sure. So as far as the, uh, I guess uniqueness of my childhood, although there are lots of people in this position, you know, I had one parent in the military, so I was born in Lahr, West Germany. Um, we moved to Canada. Um, we then lived in Guatemala for a short time and then back to Ontario, to Toronto and then to Ottawa. So, a lot of moving around there. And when my parents parted ways, I then grew up steadily in Kingston, Ontario, but they talk about the years before five lasting the rest of their lives. So, there was a lot of upheaval and moving around. Um, when I was little. And, that's all very exciting to travel opportunities when you live in Europe, you know, I remember, well, uh, hard to remember, but I know I visited Switzerland and France and I think all that moving around, I think, children kind of become really resilient. I developed a lot of resilience based on what I experienced in my childhood.

Erika Nielsen: I think, uh, certainly have given me the strength and the perseverance I've needed to do what I do. There's also a sense of when you move around a lot and have that much change in your life, you, um, how can I put it? Um, in some ways it gives you the freedom to take more risks because you're not attached to your life being, becoming a certain way or being stable. So, it was fine for me to take the risk of becoming a full time musician. Whereas if I was born in the, if I grew up in the same house, in the same town, I was born in with the, you know, um, same two parents the whole way through, steady, steady, steady, I don't think I would have been as comfortable with the idea of taking on a quote unquote risky career that has a lot of flux to it. And so I'm able to go with the flow with the flux in my work. And certainly, I think moving around a lot and having a lot of change happening in my childhood helped prepare me for that.

listenN: Yeah, that's interesting. I had a very similar experience. We moved a lot when I was young, but I also had the fortune or misfortune of every single year in elementary school having to go to a different school.

Erika Nielsen: Yeah. And I know others, like you and I have peers who it was that frequent, their shifting gears was that frequent. Okay. Interesting.

listenN: Yeah. So like we would stay somewhere for two years, but all of a sudden they'd open a new school and Oh now Brian has to go to that school even though my siblings all were still staying at the other one. But Oh, you're in grade three and that school is now for one to three. So now you're mandated to go to that school. So even when we were permanent in one location, I still had this disruption in school all the time.

Erika Nielsen: For better or for worse. I bet.

listenN: Exactly. But what I love and it's the word you just used, resilience. I mean, I love that word and I almost feel like it's a new word because I don't remember ever hearing it, you know, 20 years ago, 30 years ago. And, I did a lot of work when I was in the advertising business around HIV prevention and they used to talk about, you know, people in the gay community. Cause it was predominantly focused on gay males as being resilient. Right. And that was the first time I heard that word. And I was like, wow, that is such a great word, because it's a positive way of looking at something that maybe 50 years ago would have been seen as a negative thing. Like, Oh, this child was moved all over the place. They're going to have this problem, this problem and that problem.

Erika Nielsen: And I don't doubt that there were consequences to that and other things that happened in my childhood. I don't doubt that. But I also know that it had developed, helped me develop a thick skin resilience like we talked about. Um, yeah, absolutely.

listenN: What was it like when you kind of woke up that day and realized you were a professional musician or you were making your livelihood as a musician? What did that? Do you remember that feeling?

Erika Nielsen: Yeah, I do and I've had that feeling many times and sort of in a setting, like I'm in a rehearsal or I'm in a performance and I think, I'm doing it. It's so cool. I had that experience last night. I was, uh, really well prepared and I'm playing and I'm playing the hit off the record, purple rain and I'm digging into my cello part and the sound and the theatre's really good. I can hear everyone around me. I'm really locked in to what I'm doing. Um, and I've got goosebumps on my arms and I'm thinking here I am, wow, I'm doing this. I've come so far. I remember along the way I've had a lot of naysayers along the way. Those telling me to get a more stable career. I've played, uh, I've had some rough performances and masterclasses and things like that when I was younger and developing and I've had, you know, visiting artists that I was playing for tell me, um, I remember one favourite quote. I was told by someone, you know, it's okay to just be a nice person. It's, for example, basically like, you know, you get out while you can. Um, but that, you know, it just made me work harder. I thought, no, I can keep going here and then, and then along the way and I would get more paid work. And, when I first got my first orchestra job I won the principal cello position of the Sudbury Symphony and I worked there for two years. And that was a huge boost to. I mean there was something about feeling like I had a position that

was important to me at the time because I think it's as close to regular job security that we can get to as musicians.

