

[00:00:32] Patrick: Hello everyone. Welcome to episode 113 of the leadership window. I wouldn't say we have intentionally done this as a series, but it's kind of turned into a little bit of one.

In my coaching world.

I am experiencing a whole lot of, oh, pick your word, burnout, stress, loneliness, discouragement, frustration. Now, most of the people listening to this podcast are in the social sector, not everybody. And this doesn't just apply to the social sector, but it certainly applies to the social sector. We are altruistically motivated and sometimes to the point of being too sacrificial, even subservient to others and at our own peril sometimes. So we've talked about the burnout and the frustration with boards and these kinds of things, but lately the conversation has shifted just a little bit, particularly a couple of episodes ago with Anthony Dix around just the loneliness of being a leader.

You've heard it know leadership is lonely. We have it in our mission construct. If you go to our website and look at our mission, the first thing we say is leadership is a lonely place that's behind our why we're here and why we do what we do in terms of coaching.

But one of the things, and I do encourage you to go back and listen to the Anthony Dix episode, episode 111 around building a community is really at 180 management where he's working.

Building a community is sort of the marquee solution with Dr. Maria Len Pelletier. Last week on episode 112, we talked about resilience and we talked about leaders role in creating a plan for resilience, not just for themselves but for their organizations. Today I'm thrilled that we have the author.

I could say he literally wrote the book on this. The book is executive loneliness and my guest is Nick Johnson. And as we're going to talk about today, Nick's approach is I don't want to spoil too much of it, but we're going to talk about what he has learned through personal experience to be five key pathways out of loneliness or to overcome loneliness. And I'm not quite finished with the book, but I'm close and I want to highly encourage you to get it. But we're going to tease it out just a little bit today and talk to Nick Johnson. Nick is balancing his time between a lot of different places right now. I think he was in Singapore yesterday. He's in Thailand today. He is definitely an international speaker and coach and prolific writer and thought leader and has just worked around all kinds of corporate leadership and corporate management. And I am really thrilled to have him on the show. Nick, thank you for carving out time. I think you are about 12 hours ahead of us right now and you've carved out time for this and bandwidth to share some of your insights with us. Welcome to the show, man.

[00:03:52] Nick: Thank you so much, Patrick. It's a pleasure to be here. And indeed I'm in Thailand today and actually the sun is setting. It's almost 07:00 p.m. Here and it's great to be with you and the listeners.

[00:04:03] Patrick: Wow, you're inspiring. Just talking with you offline a few days ago, I just got very inspired to have you on the show.

And then getting into your book and digging into that has just been even more powerful and so relevant for what we're talking about. I give a real short introduction of you and I certainly want people to know that you're the author of this book because the book has so much rich content in it. But I'd like to open up with you just saying more about yourself. Who are you? What are you doing in the world? How'd you get here?

[00:04:35] Nick: Well, I was born in Sweden, educated in Australia, and then I lived and worked

the last 20 years in Asia. And basically I have worked my way up in the way that perhaps society wants us to work hard. I got the scholarships at school. I taught many classes, and I brought this mindset of winning with me into the workplace, starting as an account executive and account manager, account director, general manager, managing director, and leading the big organizations and having the good big packages. So everything was looking good on the outside. And I guess when I reached the top, though, I was really starting to question myself, is this what I worked so hard for? And that's when I realized that I was lonely. I was isolated and I had basically been striving for a success that wasn't really me. And since then, though, my life have changed and I'm sure we'll dwell into that today. I had to hit rock bottom before I repatched my life and lived a life that I'm living today.

[00:05:36] Patrick: We'll get into some of your story here in a little bit. But the life you're living today, how would you describe it? How would you describe your profession? What you're doing in the world today, what value you're adding, who you're working with, what your core mission today is.

[00:05:51] Nick: Yeah. So today I have left the corporate world and I'm running an organization where we do confidential peer groups for senior executives and also for business owners. So it's basically like a mastermind group or a peer group where the leaders can discuss the work related challenges they have and get support with them. So it's basically to normalize these conversations and to realize that everyone have problems and we can help each other and solve them. And we're living and working under motto of making each other better. So that's really my corporate world. And apart from that, yes, I'm also a coach, a mentor, and I'm a sponsor of twelve step recovery programs. I'm a volunteer and foundrancer also for a suicide prevention agency in Singapore. So I do a lot of community service groundwork as well.

[00:06:38] Patrick: And so much of this, again, is based on personal experience. So it's coming from the heart with a real purpose. And I know you also write in the book about a good friend of yours that has inspired some of this, but tell us, I guess in a nutshell, we don't have time, obviously, for the whole depth of the story that the book gives, but executive loneliness is something you just sort of ran into yourself and before you knew it, there you were. Can you just say a little bit more now? You alluded to it in your introduction, just a little bit more about the sequence of steps and when you realized something's not right.

[00:07:18] Nick: Yeah. So it was really creeping in, slowly growing this isolation and loneliness and anxiety in the workplace. And the first two things that happened to me was that I was laid off from my work. And what I realized each of those two times was that how hard it hit me because I was defining myself in my work. I did everything I could to achieve well at work. And once I was let go the first time, I sort of lost my identity and I didn't even know how to tell my ex wife about it. I didn't know what to say to my friends and so on. And luckily though, it was a quick downfall. I got a new job, a better job with a competitor, and I worked my way up. But then five years later, that company was sold and I was let go again. This time it was even worse. And then I had a son who was five years of age, and with my job then he had to be pulled out of school and so on. It was a lot for me to carry on my shoulders. And with that, I was very anxious. And then when I came into the next job, I remember being very worried during the probation, will I pass the probation? And I wasn't the same person. I lost a lot of my confidence by being let go. And I remember looking at all my colleagues and isolating myself even more, not being open, worried that maybe they're going to judge me, and so on. So in the end, I played it forward so many times, thinking that for every small little mistake I made, I thought, well, now is the time when they will let me go again. So what I did then, after a year and a half in this dream job, you can say I resigned because I thought, it's better I take a charge of my own life rather than dealing with all these emotions of being let go a third time. And the issue here, Patrick, and the loneliness here, is that I didn't talk to anyone about all these feelings. I didn't have any

professional help when I was let go. And I didn't talk to any coach or mentor or my boss before I handed in the resignation letter. So I didn't have a support network like you covered in your previous episodes, for example. I didn't know how to ask for help.

