



Hogg Foundation  
*for* Mental Health



## Episode 150: Uplifting Black Men (Transcript)

Ike Evans:

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Hi, welcome to Into the Fold, the mental health podcast. I'm your host, Ike Evans. Today, we're delighted to bring you episode 150, Uplifting Men. But first, some mental health headlines. The Hogg Foundation has just published a blog post titled, Uncovering Transgender History in Texas. It's a fascinating glimpse into the trans community's history in Texas. Did you know that in the 1970s there was a clinic, the Gender Dysphoria Research and Service Program at the University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston? And that the Hogg Foundation even awarded them a small grant. If this intrigues you, you'll want to check out the full post on our website, [hogg.utexas.edu](http://hogg.utexas.edu), which I've also linked to in the show notes. Happy reading.

In national news, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, or SAMHSA today released a new data report on lesbian, gay, and bisexual mental health. The report finds that lesbian, gay, and bisexual adults are more likely than straight adults to deal with substance use issues as well as experience mental health conditions, including depression and suicidal ideation.

According to SAMHSA their approach to addressing these issues builds on the president's executive order on advancing equality for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex individuals. That's executive order 14075. I have included a link to the full report in the show notes. Finally, a recent survey finds that 59% of dads wish they felt more seen. In an article on [parents.com](http://parents.com), the dads and mental health study comprised 1,600 American Fathers who were interviewed over a two-week period.

To quote the story, overall findings indicate that many dads are hurting and need more support, and when it comes to mental health, many fathers are struggling. Of those surveyed, two and three dads said they have felt at least moderately stressed in the last 30 days, and 43% of dads say at least half their

stress is related to childcare with 62% saying the pressure to provide for their family is a major stressor.

And because we're going to be talking about men's mental health today, this definitely ties in. I will include a link to the full article in the show notes, and that does it for mental health headlines. Don't be left out of the loop. Become a Hogg insider by subscribing to mental health headlines. You can find a signup link on our main website, [hogg.utexas.edu](http://hogg.utexas.edu).

June is an interesting month for mental health. It is both Pride Month as well as the month of Juneteenth. I don't know about you, but I have got emancipation on the brain, emancipation from trauma, from stigma, from loneliness and isolation from all the boxes that we're put into or that we put ourselves into.

June also happens to be Men's Health Month and Men's Mental Health Month, which is exciting because we can carry on the emancipation theme through a look at men's mental health and in particular the mental health of Black men. And that brings me to our guest, Thabiti Boone. He is a speaker, a college basketball hall of famer, an author, a minister, and a humanitarian. Through such advocacy as his work with the President Obama fatherhood and mentoring initiative, he has definitely made his mark when it comes to men's mental health. Thabiti, thanks for joining us.

Thabiti Boone: As always, man, it's good to see you, man, and to stay connected with you since the conference. I'm just honored to be a part of your podcast and this very important topic and conversation around men's mental health.

Ike Evans: So just to get us going, what is mental health in the Black community and what is Black men's mental health? I mean, why is it a concern and what does mental health look like in men?

Thabiti Boone: Okay. So you asked a two-pronged question. One, you got the general abstract around mental health in the Black community and then more particularly mental health when it comes to Black men. But I think mental health just with a broad stroke, no matter who it is, mental health is just those challenges, those mental health challenges that people, human beings tend to face just from normal circumstances and experiences that people have as they try to navigate and deal with society.

So whether it's family, whether it's pressures of work and home, and job, and just community environments and just the pressures of just what society puts on all of us in terms of just how do we just maintain ourselves mentally. So that's just a general approach. But then when you get into the Black community, my brother. As you know, we've been faced realistically the trauma of our mental state since we've been in this country coming out of slavery, coming into slavery, being enslaved by this country.

So you know just a whole host of what we've been put through as a people has just bombarded us and sabotaged us with just a myriad of mental health challenges. So when you look at just the years of the trauma of being enslaved, the trauma of not knowing who you are, a sense of your own humanity, a sense of having the ability to make your own self-determination and how you define yourself and how do you position yourself in this country around the pursuit of life living, the pursuit of happiness.

As you know all that has been a tremendous, tremendous constant challenge. When you look at the decades coming from slavery to reconstruction, to Jim Crow and civil rights and separate but equal, and then affirmative action, and even up until now, the last 15, 20 years of just even the institutional racism, the societal challenges as Black men, even just our lives are always on the line.

