



Raymond A. Mason School of Business

WILLIAM & MARY

DIVERSITY GOES TO WORK PODCAST

EPISODE 57: NICK JONSSON – EXECUTIVE LONELINESS: A MENTAL HEALTH CONVERSATION

Phil Wagner

Hey, listeners, thanks for joining us today. Just a brief note that today's episode will discuss themes of mental health, including a brief description of suicide. If that's a triggering issue for you, we invite you to tune out this week and join us again for a future episode. It bears noting that if you or someone you love is struggling, remember there are options available to you. If you're located in the United States, simply dial nine eight eight to reach the suicide and crisis lifeline.

Phil Wagner

Hello from the halls of the Mason School of Business here at William & Mary. I'm Phil, and this is Diversity Goes to Work. Buckle up because we're getting ready to take a deep dive into the real human lived experiences that shape and guide our diversity work in the world of work. Should be fun.

Phil Wagner

Welcome to another episode of Diversity Goes to Work. You know, there's this classic line that goes something like it's lonely at the top. And in today's fast-paced world, the conversation around mental health and wellness seems more crucial than ever before, especially in the workplace. But when we peel back the layers of corporate suits and titles, honestly, we uncover a less talked about issue, which is executive loneliness. We talk a lot about climbing the corporate ladder but not as much about the silent struggle many face at the top where there's pressure to perform. And that pressure meets the stark reality of isolation. Today, our guest, Nick Jonsson, is here to speak to those realities. He's the author of the best-selling book *Executive Loneliness* and an advocate for mental health and wellness in the C suite and beyond. Nick's going to dive into his own personal battle as well as talk about some evolving social norms, particularly around masculinity, which I'm excited about, and how those evolving social norms are shaping mental health discussions in the workplace. This isn't just a story about someone personally overcoming; this is a call to action. I think for all of us, for leaders to foster an environment where everyone, regardless of their background, feels supported, feels seen, feels valued, and as if they belong. So, Nick, my friend, it's a privilege to welcome you here. Thanks for joining us to talk about your work. Before we jump in, why don't you tell us a little bit more about your background and maybe what led to the development of this best-selling book that we're here to discuss?

Nick Jonsson

Yes, thank you so much for welcoming me, and welcome also to all the listeners. So, indeed, I was born in Sweden, educated in Australia, and then I spent the 20-plus last years in Asia. Working and working my way up the ladder, you could say. And perhaps along the way, I also came across that indeed it is lowly at the top, what happened in my shore, in very short. So I was a high achiever, an anxious overachiever. This started already at university because I failed at high school, and I had to go back to adult high school to finish my high school. I brought that with me into university got a taste for winning, topping classes, scholarships, getting awards, trophies. And then I brought that with me into the workplace, stepping on my colleagues' tools, making sure everything I did was to hit the targets, impressing the bosses, getting the promotions. Suddenly, I found myself as a managing director of a big company, sitting in an office with a big package. But I was very lonely. So that's a little bit of the backstory what have led me down this path.

Phil Wagner

I want to start at the beginning a little bit, which I think really goes back to gender if that works for you. One of the things I can really appreciate about your work is that you don't try to paint with a very broad brush here, and you've given some insight in your work about the gendered implications of mental health. And we know that even pre-COVID, there was this sort of silent epidemic, particularly among men, as it relates to mental health. Not that your work only explores men, but I'm wondering if we can wrestle a little bit with our social understanding of masculinity, how that's involved, and how that impacts the mental health discourse that tees up or sort of holds the work that you've written.

Nick Jonsson

Where I live in Asia, it's very much so still that it is. The men who are supposed to have the answer or have the power in the companies. If I'm just looking at the boards, for example, in Singapore and so on, it's only 10% women in senior position. So it's a man's world out here, and those are the roles you're in. And when you are then a managing director, like when I was managing 70 hospitals and clinics, the people are coming to you for the answers, and they would look at you with a blank face almost if you say I don't know. And that was something that I either was mentor and coached to be careful the conversations you have with your staff and so on. And I was even told to not be too close to the staff because also it could create jealousy. I remember my direct report telling me that if I buy a new mobile phone, don't put it on your desk; we don't want people to see that. And then, as an anxious man, already an overachiever, then adding that complexity of also keeping a distance and so on that suited me perfectly fine, adding also that I'm an introvert. So I led with a clear structure, hitting the goals, doing the things that I could, but not being close to the people. So that is a real issue. And what I did also then when I started research around this topic for my book is I wrote it. I interviewed men and women, but let's focus on the men here. And many had felt similar disconnections. Many have also isolated themselves and focused on the task at hand rather than in connecting with people. Rather than being a true leader, being that kind of coaching man that would then work with the teams, getting the buy-in from them, and so on, that was