[00:09:25] Patrick: A couple of things. First of all, the story of you quitting that third time, you resigning rather than risk going through being let go again, really struck a chord with me. Not because I've done that, but because it hit on a number of layers. And you didn't say this, but in the book, when you tell that story, not only did you go in and resign because you thought, well, who knows when they're going to cut. The hammer is going to fall at some point. It always does. You were telling yourself this story by now, and they even begged you to stay. They offered you other positions. They said, no, why are you. We don't want to lose you. And that's how strong the power of the mind is when you go down this hole. And that's what really struck me, is you were so convinced in the story now that you were telling yourself, I'm inserting a little bit of my own commentary in here, but the story you were telling yourself, based on these previous experiences, was completely paralyzing you to the point where you couldn't even be productive in a space where you were being productive. That really struck me how powerful that gravitational pull of that loneliness can be. That really struck me.

[00:10:45] Nick: Yeah, I had already, for a year, made other plans in another direction. And what started as a small, little idea of investing in some other company or taking a job there and doing some other things. So by the time when I handed in the resignation letter, it was too late. I'd already said yes and made some commitments at other ends. But looking back, it was very crazy decisions and selfish decisions, because I had a family relying on me as well. And there was my son at that time, five years of age. He had to be pulled out of school again, and I had no feelings or thoughts about what would happen to him. And my ex wife. They had to move back to Sweden and they had to live with my ex wife's parents for a while. There was no sympathy. It was all just about me. And I couldn't even think about anyone else because I was sick. At this stage.

[00:11:38] Patrick: I definitely want to hear more about your journey out of it because it's incredibly inspiring as well. But here's what strikes me so far about the book, and this isn't a critique on the book. It actually is. I think it actually makes it for a wider audience.

Nick, to me, your book could have been titled instead of executive loneliness, it could have been entitled Pathways to overcome depression, and have been. It could have been that the stories in the book, the tips in the book, the content, could be from a dishwasher to a construction worker to a teacher to anybody, a doctor. It didn't have to necessarily be about executive loneliness. And so what I was anxious to ask you that, I'll ask you now, is which came first?

Did the stress of everything you were talking about lead to alcoholism and the depression sort of phase that you were in which led to more loneliness? Or did it start with executive loneliness that led to the other? Or are they the same thing? Are you using the terms interchangeably? I was really intrigued by that, yeah.

[00:13:02] Nick: I think both of them sort of grew on me.

And the situation got worse. The other part of it also got worse. And I think alcohol was something that was part of my upbringing. And indeed, it's interesting you mentioned that it could be for everyone, and it could. I actually worked as a construction worker, a blue collar worker in Sweden after high school. I was only 23 years of age when I moved to Australia and started university. And if I'm looking back then, did I have an alcohol problem then? Well, I was drinking quite a lot on the weekends, but it wasn't a daily affair like it became later on. But I just didn't have any way. I didn't have a community or know a way to talk about my feelings earlier on

either. So when I was then in powerful big roles, managing hospitals and clinics with over 1000 staff. In some of my biggest roles, I didn't know how to deal with that. And without the support system, no coaches, mentors or anyone to talk to, the only way I knew how to deal with it was to go to the bar after work and have some fun with friends and drinking beer, which is.

[00:14:09] Patrick: A ton of fun and a nice let your hair down and kind of relax at the end of the day. A lot of people do that.

But then you talk about the mornings and the next day and the next day and the day after that and how this sort of added up. It sounds like it just really snuck up on you over time.

[00:14:29] Nick: Yes, absolutely. I mean, a bad habit, if you constantly do it, then eventually it turns into an addiction. And that's what happened to me. So once I resigned from the job and I lost my son and my wife, and I suddenly had all the time in the hand and I had quite some money in hand as well because of resignation. I got some payoffs and things like that anyway, so I could afford a lifestyle. But before I knew it, sitting isolated on a stool in a bar, when you're not vulnerable and you don't even know yourself, you don't talk to anyone about the inner feelings and you're just acting to the whole world and everything is great, then you're in a very dangerous spot. And that's what led me then to the rock bottom. From there on, after that resignation, it still took me two and a half years until I hit my rock bottom, until I couldn't cope anymore.

[00:15:20] Patrick: Since this is about executive loneliness, can you describe during that time what was going on with your executive world, your executive performance? How was this affecting the executive responsibilities and aspirations? And I don't know if you were even realizing at the time what impact all of this was having on your work. But looking back on it, what would you say was happening in the work you were doing? And I guess what I'm getting at is I think your story can help others go, ooh, I recognize that. That's a signal, that's a sign, because there were things you weren't recognizing at the time. What did it look like from a work standpoint? What did the executive part of this struggle for you look and feel like what was happening?

[00:16:18] Nick: Yeah. So the issue was that it was mostly about me. I needed my team to do work because I delegated things to them, but I didn't really interact with them. I was not open, authentic or vulnerable with them. So I didn't get a fair chance, both to me or them, to get to know each other. It was more a one way street where I delegated task and I gave them a deadline and I expected them to deliver. The issue was when there was complicated bidders for big projects and things like that. So I was working then in hospitals, clinics, and we were getting new contracts in the oil and gas industry, mining sites, and there were some really big projects. So when we had tight deadlines and I delegated tasks, but because I didn't have strong relationships when I needed to really be fully supported and asking them to perhaps put in some extra hours or weekends, the team wasn't there for me. And also, I'm not naturally very good with numbers and excel, so I made some mistakes, and they didn't have my back on those parts because I didn't have the relationships. I didn't put in that extra effort. So mistakes started to happen, and that's when I started to be quite anxious and also worried. And instead of discussing it again, I sort of was just letting it go. And before we knew it, there was mistakes. We lost some business and things like that. So that's the danger zone when you're isolating and when you don't have that strong connection with your team, because when the pressure is on, then mistakes are happening.

