
HE FACED DIVORCE AND THE SILENT FEAR OF LOSING HIS SONS. REBUILDING HIS LIFE GAVE HIM A PURPOSE TO HELP OTHER MEN.

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

single fatherhood, divorce, men's mental health, co-parenting, gym and fitness, vulnerability, purpose, the dad project

SPEAKERS

Nemash Patel, Naroop Jhooti

Naroop 00:00

How has The Dad Project helped Nemash?

Nemash 00:04

I've always wondered what my superpower is, what it is that I have, but it kind of feels like this is it. If you can lay your experiences out there for people, maybe they will share their experiences and those experiences will come out. It's not enough to do nothing; you have to do something. So I kind of feel like I have to do it. It's not a choice. If you've gone through trauma, whatever kind of trauma that might be, and you've come out the other end, you kind of need to repay that. And the way to repay is by helping others.

Naroop 00:37

Imagine carrying the weight of expectations, silent struggles, and the pressure to always have it together. The Dad Project is a space for open, honest conversations about men's mental health, raw, real, and long overdue. In Season 2, we go deeper, sharing powerful stories and fresh perspectives from those who've lived it and those who help others through it.

Filmed at The Old Court in Windsor, this season is about breaking stigmas, redefining strength, and starting conversations that matter. I'm your host, Naroop Jhooti. Let's talk.

So you first got in touch with me in October, Nemash, right? And now I speak to you probably more than I speak to anybody. Every day we're on the phone talking about The Dad Project and all the amazing things we're going to do with this movement. Tell me a little bit about who you are and why you are sat on this chair opposite me.

Nemash 01:44

I'm Nemash. I'm 51, and I'm a single dad.

Naroop 01:51

Okay, so you're a single dad. What does that mean to you?

Nemash 01:59

I don't focus so much on the single; it's the dad bit. And I think probably more so now than when I was in a conventional family. So now being a dad means so much more to me. I think if anything, when I was in a relationship, I was probably a little bit absent. And I don't mean absent-absent, but looking back now, I can see that I probably wasn't there as much. I was there physically, but not mentally.

Now, when I'm with my children, I'm with them. I limit time on my phone when I'm with them. I try to be present for them. It's like when you have scarcity, you appreciate it more because you only have it for that period of time. So I super-focus on being a dad when I'm with my children.

Naroop 02:54

You must love being a dad, because you literally spoke about being a dad for five seconds and nearly started crying. So it means a lot to you, right? What does it mean?

Nemash 03:09

When you know you could lose something, you appreciate it even that much more. Obviously, you go through a traumatic experience like a divorce or separation, and the thing that went through my mind through that whole period was: am I going to lose my children?

My ex-wife is originally from Birmingham, so in my mind, I always thought that if anything happens with our marriage, she's just going to go back to Birmingham and she's going to

take the children. That scared me. So that was my biggest fear. But now, it makes me appreciate what I have because I do have my children. I get to see them regularly, I speak to them all the time. So that's what it means to me.

Naroop 04:06

You're a good dad, aren't you?

Nemash 04:13

I like to think so. Could I be better? Probably. Are there worse dads? Most definitely. But I like to think I'm doing the best I can do. Ultimately, that's all we can ask of ourselves, to do the best we can.

I say that to my children when it comes to anything, whether it's their studies or whatever it is they're doing: just do the best you can do. No one's asking you to be Steven Gerrard or the best of the best, but do the best of what you can do and be happy with that. And I'll be happy if you're happy. If you're happy doing the best you can do, then that's good enough for me.

Naroop 04:57

If I got your two boys to sit down and I had a conversation with them, what would they tell me about their dad?

Nemash 05:11

That's an interesting question. I'd say: he's there, he loves us, he loves everyone. I'm often accused of being overly bothered about other people and how they feel. My kids are quite different to me in that respect in terms of personality, so they see that it's quite apparent. But I'd like to think they're proud of their dad. You don't have to be like the person you're proud of, but I think they are proud of me.

Naroop 05:54

During my time of knowing you and building a friendship with you, I would say that you are extremely kind, thoughtful, empathetic, reliable, consistent. And I value your friendship so much because you've been there for me throughout the creation of this, not just work-wise, but emotionally as a friend.

