



## MyStory

# Black Men | Mental Health

4th Blog Entry

By Rocky I. Parrish



### A Different Kind of Conversation

I've covered quite a few things in my previous blog entries, but this time, I want to talk about something deeper. It affects everyone around the world in some capacity no matter who you are and what culture or background you come from.

This topic however not only resonates with me greatly, but also impacts my everyday life in every way possible. It will be one of my longer entries, but I promise to keep you interested and wanting to read more as you keep scrolling.

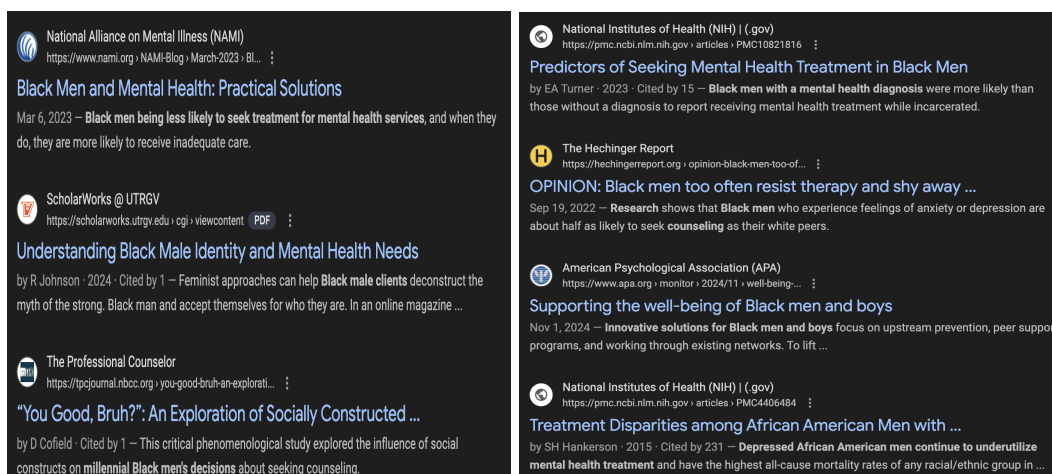
If you feel like you wasted your time once you're done reading, please feel free to cuss me out in the comments.

What exactly *IS* the topic?

Mental health. More specifically Black Men's Mental Health.




I know, you've probably read plenty of articles on the topic. Most of them say the same thing: "Black men need to go to therapy." And yes, that's true. But I'm not here to write a generic "therapy is important" piece. I'm here to tell you what it actually looks like, what it actually costs, and what it actually changes.



Yes I know there's discussion around Men's Mental Health in general and even Black Men's Mental Health, but I'll say this a few times throughout this blog, that I am speaking from my perspective.

I want to say this before digging in. I have white friends and I know for a fact white dudes go through a lot of the same things we as black men do, and I'll touch lightly on that, but because I'm black, I will focus on that perspective and I'm sure the white dudes I know won't get all upset and say "us too".

White people sometimes bring up white indentured servitude or historical slavery in response to discussions about Black chattel slavery due to a combination of historical misunderstanding, defensiveness, and a desire to minimize the unique harms of race-based slavery in the Americas. Historians and sociologists recognize these comparisons as a false equivalence. 

I appreciate when topics like this come up on social media or in person, they never feel the need to inject any "me too's", which is why they are friends.

## Why This Blog Matters

When I decided this would be what I wrote about next, I was eager to get a ton of thoughts out of my head. I wasn't sure how I would really organize it all, since there was so much to speak on, so I decided to just start writing.

I know much of what I'm about to speak on will resonate with so many, and I think it can not only help black men, but black young men and black youth. I think it will resonate with business owners, fathers, brothers and sons. I think while you are reading this it will touch on an aspect of who you were, who you are now and who you are still evolving into.

Like most, I have always said growing up that I would never go to a therapist, because I'm not crazy. As I got older and realized therapy isn't a "crazy" person thing, I made excuses and said I just can't see myself talking to someone else about my life. What was the point is how I felt. What can a person who doesn't know me tell me about myself, that I don't already know?

Well I was wrong on all fronts. I hate that it took me this long to realize it, but I have always thought myself to be pretty self aware, but then life keeps life-ing.

