**EPISODE 1510**

[INTRODUCTION]

**[00:00:00] ANNOUNCER:** This episode is hosted by Sean Falconer. Sean has a PhD in computer science, was a postdoctoral student at Stanford's Medical School, and is an ex-Googler and startup founder, now serving as head of Developer Relations at Skyflow, an architectural solution for data privacy. Sean has published works covering a wide range of topics from information visualization, quantum computing, developer experience to data privacy. You can find more of his work by following him on Twitter, @seanfalconer.

[INTERVIEW]

**[00:00:36] SF:** Before we get into the interview and our guest, I wanted to set context for the show as this is going to be a little different than our typical show, where we usually are diving deep into technology and engineering. Today, we're talking about something that I think is really important and impacts a lot of people in tech and engineering, and that's mental health. This is of course, on the back of recently losing the founder and creator of the show, Jeff Meyerson. We're not going to be talking about Jeff specifically, but you can listen to him talk about some of his struggles with mental health in the February 25th episode that he did with Kelsey Hightower.

The last thing I want to say before we jump into the show is that neither myself or my guests, Andy Johns, are mental health professionals. So, we'll be speaking primarily about our own experience in mental health and stress. And hopefully, anyone that might be struggling with their own mental health issues can be inspired by this conversation or able to connect with a professional to get help if they need it.

All right, with that said, I'm super excited to be talking to our guest today. Andy Johns, who's previously held roles in growth and product at some of the largest and fastest growing technology companies in the world, and who has also been very public about his own struggles with mental health and is now dedicating much of his time to being an advocate for mental health. Andy, welcome to the show.

**[00:01:42] AJ:** Sean, good to be here, man. Thanks for having me.

 

**[00:01:44] SF:** Awesome. Thank you for joining us. And coming on to talk about I think this really, really important issue. So, I shared a little bit about, I think a lot of people would consider a pretty impressive background. But could we start by you introducing yourself and sharing some of your backstory?

**[00:01:59] AJ:** Sure, sure. So, I started in the tech industry about 16, 17 years ago. But before that, I grew up in a small family farm and a blue-collar small community in central California. I didn't really have any exposure to the world of tech. But through a lot of soul searching, combined with some luck and creativity, I made my way into the technology industry, which has been my professional home. About a year and a half ago, I took a step back from full time, really 24/7 work, both as an executive at startups and as a venture capitalist, to embark on a new stage in life, really motivated by my own mental health journey. But that's the short story is, I poured everything into startups for a long period of time. And then there came a point where it was clear that I had accomplished enough, but also that I was ready to be kinder to myself, and to not put myself through the wringer again, if it was unnecessary. That's led me to the work that I'm doing now in the world of mental health and why I'm chatting with you today.

**[00:03:07] SF:** Could you share a little bit about your personal story with mental health and where those struggles began and how did it manifest? What were some of the ways that you tried to cope with those things?

**[00:03:17] AJ:** Sure. The origin of it all goes back to my childhood. The first 10 years of my life, certainly from a child's perspective was pretty chaotic. We were a low-income family. My mom was very mentally ill. She was manic bipolar, major depressive, and that introduced a lot of volatility in my life, as well as for the rest of my family. And some difficult experiences as part of that. It left a pretty significant imprint on my psychology on my mind, and that started when I was quite young. It culminated with my mom passing away when I was 10. Our family was also bankrupt at the time, in part due to the medical bills that my dad was attempting to cover. And so, we were just in a rough place, and thanks to had say, some good fortune, good family values and a lot of hard work, we managed to dig ourselves out of that, and me and my two brothers and my dad have gone on to live pretty healthy, sane, successful lives.

But interestingly, what happened for me was that it was when I was around 27 that the impact of the early childhood trauma and neglect that I experienced that bubbled to the surface, and it bubbled to the

surface in the form of sudden onset of panic attacks, depression, occasional suicidality. And I didn't know what was going on, because the psychological and physical manifestations issue just popped up rather suddenly. But what I did know was that something was seriously wrong, and that led to me seeking out professional help for the first time, and connecting with a therapist who, now 12, 13 years later, I continue to work with. That was the origin of it and it was around 2010, when I first, from a formal clinical perspective, started to engage in the world of mental health.

**[00:05:26] SF:** During this time, you worked for a lot of really high profile, high growth companies, companies like Facebook and Twitter and Wealthfront. And do you think that you would have encountered these, like similar mental health issues, regardless of the types of companies you've worked for? Or was there something particular about working for these companies' work environments, or these high growth companies that manifested these issues for you?

**[00:05:52] AJ:** It was nothing specific to the companies. I think anyone can relate to the stress and the pressure, having been a part of any startup, really. Companies like Facebook and Twitter in the early days were very challenging, of course, but it had nothing to do with those specifically. Instead, the way that I've come to understand it, and relate the experiences of my past, to my career, and to both the success and the challenges I experienced along the way, is that, for me, my professional life, was really a reflection of a low sense of self-worth, and I'll unpack that a little bit.

So, when you're a kid, and you still don't have the intellectual and emotional capacities of an adult, you have this really strong dependence on the nurturing and the care and the affection that you receive, especially from the adults in your life. And as such, children are very narcissistic. I don't mean that in a pejorative sense. I just mean that in the sense of, as an organism, it's so dependent on the adults, that biologically and psychologically, there's a real need for connection, and for care, and for nurturing. And the messages that that I received when I was younger, in particular, around the trauma and the pain that I experienced with my mom's mental illness, was that I interpreted some of the things that happened to me, such as the neglect or the abuse. I interpreted those as the direct result of who I was.

