



Lauren: Welcome to "52 Weeks of Hope." This is where you get to hear how to feel happy, balanced, and worthwhile, how to make that lonely ache vanish and feel empowered, confident, and secure. I'm Lauren Abrams, and I get to help you feel that magic again since going through my own dark night of the soul by chatting with incredible leaders, healers, and elders who give us their messages of hope after overcoming challenges of their own. Today, we're talking to the wellness coach, yoga mindfulness teacher, Suzy McCalley. Are you stuck in pain, stress, and feeling overly anxious and ready now for relief, that weight to be lifted from your chest? You get to hear Suzy right now. Suzy grew up in a cult and she used her experiences to turn them into art and so much more. She shares her incredible story and uses her experiences to empower you to consciously take charge of your health and well-being so you get to live the life you really want. Listen right now and learn how to achieve greater mental, emotional, and physical balance, overcome challenges and reduce your stress so that you can achieve greater health, happiness, and an overall increased sense of well-being, just this incredible story. Welcome to "52 Weeks of Hope," Suzy.

Suzy: Thank you so much. Beautiful introduction. Thank you.

Lauren: Yeah. Now you grew up in a cult and turned that experience into art. And I mean, that right there just begs so many different questions, so I have to start there. Can you please tell us where did you grow up and what was that experience and how did you turn that into art? Because that's just so beautiful. I know there's so much in that.

Suzy: Thank you. So yes, I grew up in a cult. It was called "The Children of God," and then "The Family." They had a rebranding after some bad press.

Lauren: Yeah. So wait, where was this?

Suzy: So this was in Brazil. So grew up...you know, my parents were both musicians. They joined the organization as young people, you know, teenagers, and really... My mother is Brazilian and she was a teenager and started getting involved with the group. My father is American from Maryland. He had hitchhiked to California and kind of synced up with them there, and it was part of the whole hippie movement, you know. And so with them backpacking made his way down to Brazil and lived there for 20 years. So they really had, you know, those beautiful intentions and this passionate heart for service and for living a very...what they thought was a very genuine, you know, religious life. And there's some beautiful things about that, and there was also a lot of pain and a lot of trauma. And the way that we were raised, it was fairly dogmatic. You



know, we didn't have very much contact with the outside world, and even with, you know, outside extended family members. And so it was really kind of this bubble, which, again, had both beautiful things. Like, for example, we would sing every day as a group, you know, and part of my love of music, and now, of course, I'm a musician as well, is probably born, I'm sure, from that period. But then also the downside and traumas that, you know...abuses that I experienced, and even sexual abuse. And, you know, part of my journey of healing has been... You know, like, Brené Brown, of course, talks about the courage of vulnerability and finding that story within myself and acknowledging it for me first, for my own healing, and then being able to share it with others. Some of the beautiful outcomes of that have been actually other people in my family coming out with similar stories, and so that messy, ongoing healing process can really begin.

Lauren: Do you have siblings?

Suzy: I do, yes. I'm the middle of five.

Lauren: Wow. And so how long did you guys live in the cult?

Suzy: Yeah. So we kind of transitioned out. I moved to the US when I was 10, in Miami first, and still with the organization, and moved to Texas, still with the group. And then probably I was around 12, so the most awkward period of your life, 12, 13, and that's when we left the group and went out on our own, which was really scary for all of us. My parents had never had "normal jobs." And so they're out there, you know, trying to figure things out and keep us safe financially. And, you know, it was the first time being on our own with our own house, and really just for us kids, you know, that painful really identity struggle of, "Okay, we were the special... We were always raised to believe we're the special chosen people, and now all of a sudden, we are what they called systemite or backslider." And so that meant anybody that left the group, you know. And so I'm still processing with my siblings, you know, what that meant for us in that time. And of course, my parents were just trying to survive, and so there was little guidance, honestly, at that point. So it's something we're still unpacking even today as a family.

Lauren: Are you in touch with all your siblings? Did any of them go back? Did anybody go back?

