

- Duff McKagan:* When I was in my thirties and forties I'm like, "Come on. Depression, just get out of the dumps. Let's go running," and it's not that. It is not that.
- Lily Cornell Silver:* Hi, and welcome back to *Mind Wide Open*, my mental health focus interview series. Today I am talking to Duff McKagan, who is best known for being the bassist of the band Guns 'n' Roses. He is also an author, journalist, advocate, and activist and someone who's a really strong example of speaking openly about his struggles with addiction and mental health. I got so much out of doing this interview, and I hope that you guys do as well. Thank you so much for tuning in.
- Hi, Duff.
- Duff McKagan:* Hi.
- Lily Cornell Silver:* How are you?
- Duff McKagan:* I'm good. You guys see Lily's lighting? Or is that just – that's just youth, right? Is that just youth?
- Lily Cornell Silver:* It's my glow. It's great to see you.
- Duff McKagan:* You too.
- Lily Cornell Silver:* How are you doing today?
- Duff McKagan:* I'm good. I actually just woke up maybe one hour ago.
- Lily Cornell Silver:* So you're fresh. I love it.
- Duff McKagan:* Yeah. I'm coffee'd up.
- Lily Cornell Silver:* Perfect. So I'd love to start just by talking about our similar experiences growing up in Seattle. You grew up in a big family with lots of siblings, and you shared with me that you had your first panic attack as a teenager. Can you recount that experience of your first panic attack?
- Duff McKagan:* I can recount that, yeah. I grew up in Seattle, the last of eight kids, and at 16 I was still living at my mom's. I went to take a shower before going to school and just like any other day, but suddenly the

floor dropped three feet, and I thought something happened to the house, and suddenly I couldn't breathe and I was sweating in the shower, and I remember just pushing the shower door open, crawling out on the floor, putting a towel on, and yelling for my mom. She took me to the ER, up at Group Health, a hospital here in – took me to the emergency room. They realized nothing was wrong. I think they did an EKG and whatever, and then they sent me over to this therapist office, and he kind of took out a chalkboard and drew a schematic of what was happening and says, "It's a panic attack." They gave me valium. It ran in my family, so my brothers and sisters had this, but my brothers are so much older it's just not cool – it wasn't cool to talk about. It wasn't – in my case it wasn't manly to talk about. You dealt with it. So a friend of mine when I was 18 had read an article or a book where she told me that – she informed me that millions of people have these things that could happen. That was the first time I knew anyone else had panic attacks, so that kind of gave me a bit of hope. I didn't feel alone. I discovered what happens with all of us as human beings. You discover ways to cope, and I found that alcohol was a great coping mechanism for me, so I spent the next 12, 13 years with my coping mechanism of a lot of alcohol and drugs.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* So as we know, addiction and mental health are intrinsically intertwined, and you can't really talk about one without talking about the other, and my dad talked about publicly how he struggled with addiction as a form of self-medication for mental health issues. Could you speak a little bit more to your experience with self-medicating for mental health issues?

*Duff McKagan:* Yeah, what happens is you get into this – because with alcohol, there's so much sugar in alcohol, and with a guy like myself and I think with your dad as well you can't just do a little, 'cause a little doesn't work after awhile, so you gotta do more to get that same feeling. And so in my case, I got up to two half-gallons of vodka a day, a full gallon of vodka a day, and there's so much sugar in that, and then I was doing cocaine too so I could drink longer. Cocaine's not good for panic attacks.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* I can't even imagine.

*Duff McKagan:* It's the opposite of good for panic attacks. So I would take pills as well to bring me down. Too much cocaine, the alcohol's not working, so mix alcohol, pills, cocaine, and then still function in your

band, and I could do all that stuff and function and play...until I couldn't. At about 28 and 29 it started to come up. My hair started to fall out. I'd break off. I started to get – my body was starting to show it, like huge boils and my feet would crack when I'd walk. The bottom of my feet would crack. My body was drying out. At 30 I just moved back to Seattle, got the house in Seattle, kind of my dream scenario. I had moved to LA to be in the band and then was able to buy this house that I'm still in, the house I'm in right now.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* Oh wow.