Some of you, like myself, may have the type of wife or partner you can actually speak to about many things, but we all know you can't discuss **EVERY**thing with them. Some stuff, you can't even discuss with your boys, and we all know you can discuss just about everything with your boys.

We as men can all agree on this growing up, because we have learned the lesson from experience: You can't be completely vulnerable with your wife, girlfriend or partner because you run the risk of them throwing it back in your face when an argument happens. Whether we can admit it or not, it stings. **Deep.**

Some of us had to experience it a few times from either the same partner or different ones in our past to learn that hard lesson, and it kept us from ever doing it again moving forward.

Women will say, they don't do that, but even in my fifty-three years of life, I've only had one person NOT do it and it was my current wife Desirée.

As a man who can honestly say I don't care what others think of me, if they are not my family. I can

also honestly admit that I care deeply about what I think of myself as a man, and the standards I've set for myself in addition to the many society has created.

### **Deciding Therapy Should Be An Option**

My wife has been going to therapy since before we started dating, and she shared that not too soon after that. I didn't think anything of it, as I know that women in general typically go through some ish, just being women and I could never be judgemental of that.

I had even gone to Marriage Counseling during my first marriage, but that didn't work out too well, because she (the therapist) seemed to agree with my take on several things, and that wasn't very appreciated by my wife at the time.

With my current wife, I didn't fight going, and thought some really good things came from it. Like tools and rules of engagement. Shout out to Maria, she really helped us. However I still wasn't a proponent of going for myself, because of all the things I have mentioned earlier. Not even because of the typical stigmas associated with therapy.

*Then it happened.*

After being released to home confinement for a while and knowing I needed to have a job, discouragement set in, and it wasn't a feeling I was familiar with. All my life I was raised by my father to not complain.

*"If you can do something about it, why complain? If you can't do something about it, why complain"*

I still live by that, but I realize and understand that it's not like that for everyone though.

We as men and more specifically black men are not a monolith and we all process our ish in different ways according to our experiences and traumas.

Think about those out there going through re-entry back into society who don't have my professional background to lean back on. Compare that to those who have been incarcerated far longer than my little six months trying to find work. The stress of being violated by a probation officer if they don't find employment. You wonder why recidivism is high? Limited opportunities is your answer.

Don't get me wrong, there were plenty of dudes who had a plan and were putting it into motion

while incarcerated, and that in itself was impressive. Hell, I think many of them have been doing better than me since being released.

None of this is for anyone to feel sorry for me or those who made mistakes like myself, but I do want to give some insight for others to understand the stresses we endure, even when being the initial reason for our own stress.

## REJECTION

If anyone thinks women rejecting men is the hardest thing we experience to our ego, you'd be terribly wrong. Providing for not only ourselves but also our family is what some may consider a burden, yet most men are willing to and I'd venture to say in many instances proud to do so, but rejection when looking for jobs isn't easy. Just ask James Evans.

Selling sneakers wasn't going to suffice and that was going to be a long road back. I had prepared myself for that realization before I came home. Going through the job search and interview process wasn't the hard part for me, as it was like riding a bike, and I quickly found my groove..

I was even given offer letters by several companies. I was honest during the process, and sent a transparency letter letting them know about my situation and felony. Three of the first four job offers were rescinded because either: *"they decided to put the position on hold"* or *"they lost funding for the position"*. Mind you one of those companies claims to be **"felon friendly"** when hiring.

I hope you are well. I just wanted to drop a quick line and say thank you for the initial potential opportunity to come and work you and your team at Amazon.

I was pretty excited when I received a tentative start date a few weeks ago, but admittedly disappointed when ZRG contacted me yesterday and said after running my background check, they could not proceed.

I found out that was some straight bullshiiii

I hope this email finds you well. I wanted to take a moment to thank you for your interest in the Business Procurement Specialist position and for taking the time to interview with us.

After careful consideration and review of all applicants, we extended a contingent job offer to you for the position. However, unfortunately, we will not be able to move forward with the tentative offer at this time.

