
SHAME CANNOT SURVIVE BEING WITNESSED. HOW VULNERABILITY AND POETRY HELP MEN HEAL.

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

men's mental health, shame, vulnerability, addiction, emotional resilience, communication in relationships, poetry, window of tolerance, parenting, the dad project

SPEAKERS

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Jacky 00:00

The whole point of shame is that you feel worthless, like you just feel like you are wrong. So to move from that place to getting to a place where you can say, "I love you," you got to bring that shame out.

I think one way of doing that when you're in that place is if you can find a good friend that you can do this for each other and say, "I want to have a conversation about what it's like and all I want you to do is repeat that back to me. Don't fix it. Don't reflect on it, because anything you say, when I'm in that shame place, it's going to feel like a judgment."

Even if you say, "I'm so sorry you feel that way," it's like, "Oh, I shouldn't feel that way." That's what I'm hearing. If someone is sharing, "I feel so worthless," and the other person says, "I hear you feel so worthless," that person starts to feel witnessed.

Shame doesn't survive when we start to bring it out and to share it, because shame is all about isolation. When you start to connect, it's bringing that out.

Naroop 01:00

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 01:45

So Jacky, when I first met you, we were actually upstairs in the theatre, and I was behind the camera and you were reciting this beautiful poem about addiction. I remember listening to you because I saw a therapist being so emotionally open about her views and opinions on addiction, and in such a beautiful way. It really took me back because I thought, what an amazing way to express how you feel about this topic.

From that point on, I knew we had to work together. The Dad Project wasn't even a thing then. But as soon as I created this, I got in touch with you and said, "Look, we need to work on this." And obviously, I knew I had to have you here sat opposite me on the podcast.

So why don't you tell me a little bit about yourself and your journey, and how you found yourself in this amazing position where you help people through your experiences and your therapy?

Jacky 02:42

Thank you. Thank you for that lovely reflection. I really appreciate that.

It's funny, isn't it? As soon as we start being asked to tell about ourselves, because I can tell you all the things I do, but I think my "I amness" is about noticing. I think I reflect that in the work that I do. I reflect it in being a poet and I reflect it in being a therapist.

I think I've always had this drive about understanding other people's untold stories and really noticing those. A few years ago, I wrote a whole series of stories called Fake News Fairy Tales, where I told the story of different characters in the fairy tales: like the mattress seller in The Princess and the Pea, because The Princess and the Pea story doesn't exist without the mattresses, right? Or the cobbler in Cinderella, because without the golden slipper, you know. So I think that's who I am: someone that notices

and is always wanting to bring out those stories for people so that other people notice what's going on as well.

Naroop 03:54

That's really interesting. You noticed these stories, and I found I do that quite a lot. I notice stories. I notice things in people. I think that's a learned skill, because for a lot of time I would have conversations with people and they would say something, but was I really listening to what they were telling me? Over time I realised that, working in men's mental health and the space when I speak to men, I try to dig deeper. They might say something to me: what are they really trying to say? For you, was that your experience?

Jacky 04:34

Yeah. I think with men especially, we say something, but what are we actually really trying to say? A lot of the time they say if a woman says, "I'm fine," it means she's not fine. But I think the same applies with men. They say something, but what are they actually really trying to say?

I had a row with my husband this morning. Perfect timing! We spoke on the phone whilst I was in the car driving here, on hands-free obviously, and we were sort of laughing about it. I said, "I need to understand your language, because I think actually when you were getting angry, what you're wanting is for me to come closer." We were laughing because he was like, "That's exactly it. That's my way of getting closer to you is by being angry."

I'm really interested in the idea of frustration, because when we're frustrated, we can take different tactics. Being a poet, I rhyme these: we can either blame, we can self-shame (so we make it all about us), or we can up our game (so we do the same thing, but we do it harder). I think that comes from what we learn as kids. We'll deal with our frustrations in one of those three ways, or we might mix them about a bit.

When he gets bigger and he's like, "I'll make you see what it's like," it's really a reflection of that being amplified. That can be so helpful when we're looking at communication: okay, this behaviour is showing me something underneath where there's a need. If we start looking at behaviours as unmet needs instead, that can really open up conversations.

Naroop 06:16

It's funny to talk about anger, because I was actually talking to my cousin last weekend and he said, "When something happens, I just get angry. If my child hurts themselves, the first thing is that I get angry: why did you do that?" A lot of men tend to do that: when

something happens, anger is the first response. Is that down to, like you said, maybe from their childhood having to speak loudly to be heard, or where does that stem from?

Jacky 06:45

There's different ways that we can deal with stuff as we get triggered or upset. You've obviously heard of fight and flight, but we can also freeze. We can fawn, which is when we appease and lean in, or we can flop, where we just give up.

Part of it is learned behaviour: what is it that we experienced around us? And part of it is what works in my environment, where when I do this kind of behaviour I actually get a reward for that. For different people, it's called a window of tolerance.