Erika Nielsen: So, um, on paper I had a regular pay check, I had some benefits, it felt quote unquote legit. And then when I left that position, it was very difficult for me to come to grips with it being okay to just be a freelancer. And I worried a lot about whether I would be secure enough. And I took a leap and I was absolutely fine and I was able to do it. And, you know, I'm very fortunate that I'm at a point in my career where I check my email and say yes to things because I get a lot of opportunities to perform now. And, it feels good that I'm really doing it.

listenN: And the reason why I wanted to ask you that question is because it is sort of going to lead to some of the, some of what we're going to talk about in a bit, but the Sudbury Orchestra part is great because I've heard you tell that before and I right away like anybody else who just heard you say that is going to go, Oh, you lived in Sudbury right and then in the book you go into the details of what you actually did to accomplish that.

Erika Nielsen: Yes. So, for those who aren't familiar with Sudbury, Ontario, it's in Northern Ontario. It's about by car. It's maybe a three hour drive from Toronto. I do not have a car. And when I started my position with the symphony, they, of course they wanted me to move there and that would be the most logical thing to do. But I had a lot of work and students here in Toronto and I somehow carved out a system where I took public transit weekly so I could perform and rehearse with the symphony while keeping my feet on the ground here in Toronto. And that required taking a red eye, Greyhound bus every Wednesday that rolled into the Yorkdale Shopping Mall at 5:30 in the morning. And then I would then take a taxi home so that I would not miss another day of work here in the city. Also my spouse was doing his PhD at the time, so we weren't in a position to move. So I commuted for that position to make it work so that I could get that experience as a professional musician and I could get that role on my resume.

listenN: That's why I would urge everybody to read the book. Just for those little snippets, because you know, when you describe having to put your cello underneath the bus, you know, like all of these things that you did that you were sacrificing everything in order to have this legitimacy as you described. Like feeling like I've made it or I have a legitimate job in music. It's those types of sacrifices that people don't know that when people get to a place where you are now, where you're feeling confident and comfortable and you've established yourself that, you know, we're, we live in this world of American Idol and stuff where, Oh, well it just happens overnight, doesn't it? And it doesn't.

Erika Nielsen: And I have friends and colleagues who had sort of similar positions in a way. I'm thinking of one friend in particular who would be flying to Halifax, Nova Scotia and back just to play with the symphony, but it wasn't quite a full time, enough job to merit them moving there. And,, what do you call it? Transplanting themselves. I mean, you hear about it all the time, you know, a visiting artists flying from the States just so they can teach at a special school in North

America. I mean, musicians do it all the time. My story, it's eye opening, but it's not that unique. And I even see it with lots of colleagues on a smaller scale. I'm driving through the night after gigs, after concerts. I'm trying to beat rush hour traffic to get you from Toronto to Hamilton by 6:00 PM. And anyway, I guess I did it on a, on a macro scale.

listenN: Yeah. I mean when you read about it in the book, you definitely see the macro aspect to it.

Erika Nielsen: I just wanted to say another thing. You talked about sacrifice. What I ended up sacrificing. So over time my commute became unsustainable and what I was sacrificing was my health, my physical health. I developed chronic gastric reflux. My mental health, I was not sleeping well. I was very anxious. I had undiagnosed bipolar disorder at the time. Of course my sleep was very much affected from doing a red eye every week. I mean it, it was very hard on my body, so I had to, I had to end it.

listenN: Yeah. And that's a great segue into this next section, which is to talk about your diagnosis and what that meant for you. When I think of it, I think of, you know, fears and anxieties that would come in around something like that. Right? So just take us, I mean, we want people to read the book because the book's got all the details and it's really well written and I loved reading it as I said to you earlier, but just take us there a little bit and describe the diagnosis. You just mentioned bipolar?

Erika Nielsen: So, okay. Because we haven't mentioned it yet. I wrote this book called Sound Mind, My Bipolar Journey from Chaos to Composure.

