
HE FOUND STRENGTH IN HIS DAUGHTERS. BECOMING A SINGLE DAD FORCED HIM TO REDISCOVER HIMSELF.

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SPEAKERS

Raj Sahins, Naroop Jhooti

Raj 00:00

Those early feelings are probably the worst, because your mind is in major overdrive. Every single thought comes into your head, every single demon is there. It is just everything, and it is all bad. The first thing that comes into your mind is: how can I get rid of this? That is when addiction, alcohol, and drugs can come in.

The only thing I could say to people, when you have that initial thought, is to take that step back and say, "I need help." Because you can do something that you are going to regret for the rest of your life.

Naroop 01:18

Raj, thank you so much for coming down to be part of The Dad Project. I know you have travelled quite far today, all the way from Leicester. I would love to hear about your journey of being a single father. How did you feel when that moment struck, when you realised: I am going to be a single dad?

Raj 01:53

I would like to say sad, but I do not think sad touches it, if I am honest. There is a load of emotion behind it. I went to counselling, and when we went all the way back through it, I think I went through every single part of the cycle of trauma.

Naroop 02:05

Talk me through those cycles.

Raj 02:08

At first you go through the blame, you go through the anger, you go through points where you just do not want to talk to anyone, then you do want to talk to some people, and you just let it all out. Then comes blaming yourself.

Naroop 02:15

Yeah. When you say blame yourself, what was that feeling? Was it thinking that you could have done more?

Raj 02:19

Yeah, could have done more. Could have sat down and done more with the family. But I think ultimately it was our decision. Do you think you could have done more? I think everyone can sit here and say yes, you always can do more. But I think when you are in that moment, having that conversation, time does not come into your head. It is more that emotion takes over and decisions are made.

Naroop 02:56

What were your immediate thoughts? You have got a three-year-old and a six-year-old, both very young, both needing both parents to help raise them. Was that overwhelming for you? Talk me through how you tried to process those emotions.

Raj 03:10

Literally, when we decided to part, the next thing that came out of both of our mouths was: what about the girls? We literally forgot ourselves for a minute and just sat down together. Whatever you hear out there, all the stories about what happens when couples go through divorce, we just thought: right, it is going to be all about the girls. We made a pact that we would never involve the girls in any of our discussions, whether financial, whatever. To this date we have stuck to that pact, and you know what, nothing else really matters. Three odd years in, it is working well.

Naroop 04:09

When I became a single dad, my daughter was six. I remember looking at her in that moment when I knew it was over, and thinking: I have got to raise this girl now. Every daughter, especially when it comes to her dad, needs him to be her hero, because she is going to judge every male role model by him. That is a big pressure.

And yet you are now facing the hardest thing you have ever had to face, which is divorce and separation from your partner, and they need you to be strong. Which has its pros and cons, because it helps you to stay strong knowing you are needed, but it is very difficult because you do want to be weak at times.

You do want to cry, you do want to break down. You do not want to feel like everyone is depending on you, because sometimes you need time for yourself, which is totally fair. So how did you deal with that side of it, especially in those early months?

Because I think that is really the most difficult part of becoming a single dad. Those initial first few months where you are trying to figure it all out: how do I move on? My whole life is going to change. How do I raise my child? Those early months are where I think most people really struggle. It is the most pivotal time, where someone can either become better and stronger, or can go down the path of addiction, self-harm, or depression. How did you navigate that journey?

Raj 05:45

Those early feelings are probably the worst, because your mind is in major overdrive. Every single thought comes into your head, every single demon is there, and clearing all of that from your mind is hard. The first thing that comes into your mind is: how can I get rid of this? That is when addiction, alcohol, and drugs can come in.

I am not going to lie, yes, that was the easy option, living on your own and reaching for the alcohol. I had the odd couple of crazy nights out, but that was not me. I reined myself in. But I can see how people can carry that on. So the only thing I would say to people when you have that initial thought is to take that step back and say: I need help.

Because you can do something that you are going to regret for the rest of your life, or that your family is going to regret. As guys, we are really bad at asking for help. That is the time to ask. One of the things I could have changed is that I should have asked for more help at that time. The first three months, your mind is everywhere.

