

Transcription - Nick Jonsson Part 2

Welcome back, I'm Kim Baillie, she's Fulyana Orsborn and this is Inside Exec. Today we're continuing our discussion with Nick Jonsson from Singapore and in this session will learn about how a simple video in 2019, catapulted him and this issue into the public eye and then how the years of the pandemic helped to bring a lot of these issues to the surface, so that people were somewhat more comfortable about talking about the issues that he is addressing these days.

So what happened then, when I tried to raise raise money for it and awareness, I made a video in 2019 that I posted on LinkedIn and it went viral. Before I knew it, it spiralled and it went crazy. I couldn't believe people were writing from all over the world, but especially in Singapore because I was one of the first and at this time to speak up about it. Before I knew it, I was live on radio talking about it then they asked me all sort of questions and I started to reveal more and more and then actually there was a four page feature of me and my story and some other executives in a business magazine here in Singapore. As far as I know that at the time was the biggest mental health piece ever published in Singapore. So I was right at the forefront of opening up this topic that was so full of stigma that it was even illegal to talk about it.

Nick, I think what you are doing is amazing and super relevant and it's going to help lots of people. Looking back, if any of our listeners who might identify one of those people who are just about to go through a crisis because of all the things that you said, what they should do that? How to approach so it helps the person and not interfere?

The most important item here is to decide to talk to someone. So, in my case, I was ill until I decided to tell someone. I told my new wife who I had just married then and she even didn't know. She was by my side and I was hiding it so well that she didn't even know that I was going through a very difficult time internally. So when I told her immediately I start to feel better, she said let's go to the doctor and I told the doctor and I felt better after I shared with the doctor. Then we went to a common friend who had had some issues before and I shared with this person. So within a few days everything was looking bright again. So that loneliness that I've been holding onto so long, was just gone. So, no matter where you are at with this, if you're suffering yourself, tell someone, don't keep it secret. And if you don't feel like you can tell a family member or friend, there are so many support talklines, anonymous support groups, it doesn't matter really who you talk to, the key is just get started and open up to talk to someone.

In terms of that, if we've got someone listening who feels like they need to talk to someone, what are the words they use to start? What is this person going to use as their opening sentence?

I think it doesn't matter as long as they are saying anything here. It's just about making a commitment to share with someone and perhaps make it in a place and a setting where they are comfortable. And I think that is the most important and especially for men. We have difficulty with eye contact. So if you want to face someone over lunch or coffee or dinner, then maybe you're not going to speak. Maybe also there's someone else at the restaurant. The best, according to me, you should go for a walk together, drive in a car together or cycle. Do something where you can actually go out and walk because then you don't need the eye contact. So then it's not so important what you say but then naturally you on a journey together if you go for a walk in the forest or whatever. Walk side-by-side and then you can start sharing a lot easier.

If we can just stay on the less than positive note for a moment longer, they do that and they don't get the response or they get a withdrawal of that person they thought they could trust with this information. What's the next step? Keep going, I guess. Try somebody else? How do they build themselves up for that, making themselves vulnerable again?

That's a great question Kim because not everyone perhaps might be ready to answer that. So then try to seek some professional help. I mean a doctor would listen if you're not feeling well, some of the support lines dedicated for this, there will be something for any addiction and suicide hotlines and so on and they are trained, these people and they can give you all the guidelines and it's also anonymous so there shouldn't be much stigma there.

Let's bring it forward a bit and talk about it, you've moved through that process, you come to a point where you think. okay I recognize the signs that I have to do something about it, is there a daily routine or a daily affirmation that you go through?

Yes it is and I learned a lot in the recovery. So first, basically, is that I need to get physically well and mentally well. Then once that was over I wanted to work more on it because I didn't want to have, should I say, relapse coming into this loneliness, going down again. I wanted to build something after this, something sustainable. And that is only possible by working this on a daily basis, Kim. Of course, humans have done this in generations and many are seeking perhaps to a power greater than ourselves, people looking for religion, or clubs,

associations and society. And I think we all need to belong somewhere because loneliness is perhaps if you are isolated at home and sitting behind a computer all day, it doesn't matter what you belong to, but in my case now, I'm trying to belong to some of these organizations that are related to mental health and I'm volunteering there now. So my way to do this on a daily basis is to give back and being there for the people are going through a difficult time now because then I'll be reminded how blessed and fortunate I am to be pulled out of this. It's a reminder to me to keep myself in shape. And also, it's a wonderful feeling to give back to people because then you deflate your ego and you get out of yourself and that, I found, is my happy place.

Is there a risk, then, if you are what is termed an addictive personality, that you get addicted to that adrenaline rush you get when you're doing something good? You know you've done something good so you focus a little bit more than you should? How do you get the balance?