just not on my radar. It was nothing that was told to me, and that is what I've seen. Many men have led in the same way. We just never been trained, told, mentored how to lead in a more inclusive way, sadly.

Phil Wagner

So, is the mitigating measure to help avoid or address some of those mental health concerns? Is it a focus on relationship? I mean, you tee up the importance of team building, of connection, of relationship. Is it just that we experience that isolation at the top because we have fallen out of relationship or community with others?

Nick Jonsson

I believe it goes even deeper with that, that in many cases, we don't have a strong connection or self-belief, the connection in ourselves. That's where I say the loneliness start. So, at this point, when I was in my bigger roles before I left the corporate world, I could feel lonely in the crowd, but I could also feel lonely with my friends and my family because I didn't feel well myself. So, if you then put yourself in a workplace, you will feel even more isolated and lonely. So it starts already there. And then, at the level of being around other people, if you really don't have that feeling around yourself that you're doing what you should, then it's impossible to feel connected to others. These days, I know better. But it takes a lot of work, a lot of work. I had to work on myself to go back, make amends, and set everything, all my professional relationships also in the past, and clear them, clean them, so I have a clean past behind me now. Then, I can feel a connection with myself. I've forgiven myself. There's no guilt and shame about the baggage I've carried these days because I repaired all of this. Then I'm open, and then I'm ready for these kind of senior roles and positions. And then when you're closer to people, and you're feeling good about yourself, then it doesn't really matter if it's a man or a woman anymore.

Phil Wagner

I don't want to neglect your story in all of this, and I'm wondering if there's anything more that you want to unpack. I've been able to snag a copy of your book, and you're very forthcoming and candid about sort of the pressures that you face. I think you use the language as you moved towards meltdown. I think that's the rhetoric because it stuck with me. I'm wondering if you might share a little bit more of that story and what that did to propel you to write that work. Storytelling is such an important. It holds such an important role in DEI conversations. Do you mind sharing a little bit of yours?

Nick Jonsson

Yeah, sure. So, going back a couple of years, around 2015, I started really to feel extremely lonely. And I also started to question what was I doing. I'd worked so hard for these positions. I have everything. I'm supposed to be happy now. I'm not happy. That led me then to resigning from my job. But with that came a downturn even worse, and I also filed for divorce. I didn't really know who I was anymore, and I dropped my good habits. I changed my healthy diet to fast food and pizza. I traded my gym membership for a bar stool. And that was a

downward spiral that isolated me even further. Then bad habits turned into addictions, and it wasn't too long before I found myself having an alcohol addiction, which I didn't admit at the time, but now, looking back at it, it's black and white. I was consuming too much alcohol and so on. Then, a couple of years later, I found myself at what I call my rock bottom. I wrote my will, my testament. I cleaned up my act. I wasn't suicidal, but I had no will to go further. And I thought, well, I don't think I can come back from this. I thought I was a lost case. So that's why I did that. And out of that, though, as I had surrendered, as I found myself there at the rock bottom, I managed to repatch my life and done it in a completely different way. And I'd done it through a deep dive inside myself. As I explained a little bit before, they're doing my immense and rebuilding my path. But doing it, being completely transparent, open with my feelings, working with sponsors, mentors, coaches. I now belong to confidential men's peer groups. And my line of business now is running peer groups, which are safe spaces. We also have women's group, men's group, we have mixed groups. For people to have their safe space to talk about their feelings, their pressure, and the challenges. All the things that I didn't have when I was going down is what we have now. So we should have this place where people can raise a hand, speak about what's on their mind, and we are supporting each other. So it doesn't go as deep and as bad as for me because it was a three-year spiral down for me, and we can stop that at a much earlier stage. So that's what I'm very passionate about now: to helping people, getting back on track. And by doing that, I'm also maintaining my own mental health and well-being around this.

