

Speaker Biographies



At a young age, **Carl** began using alcohol as a way to mask the shame and pain he felt as a result of his ongoing battle with anxiety and depression. Eventually, this negative coping mechanism spun out of control and into addiction. In his recovery process over the last five years, Carl has learned healthy, effective ways to handle his emotions, as well as life's ups and downs. He views the lessons he continues to learn in recovery as valuable not only for those suffering from substance abuse, but to anyone facing life's challenges. He believes that the feelings that he struggles with are faced by young people everywhere. Carl's answer is to educate young people about mental health issues to lessen the stigma attached to such problems and to empower the youth community to voice their needs, allowing the greater community to build resources to support them. [Read Carl's full biography and see his video by clicking here.](#)



Beginning when she was a child, **Mariel** utilized negative coping mechanisms to battle her bi-polar disorder and feelings of insecurity and inferiority. After developing an eating disorder and resorting to self-harm, Mariel spent the majority of her teenage years afflicted with alcohol and drug addiction. Mariel entered recovery in 2007 and has been able to maintain continuous, long-term recovery since then. [Read Mariel's full biography by clicking here.](#)



In high school, **Jordan** had everything to live for. He was popular, had good grades, and was a star athlete. Over time, the pressures mounted. During his senior year of high school, Jordan attempted to take his own life by jumping from a ninth-story window. Jordan's miraculous survival propelled him to deal with his depression and learn healthier coping skills. Today, Jordan is a nationally recognized mental health advocate. He has addressed a Congressional briefing on Capitol Hill and participated in the National Conference on Mental Health, hosted by President Obama and Vice President Biden. He has been featured in three documentaries and his piece with ESPN E:60, "Unbreakable" was nominated for an Emmy. Jordan's presentation is meant to inspire, educate, and allow others to know that they're not alone. [Read Jordan's full biography and see his video by clicking here.](#)



From a young age, **Melissa** knew there was something different about her. Unlike her peers, she was constantly worried and experienced unbearable anxiety that manifested itself physically. As Melissa tried to hide her issues and fit in, she fell into a cycle of bullying as both victim and culprit. This reaction caused her to put on a mask, hiding behind a smile and sports while her internal struggle raged. In high school, Melissa was diagnosed with depression. After a friend recognized she was struggling and approached her about it, Melissa knew she needed help. Once she accepted her diagnosis of OCD and depression, Melissa realized that she wasn't alone. This inspired her to share her story, which led her to finding a purpose in her life. Today Melissa is an accomplished speaker, author of *The People You Meet In Real Life*, and an anti-bullying advocate. [Read Melissa's full biography and see her video by clicking here.](#)

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Andrew had it all entering his senior year at Muhlenberg College. He was a starting defensive back for the football team, named captain of the track and field team, and already had a full-time position upon graduation with a large accounting firm in Philadelphia. However, an injury in the first game of the season and increasing pressure to perform caused drastic changes for him. Andrew hid his struggles from family and friends as he pretended that everything was fine, until he experienced suicidal ideations and reached a point where he desperately needed help. With a strong support group behind him, Andrew and his family began taking the needed steps toward recovery. The overwhelmingly positive feedback he received inspired him to continue talking about mental health. [Read Andrew's full biography by clicking here.](#)



Jon grew up in a home of high-achievers, which led to high expectations. In middle school, he began to experience anxiety and his attempts to avoid the stress drove him to adopt negative coping skills. This set him on a path of self-destruction. In high school, Jon's use of drugs and alcohol culminated in a night where he almost lost his life. The depth of pain he experienced caused him to finally reach out for the support he needed. After turning to his family for help, and receiving their encouragement, Jon was able to find healthy coping skills that he still uses today to manage his anxiety. [Read Jon's full biography by clicking here.](#)



When she was 15 years old, **Katya** was sexually assaulted, leading to a subsequent unhealthy relationship. Unable to process these experiences and feeling too ashamed to share her trauma with those around her, Katya sank deeply into depression, anxiety, and negative coping mechanisms until she finally sought help. Equipped with a degree in advertising, her strong self-esteem, and ongoing mental wellness, Katya now enlightens others about the stigma surrounding mental health issues and healthy relationships. Katya's goal is to inform both males and females about the messages that they receive from society and the media regarding their physical and mental well-being and to educate them about consent, media literacy, and self-care. [Read Katya's full biography and see her video by clicking here.](#)



At 16, **Ali** became a volunteer firefighter and experienced sexual harassment, sexual assault, and years of bullying at the hands of her fellow firefighters. While struggling to pursue her passion for firefighting, Ali developed Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, which kept her stuck in the past and prevented her from engaging in life. Through working with a wonderful therapist and surrounding herself with the love and support of family and friends, Ali learned how to take her life back and live it freely. Ali has re-identified herself as a victor instead of a victim. She now lives as a national speaker, author, firefighter, and Emergency Medical Technician, who is passionate about sharing her struggles and encouraging others to persevere through their own challenges. [Read Ali's full biography and see her video by clicking here.](#)

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Drew's early teenage years were filled with tremendous sadness resulting from a severe case of depression. He began to self-harm in middle school and considered suicide. For a brief time, he was able to hide his depression and cutting, continuing to perform as an outstanding athlete and model student. Living two lives intensified his depression. In his sophomore year of high school, Drew attempted suicide for the second time. By the grace of a higher power, he survived. He experienced a turning point in his recovery, and turned his life into one of inspiring others to seek awareness and treatment. Through this forum, Drew informs others that they are not alone in facing their struggles and that recovery is indeed possible. [Read Drew's full biography and see his video by clicking here.](#)



Anxiety and stress were always a part of **Meghan's** life. A drastic change came during her teenage years, when the social pressure in school and tensions at home started to increase. She began to experience negative self-talk and body image, which led her to practicing negative coping skills as her feelings of anxiety and depression increased. Eventually, she faced a decision: does she get help or does she continue down a path of self-harm and substance use? Today, Meghan has well-developed positive coping skills and a strong support system to live an abundant life. [Read Meghan's full biography by clicking here.](#)



As a child, **Kristen** experienced significant trauma. When she reached her preteen years, Kristen didn't know how to manage what she was feeling and turned to alcohol, drugs, and self-harm to mask the pain that she so desperately wanted to keep locked away. As a result of this she suffered with debilitating depression and anxiety that affected her in her everyday life. After going to treatment, where she learned how to replace her negative coping skills with positive ones, she worked hard to incorporate those habits into her life. Kristen, being a young person in recovery, proves it's never too late or too early to get the help you need. [Read Kristen's full biography by clicking here.](#)



Deanna's story begins in high school, when she began struggling with her body image, depression, and overall feelings of inadequacy. Not knowing how to process these negative emotions, Deanna turned to food in an attempt to cope and eventually developed an eating disorder. In college, she reached a point where she couldn't see past the darkness and attempted suicide. After returning to treatment, she learned to challenge her negative thoughts and find healthier ways to cope. Once she discovered that the thoughts and feelings that led her down that path were not as uncommon as she thought, she was inspired to speak out about her experiences in the hope of showing students they are not alone and that help is out there. [Read Deanna's full biography by clicking here.](#)