*Duff McKagan:* Yeah. And my pancreas burst from drinking too much in this house. My friend took me out to Northwest. They said, "How much does he drink? What else does he do?" He told them everything, so they had to get me off of alcohol with Librium in my other arm. So, I'm not having a panic attack. I'm in so much pain. I'm on Librium, which is like massive doses of valium. I'm on morphine for the pain, and they're weaning me off the alcohol, and I was in there for about 14 days. So I was sober when I got out of the hospital, and they had a rehab for me to go to, and I was really – I'd seen some things in the hospital, my mom coming in. She had Parkinson's. She was in a wheelchair. I'm the last of eight kids. I should be taking care of her, not the other way around. That really struck me. But here I was out of the hospital. How am I gonna deal with panic attacks now without alcohol?

*Lily Cornell Silver:* And were you off any anti-anxiety or antidepressants at that time as well?

*Duff McKagan:* I never took antidepressants.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* You never did? Okay.

*Duff McKagan:* Yeah, so there began that journey of a doctor – so the problem was how am I gonna deal with panic attacks? So they tried Paxil on me, which wasn't good for me, just very sluggish. I found – in my case I found I had to go back to LA. Even getting on a plane, this metal tube – I was at a point I couldn't take elevators, anything that you were stuck inside of, 'cause that would trigger my panic attacks for whatever reason. I believe that it was fate that took me to this dojo that I'm still – that I still practice a martial art called Ukidokan. It looks like kickboxing, but there's a spiritual side of it, meditation

side, that I saw in the sensei when I first went into the dojo. I saw it in his eyes, the calm, and I just basically followed him around for the next couple of years doing what he told me to do. So I found a place in meditation where I could go to a safe place, that I could deal with panic attacks, and it got – my place of strength got stronger than my panic attacks. But even I still had Xanax in my backpack, just in case, and just knowing I had that was always a great backup. So I was 30 when my pancreas burst. I had ten and a half years of sobriety. I had these pills. I was in Europe with Velvet Revolver. I wasn't having a panic attack. I was under a lot of stress, so I took one of the pills for stress. So with this kind of combination of alcoholism and having these pills, what people gotta be careful of I'm here to tell you is don't start taking those pills for another reason, because – especially if you have alcoholism in your past, because I suddenly awoke myself to, "Oh, this is how I take care of stress," and I was up to 20 of those pills a day within 5 days, enough to kill anybody else. But because you have this alcoholism and it's progressive, I picked up where I would've been if I kept drinking or kept using.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* And I've never heard that term used to describe addiction. What does progressive mean in that context?

*Duff McKagan:* I moved from a pint of vodka to a fifth of vodka to a half-gallon of vodka to two half-gallons of vodka at the end, so my – just because I stopped doesn't mean my body didn't still keep going. It went up to a bottle – a gallon and a half of vodka. Without me knowing it, it went up to – so when I picked up these pills again, going from one pill on a Wednesday to 20 by the following Monday my body was like, "I need a lot more than one," and so I discovered what progressive disease meant in that case.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* Yeah, clearly.

*Duff McKagan:* Yeah. And I had to get off those things, and there was a lot of shame involved in that, like telling my wife. I had two little girls at the time. Coming home and kicking these pills, it was fucking awful, and then panic attacks starting coming again after I got off these pills, because I think a lot of things can trigger my panic attacks, and I figured out one of them was shame, disappointment in myself. I'd done martial arts. I was a black belt in this martial art. People come to me for help, and I'm the one that's on his knees,

and I think for me in my life I believe I've gone through certain things just to help others, and I think that was one of them.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* What was that process like, telling Susan?

*Duff McKagan:* It wasn't cool. So I was in Europe. I came back here to this house in Seattle. It's 85 degrees out in Seattle, and you know what that feels like. It feels like 95 anywhere.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* Yeah, it's like the desert.

*Duff McKagan:* Yeah. And they were out in the backyard playing. I'm trying to kick this stuff cold turkey. I'm up in my bedroom with two coats on, sick as a dog, watching them play, and I should be playing with them. I just got back from Europe, and I said I was sick, I was tired, blah, blah, blah, but just lying. And she came back up inside to the bedroom and I was throwing up in the toilet, and she goes, "What is wrong?" and I had to tell her. I said, "I'm kicking drugs," and she looked at me like I was a Martian. She goes, "What do you mean?" and I said – I told her everything, and I called a friend. He came to pick me up and took me to an NA meeting, and I'm wearing two coats. It's 85 out. In the meeting it's like 105, 'cause there's no A/C in this meeting, and some guy – some friend asks, "What's your friend coming off of?" like I wasn't there. He said, "He's coming off of Xanax." "Yeah, how much?" "Twenty milligrams a day." "How's he coming off of this?" "Well he's cold turkey." And the guy said, "He can't do that. He can have a seizure," so then I have that, so I had to go to-

*Lily Cornell Silver:* Yeah. That's all you need to hear to have a panic attack.

