
HE OVERCAME SEVERE BULLYING AND A LIFELONG STAMMER. BECOMING A FATHER TAUGHT HIM TO EMBRACE HIS VULNERABILITY AS A SUPERPOWER.

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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SPEAKERS

Owais Khan, Naroop Jhooti

Owais 00:00

I was on a real high. I was on a show on Sky that had excelled. I was in LA. Came back here and all of a sudden it went boom like that and everything just stopped. I was at home. I was in the same house that I grew up in, on my own, staring at the same four walls. You can't interact with anyone.

I was like, have I gone full circle? It was like my life had gone round all the way and I'm back here again. I'm 15 again, but I'm actually 38. There were times I just sit home and I just cry. I've never told anyone that because it went bang, bang, bang, bang, bang. When you're down, it kept hitting you and it came to a point where I just broke.

There's you've built up this strength over the years. You overcome your stammer, you overcome this, you trying to do this, and there's only so many knocks you can take. As a man, you're told that you got to get up. Got to get up and carry on because that's how we handle it. How many times you going to do it before you finally actually go, I can't do this anymore? But like that, that was it.

Naroop 01:03

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.

Naroop 01:53

So, I was thinking back to when me and you first met. All I remember is I was sat on the side of stage and I see this tall dude dominate this catwalk topless, and I was there, this tubby Indian boy looking up thinking, who the hell is that? Later introduced to you through my brother, and since then we formed an amazing friendship over 25 years now, I think.

And your story is remarkable. You've achieved so much. You've been through so much, so many things to be proud of, and I'm really grateful that you've come on to my podcast.

Owais 02:36

I appreciate you asking me, bro. I appreciate you asking me.

Naroop 02:38

Thank you, man. Why don't you tell our listeners a bit about you, your journey, and who is Owais?

Owais 02:43

Wow, it's been a journey, man. Even though I was born here in England, I was raised in Pakistan till I was about 6 years old. So when I first came here, I couldn't even speak English at all. So having to move to a foreign country and have a stammer on top of that, it was a challenging start. I think I went to four different schools in England as well.

When you're trying to grow up and you have a stammer, and you're a foreigner and you have an accent, and then you're going from this school to that school to this school, it was hard to form a circle of friends or any relationships with anyone. School kids are harsh on you. The things that stick out for me in my head is that I used to get called not a Paki, I used to get called a P-P-Paki. So they merged the two slurs into one, which I

thought was creative on their part. But it's those things on the journey that you have that I feel, pardon my French, it's the shit you go through that grows you and makes you who you are.

Narooop 04:18

Tell me a little bit about those early days of being bullied, because I was bullied too so I can feel your pain. What was it like? And how did it affect you, even though you're laughing about it now?

Owais 04:26

I mean, I laugh now. At the time it was awful, bro. It was horrible. It got to a point where it was so bad that I used to go to school, go around the corner near my house, hide till my parents had gone out to work, and come back home until whatever time was end of school, then go back out and pretend to come back in again.

It wasn't fear, because I was always told to stand up for yourself, but it was continuous. It was all day. It wasn't like it was just once in a while. From the second you walked in to the second you walked out, there was something happening.

The last school I went to was an all-boys boarding school in Henley, and I was probably the one and only Asian there as well. I remember the first day I was introduced in assembly. The headmaster sits everyone down and reads out the names.

He's like, 'Andrew Jones, James Smith,' and then he goes, 'Owais Khan.' And I stand up, and I'm not lying, everyone turned and looked. I felt like going, 'You can touch me, I'm real.' It was like they hadn't ever seen anyone who wasn't blonde hair, blue-eyed turn up at this school.

It was nuts because I used to play a lot of sports, because that was the only way I felt I could be accepted or involved in anything. And I didn't have to speak, because having a stammer, now I'm older and if I really want, I can have full control over my speech. But when you're 14, 15, 16, and you feel like you're the only one in the whole school who has this, it's hard to explain because nothing comes out.

I'm trying to speak and it just blocks it. The more nervous you get, the more stressed you get, the more upset you get, the harder it is to speak.

So the only escape I found was sports. And the same kids that would call me names and fight, I mean I got in fights every day because I'm not going to just sit and take it. I was sent to the headmaster's office regularly.