You genuinely care, right? And that to me means a lot. Have you always been like this, or was this a Nemash that evolved by being a single father? Because a lot of the times I find

when men go through that transition, a side of them awakens that may have been dormant for a long time. Is that the case with you?

Nemash 06:41

I've always been relatively caring. I'm always interested in other people, but it has become more apparent since the trauma I went through.

You always feel that if you can help someone, it's like being a teacher. If you think about a teacher, what do they get? They get something from teaching somebody something. I kind of get a similar buzz out of being there for someone, helping someone. Why? I don't know. I think it's just a calling. It just feels a bit like that. I know you and I have discussed callings before. It's just something inside, I just feel like I have to help.

It sounds a bit weird, but for example, if you're moving house, I'd be saying, 'Naroop, do you need a hand?' I spoke to my brother; me and my brother are polar opposites. He would say to me, 'How come you always ask everyone if they want help? They're not going to be there to help you, or if they are there, there'll be too many people.' I don't do it for the reciprocal stuff. I do it because if I can help someone, it doesn't cost me anything. If I can help someone, it makes me feel good. I don't do it for get something for myself, but I'm not going to lie, I get a warm feeling from helping someone.

Naroop 08:24

You really want to help men, don't you? That's what initially led to us working together. Tell me about what happened to you when you separated, because I know you went through a lot and I know it fundamentally changed you and how you view the world. What kind of emotions did you go through when you found out that you're no longer going to be married?

Nemash 08:55

To give this more context, for a lot of people, something happens and that separation happens. But for me, it was different. It was a period of four or five years where the marriage was not going in the right direction. And I knew at some point, I had the sense that my wife didn't love me anymore.

Naroop 09:27

How did that make you feel?

Nemash 09:33

I felt lost. I grew up watching Bollywood movies. I grew up with this fantasy that you meet someone, there's bright colors everywhere, there's song, there's dancing. Not that I dance, and my mum told me I can't sing! But divorce was something that was never going to happen to me, because I was going to meet somebody and I was going to absolutely love them to bits, and it was going to be reciprocated. I had that vision of a love story. So straight away, it was kind of like: that's not going to happen. That made me feel sick to my stomach.

Also, like I said, there was always that worry about my children. I can handle being separated. Strangely enough, if my ex-wife's family were local, then maybe it would have been easier and I wouldn't have felt the way that I did. But I felt like there was this inevitability that this marriage was going to end at some point, and I felt that buttons were being pressed to encourage me to end it. But I wasn't going to do it, because I couldn't be without my children. So I said, 'I'll suck it up, I'll deal with it for that period.'

To give some context again: it was four or five years of no communication within the household. You know me, I like to talk! So that was really difficult, really tough for me. On the outside, when I'm at work or with my friends or my family, nobody would know any different. You put on a persona, you put on another mask, and you play a role. I did that. I kind of didn't want to go home, and it sounds crazy to say that considering my kids were at home, but I knew as soon as I went home it wasn't going to be great. So it was really tough. I almost went through the trauma of a separation whilst being married.

Naroop 12:08

So you were prepared for it?

Nemash 12:17

As much as you can be. In my mind, I'd always said to myself: one is, I never wanted to have my kids say that dad left or dad walked out. You know how that narrative gets spun. My friends said to me, 'You should leave.' I said, 'I can't.' But when my kids are older, if they go off to university, maybe at that stage I can think about myself. But until that stage, I didn't want to make myself out to be some sort of martyr, but we're parents, you want the best for your children. So I was like, 'I'll stick it out until I can't.'

Naroop 13:04

Do you think you're in a position now where you can start putting yourself first and start thinking about your life?

Nemash 13:17

Yes, in short. I have my kids kind of half of the time. What I do is, when my kids are with me, I'm all in; it's all about my kids. But the half of the week they're not with me, it's about me, and I focus on me.

I felt guilty about it initially. Initially, you're always wondering: what are they doing, where are they going? You want to know constantly what's happening in their life. But then I came to the realization that if I carry on doing that, I'm going to go down a negative spiral. If I focus on myself when they're not with me, it does two things: one, it's good for me because you're focusing on yourself; two, it stops me from thinking about them all the time. That's the way I got through it, and that's the way I get through it now.

Actually, 'get through' is the wrong word, because I get to spend time with my children, and then I get to spend time on myself. So I think I am in a good place now, and I am spending time on myself.