[00:17:49] Patrick: What a powerful notion. So the loneliness wasn't just, I didn't have other executives that I was fellowshiping with and spending time think tanking with. I was lonely, period. And you had a team right there that could have been for you, that could have had your

back, that could have alleviated a good bit of that loneliness, but because of the path you were on, you were disengaging from them, not the other way around.

You were living more the role of a manager than a leader. And I'm pausing on that because of the concept that we talk about so much in the leadership world, is relationship.

Relationship.

What do they say? People join organizations, but they leave managers. And for those leaders and managers in their lives, who they can relate to, which is one of the main components of self determination, is, I feel a sense of identity and belonging. They weren't feeling that with you because your space was not open for them at that point. I think I'm hearing that right.

That's a really powerful notion in leadership.

[00:19:00] Nick: Yeah. And there's a few reasons for that as well. So remember, I'm talking here an expat, a westerner working in Asia, and actually all the leaders I had until then had behaved in that way, they had been very powerful leaders, very delegating leaders.

It's all about me kind of leaders, the old style leadership, and those were the ones I learned from, so I copied them. And even in this particular role we're discussing now in the hospital, my leader was the same. And I remember them saying, if you have a nice car or you buy a new mobile phone, don't show it. Park the car around the block and keep the mobile phone in your pocket. Be careful what you show and how you open up. And don't talk too much about yourself to locust because it could create some jealousy. So those were many of the issues, and I've been really warned and really told to keep this distance, and I paid a price for it. I listened to that. And the issue is that if I kept a secret there, I should have really surrounded myself by mentors, coaches outside of the company then, where I could discuss all my feelings and issues and so on, and still try to build some kind of connections with my team without showing off. But because I was warned to not be too close, I took that literally, and I did it to the extreme. And these days, I completely know to do it the other way around.

[00:20:25] Patrick: Wow, you talk about rock bottom. What was that? What was the turning point where you said, enough, there has to be a change, and you started moving in a different direction? What triggered that?

[00:20:41] Nick: Yeah, it was fear driven.

I'm going back to around April 2018, and I had just relocated Singapore, and I knew this was a good chance for me, in my career to come back. And I, deep inside me, knew that by this time, I was an alcoholic. I knew I needed help, but I haven't shared that with anyone. It was just inside me that I knew this. But what happened then was my left foot started to be really swollen. Went to the doctor, got x ray, MRI, didn't show up anything.

They checked if it was gout. It was nothing.

The foot then started to really look like an elephant foot. I couldn't get on a shoe. I had to walk in big sandals, basically. And I started to be really embarrassed about this and worried more than anything. I remember lying in my bed, looking at this foot and wondering, what's going on on earth? And that was basically so much pain and so much anxiety I had inside me at this time that I couldn't cope with that. So that was later diagnosed by a psychologist as a psychosomatic illness, which is something that shows out on the outside of the body when you have so much pain inside. And that's why? I just had to tell someone. I met a woman at this time who's now my

wife. We happily married almost since that day when I told her my story and the pain I had inside, and the magical thing that happened here, Patrick, was that as soon as I shared with her, it was what they say, half a problem shared is half a problem solved. I had V shaped recovery. The swelling of the foot started to go down, and after a few days, it was gone. I was starting to feel fully alive again. Just the fact that I told one human being about this, the seekers was exposed, and that was the biggest turning point of my life.

[00:22:40] Patrick: Wow. So what's the first thing you did from there?

In fact, maybe this is the time to talk about the pathways, because did you discover these pathways just accidentally? How intentional was it? The five pathways that you have in the book to get through this executive loneliness, as you're calling it, are pretty powerful. Walk us through those and how they related to you.

[00:23:06] Nick: Yeah. So after I had told my wife about it, she took me to the doctor and we shared a story there. And then after having seen the doctor, we went to a common friend who had some problems before, also with alcohol and so on. And this person linked me up with a recovery program. And that's where I were introduced to some steps of recovery. I went through these steps and for every step I felt better. And after I completed the steps, then I started to give talks about this and my transformation. I started already talk about these things. And that's when everyone asked you, it's great for you, Nick. You had an alcohol problem, but I don't have an alcohol problem. What should I do? And that's when I developed these five steps that. Very, very happy to talk you through today, Patrick.

[00:23:51] Patrick: Yeah, beautiful. And I read that in the book, too, where, you know, people are going. Okay, well, Nick, that your story is not my story, but yet there's some of these things that lead to the same place and some of the solutions are the same ones.

[00:24:07] Nick: Absolutely.

[00:24:08] Patrick: And your first one, the first one seems a little easier to me than the second one. It seems like. I think to me, the second one would be.

The second one would be harder. But maybe the first one was tough, too. But, yeah, walk us through them. Taking stock was your first step. Hey, just pause. Take stock, get an inventory. Where am I? What's going on? Right?

[00:24:36] Nick: Yeah. So the first step I was asked to do was really to do that inventory check. And they told me, if you are a shop owner and you would do an audit, you would do perhaps a daily stock count or monthly or quarterly or at least once a year, you would check your inventory. But how often have you done that as humans beings?

[00:24:57] Patrick: Great analogy. Love it.

[00:24:59] Nick: Yeah, exactly. So I was then given a sponsor who told me, I can do this in a spreadsheet if I like, or I can do it on a piece of paper where I really need to write down everything and be brutally honest. And this was something that I then worked on for a few weeks, and everything had to go down there. Everything from that, I had an alcohol problem to that I had gained a lot of weight, I lost my healthy habits, all the broken relationships as well, things that you have said to people. And I was even asked to go back to my childhood. And I remember looking at my high school photos, looking at every picture of everyone, trying to remember the names and writing it down. If I had bullied someone, if I'd said something. So it was really a long list. I think I had about 81 or 82 pieces on my list, and I remember someone

else who had 400 items on their inventory.

[00:25:53] Patrick: Wow. What a process just to write it down.

We use in our coaching work a lot. We use history of success.

