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Trigger warning: some episodes contain topics which may not be sensitive to some. Today’s episode focuses on domestic violence with a male survivor.

Males face certain stigmas. They're expected to be the “strong male” and society tells us men are not supposed to get depressed, men don't seek help, and men don't need therapy. Men are human and deserve the same love, respect, sense of security and happiness which women deserve, however that's not always the case. My guest today is here to share his experience.

Ryan:

I’m looking forward to taking part, sharing my story, and helping you with this process. I want to help other individuals who might be trapped in similar circumstances, to find that love and care that they so deserve.

Jen:

How did you meet?

Ryan:

During my first university where I was an undergrad enrolled in mechanical engineering and international business, I met my now ex-wife. We were introduced through mutual friends at a frat party we attended. I found her very enchanting; the way she could walk around the room and lighten up everybody's mood. She could fly about like a butterfly. I found it incredibly attractive and appealing as I stand there as a wallflower. It was a nice, fun time where we're all having a little bit too much to drink.

Jen:

Opposites attract. How did the relationship continue?

Ryan:

Initially there was limited communication. She found me on FB and started commenting and liking posts of mine. It was an obscene amount of attention she was putting towards my social media. She was trying to communicate with me that way. That was the way the relationship continued to transition, from a personal encounter to an online relationship.

She ended up going to Hawaii for school and I returned back to SE Pennsylvania for a different scholastic endeavor.

Jen:

What were the challenges of a long-distance relationship?

Ryan:

We tried to create a communication routine using Skype, FB, email, etc. Hawaii is 6 hours behind where I was living. I would stay up until 2-3 o’clock in the morning to accommodate the time difference. I was doing it for her. There was a lot of goading on her part to continue that level of communication to the point where, as I'm trying to attend college, I'm changing my schedule to be able to match, work, and simultaneously still achieve high marks and maintain the level of communication.

Jen:

You were making your decisions and building your life at that time, based upon being able to make the phone call and communicate with her even with that 6 hour time difference.

Ryan:

Yes, and that would be emblematic of how the rest of the entire relationship would essentially establish itself. I'm the one sacrificing a lot of my perspective to make sure that her needs were met. I recognize that now as history is hindsight.

I had a lot of issues, in that way, as well with my tendencies. I suffered types of PTSD from my childhood.

Jen:

What did you have in common?

Ryan:

The love of food and the love of partying. I’m a recovering alcoholic. I've been drinking since I was a very young child. We used to party together all the time then we'd go out for a nice binge on eating food, like pizza. That lifestyle was what really kept us bound together. While long-distance, we would share our stories with each other. “What did you get into tonight?” “I was at a bar crawl with like three friends.” I shared. We were all drinking at the bar, at the hotel bar, etc was a normal response for me.

“I was working at the bar, doing the dancing and stuff like that. We ended up staying after the fact and partied all through the night” she would share. She hung out with random tourists and guests. After the fact, we would make plans to traverse and go see each other. We basically utilized all the savings we had from throughout our college coursework to go see each other for spring break or Christmas.

Jen:

How long did the long-distance relationship last?

Ryan:

2 to 2 ½ years and then we decided to move in together. I asked her, “what do you want me to do? Do you want me to move to Hawaii to be there with you? Or do you want to move to Southeastern Pennsylvania and be in the boss wash triangle for jobs? Eventually she made the decision that she was willing to forgo Hawaii and move to Pennsylvania.

The decision was mutually accommodating.

Jen:

What was your relationship with friends and family?

Ryan:

About a year into the relationship, I became increasingly isolated because of my demands on my time. I was always working, going to school, or talking with her. I really didn't have too many other opportunities to continue to establish those relationships. The friends I did have would start to make comments like, “from our perspective, things don’t look like they are going great for you. You seem more sporadic and struggling than normal.” I ignored the comments and would self-isolate.

When I brought up the issue of not having time to communicate with friends and family, she said, “your friends are terrible individuals, and you shouldn't be talking to them. When we moved in together, I basically had nobody as my support network. The same things happened with the few family members I talked to.

Jen:

Did your relationship have a honeymoon stage?