I always use my hands for this: people can have a very small window of tolerance where they ping off into fight and flight, or they ping down into freeze pretty quickly. Working in therapy, what we're trying to do is expand that window of tolerance so that people don't ping off into anger or rage, or like I go into freeze. That's kind of my go-to, which is really difficult in a relationship if you've got one person that's going into anger and the other person's going into freeze and withdrawing. That's a difficult dynamic, because as this one's approaching, this one's getting further away.

What you have to do is understand the discomfort underneath and have a conversation from that place, which takes work, but it's possible.

Narooop 08:05

That sounds like a hard dynamic to manage. How do you increase that tolerance?

Through my relationships, I believe I suffered from something which I termed myself as emotional fatigue. I only had so much I could give, and when I moved past that point, my responses weren't what I wanted them to be, but I didn't have anything more. I felt like my emotional bucket was empty, and I needed to fill it up. When it's at the top, you get the best version: kind, all those things. But when it's empty, I need refilling. So if you ask of me, you're not going to get the best from me because emotionally, I'm dehydrated. Is that a real thing?

Jacky 09:01

It's a total real thing. What you're talking about really is that emotional resilience: having that flexibility. Depending upon so many things—your history, whether there's trauma in your history, your genetics, your attachment style with your caregivers and parents,

neurodiversity, all of these things contribute to the amount of resilience that you have.

The other thing is about resources: how well-resourced can you be? Environmentally, if you've got a roof over your head, food on the table, a good night's sleep, they're all resources that you can pull on. It's those two key things: what is my resilience like, and what resources do I have?

To build that resilience, the first thing is to notice: when does it ping? When do I ping off into my fight-flight system, and when do I ping down into the freeze stuff, and start to really explore that. What is triggering me? If it's something current, it's probably something to do with your past as well. What does this present situation remind me of from my past, and what needs there didn't get met that I kind of need to address in some way?

Some of this can be grief work: where I didn't get my needs met. In therapy, people will really struggle because they'll say, "I had a great childhood. I had great parents. They met all my needs." We're not talking on the macro scale; we're talking on the micro scale. There might be a certain time where something happened and you didn't quite get the emotional attunement that you needed, and that's still reverberating and feeling wounded. When someone comes and pings on that wound, it's like an emotional bruise that's been banged.

Naroop 10:54

I love that, because I know so many people said the same thing: "I'm fine, I had a great childhood, nothing really happened to me." But I know that's probably masking something else, right?

Jacky 10:59

Yeah. I think it's that sense of feeling disloyal. I kind of say: you wouldn't be here if everything was okay. Yes, I understand you want to get across that love you have for those people and remain loyal to them, but there's also about remaining loyal to yourself. There's a part of you that isn't feeling felt, isn't feeling witnessed, isn't feeling calm. What does that part need? What does that part want to say?

We can acknowledge and be grateful for all of the great stuff, and still, because we're very messy human beings with all of our tricky things, we're not going to get it right all the time.

Naroop 11:35

For men, how does a man know when he needs help? Because what I find with men sometimes is they don't reflect too much openly about how they're feeling, but they're carrying stuff. What are usually the signs that a man will show that they need help that they may not recognise themselves?

Jacky 12:05

What do they find themselves medicating on? I think there can be three things: are they feeling isolated? Do they feel quite emotionally dysregulated, in that when they're driving and someone cuts them up they go into a mad rage? And how are they trying to medicate themselves? How are they trying to numb themselves out: scrolling, shopping, using porn, drinking, all of those different things?

When it's getting problematic is when there's harm being caused to yourself or to others; when you're really thinking about it a lot and it's starting to take up a lot of your mental capacity; when you're sensing some kind of withdrawal from it, so you get agitated when you can't have that thing or can't numb or soothe yourself in that way.

What is helpful to work towards is: how can you soothe yourself and get that emotional regulation in a better way? How can you feel seen so that you can feel witnessed? I think it's also about a sense of safety: feeling safe around the people you're with, and safe within yourself.

Naroop 13:22

What does safe mean? Because I often talk about this: men need a safe space to talk. I tend to say that a safe space is free of judgment: that if a man was to open up to somebody else, they don't feel they're going to be criticised or condemned or feel like they are weak in any way. Men want to feel strong: "I can handle it. I've got strong shoulders, I can do this." But a safe space for me is a place of vulnerability where you can be open. What would you define as a safe space?

Jacky 13:54

I had a therapist who I learned from on this, and she said: rather than safe space, let's talk about a brave space, which is really what you're talking about. That's where you get to show up and go, "I don't know. I don't get it. I'm going to fumble here. I'm going to make a mistake." And there's no judgment in that. It can actually be like, "Thank God I'm not the only one. Me too. I haven't got that figured out."

That's what I see in men is the real struggle to surrender. Even that word surrender: you think of war and the idea of surrender being weak or giving up. But I think it's actually about acknowledging what is: it is what it is. Rather than fighting against the need to be strong, being able to find a space to say, "I don't have the answer here, and I've tried this and it's still not working, and now I'm scared because those things that used to work aren't working for me now."

That's where I really see the change when men can actually manage to reach that space. But that's so tough, because culturally and socially, that is not a space where men get to inhabit.

Narooop 15:08

Why is that the case? Why has our society evolved like that, because surely it doesn't serve us well? Why has that happened in your opinion? What have you seen over time that has made men become like this?