*Duff McKagan:* Right. Yeah. So I went to a doctor – at that point I went to a doctor, and we did it right. But yeah, that shame held – it held for awhile. I still probably have pieces of it in me still, and my wife has been nothing more than supportive and gracious about the whole thing. She understands. This happens to you guys. Flash forward a few years, my wife and I – I travel so much in my life, and as the girls got older Susan could come with me for longer periods of time and the girls would come out, and we were back in Seattle. Susan and I – everything's fine in my life. We went to the movies, a movie about Margaret Thatcher, nothing gnarly, and I was 50 years old. And we're sitting in the seats watching the movie, and again the chair dropped three feet. I thought there was an earthquake. So I

went to go – I braced myself, and I went to go look up at Susan, and she was right next to me. I didn't drop three feet. And I had – this time instead of a panic attack it was this extremely morose downward spiral, and that's when I realized that they said panic attacks are a symptom of depression. I was going into a full spiral depression, and it happened like that, Lily.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* In an instant, yeah.

*Duff McKagan:* In an instant. And she got me out of the theater. I still never finished that movie. She got me to the hospital. I'm sure people watching this – and I'm not sure what your experiences are, Lily, with that side of panic. If you haven't got it I hope you never do, but it is dealable. So I had a – I called that first one a depression attack, because they gave me something that night that really calmed me down. I didn't go on Wellbutrin or anything to kind of get me back up, 'cause I didn't wanna have a panic attack, and so you gotta – I gotta deal with that kind of drug-free. So I went back to my martial art – that one came and it went. It went about 36 hours. But suddenly again your mind, your being is awoken to what's capable – what can happen to you, and-

*Lily Cornell Silver:* Sure. I think it's so important to share that you have – that that's something you've experienced throughout your life from the age of 16 to in your 50s, because I think there can be this misconception that anxiety and depression and other mental health struggles are things that need to be overcome and eradicated, whereas the reality of it is you need to learn how to – they never disappear, but you learn tools to integrate it into your daily life and make it so that you can handle it as they come instead of it completely derailing you.

*Duff McKagan:* When was your – you deal with panic attacks, yeah?

*Lily Cornell Silver:* Yeah.

*Duff McKagan:* And so how old were you?

*Lily Cornell Silver:* My first one – I mean I have a similar story as you in the shower at 16. My first panic attack I was 12 at an Indian restaurant in west Seattle. Nothing bad was happening. I had run anxious my whole life but had never had – there's a difference between anxiety attack and panic attack. And sitting there, curry's about to come. I re-

member the waiter was standing there looking at me, and then all of a sudden just had this feeling of kind of that hot flash, just this feeling in my head, and I turned and looked at the waiter and went, “I need to go to the hospital,” and he’s looking at me like, “Why are you telling me?” It’s just that moment, and, like you said, it happens in an instant. The bottom drops out, and I was like, “Something’s happening to me,” and immediately went, “I might have a brain tumor, or something’s wrong with my heart,” and the same experience. My mom took me to the hospital, got an EKG, and went through that whole process, and then had the explanation of it’s a chemical imbalance in your brain. As much as I made the doctor confirm for me, I didn’t have a brain tumor. There was nothing wrong with my heart.

*Duff McKagan:* Yeah, you brought up something. You run anxious. And there is a difference between a panic attack – I know people have said, “Oh, yeah. I get those all the time. I’m anxious.” And-

*Lily Cornell Silver:* Very different situation.

*Duff McKagan:* It’s a very different thing. I think if you run anxious probably the good news is you can find some meditation. I know that definitely works for me for anytime, ‘cause now I can go – if I needed to I can go to my safe place. If I was getting anxious in this conversation, I could just turn for ten seconds and be okay, so there’s ways to deal with that. But panic attacks, yeah, it is a – our fight-or-flight gets stuck on, so that happened at 50, that first depression attack I call it. Guns ‘n’ Roses, my band, we get back together, and the relationships are wonderful. We’re communicating as grown men, and it’s like this is perfect. I’m sober. I get to experience this thing again as a grown man and really appreciate what’s going on, appreciate how good Axl is, appreciate how good Slash is, how the rest of good musicians they all are. I really had this warmth for how many people are coming to see the band.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* And be present for it, yeah.