Naroop 14:32

One bit of advice I got given when I first became a single father was: treasure the time you have alone, because that's when you rebuild your life. I don't think there's anything wrong with appreciating that time to yourself, because yeah, you want to live for your kids, but you also want a second crack at life, don't you? You might want to remarry, have another kid, pick up another job, or something else.

So that guilt that sometimes people feel when they're not with their child, you can actually spin that into something positive: do something for self-improvement, lose weight, better yourself, earn more money. It seems like you are totally at peace with doing that for yourself. What are some of the things that you want to achieve? What's Nemash's dream?

Nemash 15:24

My dream is to make my children proud, to be healthy, be happy, and be a good person. I want to help people as much as I can.

If you go through anything, one of the things I think we should all do is learn from that, but then take that and do something with it. If you have pain and you've come out of that pain, then take it a step further and help someone else with the pain that they might be going through. There's no 'I want a big house in the hills, I want this, that, and the other.' Ironically, when I was married I used to think about things like that, but once

you've gone through trauma, once you've lost a lot, you reevaluate. Now that I've come out the other side, I have changed as a person. I think differently, I feel differently, I am different.

Narooop 16:44

You said that the thought that you were going to have to live a separate life from your ex-partner, you were okay with that, you could deal with that. You make it sound like it's so easy just to deal with the separation. What did you do to deal with it?

Nemash 16:59

I didn't deal with it particularly well initially. I'm quite open about it: I'd cry every day, usually in the shower, because it's the only place that nobody sees your tears. You'd go through and ask yourself these questions: 'Why me? What did I do?' It's all about that. But at some point, you kind of have to break yourself out of that.

I was quite fortunate that I've got some really good friends and my brother as well, and I spoke to them. I'm quite an open person, so it was easy. One of the things they said to me is, 'You need to look after yourself.' So I took that negative energy of being upset and sad and flipped it on its head a little bit.

Just to go back a step, I went to the GP. I can't remember why I went, but I ended up talking to him about my situation at home, and the GP said to me, 'I think you might be depressed,' and he offered me a prescription for anti-depressants. That was a moment for me. I was like, 'Whoa, no.'

Narooop 18:41

Why didn't you want to take them?

Nemash 18:47

I'd heard things about people taking anti-depressants and how they can be addictive and you could end up going down a different spiral. I was like, 'No, I don't want to do that, but I need to do something.' So I started going to the gym.

A friend of mine convinced me, saying, 'You need to do this, you need to go to the gym.' He had recently signed up to one of these online coaches and said, 'You need to do it as well.' It's about accountability, isn't it? As soon as you've got a coach like that, it's accountability. After more than a bit of a nudge from him, I signed up. That really changed things for me because it was someone else to talk to as well. It was a little bit

like speaking to a therapist, because they encourage you to talk about what else is going on in your life. With some random person that you don't know, it's kind of easier to talk to them.

I didn't really know one end of a gym from another, but I did it. I sorted out my eating and nutrition because obviously I had to follow a plan. Having a different focus meant that I wasn't focusing on the negativity at home. I was able to focus on myself, my mental health, my physical health.

As a byproduct, my children saw me going to the gym. I was getting up early in the morning going to the gym, they saw me preparing my own food. They were quite young then, but I could see that it was making a difference to them. My oldest son even asked for some small dumbbells so he could do some stuff at home as well. So it's like a win-win really.

I was looking after myself, but also my sons were seeing me do it as well. We've spoken at length about how we are because of our fathers, and conversely how our children will be because of what they see. So that was my mechanism: eating well, working out, and speaking to my friends and my brother. That was really, really important.

Naroop 21:13

You talk about your dad and how we are because of our fathers. Do you think your dad could do what you had to do and what you are still doing?

Nemash 21:20

He's from a different generation. He did things that I don't think I could do. He came to a foreign land, made a life for himself. Even for me now, thinking about going and living in America where they speak the same language, everything's the same... I believe that you're a product of your environment.

Obviously, the things that my dad did when he was younger were based on his experiences, and what I'm doing now is based on my experiences now. I don't know whether my dad could do what I'm doing now, but also I don't know whether I could do what he did then. I'd like to think that he could evolve and be different, but that generation was different.

Narooop 22:13

What does your dad think of you now, of his son being a single dad and raising two boys?

