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*[Music playing]*

*Lily Cornell Silver:* I'm Lily Cornell Silver and welcome to *Mind Wide Open*, my mental health focused interview series. In honor of September being suicide prevention awareness month, today I am talking to singer-songwriter Louis Knight. Louis placed in the top seven of the 2020 season of *American Idol*, on which he sang his song "Change," which is about the suicide of a close friend of his. Louis has partnered with the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention and speaks to the importance of vulnerability and accessibility for resources, especially for young and male-identifying people. Thank you so much for watching and I hope you enjoy.

Hi, Louis.

*Louis Knight:* Hi.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* Thank you so much for being here.

*Louis Knight:* Of course. Thank you for having me. How are you doing?

*Lily Cornell Silver:* I'm good. I'm good. I'm a little rushed today, but it's good. It's good. I would love to start just by talking about you were obviously recently on *American Idol*. Congratulations.

*Louis Knight:* Thank you.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* You auditioned with your song "Change," which is about the death of a friend to suicide. Could you tell us just a little bit about that song, what that meant to you, what the writing process was like?

*Louis Knight:* One of my brother and I's best friends, Russell, he was one of our first friends when we, when my family moved to the States, and he had never struggled before. It came on in a flash, and we found out that he was suffering but not to the extent. So we all tried to be there, and then within a, like a month and a half, two months, he took his own life. Your whole world completely just stops, and I

mean that was a really difficult time to kind of go through that and try to be there for his family and try to kind of be there for each other. I mean you just don't look at anyone the same way after. You don't look at the world in the same way in any shape or form after something like that.

I tried to write about it for a while, for a long time, and I couldn't – it just wouldn't really come out, I guess would be the way to put it. And then I ended up falling in love shortly after he passed away, and then my girlfriend at the time, she went off to college, and then that fizzled out. And then I was left with all these kind of feelings after that. I decided to not go off to college and spend time pursuing my career as a singer-songwriter, which I'm still trying to do, knock on wood.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

*Louis Knight:* So I didn't end up going off to school, so I was just left with at that time, that September, just left with all these unresolved feelings about it kind of bubbling up that I hadn't really dealt with. And then I remember one morning I just got up early and I'd actually listened to – I'm not sure if you've heard of an artist called Sam Fender. He wrote a song called "Dead Boys," which is about boys in his hometown. He was hearing about a lot of boys in his hometown started committing suicide because –

*Lily Cornell Silver:* Wow.

*Louis Knight:* And we don't always know it, but it's so prevalent in males, too. I then, I just watched this song on YouTube and then went down to the piano straight away one morning and just wrote "Change" in about 30 minutes.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* Wow.

*Louis Knight:* And it just all kind of poured out.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* I love that. Sometimes it does take that inspiration, and it's interesting that you talked about how it was difficult to put that into art because that's definitely – you know I lost my dad to suicide, and people who watch –

*Louis Knight:* Yeah. I'm sorry.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* – the series know that – thank you. Thank you. People who watch the series know that I lost one of my best friends in high school to suicide as well when I was 15, and it's one of those things that when you're creative and when you're an artist you want to put that into art, and my experience was like I just fucking can't. Like I can't even, you know, channel it into the thing I love most 'cause it's too big and it's too painful. And it's interesting, too, you talk about going through the, through a breakup, 'cause for me, I went through a breakup as well like about a year after, and it totally opened the floodgates for me to process all those unresolved emotions from the losses.

*Louis Knight:* Yeah. I think it really, it opens up those kind of gates of grieving, and it's such a strange process to go through grief, and it presents itself in different ways, and it's a long journey.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* Definitely. I wanted to circle back to the idea you brought up of how like male-identifying people often struggle more with their mental health or with their emotional intelligence because society is constantly telling them like emoting or being vulnerable is not masculine in some way.

*Louis Knight:* Yeah.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* So have you had any experiences with that, like feeling like you can't be vulnerable or be open about your mental health?

*Louis Knight:* You know, I definitely, I felt like that when I was younger. When we, my family, first transitioned to moving to Philadelphia, I did get very depressed during middle school, which is a tough time for everyone.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* Right. Right.

*Louis Knight:* Yeah, and but I've been so fortunate enough to have such like supportive parents, like my mom and dad are so supportive, and I've got my managers who are also like my best friends. And I've kind of learned that for me, I kind of, like my way of processing everything is to talk about it, and just that's how I, I've kind of learned to try to wear my heart on my sleeve all the time because that's how I can feel okay mentally. So I can't say that I have necessarily struggled with that to that much of an extent, but so

many people do. Male suicide is one of the leading causes of death in males.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* Yeah, for sure. No, I mean and thinking about it, most of the people that I know who have died by suicide are males. But I think, you know, as you were saying earlier, it is an epidemic, absolutely, and even just in my high school years and now in college there are – like I know several people a year who die by suicide, just peers or friends of a friend or acquaintances. Like it is absolutely an epidemic, so I really, really appreciate the work that you're doing. And the platform that you have built for yourself is based on suicide prevention, so I'd love to talk to you a little bit more about that, like –

*Louis Knight:* Thank you.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* – what is your goal for that and –

*Louis Knight:* You too.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* Yeah, yeah.