*Duff McKagan:* And present. Totally present. So we do this stadium tour of the US, and it goes – it was great. My point to this, saying all this, is that everything was going wonderful. So we get a – my body was pretty wasted, so we had a masseuse come over to the house, and so – a woman that we know, and I lay down face down. My head’s in the cradle. And suddenly that sliding down into the ground thing

happens. Again, nothing's going wrong in my life. The relationship with my wife is great. Kids are now getting ready for college, all this stuff. Everything's going great. I grab for the masseuse. I grab her arm. She's like, "Do you want me to stop there?" and I said no, and I'm crying, and I'm not ashamed to say it, because I think the stigma of men having to be tough it out is just such old – it's such an old-school thought process. So I'm in the massage chair. I slide down. This one is different. It's much more severe than that one I had in the movie theater. I got to a therapist. The therapist took one look at me and said, "You have to go to a psychiatrist right now." So they found me a psychiatrist that deals with people in sobriety as well, which is great. My fight-or-flight had got – I didn't have panic attacks or anything out on the road, so I didn't notice it, maybe because I can deal with them so well now. It'd been stuck on, and when it gets stuck on, that'll drive you into depression.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* Wow. Okay, yeah.

*Duff McKagan:* Yeah. So she took out a plastic brain and – which I loved. I love – show me. And she goes, "It just got stuck on. It does this, and it got stuck." I had to go to South America in four weeks, and I couldn't really function, and what I do is just try to – I get in my gym. That's how I deal. And even if I don't feel like it, I'll get on the elliptical and go hard, and I'll do 100 pushups, and I'll get out and run. And I wrote about this in one of the books that I wrote. I wrote about how you deal with this and how I deal with it. And I got to my dojo, and I'd had to be driven there. I couldn't wrap my own hands with the wraps. So my sensei – same sensei – he's like, "I got you. We're gonna fight through this thing." With the medication and with the help of many others – it takes a village – and I couldn't even talk about it at first, 'cause I couldn't talk. I just – and I'm like how am I gonna go play South America? Am I gonna let my band down? The first couple rehearsals were rough. I was like – I saw myself from above playing. My hands were working. Nobody else noticed. And Slash knew that I was – I told two of the people there I was going through this, and Slash has kind of been a safe person for me throughout this. I met him when I first moved to LA. I told him I have these panic attacks. He listened. He's like, "Okay, well, if it happens, we'll deal with it." I had plenty around him, and he knows just to talk to me about something – anything but the panic attack. He'll start talking about, "Hey, that first Led Zeppelin record, did you notice they went into a" – whatever.

- Lily Cornell Silver:* Yeah. How about the Mariners, huh? That's the classic Seattle one.
- Duff McKagan:* How about those Mariners? Yeah. So – but I got through that bout of depression. I'm still on a minute amount of this medication. I take it at night. It doesn't affect me in any way. I probably could go off of it, but I feel great. I'm not having panic attacks. I'm not having depression. I'm 56. I hope to keep it going this way.
- Lily Cornell Silver:* Yeah. Absolutely. It's interesting you talk about that looking down and watching yourself play. That's definitely that dissociative and depersonalization aspect of anxiety and depression. It's something that I've struggled with a lot, but grounding when it comes to that dissociation has been something that I've had to look into and get a lot of tools around. Did you find any grounding techniques that worked well for you?
- Duff McKagan:* Yes. And that's what I found when I went to – got into the martial arts. And it's a concentration meditation, which took me awhile to understand to get into. At first, even me, I was struggling. I wanted what my sensei had, which was this calm. You could tell. If you met him now, you would – the first thing you would recognize is he has something else. There's something else, and his mind and body and spirit are aligned to where anything can happen at any time and he's prepared. It doesn't matter, 'cause he's prepared.
- Lily Cornell Silver:* Yeah. Which is absolutely the ultimate goal.
- Duff McKagan:* Ultimate goal.
- Lily Cornell Silver:* Yeah, if you could achieve that – I mean yeah.
- Duff McKagan:* So I've been trying to get there. Just even if I get a semblance of what he has.
- Lily Cornell Silver:* Sure. And I know that we've talked about this. You and my dad toured together in the early '90s before you were sober, and then you bonded more when your daughter Mae was born what? Like two weeks after I was? In the past we've talked about times as well where you found that validation and solidarity in talking to my dad about mental health. What were some of the helpful conversations that you guys had about it?