Your house is upside down, your relationship with your ex, with your kids, with your family, everything. You have just told your family as well, so all of that is added in too. Help in that first three to six months, even a year, is the most important thing. Because the worst thing anyone going through this can do is make a decision they will regret.

Narooop 07:29

Who were your shoulders to lean on? Who were you speaking to?

Raj 07:35

I was lucky. I had a friend who had gone through the same thing a year before, he did not have kids but he was much older, and two of my cousins. I had my shoulders to lean on.

Narooop 07:48

I can resonate with that feeling so strongly. What I found really hard in the first few months was that when I was with her it was great, but when she was gone it hurt. Especially coming back from

shoots and returning to an empty house, putting my bag down, and there was silence. That was difficult, because I was used to coming back and she would be just about to go to bed. I would always rush back after shoots, and I needed to get back before she went to sleep. Not hearing her voice saying, "Dad." That was hard.

The way I dealt with it was to change my whole routine. I have always trained, always gone to the gym. I used to go at six in the morning every day, then I changed it to the evenings. I also changed my gym because the old one had memories attached to it, so I went somewhere different. Different people, different environment, a different journey.

Just changing the routine helped me a lot. It was filling the time, but with positive action. What did you do when you moved out? How did you navigate those lonely moments?

Raj 09:02

A lot of family. I am close with family, and a lot of friends who had already been through that kind of thing. They had already been through the motions of that first period, and listening to them, they said: it will pass, it will pass, just get on with the normal things that you like to do. When I moved into my own place we had a good schedule with the girls, a routine.

I saw them more or less every day, either dropping them off at school or picking them up. I got them involved in the new house as well, getting them into their bedrooms, choosing their colours and their beds. I got them settled before I probably even got myself settled, if I am honest. That routine was starting the next week, so I had no sofa, no TV, just trying to get things from here, there, and everywhere, but it got done.

Narooop 10:07

When you started getting into your own routine, at what point did you realise: actually, I have to rebuild my life too? You can give so much to somebody else, but if you do not give to yourself, you have nothing to give. I think sometimes people end up giving so much that they never receive.

Receiving, taking, and living for yourself is not a selfish thing to do, especially as a man. If we forget about ourselves and our purpose, we can lose ourselves. What did you do to make sure that you were being fed emotionally and remaining mentally stable? What were your coping mechanisms during that time?

Raj 10:47

I think I started losing myself a good few years before we separated. My friends were saying it, though they never actually voiced it directly. I kind of lost myself in the relationship. They said: we lost Raj. Even now when we go out they say there are bits of Raj coming back, so it is nice to hear that.

For the first year I just did not know what to do. There was no self-love. It was all about trying to get my girls sorted, getting my house sorted, and everything was coming from everywhere: divorce papers, this and that. I just did not have the time. If I could go back, I would slow down. I wanted to get things done quickly, quickly, quickly, and that did not work. I got myself engrossed in more work, speaking to more people, being with family, when I think I just needed to slow down.

I was very nearly at breaking point, and that is when I started talking to my friends: just slow down. Sometimes you need something like that to shock you. I have never been through something like this. You do not understand how it hits you inside. I think that is the main thing. I probably just needed to slow down.

Naroop 12:27

I remember this so vividly it feels like it happened yesterday. About a month after I found out that my ex and I were going to split, my brother said to me: come to New York, come and hang with us for a bit. All my life, all I had ever wanted to do was be a dad. I was at the gate at the airport by myself, and all I could see were families.

There was a family right in front of me: boy, girl, mum and dad, kids laughing. The lump in my throat was so big that if someone had asked me for my boarding pass I would have cried. I was holding my tears back. I am still like that. I am always on the verge of tears. Within five seconds, anything to do with my daughter and I am done. I cried on a business call in front of nine business partners. It never really goes. It stems from the sense of: have I let my child down?

Nothing anyone says to you will change your mind on that. Maybe your child might one day say, "Dad, you did everything for me and I am so thankful." But they are young. My daughter is eight. She does not know that yet. How have you dealt with that sense of: what happened, happened, and I am raising my child in a separated family, but it is okay? Have you processed those feelings?

Raj 14:11

I still am, because it was a twenty-plus-year marriage. There are a lot of memories. You might think the majority has been put behind you, but there is always something that comes up. Going to weddings, going to parties, going abroad like you said. Everything brings it back. Going to a hotel and checking in on your own when you are used to checking in with the whole family. It just floods back every time.