Ryan:

The entire dating period was marked with multiple breakups and other incidences of infidelity, and poor communication. Just absolute, heart wrenching issues that a normal person probably would have walked away from during that time. But with my mental stability and my mental health, I kind of just allowed that to continue and go down the path. The honeymoon stage began once we moved in together and things felt somewhat normal.

Jen:

When was the first time you questioned, maybe something isn’t right?

Ryan:

We took a road trip together for her to go to a graduate level coursework program. She starts talking about an event during her childhood. I had never heard this story before. As a teenager, she burned down an abandoned house in the city where she grew up. in She said there might have been some homeless individuals living in the house when she burned it down. She took solace in that fact.

I was driving and I froze. I didn’t know how to react to that information. I'm kind of staring over my shoulder at her and wondering, why? Why are you finding happiness in this? She was laughing. I'm thinking about the individuals which could have been in that house who could have lost their lives. It was horrifying to me. Growing up in the environment that I did, you hear about death and shooting a lot. I witnessed a lot of death and drug overdoses. It was somewhat of a constant in my background. I was able to look past it eventually. But it was a moment which gave me a great moment of pause there.

Jen:

Did you look at her and think, who are you?

Ryan:

Absolutely!

Jen:

As I talk to more people it seems like the root of traumatic situations stem from our childhood. Perhaps from trauma that we witnessed, was done to us, which is left untreated, or as we say to justify it, it is “just normal.” For you the alcohol, the killing, things like that were “normal.”

Can you share what your childhood was like? How it influenced you? Most importantly, why at the time, you felt it was, okay?

Ryan:

Absolutely! This is something I’ve been trying to reconcile with myself and help establish my narrative of what led me down the path I've been on. My mom suffers from severe mental health crises. This is a multi-generational trauma. She's a first-generation immigrant to this country. I took a lot of pride in that fact. She experienced a lot of traumas in her youth and never effectively was able to get the help she needed. She ended up suffering from bi-polar.

My dad didn't know how to effectively manage my mom. He started his own business and tried to maintain a healthy and happy household. During, my childhood in particular, there's a lot of coping strategies that they both pursued.

I had my grandmother who lived with us for a short period of time and then passed away right in front of my eyes. A lot of family and cousins were constantly in trouble with the law. I always felt in those circumstances, my biggest battle was being alone, neglected, and trying to figure out I could be seen by my family and recognized as an individual there.

It was a rare occasion when I was recognized because everybody was totally tuned out, high, drunk, or partying and carrying on. Or in a major manic or depressive episode to the point where it was absolutely insane to try to deal with anything. For me, it led into my teenage years of vacillating between different households and basically continuing to be self-isolating and alone or seeking out a coping strategy through food, alcohol, partying, or anything along those lines., School and my scholastic endeavors is the only place I actually found some solace from everything.

Jen:

Who was your hero growing up?

Ryan:

When I was at home, I would end up watching Star Trek The Next Generation and that wisdom and parted from John Luke Picard was like That's the man that I want to be That's the man that is inspiring me. You know, he was my idol, that character on this television show.

Jen:

Did you have many friends growing up?

Ryan:

My friendships with individuals and people that I grew up around were sparse. I ended up only associating with people that wanted to party and pursue that life as a young teenager. I wouldn’t really call them friends.

Jen:

You were self-isolating and holding everything in.

Ryan:

Yes, and directing any anger towards myself. I don't know how to effectively, as a child, lash out and confront my parents, because I'm taking care of myself. I'm distancing myself from my feelings through being a young partier, drinking and smoking. Or burying my face into books or television.

There’s no way to seek and find good and healthy reprieve. During my formative years, there was one chance to ascertain a little bit of counseling which was presented to me, but I am not a deeply religious individual. The “help” was presented as a religious counseling opportunity. Leading and ending with prayer was completely against my normal dynamics.

Jen:

Did you try to hurt yourself?

Ryan:

Yes. When I was 13, I ended up putting a loaded shotgun in my mouth. I've suffered other suicidal ideations where I've done similar types of things. I was always thinking, “ I'm going to leave a mess.” If I do this, I don't want to leave a mess. I shamed myself into not pulling the trigger. I don't want to leave a mess for anybody. I don't want to be a burden to anybody. I just wanted to disappear and to not feel anything internally and to not hold that in.