Erika Nielsen: And the first third of it is a memoir that outlines sort of my childhood and musical life and sort of symptoms along the way that I experienced and it takes the reader through some difficult, very severe difficulties in my teen years and spoiler alert it accumulated into, I received a diagnosis of type one bipolar disorder at age 27, which was five years ago. I'm now 33. Um, and then the second two thirds of the book is a self care manual of the steps I took towards recovery. Which is the place I'm in today. So a little bit about coming up to this diagnosis. In my teens, I experienced some very serious depressive episodes. I was suicidal. I presented as bubbly and cheerful and a creative girl but behind closed doors my self esteem was like zero. My self worth was incredibly low. I experienced a lot of depression, very tumultuous depression, and it would be in it phases in episodes. And it followed me, through my twenties, early twenties. And so I began seeing a psychotherapist regularly. What I knew about my condition was that of course along the way, my family and everybody around me is telling me, Oh, you're perfectly normal. It's normal ups and downs of teen years. And that's what this is all about. But I had a suspicion the whole time that this isn't normal. This isn't okay. It's not normal to want to kill yourself. It's not normal. This is not healthy. So, I guess things improved, but I still experience this horrific depression in my early twenties. And with the suspicion that it was



something else while I started seeing a therapist regularly, just because at the time I thought, well, I just want a healthy adulthood.

Erika Nielsen: I want to take care of all of my childhood issues and unresolved resentments just so I can, you know, get on my way for adulthood. And, um, and that helped me a lot, but I still had this nagging feeling that there was something more going on with the depression side of this experience. Now, meanwhile, along the way, I just thought I was being me, but I had always experienced euphoric creative flights of ideas and zipping from one task to another and being full of energy and wanting to go for a six K run at five in the morning. And, that had always been a part of who I was, not for a second did I suspect my euphoric moods to be problematic. And I didn't even consider that. So after I was married, yeah, I'm 27 at the time, right after I was so eager to kind of tie up all the loose ends and start this new chapter of my life and I thought, I'm going to get to the bottom of those teen depressions and I'm going to get a professional, psychiatric diagnosis and they're going to tell me I'm normal and I'm going to go on with my life.

Erika Nielsen: I'd love, I'd love for you to read this in my book, but that is not what happened.

listenN: Yeah, I loved how you describe it as, you were kind of like, I'm going to check this off, I'm going to take care of this and then I can put it behind me and I can get on and everything will be great. Check that box.

Erika Nielsen: Yeah. It'd be done with it.

listenN: I think a lot of people can relate to that. In a lot of other areas of their lives and their health, right? You go in, okay, I'll just get my yearly checkup and check it off the box. And then you find out there's something that's not right and then it changes your life forever. Do you have a pre post diagnosis memory that you can maybe share. Like what was that like? We're five years in, you know, in this five years, a lot is even already changed around mental illness. But you know, five years ago it hadn't, it wasn't, you didn't see billboards and and people talking about that. It's here and a lot of people suffer from it and embrace it as opposed to a lot of illnesses, you know, like a lot of times with cancer, people want to, you know, they don't want to tell people because they feel ashamed and et cetera. But with mental illness, it's, got a whole stigma or it had a whole stigma attached to it.

Erika Nielsen: It still does. We're getting better. We're working on it. Um, but you're right, it's a vastly different mental health culture now than it was at the time of my diagnosis. And even at the time of my diagnosis things were beginning to shift. We were beginning to have a conversation around it. Wow. When I was diagnosed and they said the words to me, we're about 95% certain that you have bipolar disorder without knowing it. I carried stigmas of my own. Um, the images that came to my mind were, you know, vagrant people muttering to themselves on the street. I thought bipolar disorder meant hot and cold moods fluctuating throughout one day. And of course, we know now that it's periods of multiple days to multiple weeks of a mood episode one way or the other.