But then you start thinking: right, this is me time. This is me spending time on myself. Like you touched on, self-love. You need time out to reflect, to think, to get your thoughts together. That is how I have managed it, and it has taken me over a year to do that. Just spending time on my own, doing stuff with family, with my brothers, with my friends. It has taken a lot to find Raj again.

Naroop 15:17

That is interesting, because what I try to do now is be proud to be a single dad. We went to Disney World: my brother and his family, two kids, him and his wife, his in-laws, my mum and dad, and it was just me and Lara.

I was holding her hand thinking: I am proud. I am a single dad and I will do this whole trip by myself. A man will often rely on a woman for certain things, and a woman on a man for certain things. But when it is just you, you have to be both mum and dad. Have I packed all her clothes? Have I got her swimming gear?

Are we going to the beach? Have I got her sun lotion? Did I pack a snack? Have I got the water? You have to think of it all. But then I think: you know what, this makes me a better dad. It makes me a better person. Learning the things you might otherwise rely on the other person for can only benefit you, because you apply that to everything in life.

You become more mindful, you think more, even about what others might need. As men, we can become lazy and selfish. When it is just you, all of that changes.

Raj 16:44

I do feel proud. Tell me about your life now with your daughters. When you go out, what kinds of things do you do? Daughters sometimes want to do things they might more naturally do with their mum. How do you handle those situations and make sure they are constantly doing things they enjoy?

Naroop 17:15

Most of the stuff kids are doing now, we never did as children ourselves. Because I know the weekends are mine, I can plan ahead. Some time with family, they have their own classes on Saturdays, so we carry those on. Then in the evenings or afternoons, a bit of family time, and then we go out and do something if the weather is good. My girls like to be out and about. If they are sitting at home the bickering starts.

Raj 17:47

What does going out involve?

Naroop 17:52

Walks, parks, nice walks, parks with the family. We did a family holiday last year. We rotate: one year their mum takes them abroad, then the year after I do a trip, then we swap. So they already know the routine: Dad, where are we going this year? Mum has booked abroad, so where are we going? Anything to do with the girls, we make it happen. Next year they are in a stage production and have the opportunity to go to New York with the theatre group, so we are going together.

Raj 18:52

You and your ex?

Narooop 18:54

Yes. I do not know exactly how it will work yet, but we will make it work. It is for the girls. Even for birthdays we all get together. We will have a day together and a meal in the evening. It is more about the girls. I know it sounds odd thinking about it, but when you are in it, it ends up being about them, not the two of you.

When I first became a single dad I was trying to find some resources online to help me through that initial period. I had a couple of therapy sessions which I did not actually find that useful. That was probably because the therapist was not right for me. I was in such a rush to find someone that I just went on one of those sites and was assigned someone.

I should have done my due diligence and spoken to a few different people. Did you try to find help for yourself online? Did you read articles or watch videos?

Raj 19:51

No, nothing at all. All I did was try mediation and marriage counselling when we were going through the divorce. But you touched on a good point: you have to get on with the counsellor yourself. It does not matter what their skills are like, you have to connect with them personally. I did not get on with the marriage counsellor, so it just stopped.

But that is what made me decide that when I do single counselling, I would actually find a person I get on with. I did a few taster sessions and then found a guy I really connected with. I was with him for nearly a year. I think I did all my work, just like you did with your project, but I did mine just with him.

Narooop 20:52

What kind of sacrifices do you think you have made as a single dad for your own personal life? Speaking to all the dads before meeting them in person, sacrifice was a big theme. Tell me, in some detail, about the kinds of sacrifices you have made.

Raj 21:00

Sacrifice is standard with divorce. There is a lot of financial sacrifice. Being self-employed, I had the opportunity to manage my own day. You went to the gym in the morning and then switched to evenings. I did the same with my work. I used to book appointments in the morning, but with the school drop-off I changed that.

I now have set appointment slots. Income has taken a big hit, but priorities have changed. In the past I put my job and income first, but that was for the family. Now I am doing it differently. It needs to be about the girls and everything else comes after.

Naroop 21:58

Do you think you have a better relationship with your girls now than when you were married?