Jen:

When your girlfriend told you she burnt down a house, did you wonder, “do I need to contact the law?”

Ryan:

There definitely was however when you grew up in that kind of environment, the law is generally seen as the enemy. You have a deep and sincere mistrust of policing. Your essentially brought up in the streets to think the police are the enemy and they're against you. When you watch people get arrested, or the sheriff comes in and repossesses cars, you formulate, from a young perspective, that person is the enemy. They’re taking away mom's car. It not processed, “mom can't pay her bills because she's going through a severe psychological issue”, it's the cop is coming to take the car from her.

Jen:

Describe your ex-wife’s personality.

Ryan:

She seemed incredibly sweet and nice to me. I would be going above and beyond, cooking all the meals, and taking care of everything in the household while still working full time at this point. I was trying to make a career and continue to grow myself. She had a job too and would be appreciative and shower me with compliments. She would give me gifts and tell me you're incredibly amazing. It was a such a huge and unusual thing for me to receive these compliments and all this affection. It was very, very different however it didn’t feel right at the same time.

Jen:

There are good times and bad times in relationships. Can you share with us a time or two when it was really bad?

Ryan:

Our regular course of events would be I'd be working in the city coming home from an hour-long commute to be able to put food on the table. I did the cooking and cleaning. She would chastise me because I didn't do the dishes before going into work. Meanwhile, she's working from home a lot of the time and the dishes are piling up. I am cooking the dinner for that night with no help and doing all the dishes from the day prior. To her, I couldn’t do things good enough.

I do enjoy cooking, it's somewhat of a passion of mine. But there's one time where I have a day off, I'm sitting outside grilling, having a couple beers, and just enjoying the day. I’m cooking a whole bunch of food on the grill, so we have meal prep for the entire week. I was cooking a pork loin. I really wanted the burnt end of that pork line. I'm talking with her, she grabs the knife and basically tries to stab me to make sure she can get it for herself. That’s an example of when things started to get violent.

Jen:

How did you process that incident to where you ended up staying?

Ryan:

After the initial honeymoon phase of our relationship, the verbal assaults, the diatribes, downplays, put downs, and the consistent yelling and screaming, I just became numb to it. I started accepting that this is going to be my life. I hope things will change. I'm really hoping things are going to change. I started tuning everything out.

Jen:

Did you feel, “this is better than nothing?”

Ryan:

Absolutely. There were moments which did shine through. We were having a good time reliving the old party scene drinking beer and eating pizza. Sharing those times was enough for me to think, maybe one day we will get out of this poverty trap and continue to increase our skills, get stronger and have more stable careers. Then we'll have the time to really work on and address these issues and our relationship will be ok.

Jen:

Were there manipulations used? For example, threats of leaving if you didn’t comply and bend to her will?

Ryan:

All the time. It was a “go-to” when she would be shouting at me, and I'd be trying to calmly explain my feelings. “I can take everything that I have and throw it into a backpack and leave. I can do that at any moment” she would threaten.

Jen:

Can you share some abusive things which were said? So someone listening might hear and make the connection?

Ryan:

For me, in my experience, a lot of the words that were utilized would be more along the lines of character assassinations; you're worthless, you’re incapable, or you're no good. If you feel when you try to communicate about an issue that you must walk on eggshells for fear of getting yelled at. Are you walking on eggshells as you try to share your feelings about an issue? Are you afraid they're going to break glassware or do other aggressive acts like slamming doors and shouting at you?

If so, you need to be paying attention to that inner voice that's trying to reach out to you about issues. If you feel like you must dance around on eggshells in a relationship, there's inherently something unhealthy going on in that dynamic. If they start downplaying you and calling you worthless, and saying you can't have those feelings, pay attention. If they start reacting in a crazy and extreme way you're well on the path of being in a damaging and abusive relationship.

Jen:

How was the sexual side of your relationship?

Ryan:

I've always felt highly performative on my part. You'll hear this a lot from other men that have experienced something similar, where they feel like they're constantly on performance for their partner and never really receiving anything in return. I was *expected* to perform and when I couldn’t because I was in a really shocked emotional state, downtrodden, I was derived and chastised in those circumstances. She’s viewing it as a somewhat of a sense of abandonment, “oh, you're no longer attracted to me anymore? What am I fat?”