Our lives of being constantly either at the hands of the police and law enforcement, or even at the hands of ourselves in terms of just the whole mental pressure and the trauma, what we're faced with has put us into this very, very difficult, sad dilemma around just the state of where we are as just our mental health. So our emotional stability, cultural sense of self and who we are has put us in this serious, serious challenge.

So that's where we are, where we've been. And the question becomes how do we get out of this state of where we are? But that's just kind of generally where we are when it comes to mental health in the Black community. And I'm going to tell you this and I'll stop at this, as we have not had as much conversation especially within the Black community, around the state of mental health in the Black community, whether it's social media. I see a lot of it, articles, conferences, events.

There's a lot of discussion around it. Of course, even the conference that you and I met at the African-American Conference there in Austin. So there's a lot of conversation around just mental health in the Black community. And then as you know even more as we've been digging deeper into Black males, Black men, Black fathers. We've been having much conversation around just where we are as Black men, and Black fathers, and Black boys around mental health.

So depression, anxiety, isolation, living in toxic communities, living in urban communities with constant violence all the time, constant murder and stuff like that. So when you have these kind of challenges, of course this mental health and mental state that we are in is going to always be a challenge.

Ike Evans:

Okay. So yeah, the conference for our listeners that Thabiti was just referring to is the Central Texas African-American Family Support conference that happened here in Austin back in February. So he was one of the keynote speakers and just did a bang up job distilling some of the issues that he just mentioned. So Thabiti, getting back to that conference, I was really struck by, I don't know if vulnerability is a word that you like, but how you were willing to offer up some

of your own vulnerability for the benefit of those who had the privilege of hearing you speak.

So one question that I've got is just around some of your own personal experiences with mental health, and particularly with family and friends. How much of a journey was it for you to learn that level of openness and vulnerability that you've shown now?

Thabiti Boone:

Yeah, I appreciate you asking that. The key word, especially when it comes to Black men, is vulnerability. Vulnerability is almost like anti-masculine. But now that becoming more and more comfortable with the word vulnerability, I've been one of the ones who have said, "Hey," raising my hand saying, "Here's my story, here's what I've been through, here's what I've gone through, and here's been my challenges and here's my vulnerability."

So whether my vulnerability starts with this opening and sharing the next phase is, as you saw, the emotional part where you bring up these lived experiences and you're being reminded of just some of these traumatic things that you've gone through. So that becomes a part of the vulnerability. And then the other piece is just being able to just say, "It's okay to open. It's okay for Black men to share and express, and even have emotional tears around just what we've gone through."

So for your audience, part of my sharing has started with being born and raised in a very tough community, Brooklyn, New York, which is, I mean, you would almost think it's a third-world country when it comes to survival around the drugs, the crime, the homicides, the dysfunctional families and homes, and just the toxicity of just communities like that to be born into that is a trauma of itself.

But then also to be born to a 13-year-old mother and a 21-year-old father. And you look at these two unhealthy individuals. So you have a girl who's still trying to find her way as a young girl in a neighborhood, and she becomes pregnant, and then all of a sudden her life spirals out of control to the point where her emotional stability, looking back, and even as a boy, seeing that I saw the damage that was caused to my mother by becoming pregnant too soon, how that impacted her expectations of her dreams of finishing school and whatever her future would have.

But I also saw the disappointment that was in my grandmother's face where her youngest daughter got pregnant. And again, most mothers would not even think that a child that age would get pregnant. And then, you have my father, 21 years old, had his own issues coming out of the south, coming into New York City, and his trauma was rooted around never fully dealing with the fact that he lost his mother at the age of 12. He lost his own mother and so he couldn't adjust to that. So anything that he loved, it was always in him that I'd rather hurt it and harm it than I let it leave me.

The other thing that I learned [inaudible 00:14:46] about my father through his mental challenges was that he ended up losing his left hand in a very tragic child accident. He lost his hand. So he was faced with these different challenges.

So looking back and saw the love of anger and how he handled himself and my mother, it was one of those marriages, man that was born into violence and all of that. So a long story short, so my mother ended up attempting suicide. At the age of 26, 27, she jumped off the housing building where we lived. She went up to the roof, jumped six stories off the building to try to kill herself. So as we are talking about mental health, you're looking at a situation where a little boy like myself, born to a 13-year-old mother, and then almost 10 years later, the same boy is looking at this mother who is now looking to end her life. And I'm watching my mother jump off this building.