Nemash 22:18

I think my dad's really proud. He doesn't say it, because that's his generation; they don't. And that's okay with me because I know that. But I think he's proud. He sees that I put my children first.

I moved back in with my parents after my divorce. When my children come, I see them half the week, and when they're with me, they're obviously at my parents' home. I make their meals, I iron their clothes, I take care of all this stuff. My mum's like, 'No, no, I'll do it.' I said, 'No, no, I'll do it. It's my job.' So like I said, he doesn't say it, but I know he is.

Narooop 23:07

Do you think you iron clothes for your children or for yourself?

Nemash 23:07

It's for myself. I feel like these are things I need to do for them, although I don't need to do them. They're teenagers; they should be ironing their own clothes, right? But as a single parent, you have to be careful that you don't overcompensate for the fact that you're only there half the time.

I'm quite good at that when it comes to things like gifts and stuff. I don't try to buy them; that's not what it's about. But you're right, I do a lot of stuff which they probably should do. But if I don't do it, I kind of feel like: what bit am I contributing? So to answer your question, yes, I am doing it for myself. I need that because I've got teenage boys. They don't need anyone, they don't need anything, they can do everything themselves.

If I left them to it, boys are boys, they wouldn't eat; they would just sit there until a plate arrived! But I need that. It makes me feel like I'm doing something, something I probably should have done more of before. But I'm more than making up for it now.

Narooop 24:31

And you're a good dad, you are. So you should know that, and I'm proud of you, man. What made you message me in October of last year?

Nemash 24:42

Interestingly enough, I didn't follow you on Instagram. We met once before, but I saw a podcast that you were on, and you talked about The Dad Project in that. The clip on Instagram was 60 seconds, but that was enough. I was like, 'I need to know more. What is it that you're doing?' Obviously, I'd seen the stuff you'd done on the Singh Project, so I knew what you were about, but I just needed to know more.

I scoured the internet, looking up you and The Dad Project to see what I could find out. I watched a couple of the videos that you posted, and then I went through your Instagram and said, 'Oh, he did this in April, it might be too late. Doesn't matter, let me just message him.' I messaged you on Instagram. I don't mind saying I didn't hear back!

So then I thought, 'I still need to get in contact.' I found an email, I emailed you, and thankfully you got in touch. Honestly, I was buzzing when the message came through. I was like a giddy schoolgirl: 'Oh my God, he's answered my message!'

Like I said before, you feel it in your pit, there's something you're meant for. I've always felt that. I thought it was business, and I've had a failed business in the past, but okay, maybe it's not that. But there's something that I'm meant to do, and straight off the bat I felt that this was something that I needed to be involved in. One way or another, I was going to make sure I got involved.

Narooop 26:39

I do remember seeing your message, and it was actually at a time where I had put the first bits of content for this, but wasn't quite sure what I was doing with it. I think this is a good time to dive into how The Dad Project was created.

It was never meant to be a podcast. It was never meant to be a movement. It was a project that Amit, my business partner, and I had actually done for our agents at the time for an exhibition they were going to put on, where we were asked to highlight a cause that we thought needed more attention. For us, it was this idea that single dads of colour weren't fully appreciated, and that not all dads of colour are bad dads, challenging the stereotype and stigma that was associated with them.

We ended up going our own way from the agents. We had a glorious career with them, but wanted a new challenge. We focused on our agency, but we had this body of work that we thought was quite profound and needed to be shared. It was really based

around portraiture first: the photos and the interviews that I had done were supplementary conversations. But it's only when you spoke to me and said, 'What are you doing with these interviews?' and I said, 'I'm just putting them out as bits of content,' and you said, 'We could turn this into a podcast.' I was like, 'Really?'

I remember having that conversation over Zoom with you, I think we spoke for a couple of hours, and you started telling me all these ideas of what we could do. I was like, 'Actually, I really think we could do that.' I started sharing clips with you, and you started to see the power of what this could be as a podcast. Now, eight episodes later, we are filming Season 2, which is now a proper podcast.

The funny thing about Season 1, people may not notice this, but for me it's really annoying because I'm all about detail: for the exhibition of our agents, I wanted to wear the same clothes on every interview. I thought if we're going to share this as an exhibition with this portraiture and supplementary video, I want it to seem like we shot all the dads in the same day, as a continuation, even though it was across three days.