Jen:

Was infidelity any part of your relationship?

Ryan:

It was, yes. For example, we'd go out and she would end up making out with another woman. There was an instance where she did cheat on me with another woman while we were long distance. It was always the other person's fault. Never any fault on her part whatsoever. “They just kissed me. They just came up to me and grabbed me.” she would say. Later on, she would claim it was a mutual occurrence.

Jen:

How did that make you feel?

Ryan:

Being long distant, I wanted to be there and be closer. But at the same time, I was feeling “disgruntled” It’s hard to find the right word. You feel angry and betrayed.

Jen:

At what point did trust become an issue?

Ryan:

It was an issue from the beginning. I'm not totally absolved of blame given my childhood and background experiences, but the trust issues on her part were way out of proportion compared to mine. I'd never cheated on her. I never did anything along those lines to really warrant any kind of major trust and violation issues along those lines.

Jen:

Did the abuse become physical?

Ryan:

Yes. During that time, as things continued to escalate, my work performance started to suffer. I continued to pursue more and more alcohol as a coping strategy. It was getting to the point where I started home brewing to be able to have ready and steady supply of alcohol without having to go to the liquor store, or the beer distributor in Pennsylvania.

I got enrolled into counseling through my employment. As I talked with my counselor, I started trying to unravel the circumstances and explain what was going on in my household. The counselor told me I need to be prepared for the escalation of violence. A bug out bag is key if you need to escape.

Things progress and become more verbally and physically abusive. Violent. I'm being hit regularly, slapped, and put down. I'm a 6’1” guy, and at that time, 350 pounds and she was a 5’5” woman like 275 pounds.

I’m going out to run household errands and pick up more alcohol. I get home and she was waiting for me. She had been day drinking. At the behest of my therapist, I had been storing my firearms, ammunition, and documents in my gun cabinet. I maintained access to the keys.

I get home and she start demanding the keys for the gun cabinet. “If you don't give me the effing keys, I'm going to break the effing lock off the gun cabinet.” It looked like there was death in her eyes. She grabs this 6lb sledgehammer that I had in the house. She’s staring me down, demanding the keys, and the only words that are coming to my mouth are “no.”

I'm slowly backing away from this person holding the sledgehammer. I grabbed my rain jacket, grabbed my bag, put my shoes while she's screaming at me at the top of her lungs. I continue to step backwards and walk outside. I'm shaking. Inside, I hear her start hammering on the gun cabinet to get access to the firearms. I need to get police involved because if she gets through that thin 1/8 sheet metal, she’s coming for me with the loaded AR or something.

For me, even being comfortable enough to call the police at that moment was stressful. I didn't know what to do. I was almost stricken with shock and fear at that moment. I'm sure the recording with the police on that rainy April evening, would be an interesting call.

Jen:

Was there something that triggered her?

Ryan:

Moving down south. I didn’t want to do that and leave the few friends and family I maintained some contact with. Moving would have made her and I self-isolated from the others. I wasn’t ready to do that.

Jen:

You called the police. Can you tell us what happened next?

Ryan:

I'm standing outside in the pouring rain, listening to her pounding away at the gun cabinet. I explained to the police over the phone that my partner's trying to break into the gun cabinet where there's loaded weapons and ammunition. I don't know what she's planning on doing. They told me to get away from the house and try to find some place more secure. I walked across the street and was sitting behind an electric transformer box. They show up about 3 minutes later locked and loaded. They start trying to take command and control the situation. They had me get in the back of the squad car, as they have their weapons drawn and are trying to get her to come out of the house by calling her cell phone. Eventually they do get through to her. They handcuff her and deescalate the situation.

Jen:

I can't imagine what must be going through your head as you're sitting in the back of the police officer’s vehicle. Can you tell us about that?

Ryan:

Essentially, they separate the parties. They take her inside to get her perspective. They got my perspective when I called them for help. She was a great charmer with the way she could talk herself out of situations. The story ended as being a “heated discussion.” The officers told me to remove the firearms and find a different place to go. So I get my documents, my firearms out of the gun cabinet and now I’m trying to figure out where I can go on this rainy night. Thankfully, somebody finally picks up and I have a couch to go to.

