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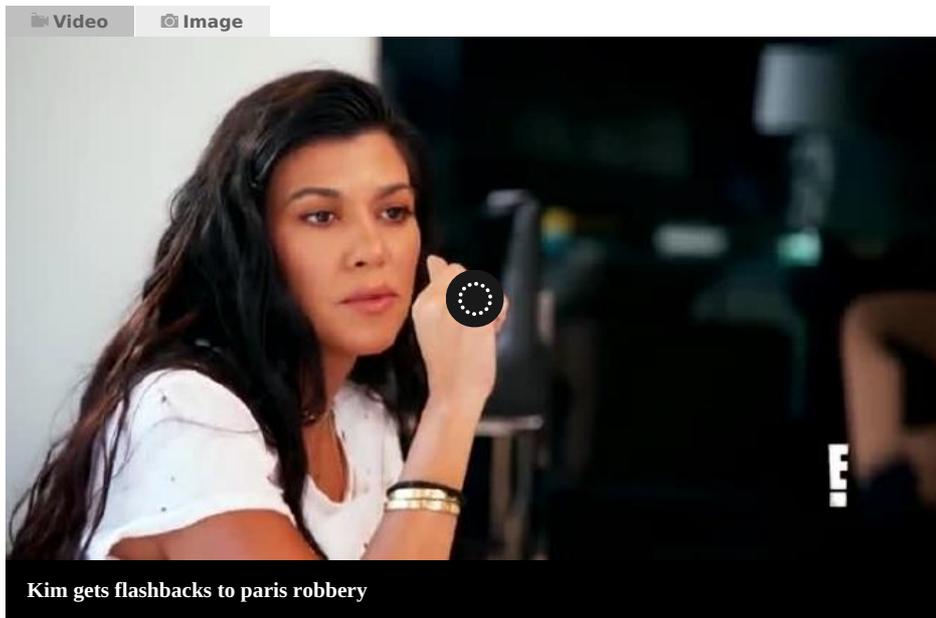
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Secret OCD nightmare of glamorous New York celebrity reporter

APRIL 29, 2017 10:51AM



Kim gets flashbacks to paris robbery

Emma Reynolds, news.com.au @emmareyn

WHEN 50 Cent is waiting for a tete-a-tete on a balcony high above New York City, you don't back out.

Not even when you're paralysed with anxiety, your head splitting, your breathing ragged and your fears tumbling out in front of the younger brother who has brought you to work.

Trembling, Allison Kugel stepped out of the car, into the lift, on to the terrace that would normally have filled her with vertigo-induced terror, and calmly conducted the perfect celebrity interview.

"For almost two hours, I was perfectly fine," she told news.com.au. "Then I sat down with my brother in the car, and my head feels funny and I can't breathe again."

This was the Long Island-based star reporter's life for almost a decade. On the outside, she appeared to have an enviable career, racing around the world interviewing the most famous people on the planet — the Kardashians, Elle MacPherson, Mike Tyson, Demi Lovato, Chelsea Handler — but inside, she was

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falling apart.

Kugel had suffered from anxiety and panic attacks from the age of eight, when she began learning how to hide her problems. At 12, she was battling obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), checking the door was locked and the stove was off over and over again. "I didn't know where that voice was coming from," she said. "I had it in the back of my mind all the time."



The 42-year-old has written a book about juggling panic attacks and OCD with a glamorous lifestyle interviewing the world's most famous celebrities. Source:Supplied

By the time she was a teenager, she remembers "bursting out of the movie theatre like it was on fire" during panic attacks. "It was pretty hard to hide," she said. "I'd find ways to check things on the sly. I'm trying to carry on a conversation like everything's normal, but they'll catch you even if you think you're being stealth.

"Even to this day, it's a work in progress."

Kugel was ashamed of her problems. She expertly hid her irrational fears about her safety to forge out a high-flying, glamorous career as a top US entertainment journalist, and a reputation as a brave and talented celebrity profiler.

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In 2012, the year she hit rock bottom and was hospitalised 15 times, she remembers sitting in her mother's house, ringing around rehab clinics, before her next phone call, to John McCain's daughter Meghan to discuss her father's 2008 presidential bid.