*Duff McKagan:* We had so many similarities, and the biggest similarity we had was we had these mental issues. And some of the conversations were like, “Is it being from big families? What is this about?” But I had told him about this dojo to go to and I’d really found a way to deal with this, and your dad brought his boat over to my house. He’s like, “Is it cool if I keep my boat here so I can ski this summer?” Sorry, can you hear my dog?

*Lily Cornell Silver:* It’s all good. Ours is the same way.

*Duff McKagan:* Probably our conversations were no different than the conversation you and I are having right now. How do you deal with this, traveling so much? You know I’m always here if you need. That sort of thing. He had other stuff that I didn’t know, and his was depression. Then I remember having my depression attack and talking to him somewhere out there, like, “Dude, I had depression. I know what it is now. That’s terrifying.” He’s like, “Yeah.” There was kind of a group. There was a few other people I won’t name who’ve struggled with it. When I was in my thirties and forties I’m like, “Come on. Depression, just get out of the dumps. Let’s go running,” and it’s not that. It is not that.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* Yeah, there is such a misconception around that, that it’s – you have it in your personal power to just go outside and smile and it’ll be fine.

*Duff McKagan:* Yeah. I wish it was that easy, but it’s not. It’s chemical, like you said. You just – but my meditation – I built myself this little house, and I go down this trail to get to my house, and in my house I kind of have everything I need to deal with whatever. I kind of just say I have herbs in there. I have patience. I have strength. I have calm. I have everything I need. I’ve used it in my marriage. I’ve used it raising my kids. I’ve gone to my little place to put together a big-ass toy set. “Okay, you can do this.” But not to take it lightly, because, it’s saved my ass so many times, and you won’t find me getting angry if some dude comes up on me and calls me a punk or something. You won’t find me – that’s not a flashpoint for me, ‘cause I can go to my place in about two seconds and deal with that situation appropriately.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* What do you tell your daughters, Grace and Mae, about mental health and addiction?

*Duff McKagan:* I've told them everything at 15, when each of them turned 15. You guys are gonna drink. You're gonna try drugs. I'm not a dad who lives in this fantasy like, "Just don't do drugs." I know you're gonna do it, and you might like something, and like me, I liked something. You're gonna chase that first high or that first drink, because, sorry, you've got half of me in you, and where that's gonna take you is some pretty – it's gonna take you to the ER at Northwest Hospital at 30 years of age with a busted organ, and it's not cool, so just talk to me as you're going through this journey and I'll be your consigliere. So I think both of them are fine when it comes to that.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* Cool. And I'm sure having an example in you of someone who talks about it so openly can only be helpful. You're so open with them, but you're also open to the public, which I think is a really special and amazing thing, and in your books and columns and interviews you're a vocal advocate and activist, and it's super important for me to have people like you that are public figures in the series who are willing to be open and honest.

*Duff McKagan:* You know what's funny? My boat just floated away.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* As we were saying that? Oh god. Oh, Duff.

*Duff McKagan:* Yeah, so I think I have to go.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* Yes, understood.

*Duff McKagan:* Susan just came and wrote it down on a pad. "The boat just floated away."

*Lily Cornell Silver:* That's so funny. Thank you so much for being here, Duff. It means the world to me to have you here.

*Duff McKagan:* Lily, I'm very proud of you, and this is a great way for you to deal with this. I'm proud of you for putting yourself out there. I just – by you doing this, I know you're gonna be okay, because you're dealing with it front-on, and I didn't have the tools you have, so good on you, and you know I'm always here for you, and people can get ahold of me about this through 320 or Change Direction. I do a couple things through Propeller.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* Perfect. Thank you, Duff.

*Duff McKagan:* Cool. All right.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* Go get your boat.

*Duff McKagan:* I'm gonna get my boat. Okay, you guys, I gotta go. I gotta go.

*[End of Audio]*