Then I'm watching a father who's supposed to be a hero to his son. I'm watching everything negative that he was exposing me to and putting me around from the domestic violence to the street crime life, the drugs, the shootouts, the pool halls, gambling halls, and all these things that he put me around.

So all this stuff that I was experiencing, my brother, back then, I didn't know it, but I realized as I got older that what I was sharing with the audience there in Austin was that my mental challenges and my mental state was all messed up back then, but I didn't fully understand it. I couldn't really process it and didn't know it. So there's a thing in mental health called the residual impact of mental health.

The residual impact of mental health is not the person per se, going through so much of the mental challenges. But I was the byproduct of everything I was witnessing and saying and not knowing how much that was having an impact on my stability and my quality of life because, again, I wasn't directly going through it, but I was being impacted by what I was saying and what I was around.

And clearly looking back, I saw the depression that I was going through. I saw the isolation. I saw the hopelessness. I saw the lack of confidence, the lack of belief in myself, the vulnerability, the lack of feeling secure around the people that are supposed to protect you. So I saw all of this and been through all of this. So my lived experience has been that my mental health back then was not the best looking back then.

So as I was going through my journey, I was noticing how not processing and recognizing and realizing that I was being challenged with mental health, how it was impacted me along the way. As a student, as good of a student I was, I could not really absorb that because I was dealing with the mental health challenges, becoming a teenage dad coming out of high school, and the challenges that that was having on me, my aspirations around basketball, striving and dreaming, wanting to be a NBA player and go to college and get my law degree.

All that success and all that stuff that was in front of me was all being hampered and challenged around and traumatized around the very things that I was experiencing in the mental state that I was in. So it took me a long time to realize how messed up I was back then and the damages that mental health was causing on me and then what I had to do to get through that and fight through it so that I can get in a better peaceful state of mind and in my mental state in terms of where I'm at.

So I had to fight through a lot of that. I didn't have counseling, my brother. I didn't have therapy. And so I had to just fight through these things myself. So again, that's just been my journey and my experiences, my lived experiences with my parents, my community, being a teenage dad, and just going through that and then how I've been able to just fight through that.

Ike Evans: When it comes to Black men, sometimes what comes across to me is the expectations that we put on ourselves to be strong. Often not just out of pride, but for the sake of other people. But that leads me to a question. Is it a somewhat rhetorical question? Is it okay for Black men to not be okay?

Thabiti Boone: Let me...

Ike Evans: Sure.

Thabiti Boone: I want to say something to you, and you raised a issue. This whole notion of strength. Now, here's the thing. So when you say... And he teaches these Black men to be strong. Now the question becomes, if we are not strong, what's the opposite of strength? If it's weakness and not having the wherewithal to be able to fight through and toughen up a little bit to survive. And if we don't have some of that, then do you think we fall by the wayside? That puts us deeper into mental challenges, that leads into the depression and the suicide and the hopelessness, and not feeling that if we are not strong enough, our weakness is going to succumb to the pressures of the things that around us that's causing.

That would be a rhetorical question to you because in my experience, I had to not necessarily suck it up, but say, you know what, I got to pull myself together. I got to strengthen myself. Because when you look around the things that's supposed to strengthen us in our weakness, in our vulnerability, it's just not there. It's not there. So we have to put on this facade, if you will, to sabotage some of that pain by saying, "You know what? If I don't suck it up, it's going to destroy me." And I've seen that happen to so many people. We've seen that happen in our society among Black men that if... It's this whole delicacy around, "Can we have a little bit of strength to push us through, but not so much strength where it sabotages how we feel, and then we put it to the wayside?"

Ike Evans: Right, yeah.

Thabiti Boone: Is it okay to not be okay? Yes. We have to be able to say it's okay to not be okay because what happens among Black men, we don't have spaces where it's okay. And then it acts itself out with a lot of self-harming that could be physical, mental, spiritual, social, emotional, or it affects us in not being okay and now not being okay in ourselves.

We can't seem to have the appropriate healthy relationships around others. So now hurt people end up hurting others. So now we are not okay. We don't have space to be okay. Now we say to everybody else, "You are not going to be okay because I'm not okay." And that keeps this whole vicious cycle going. That's another thing I had to learn. I didn't realize that my lack of being okay, and it's okay to not be okay and to be strong was hurting so many people.

I couldn't understand why I was hurting the people that loved me, the people that cared about me, the people that was there for me, people who didn't do anything wrong against me. But I was intentionally finding ways to hurt somebody because I'm hurt and on ways of making people lives unokay.