In other words, I was on the receiving and of less than nurturing care, therefore, it must have been because of who I was as a kid. So, I really internalize this message that if I was just a better kid, if I was doing well, if I was succeeding, and hitting homeruns, and blue ribbons, and all that stuff, then the take home message for me was, if I am succeeding at the highest level, and if I'm basically being this

perfect kid, then I am lovable. But if I'm not succeeding, if I'm not perfect, then I'm not lovable for who I am. I didn't realize that that's what was happening at the time. That was the internal narrative that was sitting, unconsciously, waiting to manifest itself in my life as an adult.

So, I basically became this hyper achiever, because it was through the external validation that I received from achievement, whether it's academic, or sports or anything else, that when I achieved externally, I received love in return. Eventually, I had a very unhealthy relationship with that internal belief system, such that I reached a point where there wasn't a clear end to my desire to achieve. I was climbing the career ladder, I was getting promotions, I was making more money, I was gaining esteem and notoriety. But at the peak of my career, at least on paper, professionally, and financially, I was at my lowest emotionally and spiritually, and I had hit a rock bottom, actually, hit a rock bottom a couple of times, so much so that that's what compelled me to say, like, “What gives?” I'm doing everything I can to be a successful high achieving person, and I'm accomplishing those things. Then why do I feel so terrible? And so, I had to reconcile that disconnect. That's largely what I was doing through therapy and other forms of work that I've done, is just trying to understand like, “Why is it that I feel so terrible on the inside, despite what's going on in my life on the outside?”

That's the connection. It's nothing to do with the specific companies. The stress doesn't help. But it was really my association with achievement and a sense of self-worth, that I needed to unpack and to resolve.

**[00:09:59] SF:** Was this something, when you're working for this company, at least initially, or maybe throughout the entire time that you were actively trying to hide from the people you reported to?

**[00:10:08] AJ:** I wasn't actively trying to hide it, but I certainly didn't feel comfortable sharing it with anyone. Mental health as a whole carries a lot of stigma, especially when you're still at the early stages of doing the inner engineering work, to heal and to feel better. It's something that you mostly keep between you and your therapist. And even at that point, it's often the case that at the beginning of the therapeutic process, most people still don't feel comfortable fully admitting how they're feeling, or the things they've done that make them feel guilty or shameful. And it takes a while for somebody to warm up, even to their therapist, to be open enough and transparent enough, such that that therapists can really, really dive in and help out.

Yeah, it's hardly anyone, including within my family, was aware of the work that I was doing. But I decided, it was a year and a half ago, really where I said, "Okay, it's time to make a change with that."

**[00:11:11] SF:** I think, my father was a psychologist, he's retired now. But one of the things that he said, when I was kid, that always stuck with me was that for whatever reason, the public perception, when it comes to treating the brain, people tend to get more hung up on that, than treating some other organ with the body, like the heart or the lungs. Even culturally, I think we tend to talk about people who might have mental health issues as quite a negative thing, like he's cracking up, mental breakdown, lost his mind. And there's really this historical stigma, it seems between around mental health versus something like a physical health issue. Do you think that this is something that is starting to change?

**[00:11:51] AJ:** It is, but very, very slowly. I suspect, it's going to take a few more decades before you could say that in mass, the American population, for example, begins to think less negatively, when certainly applies less stigma such that they'll seek help themselves. But we're still in the first inning of the ballgame, in my opinion, not only in terms of the existence of stigma around the subject, but also in terms of our understanding of the complexities of the human mind, and how exactly to heal from psychiatric diseases.

**[00:12:28] SF:** You mentioned that it was only like a year and a half ago that you started to open up about some of the work that you've been doing on yourself all this time, to even your family. And then earlier this year, in March, you started to write about mental health and some of the things that you've gone through. So, what motivated you to actually start writing about your personal journey with mental health?

**[00:12:51] AJ:** I like this question a lot, because there's not one single event, it's more about like a fundamental shift in values and what my goals and objectives were, but also how I perceive the world. What I mean by that is, it's my belief or theory that when a child comes into the world, a child is deeply in touch with its feelings and emotions, and sort of the bodily sensations that we might generally categorize as our intuition, these feelings of intuition. But kids don't have the brain development, and the combination of – the creation of a system of language yet to be able to express those complex feelings and emotions that exists in the body in a clear way. And that's why a kid cries. Everything. Hungry, it cries. It needs a new diaper, it cries. It doesn't like who it's being held by, it cries. They're very perceptive, very in touch with what their needs are and it's responding intuitively.

And then through the process of getting older and socialization of life and becoming more ingrained into what we just generally refer to as civilization, we sort of move slowly out of this intuitive emotions sort of feeling based approach to the world, and then we become more intellectual. We start operating at the level of the intellect. And then we're using our brain for everything, including making decisions that should be made at the level of intuition or emotion.

So, it's like somebody could be working at a job and thinking like, “This job sucks.” And like every part of their being is saying, like, this career is not for you. And then what do we do? We write a pros and cons list down, as if that's going to be the answer. It's like, “No, just listen to yourself. Get back in touch with that innate intuition you have, because something inside of your being is telling you that this isn't you.” And so, so much of this process of, at least for me, of transitioning away from the professional work that I was doing, and then discovering this new work that I'm doing was a process of me unwinding that pattern of, at first being very in touch with my intuitions and emotions as a child, and then completely losing touch with that part of my intelligence. Operating in the intellectual space the entire time, trying to make rational decisions, making decisions around which career is going to make more money, which title has more esteem, which startup is going to be more successful. And instead saying, “I'm not going to make a decision from that perspective. I'm going to make a decision based on what I feel. What I feel is most aligned with what is right for me.”

