

## Don't Talk to Me

DEREK

With all this instant messaging, texting and tweeting going on, there's nothing deep—no in depth conversations... people are breaking up on texts, arguing on texts. This microwave society needs to get back to the basics and fundamentals. Let's sit and talk to each other. Court a woman. And blacks don't want to go to counseling—it says, "I admit that I'm weak and I need help—I have issues."

CORY

*(Throws down his fishing rod)*

A lot of men have no relationships or friends they can talk to except at bars or somewhere talking about sports.

RICO

When we go to bars, it's like, this is our spot. We don't just go to get drunk and BS; we ain't that dumb. We talk about sports and everything just like women, and give each other advice. It's like our counseling session over a pitcher of beer, because we don't wanna be at home.

### **The Way Men Socialize**

**Dr. Smith:** There's a societal conception that attacks our masculinity if we're talking about something deep, as if you're not really a man if you're sharing what's on your heart.

For men to connect with women, there has to be something going on other than just talking. We could be talking while working on a car, or at a sporting event.

### SPENCER

It doesn't do any good to go seek mental health. My healing process was a lot of crying while dealing with the things my mom allowed me to see in her relationship with my dad for 30 years.

### TERRENCE

I'm vocal with my feelings and understand things that happened in the past. I talked about it for comfort before; now it's about change.

### RICO

We as men can all do this—talk... We all need therapy and counseling, but we try to be so hard like we pimps and gangstas, but women run this world, trust me. When we get hurt, we don't know to express it so we act out, and try to suppress our anger. We're born to be protectors and don't wanna seem weak when a woman breaks our heart.

When we get hurt, we don't know to express it so we act out, and try to suppress our anger.

We're private people and don't want anyone in our business. But it's not a bad thing. We might need to deal with issues from when we were raised that affect our relationships as adults.

### JOHN

*(Takes a sip from his beer bottle)*

When you go to a therapist, they want to know your history, so they can determine what's making you the way you are today. But for us it's that everything right now is like, "You're an ass—, or you're a b—"... But were you molested? Did you have issues with one of your parents not being there? Realize that just as you grow and learn, our parents were growing and learning as they raised us.

### DJ

People should be open to counseling—be open to communicate. I dated a girl and we went to counseling. The therapist gave us tools to

help us support each other. You want to marry someone and you're not willing to understand how they were raised? Do they have trust issues, mental issues? Other issues from the past? That's why I can't get with Steve Harvey<sup>12</sup> because he's not looking deep into the situations of why we act the way we do.

It causes problems in marriage if your mate was raised differently; that's why you gotta be open to the counseling, so you can look deeper, and your business stays in the household. You don't seek nonprofessionals—it leads to gossiping.

### ♠ Therapy ♠

**Dr. Utley:** These guys raise salient points about the importance of counseling. Counseling is not just for couple relationships but also for families. There's nothing about becoming a parent that automatically makes you a good one. People should also be more open to family counseling and parenting classes to help rear the kind of kids they want to see. For some blacks, counseling is anathema because they attend churches that encourage them to pray about their problems and have faith without seeking professional help. Also, many counselors are white, and lots of people of color are hesitant to tell all their business to a white stranger. Besides, there are cultural differences that sometimes make white counselors ineffective.

**Jack A. Daniels:** If your mind's not right, and you want to change your life, change your mind. How else can you get ahead? You can't always walk and talk your way through it.

**Melisa:** TV is making it easier for African Americans to get counseling or coaching and takes some stigma off of pursuing it. We're getting better at seeing there's not something wrong with

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<sup>12</sup> Refers to Steve Harvey's book *Act Like a Lady, Think Like a Man*.

us. A lot of men come to my practice that just want someone to talk to.

**Dr. Page:** Black men don't go to therapy, and we're probably wrong. But we don't think we're crazy, so we're not going. We'll talk to a friend before we go to a licensed therapist.

A lot of people use their friends as a sounding board for their issues, but you have to pay attention to the personality of the friend you confide in. It's a good idea to have all kinds of friends. You need friends that will keep it real and keep it "100" with you, as well as friends who will be there for you unconditionally. If you're talking to someone who knows you well, you can ask "What do you think I'm doing wrong? How can I improve on this behavior?" Be ready for an honest answer: "Your temper is too quick." You want to talk to people who will keep you grounded. You want to come to common ground.

If you want to go to counseling and you don't want to talk to a stranger, you can go to your pastor—that's acceptable in the black community. The key is, who do you trust—a stranger, who is more objective, or your pastor? It's your choice.

### TOMMY

*(Rubbing his beard)*

When I have to make decisions or something is bothering me, I deal with it on my own. I deal with everything myself. If I'm dating someone at the time, I'll talk to them about what's going on. I say things to get them off my chest, but I don't rely on anyone where I can say, "What do you think about this?" No matter what situation I'm going through, even if I talk to someone else about it, I've pretty much decided on my own how I will handle it. I may even call a professional—like a lawyer—to get their expertise, but I'll

make my own calculated decisions, and I do so at my own pace. I'm not vindictive—I take my time with things like that.

## ♙ Put Your Hands Up ♚

**Jack A. Daniels:** It's extremely hard being a man. We don't like to talk about it, but it's there. "I know I'm where I'm supposed to be, but I just can't get there because of \_\_\_\_\_." I want more but I can't get more. That adds stress to our lives. When we have children out of wedlock, we get frustrated with responsibility, which adds a degree of denial and blame, which can turn into anger and depression.