There was no discussion with the officers about protection from abuse orders, shelters, and any other options. It was assumed I'll be able to figure it out, and that it was just a heated discussion; they're both guilty parties. He needs to go.

From my perspective, I'm the one sitting there completely shaken, disheveled, broken down and the one who’s called the police asking for help. I was panic stricken and absolutely mortified of having to even call the police in the first place. The Sergeant in charge was friendly and he was the one shepherding me through getting me into my car and getting me out of that situation. I know their job is to just deescalate the situation as quickly as possible to prevent any kind of violence from happening.

My entire life is essentially blown up and I have nowhere to go. All the family and friend connections, for the most part, were relatively destroyed. I’m sitting in the rain wondering, what am I going to do? what are the odds? what's going to happen? what is going on?

There was no opportunity, no offering of any resources.

Jen:

Your story allows for conversation on how we can better handle situations. Thank you for sharing and I’m sorry you had to go through it.

Ryan:

I really hope the stereotype which has been portrayed that the male is always the violent aggressors, will be recognized that it is not always the case. Males are victims of domestic abuse too.

I would absolutely agree that the toxic masculinity that pervades a lot of the male search spaces prevents a lot of men from coming forward about those issues. I know for myself, I was reluctant, as things progressed to even be willing and comfortable to share this kind of thing. But as time has gone on It became abundantly important to be able to get out there and at least bring awareness to the circumstance that exists for a lot of men, even though they keep it silent.

Jen:

Yes. Did you see your wife again?

Ryan:

She tried to contact me for the next month, blowing up my phone with text messages and phone calls. After I contacted a lawyer, he communicated with her until the final hearing date. The final hearing date was intentionally drugged out We didn't own the house, we didn't have any kids, there was no real reason to have a divorce that took 18 months.

Jen:

Wow! 18 months is a long time.

Ryan:

They would wait till the last day for filing of the documents, and then they would file incorrect or incomplete documents, which would reset the clock entirely. My employment granted me a promotion, but it hadn't taken effect yet. They utilize that to ascertain more money because I was the higher earning spouse at the time. It turned into this whole game of how we can extract the most amount of money from that circumstance as possible.

Jen:

Let’s talk about your healing.

Ryan:

My healing has been a multi-pronged approach. I attended therapy through a domestic shelter. When I originally called the helpline the morning after everything happened, I got redirected to the batter's line in nearby Philadelphia. The individual on the other end of the line at the batter's line, recognized I was in crisis and called back with me on the line and said, “This guy needs help.”

I was going through my work counseling to have that other stream of counseling and therapy. I got involved with group therapy there at the domestic violence providers. It really helped to lay the groundwork for healing and establishing a healthy self-esteem and a healthy perspective and outlook on life. They helped me in trying to find a meaning out of both my childhood and from my dealings with my ex-partner.

I went through an increasingly progressive binge drinking episode. The entire 8 months after, everything was a whirlwind of how much alcohol can I consume to deal with everything. After Christmas that year, I'm having suicidal ideation again. Some people I knew recognized I was in crisis at that moment. They really tried to get me out of my head. One cousin gave me a Man's Search for Meaning by Viktor Frankl, which is about logotherapy. It’s about how to give yourself a will to meaning after going through major traumatic event.

Another friend challenged me to a 10-mile run around Fairmount Park in Philadelphia. And mind you, I'm 345 pounds and binge drinking alcoholic at that point. I make it about eight miles and then basically collapse.

That leads into a cataclysmic shift of: I can't keep following through with drinking and binge eating and binge drinking and living this terrible life to heal myself. I must do something different. Two months later the pandemic happens.

I looked at that 8-mile run, and I said, Okay, I'm going to run a half marathon. And in doing so, and trying to achieve that goal, it really changed my entire perspective on healing, processing, and dealing with everything. I continued to go to therapy while managing everything. Eventually, I run the half marathon. I continue to set more goals and keep giving myself more meaning. I continue to lose weight, I cut back on the alcohol, and I continue to go into therapy. I continue self-therapy and taking the material that my therapists are providing me and working on it independently, while still working and maintaining my job. I ended coming out of everything by losing 70 pounds, and I'm over 300 days sober coming up on a full year of sobriety.

Jen:

Congratulations!