Erika Nielsen: So I didn't know anything and I felt humiliated. I was ashamed. Um, like I had a huge secret. I was frightened of what it would mean for my career as a musician. I was frightened to tell colleagues or tell anybody. I didn't want anybody to know because any slight against artists in my industry, whether it's an email typo or a difficult behavior in whatever way you want to imagine that, um, can be a Mark against you. Your business card is your reputation. And, all of a sudden, I was slammed with a major mental illness label and we're not just talking, um, you know, we're now comfortable talking about depression and anxiety. No one was quite ready to tackle bipolar and schizophrenia. Like they're really big ones. They're up there. Um, this was really huge. At the time I was also in huge amount of disbelief because I had been humming along in my life and thinking I was fine with some occasional depression. I was perfectly, I thought what I thought was perfectly functional and upon examining my symptoms, uh, that was very clearly not the case.

listenN: In your book when you talk about specifically your teenage years, you're talking about them through the lens of, you know here's an example of kind of how erratic I might've been or whatever, but you kind of look at that and I go, yeah, but that's also normal behavior too. And so I think that's probably one of the hardest things around a lot of the mental illness diagnosis is when do you cross that line to this is normal behavior to, oh no, this is something that is an issue that has to be dealt with.

Erika Nielsen: Well something we know about bipolar disorder is that you can have a genetic predisposition to developing the illness, um, with the family history of it, but that gene can be expressed or not expressed via epigenetics, which means on account of your environment. So if your environment, um, if you're exposed to a stressful home environment which I want to believe that mine wasn't, but it was. If you're exposed to a stressful home environment and chronic stressors and other ways, um, if you experienced trauma, which I did, abuse, which I did, sexual abuse, which I did, then that gene can be expressed. And that's what happened to me. I'm a textbook case of type one bipolar disorder. So you see what you think is normal teen behavior in the teen years and this is why the condition is often misdiagnosed because it presents as major depression. So then the teenager is treated for major depression and the medications used to treat depression are different from treating bipolar disorder. And it can sometimes even ignite symptoms. Um, and then the condition sort of develops further in the early twenties. And, the bipolar symptoms show themselves, uh, start to show themselves at that point. It's commonly misdiagnosed and it's not uncommon for a patient to not be diagnosed for, you know, a decade or more. I recently presented at a mental health gala for the High Notes Avanti Charitable Organization alongside Luba Goy and Dan Hill. I was speaking with them, Dan Hill's a singer songwriter. He only received his bipolar diagnosis five years ago. And, um, this is a man in his, um, certainly late fifties, maybe sixties. So there's an example of someone not receiving the correct diagnosis until very much later in life.

listenN: Well, and that's something that I think it was in Whole Note, there was a blog written about yourself and the book and the writer did a really good job of outlining some things, but he was talking in there about somebody else's quote again about Schumann and some other composers back in their days and how they would today be bipolar. And, so it's, you know, to me it's sort of fascinating how the, how normal has evolved. So back then that was just, Oh, they're musicians, they're artists. They're like that you know.

Erika Nielsen: Which has permeated by the way, we've actually taken that romanticized image of the mad artist and we still unfortunately sort of expect mental health conditions to be prevalent in artists. And it's true, it's more prevalent in that group of professional artists than it is in the rest of the population.

listenN: Yeah. But it's, it's kind of cart and horse, right? It's like when you have these issues, do you gravitate to the professions or the ways of making a livelihood that forgive some of those ways of behaving and therefore all the sort of people that are suffering from bipolar end up over in the orchestra, if you know what I mean. Right. As opposed to, you know, you're not going to become an accountant. And so, you know, I'm just going back to your Dan Hill comment about the late diagnosis is because there was probably in his earlier years there was like he's an artist. He's a musician. He, you know, that's kind of, they're expected to work that way. Whereas now when I talk about the elevation of normal or the evolution of normal, now that's not normal.

Erika Nielsen: We can now recognize some of those behaviors that a person would experience as symptoms, not just as, um, odd or erotic behaviors. We can notice that there's a, we can now, um, notice that there's a health issue at stake here. There's a health problem that is happening there. They're not just being colorful and creative. Um, there's more going on.

listenN: So tell me about when you got diagnosed around, you talk about this in the book, the fear that it would take your music away from you or was it the source of your music, this, energy, you know, the manic. I've worked in the creative field for a long time with a lot of different creative people that I do know suffer from different forms of mental health issues and they'll take their medication and then they'll stop because they'll go, I don't feel like I'm as creative as I was before.

Erika Nielsen: Yes. This is a very common phenomenon. It's called medication noncompliance. Um, and of course when I started, well, okay, when I was first diagnosed, I thought, Oh no, that's what makes me an artist. That essence my edge. When I first got over the hump of acknowledging that I did experience manic episodes, that was the big shocker for me. That there was a name for what I experienced. There was a name, there was a group of symptoms I experienced. It wasn't just me being me. And, then I deduced Oh no, that must be what makes me creative and what makes me an artist. Um, and I had experienced in my teens, I took Prozac to treat what I thought was deep depression and it was early symptoms of bipolar and it did make me feel flattened and it did make me feel dull.