He'd go, 'Khan, you're back again,' which at least taught him how to say my name. But sports was the avenue. The same person that started a fight with me was high-fiving me after cricket or rugby. That's why I realized I had to find that escape, and sports helped me at the time.

Narooop 07:31

That's so interesting. So instead of going to see a counselor or therapist at a young age, you found your avenue to gain respect. Because being bullied isn't nice. You feel like the odd one out, you feel weak in a certain way, other kids laugh at you, you don't know what to do. But this is your opportunity to say, 'Look, respect me. I might have something that is not like what you guys have, but I'm just as cool. Accept me.'

So what did your parents do at that young age for you? Because they're obviously trying to help you, they don't want you to be bullied. What kind of things did you do, and how did it affect your self-image? When you're home and you're alone, you must have felt something, trying to dig deep into why you have this stammer.

What kind of processes did you go through to try to overcome that, and how did it make you feel?

Owais 08:26

At that age, the first thing your parents do is to send you to a speech therapist. But even at that age, it was hard to understand that, and you close yourself off. I found that I would distance myself more in class and school. I wouldn't speak as much, I wouldn't interact as much.

Back then, parents didn't take it as seriously as they do now. There's more out there to help others going through stuff like this now. Back then it was like, 'Oh, he'll be all right.' And also because I was a boy, they were less concerned about that side of things. 'It's a growing experience, you're a boy, you'll be fine. Stand up for yourself, you're a Pathan boy, you can't be weak.'

So it was hard to even express any of that, because who am I going to tell? At that stage I was boarding in school as well, so I would cry down the phone to my parents at night. They were like, 'How are you?' And at first I'd be like, 'I'm okay.' You can only hold that for so long.

Naroop 09:53

So you didn't feel strong? They said be strong, but you didn't feel strong?

Owais 09:56

No, because I was on my own. I had nobody really.

Naroop 10:00

And so you couldn't open up because were you embarrassed, or you didn't want to?

Owais 10:04

Who am I going to open up to? I tried to tell my parents. My dad, though he's opened up a lot more now, he's great now, he cries at everything now. But back then, it was the whole 'You're a Pakistani Pathan, you have to have strength to handle this and overcome this.' But I was a kid.

Naroop 10:29

That's a lot of pressure on you.

Owais 10:30

Of course it is. At that point, it came to a point where I was struggling at school. But saying that, in the one year I boarded, my grades were the best they ever were, which is the irony of the whole thing.

But I just wish that at that age, I had somebody around who would just be like, 'It's okay, if you want to speak to me,' trying to understand or empathize. Back then it was different. Even at school, who am I going to tell? I had proper old English housemasters, and I couldn't speak to them.

Naroop 11:17

Yeah, that's really interesting because when I think about my bullying with my eye condition, my parents, having listened to the podcast, said, 'I never knew you were bullied.' And I was like, same thing. What am I going to say? I went to private school, one of the few Indians, gets bullied, gets excluded.

I was chubby, I wasn't good at sports unlike you, so I had no way of gaining respect really. Wasn't amazing at education neither. And you're the same, you don't have anyone to turn to. It's hard, man. But it takes a lifetime to get over something like that.

When you become a man, you might be able to find ways to process it. But nowadays young boys are quite fortunate that the systems now, teachers will look out for it 100%. They write to the parents, 'We think this is occurring.' With my daughter, if there's anything in class, the teacher will email you the same day.

If that was me, there'd be emails every day flying to my parents. But you just kept it in, didn't you? Nobody was aware of the importance of handling these things back then, and you just held it in, and it built up and built up.

Do you think now as a dad, you're going to keep your eye open for stuff like this?

Owais 12:44

I really do, because my daughter funnily enough, happily enough, looks more like her mum. The only thing that I gave her, I started noticing in her about five, six months ago about her speech, and she started stammering a little bit. And bro, of all the things I could give her. It's just because I went back to feeling so alone and so scared about the whole thing.

And then she has to go to school, and I can't be at school, I can't be around all the time. I don't want her to have to go through all of that.

Naroop 13:38

Oh, bro. I feel your pain, because my daughter had to have eye checkups for four years, from when she was born till she was four. They had to put her under full anaesthesia. When they would do it, I would hold her and she would cry because they tried to fool her with the toy just so they could do a checkup on her. And I'm thinking, is this the gift I'm giving you? So I get it, I totally get it. But she's okay.