So, to get directly to your question, the way in which I arose, or wound up writing my Substack was that, over the course of a year, really all of 2021, I continued to just have this nagging feeling that I wanted to write. I even felt that desire to write professionally when I was working. But I would only occasionally satisfy that by writing about things that were related to startups. I experienced some joy in doing that, and there were times where the writing would really flow. But for example, I never completed a book on a professional subject, because it just wasn't the right topic for me. But then this repeated sensation of like, Andy, just move beyond the fear that you have, move beyond the self-judgment, write about your authentic experiences, as somebody who's had some significant ups and downs in the world of mental health, just write. That was this feeling that I could not shake. So, I finally listened to it.

I was at a local coffee shop one day, not planning to write at all. And that really, guttural instinct, popped up again, and I said, “You know what, I have to listen to this intuition.” And that's what I did. I wrote the

first post in March. The reception was well beyond what I expected, and here we are about six months later, and I'm over 6,000 readers now. So, it's on the right track. I'm glad I listened to that instinct.

**[00:17:19] SF:** As somebody who's deeply connected to a lot of people in prominent positions in tech, and having, on the back of yourself, being an executive at a very well-known company, were you nervous at all about what the potential negative reaction might be to talking about this type of stuff?

**[00:17:38] AJ:** Certainly, especially because so much of my personal identity was wrapped up in my career identity, given that the lines between my personal and professional life had mostly disappeared later on in my career. So, part of the fear was just the fear of saying goodbye to my old sense of self. That was a really big part of it. There's a bit of a feeling of, to use poker terminology, of being pot committed. It's like, “Well, I've already put enough chips in, I might as well just keep putting more in.” And there's a tendency you want to get into that fallacy.

There's also definitely the fear of, well, there's going to be people out there that men say negative things that say. That say, “We’ll see, he wasn't cracked up. He wasn't tough enough.” Or folks just doing something that's more implicit, which is just choosing not to do business with me in one form or another, because they say, “Oh, this person, they have PTSD, not sure we can work with them.” Yeah, that fear was there. It basically kept my finger on the publish button for about a year. It wasn't until I just finally said, “Fuck it.” You know what, this is an act of me moving forward and saying, “This is who I am and what I want to do, and I need to stop caring about what everyone else thinks. That's part of the problem.” And I'm really glad that I did.

**[00:19:01] SF:** Yeah. One of the things you mentioned there was, this fear that people might react and think like, “Oh, well, Andy’s just not tough enough to hack it.” I think, we live very much in a culture of praising hard work, especially in the Bay Area, or the Valley. Even when I was a startup founder, I remember, talking to other founders, and they brag about all the time they spent working on the weekend and at nights and meanwhile, a lot of times their startups didn't have customers or business model, but I was always curious about what they're actually doing during that time. But there's just this association between working crazy hours and startups and tech and success. Do you think that there's a change happening? And could a startup be successful with a more balanced approach? Can you compete in this market without essentially pushing your employees to the max?

**[00:19:49] AJ:** I'm a realist about this stuff, too. And I've been an employee at the four startups. Two of them, I was one of the first 15 employees, another one I was about employee 100 and there are 5000 people. The other, I was employee 300, and they're about 50,000 people now. So, I've been involved early as an individual employee, that I've also seen as an advisor and investor. I've seen enough startups to be realistic around like the practical nature that they are extremely difficult, require a lot of risk and a lot of hard work and a lot of sacrifice. I think that's just the nature of the beast. I'm not saying that, that's the case for all startups. There are definitely cases of people that entrepreneurs that took their time building slowly and methodically, and then they build this great 10 million ARR "lifestyle business", which is kind of a condescending term. But that's a hell of a business by most standards, and they didn't break themselves in half. They still absolutely pushed themselves at times.

So, I think, it is the nature of the beast that it requires all of those sacrifices that can work at the detriment of physical and psychological health, as well as personal relationships, romantic relationships, family, and all those other things. Now, that said, I guess if there's a message that I'm trying to get out, it's that the issue is when somebody makes those sacrifices, for reasons that are driven by a subconscious part of themselves, or for reasons that are driven by the need for external validation to be accepted by others. I don't think there's anything wrong fundamentally, if somebody came to me and said, "I want to be the Michael Jordan of startups, and I'm going to sacrifice everything to be the greatest." If you know what you're doing, and if your intention is set and clear, and if you're going into it, eyes wide open, understanding the implications of that it's your life, you can pursue it exactly how you want to.

I think the real issue is that I've seen it as a subtle, yet pervasive characteristic of the collective psychology of the industry that I'm a part of that there are a lot of people, whether they're founders, or employees, or investors, that are doing the work that they're doing, which is requiring significant sacrifices, like those that I mentioned. But they don't really know the root cause, or the real reason behind why they're doing it. And that there is at least some aspect of their subconscious that feels like they are unlovable and unworthy unless they do it otherwise. So, that's the message I'm trying to get across is that I want everyone to be able to make their own decision, but do so with the clarity and consciousness of knowing what they're getting into and knowing why they're doing it.

**[00:22:52] SF:** You wrote a great article titled, Stop Asking for Career Advice, where you talk about, you know, this need to live for yourself. And maybe you can comment a little bit on how some of the things

that you cover in that relate to this problem that you're speaking to, which is that people seek achievement, not necessarily because, in that case, that you're mentioning of a deep desire to be the Michael Jordan of startups, but because of a feeling of lacking, like they're not living up to something that they think they should be living up to. Can you talk a little bit about what you've talked about in that article?

**[00:23:26] AJ:** Yeah, so the title was a little hyperbolic. But I basically said, like, stop asking for career advice. And the reason for that is, if you ask somebody for advice around what you should do with your career, it's effectively another way of asking for somebody else to tell you what you should do with your life. If you think about that, it's like, well, in some ways, maybe that's beneficial. There's career advice along the lines of a mentor asking you questions, so that you, as the mentee, arrive at the answers yourself. And I think that that is a healthy form of coaching. That is fundamentally what therapists do, right? It is like trying to assist you in discovering the answer for yourself, because if you do, then it sticks. That's where real change happens.