Phil Wagner

How do we get men to talk about this? I mean, if you're just looking at your standard stereotypical model of masculinity, you think that sort of John Wayne masculinity to go into the literature a little bit here, right? That rugged rough and tumble you mentioned, I had to get honest with my feelings. I had to lean into that vulnerability. And it's sort of coded into the traditional masculine script that that's not something that we do. That reality exists on the same plane where we have to recognize two-thirds of suicide victims are male. I heard a statistic once, and I apologize that I don't know how correct it is, but it stuck with me that men are 25, 28, something like that, 28 more times likely to have a mental health condition like depression than they are to have prostate cancer. So, this is an epidemic. So this is clearly in men's best interest. How do we crack that ice? How do we actually get men to do what you did? Does it take that meltdown, that midlife crisis, that big lightning in the sky moment, or are there things that we can do in the workplace or in society to prompt that conversation? What do you think, Nick?

Nick Jonsson

Yes. What happened if we turn back to my story, then so 2018, I was getting better. I was on the right path. I found my safe spaces with coaches, mentors. I joined one of the beautiful twelve-step program where I trained and learned to be vulnerable for the first time in my life. And I call it the vulnerability muscle. It's like a muscle we can practice. The first day, I just introduced myself. The next day, I said a few words. For the first two months, I was mainly listening and being quite shocked, honestly, with all the people being so open and honest.

And I heard men in the age 40, 50, even 60 who had lived beautiful lives, who lost it all and now rebuilt it so I could hear the stories, and therefore, I started to have the confidence of speaking up. One year into my own recovery, I lost a good male friend to suicide. And that was another game changer for me. That was the moment when I decided to share my story outside my closed circle. Until then, I shared my feelings and thoughts and my challenges inside my circle of safety. But when Simon, who's my friend, was died, I was in complete shock. He had just come back from Mount Everest. He climbed up to the base camp. He was the fittest of his life. He had a girlfriend he loved. He was just transitioning into a new career. I had just worked with him on a project, and I just couldn't believe he was gone. So that was the start of me writing a book about this. I called up his brother in the UK, and I asked for permission to write a book in memory of Simon. And he agreed. He said, shout it out loud. If we can just stop one suicide by this, I'm all in. So then I became relentless. I set up a fund for this, an awareness campaign. I also became a volunteer for the SOS Samaritans, a suicide prevention agency in Singapore, where I'm still working today to support the drive here. And therefore, the only thing I can say is to normalize the conversation; we need to remove the stigma in discussing suicide, and that is something that I'm doing. I ran a men's peer group last night. And we were eight on the call, and there were two of the men on that call who have suicidal thoughts right now. Everyone else on the call have shared that from time to time that they had them. So we talked about it just like we are talking about any other kind of feeling. So we normalize the conversation so that the people who are going through those feelings right now dare to say that I'm suicidal now, or yesterday, I had these thoughts again. They're coming back to me. And then we can share in the circle of the people who had those before, what they did to get out of it, and so on. So, I would say that's the first step here is to normalize the conversation. And that was what I started to do in 2019 when I did a video and it went viral on LinkedIn. People wrote me all over the world. I went within 24 hours, also on live TV, live radio. So here I am, talking about these conversations, which, before, I would have kept secret under the carpet, but that was the game changer for me. And with that, after that, I've never had those thoughts coming back to me. I'm glad I wrote my will, my testament and prepared those documents. They are there, but I haven't looked at them since.

Phil Wagner

You talked just a little bit ago as you teed up that story and rounded out that narrative arc about flexing the vulnerability muscle. And I think that's a great sort of mental model to think about some of your other experience. And I want to ask how that informs your approach. And what I'm talking about is your experience as a triathlon athlete and an Iron Man, how that works, that experience with health and wellness impacts now, how you coach, how you lead, how you structure conversations around overall health and wellness. Do you care to unpack that a little bit for us?