Owais 14:18

I didn't necessarily think that this would be a point that we'd both connect on, because I didn't know this. But it hits, man. It broke my heart. That was the first time I was like, wow, if that's the thing I gave her. But that's where I know that I can give her the strength and the tools and everything for it not to be a big deal for her. And the thing is, it can stop at a certain age. Mine has calmed down, and I'm hoping it will stop at some point for her.

My family were like, 'It'll be fine, perhaps she's just trying to copy you.' I was like, that's not her. I can see my daughter getting frustrated, and what I've taught her is, 'Just stop. Take a deep breath.' And I hear her going, 'I feel frustrated, I'm going to take a deep breath.' And she takes a deep breath. No one else understands how it feels to be in that moment, so they will all say, 'Oh, it's okay, she'll be fine.' But if I can help her through it, that means everything.

Naroop 15:35

I'm just processing your feelings, man. I really am, because I can't help but put myself in your place. Do you sometimes look at this, and we'll get on to your work helping children with stammers, do you feel like this could be part of a greater calling for you? In terms of helping your daughter through this, but also as a Stambassador yourself, you could help so many others?

Owais 16:21

It's strange because after I was on the show on Sky, the response I had blew my mind. The number of families, mums, children themselves that said seeing somebody that has a stammer on TV made them feel like they're not alone. A stammer is not taken as a serious issue or a terminal illness, so it's not taken as seriously per se. If you are suffering from it, it's hard to find avenues of how to overcome this, or if there is anyone else out there.

Seeing that you can overcome it, and you're not scared to openly have it, because there was a point I was scared to say my own name. I wouldn't even speak. A charity approached me, and that's when I realized that if I can help even one kid, child, adult, whoever overcome and not have to go through the journey I did, that's what it's all about for me.

Having a superpower like this has made me a lot stronger than I think I ever would have been. If I really slow down and take a breath and want full control, I can speak normally and I will not stammer. But trying to do that all the time is really difficult. You have to focus and concentrate. That affected me even with work, where someone who has a stammer chooses he wants to speak on camera. But if I can use this as a tool to help, that's what I want to do.

Naroop 19:01

One thing I've always wondered about you throughout all these years, when I think of Owais, I think six-pack, glossy magazine ads, wet pout. Was that to do with your stammer?

Owais 19:35

100%, not even 99%, bro. It's an industry I fell into by chance completely. The amount it helped me, firstly because I didn't have to speak. I was in a job where I keep my mouth shut, stand there, pose, look good, and walk. I can take instructions and do that. The confidence it gave me led me into fitness. I got into fitness after having surgery on my back where I couldn't walk for about a year.

Falling into that industry helped my confidence, but a lot of the reason I was in it was because of speech and not having to speak: 'Look at this, and don't listen to this.' Exactly. It was the easiest.

In that industry, the ones in front of the cameras are some of the most insecure people in the world, and you need that validation of 'Look at me.' Growing up, no one really did. I was the quiet, tall, lanky kid sitting in the corner of the classroom who didn't really speak. The first time I asked out a girl, I stammered, and she stuck up her middle finger to tell me to fuck off. So modelling gave me that confidence and validation. People started looking at me, and I was like, this is great, who doesn't enjoy that?

Naroop 21:13

Why do you think the universe gave you a stammer?

Owais 21:16

Because it wouldn't have been fair otherwise on everyone else!

Naroop 21:22

You've been asked that question before, haven't you?

Owais 21:25

I just thought of that now, man! When I was trying to pursue my TV and media career further, I got to a point in my modelling career. John Abraham was doing a film in England called Goal. They had cast me to be his supporting role. I can speak and understand Hindi, but if I have to translate it in my head, the way it affects my speech is ridiculous.

I went for this screen test casting, and it was the longest casting this woman's ever had to go through. I stammered through the whole thing. It was awful. I've had moments like that, but as you get older, when you're this big, tall, 6'5" guy, people find it very endearing. Over the years, it's helped in certain things as well.