*One of those times I lost a job opportunity was because I was "accidentally violated" and placed in Rappahannock Jail and missed a security interview with the DC Government Security person.*

*(That's another story for another blog.)*

As I mentioned earlier, I've never been one to be down on myself or have self doubt. It wasn't a macho thing, I just wasn't raised to waste emotion on self pity. But after a few more successful interviews and subsequent offers being rescinded, as well as having to borrow money from my mother and father-in-law I became really disappointed in myself.

I think as a man we can all agree having to go to your wife's father OR your wife going to her Dad to ask to borrow money can be pretty damaging to your self-worth. I have always prided myself on being able to provide for my family.

I asked my wife if I could use her therapist, and she said that's not how it works, and I then asked her if she could find me one. To her credit she refused, because she said it was a journey I had to take on my own and she couldn't do that for me.

She really does a ton for me already and in retrospect, that was a big ask. I should probably apologize!

After some extensive searching and thoughts about what type of therapist I wanted to talk to, I finally found one.

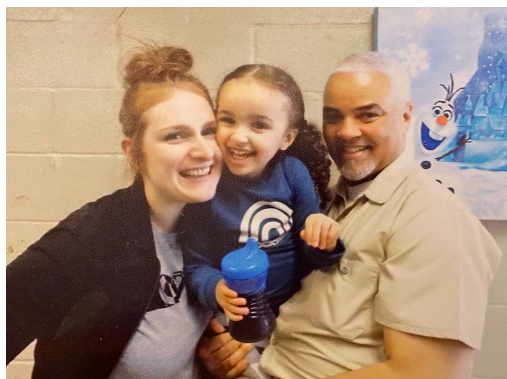
Hannah... and she's been great.

There's much that goes into finding the right one and I'm not sure I'll ever say why/how I chose mine - but I did.

***It was literally the first step.***

While I am speaking as a man who was formally incarcerated, nowhere near the time others have experienced, I am also speaking for black men who have also never seen the inside of a prison or jail cell.

### **Father First. Husband Second. Everything Else After.**



My family's mental health was impacted as much as my own: my wife Desirée already had anxiety and my incarceration and being away for six months only added to her carrying that much more stress.

Many women from my past would have exited as soon as the verdict was read in court.

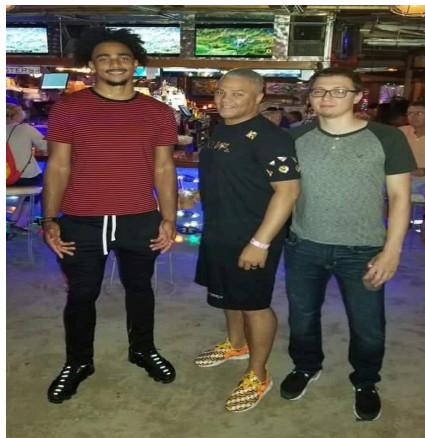


My daughters were going through things and all of it hurt me to my core, because I wasn't there when they needed me most.

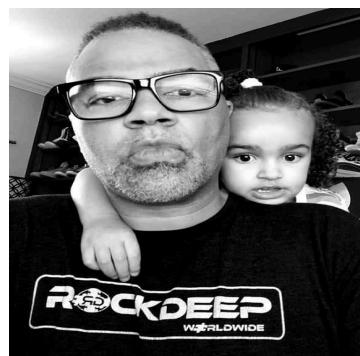
When I sit with my therapist, it's not just about me. It's about Dez. It's about my seven kids. It's about being as mentally and emotionally stable enough to show up for them every single day.

My healing has to serve them as much as it serves me. Because what's the point of building businesses, chasing opportunities, or even surviving prison if I'm broken and disconnected?

I want my four sons to know it's ok to be broken and get help.



I want my three daughters to see a father who is willing to do what it takes to make sure he is willing to talk to someone, not just because of things affecting me, but things that have affected them because of me.



When anyone asks me what I do for a living (*as it is customary to do in the Washington, DC area*) I always say, I am a Father first, Husband Second and everything else after. This doesn't mean my wife comes second to my children, as a matter of fact she comes first before everyone. Even parents. She's earned that position. Yet she knows the hardest thing I've had to do in my life was be a father and it's also the thing I love most in life, (other than her) being a father.