Suzy: No. We're all so grateful for where we are now. Everyone is thriving and very successful, but we're so happy that our parents left when they did, you know, because it was those pivotal teenage years. No, none of them have gone



back. We're all very close, and they live, you know, as a couple, but we live all over San Diego, London, Texas, and so we get together and travel and meet up. We just got back from a family trip to Brazil and seeing family there. So it's been quite a ride.

Lauren: Yeah, I would imagine. So how do you recover from something like that? And I mean, was there therapy? Was it not talked about? Did you say, "Oh, I just left..." Like, what do you do?

Suzy: Yeah. So no, there was no therapy. You know, it just really wasn't... There's some intergenerational stuff that is coming up as far as trauma too in my family and reasons why, you know, there was a culture of secrecy kind of passed down. Like, for instance, we just found out through DNA testing that we're all Jewish.

Lauren: Oh, my step-sister just found that out through the... What is it? What's the DNA thing? Yeah, anyway.

Suzy: Right. I think my mom did ancestry.com.

Lauren: Yeah, yeah, that. One of those.

Suzy: And so she actually had family members to contact her and she made some big discoveries about new family members. It's her story to tell, so I'm gonna leave it at that. For many reasons, this was something that was secret and that was not safe, you know, when they moved to Brazil because of persecution. It wasn't safe for them to be who they were. And so, you know, going through that, I think it just developed a culture of, you know, not talking about our thing. And so when I was struggling with anxiety, depression, as a teenager, and engaging in all these risky behaviors, drugs, sex, just all the exploring that really I look back on it now and it was me trying to find balance. And even, you know, now as a yoga teacher, as a mindfulness teacher, I look at it also from a nervous system point of view and it was really me just trying to find equilibrium and reaching out to all of these external sources to do so which we know is not very productive a lot of the time. So, you know, to your question about, you know, what kind of support was available, it was like, "Go read your Bible. Go pray about it, you know. No, we're not gonna go do therapy. Like, that's not how we do things. That's not really part of our family culture or what we believe." And we're just now changing that in our own family. So it made it for a very difficult transition. And it wasn't until I was in my 20s and I discovered yoga and all these mindfulness tools and then kind of went down that rabbit hole getting... You know, I'm a certified Reiki master. I've been coaching folks for decades.



But it was really out of desperation to be completely honest. You know, like so many of your speakers share about how where they are in their healing journey has come from a place of pain, and that was really my motivator for writing the play as well, as you mentioned, turning trauma into art.

Lauren: Yeah. So did you go to college?

Suzy: I went to college. I just got my master's finished last summer during COVID. Finished my degree right there.

Lauren: Oh, congratulations. I know. I saw that up there. So when you went to college, did you talk about, "Oh, I used to be in a cult." I'm sorry. I just have so much...

Suzy: No, absolutely. I know, yeah. It's interesting how each of us... So being one of five siblings is so interesting. So one of my sisters, like, really never talks about it, and even like her very close friendship, like, never talks about it. And then I have another sibling when, you know, the first time you meet him, he'll tell you, "You know, I grew up in a cult." So yeah, it's a range.

Lauren: Like, slowly as they get to know you, "Yeah, well, I grew up in a cult." I guess it's definitely an icebreaker at parties, you know.

Suzy: It sure is, yes. And I'm kind of in the middle, you know, in the targeted space because, you know, it can even be triggering not just for me but for other people, and so you never know what anyone's background is.

Lauren: I could tell you would read that energy in somebody though. Like you're the type of person that would know not to say it to this person unless you wanted to get a response. Like, I mean, you just...

Suzy: Yeah. Sometimes I share and sometimes I don't. That's been a journey as well, you know, like who to share, how much, when, where.

Lauren: Right, right, the oversharing, yeah, it is. So how did yoga... You said everything started getting released with you with yoga. How did yoga start doing that for you?