"I would have a strange feeling like my head was in a vice," she said. "I'd feel dizzy, like I was floating above my body."

How would she look? "Completely confident and knowledgeable," she said. "That was the odd part."

For Kugel, immersing herself in the life stories of politicians and the glitterati became "an escape", and even a kind of therapy, she said.

"I love hearing about people's lives, asking questions," she said. "It's almost like an addiction. If people just talked to each other, they wouldn't feel so alone. You don't know about someone else's life, no matter what it looks like in magazines or on TV."



The author says that finding out A-listers including Kristin Chenoweth, pictured, suffered with anxiety and depression was a form of therapy for her. Picture: Valerie Macon/AFP Source:AFP

She described meeting actress Kristin Chenoweth, "the consummate professional, always bubbly" and learning that the West Wing and Glee star had suffered from depression.

"That shocked me."

In an anecdote from her new book, *Journaling Fame: A Memoir of a Life Unhinged and on the Record*, she recalls an interview with Sopranos star Joe Pantoliano.

"I listened to Joe recount stories from his episodes of anxiety and depression, and I silently commiserated," she wrote.

From Emma Stone to Zayn Malik to Ruby Rose, celebrities are increasingly opening up about their mental health struggles. The 42-year-old says she was intrigued to hear Kendall Jenner speak openly about her anxiety, and how her fears of getting on planes and catwalks had affected her modelling career. Having interviewed Kendall's three older sisters on various occasions, Kugel still has questions about Kim.

"The three girls are very different," she said. "[Kim and I] just didn't connect as much.

"She just wanted to talk about body image, make-up and fashion ... pretty surface answers. Is that really what she's focused on?"

The reality star has previously confessed to anxious thoughts on *Keeping Up With*

the Kardashians and recently vanished from social media after she was robbed at gunpoint in Paris and husband Kanye West experienced a very public breakdown. “I wouldn’t be surprised if she’s struggling with anxiety at this point,” Kugel said. “I hope she’s in therapy.”

The journalist quit her job after her own *annus horribilis* in 2012, the year she split from her son’s father, her grandmother and father fell ill and she collapsed with “the most severe anxiety of my life.” She cycled through various kinds of medication and therapy, slowly got back on her feet and started writing her recently published book.



Allison says Kim Kardashian West was a closed book. Picture: Kevork Djanssezian/Getty Images Source: Getty Images

“[I was] unable to experience any emotion other than fear and the many physical sensations that racked my defeated body,” she recalled in her memoir. “My body showed me no mercy, perhaps because my racing mind did not extend that courtesy to my body.

“I watched as the Ativan [a strong form of psychoactive drug benzodiazepine] made its way from the clear plastic bag, down the long thin tube, into the open port, and

into my vein. Within what felt like mere seconds, and for the first time in eight long and excruciating weeks, my body fell into a state of rest and release, albeit an artificial doped-up state. It was the kind of drugged haze where you don't even care if you truly exist or not."

Kugel told news.com.au she now wants to help others see that even superstars and high-achievers struggle with their mental health. "I felt so isolated my whole life, so much embarrassment. But 40 million people in the US alone suffer with anxiety.

"I want to be a voice for people. If you're in a crowded room, airplane, about to go on stage, don't be afraid to turn to someone and say you're anxious. Tell a parent, sibling or friend. Talk about it, don't hold it in. Get into meditation, work on breathing from your diaphragm.

"A psychologist said to me people with anxiety tend to be creative and intelligent. People in writing or music, our emotions tend to be closer to the surface, our senses tend to be heightened.

"We live in a crazy world. A lot of people are anxious. Have a sense of curiosity about the challenges in life, a sense of looking at the big picture."

Journaling Fame: A memoir of a life unhinged and on the record is available now at fishpond.com.au and booktopia.com.au.

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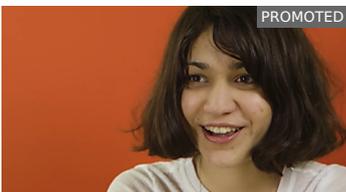
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