So when someone is lacking confidence, we'll ask them to write down all the things they've accomplished and done in their lives, things they're proud of, anything, big things, small things. And what they end up doing is they write more than they remembered. It's like, wow. Yeah. And I also did this. And we can prompt them and prime the pump a little bit and say, well, what about high school? What were some of your. And they'll think about these things, and then they'll write down all these things they've accomplished and go, wow. And we say, well, if you could do all that, what were the things that led you to do that? And why are you so down on yourself? So writing it down. In that case, it's an inventory of successes and positive things, but the power of writing down the inventory, taking stock of where you are and what the issues are that you're experiencing.

What a powerful thing.

And then we go to the second step now, am I right? Was the second step harder than the first one?

[00:27:00] Nick: Yeah. So the second step, and it has basically two phases. The first phase on the second step is preparing yourself, asking for help. So you then basically add another column. There you've written down all the things that you need to take stock on, and then in the column next to it, you just start writing, who would be the person to ask for help? So in the case of, for example, that had an alcohol problem, I knew immediately some hotline, I knew a recovery program, I knew some friends who have had problems before who now were sober. So I've wrote them down. When it came to my diet and things like that, I write down nutritionists and so on. So it's just really in the first step there to prepare yourself for asking for help.

[00:27:45] Patrick: That's a little bit. So in our coaching training, we walk through an academic model called it's Prachaska's stages of change. The five stages of change. There's pre contemplation, where you're not even thinking about making a change. You don't even know a change is needed. Then you get into contemplation, which is, I think this first column you're talking about where you start prepare, you start thinking about it, okay, I probably need to make a change, but I'm not sure how, I'm not sure what. Where could I go?

And those happen before you get into implementation and action and certainly before you get into any permanent change of status of where you are. So if I'm relating it to that, I'm thinking, yeah, that makes sense to have a section where I'm preparing to ask for help before I'm actually asking for help. I'm loving this because it's intentional, it's a plan, it's safe. It's a lot easier to prepare to ask for help than to ask for help. So I love it. You are getting some great guidance here. And I love that these aren't just concepts. You're not just saying, well, ask for help, you're saying there's a framework for it and there's a process for it that's doable and you were guided through that. So you go into the second stage of that then, and you actually ask for the help. And again, I'm guessing that's where the difficulty comes in, is actually going and saying, I need help.

[00:29:14] Nick: Yeah. And as you have written things down, you talk through it, in this case with a sponsor, but you can do that with a friend, a coach, someone to prepare you for that and discuss it because it might be also needed to prioritize, which are the things that you need to ask for help first. And this links us over to the third step. And I say the first thing you ask for help for is really to get yourself healthy. So highlight all those parts because you got to look after yourself

first and heal yourself, especially if you have not been well. If you're coming from a burnout or from addiction or isolation. Then before you start dealing with external factors, get well soon. And it's both physically and mentally, but also emotionally. So that's what I did then. Everything from going to getting fitness advice, nutrition advice, getting a wearable device with a coach who set me some goals, developed the goals, and I followed them. And as I did that, I also said bye to alcohol. I had to separate myself from alcohol, and I haven't had a drink since that day when I took that step of getting healthy by changing my diet and also stopping the alcohol, for example.

[00:30:29] Patrick: So a couple of things I'd like to throw in here. One, I want to come back just a second to the asking for help part. Last week, when I had Marie Helen on the show, she brought out some research. She brings out some research in her book that for companies who have EAPs employee assistance programs, part of their benefit package, you can call up, you get free counseling sessions. If you need therapy, it's there for you if your company offers it. But her research said that only 8% of employees ever access it.

And that really didn't surprise me or didn't shock me.

Let me say that better. It shocked me. It didn't surprise me. That's a pretty telling statistic of all the mental health issues that are revealing themselves, particularly post pandemic. We know that mental health issues are on the rise, and yet only 8% of employees are taking advantage of a free resource that's right there in front of them.

Do you think that's because they forget they have one or it's a stigma and they think that asking for help is a sign of weakness and they never want to admit that they actually need that help.

[00:31:51] Nick: Yeah, it's a lot to this, Patrick, and thank you for bringing this up. So for a start, it's a stigma perception, especially if you are in the workplace. You're also worried that someone will find out, despite if it's confidential, you're worried about all those things. But here is the number one thing I think they don't know how to prepare for this, Patrick. And this is exactly the steps here. They might have so many issues that they're overwhelmed. They don't know how to take stock. They have not written it down. They've not had anyone to prepare them to come to this counseling session. They need perhaps a sponsor, a coach or a mentor to prepare them just for this conversation. So that's why even what we see even is that many who make this appointment actually because they realize they need help, they cancel it in the last minute and give some excuse because they don't even know how to prepare for it and get there.

[00:32:45] Patrick: I don't know. I don't have the research on this. You are much more informed in this area, but I hope that stigma is decreasing. I will say this. I'm seeing a number of my coaches, maybe as many as a third, a quarter to a third of the people that I'm coaching also have a therapist. And I'm always excited to hear that because not that everyone in the world needs to go out and hire a therapist. First of all, everybody can't afford one. And secondly, I don't know that everybody needs a professional therapist, but I'm coaching people who are doing it not because they're in deep depression or they're crazy or anything like that, or even. It's not even necessarily because their family is falling apart or all the things that you think of when you think that people are in therapy. Sometimes it's just they're dealing with this kind of thing. They're dealing with loneliness or they're dealing with stress, or they're realizing that some of the things from their past are holding them from greater success in the future. So I love it when my coaches tell me, oh, yeah, my therapist said the same thing, and I'm talking. I was talking to her the other day about such and such, and it seems to me like there is a. I think it used to be that people would never say that to you. They wouldn't tell you they have a therapist. They want to keep that to themselves. Today, it seems like, at least here in my circle, it seems like that stigma is decreasing and it's becoming a little bit more sort of mainstream and normalized that you might get some therapy for particular things. Are you experiencing that? Or do you know of any



research that says that the stigma is decreasing? I hope it is, and it seems like it.