I can admit I haven't always been the best one, but unbeknownst to my kids, I have tried to do whatever it has taken to do right by them. Have I fallen short? Of course. But I also know I can't control what others say about me or may have made me out to be. I also refuse to speak ill of the one who's created another portrait of me. I know at some point they'll figure it out and see for themselves the "why's".

I am honest to a fault with them, even when they think I may be lying, but I don't let that dissuade me from being the best Father I am capable of being.

Being incarcerated kept me from being available and present for some really serious things that affected a few of my children. I only had one person to blame for not being able to protect them and putting myself in that position. I have to live with that until I leave this earth.

## **The Fear of Judgment**

Let's keep it real. Black men are taught early: be strong, don't show weakness. If you do, people will judge you. Family, peers, even other men who are just as broken but hiding it better.

Judgement was the last thing I was worried about, and as I mentioned earlier, I truly never gave two craps about what someone else thought / thinks of me if they aren't my wife or kids and at the very least signing my checks.

But.....

To all of you out there reading this. If you fear judgement even now that therapy has become more accepted, I say to hell with being accepted!

Don't bottle things up or carry weight you have no business carrying alone. Please don't let pride steer your choice to speak to someone as silence can cost you more than the truth ever would have.

Especially when it comes to family. This may not be a popular sentiment to say openly, but we can all agree that at times, your family can be the ones judging you the most or worried about what others think of you.

***F em.***

At that point, they put themselves in the same category as everyone else who has the audacity to judge you and needs to be cut off.

## Generational Trauma and Breaking the Cycle



Silence runs in our bloodlines. Our fathers, Uncles and grandfathers taught us survival, not expression.

I used to think this was a Parrish thing. But watch a reel on social media or see the comment sections with mainly other men and you realize quickly, we were all raised pretty much alike in many ways.

Adding to that, poverty, systemic injustice and incarceration all reinforced the idea that we had to be tough, never vulnerable.

My therapist asked me if I thought I was raised to think being vulnerable was weak. I told her honestly no. I don't think in our families the word vulnerable was even thought about or really a thing.

I know she also means being open with your feelings, but honestly things like that just never come up when growing up. We just didn't share feelings, unless we were mumbling under our breath!

I used to think that being vulnerable meant just crying openly or telling your boys you love them .

*"Ole emotional head ahhh ninja!"*

My wife calls me a robot, because I don't show emotion much, and I can count on two hands how many times I've cried publicly if it wasn't about getting a wuppin' from my Pops.



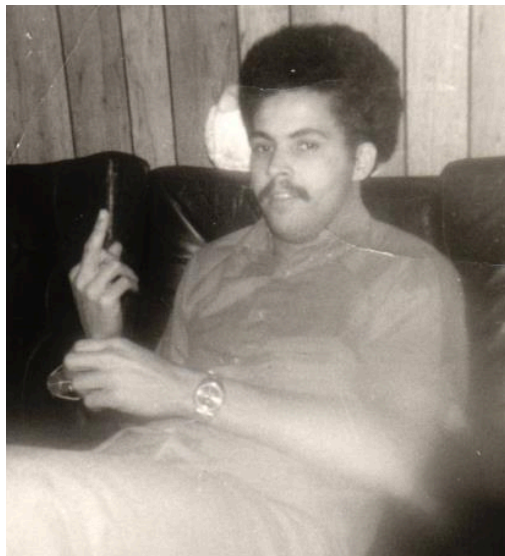
I told my therapist that I think my father prepared me for the world without me realizing it in some ways. Not only because he'd tell me he'd "give me something to cry about" but my father was military and wasting emotions wasn't a thing for me.

He was hard on me and we didn't get along much until after I left for college. Our household wasn't one for "I Love You's" and hugs, we just knew our

parents loved us. Many of us say we don't want to be like our parents when we grow up, but at some point you realize you are doing something EXACTLY like them and you become almost confused, upset and more.

You realize that they were right in some ways, and you appreciate them just a little bit more, even though you still wish they'd gone about things a bit differently raising you. You also realize they only knew what they knew and passed down some of that to their kids.

I also know my father passed down his anger to all his kids, and I know I passed down the anger gene, and I've seen it in different ways in all my kids and it truly made me sad to know they had no choice in that.



