

# On facing your fear



Actor, comedian, and writer Alyssa Limperis discusses loss, securing your finances, and doing it scared.

January 31, 2025 -

As told to Cat Woods, 2518 words.

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**You studied both comedy and theatrical performance at two prestigious institutions, and I'm wondering, did you intend on pursuing both comedic and dramatic roles or even writing those sorts of productions from pretty early on?**

I think that being a creative is sort of like a long battle to saying what it really is you want to do. So I think that I knew I always wanted to act, both dramatically and comedically, but I was always inclined more towards comedy early on, and I did improv in college. Then, there was something a little bit more tangible about comedy, so I think that I started out focusing on comedy, but I think part of me, deep down, knew I wanted to do drama and comedy all along.

**Have you auditioned for or wanted to audition for any dramatic screen roles, and maybe agents or casting directors have said, "No, we can't envision you in this dramatic role, because we haven't seen you do that before"?**

I'm sure maybe those conversations are happening. I haven't heard that. Who knows though? Maybe I have not been considered for something because of my comedy, but just this week I'm on *Dexter* as a sort of a dramatic role, in which I'm playing a lawyer. I have a short film coming out with my friends where I play a girl who just attempted suicide, and it's super dark. I think that we all have so many dimensions, and I am lucky to be here and alive in a time where I can make my own stuff. I think that when I started, I started basically by making all of my own comedic videos, because at that time I didn't have an agent or a manager, and I really wanted to act and show who I was comedically, and how lucky that I had a phone and editing software, and I was able to do that.

I felt so happy that I was like, even if I'm not getting a role, I know that I am getting to do what I want, which is be funny and show people what I think it is that I do or that's unique to me, and I think I started doing that with drama too, where it's like once I decided, "Okay. I love comedy, I also want to merge into drama," I made some short films, I wrote some pieces that were a little bit darker, and that kind of naturally built to a place where, then, I also had dramatic roles on my reel. So, in the same way that the internet helped me become visibly a comedian, I think short films and independent projects helped me show that I can also do dramatic work.

**I'm very interested in that short film. Sometimes it's hard to see, especially indie stuff, in Australia, but you're going to have to let me know when that's out so I can hunt it down.**

I will. I did a special called *No Bad Days*, which was about losing my dad to brain cancer, and that was a standup show when I started it. I think the two worlds of drama and comedy live so closely together. It was like, "I'm going to comment on what's happening in my life. This is what's happening, and the way that I'm going to comment on it is showing both the dark side and the comedic side of it."

**Have you ever referred to someone else in a sketch, and later had to navigate a conversation with them, knowing**

**that they know what you've said?**

Oh, gosh. No, but it's funny you say that, because anytime I make videos with my mom, so my mom films, when I make those videos of her, basically anytime I'm back east and I'm making an East Coast video. I'll always want to say a name, and it always takes me 20 minutes to find a funny name that isn't a name of one of my mom's friends, for that exact reason. No, I'm pretty fascinated, usually by strangers or behaviors that I see in public, so it's usually something that I see and I recognize even within myself. That's usually where all my stuff comes from. I like to have love in all my characters, so even if they're lunatics or they're doing things that seem crazy, you almost see the pain behind their eyes. Why is this woman talking so much in a coffee shop? It's like there's a pain and loneliness there, so I like to always have some empathy for the character, even if it's a wonky sketch.

**I'm wondering whether you've had experiences of raising issues in stand-up or videos, and later, people maybe using that in a way that feels like a violation of some nature?**

I think that the good outweighs the bad. I think that I remember the first time of breaking that seal. I wrote about having an eating disorder and being in recovery. It was one of my first published pieces, and I have never felt so exposed in my life, and I remember wanting to crawl in a hole. I felt so naked, and then it goes away, and then you give it less power. My first blog was called "What I Mean When I Say I'm Okay," and it was basically this long piece about what it was like taking care of my dad as he was dying, and so, both pieces, I do remember feeling just like a lot of fear at first, but then you give it less power.

There's less power in an eating disorder if you've said it out loud, you've shared it, and people understand and can share that they've been through it too. Oh, now we're less alone. So many people coming up to me, "I've dealt with my parent dying. I've dealt with this person dying. I've dealt with an eating disorder," and I think loneliness is basically the big killer. That's the one that makes you spiral and feel the worst. So, to kind of air out your stuff, it's scary, and sometimes you're like, "I wish I could just not talk about this," but the net benefit is always much bigger, and then you can just live your life. My life is, there's a lot of good I've done. I always talk to my friends who also deal with eating disorders, where I'm like, "Isn't it just wonderful that we are living, and all of our energy is going to this instead of what it used to go to?"