[00:34:35] Nick: I'm on your page and I believe that it is reducing, especially in the western world, I think Asia, where is a little bit lagging in this matter. What I do have, I have statistics, and I did interviews also for my book in regards to this. And the findings that I had was that 84% of the senior executives that I interviewed would not talk about any mental health related issues in their company. Not with a HR, not with a boss, with anyone else. And then on the follow up question, would you seek help? 75% said no.

[00:35:12] Patrick: Interesting that you mentioned the different cultures that research. Was that global or was that focused on Asia, or was that in the west or a mix.

[00:35:20] Nick: This was in Asia and this was basically Singapore, but many of them are westerners who've been living and working in Asia for quite some time. So it's a little bit more close over here than in the western world, I would say.

[00:35:34] Patrick: I think that's interesting to note that a lot of this is cultural. And you mentioned management style a while ago too, and I've seen, seen. I don't want to stereotype at all, but I do think that there is a different leadership mindset and shift of mindset in the west. I've coached individuals of asian ethnicity and origin who really embraced that old style of management and in some cases wanted to break free of it. But it's cultural.

It's not racial even, it's cultural. And I think that's an interesting dynamic to consider. And for any coaches out there, I think that's one of the more nuanced and complex layers of coaching, is to understand that this is not a one size fits all when you're coaching someone. People come from different backgrounds, their context. As Dr. Pelletier mentioned last time, the context matters of where you're coming from. So I appreciate all of these nuances. The second thing I wanted to bring up to you is it strikes me just as you're talking, you're talking know, you took stock. Someone helped you with that because they told you how to build the list and then you asked for help and getting healthy, you had a physical trainer, you had these doctors. You start to pile on these resources of people that you asked for help. What about listeners that would say, well, that's great. Nick is a successful executive. He's got resources to be able to do these things. I can't afford a physical trainer, a therapist. My company doesn't have an eap. I don't have access to some of the resources that Nick has. He just said he was living the lifestyle, the, the rich and famous. What about for those that might feel like I don't have access to those things?

[00:37:28] Nick: That's the most beautiful thing with all of this is that there's so many charities, associations and volunteers in this space, like myself. Since this time, I'm giving back every day, also as a volunteer and fundraiser, not only for the suicide prevention agency, but I'm also supporting the twelve step group. So, for example, for all addictions, you have twelve step recovery programs all over the world and especially in the US. Anything from shopping, social media, alcohol, sex, food addictions, any addictions that people pick up. There's so much. And they are all run by a lot of volunteers, have hotlines you can call 24/7 I'm manning in a hotline like this myself for about one month every year when I'm taking all these calls and I'm sitting there to guiding people for free. So a lot of it comes for free. And especially the tips and the resources that I got was from mainly the program. The sponsor I had to take me through the steps was someone who's done it before, who was a volunteer, who gave it back, and I'm giving it back. In fact, I done a few hours of this work yesterday, and despite being on a business trip in Singapore yesterday, I was up 530 in the morning before I gave a keynote to be out in the community on the ground for 2 hours in the morning, helping people to go through these steps as a volunteer. And this is all non paid, so there's a whole infrastructure of people being there to help. Complementary.

[00:38:55] Patrick: Nick, thank you so much for saying all of that, and certainly for doing what you're know, this show is leadership through a social sector lens. So many of the listeners right now are probably jumping up and down and screaming and going, Patrick, Patrick, we're here. We're here. What are you talking mean? And I've worked with them, everyone from homeless organizations to drug and alcohol addiction organizations, to mental health organizations, to domestic violence. There is help out there. And I'll tell you interestingly enough, so many of the people that I have tried to help, there's a number here in the states that people can call. Everyone knows that when you're here in the United States, if there's an emergency, you pick up the phone and you call 911, and you get an ambulance, a police, a fire, whatever, you just call 911. That's it. Everybody knows that number. The number for social service referral here in many parts of the country. I'm not sure how saturated it is. Certainly in a lot of the places where there's density of people, the number is two one one. And if you call two one one, you get. And again, our listeners are all over the place, so I don't know how available two one one is everywhere, but I think probably most of our listeners have access to two one one. And I will often refer people, call two one one.

These are people whose job it is to help point people in the right direction for services that they can access.

And I have found so many times that people are a little bit put off by that. Oh, you're just giving me a phone number. What I need is money. It's like, no, what you need is a deeper bit of help here or you're just going to keep needing the money.

And so there is help out there taking inventory. I love the first step. Find the help, figure out what the plan is, prepare for it, figure out who it is you can reach out to, and then reach out. So anyway, that's really good insight, and I just wanted to pause on that for just a minute.

Well, you were in the getting healthy, and I've got a question on that one, too. But let me let you finish that one up. The getting healthy stage three here.

[00:41:15] Nick: Yeah, I think if you're coming out of it, doesn't matter if it's burnout, isolation, depression, any kind of addiction, you need to get well, physically, mentally and emotionally before you can do anything else. So that's the first step. And even for that, there's so many free articles, advice and people who are willing to help as well. And a lot of the twelve step programs cover that, as we discussed. So it shouldn't have to cost a lot of money. And again, if you are starting to open up and you're on a journey, you probably have a few friends in your circle who can give you some advice or mentor you around that who'd be very happy to share. There's nothing more than make me happy these days. If someone called me up and say, nick, I'm so inspired by you running the half marathons and so on, can you share with me how you're doing? And I'd be the happiest person in the world carves out some time. And in fact, there was one of my friends just recently who said, my son, want to run a marathon, can you just have a call with him and talk him through it? And of course, I'm happy to do that. So in that sense, Patrick, it doesn't have to cost him a lot of money to get healthy. In fact, she'll save you money on medical bills and sick days as well.

[00:42:25] Patrick: Well, I have to ask you this question.

This is jumping ahead a bit, but in your case, you took this getting healthy thing really seriously. You went from one extreme to the other. So for our listeners, I'll give you another spoiler alert for the book.

Nick is a triathlete. And I've heard the term I'd never really looked know Iron man triathlete, but you talk about healthy and fit. I mean, it's extreme. And I think you said it was a period of just

under two years, right? That you became Iron man triathlete fit.

