

MEN'S MENTAL HEALTH SERIES

SHAO



*My mental health journey has been **Silent** and **Sporadic***

Why were those the words you picked?

I chose **Silent** because within the various walks of life I have taken, I've always felt the word mental health was stigmatized. Especially in the environments I grew up in. Mental health became synonymous with words like weak, failing, sick, or soft. And for those people who need to showcase or exhibit strength in their life like a parent, leaders, visionaries, etc., we are told to wake up every day trying to exhibit strength (or what we think "strength" should be) for the people around us. I felt if I were to talk about emotions or feelings, I would be perceived as "weak". I am someone who is always trying to exhibit strength. As a parent, athlete, sibling, or coach, I feel there have not been many opportunities to be vulnerable and address or talk about mental health. This means our mental health can often take a back seat for days, weeks, years, and decades, all while trying to exhibit my so-called "strength". The avoidance of talking about it will eventually silence you.

I chose the word **Sporadic** because I feel my mental health is not a destination, it is a journey. There are going to be ups and downs, failures, loss of loved ones, turbulence, and challenges, as well as successes, fulfillment, and excitement. These experiences are all going to impact my mental state and mental health. A lot of my journey has been trying to learn and better understand how to deal with the lows of life, and how to appreciate the highs more often.

What is one internal barrier, perspective, or insecurity you hold that you feel is unproductive?

One internal barrier that seems to be a challenge for me, is the notion a busy life is a successful life. I know I can get myself caught up in chasing the illusion of "success". This results in me saying yes to things I don't actually want to do, even when it is mentally draining and stressful. For me this is a

fast track to burn out. I want to be successful, but I am realizing more and more I need to define what success is for me. This is something that fits my needs, wants and demands of life and finding the places or situations that can best help me get there.

As it relates to the culture of mental health and masculinity or being a “man” what is one thing you are hopeful or excited to see changing in the future?

The education of mental health, and particularly working to understand what mental health is for each of us as individuals.

I feel some of the information about and the conversation with mental health is so general. This can be challenging. People are individuals and we all go through our own unique challenges in life.

For example. I’m Black, and more specifically I am an African-Nova Scotian that is from the largest Black Community in Canada. This means it is possible you may not fully understand my life experiences by just educating yourself on the broader elements of the Black community. You can only understand me by working to build a relationship with me, engaging in conversation, and listening to what I choose to share about my experience.

I think the same is true for the term mental health. There are plenty of mental health diagnoses, experiences, and stories. Not coming to wide sweeping assumptions based on generalities matters. We need to take the time to understand ourselves and each other, and then develop supports to help us get there.

What is a piece of advice relating to mental health that is so good or so horrible, you would want others to know or be aware of as they move through their own journey?

This is a tough one, because I feel like we are constantly exposed to advice. I probably consume hundreds of pieces of information daily on Instagram and LinkedIn alone. I want to share a piece of advice that was most horrible.

I was told and have seen a lot of information about needing to work on yourself first. While I feel it is important to self-reflect, I feel a lot of the messaging can be taken as if you need to cut everyone off or self-isolate. I see it all the time, people cutting themselves off from friends and relationships because they feel like it’s going to help put themselves in a better situation or mental state. I actually think it’s the opposite.

I think there is a need to build more community. We need to find more people that we can be vulnerable with, people who have been through similar things, and people we can share with and learn from. One of the most rewarding community groups I am part of today is called ACCE and we are a group of young professionals who all come from Black communities throughout Nova Scotia. This group is so fulfilling because we share stories about being Black in Nova Scotia, and it is amazing to see there are common connections and while at the same time, we each have our

own unique experiences to share. Connecting regularly with a group like ACCE has created a sense of community and connection for me, and I believe community is what can best help us grow and be successful.

What is something you are grateful to have learnt, or a skill you are proud to incorporate into your mental health journey?

The skill I use most is planning and time blocking. I feel my personal health is an ecosystem, and there are many components that contribute to its' success and failure. I need to hit the gym, I need to travel and take time off, I need to disconnect, I need to reserve the time for family.

In terms of time blocking, I have integrated my whole life into one calendar. My Family time, work schedule, picking up the girls, coaching, gym schedule, haircuts, appointments, it's all in one centralized calendar. This helps me plan and execute the things that are important to me so I can feel like my best self, even when I struggle through life's ups and downs.

Don't get me wrong, there are days and weeks that slip away from me, but by taking time to plan my calendar in advance, it makes it easier to identify which part of my ecosystem is becoming misaligned and slipping away.

Shaq Smith is a digital consultant who graduated from Acadia University with a Business degree. With a keen interest in technology and marketing, he honed his skills in digital marketing and has since become a sought-after consultant in the industry.

Shaq's success is not limited to his professional accomplishments. He has also made a significant impact in the community by leading various social causes and initiatives. Shaq's community engagement has helped him build strong relationships with people from all walks of life.

Shaq has helped many businesses grow and succeed in the digital space. He understands the importance of building relationships and takes a human-centric approach in his work. Shaq's ability to connect with people, combined with his technical skills, has earned him a reputation as a trusted consultant in his community and beyond.

