

Interview Overview

The statistics of men relating to mental and physical health at midlife are often confronting. There are many complex reasons for this, and there are many examples of great work being done to address the underlying causes.

One very positive initiative was that the UK Government recently launched its first-ever dedicated Men's Health Strategy for England in Parliament. Announced on International Men's Day (19 November 2025), the comprehensive 10-year plan aims to tackle deep-rooted health inequalities, improve health outcomes, and encourage men to seek help earlier.

Today I wanted to examine an often misunderstood and avoided topic and how that relates to overall mental health, addictions such as substance and sex addictions, relationship break downs at midlife and more. That topic is shame.

Brene Brown brought the topic to mainstream attention in her 2010 TED talk on this topic, which went completely viral.

I wanted to understand how shame impacts men, specifically, and what we can do to address any semblance within ourselves.

I invited Ben Larke onto the show. Ben is a clinical psychologist specialising in trauma, and in working with men navigating midlife transitions.' He is on a mission to demystify what therapy is and can do for ordinary folks. In this conversation, Ben shares both professional insights and personal experiences of shame, its impacts, midlife reinvention, and offers a deeply human perspective on therapeutic work and personal transformation.

The Fundamental Distinction Between Shame and Guilt

Shame operates at the level of identity ("I am defective"), while guilt concerns actions ("I did something wrong"). Two dramatically different perspectives. Shame is about self-labelling and becomes deeply meshed with how we see ourselves.

This distinction explains why shame is so much more damaging—guilt related actions can be corrected, apologised for, turned around, fixed etc. but shame attacks our fundamental sense of worthiness, who we are as humans. It goes deep. And continues over time.

Our nervous systems can then habituate to familiar states, even painful ones. If we grew up feeling ashamed, that state becomes "comfortable" in its familiarity. We unconsciously repeat patterns and make choices that return us to known emotional territory, not because we want to, but because it "fits" neurologically.

Which leads to another reflection I have had since talking with Ben.

Compulsive Behaviours Serve a Function

Addictions and compulsive behaviours—whether substances, shopping, or pornography—always serve a purpose: escape, numbing emotional pain, dopamine release, or perceived "reward" in an otherwise unfulfilling life. Understanding the function is crucial to addressing the behaviour, not just judging or eliminating it.

I love his metaphor - we're like a car with multiple passengers (parts)—young parts, traumatized parts, coping parts, parental parts. Only one can drive at a time, but we don't always control who's in the driver's seat. The goal of therapy or intimate conversations is not in eliminating the difficult parts, but having a coping part in the passenger seat with "one hand on the wheel," stabilizing the journey and reaching back to comfort the traumatized child who's always in the car.



Masculine Conditioning Creates Walls Around Sensitivity

The sensitive, connecting parts of men—core to being human—are often walled off through masculine conditioning ("boys don't cry," stoicism). This suppressed sensitivity doesn't disappear; it gets locked behind protective barriers that later create disconnection in relationships and internal fragmentation.

Whether we felt validated for who we were (not just achievements) shapes our core sense of lovability and worthiness. Ben referred to a notion called 'Attachment wounds', unplanned or inadvertent 'wounds that commenced with early caregiver relationships—when parents were distracted, unavailable, or conditional in their love—create lasting patterns in how we connect and perceive ourselves.

Fast forward 4-5 decades....

For men who've spent decades in perpetual motion (next job, next country, next project), midlife often forces a reckoning. When life finally slows and stability arrives, the unprocessed material from earlier life "catches up"—manifesting as crisis, breakdown, or catalyst for change. We have a few choices, one of which is to address the original causes of whatever is causing us to feel ashamed and to move past that, finally.

Ben suggested and I wholeheartedly agree the first and most crucial initial action is telling another human being about what you're carrying in secret. The "monster in the closet" becomes manageable when exposed to light. Shame grows in isolation; sharing with someone trustworthy—therapist, friend, sponsor—immediately reduces its power and transforms self-perception. This is the first step towards forgiveness of self and others.

Ben's personal journey illustrates a common pattern: what attracted us in our twenties often resurfaces as the path we're meant to follow decades later. Midlife offers the opportunity to consciously revisit and reclaim those early callings, now enriched by life experience and hard-won wisdom.



One Practical Experiments for Listeners

Experiment 1: The Parts Identification and Compassion Practice

What to do: Over the next two weeks, notice when you're emotionally activated or reactive. In those moments (or shortly after), ask yourself: **"Which part of me is driving right now?"**

- **Week 1:** Simply identify and name the parts. Is it your traumatized young part? Your hypervigilant protector? Your angry defender? Your people-pleasing adapter? Give them descriptive names that resonate for you.
- **Week 2:** When you identify a part that's driving, practice having a "coping part" reach back with compassion. Literally imagine or say to yourself: "I see you. I understand why you're here. Thank you for trying to protect me, but we're okay now."

Why this matters: This practice develops the internal compassion Ben describes and creates space between stimulus and response. You'll begin noticing patterns in which parts show up in which situations, giving you choice about how to respond rather than being driven by automatic reactions.



Closing Reflection

Ben's wisdom throughout this conversation centres on a profound truth: transformation begins with understanding and compassion, not judgment. Whether we're addressing shame, compulsive behaviours, or midlife reinvention, the path forward involves acknowledging all parts of ourselves, breaking isolation through connection, and meeting our humanity—imperfect as it is—with the same generosity we'd offer a dear friend.

The invitation isn't to fix yourself or achieve some idealized version of masculinity. It's to become more integrated, more conscious, and more compassionate—with yourself first, then with others. As Ben powerfully states: what we don't transform, we transmit. The work we do on ourselves isn't just personal; it's generational.



DLTOMI is a podcast brought to you by Pod O'Sullivan, where he has real and candid conversations with experts, celebrities and ordinary men about navigating midlife. The ups, the downs, the surprises, the opportunities, the secrets and how to do it on your terms, gracefully or even disgracefully!



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