Nick Jonsson

Yeah, definitely. So, as I explained before, what happened in my journey I lost my fitness and my health, and I wanted to get it back. And I thought that because I have an addictive personality, I admitted that. And I said, let's get some healthy habits going here. And I went in

deeply inside myself, also identifying my purpose and trying to find some fun in my life. And I found out that what I really love is to cycle. And I also like to run. But if we only run as we age normally, we get injured. So I need to add some other sport to it. And indeed, swimming is very light on the body. So I thought that was the perfect combination. But it's also a backstory to this is that men in my family, including my father, grandfather, they all had high cholesterol, they all had heart attacks. And I thought, well, I want to set myself on a path here where I don't have to go on medication for cholesterol and all these medications that I seen all my relatives on. So, I won't set up a holistic lifestyle where my life centers around sport and healthy diet. And as I started down that path, getting coaches, then in the triathlon world, and so on, I became obsessed and fanatic about it, reading everything about it, starting to travel to weekend triathlon camps, and so on. And now, fast forward a couple of years. I even changed my life. So, my back office, where I live these days, is inside a triathlon camp. I work out of there. So I have two training sessions a day in my group of pro athletes, world champions. My coach is a former Kona world champion, top ten finisher. He done eight times in the top ten world championship in Kona, Hawaii. So those are the people I surround myself with, and they mentor me, they coach me. And now I'm passing this on to other generations, but also men on the outside world. And I say we got to get play and fun back into our lives. We got to have a healthy foundation for our life because everything else we discussed today becomes impossible if we are not in our best state. And for me, that means eating well and exercising.

Phil Wagner

I'm 100% with you. And this is one of the things I can really appreciate about your work is: you don't just again, give us these big ideas. You tell us exactly how to walk them out. And a lot of students of ours will listen to this podcast. And if you are one of our students, I'll always talk about two things. Number one is my own mid-career burnout, and number two is my undying love for group fitness. And I'm with you. It really saved my life in many ways. It built that community. It gave me an outlet that wasn't work. You talk about finding your purpose in the book, but if you are in that mid-career cycle and you're a workaholic like I was, then all you can see in terms of purpose is, what are my work-related purposes? And what I can really appreciate is that you tell us, no, cut through that. Yes, find a plan b. Think about how you can serve, not just in work, but beyond that, and then find a hobby. Right. Maybe it's cycle. Maybe it's swim, maybe it's fitness, maybe it's something wildly different altogether. And so I appreciate the toolkit that you craft here, too. What do you recommend for men or women or anyone who are stuck in that mid-career glut and can't seem to even think about fun outside of work like? What do they do as a first step to start to find those passions and think about themselves beyond their work capacity?

Nick Jonsson

Yeah, it's a great question, Phil, because I think too many times we just follow what we believe the society expect of them. We go to the work, and then we go to yoga class during working hours because our boss have put that on, and we're supposed to show up. So we keep doing the things that others are saying: you should do this. And we never take a time to pause to find out what our true love is. And as I went through a deep dive into myself to find out about my

purpose, I went back into looking at what was it that I loved as a child. What was my fun and joy? And I only have to look back into my parent's photo album of me as a young child. I was always on a cycle. It's hard to find me on something where I wasn't cycling. From the moment I could walk, I was on a bicycle that's how I got around my neighborhood. So for me, as I came on a bicycle again, I got some joy back into my life. What was the other things I like? Well, as a small child, I remember my first profession. I wanted to be a farmer. I love to walk out in the forest and being around animals and so on. So then, combining cycling by getting out in the nature, then I become a child again. So now I make sure that I do this multiple times a day. So I would encourage everyone, when they're working on this personal discovery, to ask yourself, what was the times in your life as a child when you really enjoyed, and you felt fulfilled and time was floating and you were in the moment? Those are the things we should look at, not ticking boxes to join a yoga class. If that's not really where your purpose or passion is, when we do that, then many things unfold. I basically feel that when I'm working in the office, on my desk, then I'm sort of the manager, I'm the operator, I'm executing my business. But when I'm out there on my bicycle, in the forest or with other groups, socializing with others, out exercising, and so on, then I'm the CEO. I'm the strategic person. When I'm coming back from those exercises, that's when I have the big ideas. So, for anyone who's aspired to be an entrepreneur or business owner, then you have the perfect combination, especially as you scale up your business. You might not be able to afford to have a lot of team members, but now you can be the operator, the manager, you can be the leader, you can have that mindset as long as you incorporate your purpose and something which has to do with exercise as well.