Suzy: So in my first class, even though it was... This is so funny to me. It was taught by our PE teacher at my community college. And she had, like, the most unsoothing voice you could ever possibly imagine, but it didn't matter. Like, you know, of course, they're like 6,000 years old and so it didn't really matter, you know, who was delivering it. The message came across. And for me, the



message in that moment was relief. And, you know, one of the first times that I remember feeling like just the absence of what I now know to be anxiety and stress, and I didn't even have words for it then, it just felt like I was always on edge and, you know, something was, like, wrong. And fundamentally, you know, as I peeled back those layers, the belief that something was wrong with me, and in that moment, you know, it was just instant relief and peace. And so I was like, "Okay, there's something to this." And then, you know, I was a single mom raising my son and all the challenges of that. And so I just kept coming back to it periodically and then finally was like, "Okay, I'm going for it." And, you know, opened my studio shortly after getting certified. Now, I'm a 500-hour yoga instructor, and as I mentioned, a lot of other modalities that I've gotten into including tapping and Access Bars, and even became a certified Tantra practitioner as a way to really address my own healing and then share it with others.

Lauren: For sure, if you were sexually abused. What are... Just lost it. Something bars?

Suzy: Access Bars.

Lauren: I'm not familiar with it.

Suzy: Yeah, it's another healing modality that was kind of channeled and really works with the energy systems of the body to help us find balance. You know, there was a period of time where I was like... You know, people kept telling me, "Well, you do so much." You know, because I'm a musician. I have an album out. I'm a playwright. I'm an actor. I've starred in films. You know, I do speaking. I do coaching. And then I have, you know, my practice and I also started a nonprofit. So we bring yoga and arts into underserved schools, and I'm very passionate about that. But, you know, "So you do so much." And then I thought about it, I'm like, "No. Really, I just do one thing and that is healing. That's it." Like, you know, whether it's through the arts, whether it's through yoga, meditation, like, whether it's for me, whether it's for others, like, it's just that one thing for me.

Lauren: Yeah. Like I'm [inaudible 00:11:58] service and that brings hope, so I understand. I completely get that. So you turned your experience into art. Do you wanna talk about how you did that and how somebody else would be able to do that if that's what's meant for them? And how would they know what is meant for them because you do teach mindfulness?



Suzy: Can I ask for the question again?

Lauren: Yeah. So you turned your experience of being in a cult, you turned that into art, which is beautiful, and I'll start there. How did you do that?

Suzy: You know, you mentioned my meditation practice, and to me, everything starts with looking inwards. And so I don't know how I did that, to be honest. I had a lot of support. You know, it was part of a journey along the way. I worked closely with collaborators. I had a lot of encouragement, so I certainly didn't do it alone. But for me, you know, it was reflecting on that and then it's, like... You know, Morgana Rae who was also on your show talks about the process of alchemy, taking, you know, the deepest, darkest, richest compost and turning it into something that brings light. And so for me, that looked like writing my own play and producing and directing it, and then it looked like writing my own story and my one-woman show and taking it on the road and doing it off-Broadway and sharing it with folks in that way. So to anyone that is interested in turning your story or your compost into art, I would say absolutely do it. And I think getting clear on the reasons why, getting clear on my why like so many people talk about was very helpful in being able to see it through because not everybody was thrilled that I was doing that play. So make sure that you're clear, you know, with yourself as to our intentions, and also making sure that it's not causing harm, right? So, like, making sure that we have processed enough to be at a point where we can share it in a way that brings more healing and connection in the world instead of, you know, causing more harm.

Lauren: Yeah, of course. And how would you tell someone to get clear on what it is that they want to do? They have this feeling, like, "Oh, I know, there's more. I'm not doing what I'm meant to do."

Suzy: Yeah, I really believe... I think we were talking about Mary, your guest on the show, and she talks about how each of us has all the knowledge within us. So, you know, it's really about uncovering what's already there. We're all born... You know, little kids are like, "I wanna do this and I wanna do that." And, you know, they're very comfortable with desire and with stating it, and then we have layers on top that confuse things or distract us or send us on a different path and, you know, might be connected to survival strategies from when we were little kids or we wanted to please and we can get can kind of thwarted on our path. And so, for me, as I'm supporting clients, it's more about, how can we hold base for who we really are and how can we let some of those layers peel off or melt off? Hopefully, you know, it can be a very beautiful, transformative, and even a gentle process in letting some of that, you know, whether it's the stress or the



anxiety or the depression, you know, kind of getting to the root of that so that we can allow it to peel back and reveal who we really are and all of the desire and purpose that comes with it.