So I'm thinking, I'm putting out all these podcasts and I'm wearing the same clothes in every episode! People must think, 'Does Naroop own one brown shirt, the same beige pair of trainers, and the same jeans?' They may not have noticed it, but for me I thought it was quite funny.

What was beautiful is that you saw an opportunity in something that I had seen as something else. Now you're on the team, we're growing The Dad Project together along with the wider team with Amit. What you've brought to it is really, really powerful. As a creative, leader, and founder of this, I see my skills and what I can do: I love storytelling, I love talking, I love bringing the best out of people.

But you've got this really fine attention to detail around online, how to create opportunities, link things, spot things, and repurpose them for how we can use them. Your passion for helping people is something that's really driven this forward.

Seeing people respond to you in such a positive way really makes me happy, because I know you were looking for something in life to really sink your teeth into, to use all the skills of these last 51 years and put them into practice to create something groundbreaking. And that's what we're doing with The Dad Project.

When you first started coming on board with this, did you think it would be what we know ourselves we're going to turn it into? What were your ideas, where did you think it would go, and what were you hoping to achieve?

Nemash 31:05

I thought it would be a podcast, and that was pretty much it. I thought we'll produce some content that goes around it, have a website, expand on those stories. But you have taken your vision... not in my wildest imagination would I imagine that we would have gone where we're going. And I say 'going' because I know it's going to go that way.

What's great for me is that I have ideas, but many people will tell you if you ask them, I don't necessarily complete on them. Meeting you and working on The Dad Project has actually made me realize that I can achieve, and we will achieve, because of the drive that you have and the way you see this going.

From our initial conversations about it being a podcast—and I don't know if you noticed, but I had no idea how podcasts work and how you do it! I just went away and learned it, then came back to you and said, 'This is what we do'—to where it's going to go now, we talk about that thing in the pit of our stomach where there's something. I know it's this.

Interestingly, you talk about the reaction I've received: I posted on LinkedIn to say that I'm working with you on this, and it got a great response. I had people reaching out to me who didn't know I was divorced, you don't go around with a badge saying you're divorced, and I had a friend in LA who reached out saying he's going through some challenges, and people in the UK. I found that I was starting on that journey with other people because they're reaching out based on what they've seen on LinkedIn, and we had only posted the trailer, I think that's all it was.

So yeah, I'm super pumped, I'm excited. You said earlier we speak all the time; we speak every day, and I'm constantly buzzing: 'What are we going to do next?' I am genuinely excited, and I can't wait to see what we're going to do.

Naroop 33:33

What do you want to do with it?

Nemash 33:39

I just want to help people, and this project is creating the vehicle to help people. Whether that's through a men's group, or through somebody going online and finding some content, whatever that may be, I just want it to be easy to get help.

One of the things we spoke about way back when was where to go for help. We were fortunate we had people we could turn to, but what about those people who don't have people to go to? I want to be able to think that we can help them, whoever they may be.

Narroop 34:28

Why do you want to help people? Because I ask myself the same question. I, too, have always had this burning desire to help, but I've always seen myself as a source of inspiration for people, and I don't know why. Not in an egotistical way, but I've always taken care of my appearance, my health, what I say, what I read. I've always offered advice, sometimes when people don't want it!

I can't help but jump in and say, 'If you did this...' If I see someone who's got potential, I want to bring it out of them. Through this, I think maybe the universe was gearing me up and saying, 'Get ready, this is what you're going to do,' and then everything fell into place. What is it in you that makes you want to help people? Because it might seem normal to you, but it's actually not common.

Nemash 35:18

My mum often tells my dad, 'Why are you helping them?' If someone needs help, they don't even have to ask; my dad's on it. I'm kind of like my dad like that. My dad is very much: if you need help, he'll help you. Probably a bit like you, he's going to offer advice whether you want it or not!

Bringing it full circle again, we are some sort of image of our parents, and I guess that's probably why I see my dad help so many people in different guises, whether it be helping them set up a business or back in the day helping people get married with introductions and stuff.

My dad's very well connected, lots of people know him, and he's always helping people with whatever it might be. You spend time around someone like that, and some of it is going to rub off on you.