Phil Wagner

Yeah. Again, I really appreciate that you first focus on what we do outside of the workplace, sort of settling up with ourselves, taking stock of who we are and where we are and what's going on, not sitting with secrets or in silence. But then, in the book, you also do take us back in the workplace because work is often an important part of our identity, our lives, our livelihoods. And you give some suggestions there as well. One of those is developing effective peer networks. Talk about the role of networking and creating a support system for mental health, wellness, resilience, and success in the workplace.

Nick Jonsson

Yeah, I'm a big believer that we need to have these safe spaces, and we need to be surrounded by these safe spaces, and it's not enough to have one. I speak about the personal and the professional, safe spaces. On the personal side, we build up perhaps some coaches, some mentors. Outside the workplace we have perhaps a men's group, a woman's group. We have perhaps a mastermind group. I have also my triathlon group, my running, my swimming. These are my pockets, and I try to find some people in each of these where I feel I can be safe. I can have open conversations, honest conversations and so on. I also have my twelve-step recovery group on that side, which I'm now giving back to. When it comes then to the professional safe spaces, it can be confidential. Peer groups, that's what I'm running on the professional side. Now, for executives, like a HR leaders group, we have the sustainability peer group. So, related to your profession, you can join peer groups which are with people which

are like-minded in your passion. So you can talk about your passion, your challenges, and where your work is going in that direction. And inside at the company, it's great if you also can have some safe conversation, but as we all know, it can be quite difficult. Inside organization. People are worried about being exposed, being backstabbed if you share too much. So, we also need to be very careful with what we share inside organization. However, I'm a big believer that this needs to start at the top. Inside a company, it's very difficult to get a young, new, fresh graduate to join your company, to open up, and be vulnerable in the workplace. If you have a CEO or a leader at the top or a manager who's not open, and honest, and vulnerable, we need to be open about this. And I can share one story here: what I do when someone is applying for a job in my organization. The pre-reading we send them is two pages from my book. When I hit my work got done. That's the darkest moment of my life. We send that for them to know me a little bit. What happens is two things. Either they cancel the interview, they just feel this is too much for me, or they come into the interview, but then they know the darkest moment of my life. Then, in the interview, they feel quite safe, to be honest and open. In fact, I interviewed one man for a job with us, and he shared with in five minutes of the interview, he showed a score on his shin. He said that he had two suicide attempts behind him. We had an open dialogue, an open job interview. He's hired, he's working for us still today, and nothing else off the shot. We can have open conversations and so on. He's never scared to raise his hand or come into my office and tell me when he's facing some issues because that was cleared within the first five minutes of the job interview. Now, I'm not suggesting that everyone do that, but I think it sets the scene for an open and honest conversations. And I'm passing here the responsibility to all leaders to ensure that that happens. Then the workplace is also a safe space and where we can talk about all issues.

Phil Wagner

So you're teeing up our next question perfectly. Let's talk to those leaders who are listening to say, look, this is great. Maybe this doesn't quote unquote, apply to me. I'm not that one approaching mid-career burnout. I'm not that one facing a mental health crisis, though I think post-pandemic, if we all step back and do an honest reflection, we're grappling with some stuff, particularly now as the world seems to be on fire and spinning faster than ever before. But I digress. What do you say to those leaders about what to do, not maybe for themselves, but for their people? You gave some great examples here. I'm thinking ERGs, right? Or spaces where employees of similar background can congregate, can build community, can build a support system. Are there other things that can be put into place for the people that we might lead to ensure that not just ourselves but those we lead are healthy and well in all areas of their life?