*Louis Knight:* Thank you. Thank you for –

*Lily Cornell Silver:* That's true. I guess me, too.

*Louis Knight:* Thank you for doing this, just talking about – just opening the conversation is the biggest step to change, so thank you for doing everything that you're doing.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* Of course. But I just wanted to hear from you a little bit more about like your, you know, what that looks like for you, what like the goal of bringing awareness to suicide prevention looks like for you.

*Louis Knight:* Yeah, so I've been, since Russell's passing, since writing "Change," I've become really involved with the AFSP, the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, and my goal – I mean we just have to change the stigma surrounding – and I know we're talking about males, but it affects everyone. Mental health is something that we all have whether we struggle with it or not. I mean the two parts of health as humans, just how we are, is our physical health and then our mental health, and they both need to be intact. They

both need to be working together. So my goal is to just try through my music and my experience to try to help people not feel so alone and to just let them know that, first of all, to end, try to end the stigma around talking about mental health, and it's okay to not be okay. And it's, I mean we just have to let people know that there are resources and put them in, make them, resources, more available to people, and let them know that it's okay. And just I mean like if we have friends that we think might be struggling, we need to look for the warning signs. Just educate people.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* For sure. Have you, I mean if you don't feel comfortable answering this, totally good, but have you experienced suicidal ideation of your own, ever?

*Louis Knight:* I, honestly I've never talked about this but I have. I mean in middle school I did a little bit. There are times, I mean when I was at my, the last time I had, I was really kind of struggling was in, during Hollywood Week of *American Idol*.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* Wow. Okay.

*Louis Knight:* I hadn't slept. I was so sleep deprived, and I mean sleep is, it's huge.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* And so underrated.

*Louis Knight:* So underrated. I mean I basically, I hadn't slept at all for like three days. I had about three hours' sleep over the course of three and a half days because – and then I just slowly started like losing it mentally and just breaking down. Me and my duet partner, Francisco Martin, who's one of my like closest friends now from the show, we both ended up forgetting all the lyrics on stage in front of like –

*Lily Cornell Silver:* Oh, my God.

*Louis Knight:* On national TV and in front of the judges. And then so that was just like such a horrible experience, and then my roommate who I'd been really close with, Leon Majcen, had been sent home on the second day. So then I got back to my hotel room, to this empty hotel room, and went to sleep, and then a few hours later I ended up – that was the one day where I could actually get like three hours' sleep, like a little bit of sleep. I woke up, and as soon as my

eyes opened I went into a panic attack, and I'd never really experienced a panic attack to that extent before. And thankfully I don't deal with it now. I think it really was just sleep deprivation. I woke up, and as soon as my eyes opened my entire body started shaking uncontrollably from head to toe, and I started hyperventilating, and I was just, I was like I can't do this.

I started packing my suitcase. I locked my hotel, I locked myself in my hotel room door. I said, "I'm leaving." I got in the shower 'cause I thought like hot water might stop my body from just shaking, and it wouldn't. And I mean that's the last time where I looked, I had this great big window, and I looked down outside of the window and for a second – I mean I'm not, like I wasn't, I don't think I was suicidal, but for a second I was like my mind was just spiraling, like what do I do to escape what's, how I'm feeling, what's happening? And I just looked down at the city of LA and I was just like the thought crossed my mind for a split second, and I was like no. Like 'cause obviously I, once you've been through a loss like that, I mean for me anyway I, like I look at it completely differently and I know I could never, and I'm lucky that I don't struggle still or anything. But that was just a really low point. But yeah, so that's that.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* Definitely. No, I mean and you say that the panic attack was brought on just by sleep deprivation, but I would think also by like you were in a very high pressure situations.

*Louis Knight:* Yeah.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* That's an experience that not many people will ever have in their lifetime is being in that kind of situation. So but thank you so much for sharing that, and my experience –

*Louis Knight:* Of course.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* – has, with suicidal ideation has been similar to the extent that like having known people and loved people who have committed suicide has very much changed my perception because I know what the aftermath looks like. You know, the people who do commit suicide don't know what follows from their loss, and I know what that looks like.