Jacky 15:16

If you go back to what we were saying about the nervous system and going into fight or flight, and what gets passed down: we learn and absorb so much from what we're around. This is why when people talk about how important trauma healing is, it's not necessarily just for the individual, but it's for society at large.

If you've got all of these different people pinging, they go into certain roles. This is what you find in dysfunctional families: people will take on a certain role. There might be the hero role, or the scapegoat role, or the lost child. The system becomes bigger than any individual: the system is just trying to get through this day and keep calm and carry on. So we end up taking on these roles. The idea of breaking out of those roles is one thing, but actually doing it is another thing, because you do get mocked, ridiculed, and questioned by people within your system, because the system becomes stronger than the person. It's challenging. It's very rewarding work if you do it, but it's challenging.

Narooop 16:37

I love this idea of roles that you said, because I often hear: what role does a man play? Men don't know their role anymore. Society says this, society says that. What is a healthy role for a man?

Jacky 16:49

Gosh. I think it's to show up as a human.

It is about: how can I connect with you on a feelings and needs level, and where are the spaces where I get to do that? Some of those roles are still traditional roles: the provider and the nurturer. I think they're good roles, but it doesn't mean that you want to be 100% provider all of the time, or I want to be 100% nurturer. There's multiple parts to us. How do I get to be and express and share that part—which is the resources element—so I can have the resilience to show up in this way?

I think the clarity of communication is vital. Like that argument with my husband this morning: we're right back in it, right back to where we've been in the past. But to actually go: okay, I'm going to bring in curiosity. I'm going to bring in humility. Even though I really want to win this argument and prove how wrong you are and how right I am, I know that doesn't get us anywhere. I don't want to armour up in that way anymore, because it's much nicer when we're connecting on an emotional level. That's where you get to play and be creative. You can't have all of those lovely things while you're trying to defend yourself and prove.

Naroop 18:20

You're talking about arguments, and obviously this happens in relationships a lot, where a man will try to come in and fix it: "Okay, what do we need to do to sort this out?" And a woman's like, "No, just hear me. Just listen to what I'm trying to say."

What is a healthy way to argue? Because they're going to come, and I heard this on a podcast: it's not a bad thing to argue, it's about how quickly can you get back to a baseline. If you can get back to that baseline quite quick, it shows a healthy relationship. These challenges, especially if you're in a relationship and you're still working stuff out in early stages, arguments are ways to understand each other.

"This happened last time and she didn't like it, so in the future I'm not going to do that," or "He didn't like when I did this; I'm going to make sure that doesn't happen, because his feelings are important to me." Those challenges actually create strength within the relationship. What's a healthy way for couples to handle arguments?

Jacky 19:07

There's quite a few things. I'll tell you what we do in our relationship which has helped.

One of the first things we agreed on was saying: is this a "get it" or a "fix it"? When a problem is presented, what do you actually want from me? What are the expectations here by you sharing it? It can feel really clunky at first, but it's the willingness to clunk your way through it.

We also came up with code words for certain points that were not helpful. We've got "time crunch," which is when one of us is under pressure. I always used to try and set myself up for a time to have a conversation, and it would always be just as he was walking out the door! So we have this agreement now where if one of us is under pressure, we'll just go: "Time crunch." The agreement is this is not up for discussion now; it's not a good time to discuss. He has "feasting": he doesn't want to talk about certain stuff when he's eating. I have "landing": when I come in from being on holiday, I need some time to recalibrate and have a bit of space for myself. We're 20-plus years married now, so having that experience is definitely a benefit.

You're 50% of the relationship. If I find myself above a 5 on an emotional scale from 0 to 10, one of my emotional bruises is likely to have been touched upon. I need to take some time out. This is what I work with with clients: it's called a diffusing process, where you say, "I need to take a time-out. I need to go and reflect on this for myself. What is it reminding me of about my past, about my internalised messages—I'm not good enough, I need to man up, whatever it is. How am I bringing that mentality into this?"

Again, coming back to: what actually do I feel about this, and what needs are there? I always think that feeling is a brilliant signpost for needs. What needs are there underneath that I need to be addressing: do I need to be addressing those, or do I need to bring them to the partnership? If you can agree for both of you to do that, that can be really helpful.

Another thing is agree that there are intruders in your relationship, and there are hot topics. Intruders can be things like in-laws or homework. Hot topics are things like money and sex, where you know they're going to be difficult conversations. Acknowledge that that's going to be the case, and set aside a time to actually discuss that, and arrange a way that you're going to discuss that: "I'm not going to roll my eyes at you when you ask me how much I've spent, because that's passive-aggressive behaviour."

I'm going to answer that honestly," and vice versa. Identify what pushes the buttons and stop pushing those buttons, because it's not helping.

Naroop 22:31

Being mindful of the other person's state of being is really important when having arguments. A lot of times couples have really deep conversations late at night when they're lying in bed and their battery is close to zero. They've had a long day, they've been to work, they come back, they sort the kids out, now they just want some time to chill. And now you bring in this heavy conversation, especially for men! Where's the battery? Where's the energy?