But again, that was one of those things I had to process and learn that that's not a good thing to do. And it starts with, it is okay to not be okay. And when you find that space and say, "Okay, it's okay. It's okay, you're not okay." Now, that personality and emotion does not harm other people that you're around. Now, what they notice is through my vulnerability and openness is he's not okay. He's letting us know he's not okay. So now it opens up the process of relationships to now support that how do I become okay. Is that making sense?

Ike Evans: Oh, absolutely. Yeah, absolutely. It's kind of an art. It's kind of an art being just as strong as you need to be when you need to be being just as weak as you need to be, when you need to be, and not-

Thabiti Boone: You know what I learned? I learned my triggers. That's definitely thing about mental health. We have to learn our triggers. I know sometimes through therapy and counseling, we get those recommendation feedback, but I've learned how to know when my triggers are about to happen. I know when my triggers are occurring. So I know how to process myself when I identify those triggers.

Ike Evans: Yeah, triggers. That's always a big part of it. It's like life being the way it is, you cannot avoid being triggered sometimes. Or one of my triggers, just putting a bit of my own stuff into the conversation. One of my big triggers is just disrespect in general, just being talked down to. And maybe it's the kind of thing because I'm of a certain age now where I'm even more sensitive to it than I was because I feel like there's a level of experience that I've accumulated. And so being talked to, I'm still young. It's just one of my things.

It can be a long process getting someone to the point where they recognize that for what it is. I don't know. Do you have anything like that where specific triggers that you know to be on top of?

Thabiti Boone:

Yeah. As you mentioned that, here's my take on it, because I have the same similar experiences where if someone don't validate me a certain way, as you mentioned speaking down to me or very condescending, I tend to lash out. Now, here's the lashing, and here's going back to the mental health piece. So the lashing is at the person. So now I get disconnected from the person. Now I'm in isolation. Now I'm in distrust. But here's the other thing, and I'm not sure if you go through it yourself, but then I used to beat myself up by saying it's something in me that I did wrong that caused a person to talk to me that way and treat me that way.

So now my mental state and mental health comes in and says, "Well, it's you. You're negative, you're negative. It's you. You're not likable, it's you." You're not worthy of respect. So I get into all these negative connotations and definitions about myself, but again, I had to process and say I got to disconnect from that. I am not causing the disrespect as you mentioned from individuals that may talk to me a certain way.

Now, what I do is through my strength of who I am, my own self validation and affirming of what I stand for, my values, that comes out in two ways. One, it comes out and now I have a right to share, as you mentioned to the individual. This is how you're making me feel so that they're aware of that. And then I go through my reaction and boundaries of saying, "I'm going to stand my ground, whether it takes away the relationship or the individual or whatever's triggering that. I'm going to hold my ground and hold my boundaries, and hold self-respect, and make sure that my validation gets honored first with it myself and then the others.

And then the other thing I had to learn was how do I make sure I'm having myself in a position of my personality and character and spiritual state that I walk in a way that I demand and command respect, that somebody says, "No way. I will talk to this person other than what I see in that person." I work hard to make sure I'm in that position to make sure that whatever I don't want to receive spiritually within me, I'm not going to have it in me. And if I do do it, and if I'm not causing it, I speak out on it and I set my boundaries and I make sure I deal with it properly, and making sure that I don't sacrifice myself for the sake of someone else and how they treat me.

Ike Evans:

Okay. So, Thabiti, you are an athlete, and in particular, basketball is a pretty big part of your life. And in fact, it's a venue for a lot of the mentoring of Black men that you do. So I was just wondering if you could say a little bit about, for example, the work that you do for the New York Knicks and just how basketball enters into it all.



Thabiti Boone:

Yeah, I appreciate you sharing that. I've been around basketball since I was eight years old. So growing up in the Irving community, basketball is just around you. So when I picked up the ball at eight, here's again, if you don't mind, and this will lead into the New York Knicks and what I do. So here's what a lot of people don't realize and don't see. What a lot of people don't realize, my brothers, that sports, particularly basketball for me, became the counselor, became the counseling, became a therapist, became the environment by which I can actually find myself, find a big piece of my purpose and who I am, and to help balance out all the things that I was going through.

So basketball became a huge part of me surviving through the different experiences that I've had, but it also became a very soothing mental foundation for me. So leading all the way up into the New York Knicks my work, not just around how do we take the brand of an NBA and a professional sports team, and how do you just engage with the fans and selling a product, selling tickets and things like that, and you just teaching the love of the game.