Naroop 36:26

When a man is exposed to The Dad Project and all the things that we're creating and building around it, what do you want it to do for that man?

Nemash 36:37

I want it to empower them. I want them to feel that there is somewhere for them, there's a space for them, there are people there for them. A safe space. Like I've said before, it's easy for me to talk, but it's not easy for others. I just want there to be somewhere that people can go to be safe, can get help, and there'll be no judgment.

Naroop 37:14

How do you think The Dad Project has helped your own development? I've seen you even in these five months I've known you, your confidence has risen. I remember taking you to an event over Christmas and you said, 'Naroop, I would never come to an event like this and talk to people.' But having this has allowed you to converse with people and talk to them about something, and the way they talk back about what we're doing is so rewarding. How has it helped you? How has The Dad Project helped Nemash?

Nemash 37:44

I've always wondered what my superpower is, what it is that I have, and I could never put my finger on what it is. But it kind of feels like this is it: being able to talk to people positively about what we're doing and seeing the interest that it brings. Divorce, separation, mental health, all of these things are very prevalent now where they never used to be before. Somebody always knows somebody who could do with support or help, but they wouldn't necessarily know where to send that person.

Just being able to talk about it, being able to talk about my experiences—not in an 'I've been through this' kind of way, but if you can lay your experiences out there for people, maybe they will share their experiences and those experiences will come out. I feel like I have to do it; it's not a choice. If you've gone through trauma, whatever kind of trauma that might be, and you've come out the other end, you kind of need to repay that. And the way to repay is by helping others. That's where that confidence has come from.

I believe in this project, and I know that if at any point I feel it's going to slip a bit, you won't let it. I feel stronger for it, and because I feel stronger for it, I can speak about it.

Naroop 39:41

That's lovely, man. And I want to let you know that you give me strength to do this too. Through your friendship and the work that we do, it gives me the same belief. It's a two-way street here.

You said something there when you said you don't have a choice but to do it. That's exactly how I feel. You've been given this gift, and if you don't do it, you're doing a massive disservice to people. That's what actually drives me all the time: you've been tasked with this now. The universe has said, 'Hey Naroop, let go and do the work.' If I don't do it, I can't sit there.

Even now when I'm at home watching a film, I will literally be working on something, not because I'm a workaholic, but because I'm just so excited and I want to get it done. As each week has unfolded and more people come into the team and opportunities open up to us, it just reaffirms this idea that everything is aligning: get the job done, get the job done. And I think we are going to get this job done.

Five years down the line, where is The Dad Project and what are you doing in it?

Nemash 40:54

It's global. It's everywhere. Everyone's going to know about The Dad Project. It's evolved already even in the months that we've been working on it; it's evolved from when you first started it. We'll be helping thousands, millions of people with their mental health, and we'll be spreading the word as much as we can.

Naroop 41:29

What changes do you think your friends and family have seen in you since you started working on The Dad Project?

Nemash 41:36

Definitely purpose. I've got purpose, I've got focus, and there's a drive. I'd like to think they're proud of what I'm doing. I've had friends reach out to me and tell me that, but also tell me their challenges. So I feel like already it's working.

Friends and family who have seen me go through it, it's tantamount to a caterpillar: you've been in that cocoon for a while now, and now I'm ready to come out of that as a butterfly. It sounds a bit corny, but I think they see a certain strength now.

Naroop 42:26

Amazing, man. Well, I'm super proud to have you on board. I know what we're going to achieve through The Dad Project. As we come to an end of this conversation, I want to know as a final question: how does Nemash want to be remembered? What do you want people to be saying about you?

Nemash 42:42

I want them to say he was kind, he was present, he was helpful, he was supportive. Hopefully, by the things we're doing, that'll be true. To be honest, it is true. I feel that now when I talk to people, people are kind of drawn to me to tell me stuff. I feel that they want to open up.

We talked about superpowers before; I feel like that's my superpower, that people want to open up. That really lends itself to the project, doesn't it? If you had asked me before, my answer would have been similar, but I wouldn't have known what the vehicle was to get people to say that at the end. But I think that's what it would be.

Naroop 43:49

Amazing. Well, look, this is just the beginning of an exciting lifelong adventure, man. Get ready, buckle up, because it is going to be one hell of a rollercoaster. Thank you for being on it with me, bro, and excited for what we create together. Nice one, brother man.