Jacky 23:03

Recognising that and acknowledging it: after lunch on a Sunday is when is a good time. We have an agreement: no heavy topics after 9:00 at night, because you just don't want to take that into the rest of your evening or wake up with it as well.

Naroop 23:20

What I'm hearing from you is that the relationship takes a lot of care and planning to manage it, but a lot of people don't do that. They'll talk about it on the way to a party, or in the back of the cab on the way back when they're a little bit drunk, and now they want to raise something up. You really have to plan this stuff out. It shows respect and care: make sure that person is in the right frame of mind to be able to handle what you're going to talk about.

What I've found sometimes is if a man was to say to the woman, "Look, I'm not ready to have this conversation right now," it's not dismissive that he doesn't care about how she feels, but there's stuff that he has to process and manage, and he hasn't got the capacity to give the respect and the time to handle a challenging conversation. A woman might take that as a sign of rejection: that you don't care, you're being dismissive of my feelings because I want to talk about this now, but your football or these other things are more important. A man is not trying to say that: he's just saying, "These are things where I'm at emotionally, and I just need to process this and have my time, and I will come back to you on it."

How do you navigate that situation, especially when it might have been on her mind for a couple of weeks already, and now she's got the courage to talk about it, and he says, "Not yet"?

Jacky 24:53

There needs to be a dual agreement that you're both committed to the relationship and you're both trying to show up in the relationship imperfectly. It's always coming back to that idea: I'm committed, but I don't have that resilience or resources right now.

You framed that beautifully: "I totally get you want to talk about it, but I haven't got the capacity now. It is important to me." One thing the guys can do is say, "Let's put a date in the diary that we're going to talk about at this time." Giving that certainty of when we'll discuss it and when it will get addressed can help to alleviate that sense of abandonment that can come for the woman.

I also think it's tricky for men because what are you doing there? You're actually being vulnerable. You're actually saying, "This is what it's like for me." Women need to appreciate that: "If I don't appreciate this right now, then you're going to get worn down and you're not going to come to me with those vulnerabilities." That's really important.

Narooop 26:04

What are some of the key challenges you think men face based on the work that you do? Are there certain key things that you're noticing right now that are common across men of different ages?

Jacky 26:20

In my experience, because I work a lot with addiction, there's a lot of medicators going on: what men are using to not be in touch with those feelings because it's too hard. I think that's the first thing.

I think there's also a lack of education around emotions. From very early on, young boys are given roles: who's the sporty kid, who's the brainy kid. If you don't fit into those roles, there's that sense of identity: "Who am I and how do I exist in this world?" That can be a real challenge. I have three young men who are all adolescents now, and talking to them with social media and all the talk about toxic masculinity: it's about coming together as humans. There's great strides in things like the Me Too movement, but that can't all be centre stage and then shove people to the other side. What needs to be understood is that things like the Me Too movement is an issue for both men and women, and how can we work on that together rather than finger-pointing and blaming?

Around that educational piece with emotions: when I'm working with guys, sometimes they're so numbed out. They might stop medicating, but they're not in touch with what's going on. I'll say to them: get your phone, set an alarm three times during the day. When the alarm goes off, note down how you're feeling, what contributed to that feeling, how you knew you were feeling that feeling, and where you felt it in your body.

There's a great Finnish study which found that all human beings feel emotions in the same place: you feel pride in your chest, you feel the flame of shame down your back. Getting in touch with those physiological things going on can help you be more informed about what's going on for you.

Naroop 28:29

Is that the best way to understand your feelings? Because if you said to a man who is quite closed up, "Write three times a day your feelings," what kind of words are they going to use? Anxious, tired, stressed out, annoyed: what are the kind of words a man would use to describe feelings? I can imagine their vocabulary being really limited.

Jacky 28:51

There's a great feelings wheel you can get: there's 87 different feelings that we can have, and most people can name three. That's research done by Brené Brown, which is why I wrote a whole series called Permission to Feel, going through all of the different feelings.

What I did with one client recently who was totally shut off: I said, "Next week come to me with a music playlist. Communicate to me through the songs that you connect with." In the session, we listened to a song and I said, "I feel that really here. Where do you feel it?" He said where he felt it, and I asked, "What does that connect with for you?" He said, "Actually, this song really helps me get in touch with my melancholy." Wow. He hadn't been able to use the word melancholy before, but those things can evoke different feelings.

Naroop 29:48

I love the idea of music as a tool for expression. I've never heard anyone use that method, and I can imagine men do need different ways to express how they feel: music, rap, everything. I know I do the same thing: when I'm reflective, I'll listen to love songs or slow music. When I'm feeling good and going to the gym, it'll be hip-hop.

What other tools can men use if they're trying to understand themselves apart from music? Is there anything else they can do? How can they become aware of their feelings?

Jacky 30:46

Anything where you're connecting with your senses starts to bring in an emotional response, because emotions are like energy in motion. When you see an amazing sunset, you suddenly start to feel awe: all experienced through sight. When you smell something, the olfactory system is the oldest system: instant memories come back, like those feelings of nostalgia.