Yes, I think that's a risk and I would say, that's probably a good addiction in that case. If all we do is a giving back this way, helping people everyday, I think the world would be a wonderful place. I would say, I haven't gone that far, Kim, I haven't made it my life. I've made it part of my daily routine. But I also equally, am very keen to get and to keep myself in shape physically, so exercise, do cycling and running and swimming. To keep myself in shape, but also to socialize with people, not only those who are going through a difficult time because it can also be, you know, quite draining to be in an environment where everyone is going through challenging times, perhaps many times with divorce or addictions and other issues. So it's important, also, you need to lift up yourself as well.

Nick did you find that some of the people, colleagues that you worked with before that saw you being that person who is totally focussed before the break down, were surprised at what happened with you and I did that encourage them to come to you and say, hey I didn't know and this is helping me?

Well. some of them I know are still appreciating that I was so goal driven that I really drove myself so hard and them so hard. Many people I worked with in various countries in Southeast Asia are today general directors themselves and in very, very senior, well-paid jobs and they say it's thanks to me, how I trained them and how I supported to them, and so they looked at me and they wanted all that. Well, so most of them are actually very grateful. They didn't see that I was down that path. It was indeed a few events such as a divorce and so on, that made me really isolate myself. The fact that I didn't talk about my issues at home

with someone that really was brought into the work until I felt, you know, lonely at the workplace and that led to the resignation and with that everything else fell down. So they didn't really see the bad parts of me and many people were surprised then when I spoke out that I had gone through a difficult time and they didn't really see it happen. Yes, they saw that I gained some weight, they saw that I stopped exercising but most people said at the time, good for you Nick that you're enjoying yourself, it's good to see you out eating at restaurants, good to see you at the bar. Yeah it's good. You've been working too much, you just have to relax now. So I think that's quite common in society where we are happy with that.

One of the questions we sent you earlier was about the last two years. It's interesting that really the momentum for what you doing started at the beginning of when we then went into a period of time across the world where we were be isolated from one another or isolated physically. Do you think that the enforced isolation has made people be reflective? And then on the other part of it, do you think in some ways, particularly the eye contact you spoke about earlier, that the remoteness of communication helped people to recognize it?

Yes and indeed, Kim, it was very good timing in that respect because I started to do a survey in 2019 of senior executives in Singapore, and I found that 30% of them were suffering from loneliness. And then I had the opportunity to do the same survey a year later, that's in the middle of the pandemic, 2020 when most countries were in lockdown. All these people are working from home, 59% then said they were suffering from loneliness. That means it had doubled and I think these numbers speak for themselves. If you are a senior executive, that means that you carry around a huge responsibility. All your colleagues are working from home, just sitting at home, trying to run these, perhaps, a company in a crisis mode. Yes, people were suffering more. Were they more open about this than before? Yes, I believe everyone was. We saw all this, it was suddenly okay to ask "Are you OK?"

It came to the forefront and I was giving my keynote talk almost every second day, to every business organization, to companies had all the teams working at home, who wanted to have staff gatherings and company talks. I was giving this, you know, Friday morning all hands meeting. People were willing finally to listen to this.

This also had the potential to throw you back into a routine that pushed you to the limit in terms of what you were doing, knowing that the opportunity was there and trying to reach as many people as possible and go back onto the path of

overwork and the associated stress of having to get the message out. Knowing how important it was, how did you put the reins on that and control yourself.

That's a great reflection, Kim and I'm glad you spoke to that because indeed I could feel the pressure, that I could feel the urgency. I was also on more media interviews, more newspaper articles and it was a lot of write up. What I had learned during this time was not to just sit on that pressure by myself. So what I did instead, I contacted someone like yourself Kim, a public speaking coach, someone who had herself a fantastic TedX talk she had developed and she was specializing in helping executives to give presentations. So I hired her as my coach and I basically worked with her for my first talk and I think I allowed myself a month or so to prepare and we worked back and forth. I recorded my talks, she helped me to coach me. After each talk, we would have a debrief and she would guide me. At least I didn't feel alone. I certainly felt the pressure, but I didn't feel alone and had someone who was there and holding my hand and helping me get better during this time.

It's interesting that I find that is the trigger that people will pick on something that they know they need to improve and work on that rather than keep pushing themselves in the areas that they know about and are their comfortable zones. So make themselves a little bit uncomfortable in one area reassures them that they can then talk about something that they are really uncomfortable about.

We'll take a break now in our discussion with Nick Jonsson. Join us for the final part of this really interesting coverage of what to do about loneliness in the senior executive ranks. For now I'm Kim Baillie, she's Fulyana Orsborn and this is Inside Exec.