Erika Nielsen: And so not only did I hold a stigma against having a mental health condition, I had a stigma towards taking medication. And a lot of people still do. Now, if you're taking the incorrect medication or improper dosage, it can make you feel flat or dull. So when I began treating my bipolar disorder, I was very much afraid of my creative essence, my being, my what made me disappearing. And here's what I found out. It took some, not getting used to, but it just took time to feel a new normal. And it does take time for a new medication to kick in and get used to it. It took me, this is not uncommon, it can take someone years, find the right combination of medications that work for them when treating any mental health condition.

Erika Nielsen: But bipolar disorder certainly it took me two years to find the right mix. And I was patient. I believed in the process. And, um, with regard to the combination I am now taking, I had to do a lot of back and forth reflection as to am I lesser than I was before. Am I dulled down? And it would seem that way at first, but only because the contrast between those two states was palpable. And as I began to live in my new normal, I realized that I am creative and I get amazing ideas and I'm musical. Um, I paint, I write and I'm taking the medication that I take and I'm still an artist because that is who I am. It's not because of my illness and my illness is an illness. It is not what makes me an artist.

Erika Nielsen: I am not an artist because I have bipolar disorder and I'm not more artistic because I have bipolar disorder. One of my bipolar peers in the support group, I belonged to the Toronto Bipolar Disorder meet up group. She's a lawyer and she is not an artist, but she experiences symptoms like I do and they relate to her and her work. Her mania fuels her workaholism, et cetera. I had symptoms a lot like that. So my mania actually made me less productive. Um, I couldn't complete the tasks I started, I would think I had this Rolodex of amazing ideas, but then none of them could really come to fruition. I couldn't fully form them because of my limitations cognitively. I would be flighty from task to task to task. So my illness held me back. Um, and now I'm functioning better than I could have ever thought possible. I have a very full plate. I'm able to work and live as an artist and I am as creative and artistic and as colorful a person as I've ever been. I can just function now.

listenN: That's such a great way to put it. I love that. So speaking of the sort of recovery stage and the management stage. I didn't know whether to call it recovery or managing?

Erika Nielsen: Call it both. I think both terms convey that it's not solved. It is managed. Yeah.

listenN: You outline a number of wonderful ways of how you figured out how to manage it in your book. So I won't go into, you know, tons of detail into all of that. But I think the thing that was so or is so important about your book for people who don't have bipolar disorder, but they are freelance of any kind, is how do you manage your mental health when you are a freelancer. You know, under the stresses and the pullings and the, you know, because most freelancers, they work, if they have work, they work seven days a week.

Erika Nielsen: And that was me. Yeah. 100%. Well, okay. I outline all of the areas of my life that I had to tackle to treat my illness and treat my mental health. But these steps I took are relevant for everybody. I love speaking to freelancers in particular. Because I work as a freelancer and I had to change some attitudes at the core. I had limiting beliefs. One belief was that if I'm an artist and a musician, I must just love what I do all the time. Therefore, it's not legitimate work. Therefore, I should work seven days a week and burn the candle at all ends because I'm enjoying my work so much. If I enjoyed my work, then I must not be working. False, absolutely false. Of course it's a job we do.

Erika Nielsen: And I've learned to view it that way. I certainly view it that way. Now. The limiting belief I was holding onto was following me from growing up in a family of nonprofessional artists. The idea that the romanticized idea that an artist is always doing what they love. Maybe that's true at the core, but work is still work. So when I changed that attitude, I used to not believe that I even deserved a day off. And this came from family attitudes bordering on workaholism very type A, if I was resting even for a minute while I wasn't being productive and the worst thing you could ever be is not productive, I had to let go of that 100%. This go, go, produce, produce, produce attitude that is permeating our culture and our society is making us all sick.