It's not about, "Okay, I need to get my notebook and figure out my feelings." It's just: how am I experiencing life? We have become so distracted from our own experience that we aren't in touch with where we feel discomfort or where we feel joy. It's all getting numbed out. How can I put those distractions away and sit with whatever starts to come up?

The challenge for men is they want to fix it: "Oh God, I'm feeling this." But I really think there's real treasure in the discomfort. When I'm really with it—and this is why I love writing poetry, because that's another thing guys can use—as I write something, it starts to evoke feelings. I write what I like to call the "shitty first draft": really just get it all out, no censors. That can bring some relief, and then you have a chance of reflecting on it and seeing what else is there. But you've got to get over those defences: if guys really want this, then they'll do it.

Naroop 32:52

This idea of distractions: if you remove distractions and really just sit with where you are, you'll find that the answers are out there and will come to you, but you have to actively remove them. Even going for a beautiful walk, just really being present and thinking, "I'm here right now. It's a beautiful day, the sun is shining, I can hear the birds chirping." How does that make me feel? What am I experiencing in this moment, rather than being bombarded with stuff online and filling up your mind?

We have a finite amount of space in our brain for our experiences throughout the day, and you're just getting clogged up. Men need to be able to do that and stop trying to find a solution for everything, and allow and trust that a lot of the time the answers are in here.

Jacky 33:52

That's so spot on about trusting: how can I trust in myself and how can I trust in life? How can I trust in myself when I don't have the answers? That is a real challenge.

Naroop 34:05

Your body and your mind knows what you need, but have you given it the space to speak to you?

I bang on about this: be your own best friend. No one's going to come and help you. Even a therapist won't be able to help you unless you allow them in. Give them the space, but be your own best friend. Have a conversation with yourself: the mirror test. Look at yourself and tell yourself, "I love you" ten times. How many people could do that? It's quite a challenging thing to do.

Jacky 34:44

I've written a poem about how hard that is to say.

Naroop 34:44

This sense of loving yourself and being your own best friend: no one is going to help you unless you first help yourself.

Jacky 34:58

The real challenge in that is the idea of internalised shame: when we internalise shame from overt or covert messages that we've received, to actually believe that toxic shame where you feel worthless, like you are wrong. To move from that place to getting to a place where you can say "I love you," you've got to bring that shame out, which literally feels like your skin is off; you're so raw.

One way of doing that is if you can find a good friend in that brave space and say: "I want to have a conversation about what it's like, and all I want you to do is repeat that back to me. Don't fix it. Don't reflect on it." Because anything you say when I'm in that shame place is going to feel like a judgment. Even if you say, "I'm so sorry you feel that way," it's like: "Oh, I shouldn't feel that way." Whereas if someone is sharing, "I feel so worthless," and the other person says, "I hear you feel so worthless," that person starts to feel witnessed.

Shame doesn't survive when we bring it out and share it, because shame is all about isolation. When you connect, it brings that out. You're talking about co-regulation, which

affects your vagus nerve: the major nerve that tells you whether you're safe or threatened. When we have co-regulation—talking, connecting live, eye contact—all of that helps us be in our ventral vagal state: the connection and safety state. That helps calm everything down and feel like everything's okay.

Naroop 37:02

That's powerful. When I did that mirror test, I was actually on a call with one of my friends who is a life coach. I was going through a moment where I needed to work through something, and he said, "Turn around—I've got a mirror right behind where I work—and tell yourself 'I love you' ten times." This was before I'd really got deep into the work that I've done and into The Dad Project. I started doing it, and my whole body filled with emotions. By the fourth time, I think I was crying.

It was his voice in the background saying, "You're okay, carry on." If his voice wasn't there, I would have stopped. That was a power move for me; it was massive. Every time I've done it after that, it's fine. But I had to break that. There is stuff that I feel shame over in my life: not because of what I have done myself, but what I've experienced and what's happened to me as life unfolds. Being okay and owning that, and loving that I've been through these experiences—a lot of them I couldn't control, but they've happened—and allowing it and really speaking to myself.

Sometimes people might think I'm conceited or bigheaded, but I say: I love myself. I love who I am so much, not in an egotistical way, but in a way of pride because no one's known my journey, and I've walked this alone.

Jacky 38:38

You haven't got to loving yourself through luck; it's through commitment: commitment to being present with yourself.

Naroop 38:47

I heard this quote: "Thieves never rob an empty house." When life is giving you challenges, it's because you're worthy of so much. There's so much inside you. If you take and welcome each challenge as a way to build your strength—not harden yourself, not put on armour so nothing can hurt you, but build through it—it's amazing what you can achieve.

What I love about doing this work and meeting someone like yourself is the man I evolve and become into. I feel a massive energy rush. Even now, I feel energy coming,

reaffirming thoughts I've had already and making me feel even more certain that the path I'm walking down is the right path.

Jacky 39:43

I've listened to episodes of this podcast, and what I absolutely love about it is what a role model it is for what healthy masculinity can be. There's so much talk about toxic masculinity, but what we're not seeing is open, vulnerable conversations man-to-man. That's just so needed. I absolutely love the work that you're doing; I think it's brilliant.

Narooop 40:09

Thank you. One thing I want to touch upon with you is your work in addiction, and your poetry, which is how I first met you.