The pitfall I see with most common forms of career advice is when you sit down and ask a really smart, successful person, “Hey, what should I do with my career?” Most of the advice that they give you is, it's the playbook that worked for them in many cases, or is the general playbook that is told to the entire industry. For example, common one in tech is like the whole Sheryl Sandberg story of when she got the offer at Facebook, and was talking to Eric Schmidt, the then CEO of Google about it and he said, “Hey, if you're offered a seat on a rocket ship, don't ask what seat. Just jump on it.” And that's not bad advice at all when somebody's goal is to rapidly climb up the career ladder, give themselves more optionality get higher titles, make more money in a short period of time. I followed that to a tee, basically. I was like, “Let me find one rocket ship and jump from one to the other”, until I just had no more energy to jump.

It absolutely has served a purpose in my life around giving me financial comfort and independence, and I'm thankful for that. But eventually, that risk of continuing to ask for advice comes at the consequence of an individual understanding for themselves, who am I, and what do I want for me. It can be terrible advice to tell someone to jump on a rocket ship, if it means that they jump on a rocket ship that prevents that person from pursuing a path, that may be less lucrative in terms of esteem, and in terms of financial gain. But that path would have been one that is truly authentic to who they are, and would

have eventually been a path of individuation, or self-actualization, where they would have really grown into who they are.

So, one example that I just really, really enjoy is the early career decisions that Joe Rogan made. He was, at the time just not a well-known comedian, doing standup from time to time. And the name of the game in the ‘90s was if you're a comic, you try and get into sitcoms, and he made his way into a sitcom. He had a minor role, but he was a likeable figure there and he was starting to build his career. But in his personal life, he had his own interests and hobbies around martial arts, having been a martial artist himself in his teenage years. And he came across this thing called, the Ultimate Fighting Championship and he auditioned, and he had the opportunity to basically become the play by play commentary for this no holds barred, sort of burgeoning backyard fight club. And Joe Rogan's agent at the time was just like, “This is career death. If you take this role, instead of jumping on the sitcom train, this is career death.” In a sense, he was right, because that was the name of the game at the time, was get on sitcoms, maybe you do Saturday Night Live, and maybe you do a movie or two, and then you're set. But Rogan was just like, “Nah, I'm going to pursue the thing that interests me.” And clearly, that's worked out well, for him. He is a one of one. Whether you like him or not, it doesn't matter. What's clear is he's doing exactly what he wants to be doing, and because he's doing that, he's really, really succeeded at it.

So, that's why I wrote the article, and is really inspired by a handful of conversations I'd had from people earlier in their career that had asked me from a mentor’s perspective around career advice, and the very first question I asked them is, who are you and what future do you want? And in most cases, they would pause and freeze, because they didn't really have an answer for that. I said, if you know who you are, and you know what future you want for yourself, then the career decision that you make will become self-evident. But if you don't know who you are, and you don't have a vision for your future, that's when you turn to others in an attempt to fill in the blanks.

**[00:28:23] SF:** So, how does somebody I guess, get to that point where they're not turning to others and falling into this trap of kind of always wanting more, because they perceive that as the thing that they should be doing versus, taking sort of the Joe Rogan path and carving out their own path that makes sense for them and their desires?

**[00:28:44] AJ:** I see an old question. And the short answer is, it's not easy, it is quite difficult, and it requires, in most cases, a complete dedication to breaking free from the norms and expectations that have been placed on us. Slowly and consistently throughout the course of our entire lives through the process of being a socialized creature, being part of civilization. I'm going to get a bit philosophical here, but my worldview is that society or civilization works when you can get enough people to subscribe to enough standardized beliefs. So, you get beliefs around religion, around politics, around governments, around education, around civic responsibility around the economy. And then, when you have enough people that congeal around those prescribed beliefs, then that's when a large collection of people can generally function. The thing is those that can come often at the direct expense of individuation. The person becoming their own individual self, especially going back to what I mentioned earlier of like, when you're a child, the scariest thing in the world is to be alone, and is to be left alone or to be abandoned. It's like when you see a three-year-old child at the grocery store, and they're walking down the aisle and they turn around, and they realize that mom with the shopping cart isn't behind them anymore, they immediately jumped into panic.

Because we're so hardwired for the need for love and connection, especially from the adults in our life. Because biologically, we're dependent on them. We have this really long, nine-month incubation period of the bun in the oven, but then it takes years, afterwards, before a human can be independently sustainable. And as a result of that biological dependence for survival, we have a really strong psychological root in the need for connection.

So, what basically happens is like we're brought into this world with this deep-rooted need for connection, but we're also brought into this world as our own unique individual selves. So, we have those two fundamental needs. One, to be ourselves, to be authentic, and the other to be connected. But because that need for connection is so strong, and so scary to think of not having, say, the parents in your life or not having the friends or anyone to connect with, that often what a kid does is they suppress their individuality for the benefit of staying connected to others. And that's what we call conformity. And so, we conform into these cliques and into these, like, increasingly small tribes, whether it's around fashion, or it's around sports, or like, when I was in high school in the ‘90s, it’s like, you can see, you had the jocks, and then you have the goths, and then you have the cheerleaders, right? Everyone falls into these groups.

