



Season 3
Episode 6 Transcript

A Panic Attack and a Calming Voice

Torah Kachur:

October, 2017. K.Page Stewart Valdes is commuting to work, taking the subway from Brooklyn to Manhattan.

K.Page Stuart Valdes:

It's a subway, man. It's loud. It stinks. I can't say anybody looks excited at 7:15 in the morning.

Torah Kachur:

It's also packed.

K.Page Stuart Valdes:

The train was so full that I couldn't reach the pole. I was just being propped up by everybody else that was around me that was holding a pole.

Torah Kachur:

A typical morning on the New York City subway and then out of nowhere ...

K.Page Stuart Valdes:

Not only did we stop abruptly, we were in a dark tunnel. You could see nothing. A shared sort of emotional panic goes through the car.

Torah Kachur:

No one knows what's happening. K.Page can't move. Her mind starts racing.

K.Page Stuart Valdes:

All the fear just rose to the surface immediately.

Torah Kachur:

That fear, it's connected to a stroke she had a month earlier. She's just gone back to work. Now, stuck in the dark among strangers, the fear takes over.

K.Page Stuart Valdes:

I just think I'm going to have a stroke again, and that's what I think is going to happen right now.

Torah Kachur:

K.Page can't keep the panic inside.

K.Page Stuart Valdes:

And I just started crying profusely, just could not stop sobbing.

Torah Kachur:

The train doesn't move. She is sure something terrible is going to happen.

K.Page Stuart Valdes:

I'm going to die right now. I think I'm going to die right now.

Torah Kachur:

I'm Torah Kachur and this is *Tell Me What Happened*, true stories of people helping people, an original podcast by OnStar. Every day when you wake up, you don't know if you'll be a person who needs help or if you'll be a person that helps someone else. It's important to remember that it's in all of us to be either one of those things every day.

September 12th, 2017. K.Page has just finished a busy day of work.

K.Page Stuart Valdes:

I came home, I exercised, I sang, which I usually do every day.

Torah Kachur:

She's a writer, filmmaker, and educator living in Brooklyn, New York.

K.Page Stuart Valdes:

I looked at my phone and was like, "Oh, I have to go. I'm meeting my friend at six at a restaurant around the corner."

Torah Kachur:

K.Page goes to her bedroom to change her clothes. She has no idea that her life is also about to change.

K.Page Stuart Valdes:

I was pulling my jeans up and I got to about right above my knees and I just literally lost control of my whole body. I landed on the floor and I kept trying with this left hand to pull myself up. I realized very quickly that I was paralyzed. I felt like I was underneath like a 400 pound bag of sand. I could kind of wiggle a little bit, but I couldn't will my body to do much more than just sort of struggle.

Torah Kachur:

K.Page is lying on her bedroom floor. She has no idea what's happening or what to do next.

K.Page Stuart Valdes:

I was scared and I was confused, and I thought, "I'm just going to wait and see if this passes."

Torah Kachur:

Her husband, the only other person who'd be in their apartment, works long days. She doesn't expect him to be home for hours, but tonight of all nights, he finishes early.

K.Page Stuart Valdes:

If that had not have happened, I might not be talking to you right now. 100 percent. I could be ... I don't know, I could be paralyzed.

Torah Kachur:

Her husband, Harvey, walks into their apartment carrying groceries.

K.Page Stuart Valdes:

He turned around and he saw me lying on the floor half dressed, and he looked at me and he said, "What are you doing? Are you meditating?" Then he just walked back to the kitchen and started putting away the groceries, which is funny and horrifying.

Torah Kachur:

But K.Page doesn't answer.

K.Page Stuart Valdes:

That's the first time I realized that I couldn't talk. Things got a little scarier then.

Torah Kachur:

It doesn't take long before Harvey realizes something odd is happening.

K.Page Stuart Valdes:

He sat on the edge of the bed and just looked down at me. I saw something on his face register like, "Something's really not good here."

Torah Kachur:

Harvey reaches down to help his wife. His touch helps, somehow. Suddenly K.Page is able to move.

K.Page Stuart Valdes:

I could walk. I could sit. I was still frozen in my right arm. I kind of sat there not really knowing what was happening, but feeling like, I just don't feel good. I think I want to take a shower and go to bed.

Torah Kachur:

While she's in the shower, Harvey answers K.Page's phone. It's the friend she was supposed to meet for dinner, wondering where she is. Harvey tells her how he just found his wife on the floor, unable to move.

