

TIMES 2

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Heard the one about the comedian who
talks to teen girls about depression?

Meet Anna Akana (1.8 million followers)



I felt so bad

Ten years ago her little sister killed herself. Now Anna Akana is a cult YouTuber who helps young girls to build self-esteem, says Helena de Bertodano

"I hate you." Those were the very last words that Anna Akana said to her beloved younger sister, Kristina, before Kristina killed herself, aged only 13, a decade ago. Although Akana went on to become an actress, comedian and internet sensation, with more than 1.8 million subscribers to her YouTube channel, the pain of losing her sister — not to mention the guilt — lives with her every day.

Now she has written a book to say all the things she wishes she had had the chance to tell her sister had she lived. In *So Much I Want to Tell You: Letters to My Little Sister* she offers candid advice on everything from friendship to love to pursuing your dreams.

Not a day goes by, Akana says, when she does not miss Kristina. Now she thinks of her life in two parts: before her sister's death and after. "She was funnier than I am and she was fearless," Akana says. "Her strength was also her weakness."

Before Kristina's death, Akana was part of an ostensibly happy family of five. The eldest of three siblings, she was born in Monterey, California; her father worked in the military, which meant that the family had to move every two or three years. "It was a very happy childhood," she says. "I have two parents who still love each other very much." She and her siblings squabbled, but were close, the bond strengthened by the constant moves.

In 2007 Akana was 17 and in her last year of high school, planning to go to college to become a vet. Kristina, who had dyslexia, had recently switched schools after being bullied — but was experiencing the same problems at her new school. On the day she died, Valentine's Day, she had argued with her parents about going to a sleepover party. They said she could go to the party, but not the sleepover.

"She said that if she didn't get to sleep over, everyone would become friends without her," Akana says. "I said, 'You're being stupid, you can go to the party.' So we blew up and she flung a bunch of stuff around my room. I screamed at her, she slammed the door."

So did she go to the party? "No, she went into her room, wrote a suicide note and hung herself," Akana says bluntly. She has never seen the note — her father told her he had lost it.

Their 15-year-old brother, Will, found Kristina almost dead when he went into her room to ask her to turn her music down. At first he couldn't see her anywhere. "She was known for going into her closet to write in her journal or draw — it was like her safe haven," Akana says. "He looked in there and found her. The paramedics said there was a very low chance that she would survive because she had been hanging there a while."

Her eyes fill with tears as she talks. "I felt so bad. I felt like it was my fault. It took five to seven years to really accept that it wasn't."

Each member of the family mourned in a different way. "We were all very separate and I isolated myself," says Akana, now 27. She could no longer face the idea of college. "I hated everybody and it made me mad to see people smile and laugh and do stuff. It felt like my whole life had stopped."

A year or two after Kristina's death, after dabbling in drugs and alcohol and even momentarily contemplating suicide herself, Akana watched a Comedy Central special, featuring the stand-up comedian Margaret Cho, and laughed for the first time since her sister had died. She realised that laughter was the key to moving on with her life and started doing stand-up comedy at the age of 19. From there she progressed to YouTube to make heartfelt, often funny videos. Her make-up video, *How to Put on Your Face*, which is about inner beauty rather than cosmetics, went viral and has had more than four million views. Her second most-viewed video is about suicide, *Please Don't Kill Yourself*.

Although in two minds about making a video about a subject so raw, she decided that the chances of it helping someone outweighed any hesitations

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she might have. "YouTube has become a diary of sorts for issues in my life." The video is immensely moving. "I'm jealous of everyone who has a sister," she says through tears. Addressing her sister, she tells her: "I f***ing hate you and I f***ing love you."

At first she did not know how to handle all the people who then reached out to her saying that they were contemplating suicide. "Some would say, 'I'm going to kill myself if you don't respond.' I can't engage on that level," Akana says. "I've had first-hand experience of someone killing themselves because of something I feel like I did." She consulted Crisis Text Line, an intervention service in the US — they told her not to make herself emotionally hostage to individuals and to concentrate instead on her advocacy work.

We meet at her home in trendy Silver Lake, Los Angeles. She has six cats and every room is dominated by cat furniture: nesting trees, scratching pads, even the clock on the wall is in

about my sister's death

COVER & BELOW: JAMES STENSON FOR THE TIMES



the shape of a cat face. Sitting on a sofa in her upstairs office with her legs curled under her, multiple cats padding over her, she sips an iced tea. Opposite is a whiteboard with her ten-year plan: goals include writing and directing a feature film ("I'd love to do a thriller/horror"); funding an animal shelter (or, as she puts it in writing, "have a f*** ton of money to help no-kill shelter"); and, by the age of 37, "have a couple of little humans".

For despite recently releasing a video saying she was going to stay single for the foreseeable future, Akana is in a new relationship, with the American hip-hop artist George Watsky, who she says may be "the one". Does she always think that about a new boyfriend? "I actually don't. We've been very intense and serious about each other from the beginning."

Inevitably she is the target of online abuse and says that at first she used to

Anna Akana

look at every comment. "It gets obsessive-compulsive. I'd read everything and cry all the time, but now I just think, 'This person is mad and sad.' I get a lot of obscene stuff, like, 'I want to rape you' or 'You're a talentless c***'. I loved the way Rihanna responded to trolls; she'd be, like, 'Yeah, I'm a talentless c***.' So I would try that, I would try blocking people, I would try laughing. But it got to the point where I realised that nothing I say matters to them. So now I just ignore it."

In terms of number of views, Akana is known as a YouTube millionaire. However, she is not a millionaire financially. "I make a lot of money, but I put a lot back into my business." She earns a living from advertising on her videos and from her acting jobs, which include roles in movies such as *Ant-Man* and the forthcoming *You Get Me*, and TV series including *The Fosters* and *Stitchers*.

She seems to have no limits when it comes to talking about herself — or other people for that matter. In her book she graphically describes the loss of her virginity and the

“I know that I overshare. But that's the reason I've stood out

trauma of having an abortion. "My publisher told me to reel it back a bit. There was too much emotion."

For the photoshoot after our interview Akana wears a micro-minidress. The photographer tries gamely to shoot her in it, then suggests that the picture will work better if she wears trousers instead. "Copy that," Akana nods, mock-seriously. "Do not show vagina in newspaper."

Sometimes she pushes it too far. A few months ago she was on the same flight as Carrie Fisher when she stopped breathing; Akana was criticised heavily for instantly tweeting about it — before Fisher's family were informed. Today it is the only topic she will not address. More generally, she does say: "Sometimes [things] come back to bite me in the ass." She tells me she has just been arguing with a friend, who is furious at her latest video, which discusses the friend's depression, albeit without naming her. "I didn't realise it might be a messed-up thing to do until [another] friend said she would know it was her. She was really upset and hurt by it. She felt like it was a breach of her trust."

It's a tricky balance. She says she does not want to rely on using her personal experiences to sustain her career, but she firmly believes that the reason she has become so successful is that she always tells the truth.

"I know I overshare. But I think that's the reason I've stood out. [My videos] may not be funny, they may not be good. But at least they are always completely honest."

***So Much I Want to Tell You* by Anna Akana is published by Ballantine Books, £12.99**