Lauren: Yeah, no, that's great. And I firmly believe we each have our own unique print or, like, we each have our own handprint, we're each unique in our own way. So when we think, "Oh, but somebody is already doing it." But nobody's doing it the way you can. There's nobody that can do it the way you can do what you wanna do. And so if there's something you wanna do, you can do it. Nobody can speak it the way you can. No one can write it the way you can do it. No one can dance it the way you can or perform it as you, whatever it is.

Suzy: And we just need more too. We need more of that in the world. So, you know, you are an attorney, and, you know, so most people don't say, "I can't be a lawyer. There's already lawyers in the world." You know, it's, like, we need more. We need more healing. We need more healers, more artists.

Lauren: Yeah, absolutely. Now, how do you help people feel the relief that they need, especially right now? What do you suggest? I mean, I guess that's an individualized question. It's a tough one, but there's so many people that do need relief.

Suzy: Absolutely. So through COVID, I've been working with a lot of organizations and supporting them with their staff. And so I've heard from hundreds of mostly women who I have the fortune to work with, and this is a huge one that comes up, is, like, just, "I need relief." You know, we surveyed people and that's one of the top things that we're hearing is, "I need relief." Once they understand the problem a little bit more, there are thousands of ways that we can address it, you know, whether that's through the breath, whether that's through journaling, whether that's through movement and stretching, whether it's through creating healthier boundaries for ourselves or with work or family. So those are some ways that we can address, but really taking time to, like, look at this, not only individual but collective issues that are coming up. And you're right, it's individual for each person. It's different for each organization as to, like, what is causing the stressors and the pain and the isolation for folks. But then once we spend time with that, like, really, again, trusting that we all have this innate wisdom to be able, when we have the opportunity... And it's really helpful to have someone holding space for us and to do this work in community with our peers. One of my favorite quotes from Miriam Greenspan is that healing happens in community. And I really believe that. You know, it's not just by ourselves on our meditation cushion and it's not just in therapy. Those are all



important, but we also need that social healing, social justice piece, which is part of what I believe that we're all, both individually and collectively, searching for.

So that was kind of a roundabout way to look at relief, spending time with the problem and trusting that we have answers within us. So a lot of my work is facilitating folks to do that inward journey, and we do a lot of journaling and we use a lot of different tools to help us get there.

Lauren: And for journaling, I was always taught to handwrite not on a keyboard. Is it the same? Is that what you teach?

Suzy: I believe so. There's something about that hand-head, heart-body connection with the handwriting. A lot of my plays and screenplays I do by hand and then I transfer it over. So there's something to that for sure.

Lauren: Yeah. Now, you founded The Breathing Room. Can you talk about the importance of breath? I don't mean just for staying alive, but do you wanna talk about what The Breathing Room is and the importance of breath?

Lauren: Yes. Let's start with the breath, the first thing we do when we're born, the last thing we do before we die. It's pretty essential, pretty key, and yet many of us have don't have the skills, haven't taken the time to really unlearn poor patterns of breath. So we're all born knowing how to breathe naturally. The belly expands. The ribs expand on the inhale. It gently comes back on on the exhale. And then, you know, because of stress, because of nervous system being out of whack, because of...especially maybe for women, you know, not wanting to appear fat, these kinds of things that... Or wearing bras or tight-fitting clothing, that we are not breathing in a way that's most supportive to our bodies. And so really just getting back to the essential breath and the effects that that can have on not just our nervous system, but then how that affects everything else in our lives and our choices. So the breath is very key to what we do, and it is...you know, taking a full breath is one of the most radical things that we can do sometimes, especially in difficult moments.