Naroop 22:50

What I love is when you said it's your superpower. If you can frame something that someone might see as negative into something positive, your brain will automatically make it something that lifts your confidence rather than knocks it. With my eye condition, I see it as my superpower. I was given this for a reason, and it gives me character. People don't forget who I am. And the same thing with you, you have that light-hearted approach to it all. You make a joke of yourself, and everyone sees you're easygoing.

That leads us to Action for Stammering Children. When I heard you were a Stambassador, which is a great name, tell me about when you first heard of them, the work you do for them, and what you want to achieve going forward.

Owais 24:10

When I was on the show, they contacted me and we started speaking. It's great because they help children at that core age. I went to speech therapy at 13, but speech therapy is trying to fix you when you can't fix it. It's a journey you have to go through. They have people in the public like Ed Sheeran and Emily Blunt who are part of it because they had stammers.

They say if you sing, you don't stammer because you build this harmony in your head. As a Stambassador, you mentor kids aged between 12 to 21. Four or five kids chose me because either they wanted to go into a field I'm in or their story was similar. I sat with them all individually, and I saw a part of myself in all of them.

As they were speaking, you could see them holding the tension, and just having someone understand helped them relax and let it out. The joy it brought me knowing I affected them in a positive way, even slightly, was amazing. There was one 18-year-old kid struggling with every single word, and by the end of it, he came out with his chest up. Now he's got a long-term girlfriend, a great job, and everything. If I can help, that's what it's all about.

Narooop 26:58

What I'm hearing is that anxiety or stress triggers it, which knocks confidence, creating a cycle that goes round and round. How do you stop that anxious feeling? What is the long-term management, and how is it linked to mental health?

Owais 27:37

It affects people in varied ways. What I've learned is that you have to regulate everything inside. Meditating and exercise helped me let go of the tension, because it builds up. When it builds up, you close off.

When COVID happened, I came back from LA, got ill, and was going through a lot. It affects your speech in ways you don't even realize. I stopped speaking to people, wouldn't interact with anyone. It's all linked. If you can keep your mind calm, it keeps your speech under control. You have to find things that bring joy in your life: having a family, having a daughter. Anxiety and stress make you get in your own head, and you become your own worst enemy.

Narooop 29:36

During that COVID period, you went through challenging times and started going to therapy. Was that therapy for your stammer, mental health, or both?

Owais 29:48

I think it was mental health, coming from all the years of frustration with my speech. I was on a real high after spending 18 to 20 years struggling in the industry. I had finally convinced my dad that it wasn't just a hobby, it was a career. I was on a show on Sky that had excelled, I was in LA, and then suddenly everything stopped.

I was at home in the same house I grew up in, staring at the same four walls. I was in my late 30s thinking, how have I gone full circle back to being 15 again? Then I went through two back-to-back horrendous relationships. My family were so concerned, they told me I needed to speak to somebody. I would sit at home on my own and cry. It came to a point where I just broke. You've built up strength over the years, but there's only so many knocks you can take before you go, 'I can't do this anymore.'

Narooop 32:15

What brought you out of that?

Owais 32:18

I actually got help. I went to see a therapist. I found this guy who was the most unbelievable human being for me. As soon as I sat down with him, he had a warm, calm, caring energy. For the first time in my life, I felt I could say whatever I wanted to anyone, and he understood.

You have family, but as the eldest son and brother, it's hard to totally open up. The way I could open up to him, I came out of sessions feeling like I was on a cloud, letting go of things I had carried for years.

Naroop 33:41

That's so powerful. You carry those emotions with you, and unless you deal with them, they weigh you down until you snap. If you had a men's meetup group at that time, like what we're creating with The Dad Project, would you have gone?

Owais 34:14

I think so, yeah. Creating a safe space for men to come and talk is so needed.

Naroop 34:21

I've known you for so long as a mate, and I'm learning things about you I never knew. I've always admired you physically and emotionally, thinking this guy is like Superman, flying around the world, on TV, on magazine covers. What's his kryptonite? But you find out everyone has their struggles.

Owais 35:05

You spend your whole life trying to be accepted. Because I kept changing schools, you guys were my first core group of friends. Then I went into a career where you're constantly seeking validation, asking, 'Am I good enough?' Even with my father, all I ever wanted to hear him say is, 'Son, I'm proud of you.'