But for me, in my work, it has been a constant connection around how do I take who I am through basketball and the popularity and environment of basketball and what sports teaches us even from a mental state. And how do I apply that into the men, the young men, the fathers, particularly the Black community that I'm around? How do I apply that to make sure that I'm using as a healing tool, a mental health tool to help empower Black men, Black boys, the Black community through it?

I've been very, very successful with it. We have mentoring programs. We have special initiative initiatives that focuses on Black fathers, Black men. We have special initiatives that goes into and target our challenging urban communities where it's poverty, lack of resources, services, the drugs, the crime, and homicides. So when I go into those communities, what they get from me, my brother is not just an athlete and someone around professional sports, but they getting someone that's humanizing them and valuing them and giving them a sense of hope and value in themselves in a mental foundation and comforting them through basketball.

So that's what they getting from me. So the basketball is like, "You're doing good, you're doing well. Dad, you're great, mom, you're great." To the kid, you're great. Going into the community when they can see someone like them who have become successful to come back to them. You can see in they eyes, they light up. Their spirit gets energized. They get a sense of hope in themselves. They get a sense of, "Hey, I can get through things. I'm not as bad as what things seem to be. Life is not as bleak. I can achieve, I can strive." So that's what basketball and my work through the New York Knicks is being able to provide. Can I give you one quick example of?

Ike Evans:

Sure, sure.

Thabiti Boone:

So tomorrow I'm going to be visiting a fourth grade class. One of their classmates, a young girl about two months ago, back in April, May was tragically murdered. So of course you know when a fourth grade, 12-year-old kid, 11-year-old kid gets murdered, the impact of that goes into the school, it goes into the classroom. And so those kids have been traumatized.

One day, she's your student, she's your best friend, she's in your class. The next day, she's been tragically murdered. She's not there. So how do you process that? So the school reached out to me. So tomorrow I'm going to go to visit these students, and as a basketball player, someone represented New York Knicks. I'm going to bring some gifts and spend time with them to lift up their morale and lift up their sense of who they are and purpose and help them still process this tragedy through that.

So when I got the call from the principal, she said, "The excitement is so high from these kids tomorrow 'cause they think that people have forgotten about them." So, again, through basketball and through who I am, I'm going to use basketball and again, who I am in my lived experiences and to go and not just bring joy and gifts but also to have a nice conversation with them. How do they process tragedy? How do they process and know that they still have a life to live and they are achieving young students and they still have so much to live for?

How do they utilize the memory, their classmate who's no longer with them? How do they take that spirit and energy to move on to greater things and in their future? But also the biggest lesson is that it's okay to not be okay as students. It's okay to miss your classmate. It's okay to feel pain and the loss. And so again, so we are going to have that conversation, and again, using basketball as a vehicle and tool and opportunity to do that. So I just wanted to share with you and your audience of this, how do we just always use moments to strengthen and process mental health around one another?

If there's one wish that I have as us as Black men, including you and I, if we could spend more time in the interest of looking out and after one another that would do so much for our mental foundation, our mental state, our mental health, and who we are as Black men in this country. We have so much fighting against us. The last thing we need as Black men is to be against one another. So my greatest wish, my brother in this conversation as a lasting takeaway as Black men, let's be there for one another. We are not the enemies of each other.

Ike Evans:

Yeah. Amen to that. All right, Thabiti, you take care. And thanks again.

Thabiti Boone:

Thanks for having me, my brother. Thank you so much.

Ike Evans:

One of the big takeaways for this episode is that effective mental health advocacy is largely about going to the places where people are, meeting them where they're at, whether that be the barbershop, the church, or the basketball court. Thabiti is a really excellent example of how you can make a large change

in the world just by attending to your own particular corner of it. He already happened to be plugged into the world of sports, and in becoming a mental health advocate, he was able to bring a nice size fraction of that world along with him. And that holds important lessons for all of us.

That does it for this episode. We are so glad that you could join us. Production assistance by Kate Rooney, Darryl Wiggins, and Anna Harris. Just as taking care of ourselves enhances our ability to help others, so it is that by helping others, we enhance our own resilience. I want to hear from you. Leave us a review and subscribe to us on the podcast app of your choice. You can find us on Apple Podcasts, Google Play Music, Spotify, TuneIn among others. And taking us out now is Anna's Good Vibes by our friend Anna Harris. Thanks for joining us.