But I'm choosing to break that cycle.

I've told them all that the anger they unexpectedly feel and emotional lashing out they do is my fault, but they can do something about it like I did.

I went to anger management class years ago and later became an instructor for that same class. (***That is a story for another time as well.***)

Not to sound too corny but by the time I leave this earth my sons will know it's okay to talk about what they feel and they can come to me with just about anything. My daughters will also grow up seeing that vulnerability is strength, not weakness.

Most men say fathers spoiling their daughters and giving them the world is what teaches them what a good man is. They don't want their daughters needing to rely on some young Thunder Kat.

I agree to an extent with some limitations and additions however.

I also think showing them their father had the ability to seek therapy when he needed it, no matter how late to the game he was and being able to communicate and hug and tell his children he loves them is something they should see in a good man. A man capable of mistakes and growing from them.

***Good Men make bad mistakes sometimes.***

That's the legacy I want to leave my children, not just sneakers or businesses, but a different model of manhood.

This is what I want to share with anyone who will listen. We all know our children are our legacy, but how they see you, what they see you doing and how they see you react to things when you don't realize it matters.

**The Business and Leadership Pressure**

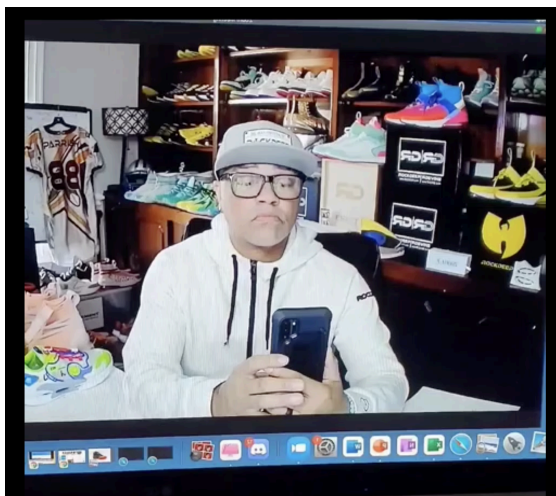
This is something I don't see talked about enough: the mental health toll of entrepreneurship for Black founders.

We don't usually have investors, generational wealth, or safety nets. We build companies with nothing but grit and some use prayers, while carrying payroll, contracts, and expectations that never let up.

For me one of the great feelings other than being able to be successful while running a business and providing for your family, is to employ others and help them provide for their family. Even if you employ over 90 people and the majority of them don't understand what you may be going through, and honestly it's not their job to.

And when you're in the C-Suite, it gets lonelier. No one admits when they're struggling. You wear the performance mask, smile in rooms, sign deals, and then go home to wonder how you are going to keep it all going in silence. I've been there.

I still am on some days.



Daily I'm showing customers on social media or Live Video what designs we have and asking them what they like. ***Allum*** is the greatest answer a business owner can see. You try to meet the expectations, and you want to appease all your customers, because they are there supporting you and it's a great feeling.

But you / we can get in trouble trying to make everyone happy. Even customers. I'm a walking example of that. Do you know how hard it is for a person who cares not what others think of them but as a CEO cares what everyone thinks? It's a tightrope of emotions. Not hard to do, but you also don't want to be a hypocrite to yourself let alone your kids.

You almost feel like you are wearing a mask, even if you know you are always being your authentic self. But sitting in a therapist's chair as a CEO and VP of the Parrish household is me choosing to take the proverbial mask off.

## The Hustle vs. Healing

In our culture, the grind is worshipped. If you're not hustling, you're falling behind. But hustling without healing? That's a recipe for destruction.



I am one for clapping for everyone who looks like me doing it at all, let alone doing it big.

I would see other companies like [Actively Black](#) taking off and they were just hitting the scene and I had been around for almost 10 years.

Was I happy for them? Hell Yes!!

But that also didn't prevent me from second guessing myself from time to time. What am I doing wrong? What am I **NOT** doing? What MORE can I be doing? Was that self doubt creeping into my mindset? I didn't think it was.

Instead of thinking it was self doubt or negative self talk, I told myself it meant I needed to up my game. So either way I was putting more on myself than I realized at the time.