K.Page Stuart Valdes:

My friend had known somebody very close to her who she loved very much who suffered a stroke, and my friend said, "You need to get her out of the shower and to the hospital right now." My husband was like, "No, she's not. She's walking. She probably just fainted. She's really healthy." My friend was insistent. Insistent. Insistent.

Torah Kachur:

Harvey jumps into action.

K.Page Stuart Valdes:

He comes in and he rips me out of the shower and he said, “We’re getting ready to go to the hospital.”

Torah Kachur:

The hospital is only three blocks from their apartment. They decide to walk — faster than calling an ambulance.

K.Page Stuart Valdes:

He just walked into the emergency room, walked straight up to the desk and said, “I think my wife’s having a stroke.” And they brought me in immediately.

Torah Kachur:

Minutes later, she’s being examined.

K.Page Stuart Valdes:

I tried to talk. My husband said it was just total gibberish coming out like [muffled sounds]. From reading his face, I knew I failed at talking.

Torah Kachur:

They take K.Page for a CAT scan immediately. It reveals that there’s a stroke in progress. The doctors decide to give her a very strong drug. It can have some serious side effects, but the doctors say ...

K.Page Stuart Valdes:

“If we don’t give her this drug, the stroke will just play out and she’ll definitely be paralyzed.”

Torah Kachur:

The drug works. When she leaves the hospital just four days later, she’s quickly regaining her motor and cognitive abilities, but despite hundreds of tests, no one can explain why K.Page had the stroke, why she’s recovering so quickly, or if she’ll have another one.

K.Page Stuart Valdes:

I was doing follow-ups with a hematologist, a rheumatologist, an endocrinologist, a cardiologist, the neurologist.

Torah Kachur:

Eventually the neurologist says ...

K.Page Stuart Valdes:

“If you’re okay with us not knowing why this happened, then we are okay with us not knowing why this happened.”

Torah Kachur:

K.Page is not okay with not knowing, but what else can she do? A few weeks later, it’s hard to tell she’s even had a stroke.

K.Page Stuart Valdes:

Could I get on the subway by myself? Yes. Could I go to work? Could I talk?

Yes. Could I write? Yes. I couldn't write as fast as I was writing previously, but I could write. I wasn't 100 percent, but I was probably like 85, 90 percent on the external. Internally, I wasn't at all.

Torah Kachur:

But no one can see that.

K.Page Stuart Valdes:

I started to have anxiety, panic about having another stroke, and also I recognized that I was so lucky, that if my husband didn't come home, I might have a paralyzed face. If the emergency department didn't have a neurology unit, I could have been in recovery for three years, four years. It could have been anything, and that made me very anxious.

Torah Kachur:

K.Page keeps those feelings to herself. Everyone around her is so relieved that she's okay. She wants to believe she's okay too.

K.Page Stuart Valdes:

That's where the sort of performance of my wellness kind of started, where I wasn't okay internally, but everybody was so happy that I was okay externally that there was a push. My family was like, "Okay, let's return to normal. Why don't you go back to work?"

Torah Kachur:

This is *Tell Me What Happened*, a podcast created by OnStar to showcase the importance of a human connection when you need help, whether you're stranded in a hurricane or scared and alone on a packed subway car. A month ago, K.Page had a stroke. Doctors haven't been able to explain why or tell her if she'll have another. Now, with a lot of encouragement from her family, she's getting back to normal and going back to work, even though ...

K.Page Stuart Valdes:

I didn't want to go, I didn't think I was ready.

Torah Kachur:

But she doesn't want to let anyone down. Physically, she seems fine. No one knows she's terrified of having another stroke and especially nervous about spending an hour and 20 minutes deep underground in the subway to get to work. K.Page starts her commute at 7:15 AM in Brooklyn.

K.Page Stuart Valdes:

I'm five feet tall so a lot of times the people that are taller, they get to the poles quicker because they can reach above everybody, and so the smaller people feed in underneath them and get held up in some kind of human Jenga. That's what was happening.

Torah Kachur:

She's surrounded by strangers.

K.Page Stuart Valdes:

I say New York is both incredibly intimate and totally anonymous. You're all up in everybody's business and you don't know anything about them at the same time.

Torah Kachur:

Then suddenly, the train stops in the middle of a long, dark tunnel. No one knows what's happening. K.Page feels trapped.

K.Page Stuart Valdes:

How would I possibly get out of here and am I going to have a stroke again? Nobody knows why this happened. It happened when I was healthy. It doesn't matter that I'm healthy now. So all of that fear that I was living with and the fear of getting on the subway just came to the surface so strong, so quick in a panic attack.