*Louis Knight:* Yeah. I saw your interview with Eddie Vedder and I saw him, he brought up Headspace, which is something that I started using, and I use this app called NeuroFlow sometimes. It just gauges how I feel. And during like each day, each morning, how was my sleep? And they have like a breathing bubble on there. And I started picking up meditation from my manager, Cliff. He taught me how he meditates, and even yoga, and that's something that I – I need to get back on it, but during *Idol* I was meditating a lot, at least trying to, 'cause it's – I mean just picking up tools to try to manage your thoughts and just find some level of peace even just for a moment can go a long way.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* Definitely, and kind of get you out of that negative feedback loop and that spiral.

*Louis Knight:* Exactly.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* I wanted to ask you, too, like what the process was like auditioning for *American Idol* and what was the driving factor behind that?

*Louis Knight:* So honestly it completely, the opportunity completely fell out of the sky. I'd basically just been spending six months to a year just trying to work on my artistry and being a singer-songwriter. I'd started putting together my backing band to play live gigs around Philadelphia, just kind of trying to grow that way. And I'd just gone over for a meeting at my brother's, I mean at one of my good friends' houses, 'cause his brother was studying like social media, and then he was giving me tips on how to grow my social media. So I started commenting on singers like me, just comment – engaging with their posts, saying, "Oh, I love this." And so a casting producer saw one of my comments – long story short – and then found me and my music, and then reached out to me. Her name was Shae Wilbur. She's now become a really great friend of ours.

But at first I wasn't sure if it was real, and I kind of, I was a bit sketched out. I was like what? Like I'm getting a DM asking to audition for *American Idol*? And at first I didn't think I wanted to do it because I had this kind of preconceived notion about these singing talent shows, and I was so caught up in trying to be on the singer-songwriter aspect of it that I wasn't that excited to go into it and sing covers. But then they told me that I could sing my original songs and they told me I could sing "Change." We didn't have any

expectations. I didn't even think I would end up getting to the live, to the judges' audition. We just, we started off doing Skype auditions and it was just, we took it each step at a time and somehow, some way I ended up getting to the top seven. I don't know how. But yeah.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* Incredible. No, that's amazing. I mean it sounds like totally fate. What was that process like? What was it like singing the song "Change," which is definitely a very personal song to you? What was it like singing that for such a wide audience?

*Louis Knight:* I mean I thought it would resonate with some people. I mean after my audition, just the feedback from the judges was unreal. I thought – I just didn't believe it. It was just so surreal. And then receiving really kind feedback from especially Lionel Richie on my songwriting meant the world, as he's been like – my granddad used to have all, I mean has all his CDs and we used to play them when I was a kid. And then the day after my audition aired, receiving so many messages on Instagram from people saying that they've been suffering or that they've been, yeah, that they've been suffering or they've lost a loved one or a parent to suicide was just – and that they found some peace in my song somehow was, just meant the world. Like I couldn't have possibly asked for anything else. I mean that just, that's just so heartwarming.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* That's definitely been very parallel to my experience with *Mind Wide Open* is maybe naively I was like, okay, hopefully this will help like 50 people. You know? And something around those, something along those lines, and the response I've gotten has been so beautiful and so overwhelming, and in a beautiful way, you know, to receive messages –

*Louis Knight:* Yeah.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* – like that, saying like I have struggled with this, or people I love have struggled with this, and what you're doing is helping me. So using music as an agent of change is something very close to my heart as well. And I appreciate you, too, talking about taking time off school, because I took – I did a semester of college and then ended up taking the second semester off because my mental health was really struggling. I was experiencing really severe anxiety and a lot of depression, and it was very difficult choosing not to go back to school, you know, just for the one semester because there



is the stigma around mental health as we know, but definitely stigma around like not being a productive member of society. You know?

*Louis Knight:* Yeah.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* I think someone who has mental illness but is very high functioning is definitely more rewarded than someone who struggles with mental health and like takes time for themselves. And I experienced a lot of backlash, honestly, like a lot of people –

*Louis Knight:* Really?

*Lily Cornell Silver:* Yeah, which, you know, is disappointing to say the least for people.

*Louis Knight:* That's – yeah.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* Yeah, but it saved my life. Honestly it saved my life to take that time off and just work and not put myself in that pressure chamber. So that's, it's huge. It's huge.

*Louis Knight:* Well, I'm so happy you did, and I'm so happy you're doing better –

*Lily Cornell Silver:* You too. Yeah.

*Louis Knight:* – now and – yeah. I mean this is just incredible what you're doing here, so –

*Lily Cornell Silver:* Thank you. Thank you, Louis. So we talked about this earlier today, but that it's such a time of change for our generation especially and like the way that kind of the pressure that's been put on us societally and the way that we've mobilized around that. What would, like ideally, what do you hope would come out of the turmoil that we're in right now, whether that's like activism or art or other people, songwriting, or anything in that vein?

*Louis Knight:* There are so many aspects to what this pandemic is showing us, and the problems it's causing and the problems it's bringing further to everyone's attention. Racism is fundamentally just ingrained in how this country and many others were built, and we have to strip that systematic racism away and we have to just change how we are as a society.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* Yeah.