Addiction is a big problem. A lot of men, understandably, when they're going through a difficult time, their response is: "I don't like this state. Please take me out of it. Let me get drunk, let me use drugs, let me watch porn, let me gamble, let me do whatever I need to do because I don't want to be here." But they know they always have to go back there, because if they don't go back to that space and address it and work through it, that is just a vicious cycle. They'll spend their whole life going round and round and it will never end. Wherever you go, there you are.

Tell me about the work you do in addiction. What can a man do initially to break the habit, or just take a first step away from it into a healthier space?

Jacky 41:14

Recognising that it can be a stumbly journey. When people are addicted, there's often all-or-nothing thinking: you try something and that doesn't work, so you go back to using. Recognise that it's actually done a really good job: people don't use those things because they're rubbish; they do what they're wanting them to do. They numb them out; they make them feel better.

Acknowledge that if I carry on doing this, it is going to take me to a place where progressively things get worse. The people I work with have lost their families, their homes, their jobs. It's devastating, and it doesn't need to be this way.

In the DSM, which is a manual for mental health disorders, it was talked about as being a personality disorder. There's so much stigma around it that people don't want to talk about it or admit that it's an issue. But one in three people are affected by somebody's

substance use, and when you look at the stats around porn and other things, it's massive. You're not alone in struggling with this. If you can get curious about another way of being, it can be a real invitation. All addiction is saying to you is: you're in pain. You've looked for a solution in a certain place, but that solution's days are numbered.

Naroop 43:12

How do they become curious about something else, because a lot of the time they're so far down that road?

Jacky 43:18

Not everyone does, to be honest. Often it's when circumstances are quite dire. Also there's a whole family system around those people. Often loved ones might try and rescue them from that behaviour: calling up for the person and saying they're ill today and can't come into work, when actually they're too hungover.

Rather than families trying to rescue that person from the consequences: how can I not do that? That is really scary. Every addiction has consequences: it starts small with multiple hangovers, parking fines, car tickets, and all of these things start to add up. Loved ones might be helping to alleviate the pain of the consequences, and then the consequences get bigger, and they're having to do more to alleviate those.

Until the person with the addiction is in a place where they have no choice but to see the impact of their behaviour in a negative light, it's very difficult for anyone to get curious, because you're either running towards pleasure or running away from pain.

Naroop 44:56

That's actually quite scary for the family. I remember listening to an interview with Gordon Ramsay, and he was saying that his brother is a drug addict and he's paid for rehab so many times, but it doesn't change. Here's a man trying to help with financial resources, but he can't because his brother is not ready.

In Indian culture especially, alcohol abuse is a big thing. There's an Indian term which says, "Man up! Have a whisky, man up, come on, let's drink." What you're really encouraging is bad behaviour. I still see it now, and it's really hard for me to witness because you're doing the wrong thing, but it's not my place to say it.

Jacky 46:05

What you can do is take care of yourself. By having boundaries and saying, "I'm not okay with that, so I'm going to take care of myself by either not being around that or leaving early," that is all you can do. What happens then is you start to get reactions from people because you're not playing along with that dynamic, and there's nowhere for that energy to go other than back to themselves.

Naroop 46:31

That person can be perceived as being selfish: "You should care, that's your brother, why are you doing that?" But that person's energy can disrupt someone who's trying to live a healthy life. It's a difficult thing to say, "I have to let you be," but you're saying that is the best solution. People tend to change when they feel the heat or they see the light.

Jacky 47:11

It's very complex and there's different nuances. It's not about saying, "Good luck, get on with it." You can offer interventions and support. I had someone I was working with on a weekly basis, and they'd lapse again and lapse again. I said: "This isn't working. What you actually need is someone on a daily basis where you can have accountability." That person has now got a year of sobriety tomorrow!

It's not seeing that person as a terrible person or what they're doing as terrible things: they're in pain. All I can do is offer up solutions to alleviating your pain, but that choice is yours. The issue with addiction is it's almost like a condition of no choice: "I don't have any other choice than to drink or use. Bad day, I'll use; good day, I'll use." Whatever the emotions are, I need to numb out.

It's really hard for the family member, because when they reach that point of pushing back and letting the consequences be what they will be, they really understand the hopelessness of the situation if that person doesn't decide to pick it up. A lot of people would rather deal with familiar disruptive lives, because at least it feels like there's some sense of control in that, rather than taking hands off and trusting that things will work out as they need to be. There are very serious consequences: people do die and don't find recovery.

Naroop 49:11

Some people I've met who have been addicts are such kind, sweet, amazing people. I find it hard to imagine that they could be addicted, because I feel a big sense of love from them. But what I also see underneath it is self-hate.

Jacky 49:31

What if these people are so sensitive and attuned to the world that they really end up feeling that pain, and there's not a place for them to share that pain or for it to be witnessed? That's my experience working with people: there is a real sense of love and an openness to life.

Every one of the people I've seen, when there's addiction, there's trauma there: where they have felt isolated, or something dramatic has happened that they haven't had the resources to deal with, and that's what they're battling against.