Torah Kachur:

She can't stop herself from crying.

K.Page Stuart Valdes:

My face was just covered in tears and whatever was coming out of my nose, I don't even know.

Torah Kachur:

The more she cries, the more she's convinced she's about to have another stroke and no one will be able to save her in time. Despite her growing fear, K.Page is trying to hide her tears.

K.Page Stuart Valdes:

I didn't want to make a spectacle of myself. I didn't want to also make everybody else more nervous because everybody was nervous already, and that's when this wonderful person saw me.

Torah Kachur:

In the human Jenga of the stalled subway car, the woman wedged directly in front of K.Page chooses not to ignore this quietly sobbing stranger.

K.Page Stuart Valdes:

She was facing me and she just sort of raised her eyes and looked up at me, broke that anonymity, and she just said, "Mami, are you okay?"

Torah Kachur:

The woman has a Spanish accent. K.Page's husband Harvey is Colombian American.

K.Page Stuart Valdes:

I speak very bad Spanish with his family.

Torah Kachur:

In fact, this stranger looks a little like her mother-in-law. The way she calls her Mami, a term of familiarity, is comforting.

K.Page Stuart Valdes:

I just started talking to her and just saying I had a stroke and I just think I'm going to have a stroke again and that's what I think is going to happen right now. It's going to happen right now. It's probably going to happen right now. I'm going to die right now. I think I'm going to die right now.

Torah Kachur:

The woman doesn't pull away. She isn't startled by K.Page's tears or her fears.

K.Page Stuart Valdes:

She put her arm in front of her torso, kind of like a railing, and she said, "Take my arm." There was something about this person, her warmth, her willingness to see me in a completely vulnerable state and to decide to just join me in that state. She had a gentleness about her, so I responded by just gravitating to her like, "Yes, I will take your arm," and then she just took a very deep breath and she breathed out and she was maintaining eye contact with me the whole time, and she sort of gestured inviting me to do that with her, and I started breathing with her. She was instinctively creating a space where it was just okay for me to have a panic attack in the subway in public, in the middle of other people.

Torah Kachur:

Word comes through that the stoppage was due to a bomb threat, now cleared, in Penn Station. The train starts moving. K.Page and the stranger keep breathing until the next station where they're pushed out with a wave of people relieved to get off the subway.

K.Page Stuart Valdes:

We just were separated. We didn't get to say goodbye, nothing, and I sort of thought that's that.

Torah Kachur:

She drifts along with a crowd of people, a little stunned by what just happened.

K.Page Stuart Valdes:

But then as I was walking, she caught up to me and grabbed my hand and she said, "I'm not leaving you." It's very amazing that she did that.

Torah Kachur:

Together they figure out the best route for K.Page to get to work.

K.Page Stuart Valdes:

She waited at the platform with me until the connecting train came. She held my hand the whole time. I wanted her to come on the train with me. I was like, "Come on", and she was like, "No, necesito trabajo." She had to go to work, and so I was standing right next to the door and I was waving, and then for some reason, I don't know why, I just said, I love you. I said, "Te amo" and she was like, "Te amo, igualmente, mami, igualmente," and then the doors closed, and then the train left.

Torah Kachur:

Normally on *Tell Me What Happened*, we tell both sides of the story, the person who needs help and the stranger who shows up to help at just the right moment. This time, though, the stranger that helped K.Page is still a stranger.

K.Page, what did her help mean to you that day?

K.Page Stuart Valdes:

Everything. I realized that I was having real emotional problems. I didn't know that, because everyone in my family was so relieved that I was recovering quickly and the whole event was so traumatizing for everybody. And I did not know how much those decisions that I was making for the sake of other people's comfort, I did not know how much that was impacting me until that day. So I sought out a therapist who worked with different approaches, and that took probably until about eight months ago for me to stop having panic attacks of some kind.

Torah Kachur:

Do you think the stranger knows how much she helped you?

K.Page Stuart Valdes:

I don't, and I really would love it if we could find her. Oh my God, what's your name? Where do you live? Thank you for seeing me. Thank you for not being afraid. Somebody could have looked at me and had a very non-compassionate response, could have said, "This person's crying. What's up with them?" I would say, "Thank you for seeing my humanity. Thank you for being unafraid of my emotions. I'm sorry I speak bad Spanish." I would say all of these things. "Do you want to come to my house for dinner?" I would say all of those things.

Torah Kachur:

K.Page, I'm really glad you're well and I'm really happy you shared your story.

