

'Crippling anxiety forced me to lead a double life'

Allison Kugel tells **new!** how during a decade spent grilling celebrities, she was in fact battling a paralysing anxiety disorder...

As a top US entertainment journalist, Allison Kugel spent her life rubbing shoulders with A-listers. But behind the glitz and glamour she was hiding a painful secret. She was suffering from anxiety and debilitating panic attacks. In 2012, things finally came to a head when

she was hospitalised, convinced she was dying. Here Allison, now 42, from Long Island, New York, tells **new!** how she eventually beat her demons, gave up her celebrity journalist lifestyle and decided to write a tell-all book about her time mixing with the biggest names in showbusiness...

"Stan would love you to fly to LA," the agent told me on the phone. Most entertainment reporters would kill to meet legendary comic book creator Stan Lee – the man behind *Spider-Man* and *X Men*. But my chest tightened and my hands went clammy. "Sorry," I stammered. "Can we talk over the phone?"

It was March 2006 and I was a celebrity reporter for online newswire PR.com. But I had OCD [obsessive compulsive disorder] and any travel sent my anxiety skyrocketing. I felt ashamed I'd turned down a meeting with a legend. The pressure of hiding my condition weighed more heavily than ever.

My crippling anxiety began when I was eight, when I lived in Long Island with my mum Shelley, a teacher, dad Richard, a tyre maker, and younger brothers David and Jared. A friend lost her sister to a brain tumour and I became convinced I'd die the same way.

At 11, I sank into depression. Mum

took me to various therapists – she suffered from panic attacks herself – and showed me how deep breathing could help.

But in my teens, I developed OCD. I couldn't get in a car unless one of my family was driving and had to constantly check ovens were off and doors were locked. I worried constantly.

Despite this, I secured a place at university in New York studying criminal justice, and volunteered as a police officer. Although I decided the job wasn't for me, questioning criminals gave me a taste for interviewing.

At 23, I moved to LA and did some modelling. I even did a *Playboy* shoot. Then, in May 2004, aged 28, a friend who worked at PR.com called. "We need a reporter," he said. "Can you do it?"

Friends had always asked me to write job applications for them, so I figured I could write. I jumped at the chance.

I set up interviews and began grilling reality TV stars, but my OCD hung over me like a cloud and I took ages thinking up questions. I said a silent prayer before each interview and travelling to them was fraught. Once there, I couldn't eat anything that wasn't sealed.

"No thanks, I'm not hungry," I'd lie if someone offered me food that didn't meet my strict criteria.

PANIC ATTACK

In February 2007, I met Patrick, 29, a paralegal. On our third date, my heart started racing – but not in a good way. "I'm having a panic attack," I gasped.

Thankfully, it passed and Patrick was so supportive. But my anxiety about flying meant I missed out on other interviews – including Holocaust victim Anne Frank's cousin.

But in May 2007, quizzing porn star and *Celebrity Big Brother* contestant Jenna Jameson about politics changed my life.

She told me she preferred Hillary Clinton to then-presidential hopeful Barack Obama and my interview headlined "Jenna Jameson endorses Hillary" was emblazoned across the news. That scoop meant agents started offering me big celebrity interviews and flooding me with invites to parties. Patrick and I loved the glamour, but when I met heart-throbs like 50 Cent, he'd jokingly remind me not to run off with them!

In 2008, aged 32, I fell pregnant, and in October I had to cancel an interview with Khloé Kardashian minutes beforehand because I felt so sick.

"I'm so sorry," I gushed at our rescheduled meeting. "Are you kidding?" Khloé said. "Your health is what matters. I'm not important!" She was down-to-earth, funny and sweet.

My son Marcus arrived in May 2009, but my OCD meant I avoided pain-relieving drugs. I was so worried about being out of control, I endured an agonising 16-hour labour instead.

Seven months later, I interviewed Khloé again. This time, Kim was there too and I remember the appalled look on her face as I placed my £30 woven brown bag next to her Hermès Birkin, which can cost up to £100,000. But she soon composed herself.

"Hi," she said, shaking my hand then sitting with her legs in Khloé's lap. She was



Khloé was funny and sweet



Allison hopes her book will help others with anxiety



She now devotes her time to son Marcus

our relationship broke down. Finally, I had a row with my boss and quit my job on the spot.

Suddenly, my life spiralled downwards. I lost my appetite and, at 5ft 3in tall, I dropped from a healthy size 8 to a size 4. One night in August 2012, while Marcus was with Patrick, I had an episode worse than any before. My heart was pounding in my chest. Convinced I was dying, I called an ambulance.

"I can't breathe," I gasped.

But in hospital I refused medication. My OCD just wouldn't allow it. However, over the next few months I ended up in hospital time and again.

"We'd like to evaluate you in the psychiatric ward," a doctor said on my fifth visit.

Suddenly, the seriousness hit me. "OK, I'll take the antidepressants," I agreed. "Anything but the psych ward."

When I took the antidepressant Paxil, I felt more balanced and started eating again. I also began talking therapy, which helped. My therapist taught me to visualise a happy place, like the beach, whenever I became paralysed with anxiety or fear. Gradually my panic attacks lessened.

After a decade in the crazy world of celebrity,

in 2014 I hung up my journalist boots. When I wrote my book it felt cathartic – like the final stage of therapy – and I hope it'll encourage others with anxiety to get help.

These days I'm on a tiny dose of antidepressants, but I feel completely on top of my disorder. I support myself by running a mobile app connecting journalists and PRs and I'm currently single so I can devote more time to Marcus. I still look back at my career and pinch myself, but I'm happy being a mum. It's the best job in the world!

Claire McAteer

Journaling Fame: A Memoir Of A Life Unhinged And On The Record is available from Amazon.co.uk, priced £18.36



Kourtney thanked Allison on her website

'I tried to grill Kim on politics'

myself opening up about my own anxiety disorder and it felt like chatting to a friend.

"I feel like you really get me," Kourtney said. She even thanked me publicly on her website.

I was thrilled to be made senior editor at PR.com. Interviewing celebrities including Demi Lovato, Stephanie Pratt, Chelsea Handler and Kendra Wilkinson kept me on my toes. When I admitted to Elle Macpherson that I went commando to avoid a visible panty line, she offered to send me some of her knickers!

But my anxiety was always hovering over me. At one point, while I was interviewing Christopher McDonald, an actor from *Thelma And Louise*, it got so bad I felt like I was floating outside my body. Somehow, I managed to plough on.

DOWNWARD SPIRAL

Then, in 2012, a series of events ripped the rug from under me. My beloved grandmother had a stroke, then Patrick's partying meant

gorgeous, but her famous derrière wasn't as big as I was expecting. She seemed very concerned with how she came across after her "leaked" sex tape. Her answers were professional – there was no banter like with Khloé. I tried to grill her on politics but she just focused on superficial things. Kim was like a wind-up doll. The story about Tiger Woods' affairs had just broken, and I asked her about it.

"It just makes me realise how much more private I'd want to be," she said, ironically. She also told me she'd love to meet George Clooney. "He's so cute," she smiled.

When I interviewed Kourtney Kardashian, she was self-deprecating and sweet. I found



Allison with her mum, who also suffered from panic attacks

She volunteered as a police officer