And really, it's just an expression of people saying, “I don't want to be alone. I do want to be myself. But in the past, when I've tried to be myself, sometimes people don't like that. So, I've learned to just stop expressing my individuality.” So, that's what I think is really at the core of the career decisions that a lot of folks like myself make, going into adulthood is because that fear of walking their own path is that they won't be accepted and loved and welcomed by others. So, I think that's what, certainly, in my case, that's what prevented me from listening to my intuition and saying, “Andy, like, stop working this hard. You don't have to anymore. You don't have to prove anything to others. You're likable and lovable as you are. Just go and do your own thing and be yourself.” I was afraid of that, for a really long time. And it wasn't until I really unpacked at a deeper psychological level, the root and the origin of why I felt that way, when then I had the opportunity to sort of break free of that and move on, and then start to walk my own path and do my own thing.

**[00:33:06] SF:** I think you touched on something, I think, is really important to where we are and the work world today, where you talked about the three-year-old child, the fear of being alone, and we live in a world now where because of the pandemic, more and more people are working from home. And that creates a lot of isolation for people. Even in my own life, probably the time I struggled the most with depression was during my first couple years of university. I moved away from my home at 17, and I lived off campus. I basically, like, cut off all ties to friends that I had in high school, because I kind of felt like I was moving on and I didn't talk to anyone at university. I went to class and I basically went home, and that was about it. So that, total isolation from any connection to friends and even to family caused the wider personal problems, and it's a hard spiral to get out of. So, for someone feeling isolated, what advice would you give them to help stay connected or get connected with people outside of the pure sort of work relationships that we have that exists through platforms like Zoom today?

**[00:34:08] AJ:** Yeah, and even in-office, the work relationships aren't enough to meet the connection needs of most people, and certainly over Zoom. I experienced that too. If I was still working at a startup, I would definitely be the sort of person that would be in the office at least three days a week, just so I could, you know, have more human contact. The most common option though, is to turn to the forms of enabling human connection that tend to commonly exist within society. So, for example, as kids, it's easier because you have these institutions of education that bring us together on a daily basis, and you have these institutions of sports that bring us together. And then you get into college and sort of the same thing and then into professional life, you still have the institution of work that brings us together

but it's not the same. You're not doing recess. You're not sitting in class, that the same kids building really long relationships over a 12-year period.

So, the short answer is, is especially as you move into, call it your late 20s, and your 30s and beyond the normal methods through which societal institutions could provide, means through which we can meet our connection needs, like those go out the window, and there's fewer of them. Now, you can ask the question and say, “Well, what other forms of these natural groups or societal connections, what are the forms take place?” You can join adult sports. That's certainly one of them. That's why people like to go to, SoulCycle, or the gym. They like to fall into routines, because often those routines involve familiar faces. Whenever I do work, I don't like to work from home now, unless it's a podcast interview, I'll do that at home. But otherwise, I go to a local coffee shop, simply because I want to be around others, and I have gone there frequently enough to where it's a bunch of familiar faces.

So, I'd say that that's one channel to exhaust. The other, of course, is start your own family. There's no better form of connection than to build your own beautiful family. And that can be fur babies, in addition to non-fur babies. It's just your choice, having a loving household is a really powerful thing and that is typically what many people do when those forms of social connection from earlier in life, sort of run their course, and then, you go and start your own family.

But I think a third option, which is the one that I'm also pursuing, being 39 years old, I don't have children, I'm not married. I'm certainly in the class of people that within American culture, I say like, “I'm fucking lonely a lot. It's common for me to be lonely.” And I go out of my way each day to get those small doses of socialization. But our culture isn't one in which people hang out a lot. It's very different in other parts of the world. So, one thing I do is I spend about half of my time in another place, another part of the world where the sense of community is much more common and natural. It's easy to be around and to see people everywhere all day, whether it's like the cafe culture in Europe, and sitting outside and socializing, or the food markets that you get in Asia or South America. I spend time in those places to put myself in an environment that is inherently more social and connected.

But the other thing that I do is, I just say, like, what new community can I create for myself? And that was one of the motivations for me to do my writing, which was, I really enjoy connecting with people now who are on their own path of spiritual awakening, or emotional healing. I've never really been one for small talk. Now, I especially don't give a shit about small talk. It's just not – it doesn't fill my gas tank

up, and I suck at it. I'm sure it shows when I stand there awkwardly next to somebody not knowing what to say. But if they then said, “Hey, have you read any of Carl Jung?” And then my eyes light up, and I say, “Well, yeah, I have. I'm reading one of his books right now. Let's talk about psychoanalysis.”

I'm trying to connect with people who have similar interest in understanding and changing their own mind. And that's part of what I'm getting from this community that's building around the newsletter I'm writing. So, I think that's the bit of advice I would give some folks that is not commonly tapped is to say, like, pause for a moment, and think about what would be the perfect social setting for yourself. What is that ideal? Now, go out and create it.

**[00:38:49] SF:** That's awesome advice. You mentioned this idea of going – you're spending some of your time in other parts of the world where, that are different than United States, in the way that they might build and think about community. And that reminded me of this meme, I saw a while back, about summer vacation of Europeans versus Americans. And for the American employee, they're basically walking out of the workplace and saying, “I'll see you in six weeks, don't try to contact me.” And then on the US side, the employees step saying, they're stepping out for a few hours for surgery, but they'll have their phone with them if you need to contact them, and they'll be back at their desk within a few hours. So, I think the US, it's a country known for – it doesn't prioritize vacation. Even when people are taking time off, they're still largely connected to work. So, do you think mental health in tech is something that is primarily a US problem? Or is this something that spans various cultures?