Naroop 50:26

Tell me about your poetry, because the first time I heard you, you were reciting a poem about addiction. I'd love to hear how you got into it. You were telling me the other day that your poems got published on BBC Radio.

Jacky 50:43

They've picked up four of them now; I did one on Father's Day actually.

For as long as I can remember, I've always written lyrically with a lot of metaphor. When I was about 11, I had to write an anti-drugs piece and I decided to write a rap. It started there. I used to have a diary when I was a kid and I wrote in code. Writing poetry is like a grown-up code: I can share a whole poem with you about an experience that I've gone through that you won't even know what that experience is. I get to share vulnerably without feeling exposed, and that's what I love about it.

Naroop 51:38

I never thought of it like that! It allows you to express your emotions.

Jacky 51:45

It helps me to make sense of the world and helps me not to feel as alone. During COVID, it was such an uncertain and unpredictable time. I thought, I'll write something to help me through it. I sat down thinking I don't know what to write, so I started with the line: "Once upon a time..."

A whole poem came out of that: "Once upon a time was a washed up hag / Her face all raw, her boobs all sad / Happy ever after, her faithful beau / Exposed as a fraud, it had all been for show." It was this whole idea of the world being topsy-turvy and where do we go from here. It's just this place that you can really be in.

Narooop 52:38

I find writing is very important for me. Because I work in visuals—I've been a filmmaker and photographer my whole life—when I create these videos and little films, that's my equivalent of poetry, because I'm expressing myself. There are certain things I might do that no one will notice, but for me it's a release of emotions.

I get a lot from giving: I put something out for the whole audience, but really it's for me too. I need to hear the words myself, because we all know advice, but whether we action it all the time is a different thing. We all make mistakes; that's what makes us beautiful and human.

I'd love to get your thoughts on The Dad Project. Sat opposite you is a man who is dedicated to changing the way men see mental health and the way they express themselves. What advice would you give me in terms of what I need to do, how I should be, and what I need to reflect for men to see in me being a role model and the founder of this organisation?

Jacky 53:57

I think you're doing it, to be honest. We pick up on an embodied sense before anything that's said, and you really have that embodied sense of being authentic to what you're putting out. There's that sense of humility and curiosity, feeling free to share in a considered way that feels appropriate and right for you.

I know that you're pulling in different people and seeking advice. A friend of mine says, "My greatest strength is knowing my weaknesses." That's a lovely expression: knowing where it might not necessarily be your area of expertise and bringing different people in.

A lot of people can be watching without you realising, and they can be taking things from it, so you're never really going to know the full impact of what you're doing. It is about showing up and continuing to do that because it feels like a life purpose. It becomes quite spiritual: this is what I'm here for, it's just my job to turn up and do it, and I have to let go of control of how far that goes. I can put all the work in, but this is me trusting life that this goes where it needs to go to the people it needs to go to.

Narooop 55:38

One interesting thing that's happened through the content is the female audience is massive. A lot of the messages I get are from women; I was not expecting that. What's

important is the message gets to men too, because we're going to start our meetup group soon and we want men to come to talk.

Why are women so drawn to these conversations, do you feel? And what would help men to be more open to listen? Having worked with so many clients, what does it take for them to make that step to come and see you?

Jacky 56:16

Women are more accustomed to pain, acknowledging pain and being in pain: from having periods to childbirth to all of those things. For a woman to say, "I'm in pain" isn't as challenging as it is for a man.

When I'm doing work with guys, I apply to logic. I'll use frameworks and say: "Here is the research, here is the evidence on this, and this is what's going to work and what's not." It's a bit like building a flatpack: you want to build it, these are the instructions. You can decide not to do that, that's fine, but this is what has been suggested and proven to work. That can be a real in.

It works most of the time when there isn't that pressure: "I can offer you this as a way of living and working through your own stuff, but it's totally your call. You have autonomy in that." It's back to that idea of choice when everything has felt so constricted. If they feel it's not for them, explore what the hurdles and barriers are.

Narooop 57:56

One of the things I want to do with the meetup groups is to have different types of meetups: men only, couples meetups where the woman can come with the man as a safer space, and monthly "come and meet the community" sessions in London where everyone mingles and talks with no pressure. A man can meet guys like him in a brave space, rather than saying, "Sit down in a circle and tell me about all your feelings." That's way too far initially. Is that a good way of doing it?

Jacky 59:07

There's a really nice technique you can use called sociometry, where you say: "Here is a line from 0 to 10. Put yourself on the line of how comfortable you feel right now." Everyone is down at zero: do not feel comfortable. Then you go, "Ah, you feel like that too!" You're talking about feelings without talking about feelings. You've got a shared experience to connect on.

You can do that for different things: who's struggling with being a dad, who loves talking, who hates it. You've got that space of being in amongst it without being observed, but you also get to observe others while everyone is in it together. That creates this brave, safe space where everyone shares a little bit of themselves that feels vulnerable without feeling exposed.

Naroop 1:00:14

Why is it a sign of a strong man that they're vulnerable?

Jacky 1:00:22

Because you're not defending yourself. Defences mean that you're hiding yourself. When you're vulnerable, you're not hiding. You're saying: there are these parts of me that I struggle with, that I like, that I dislike, that I love. All of these parts make up who I am as a human.