Had I had a therapist back then, I honestly don't think I would have gone through much of the negative self talk I did at the time.

I was hustling and hustling hard without doing any healing or real mental preventative maintenance. That led to me being desperate or should I say acting out of perceived desperation and fudging numbers on my bank loan application.

Therapy could have prevented me from being my own worst obstacle and being incarcerated.

I think of it like athletic training. You don't skip conditioning just because you feel strong today. You train to stay strong tomorrow. Therapy is mental conditioning. Without it, the grind will eat you alive. Literally.

I don't use my desperation for capital for my business as an excuse for why I was incarcerated, but it is undoubtedly the reason for my actions, and I think it's always important to point out the distinction between excuses and reasons.

I myself, like my Father, despise excuses, but can appreciate reasons for certain things, even though my own actions were wrong and inexcusable. When I fudged numbers on my bank loan application I knew it was wrong, but my dumb ass risked it all anyway.

### **Family Anger Tax - Residual Burdens**

There are so many things people don't mention when talking about mental health in general, but I want to touch on this specifically.

I talked about the impact your mental health can have on your partner and families mentally, but there is also a potential for unaddressed issues to be exported as an anger tax to the ones you love most.

Because we are constantly suppressing emotions and not finding ways to address them, that suppression can create a deep frustration or perceived resentment that spills out in damaging ways towards your partner, children or other loved ones.

Therapy can be a release valve.

***"We hurt the ones we love"*** doesn't have to be a real thing. That's all I will say on that because that alone will resonate with many.

Some will ask, why is this all I am choosing to say - but men who this is aimed at understand and ***what is understood doesn't need to be explained.***

## “Checking In”

We as men don't need much in the way of thoughtfulness when it comes to our relationships. We may not speak to one another for months or years as friends and once we see each other or speak on the phone we simply pick back up where we were.

We don't need to know details about things when we do speak on problems or happiness in our lives with each other. We get the topical stuff, and keep it moving.

We know this boggles the mind of women to their core, but it's just a thing for men. We appreciate this type of friendship because it doesn't involve a lot of drama.

I will say in my world and I think generally speaking, we as men have gotten better at checking in with one another and not just to say what's up, but really seeing how one another is doing mentally.

Before I ever considered therapy, my circle of friends has been doing this.



My **ONLY** best white friend in the world (weird right?) Frank and I often check in with one another. We played semi-pro football together for almost 15 years, and when we were driving around recruiting players on the weekends it would just be us talking about life, our kids and stuff some would think inappropriate for a blog.

We text if we can't jump on the phone, but other times we might even do a random video call just to shoot the willy bo-bo.

Then there's my best friend of 20 plus years, Roy. He probably knows more stuff about me than my wife and sometimes we don't talk to each other for weeks or a month, and I will text him just to make sure he's alive! Other times we speak 4 or 5 times a week.



No matter what though, we pick it right back up, as if we spoke earlier that same day. My boy Goodie and I are the same way. We hadn't talked in about 10 years and I asked him to be my Groomsmen and he posted.

My wife will ask how they are doing, and I'll say I'm not sure - I haven't talked to either one of them in however long, and she is in sheer amazement that we are like that.

Do I worry about them? All the time, because I know a call could come in that I don't want but that's just how we are, and I know I'm not the only one with friend relationships like that.

One thing I have really started to understand over the years though is that there are those who you should check in on for a multitude of other reasons.

If you know me, you know I think the **only** good cops I know are the cops I know, and I know a few who I'm pretty cool with including family.

One of my really good friends who I consider a brother much like my best friend Roy and Frank is Cortney who is a Police Officer. This dude had to deal with [stuff down on the Capitol](#) when those crazy folks were doing what they did and he literally puts his life on the line daily down in DC.

I genuinely worry about him day to day as he is one of the good ones and joined the force to make a difference. He often has to put others he works with in check on how they police and you have to appreciate any person willing to do that when it comes to those you know that will look out for their own before they look out for us, even though they are supposed to 'protect' us. They don't make many like Cortney and we check in on one another, and I appreciate him in many ways for the sacrifices he makes.