I think I heard him say it once. You want that validation because I look up to my dad. When I see what he went through, I think, if he could go through that, why am I complaining?

Naroop 36:26

That's beautiful. A dad signifies a superhero for a man. Tell me about your journey with your dad.

Owais 37:08

Growing up, it was a traditional father-son respect dynamic. As I've gotten older and after everything we've been through, he's the one person who has always been there for me. He might not have agreed with everything I've done, but he's always given me that reassurance. It scares me as parents get older, but you see your father as an invincible superhero.

Naroop 38:17

Your parents separated when you were 19. How did that affect you?

Owais 38:30

I was 19, in my university student union on R&B night. My mum called on my old flip phone and told me. I just sat on the floor outside the SU for hours. Back then, divorce wasn't common in Asian families.

My parents had a real love story: my dad saw my mum on the street, followed the bus, knocked on the door, and said he wanted to marry her. So when that broke, I was devastated. It's why I work so hard to make my own family work. The one great thing that came out of it was that me and my dad became incredibly close.

My dad moved to England for his children's opportunities, leaving behind a great career and everyone he knew. During the crash in the late 80s and 90s, he lost everything, but he still managed to pay our school fees. He was always unconditionally there.

Naroop 42:35

That's had a massive effect on you, and on how you're now raising your daughter. Tell me about your relationship with her.

Owais 43:03

Before she came along, being sad came easily. Then my daughter was born, and it's happy tears now. It's the most overwhelming love that you didn't think was humanly possible. The first time you hold her, you never forget it. She is my greatest achievement in life.

She's calmed me down and given me purpose. After LA and being ill, I had lost a part of myself, and she made me whole again. When she came along, I started smiling every day.

Naroop 45:03

What world do you want to create for her?

Owais 45:07

I want her to feel that she can be anyone she wants to be, that she can live any life without being held back. I want to love and protect her. Most importantly, I want her to feel she can come to me for anything without being scared to tell me how she feels.

Naroop 46:18

What advice would you give to a father who wants to be present?

Owais 47:05

Being present is the most important thing. Having a child is the most beautiful thing in the world, but it's hard, and you have to want it. You have to look past yourself because you're not the most important person anymore. Your child comes before everything.

Every action I take, from what time I get up to how I train and eat, I think about how it will affect her now and five years down the line. Take small steps to get involved: help with feeding, changing nappies, bedtime routines. When you're a single dad, you have that alone time, and you have to use it to build that deep connection.

Naroop 49:46

That's so true. Social media puts so much pressure on dads with dad guilt, but being present in the small daily moments is what children really want.

Now, what do you think your daughter is going to do when she grows up, turns on Netflix, and clicks on Desi Rascals? Tell me about your time on that show!

Owais 51:06

It's been 10 years, can you believe they brought it back on Netflix without even asking us! I had put my media career on hold after three years in India because I refused to sacrifice my self-respect on the casting couch. I became a personal trainer, working in the family business.

Then Sky TV called and scouted me. My dad encouraged me to go for it. On the show, because it was structured reality filmed and aired weekly, the first episode was dry. I sat down with production and agreed to be the 'bad boy' because someone had to make good TV. I got sent for all the press and interviews because I put myself out there.

Watching it with my family was nerve-wracking, but I don't regret it because I got so much out of the experience.

Naroop 54:13

Do you want to do more in TV or media?

Owais 54:18

I'd love to do sports punditry or sports journalism. I've also started doing standup comedy again. Most of my material is about growing up with a stammer, dating with speech issues, and fatherhood. If you can take what people see as trauma and turn it into something that makes someone smile and laugh, that's pure joy. You've got to laugh at yourself.

Naroop 55:51

How would you want Owais to be remembered?

Owais 56:04

All my life I've been judged, whether it was how I speak, how I look, or being topless on TV. I just hope people remember me for the genuine, real version of who I am. Everyone has scars, and it's the shit you go through that makes you who you are.

Naroop 56:45

Amazing, brother. Thank you for coming down. You're an amazing guy and an inspiring father. Make sure you give me front-row tickets to your standup!

Owais 56:55

I will do, bro! I'm going to put you right at the front and heckle you!

Naroop 57:00

Thank you so much, man.

Owais 57:03

Thanks, bro. Appreciate it.