Erika Nielsen: I had to drop that one as well to treat my condition. I absolutely had to revamp how I viewed sleep, rest and stress management. And we all need to do this. We all need to overhaul our sleep. The amount of rest we're getting and manage our stress. But for me it took a major mental illness diagnosis to face me with that reality. And I think I could say it's similar for those who are faced with any other major illness diagnoses like cancer or even diabetes, you have to overhaul your diet. And so finally it clicked for me that I deserved a day off at least per week. Just like anybody else who gets weekends. And I actually used to believe I didn't deserve weekends or I shouldn't get weekends.

Erika Nielsen: Also, I had a limiting belief that as a freelancer I might not know where my next meal is coming from. So I must say yes to every opportunity that comes my way. And I can't say no to any project. Now I recognize when you're starting out in a freelance career it is important to accept whatever work comes your way and we do need to start out that way, but eventually it will snowball and you'll have more work than you know what to do with. And then you find yourself working seven days a week.

listenN: Yeah. And feeling like you have to, I mean, it really resonated with me when you said that in the book, because I went from a kind of productive type of number of different careers. I'm somebody who's done a lot of different things in my lifetime and some of them are very, you know, you can, check off the productive piece of it. And then I got into the advertising business and I got into the creative side of it and I struggled for the longest time because I didn't feel like I was doing anything. I was going to work. And I was kind of like just playing and I don't mean playing in the child playing way, but I was just kind of coming up with ideas and that's not real work. And you know, that's not being productive.

- Erika Nielsen: And playing long to Prince singles isn't working. It's just having fun on a Wednesday night.
- listenN: Yeah. But you've got 5,000 people or whatever is there in the audience who've all paid good money to watch you do that.
- Erika Nielsen: And, for you coming up with ideas and playing around, you know, no doubt there are like people at Google who, you know, lye around in hammocks and play ping pong, you know, whatever they need to do to come up with our next idea, that's part of their work process. Um, and it's legitimate work. You know, in preparing for any concert, I just have to put in the sheer work hours. And so my work is different from someone whose work is all based on a computer for example.
- listenN: Right. Or has a nine to five attachment to it.
- Erika Nielsen: In pro baseball players play baseball. That's their work. I couldn't believe how I didn't really know this. Even studying music in university and in graduate school. I mean that realization that I'm at work, I am working hard. That came later for me.
- listenN: Yeah. But I did love that in the book where you said I'm having fun doing what I'm doing or I enjoy what I'm doing, therefore I'm not working. And the realization that we all gravitate to doing work that we love to do. That feels like it's not work. But when we get there we don't understand to embrace that we feel like I must be doing something wrong.
- Erika Nielsen: I remember I used to think to myself, I'm not working this afternoon. I'm just catching up on email. I'm not working this afternoon. I'm just organizing student lessons. Well, no, that admin work, that's actually your work. If you were not working, you'd be going for a stroll around High Park. Yeah. I'm not doing enough of that. So, when I overhauled my lifestyle as a freelancer, here are the big things that I had to put into place for my own mental health. One, I ensured at least a minimum of one day off a week and aimed for two. So, I started taking Mondays off and a lot of small businesses do that. You'll notice your hairdresser's closed on Mondays. The chocolate stores closed on Mondays for example. I used to say to students or colleagues, what time works best for you? And I would accommodate everybody else's schedule. And now I say, Nope, these are the hours I'm operating. And Monday's not an option. So I didn't have any work boundaries as a freelancer and I had to create my own boundaries because they weren't made for me. And, that's something that I think is really important for freelancers to do is recognize when does your work day begin and when does it end. I used to sprint from task to task. I would finish a lesson run out the door so that I could get to my rehearsal and I would think that I had no choice and I would think that I was just really busy and that's what busy looked like. I'm still busy but busy doesn't look like frantic anymore and that franticness left me in a constant state of fight or flight, which contributed to my mental illness and contributed to not feeling great.

Erika Nielsen: I was getting a constant state of stress and I know plenty of colleagues who are in that position. Even right now, I've built into my schedule a minimum of 15 minutes between activities, 15 to 30 minutes of buffer. Is it always possible? No. Is it always realistic? No, but I work very hard to do that. So you know, student lessons, three o'clock to four o'clock four fifteen to five fifteen and it lets me catch my breath. It lets me, you know, grab a snack, check my email, use the restroom or just lie with my feet up the wall.

listenN: Yeah. No, it's so important. And, I think it was somewhere in the book where you were talking just about that, you know, running around frantic. So many people, and I've worked with people like that where, if they're not cutting every conversation short, leaving every meeting early because of the next thing, they don't feel like they're important or they're busy.