**[00:39:45] AJ:** Yeah, so my hypothesis on this, is that for any rapidly developing economy, that then places capitalism and rapid economic growth as the top priority, that once they get at least two or three generations into that, and they quickly accelerate their economy and they lift a lot of people out of poverty and all these wonderful things happen that come as a byproduct of a strong embrace of industrialization, that what ends up happening is to put it in Maslow's hierarchy of needs, you start at the bottom with these basic needs around survival of like food, safety, reproduction, shelter. And when you are in a culture where there's an extremely weak economy, then there aren't a lot of people where it's, it's guaranteed that they can meet their most fundamental needs. So, most of their time is spent working on meeting those fundamental needs. And they can derive a lot of emotional and spiritual value out of the fight, or the struggle to meet those fundamental needs.

It's a life well lived, if they can put food on their table, and a roof over their head, and send their kids to school. There are many parts of the world were like that is a deep and purposeful meaning, and there's a lot of fulfillment that can come from meeting those fundamental needs. But then you get into cultures like in developed markets in the West, not just the US, but the UK. And what happens then is you have this incredibly strong economy, the fundamental needs for most people are met. And as time goes on, it's becoming easier and easier and more likely that those fundamental needs will be met. And then what happens though, is as those needs are met, then a higher order of deeds occupies your psyche. The mind then starts thinking about, I need love and connection. I need to be valued and to have sort of a public esteem. People need to respect me. And then above all, that what Maslow called self-actualization, which was like, fully leaning into one's inherent capabilities and interests and becoming everything, they can be.

So, my interpretation of the collective set of symptoms that we're sort of seeing and talking about, around how younger generations have really high rates of mental illness, and they seem to be like bailing on most of our common forms of institution, whether it's our existing form of government, whether it's our existing form of our economy, whether it's traditional religion, is the younger generation sort of questioning all those things. And my interpretation of that is, well, yeah, all their fundamental needs are being met. And then at the same time, our culture has been telling them that the path towards fulfillment is one in which you get the best college degree you can, and then you get the highest paying job you can, and you just do that forever until you die. And then it turns out, like, that's not true. It's just not – that's not the answer for most people in terms of meeting their real emotional and spiritual needs.

I kind of look at our culture and say, like, “Yeah, we're experiencing a connection and a purpose crisis.” Because we're not connected enough. The question around purpose is a looming one, and I think the younger generation beginning with millennials, like they were the ones that are starting to feel this. Okay, just climbing the corporate ladder isn't the long-term solution to a life well lived. This doesn't feel right. So, I think you'll see just about every culture or country that goes through that rapid arc of development experience the same thing. We just happen to be on the razor's edge, being the largest, fastest growing economy in the world. We're also experiencing what I think is the largest crisis of connection and meaning.

**[00:43:59] SF:** We've talked quite a bit about how, like the self-work that someone needs to do in order to do not fall into this trap necessarily of pushing themselves based on these societal pressures, or this feeling that they are only going to have value if they're pushing themselves beyond their capacity. But when it comes to – I want to take some time to kind of zoom out a little bit and talk about what might be the responsibilities or things that like a business or manager or friend can do for people that they recognize that might be showing symptoms of burning out or having other mental health issues. What are some of the things that, I guess, from a business perspective or a manager's perspective in the workplace, they recognize that an employee might be struggling in this capacity. What are their responsibilities and what are some of the things that they can do to potentially help that person?

**[00:44:56] AJ:** The number one thing from my perspective, and this really stems from the experiences I've had in a clinical therapeutic setting, is that the mind can only heal when it feels safe. For example, if you ever watch video on YouTube around, say dog adoption, it's common that you'll see when you go to the pound that these animals are traumatized in many cases, either from the environment that they're presently in, or from their prior environment with their prior owner. The dog can be nervous and skittish and tail between his legs, and shaking and all that. The first thing that that new owner needs to do when they adopt that dog is find a way to make sure that the dog feels safe. So, you don't pressure the dog too much early on. You bring it into the home, you don't force it to do anything it doesn't want to do. And if it needs seven days before it decides to crawl out of that hiding place behind the couch, well, then that's what the dog needs. So, you learn to be patient and to give it the space and to provide a safe environment. Such that when it finally feels safe, you can see the shift. It may come over and sniff you. It may lay next to you. It may eat more. And then it's when that dog is happy and running around, or then it's like, okay, let's teach this thing, let's potty train it. Let's teach it how to sit. Trying to teach a dog to sit when it's scared shitless and it's shaking is pointless.

I use that example, because with people, we commonly make this mistake. If I go to a manager, and I don't feel like the environment is safe for me to say like, "Look, I know that you wanted me to work on this project, and like honestly, like I'm trying, but I'm struggling and I don't think I can do it." They're afraid of the consequences of speaking up for themselves. Or to tell someone, there's this mentality of upper out at a lot of tech companies where it's like, if you're not progressing, you're not improving, well, then you got to go, because we only keep people that are constantly progressing.

On one hand, I can understand that. I've worked at startups where that was the culture. On the other hand, it also flies in the face of meeting the very real human needs of somebody. And so, I can't give a specific prescription around what is required to make somebody feel safe. But what I can say is that as a manager, or people leader, unless people feel safe sharing with you that they're having a hard time, there's no opportunity for that relationship to be nurtured and fostered in a way that not only meets their professional needs, but the personal ones.

That's just the number one. For the employee, like, if you're an environment where they don't give a shit about trying to understand the human struggle, and they just want you to be typing into the spreadsheet and shut your mouth, like to the extent that you've got the opportunity to or you're in the financial position to, leave that company. Find a place that treats you better. That's what I say is like, people need to find a way to provide safety. I think one of the common forms of this at larger startups is you get like, what they call a – or larger tech company, I should say. It's usually not a startup at that point, is you get an HR business partner, which is sort of that intermediary that you can talk to, that sort of sits in between HR as a whole and your direct manager, and like, those are helpful attempts. I've definitely had good interactions with HR business partners. But for the most part, I haven't really had a lot of managers where I felt safe saying, “Sorry, I'm just too tired and I just need a break right now”, without that showing up on my performance report. So, to explain in part why I just bottled it all up, which wasn't a good solution.