Raj 22:02

Yes, and even with my wider family too.

Naroop 22:06

Is that because you have made the time?

Raj 22:08

Time, and I make a conscious effort as well. Time with family, time with my cousins, time with my mum and with the girls. We are conscious of having that time together. I think family is really important.

When we were growing up we had a small family and that was enough, but my girls need to see that connection. In this new world, family ties are drifting. One thing that comes into play when you are a single father of colour is family, in a big way. One of the reasons Naroop and I wanted to do this project was to explore how single fathers of colour live differently from other single fathers, and it really does come down to family.

I know I could not live the life I live now without my family. When we are on shoots, my parents go and pick up the girls, drop them off, keep them home until I am back. Without them, everything that Naroop and I have been building for the last twenty-two years could have fallen away too, because I simply would not have been able to do it.

Naroop 23:35

The sense that you need family is so important. Imagine your life without them, you just cannot. I think that is one of the things we are blessed with when we have this extended family unit. Cousins, aunties, siblings, grandparents, everyone just comes together. In Indian culture especially, everyone says: what do you need? Because without that, I think the pressure would be ten times worse. Tell me some of the things your family have done to help you through this stage.

Raj 24:04

The fair majority of the time I manage my diary so I am there about ninety percent of the time. The other times I do ask my ex-partner. If she is free, she will step in. We rely on each other first, and then it is family. At weekends it is more about spending time with family, getting to know them properly. Before, they would come along to a birthday celebration and that was it. Now it is

about actually getting to know my mum, my brothers, and their families. The girls have become a lot closer with the wider family.

Naroop 24:41

I can probably say the same. The family ends up feeling for you, does it not? They know what you are going through and they just want to give you love. That is a beautiful thing. If someone came up to you now and said: Raj, I have just split up with my partner, we have been together for ten years, we have a kid, I am really struggling and I feel depressed. What advice would you give them?

Raj 25:09

A couple of things. First, we have touched on it already: slow things down. Just take it in. Maybe write things down as well. I did not do that, but I think it makes a massive difference. Tick things off as you do them. And try to have a good relationship with your ex, I know that is easier said than done, but I think if you can manage it, that would be at the top of my list.

Naroop 25:40

How would you tell someone to separate the emotional feelings from that? A lot of the time the separation happens for a reason. There is resentment, anger, even hatred. A lot of negative feelings towards that person. How would you guide someone to separate those emotions and still communicate for the sake of the kids?

Raj 26:09

I can only relate what has worked for us. You are right, there are a lot of negative feelings. But we just communicate about one thing at a time. A text that just says: so-and-so has a day free, have you got this free? It is an easy, quick message. You do not need to go into much detail. It is easy: she knows when she has the girls, I know when I have the girls.

Can we swap? I have got a meeting that day. We swap. Both of you have to sit down and agree: right, this is how it is going to be. When it is about the divorce, it is about the divorce. When it is about the girls, it is about the girls. I think that is the only way it works. Three years in, it is working. Everything else will sort itself out, because that relationship with the girls and with your ex is not going away.

It is for life. Whereas when other people split up without kids, they go their separate ways. You cannot do that here. You are in each other's lives whether you like it or not.

Naroop 28:10

Have your girls ever sat down with you and talked about it? What have they said?

Raj 28:14

"Why did you not come home?" Sometimes when we do a birthday and we are all together, that is when it happens. They say: just come home, Dad. The older one understands, and she is slowly helping the younger one understand too. What does she say? She says: Mummy and Daddy fell out of love. I think we will just leave it at that. I do not want to go into any more detail with the girls. If they are okay with that, we are okay. When they are older we might go into a bit more detail. It does hurt them, there is no doubt about that.

Narooop 29:14

One thing a lot of single fathers feel in the beginning is worry about how their child will feel when they go to school and see other families. But in my daughter's class there are at least five or six children whose parents are no longer together. So it is not anything new, which is actually a good thing in a lot of ways, because the child does not feel alienated. Blended families are so much more common.

We are probably already at the point where no one thinks anything of it. But when it comes to single fathers of colour, there are still certain stigmas, which is one of the main reasons we did this project. When I told people that my ex and I were no longer together, they said to me: what have you done? As if the father is not doing enough. This sense that he is not there all the time, that he has handed off his responsibilities.