Erika Nielsen: And I really want to speak to that, we fetishize busy-ness and it makes us feel important and validated. It gives our ego a huge burst. And I used to subscribe to that to. Lots of people who when you ask them how are things going for you right now? And they brag insane, things are insane. It's just, you know, things are insane. I'm so over it, Brian, I'm so done with it. You're only functioning at like 60% when you think you're just being extra productive and then you're not sleeping and it's the snowball effect. I can't live with that anymore. It's exhausting. It exasperates my condition. If I didn't have this condition, I would still benefit from making these changes and I love talking to friends about this because they want to make some of the changes that I made too, and maybe it means that I teach two fewer lessons in a day. Maybe it means now granted this, this can affect one's income, but how much money do you really need? And I would rather feel great than make another hundred dollars at this point. And I realize I'm in a good position to be able to do that and not everybody can, but my health is more important to me now.

listenN: One of the things that I love about your book is that it's not just written for the person who thinks or who has been diagnosed with bipolar and Oh, here's your book. The thing I love about your book is there's the whole story about being a musician, becoming a musician or being a girl and just growing up. You know, there's all of that. And then there's the diagnosis part and what that was like and how you handled that. And then there's the recovery or the managing of it part, but in the recovering and the managing part of it. What came up for me, and I know this is going to probably sound a bit crass, but thank God you found out you had bipolar.

Erika Nielsen: I agree.

listenN: You know, cause the changes you've made and the things that you've done I guess what I'm trying to get at is that you're kind of the proof that this stuff matters and works, if you know what I mean. You're not just, Oh, we've got this friend Erika and she's peace, love and granola and you go to her house and she, you know, she looks after herself and she's mindful and you know, that's just the way she is. You, weren't that person and you enjoyed not being that person,

but because of your diagnosis, you had to learn how to manage stress being a freelancer, all of these issues and it's working for you. And so you're a great example to anybody. We're all going to suffer from some form of mental stress from a lifestyle that's out of balance. And so, I really think that your book is a great book for anybody who's just dealing with the stresses of modern life and being pulled in multiple directions. And here are some things that work really well and they work so well that they keep a disorder like bipolar under control and not a debilitating aspect of your life.

Erika Nielsen: And for someone else taking a look these lifestyle pillars like their sleep, stress level, nutrition, living mindfully, et cetera. Maybe they don't have bipolar disorder, but maybe they suffer from chronic anxiety, um, or they're suffering from their go, go, go lifestyle and their workaholicism. I hope, and I know it can be beneficial to a lot of people, maybe everyone.

listenN: Yeah, I think it's funny, like if somebody has heart disease and they start to eat properly and they get better, we go, yeah, you should eat well. Eating your french fries and burgers is not a healthy lifestyle. So we know that. But when it comes to our mental state, we don't, we don't necessarily think the same way or we don't talk in those languages. They even have jokes in places where they'll call a burger, a heart attack burger. We acknowledge, you eat that you could get a heart attack, but we don't have Oh, this is a mental stress thing.

Erika Nielsen: Yeah. Well sometimes I'll chat with a friend and they'll be relaxing. And then I did this and then this, and then we had to run to this and I kind of smile and go well, that sounds bananas. That sounds like a breakdown waiting to happen. And I think we need to, we absolutely need to start thinking of these mental health conditions as a health condition. Just like diabetes, just like other ailments. And, it's starting and I'm hoping to contribute to that.

listenN: You are.

Erika Nielsen: You know, I have this condition, it needs 24 hours a day management and part of the treatment is making sure that I get adequate sleep and it's one of my part time jobs to make sure that happens.

listenN: You know, I was envious, cause you talk about sleeping 10 hours.