Nick Jonsson

Yeah, thank you for the question, Phil. And you answered it partly yourself. Indeed, as a leader, if everything is great and you're open, you have close relationships with everyone, and perhaps this isn't for you, then you never know what lies around the corner. Life events may happen, and you might find yourself around the corner losing it. And therefore you want to be proactive about this. You want to build up your safe spaces and practice your vulnerability muscle in the good times so you're ready for the bad times. Don't wait for the moment when

you lost your health or something because then it might just hit you overnight. Life happens, and it's a roller coaster. We lose family members, we lose friends, companies merge and acquired. You might find yourself today in a great paid role, feeling safe, but that doesn't mean that your role will exist in one year from now. So therefore, be there now because you might be the one who need help in a year from now. But in addition to that, indeed, if you don't do this for yourself, do it for your family or your colleagues and build up this culture. Because the people who lose colleagues due to suicide, they will, perhaps, for the rest of their life question, why didn't I? Why didn't I create these safe spaces? Why wasn't I there or create a safe culture so that we shouldn't have this happening in my company? But then it's too late. You already perhaps lost a life in your family, in your workplace. So, therefore, indeed, I would encourage you to practice your vulnerability muscle if you're a leader. And then also encourage everyone to have their safe places. And you also mentioned community. And it's so important in this world where we communicate perhaps too much virtually, but we also do those communications around physical meetings and gatherings. That's why, again, I love swimming, cycling, running. While we have community groups where we share photos before and after and training sessions in our online groups. And it's good memories to share them and stories. But then we do meet in person. We need to have these physical meetings. And I'm a big believer that we need to force ourselves almost to spend two, 3 hours a day in some form of community. I do that every day. It can be 1 hour of charity or social service a day, 1 hour perhaps with a swim academy in the morning. And then maybe I join a run squad at night. So I spend two, 3 hours every day making sure that I'm out there in the community doing things for myself and others. Then I get that real physical connection. I get my exercise, and I have the good feeling of social service. Without that, I wouldn't feel that I'm on the right track anymore.

Phil Wagner

That's super helpful. I have really one more lingering question. And it just kind of keeps the main thing. The main thing. I think your book is written to everyone. But ultimately, I see it as an invitation to the person who's really struggling finds themselves in the position that you found yourself in all those years ago. And maybe they have no idea where to get started. I think this is an opportunity to speak to people who I hope will go out and buy the book, and we'll talk about where to snag that in just a bit. But if they don't, what do you say to that person? Where did they begin? When it feels hopeless, when what they're facing seems insurmountable, they're burnt out. They have no idea how they're going to move forward. What do you say to them, Nick?

Nick Jonsson

Well, the first step of my book is taking stock. So that's the first thing. And why that in the purpose of the book is taking really a deep taking stock, almost like a stock account or an audit of a shop that you do that on yourself. But what that means on a day-to-day basis? It means having a pen and paper on your desk and next to your bed also, which I do have. And it's about writing down your feelings. If you wake up in the morning, try to express your feelings yourself and write down what is it that you're feeling. And then next to that, just think about

who can I discuss this with. Is there a mentor? A hotline? Is there a friend? Is there a colleague? Can I talk to my boss about this? And otherwise, there's so many anonymous support hotlines these days. I just mentioned before, I'm the volunteer for a suicide hotline. These exist all over the world, no matter what problem or issue it is. There's also the twelve-steps program for shopping, sex, alcohol, drugs, social media addictions. There's something for everything. And you can even on the search engines then and find the right place. There will be volunteers, people who've gone through similar feelings, who can have a conversation with you. It's anonymous. You're not getting exposed, so just take some action on that. So again, to summarize, write down whatever feeling it is and then try to think, who can I have this conversation with? And just take action on that. And if you get that practice into motion and do this on a day-to-day natural basis, then you will prevent a lot of pain and a lot of issues for yourself.

Phil Wagner

Fantastic advice. Thanks, Nick. So the final question I have you know our listeners, I imagine, are likely very engaged by this conversation and want to support you. How do they do that? Where do we find you? How do we follow your work? Where do we pick up a copy of executive loneliness? Tell our listeners where they can find and support you.

Nick Jonsson

Yeah, I'm quite active on LinkedIn, so they can look me up there. And my name is Nick Jonsson. It's Nick and Swedish spelling of Jonsson. J-O-N-S-S-O-N. Otherwise my book is a bestseller on Amazon. It was a bestseller also in the US under men's health and mental health when it was launched. You can look it up there called executive loneliness. It's also on Audible as an audiobook.

Phil Wagner

Nick, thanks for this great conversation today. Thank you for your candor, not just in the book but here as well for the important work that you do addressing a critical need. Thanks again. Great conversation.

Nick Jonsson

Thank you, Phil, for having these important conversations. And thanks to all the listeners as well.

Phil Wagner

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