What we really want to challenge with this project is that we want to be amazing dads. We do not want anyone to take our responsibilities from us. What is misunderstood sometimes is that people think men want to pass the buck, to go out with their mates. But a lot of the time, with single dads, the separation actually fuels them to do even more. If anything, they become even better men.

They sacrifice the nights out, they work on themselves, they focus on fitness, they earn more money, because now they think: I cannot rely on someone else to split the bills. They end up becoming better dads. But they are not always given the opportunity to show that. Can you relate to any of that?

Raj 31:43

That is exactly what happened to me. People told me I was not going to be in the girls' lives. I had never done any of that in the marriage, so why would I start after? Whatever differences exist between me and their mum, the girls' lives carry on. Whatever they are feeling, I want them to feel loved.

I have seen it with friends and family of our generation: when they have had traumatic upbringings, it comes back to bite them later in life. I do not want that for my girls. The more love you give them, the less they will feel the absence later. I want to be the role model, the man they

will look up to and the type of man they will one day look for in a partner. What do you think they would say about their dad right now?

Naroop 33:08

Loving. That would be the first word. I remember Raj and I went to a Christmas party once for one of our mentors. Opposite me were two life coaches, and they were talking to me about what we do. I was talking about my daughter, and they asked: Naroop, what is it you want for your daughter?

I said I am building these businesses and I just want her to grow up and maybe take them over. She will have financial security and can do what she wants. And they said: is that what you think she wants? I said, well, yes. And they said: what she wants is your love. Because all that stuff does not matter. If you gave her everything but no love, she would not be happy. If you gave her nothing but love, she would have everything.

That changed my whole perception. Yes, we want to do the best for our children, take nice holidays, buy them things, send them to private school. But ultimately, it is love that is the most important thing. Having a daughter, and going through this kind of trauma, opens a wound in you. But it also brings out a part of a man that may have been dormant for a long time: the softer side, the understanding, the ability to be there in those moments when your daughter needs sympathy or consoling or love and it is just you.

You cannot say: speak to Mum, Mum is not here. At that moment it is just you and her. And I think you learn so much more about yourself as a man through those moments. You are speaking to her but also speaking to yourself, and thinking: I never knew I had that in me. No one can ever teach you that. That is just pure, in-the-moment learning.

Raj 35:13

I constantly make note of those moments, every single day. It is just beautiful. I think that is one of the positives that come out of this: you do become a more rounded man. You become a different man, do you not?

Naroop 35:43

Definitely. Tell me about the man you think you are now compared to who you were before. Do you think you are a better man?

Raj 35:55

Definitely a better man. I want to keep developing and keep becoming that better man. Like I said, I want to be that role model and that father figure the girls will look up to and be proud of. You hear so many stories of kids who do not even know their dad, have no relationship with him. I just do not get that. Three years ago I was very goal-driven. I knew where I wanted to be in five, ten,

fifteen years. Now I just take it day by day. That is the biggest change. I do not look that far ahead anymore, because you just do not know what tomorrow will bring. You have to plan a little, but not the way I used to. All of that has kind of gone. I think that is actually a better way of living, because you are so much more present.

Naroop 37:17

What do you think the biggest challenges you face right now are, personally and as a single dad?

Raj 37:25

Time, I would say. I am time-poor. I still want to be everything to everyone, and it is difficult to have it all. I am forty-seven, and while age is not everything, you hear about younger guys having something happen to them and you just want to carry on being that father. You just do not know what is going to happen in a few years' time.

So again, making the memories. I just want to be present with the girls. The challenge is maintaining that. And keeping the relationship with my ex working is also a challenge. I am sure she feels certain ways and I feel certain ways, but we do it for the girls and we always have. It is working, and I really hope it carries on.

Naroop 38:51

Thanks for coming in, Raj. I think you have told us so much about your life today. There are so many nuggets of useful information in there. I think anyone watching this will really find it helpful when they go through the early stages of being a single dad and knowing that there is a way through. You are living your life in a very positive way.

You came in here with a massive smile on your face, a fresh haircut, and you can tell that you are living your best life, bro. Thank you so much. We are going to take some photos now.

Raj 39:17

Thank you. It was a pleasure.