Erika Nielsen: This is something I want to break open the response to. Now I take medication that allows me to sleep 9, 10 hours and the response I get is, Oh, I'm jealous. Oh, I'm envious. Um, or what a luxury. And as a person with a major mental illness to manage my need for sleep is not luxury. It's my medicine. And in the research I've done, now we know how important sleep is. My spouse just read this great book called Why We Sleep and I don't know if it was in this book or elsewhere, but we learned that in the Guinness Book of World Records, they have removed the record breaker of going without sleep for the longest amount of time. That's been erased because it's too dangerous. Jumping out of an



airplane beyond the atmosphere remains. But, not sleeping is too dangerous to our health. It is making us sicker and we know now you can't actually catch up on sleep. Where you think, I can just sleep in on Saturdays. I'll sleep until nine and that will make up for it. It doesn't. So we're facing a sleep crisis and you know, there are thousands of other sleep experts who are on podcast talking about the importance of sleep. But the sleep that I need is my medicine and I think we could all benefit from that same medicine.

listenN: Yeah. A number of years ago I had an MS scare which is, you know, very, very nerve wracking at that time because it's kind of like, Oh, you're that age. You know, like, this is when it happens. You had this happen, therefore, let's take you through this very slow medical analysis to get to the other end to then tell you that you're actually going to be okay. It turned out to be something they call singular sclerosis, which means you had an effect, but its not happening all over your brain or all over your spinal cord. Yeah, but during that time I was sleeping 10 hours a day. While I was waiting to recover and make myself better, I was able to sleep 10 hours a day and it was the best I ever felt. Right.

Erika Nielsen: It's really powerful that you noticed that.

listenN: Yeah. It was the best I ever felt and I think if you look at it like a luxury and I don't mean sleep as a luxury, but if you look at it like a luxury, like eating ice cream or you know, having fun or whatever.

Erika Nielsen: They see it being much like lounging and, you know, not working, I see it as repair. Your brain is repairing itself from what you put it through all day.

listenN: Yeah. And there's something liberating about knowing that you're getting enough., When I used to sleep for 10 hours, I would wake up slowly and there's something beautiful about that, right? Like you would know, you're done. And so when I was talking about laughing or eating ice cream or whatever, it's like having this luxury where you know, you've sapped it for the time. It's like you, you ran this to the finish line, right? And you can get up and you feel refreshed and you feel good. It was something that was very personal to me and I never really talked about it, but when I read in your book that you sleep for 10 hours and that was the magic number for me as well was this 10 hours meant that I felt amazing.

Erika Nielsen: You know, certainly can I do on eight or nine? Sure. But, I do take medication that allows for that to be possible. Um, it wouldn't be possible for me without the medication that I take. Maybe it would, but it wouldn't be nearly as successful. And I realize, I'm very fortunate in that I can set my own hours to accommodate this. I can accommodate my sleep needs. Not everybody can. I acknowledge that. So those that have their nine to five jobs and they have children and they're up in the night, you know, it's, it's not easy, but I want to help people prioritize it more and see it as important as doing our work is. I think it's work. I think we could be doing a lot more work around prioritizing our need for sleep.

listenN: And I think that that's something that we're going to see more and more about. Again, you're starting to hear people talk about it. You know, I wanted to read your ending a little bit of your ending to your book because I found that I got emotional when I got there. And so, you know, I don't love reading out loud but I'm going to read this. 'It's my hope that one day mental health conditions like mine will be as universally accepted and widely understood as the language of music, individuals who encounter mental illness will not, as I did, be forced to learn an entirely new vocabulary to understand its implications. In the same way we are all exposed to music in a myriad of ways as children. I hope we will evolve and appreciate a new universal language of awareness, compassion, self care, empathy and wellbeing.' And I believe that's exactly what you accomplished with this book and it's been my pleasure talking with you and I wish you nothing but success and I do hope that it gets into the hands of everybody who can benefit from it. Thank you so much for being on the show.

Erika Nielsen: Thank you so much Brian. It's been such a pleasure.

listenN: You're welcome. Take care.

listenN: All right. Just before we go, I want to shout out. Erika's touchpoints. She can be reached on Instagram and Twitter at celloerika, and that's Erika with a K as well you can visit her website, cello erika dot com or go straight to Amazon to find her book. Sound Mind: My Bipolar Journey from Chaos to Composure.

listenN: Well, that's another episode of listen in. Thanks for being. Please subscribe, leave comments or head on over to our website at [inaudible] dot com that's listen with two ends, pod.com where you'll find episode notes, links to anything that we talked about in this episode, and you can connect with us about being a guest on listen in.