Ryan:

Work recognized that I was very capable of doing my job. They offered me an opportunity to go abroad for work during the pandemic, providing the vaccine abroad. It was an incredible opportunity too. I've run multiple marathons. I just ran the Philadelphia marathon a couple of weeks ago. I have run 1000s of miles across three different continents.

Jen:

Congratulations! Can you share some words of encouragement?

Ryan:

Therapy at the outset, can seem incredibly daunting; you’re sitting across from the stranger who's looking at you, observing you, and taking notes. You might be in a state of complete mental dysregulation, complete mental shock, or in a lot of pain and you don't really know what you're feeling. You might be completely numb. I know I experienced all those different emotions when I was first going to my initial counseling sessions.

Who is this stranger? What are they trying to do? How is this going to affect me down the line? How is talking openly with a stranger going to really help me? I would ask myself these questions. I had that doubting perspective early on. As the therapist utilize their techniques, cognitive behavioral therapy, and using the Socratic method for dialogue, they started to really allow me to open. They asked me questions which I never would have thought to ask and that provided me an outlet to be more and more open with them. As that progressed, you keep the distance, they're still a stranger, but they are an unbiased stranger. They’re there to support you and be there for you.

At some point, it just flips. It becomes this incredible relationship where the therapist is there to help you and get you to a better place by providing you with a tool set. I'm not going to tell a mechanic to go work on a car without giving them wrenches. Well, I'm not going to work on my brain without the right tools either. I need to understand my own thought processes, because it's been so dysregulated for so long. So getting that tool set to be able to work on everything and find that voice inside myself and build the scaffolding to have a better life was incredibly valuable.

Jen:

What advice can you give to friends or family who are witnessing someone who they suspect is being abused?

Ryan:

The number one piece of advice that I can give is: do not interject yourself into the dynamic. What you need to do in that circumstance, from my perspective, and from what I've heard from many other individuals who've been through similar types of traumas or worse, is that the moment you interject yourself between the abuser and the abused is that the abuser will utilize you as an example as to why other people are to not be trusted.

You must be supportive of your friend. Be there for that friend or family member. But you can’t intervene unless it's a major moment of severe danger and damage to that individual's personhood. If the person who is being chastised wants to vent, talk to you and they feel safe with you, let them come to you and talk to you. You can't bring down their abusive partner, you can't chastise the abusive partner, or the person that's coming to you for that help. You must just be there to support them.

Jen:

I'm proud of you. I love that you took this challenging, difficult, traumatic, emotional situation and turned it into something positive and healthy. I think healthy was an important place for you considering the emotional, the physical, the drinking, the partying environment that you started out with at an early age. When you look in the mirror, what do you see?

Ryan:

I see somebody that's happy to be alive, is able to smile at himself for the first time. He is ready to take on new challenges and help people along the way. That's what I see when I look in the mirror now.

Jen:

I'm so happy for you. Do you have any last words of advice or thoughts?

Ryan:

The National Domestic Violence Hotline is an incredible resource. They have chat functions where the browser self-deletes when you are inactive for a certain amount of time. They're unbiased, well trained, and they can help you connect with your local resources.

The National Domestic hotline for domestic violence is just an absolute treasure of a service. I know when I was originally questioning things and questioning what my work appointed therapist was providing to me, I ended up chatting with them for a little bit. They said they were seeing a lot of markers which are reflective of being in an abusive situation and we are here to support you. If you need to disappear, shut the phone off, or schedule a call where you're completely isolated, we can help you in any kind of way. You can call their hotline number, which is 1-800-799-SAFE. Or 1800-799-7233. They're incredible resource.

The second piece is don't be afraid to contact your local community. The local police are there to help and support you. If you ever feel like you're unsafe, or you're potentially walking into a ticking time bomb coming home from work, police have a non-emergency service line for most of the local departments.

Jen:

[www.ineedblue.net](http://www.ineedblue.net) and click the “get help” tab

Ryan:

Thank you, Jen for allowing me to help spread the message and take part in this and help get some of this more off my chest as well.

Jen:

I am a resource for you at any time. Thank you, Ryan. You are amazing and an inspiration.

Check out: [www.ineedblue.net](http://www.ineedblue.net)

Facebook: I Need Blue