K.Page Stuart Valdes:

Yeah, it was beautiful.

Torah Kachur:

If you want to help K.Page find this kind stranger, please share this episode. You could be part of a very meaningful reunion. You could also find yourself in this stranger's shoes one day or experiencing challenges with your mental health, like K.Page, or both. I'm turning to a mental health expert, Natalia Dayan, for some advice. Natalia is a licensed social worker and the global strategy director at Crisis Text Line, where she launched their Spanish language service.

What do you think of the stranger in K.Page's story?

Natalia Dayan:

I think it's a great example of what to do when you see someone struggling. I think our hero in this story did everything right, and I think the most important

thing that our hero in this story is doing is she's not trying to fix it. She's not trying to fix the problem, and most of the time we just need to be there for that person, and I think in this story, the level of empathy. I think right now we live in a world that unfortunately sometimes it's busy with our own stuff and we're all moving forward, but I think the level of empathy that she showed, the no judgment, right? Sometimes when we're struggling, especially in a moment of crisis, of intense crisis, we get caught up in our own heads, and the most important thing is to get out of your head, even if it's for a moment.

Breathing can do that, which is what she was doing, helping her with breathing exercises. Other grounding exercises is looking around you, identifying things that you're seeing, touching the ground. I think that wisdom in that moment to just focus on the now, focus on getting through, keeping her company and no judging, no judging anything that was happening in the moment.

Torah Kachur:

It struck me, the language barrier. What can we do if we don't even speak the same language?

Natalia Dayan:

Yes. That was really wonderful to see how empathy can go beyond language. We can be from different cultures, we can speak different languages, and still we can recognize pain in one another. I think even if you don't speak the language, being present and showing up, you can still do that without the words. You can make eye contact, you can nod along to show that you're invested, that you're there with the person. So all the body language, it becomes at play when you don't have the actual language.

Torah Kachur:

Sometimes people can be afraid to help. How do you help and know what to do, but also keep yourself safe?

Natalia Dayan:

That is a very valid concern. I think it's really important that first we assess our surroundings, that we feel safe going in, and if we don't, that's okay. There are other ways that we can get help. You can alert an official or someone around you that can try to help the person. Your safety should be your priority, and not only your physical safety. What is your mental health state like? Do you have the mental health and emotional space at this time to hold space for someone else? If you don't, if you're going through your own stuff, it's okay to not do that. We can't pour from an empty cup.

Torah Kachur:

These days people are dealing with a lot of uncertainty, a lot of unknowns, a lot of stressors. How common is this kind of anxiety that we just don't see?

Natalia Dayan:

I think it's more common than we think, and I think in this story also it shows it's a lot easier for us to talk about our physical health and take care of our physical health than it is our mental health. I think that it's really important to

start taking care of our mental health the same way that we do our physical health. That means having regular checkups. The same way that you do your regular checkups for your physical health, you do for your mental health. I think in our society we're now fixed on maybe waiting until we lost all control that we feel like we can't take it anymore. We pride in trying to solve things on our own and pushing as much as possible, but it's so important to reach out much earlier than that.

When you start feeling like something's changing, like something's different – and it's okay to get support, there's a lot of stigma around mental health – but we need to break those barriers. In the same way that no one would expect you to manage a stroke on your own, we don't expect you to manage mental health on your own. That's okay. You need to ask for help and ask as early as possible.

Torah Kachur:

I think a lot of people think, “Well, my problems aren't as bad as the next person, so my crisis doesn't count.” What do you say to that?

Natalia Dayan:

Yes, it's okay to take space. Just because we take space, we're not taking away from others, so we don't need to compare what's happening to us to other people. At Crisis Text Line, a lot of people are like, “Well, what is a crisis?” We don't define it for you. Whatever you feel is a crisis or whatever you feel is causing distress, that's important enough to us to talk to you. It's okay to take that time and that space to heal yourself and to take care of yourself.

Torah Kachur:

Natalia, thank you so much.

Natalia Dayan:

Yes, absolutely. Thank you, and thank you for talking about mental health and helping one another.

Torah Kachur:

That's it for this episode of OnStar's *Tell Me What Happened*, true stories of people helping people. Let's share some love for people who help others in big ways and small. If you'd like to help recognize the stranger who helped K.Page on the subway, please share this episode and while you're at it, share some love for this podcast. It really helps if you review and rate us or share this with someone who would enjoy it. On behalf of OnStar, I'm Torah Kachur and please, be safe out there.