Where does this come in? Was this way later, or was this a part of the getting healthy? And how did you go to this extreme space of.

I'll let you tell what a triathlon is, because it's extreme.

[00:43:23] Nick: Yeah. So I was already interested in running marathons and triathlons before I hit rock bottom. The issue was, before that I wasn't so well. I was mentally and not well. I was isolated and I was consuming not a very healthy diet and alcohol. So I did it. But it was painful. So, of course, now, as I was getting healthy and I had goals in my life and all these healthy people, and a mindset that I will keep asking for help and keep asking, keep asking, wanting to learn more. So once I ran a full marathon, then I thought, well, I set the goal to do an Iron man event, and an ironman event is a 2.4 miles swim, 112 miles bike ride, and a 26.2 miles. So that's a marathon all in one go, and you have 16 hours max to do it. So that's what I set out to do. And I put it as a goal, and I work with a coach, and I just continue working the same steps as we've been talking through here.

Then I just keep going. And that's what I'm doing today. And I'm just so happy because cycling is something that I loved as a little boy, and it's back in my life now. I love keeping fit and healthy, being surrounded by the community that sport brings, and also giving back. A lot of what I do in the sport is giving back. I'm coaching and mentoring young athletes, especially the pros, the ones who are trying to qualify for the Olympics, to also get a career for themselves outside of sports, also making sure they learn English and so on. So for me, being in the sport and being all in is something that give me so much.

[00:44:58] Patrick: Well, I hope it goes without saying that everyone doesn't have to go be a triathlete to overcome executive loneliness. That happens to be your space. But there is tons of research out there that draws the correlation between physical activity and mental health and stress and these kinds of things. They are absolutely linked. I'm working with an organization right now that I've actually worked with for a number of years.

They're called pal in Spartanburg, South Carolina. Here in my home state, it's play advocate and live well, it's the PAL acronym, and they're responsible for many miles of trail systems throughout their city, and they hold a criterion bike race event that draws 10,000 people into town, and they have runs and things for fundraisers. And we were just in a session with them recently with their board, talking about the link between what they're doing and mental health. And while they don't want to purport to be a mental health organization and start putting together a bunch of mental health programs, they do want to educate people on the fact that what they are doing is related to mental health and is, if not a necessity, certainly a value add to creating good mental health or protecting mental health. And that's just being fit and being healthy. And healthy eating is also a part of their work. So, once again, the social sector steps up and says, there's reasons we do these things.

So I appreciate that. But, yeah, this is not to say, all right, the way out of executive loneliness.

Go get in the iron, man. Certainly everybody can't do that. I don't know that I could even make. I think you said it starts off with 2.4 miles or kilometers of swimming, and I don't think I could even do the 0.4, let alone the whole rest of the thing. But kudos to you, man. That's incredibly inspiring. Your fourth step in the pathway is nurturing healthy relationships. Talk about that one.

[00:47:03] Nick: Yeah. So most likely, if anyone who's been isolated or been in a depression or in any form of addiction, especially addictions, are quite selfish, typically, they take over your life,

and you do it at the cost of the people in your life, colleagues, friends, family, perhaps you push them away from you. So on your list, when you took stock, there will most likely be quite some people who you need to then come back to and make amends and really apologize for the behavior and so on, and really make the amends to set things right and say that you're working on yourself, you want to clean, that you're cleaning up your side of the streets so you can move forward freely. And this is a big cleanup, and it's best done again with a coach or a sponsor. I had a sponsor helping me, and this is now something I do every week. I'm helping people now to go back and clean up their relationships. And we start often with the closest ones, wives, children, parents, and the closest relatives. And there will always be things, pain points there. And just to give you an example here, I had something with my sister a few years earlier. I remember that she gave a Coca Cola to my son when he was very little, and he had never had a sugar drink before.

When I saw that, I grabbed him and stormed off the table. And then I didn't speak to my sister for quite some time after that. I ignored her calls and just the relationship grew very cold. And this was something that I had to go back to and make amend for. I called her up and I said that I've not been too well. I wonder, can we catch up for a lunch? And we did, and I made amends. And I basically explained the journey I was on, and I said it was very selfish of me. And I said I wasn't in a healthy space. I couldn't explain myself or express myself. So I'm sorry for that. And then I asked if there's something I can do to make things right. And of course she would just give me a hug. And we were best friends again, and we moved forward. And there's so much pain lifted from you when that happens. And there's so many small little things we have said or done that we just need to fix. And having these conversations then one by one with all the people, really is a very important step to clean up your whole past so that you have no regrets from the past.

[00:49:30] Patrick: Wow.

When you really start thinking about, as I'm listening to you, I'm thinking, I hope everyone's thinking about their own lives. You start thinking about your past. You start thinking about the way you've treated people, the way what your role in it was.

I've had conflicts, for example, with people, even professionally, that you walk away and you think, well, I was right, I was right, I was right, they were wrong. And then the more you think about it, you go, you know what? Maybe at a minimum, we're both wrong. I played a role in this. What's my role? And one of the things we use in our coaching model is a framework we call 60 60.

And what it means is I'll go 60% of the way if there's a conflict and you hear people say, meet me halfway, well, the 60 60 rule says go more than halfway. Go 60%, not 50%.

And I think that's what this step somewhat is about, is whether you feel like you were right or wrong in the conflict. The idea is to go and make it right. And there is nothing, there's no better feeling than that. I've done that a few times in my life, not necessarily as part of a twelve step program or anything, but it's liberating and it's freeing and it frees positive energy. And I just really like that one.

I had a conflict with one of my boards of directors back when I was in organizational leadership. And I walked away from that situation saying, can't believe them. And then I had a great friend who, one of those friends that will tell you what you need to hear, not what you want to hear. She wagged her finger in my face and she said, be careful.

Be careful that you don't learn from this. Be careful that you don't get introspective and think about what your role in this was.

And it changed my whole outlook on that entire situation for me. So, yeah, I really appreciate that one.