**[00:48:48] SF:** Yeah. So, I mean, speaking about that, do you think that in the same way that companies have, typically programs, especially in tech, for medical, physical care insurance, dental care insurance vision, should there also be – should tech companies be prioritizing some insurance or service for mental health for their employees?

**[00:49:12] AJ:** It'd be great. There aren't a lot of options available, because in many cases, and I experienced this directly myself in 2013, I wasn't able to get insurance on the private market, because I was denied based on precondition for having a certain set of clinical psychiatric conditions. And so, I think my understanding of the issue today is that the insurance companies don't want to touch people with mental illness for the most part, because they can't make the math where it's profitable on their end. And they can't make it work because they don't have the data that they need to show that if they pay for, if they cover the cost of a certain form of treatment, then it will reach a satisfied to a resolution rate, where then the math checks out, and they can get their money back on that customer.

So, until that is the case, where there's enough data that then informs highly effective therapies, that then leads to a high rate of resolution, we're not going to get insurance coverage for a lot of this stuff. I think the first thing that needs to happen is somehow, somewhere, some way for a lot more data to start being collected and analyzed in a central way, so that we can start to drastically improve the efficacy rates of various forms of treatment for mental illness. Because if you look today at say, the rates at which some people have PTSD, or bipolar disorder, and then you looked at those through the traditional lens of physical medicine, and you said, “Okay, what percent of these do we heal or cure that we would define as ‘job done’? In many of those cases, the resolution rates are down there with like rare forms of cancer. It's for the same reason that the insurance companies don't cover those, because they can't make the math work, because we don't have reliable treatments that lead to resolution.

So, I think we're going to have to figure out how to do a lot more of what is termed as like inspection of the organ. When somebody goes to a psychologist and says, “I'm depressed.” Right now, all the psychologists can do is say, “Okay, let's talk about it.” But if I went to a doctor and said, “My chest hurts”, the doctor would say, “Well, let's do an X-ray, or an MRI, and maybe I'll take some saliva, because I need to see if you're having a heart attack, or if you're having heartburn.” And they're able to then inspect the organ. And then with organ inspection, providing data, that data then leads to treatments that are much more efficacious. And since the treatments are efficacious, then insurance gets on board.

I mean, I'm sure that there's companies or people working on this, maybe insurance specific to mental health patients. I'm sure there's something out there like this. But I think the thing that is hugely under represented and misunderstood is that, and I'm willing to take a bet that we will find this to be unequivocally true over the next one or two generations, as the science advances on this, is that an awful lot of common physical illness is actually derived from mental illness, where the brain is not separate from the body and vice versa. It's all one integrated unit. And when there is illness in the brain, it directly influences the body in a way that leads to chronic illness.

So, for example, there was a study, I believe, is, or large dataset coming out of Canada, I think. It's called the Adverse Childhood Experiences study, ACE. Basically, what they did, and they said, like, “Let's look at a huge set of children, let's then tabulate a list like a checkbox of all of these adverse experiences that a child could face.” That could be the death of a parent, parents divorcing, so on and

so forth. Anything that you can imagine is not a nurturing experience for a child. And then, let's sort of tabulate which of these less than nurturing experiences a child has had, and then let's look later on in life at their health, and let's start to identify patterns.

For example, for children like me, that experienced a similar set of traumatic childhood experiences, they were somewhere around 50 times more likely to have asthma. And then lo and behold, at the age of six, I'm diagnosed with asthma, which also happened to be in the midst of a lot of household chaos. And there's something interesting where an asthmatic response, in a lot of ways, is really inflammation. It's like the body responding and overreacting in a way that then constricts the lungs, and the medicine they give you is a steroid, which they use steroids for all sorts of other autonomic diseases. There's something there around how stress in the environment is then shaping the mind, and then the mind is then flooding the body with stress hormones, which then leads to chronic illness.

So, whether it's obesity, which can certainly come from some form of psychological pain, where people are soothing themselves by eating too much and leading to obesity, like the root cause there's a psychological pain. And so, I think across the board with inflammatory diseases, common forms of cancer, irritable bowel syndrome, you name it, we're going to find irrefutable evidence that these are all brain borne, so to speak, and that the body is – Bessel van der Kolk wrote in his book, *The Body Keeps the Score*, the body keeps the score. The body is telling you everything about what's going on in the mind.

**[00:55:07] SF:** Yeah, it's amazing. When it comes to – there's people who struggle with mental health that is a clinical condition or a clinically diagnosed condition, but everybody at some point in their life feel stress from the pressures of work and maybe isolation or staying connected other things that's going on in their life. What are some of the things, strategies or recommendations you would have for making sure you're maintaining a healthy mental state when you're going through these different cycles within your life, so that they don't end up being a serious health issue that, as you said, could manifest actually as a physical health issue as well?

**[00:55:47] AJ:** There's a couple parts to it. One is thoughtfulness and intention. So, think of it like going to the gym, right? If you said, “Well, my goal is to build muscle.” Okay, well, then I'm going to go to the gym a certain number of times per week. And then I'm not going to overload my muscles to where I have major injuries, but I'm going to maybe increase the amount of weight I lifted, working out my back

this week by 10%, relative to the prior week. And then with that incremental uplift, I'm striking the ideal balance between stressing the body so that it then adapts to become bigger and stronger, but not over stressing it where then it's a completely counterproductive process.