And so we even notice... I mean, we all do this. You know, the breath really reflects our emotions and our thoughts. So we all know that when we're feeling anxious, the breath might be more shallow and higher up in the body, and then when we're feeling calm and relaxed and safe, the breath might be longer. We might especially have a longer exhale. And so just really building our awareness to this very key and "basic" human thing that we do so that we can have more ease and more influence over our thoughts and emotions. And then, you know,





The Breathing Room, I started it about eight years ago, and I really wanted to bring together both yoga and the arts and all of these healing arts kind of in one space and really make it accessible to folks. So a lot of people that we work with are newer to the practice, and so they have all of the, you know, reservations like, "I can't do yoga because I can't touch my toes." I hear that a lot. "I'm not flexible enough," or, you know, "I can't meditate because my mind never shuts off." And of course, that's not really the goal of meditation, you know. It's really becoming more friends with our minds, with our bodies, and accepting ourselves where we are. And so that was my passion behind opening The Breathing Room. And now we've been partnering with, like you mentioned, the Downtown Detention Center where we live and bringing yoga to the women in Mayfaire and also working with behavioral health centers, working with mental health patients. And then we started Breathing Access, the nonprofit. I founded it and I serve as executive director, and it was really a matter of, like, how can we bring this to use? And so we are partnering with special schools in our local school district to support not only students but also educators and staff because the research shows that when we take care of ourselves, we're better equipped to take care and to teach others.

Lauren: Definitely. If they're doing it, they're going to pass that on. I mean, I talk about... That's a good segue to, what practices do you do on a regular basis?

Suzy: So, to me, you know, like, some of my friends are like, "Oh, you're so disciplined because you do this, you know, every day." And I was like, "Huh, I never really thought of it as discipline because, for me, it's really my medication kind of a thing." For me, it's maintenance and if it makes me feel good, so naturally I want to do it, and I feel it when I don't. So as far as what I personally do every day, and this is not what's right for everybody, this is what's right for me right now. You know, I meditate in the mornings. I have my tea. I do my journaling. I do yoga. I walk pretty often. I'm getting into gardening. So those are some of the things that I do. And then I have boundaries with my phone and with work. And I'm also not on social media, and I haven't been on for a few years, and that's not right for everybody. It was right for me, and that could change at any moment, but those are some things that I do to maintain and stay healthy. And I have a pretty strong social group that I nurture my relationship. So those are some of the things.

Lauren: I love those. Those are so great. And what got you started, like, really in... Like, with the journaling, why would you have started? Here you are.



You're doing yoga. You founded the meditation. What made you start journaling?

Suzy: I really trace that back to... I took a course called "The Artist's Way" that a lot of people have heard of and very familiar with. And so I love Julia Cameron. I read all her books, and so I started doing morning pages and I've just kept it up to go on.

Lauren: Yeah, that explains it right there. Okay, yeah. Amanda Payton, one of my earlier... I think it was early... Her episode was out I think in January. She does "The Artist's Way" and she talks about journaling. And she also talks about, for somebody having a hard time getting up in the morning, just make one of your goals, "Wash one dish." Like, make your goals that small and easy. Don't make it look for a job, five jobs or, like, you know... She made the goal-setting so small, because that's how she was able to do things because she's been in that place. And I talked to her when she was on location in London, so, you know, the fires were raging here at the time and she was... And, you know, everything changes, so anyway. It's just very interesting.

Suzy: Yes, that is so important. I really wanna underscore that is really baby steps. So even as I sit here talking about... You know, and of course, at this point, I've customized my whole life around my practice and what's right for me. That it took a long time, it didn't happen overnight, and I am very lucky to have the life that I have right now and that I've built. But yes, the baby steps, you know, is really how we get to where we wanna go. So the teeniest tiniest action, you know, whether that'd be waking up at the same time every morning, you know, which is so important for our circadian rhythm, just finding that smallest little next step.

Lauren: Yeah, do you have a message of hope you wanna give?