I'm glad we all can do this and I hope more of us as men can do things like this. Tell one another we love each other and more.

Another shining example is my buddy Chandler. (You may think damn he's using real government names and telling folks business, but it's ok trust me.) When you hear "check on the ones who appear happy but may have some ish going on you aren't aware of." Chan comes to mind.

Chan is that dude who is simply a good genuine dude with a huge heart. If you think you have a funny friend, he won't stand a chance next to Chan, as he's funny as a mug. Chandler will hit me by text or recently we send voice note texts and you can't help but laugh listening. He is honest about what's going on in his life and the hard days he has, but he's mostly concerned about his friends and how they are doing and how he can help us.

Professionals will say those who are the life of the party or always smiling are the ones who are

going through the most ish. I say that may be the case, but not in all cases. I know many black folks are just naturally funny.

I often tell people, if they think I'm funny, I ain't even in the top 20 funniest people with the last name Parrish.

Folks like Chandler and even myself to an extent aren't outwardly happy to hide the hurt we are going through, but we genuinely just want everyone to be happy and want to help others.

Yet, I appreciate Chan for checking in on me and offering to do what he can to make MY life better even when going through his own personal struggles day to day. You can't help but love him.

I'm proud of him and all my boys.....which I try to tell not only friends of mine, but random black men and women I meet casually or in passing.

## Being Proud

This brings me to a quick story and thought I wanted to share before I wrap up this long a\$\$ entry.

We as a people are a prideful people in many things, and there was a time, when we'd pass one another in public and "grit" on each other. Make a face or look judgemental. I mean who am I kidding, many of us still do that right?

But we have also evolved in our pride, and started sharing that sentiment with others. For a long while I thought I was the only person who would randomly tell others I was proud of them. I knew it could mean a lot coming not only from someone they may have admired, but from another black man period.

Over the years, I have seen and learned that I am not alone in doing that.



Some years back, I got an unexpected call from David Banner. For those of you not aware of who [David Banner](#) is feel free to catch yourselves up. I'll share the full story in a future blog but...

One of the first things he said was he was proud of me.

That hit me deep unexpectedly, because David Banner is from

Mississippi and I was born in Vicksburg, Mississippi, and he opened up about his mental health struggles and depression years back and that meant a lot to me. I can't really explain all the reasons why, but it did.

As you know, I don't fawn over famous people. I don't get star struck or anything close, but that conversation meant so much to me that I've held onto it and it reminds me that we can ALL share the pride we have in others, even if we are going through our own personal struggles.

Being proud of each other and our successes should be normalized. Being there for one another to be more than just a friend we can joke with but an ear can go a long way.

Most importantly, if that's still difficult for you, realize therapy can be one of the first steps.

## **Transparency as Therapy**

"Black men don't go to therapy." That lie has been passed down for generations. And it's killing us.

This blog is my therapy. Speaking is my therapy. Sharing my mistakes and my healing is how I process. And maybe, as you read this, you're processing too.

Funny and ironic, that for years, I always said openly, that the one thing some hated about me, was that I would be open about whatever was going on in my life, good or bad before anyone else could and think they had something over me.

Me sharing it all publicly now IS therapy and a part of my journey.

That's why I'm taking this conversation into schools, boardrooms, conferences, and C-Suites. Because it's one thing to talk about therapy in a barbershop or podcast. It's another to talk about it in front of students, young adults, executives, and founders who are silently drowning.

I've learned that my lived experience is my greatest tool. Not theory. Not statistics. Real lessons from mistakes, incarceration, rebuilding, fatherhood, and therapy.

Incarceration showed me that mental health isn't optional. It's survival. It's leadership. It's fatherhood. And it's love.



I'm not in therapy just for me. I'm in therapy so my kids see their father whole, not broken. So they know it's okay to feel, to talk, to heal. I'm in therapy, so my wife isn't ever in jeopardy of enduring my unknown, unrealized or internalized traumas from childhood or adulthood.

My goal is simple: to tell the truth, even when it hurts, and to use my story to help Black men from young boys to CEOs, understand they don't have to carry the weight of the world alone.

***The journey continues. Every chapter, good, bad, or heartbreaking, is building the road I was meant to walk.***