Mind health, from my experience is the same. You want to think of it as – like imagine you have this horizontal band, and that horizontal band is a range of acceptable tolerance for one's nervous system. And it's not that we want to avoid stressful situations at all, it's that we want to avoid these sorts or the types of stressful situations that are either too extreme or so chronic that they have a negative impact on the psychology of an individual. For example, me, I've said, “Okay, well, I got a complex PTSD diagnosis. OCD.” I basically am a hyper nervous individual. My system is in fight or flight mode more than I would like it to be. And because it's hyper vigilant, I then say, “Okay, well, my band of acceptable tolerances is narrow relative to the average person.” And then I have to figure out what are the things that I can do that are day to day behaviors that keep me within that acceptable range of tolerance. And then be just as intentional by saying, “Okay, there are times where I want to step outside of that range, but I need to make sure that the juice is worth the squeeze.”

Now, if somebody finds that their core bodily functions are consistently disrupted, for example, sleep, diet, even digestion, and bowel movements, all of those can be signs that the body is just being placed under undue chronic stress, or extreme stress, where these basic bodily functions of digestion and sleep and sex are now suffering. The organism is giving a feedback loop saying, “Hey buddy, this is too much.” Right? So, that's what I say to folks is, like, they need to start with an inventory and check in with themselves and say, like, “Okay, across all these dimensions, how am I doing?” And if they’re curious what those dimensions are, like, sit with a therapist. Do a check in with a professional and really analyze how am I across all these dimensions. And then if you get the general sense that like, okay, things are out of whack, then you need to be proactive in constructing a daily routine that helps you stay within an acceptable range of tolerance. And then from time to time, just make the intentional choice of saying, “Okay, I'm about to go do something difficult or stressful, or emotionally taxing. And I'm going to do this on purpose for a particular reason or maybe it's necessary. I got a kid on the way and it's just stressful.” But what do I need to do to check in with myself, to see how I'm doing? And then what routine can I turn to, to bring myself back within an acceptable range of tolerance?

**[00:59:26] SF:** Yeah, I think that's fantastic advice. I like the idea of this introspection and potentially working with a therapist to come up with understanding this, your checklist and basically your

parameters for success. Given that you stepped away now from full time executive roles in tech and you're writing and advocating for mental health, what else beyond, I guess the journey that you've taken with writing about your challenges in mental health, and are you focused on these days?

**[00:59:59] AJ:** I'm a passionate advocate for being on the frontier. And what I mean is, as I mentioned earlier, our level of success in terms of being able to say that, hey, this person was depressed, and they are no longer depressed, or this person had PTSD, and they no longer have PTSD. Our rates at resolving those are quite low, single digit percentages in many cases. What that tells me is that the current solutions that we have in place may be helpful. I wouldn't tell anyone that they should avoid a therapist. If you can find a great therapist, get one. It's really helpful.

But we clearly have further to go, if we want to obtain the same level of mastery over parts of human health, like being able to reset a broken bone, and apply that same level of success and reproducibility with mental health. Then we're going to have to discover new methods, new treatments, new ways of living, that haven't been applied yet. Or tap into ancient wisdom, stuff that we did know, way back in the day, but we've lost in modern times.

So, for me, it's a lot of what I'm doing now is sort of on the frontier. The core of my, call it my base is, I try and exercise every day, but it's not vigorous. I go with the consistency principle, where it's like, I'm going to push myself to 70% or 80%, do that every day. The diet and the routine, of course, I try and sleep consistently and as well as I can, and then foster as many close loving relationships as I can. Because if somebody is physically healthy, and sort of their mind is calm, and then they're able to spend a lot of time with people that they love, and that love them, they're going to be doing pretty well. But above and beyond that, which is kind of the realm that I'm in now, is around infrequent, but intentional use of various psychedelic substances for therapeutic purposes. That's one of them. The other is by way of an analogy to a tuning fork, which is that our body is basically one giant sensory organism that is in touch with its environment. If it's too hot, we sweat. If it's too cold, we get the chills, and goosebumps. And there are countless examples of how our body is sensing organism. That's always surveying the landscape. And as such, depending on what environment you put it in, it's going to fall into resonance with that environment. You can take the sweetest old lady, but you put her in LA traffic for five years, and she's probably going to develop road rage.

So, that's one of the reasons why I said, like, “I'm out of the Silicon Valley. I need to take my tuning fork out of here.” Because, for me, I was unable to mitigate the effects of the environment on my nervous system, given my higher default state of alertness. So, that was a big one, I'm pulling myself out of there. But then that's why I'm also spending a lot of time in other countries, because I'm very intentionally putting my body into an environment that it'll fall in resonance with. And once it does, it's going to be quite healthy. For me, that means easy access to really high quality, healthy, tasty food. I want to be in a daily environment that is warm and welcoming, and has a real communal sense to it. I want to be in an environment that isn't big city chaos, and that also doesn't place career drive and career success overly emphasized over every other part of life. So, I want to be somewhere where like, work is there, but work is just work. Work is not the dominant factor.

For me, it's parts of Southeast Asia that for where I'm at in my life, and for what I want, it's the tuning fork. I put my tuning fork over there and when I do, I feel better. I'm healthier. I'm calmer, I'm happier. So, that's what's driving me now, are more exploration with different psychoactive substances with very clear intention done responsibly, not as a party thing. And the other is experiments with my human body as a tuning fork.

**[01:04:22] SF:** Thanks so much, Andy, for coming on the show and sharing your story. Your passion for helping those struggling with mental health and your transparency. Again, I really hope that this conversation will be helpful to anyone listening that might be impacted by mental health issues or are struggling with things that work and they're able to go and seek and find the help that they might need.

**[01:04:41] AJ:** Yeah, thank you, Sean. I appreciate you all for carving out the time to talk about something that's important. It means a lot to me and to others. So, thank you

[END]