That's a real strength. For The Dad Project, to go as a dad to your kids and be this open person: what a role model! What you're teaching that kid is: I don't have to sequester parts of me in order to be accepted. I get to show up as who I am. I don't have to adapt anything; I just get to be me.

Naroop 1:01:27

I've learned later in life that we're not meant to be friends with everybody. A lot of people people-please. As I was working through my insecurities, I would always want to be liked by everybody. If I didn't, I'd go home and think: "Why didn't that person chat to me? What did I do wrong?" I quickly realised you're not meant to get on with everybody. If you do, you're not authentic, because we're all different.

Jacky 1:02:12

I was a total people-pleaser and lost a lot of friendships along the way, because what do you attract? You attract people who are attracted to people-pleasers! Being your authentic self is refreshing, because the only person you've really got to please is yourself.

Being yourself and saying, "This is the way that I am" is freeing. In my experience, when people have been upset with me, it was not on my radar: all the things I was busy trying to take care of so they wouldn't be upset, and they got upset about something totally random that I had no idea about. Trying to please everyone is a path to nowhere, because you have no control over whether they're pleased or not.

Naroop 1:03:23

Being authentic is an attractive quality: people can see straight away that this person is confident in themselves. Yesterday, one of my cousins said to me, "Naroop, when I look at your content, I see you. You are the same in front of the camera as you are sat opposite to me now." For me, that was a massive achievement. For the majority of my life before, I probably wasn't me; I was trying to be someone else. At 44, I am now the truest version of myself and I'm proud of that. I say to men: "I've put on all the masks, and none of it works. Just be yourself."

Jacky 1:04:38

It's exhausting! Mentally, emotionally, physically, it drains you.

Naroop 1:04:47

What is one thing that you think we haven't spoken about as we near the end of this conversation: something that you think is really important that people should know?

Jacky 1:04:54

Stuff around adolescent boys and how we can help them. They're the first real generation coming through with the impact of everything being so available online, and all of that information coming to them. They need strong role models. They need to know what good looks like, and how do we support them: we know suicide rates are worse amongst young men. How can we support them as they're coming through?

Naroop 1:05:30

Part of what we're doing with The Dad Project is going to be school talks. The idea of dad is that every man needs a dad as a role model. A lot of times now, that role model has vanished, is weakened, or is not even present. The younger generation needs a positive role model. How do they need to see this role model?

Jacky 1:05:53

They need presence, and they need people listening to them rather than being told what to do or that we have all the answers. We don't know what it's like for them: just hearing them and them feeling like they have a place to honestly share that.

I really struggle with some of the mental health stuff in schools about encouraging kids that you just need to talk. That's not always the answer: a lot of people are not good listeners, a lot of people will try and fix, and a lot of people will put labels on things. How can we go in there and say: "Share with me what your experience is like. You don't want

to talk about it? Okay, how do you want to share it with me? Do you want to make a playlist? Do you want to draw a picture? Do you want to write a poem?" How are you going to express this?

Naroop 1:06:49

That's true with children. My daughter is nine: she's going through a stage where she's finding herself, and the love she has for me is boundless. She says it in different ways, and it's up to me to understand. She will show me love in her way, and it's being open to seeing it and picking up on it. It's finding these ways for young men to be expressive, and not forcing them down a strict path.

Jacky 1:07:26

It all comes down to listening and creating a space for open conversations.

When my eldest had a mobile phone, I said: "The thing is, I should be looking through your phone randomly just to check what's on there." But that didn't feel good to me; it felt like snooping. The conversation we had was: "I'm going to come across stuff, but when I'm struggling, I'll come to you. When I have that icky feeling about something, I'll come to you."

With all three of my kids, we've had difficult, open conversations. Sometimes I say, "I haven't got the answer to this, but I'm here with you as you're figuring it out." That sense of: I'm not going to be isolated, I'm not going to be abandoned as I show up as myself as I'm struggling through—that is key.

Naroop 1:08:40

We'll have to come and do another episode around the parenting aspect of stuff, especially as a father navigating that time. As a child gets older, the father's role changes. A lot of times fathers will treat a 30-year-old man the same way: shouting at them instead of thinking, "He's a man now; I need to allow him to make his choices because he sees the world in a different way than I saw it when I was 30." My role is to be supportive rather than try to make him live his life as if I would live it in his position.

One question I'd love to ask you as we conclude: you do amazing work, you're a mother, a wife, and you help so many people. How would you like to be remembered?

Jacky 1:09:42

Legacy is something I think about quite a lot; I always have since I was a kid. I have a poem that ends with: "All I'm ever trying to do is encourage you to be who you are, to be the youest you." That's how I want to be remembered: to encourage you to be the youest you.

Narooop 1:10:03

That beautifully summarizes this whole conversation: be yourself. Sounds so simple, but it's actually quite challenging. This conversation, even for me, I learned so much from you. I'm really looking forward to us working together and helping a lot of people. Thank you so much for coming down, Jacky. I really appreciate it.

Jacky 1:10:44

Thank you for asking me.