[00:51:42] Nick: Yeah. And I'm helping all my coaching clients now, if they want to go back and clean your past, and we identify this because it can be some pain points there, especially if people have sugar cravings and they falling short, they want to control the sugar, they don't want to have it, but there's some pain points there. And then it could be something, perhaps that they said, and many times it can be even a minor thing, something that, with a neighbor 1520 years ago, maybe the neighbor overstepped or something happened and you said something, and then they're still there. And I even helped my mom to do this. My mom had something unsaid with a neighbor and said, just go and sort it out so you don't have that walking around with that small little itchiness on you and remembering that for life. And I've had the most amazing things happen when people have made this amendment. And of course, there's no guarantee about the response at the other end, but you cleaned your side of the street, and you can walk forward.

What I also do myself now is I try to do this on a daily basis before I go to bed. I have a pen and paper next to my bed, and I'm thinking over the day, did I say something that wasn't quite right? Did I send an email that was rushed with perhaps not the nicest tone? Then I have a chance to clean that up before I go to bed. I can just send a new message or say, sorry, I didn't mean what I said today. I will give you a call tomorrow so we can talk about that. So you really have a last chance every day to close that day in a nice way. And then ultimately, and I'm trying to live this now, is that instantly, if I walk into a supermarket and I'm rushing a bit because I'm on a rush, if I say something a little bit rude or it doesn't come out right immediately, I need to catch myself and say, I do apologize. I didn't mean that. It didn't come out nicely. And then try to say something nice. And I can just remember, actually, there was one time I bought reading glasses recently, and I wasn't very nice. I have not treated them very nicely in the shop. I actually went to buy flowers, and I went back to the shop the next day and I made an amendment. I'm sorry for the way I spoke to you yesterday. That was not well done on me.

[00:53:48] Patrick: Wow.

Just. Man, I'm pausing on that one.

That's extraordinary. What a great reminder for us. I do this in traffic sometimes, Nick. I wouldn't say I have road rage. I mean, I don't run people off the road when I get upset at them, but I do find myself getting angry, maybe shouting out loud to myself with someone on the road. And then I think, you know what? I've made that mistake. I've crossed over into a lane without signaling and didn't see the person I've done that. Is that how I want someone treating me?

And we forget the other thing that my wife and I were watching one of these TV shows, one of the talent shows, and they often will tell the story of the contestant, and a lot of them have lived in some dark places. And we just realized, you just never know what someone is going through. Someone that, someone at the counter, at the eyeglass plate. You just don't know what they are going through in the moment. Everybody's got baggage. Everybody's got a life and something that is troubling them to some degree or another. And, man, we just don't know. And I love your approach to it, to just fix it on the spot.

Don't wait and fester. The longer it goes, the harder it is, I think, to probably apologize to someone. But, man, that's amazing. The other thing I want to say quickly or hear from you on is the other side of healthy relationships. So one is to make amends for unhealthy relationships.

It dawns on me that part of this has to be around the good relationships that we have, that we

often take for granted, and how do we appreciate those and foster those and be fully present with those. Have you found that to be a part of your construct?

[00:55:41] Nick: Absolutely. And it's about having, really a full service mindset to constantly being there for your friends, being there for the people around you. And I do this as well, of course, in all the recovery programs and so on. We do look out for each other. But I also have my little closed circle men's group. We go online 1 hour every week and we share on a theme. Last week it was about sleep and rest. Tomorrow night we're going to talk about guilt and shame. So it's our safe space. We have a WhatsApp group to go with it, where we share during the week some readings, some thoughts, and there's a place where anyone can raise a flag if they need some help and we're all there for them. And then once a week we just practice what I call our vulnerability muscle. And that's our way of building relationships. It's because I'm an expert and I'm moving around. I have this group online, but otherwise people can meet as friends. And I think especially us men perhaps need to do this. We need to practice to be more vulnerable. Women did, women groups and women leaders groups perhaps a little bit before us. But men, we need to catch up and really train that vulnerability muscle.

[00:56:53] Patrick: That word, by the way, is a word that came to mind as I read your book as to how vulnerable you are being in writing this book and even in telling some of the stories that you're telling on this show, the vulnerability, the honesty, to say, yeah, I treated someone badly.

I did that. That's a vulnerability. Just to say that all of this stuff and the stories in your book really speak to vulnerability and authenticity. Because now you're practicing what you're writing about and teaching and preaching and you put authenticity and vulnerability together and boy, you got a magic combination. So I appreciate that. Let's hit on the last one. Finding your purpose.

[00:57:40] Nick: Yeah, I do believe that it's very important that we at this stage then in the steps also start to question what is it we are doing?

For example, when I elbowed my way to the top, I was first looking after pleasing my parents by being a good student. And then I was pleasing the teachers by trying to make them look good, by having good grades. And then after that, it was about pleasing the bosses, hitting the targets, getting the promotions. So it was never really a moment when I slowed down and really questioned what is it that I want to do? What make me happy in my life? But naturally it fell straight in my lap here, because as I started to help others go through these steps and I started to be of service and then talking about this topic, because something happened also here, Patrick, that changed everything. About a year into my recovery, I lost a close friend of mine to suicide. And that's when I decided then to go public with my story. And that's when I really decided to step up my efforts. And I made a promise to myself, if I even can prevent one suicide for the rest of my life of one person, then that will be my purpose and mission in life. And that's what is something I continue every day to work on. And I receive basically weekly messages now from people, mainly from men, most of in the age 40 to 60 executives, who are thanking me for the efforts I do. And even one last week who said, I'm sitting here looking out over the ocean and just sending this message to thank you. I didn't think I would be alive today if it wasn't for you. And that made me cry and just realizing how blessed I am to living my purpose, something that is much more meaningful than any success or career that I ever had.

[00:59:29] Patrick: Wow.

I want to pause right there. Rather than do this at the end of the show when you start getting into topics like suicide, that is such a serious thing. And again, I am going back to a conversation my wife and I just had earlier this week about people that are considering suicide and ultimately who would commit suicide.