Suzy: So many of the folks that I've been talking to during COVID and now post are dealing with isolation and feeling, like you talk so much about in your podcast, feeling alone. And so remembering that we are connected, whether that's to other people or whether that's spirit or nature or the families, you know, that we are not alone and that we are okay, that you are okay, and that you are safe. Hopefully, you know, if you're not safe, taking steps to get to a place to be safe. And once we're there, retraining our nervous system to know that we are okay, that we are safe and being able to create our lives from that space instead of creating from a place of fear and insecurity and isolation.



Lauren: That's such a good message to give. It's really important. And anybody who wants to get in touch with Suzy, all of her links and everything will be on the website. And she does private coaching. She does so much, but she does private coaching as well. I do wanna take a minute to mention that. Is there any question I should have asked you that I forgot to ask that you wish I had asked and we're going to be off of this and you're like, "Oh, Lauren didn't ask me this?"

Suzy: Okay, hold on. You should ask me to sing.

Lauren: Oh, I've never asked anybody to do that. Is there something in particular that you should be singing?

Suzy: So I can't believe I'm suggesting that but I hosted a group for leaders during COVID, and based on what each of them was struggling with, we created a collective song that I wrote, and it's a very simple... It's kind of like a little mantra, so I would like to share that with folks right now.

Lauren: Okay.

Suzy: And if you feel like humming along, that is so beautiful and balancing for our nervous system, so please feel free. It's a simple tune so I think you'll get it, just fun. I am brave. I am brave. I am brave. I am brave. I am worthy. I am more than enough. I am brave. I am brave. I am brave. I am brave. I am worthy. I am more than enough. You can keep singing that song. You can replace it with the words that are especially meaningful for you, like, "I am safe. I am safe. I am safe. I am worthy." But finding simple things that you can sing as a mantra. I do have an album on Spotify that we'll link to that has some soothing songs like this.

Lauren: That was wonderful. I had no idea what to expect. I was like, "Okay."

Suzy: Me either.

Lauren: The look on your face. You got to watch this on YouTube now so that you can see the look on Suzy's face when she said that. And you look radiant right now. I love that.

Suzy: Thank you.

Lauren: Yeah. This was fabulous. That was very, very fun and surprising. And you just made my day.



Suzy: Awesome.

Lauren: Yeah. Thank you so much for being a guest today on "52 Weeks of Hope."

Suzy: Thank you. Thank you so much for doing this.

Lauren: Yeah. I hope you enjoyed this week's episode and take with you Suzy's messages of hope, empowerment, and mindfulness. Such great messages we get to take into our week ahead. Join us in our Facebook group where we're talking about everything from today's podcast as well as gratitude and healing and reaching for your biggest dreams. We also have a monthly meetup in the "52 Weeks of Hope" Facebook group with different guests each month: leading, healing, and tapping, or breathwork and different types of modalities for you. So be sure to join the Facebook group and also get on the email list so that you know what's happening. You're one of the first in the know, so to speak. That's at [52weeksofhope.com](http://52weeksofhope.com).

And in September, we're having a free breathwork session, which is really fun and we all get to join in that together. So be sure to join in "52 Weeks of Hope" and the Facebook group and get on the email list on the website, [52weeksofhope.com](http://52weeksofhope.com). Next week, be sure to tune in for a PR expert, motivational speaker. She's a super motivational speaker. You will just be ready to go after listening to Michelle Lamont. She's also a coach. If you're sick of feeling alone, choosing the wrong path, wrong partners, things like that or that life's too hard feeling, Michelle has been there. That's for sure. And she's learned those hard lessons, and she is on next week's episode teaching you how to choose that easier path and listen to your higher self. She's personally manifested an interview with Oprah Winfrey, Kim Kardashian, Cindy Crawford. She just moved to her dream home on the beach right on the water. She's an amazing speaker, gigs all over the country right now, and listen for how she's truly turned her life around and she'll teach you how to do the same. That's next week for a really uplifting episode. Thank you so much for listening. If you're enjoying the podcast, please tell two of your friends as well as leave a positive review. I'm Lauren Abrams. Thanks again for listening.