We've been reared with a sense of hardness. We don't acknowledge it; we just keep going. High blood pressure, alcoholism, substance abuse—these are some of the results when we numb ourselves from the pain of being present in a place where we don't want to be. A lot of people don't understand the moodiness or roller coaster. You can get help to regulate those levels of moodiness, but because of our pride and ego, we won't raise our hands for help. You know those old cop movies where the cop catches a guy and says, "Freeze! Stick 'em up!"? You have to say "I surrender." Surrendering is the most vulnerable position because you've got your arms in air, and everything is exposed—your chest, heart, and vital organs. We're afraid of that vulnerability; admitting it is seen as a sign of weakness.

People walk around thinking that emotional wellness and health are not a priority, but we have to dispel those stigmas and stereotypes in the black community. It's okay to be vulnerable and say you don't have all the answers, or that you don't know all the strategies. Simply say you don't know. What you don't know can hurt you so much more than what you do know.

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Ladies, here's how you can help a man who's feeling depressed or having some emotional stress in his life:

1. Get him to keep a journal or write things down somewhere.
2. Encourage him to pick up a new hobby or resume an activity he enjoys. Men communicate better during activities—we don't sit down on the couch, cross our legs and talk. We have to be doing something before we will talk (driving, basketball, etc.). You can do it with him if you want him to talk to you, or he can do it alone in his own space to process things.
3. Don't be so quick to get an answer from him. Men process things slower than women.
4. Make subtle suggestions about being around other men (for example, at sports bars or sporting events) so he'll be more comfortable talking things out or venting.

### CORY

Social services are usually dedicated to women and single mothers. At my job, we have the best comprehensive programs for men in Newark. Men are receiving attention and developmental training in our program. These men have been beaten up by life; many of them were incarcerated, separated from their family, or had no parents. These are the kind of issues that hold us back.

Our community is dealing with the massive issue of abandonment; 70 percent of the men are gone<sup>13</sup> because of abandonment or incarceration.

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<sup>13</sup> Absent from black households.

If you have limited education and experience, you can't get a job. It's difficult to achieve anything with just a high school diploma, so we offer GED programs and vocational training in construction, landscaping, and other skills, or they can go to college. It's a full-service menu that men can participate in and enhance their skills as fathers, men in the household, and their families.

No man is an island. This is a brotherhood; a place where men can have conversation and unload thoughts on what's on their minds. Seldom can these men freely express themselves, so when they come to this program, it's like getting a therapy session.

Take this for example: A 37-year-old man is in our program, and he has no job. He's been on his own since age 12; his foster father sexually abused him, and he's been hustling since age 17. He said he's been involved with a 45-year-old woman now for six months. He says loves her and is faithful to her. Then he mentioned that "other women support me," so I questioned whether he was really faithful. I said, "Did she give you lunch money today?" and that triggered an angry response. I had to calm him down and get him to see that he's looking at his girlfriend as if she's his mom in a way.

### **Picking a Mate like Your Parent**

**Melisa Alaba:** Having real trust with each other in relationships is a big issue. Some people either knowingly or unknowingly label their partner as their parent (like the man that Cory mentioned); they label something as a negative even if they didn't see it. This often happens when a behavior from their partner triggers something their parent used to do when they were a kid. Or, they take one situation and label it based on their past personal experience. Even after the offending person says "I'm sorry," the other person can't accept it. There's too much quick judgment, unforgiveness and unwillingness to see a situation differently.

## CORY

Every 12 weeks, we run an eight-week program. During orientation, we test their commitment. Does the applicant stay for the full day, or have excuses on why they are late or have to leave early? We also do one-on-one interviews before placing them in jobs. Funders don't care about the sob stories. If the person we place isn't committed to the job, it makes us look bad.

In the program, we cover employment skills. We do an educational assessment of reading and math levels, and participants improve two grade levels while they're with us. We have doctors, life coaches, and job coaches do assessments and career inventories. We find out who they live with, their criminal history, and address health issues.

We also teach basic life skills—simple things like when to go to bed and when to wake up. They don't have the skills to know, like scheduling their transportation to allot time to get to work, or call their supervisor to let them know if they are running late. We talk about parental responsibility and relationships—how do you select a girlfriend or a wife? What characteristics, background and upbringing should you look for in a mate? They don't think about it until it's too late... when a child is conceived and they feel stuck.

We have attorneys that can petition the court when there's an unrealistic child support order, and get the court to acknowledge their bills and income and grant temporary leniency while he is at new job to wait until his wage increases. They get discouraged by the mounting child support debt, and then if the child's mother says, "You can't see your kid because you didn't pay," it becomes a vicious cycle. We also offer counseling about how they can work together to get along for the sake of their child.

I tell these guys that you don't have to be in love with your children's mother to have love for her. We have a responsibility to our kids. I also tell them that if you're the smartest guy in your crew, then you have a problem because you

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then you have a problem.**



don't have anyone to guide you, mold you, or tell you when you're messing up.

## **Being a R.E.A.L. Man**

**Zeke:** I can tell what kind of man you are from the kind of life you lead.

Are you prepared to change your circle to become healthier for yourself? Read some books and get some knowledge. Put yourself in a core of people who are healthy and knowledgeable. Think ahead of time and be strategic about what you want, and how many kids you want to have.

If you need a place to grab wisdom and get clarity, seek out a small group at church or a men's retreat. You can form a group where you can have prayer and get accountability. If you're not gonna live what you say, your accountability partners will kick in, and help bring you back to your focus. You need to a place to go where you can be R.E.A.L.<sup>14</sup>

R - Reject Passivity

E - Engage with God

A - Accept Responsibility

L - Lead Courageously

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<sup>14</sup> R.E.A.L. is from Dave Wilson, Co-Founder of Kensington Community Church in Troy, Michigan, and the long-time chaplain of the NFL Detroit Lions.