**LA is an expensive place to live, by all accounts, and I'm wondering, have you ever struggled to pay rent or bills, and has the way that you approach financial management changed over time?**

Let's see how to answer this. Again, I'm from Massachusetts, and I grew up in, my dad was a sheet metal salesman, my mom was a teacher, so I knew I wanted to act forever. I wanted to not go to college and act, but my parents were like, "You should go to college," so I did. So the minute I graduated, I wanted to go try acting, and my dad was very big on, "Right, but you need money, and you need structure in order to do that." So, I was a management consultant my first year out of college, so I had a suit. I just saw a picture of myself, and you know when you see a picture and you're like, "That's not me"? That was me. So, I had a suit and a little bob cut, and I would literally fly, Monday through Thursday, to Fortune 500 companies, and I was a financial analyst for them, and I went to Tuck Bridge business program, and so I was able to save up money there. My dad was like, "Stay for a year." I stayed for a year on the dot.

Before I quit, I got a job, waitressing tables at The Butcher's Daughter, which is this awesome vegetarian spot in New York. All this to say, I was very risk averse, financially, so I never leapt without a net financially. I'm pretty big on that because I think that in order to be creative, you don't want to have to be worrying about money, so even if it takes up more of your time to work a full-time job, if you're not worried about how you're going to pay your bills, how you're going to live, how you're going to eat the foods you want to eat, then that creative energy is going to go somewhere else. Then, I worked at Conde Nast, and I was a full-time there, making videos and writing, then, I started booking acting work. Then, once I did that, I moved to LA, and I've been fortunate to stay acting since then. All that to say, I have been okay and been fortunate to be okay, and that I do thank my dad. I'm grateful that I started in the career already with a nest egg, so I never had to feel panic.

**There's a great self-help book from the 1970s called Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway. It's a bit of a cult classic.**

Yes. I love it. I think I've heard something like that: "Do it scared." People don't get to a place where they don't get scared. It's just they do it scared, so whenever I'm nervous for an audition or for a job, I'm like, "Yeah, of course you are. This is part of it. Do it." Do it anyway, and if you're scared, you're growing and you're trying and you're pushing, whereas if you're not scared, you're probably staying in a comfortable spot. So, I feel in a comfortable spot right now, so it's nice to be like, "All right. You've got your comfort, you've got your friends, you've got your family, you've got your people. You can go do it scared."

**How often do you reflect on what you've achieved, and are you good at applauding yourself, or is that a work in progress?**

My dad has passed away, and I think that he was very funny, and again, he was a sheet metal salesman. He wasn't in [the entertainment business], but I like to think everything I do is sort of shared with him, so that's helped me love myself and appreciate myself more. Anytime I have something good, I'm always just like, "Look at what we're doing." Yeah, there's so many losses. Oh my god. There's a loss every day. There is a loss every day in this job, and that's just what it is. I auditioned twice today, so there will probably be two losses today, the day I talked to you, so that's just what it is. There's just constant losses, and then you get a win, and so you got to celebrate the win. I'm good at it. Maybe that used to be a hard thing, but I think I'll get myself a treat, or I have posters on my wall of all the things that I'm proud of.

**Alyssa Limperis recommends:**

**Noah Kahan.** As a proud East Coast native who went to college in Vermont, I've loved Noah's music from the first album he dropped and am so inspired and impressed by his ability to make music that transports you to a place. His music makes me feel both at home and homesick. I have his albums on repeat and admire his openness. I also love how he had his whole family join him at his Fenway park show. If you haven't seen the video, watch it!

**Baby Reindeer.** This series was single handedly the bravest piece of art I've seen. The epitome of sharing your truth with no filters. What must have been a very scary experience, sharing such a vulnerable story, made every single person viewing it feel less alone. What a triumph. I've never seen something that kept me thinking about it for weeks after I'd seen it. It serves as a reminder to me to be specific and true to your story.

**Making Things with Friends.** I cannot imagine my life creatively without my friends. We are so lucky to live in a time where we can make art with our phones! Making videos with my mom and my friends has been the way that I've been able to express myself and my comedic voice online. I've also been so lucky to make short films with Emily Murnane and Andrew Daugherty as a part of our production company T43. Our ethos has always been making art that feels fun and important to us on a budget. This allows us the freedom to constantly create and not have to wait on anyone to give us permission to do so. Because of this freedom, we are able to really diversify our work- in the same year we made a screwball buddy comedy with my friend Gwynn Ballard and a drama with Anosh McAdam and this year we're coming out with a horror comedy with Will Madden and a dramedy with my friend Caroline Cotter. I moved to LA with May Wilkerson and write scripts constantly with her. The process is the whole thing!! So enjoy it and it's more enjoyable with friends. Find your people and make work that moves you and makes you feel alive.

**Letters to a Young Poet.** This book anchored me at a time in my life where I first made the leap to pursue arts seriously. That is such a scary, path-less time and this book helped guide me through that period. I remember being particularly struck by this passage: "You are so young, so before all beginning, and I want to beg you, as much as I can, dear sir, to be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves like locked rooms and like books that are written in a foreign tongue. Do not no seek the answers, which cannot be given to you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer."

**My Dad.** My dad who I lost to brain cancer and who was the subject of my solo show No Bad Days on Peacock was a sheet metal salesman who spent his days cold calling. He was relentless and told me that it takes 100 no's to get to a yes. He had unending amounts of grit, positivity and resilience. I always think of him and keep going when the no's come in and I give him a big ol air pump when the yes's come in. Can't have the wins without the losses.

Name

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Vocation

actor, comedian, writer

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