A Conversation About Mental Health With Two Justins

Justin Peck takes a moment to speak with Justin Birckbichler on his mental health journey.

November 6, 2019 By Justin Birckbichler

Back in June, I attended and presented at the Mental Health America Conference, where I really took a moment to reflect on my own mental health. One of the keynote speakers was Justin Peck, who inspired me so much. He graciously agreed to do an interview with me about his journey with mental health.

Justin Birckbichler: Before we get into the mental health side of the interview, tell us — who is Justin Peck?

Justin Peck: I am a goofy guy who happens to be an off-road champion race car driver in the Lucas Oil Off-Road & Best of the Desert Racing Series, owner of Racepro Technologies racing team, Mental Health Advocate, and author of my memoir, BULLETPROOF. It is my story of living with severe bipolar disorder, addiction and the daily struggles of both diseases.

But most of all, BULLETPROOF is my truth and provides what I hope to be a platform of strength for all. My passion reigns for making mental health awareness a movement of inspiration versus despair. As a Mental Health America Ambassador, I travel throughout the US for interviews and speaking engagements to educate others by sharing my story, hoping to aid in their quest to find the strength to #FightInTheOpen and get help #B4Stage4.

And that, my friend, is how I met you!

And that segues nicely! We did indeed meet at MHA19, where we connected over shared first names and an affinity for beards. Beyond that, we've both gone through mental health challenges — or as you say, blessings. Talk to me more about that.

LOL! The brotherhood of beards is a phenomenal connector.

I'd say learning how to manage my bipolar disorder on a daily basis has been my biggest challenge. Most of the time, I still severely doubt myself and my abilities on an everyday basis which can easily lead to thoughts of failure, despair, and ultimately no self-worth.

However, I live by a personal saying where I pump up myself to stay motivated and in tune with my rational mind. Does it get easier? I wouldn't say easier, but it is constantly changing and ever-

evolving. What does get easier is the ability to limit the down moments through proper medication, diet, exercise, and positive thinking.

The down moments still suck and are hard to pull up out of no doubt, but I now know that I can overcome anything. I've recently been trying ketamine treatments for the depressive side and they seem to be working wonders. It's not for everyone though. I also have to make sure I get sleep during my manic phases, because that can force me into a very dark place when I eventually crash.

Mental health is like a game of chess. There's strategy involved with all my treatments and self-care.

If we can focus on the positive things that make us happy, then the challenges seem not so bad. The other thing that I have always told people is this… What life struggle did you have exactly one year ago? Was is consuming, overwhelming, and did you think that life couldn't go on because your struggles were so intense?

Now, think about today, one year later. Are those same struggles still the same fight for you? Most of the time, they are not! We find a way to overcome our current problems and then move onto the next. So, whatever struggle you are having right at this exact moment in life, please know that one year from now, it will be nothing. There is always light at the end of the tunnel as long as we believe there is.

Why did you choose to be so public with your suicide attempt and mental health journey?

I put a gun to my head and pulled the trigger, but it didn't go off. That rush I got in that moment is what probably saved my life. Instead of the easy way out through death, and folding pain onto my loved ones by leaving this world, I chose to become a racer, a champion, a survivor. That was the day I knew I was bulletproof. Today, my life's mantra is to tell this tale on repeat to others so that I can save lives and inspire the gift of hope. It exists everywhere and in everyone, though sometimes it takes some serious muscle…and often a village to find it.

As an off-road race car driver who has raced against opponents from all over the world, challenges just come with the territory. As an ambassador for Mental Health America, I have the challenge of raising positive awareness about bipolar disorder — both among people who have bipolar and to the general public, who may not have an understanding of how it affects others.

This is a challenge I'm excited to face.

Telling the truth about bipolar disorder and helping others learn the facts about it is one of my main missions. There is hope for people with mental health issues, and especially bipolar disorder. But, the course for treatment isn't just one size fits all. It takes all sorts of twists and turns along the way.

Regardless of how maintenance is found, it's critical to replace fear with hope, ignorance with

knowledge, and darkness with light. I thank you for wanting to join me on my journey for increased awareness about bipolar and the people who live with it every day. There is a light at the end of the tunnel — we just need to point the way for those who need help.

What helps you to keep going?

Turning to racing in the Lucas Oil Off-Road series and the Best of the Desert Racing Series and eventually becoming owner of Racepro Tech racing team has been my gold. Racing is the life blood of my entire world. Through the chaos of life, business, family, and all the other things that add stress, the second I put on a helmet… the outside world stops. It's almost surreal. My mind can be scattered and all over the place, but the helmet takes all of that and focuses it into one straight path.

The emotional rock that racing provides me is something that is hard to explain, but I do know that without it my life would be a hard one to live. Everyone needs an outlet that supports them and be grounded in the game of life. Everyone needs a vice in this life. Mine just happens to be my innate need for speed and some burning rubber.

My kids and my grandkids share in my treasure, too. Let's definitely not forget them, too. It's amazing what joy a little 6 year old girl can bring with the flash of a smile. Don't even get me started on how easily my granddaughter can make me melt and can control me with a single smile. I also managed to find a pretty awesome girlfriend who supports my career, my passion for mental health advocacy work, deals with all my highs and lows, and is my constant ray of sunshine.

What do you want the world to know about bipolar disorder?

It's important to remember that treatment of bipolar disorder is a lifelong process and often involves a combination of medications and psychotherapy. It isn't one size fits all.

Over 60 million people are struggling with bipolar disorder worldwide and 2 million adults in the U.S. have bipolar. There are a lot of myths about bipolar disorder, but they're just that — myths. Bipolar disorder is not rare — it affects many, many people.

And bipolar disorder is not just "mood swings" like the general population has from time to time. It is a complex beast which needs to be treated by a physician and a tribe of support.

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Lastly, people who are treated for bipolar disorder are not in danger of "losing their creativity" or strength on life. Quite the contrary… getting control of bipolar disorder may be the single most important thing that a person dealing with bipolar disorder can do to keep their creativity in check and understand their "superpowers."

This is exactly why I often refer to bipolar disease as a blessing versus a curse. People don't realize the power packed behind the disorder and it's not all bad.

Why is it so important to talk about men's mental health? What are some strategies you can share to help men heal?

Traditionally, it's harder for men to communicate than women and especially when it comes to mental health. Our emotions have a huge impact on our health. When the mind, body and spirit are out of whack, our energy can begin to work against us. But when we connect these three elements, and our energy is flowing, it can have a positive impact on us and our well-being. When we're in tune, we may even begin to feel warmth, euphoria and bliss.

One way to keep our mind, body and spirit in tune is to write down our thoughts, perhaps in a journal. The simple act of writing can release blockages — both physical and mental— inform our minds and ultimately, promote healing in our spirit.

Another way to heal yourself is to listen to our body, to take a body scan, which can be done during meditation.

When you get comfortable and relax, and simply notice where your discomfort lies, you can release the tension and banish the negative emotions that often follow stressful feelings. Once again, you're regaining control.

Finally, it's important to be open to spirit. We are constantly interconnected with other people who are around us, and we're communicating in many ways we're not even aware of in the moment. If we remind ourselves that we're not alone, and that everything we do has the potential to affect others, and vice versa, we can finally relax into our own sense of well-being.

Life is a constant challenge. But by being aware of your own mind, body, spirit connection, and how this connection can have a major impact on your well-being, you can finally take control of your life and your emotions — even when times get rough. Take it from me — there is a light at the end of the tunnel. You just have to be open to making the internal mind, body, spirit journey to find it.

Be sure to connect with Justin (the racing one) on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and his website.

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