So many times people are shocked. Like I would have never dreamed they looked so happy. I think you call it smiling depression in your book. They look so happy. They're so functional. They're so full of joy. Look at these pictures of them. You couldn't imagine the dark place they are in their lives. And so I just want to pause here. I've never done this, but we've never really hit on this topic on the show. But I do want to urge you listening that if you or someone you know, as they say on the PSAs, you are struggling with thoughts of suicide, please know that help is available. It is available. Start with a trusted friend, a family member, a mental health professional, particularly here in the United States. And again, I don't know, how about internationally? I would say look into it. But nine eight eight. So we talked about two one one.

If you just need referral to some resources, call two one one. If you're really struggling with this dark place or you know someone who is, call nine eight eight. It's a national suicide and crisis lifeline. You can call it, you can text it. Don't sit there and be alone and not ask for help. Don't not reach out because you're not alone. As much as you might feel alone, there are resources out there begging to help you. They just don't know where you are, and you've got to let them know. So I just want to pause on that.

The story about your friend in the book was very moving and you just never know.

I've seen enough of it, known enough about it to know that you just don't know. You don't know about other people.

What's obvious is that people hide it until it's too late and they don't know what to do. So I wanted to pause on that. I want to end on a better note, but I just wanted to stop right there since we were on that topic and share that with people. And I think most of our listeners would know that. But thank you, Nick, for bringing that out. And more vulnerability. More.

Here's something I love about what you've done, is that what you've gone through, you could have kept this to yourself. I've talked to people who have said, yeah, this is about me, though. It's not about anybody else. I don't want to tell the story. I'm not trying to make money off of it or anything. And you're not either. It's very clear that what you're doing is using your struggles to help someone else avoid them. And I really do appreciate that.

Is there anything else in the book that you would want to cover that we haven't talked about? Any other major tenet of sort of what's in it, why it's there? Before we move on?

[01:02:54] Nick: I think we are at a very good stage here and I think that it's very important that we become comfortable with uncomfortable as we are discussing these topics, which could perhaps be dark. But as we normalize the conversations, we actually break the stigma. And the more normalized these conversations are, the easier they are for us to talk to, at least if we have these safe communities around us. Because it's better to talk about these feelings and knowing how to talk about them and have someone to talk about them than sitting there with these feelings by yourself. So I just wanted to thank you, Patrick, also for pausing there and for sharing those phone numbers and the hotlines. And it's very important. And that's also what I have in my book. And for anyone who buy my book, even though it was written for Singapore and most of the hotlines are for Asia, the last pages is full of appendix of service and hotlines and most of these organizations also exist in the US. So that is perhaps one thing to mention also from the book and from the conversation we have that it is help out there and there's nothing more important than reaching out if we need help.

[01:04:01] Patrick: Yeah, I always appreciate the books that have additional resources that you can reach out to, not just, hey, here's a book, give me \$20 and move on with your life. This is so

authentic and I really appreciate it. I want to wrap the show, Nick, with two questions that I like to ask all my guests. And one is, I love to hear stories about leaders in people's lives.

Either someone who inspired you that you've never met, or someone who is close to you, but who is a leader that comes to mind as someone who has had profound influence on your view of leadership and who you are today. And why does that person come to mind?

[01:04:47] Nick: Well, it's a fellow podcast host in the US, rich roll. I absolutely love his show. He has quite a similar journey as me, and he covers the topics and the conversations we had today at the very depth, with a raw honesty. And when I read his book, he's an ultra barrunner. He's also an athlete, and he used to be a competitive swimmer in the US. And so the story of him, I really find myself in his journey, his story. So I'm a big fan and he's had a huge impact on me. In fact, I even tried to go vegan for six months. I'm not as disciplined as him. I'm not sticking to it. But like him, I'm not at the hope. I never go back to the alcohol and the unhealthy life I was living before. So yeah, I cannot recommend the rich role podcast enough.

[01:05:40] Patrick: Oh, that's great. We'll have to look that one up. I hope our listeners will go check that one out.

Last question, Nick. You're on the top of a mountain with a megaphone and all the leaders of the world are at the foothills listening to you. And you've got 15 seconds to tell all the leaders of the world what you believe to be the most important tenet of leadership. What's the Nick Johnson sound bite of the most important tenet of leadership for all leaders to keep in mind?

[01:06:09] Nick: It's a very short version of my book. Basically, whenever something comes up for you, something that gives you some pain, write it down. And then in the next column, write who you can, reach out to, ask for help, and then just take action. Just give them a call and you will be basically lifting the pain right away.

[01:06:29] Patrick: Man, I love it. Nick, I'm so glad we connected. This is some of the richest content we've had on the show.

Thank you for being vulnerable, putting yourself out there, going through the grind and living to tell about. It's a pretty powerful gift and you're sharing it and I really, really appreciate it. I want folks to go to [nickjohnson.com](http://nickjohnson.com) and for those in the States, Johnson is not the way you would normally spell it. It's Nick. N I c k. Johnson is Jonson, two n's. No H. Johnson, [nickjohnson.com](http://nickjohnson.com). And check out everything that Nick is doing. Get the book.

I will tell you, for those of you that know, Patrick promotes a lot of books on his show. Yes, because Patrick reads them first. And I don't recommend books I haven't read. And I also talk to all of my guests before we actually record. So I got to know Nick a little bit.

I've heard of others recently who had recently bought his book, as a matter of fact. So when I say read this, I mean it. This is one you'll want to read. Much of it you will relate to, even if you feel know, as Nick says in his book, well, I'm not an alcoholic and I'm not in depression. Just read the book. If you're an executive, if you're a leader, it's a lonely place. Do it. If you need help of any kind, call two one one and get some referrals to some help. And if you are, as we said earlier, at a really dark place of even having suicidal thoughts, don't sit there on it and think that it'll just go away. Don't continue to entertain it. Reach out to a friend. Call nine eight eight, the national suicide hotline here in the United States. Nick's book has resources elsewhere in the country, or in the world, rather, and Google it if you have to, but there's quick, accessible help out there. Hope you do it, Nick. Man, I just can't thank you enough. Thanks for being on the show.



[01:08:38] Nick: Lead on having me.

[01:08:39] Patrick: You bet. Lead on, folks.