*Louis Knight:* And it's amazing to see so many people coming together to fight for this, because it's about time. And it's been going on for too long, and I mean we have Donald Trump and he's just, ugh, I won't even get into that. But –

*Lily Cornell Silver:* Different podcast.

*Louis Knight:* Different podcast. Yeah.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* Different series.

*Louis Knight:* Different. But what –

*Lily Cornell Silver:* But that's a mental health crisis. Yeah, no.

*Louis Knight:* It is, and there's also – I mean mental health, drug overdoses have gone up by 18 percent in America since, between March to May they went up 18 percent, and I mean this came, affected us really close to home because my manager's son, Cliff's son, Kyle, such a beautiful soul, and I'm getting choked up even talking about it, he fought his whole life. He was diagnosed with cancer at a really young age. His mom ended up walking out while he was in chemo, while he was in the hospital, and he had PTSD and he just fought for, just trying to kind of stay, to stay in this world his entire life. He loved everyone so hard. He would seek out other, like people who were outcasts, and just try to make them feel not so alone.

And he ended up becoming a heroin addict because of all the PTSD and the trauma that he had been through as a kid, and he – and then he'd been clean for a number of years, and then during COVID it's isolation. It's being isolated. When we're so isolated from everyone it's, you just, you lose it, and he ended up passing away. He ended up killing himself from drugs this, a few months ago, and it's just – and he struggled with bipolar. And it's just mental health is everywhere and it's, we just need to change. We need people of, people in power to create ways of – so it's more affordable, reachable for everyone.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* Right. Right.

- Louis Knight:* Suicide rates have gone up. I mean just the – and it's just undeniable that mental health is a thing and that people are struggling and that we need better resources. We need better ways of pointing people in the right direction and better ways of police with – maybe we have more mental health experts in police to be dispatched, and so many things.
- Lily Cornell Silver:* No, I absolutely agree that it is a change that has to start systemically, and that's how it will help ingrain itself into our individual lives.
- Louis Knight:* Yeah.
- Lily Cornell Silver:* And thank you for sharing that story about Kyle. I actually, even you saying that reminded me that I had a friend who died of overdose in May, and it was –
- Louis Knight:* I'm so sorry.
- Lily Cornell Silver:* He had struggled with drug addiction in the last three years, but the pandemic and the isolation and the loneliness even – you know, he was in a supportive family situation, but what we're going through right now is so unprecedented and so intense that that, you know, the loneliness kind of overcame. So as you said, that's been a pretty universal experience as of late.
- Louis Knight:* Yeah.
- Lily Cornell Silver:* How have you been coping with your own mental health in the last, in the wake of everything happening, but just in general like what are tools that you rely on?
- Louis Knight:* I see a counselor who I've seen for years, and he's helped me so much. And even when there's nothing to talk about, you know, it's just good to just talk to someone.
- Lily Cornell Silver:* Right. Right.
- Louis Knight:* He also is kind of like a performance coach, like he kind of helps me aspects in my career, too. So I'm so fortunate to be able to have that. And, again, I'm just, I'm so lucky to have so many, like just people, good people around me who are there when I need to turn

to someone. But yeah, I've been, thankfully I've been doing all right. Thank you.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* Good. Good. Yeah.

*Louis Knight:* What about you? What about – yeah.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* I mean meditation has been huge for me. I box, which is like a really good way to get some of the aggression out.

*Louis Knight:* I'm trying to get into that. That's awesome. Yeah. Yeah. That's great.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* It's really good, really good. But a huge part of it for me has been support system, maintaining that connection, and it's easy I think, especially for many of us in this pandemic, to slip, to buy into that isolation. And so for me it's just been reminding myself like, okay, I'm gonna reach out to this person today. Or even if I facetime one person today, that's gonna kind of help me get out of this rut. So that's –

*Louis Knight:* Absolutely.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* Yeah, that's –

*Louis Knight:* And maybe help them, too.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* Exactly, that human connection. That's what will help break the stigma. I do think that.

*Louis Knight:* Absolutely.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* What is something that's bringing you hope right now?

*Louis Knight:* This. I mean youth. The one thing this pandemic is doing is it's showing every – it's bringing all these problems in society, it's really bringing them to the surface, and it's our job as the young generation, the generation that's gonna lead everyone, I don't know, everyone to come after us, in a sense. It's –

*Lily Cornell Silver:* Right, right, right, yeah, to set the example.

*Louis Knight:* To set the example and to really fight for change, and that's what we're seeing is slowly, it is slowly happening on all fronts. I guess that's what's giving me hope right now.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* Definitely.

*Louis Knight:* And just relationships and just with my family, and I mean those are the things that we have to cherish, and friendships, and that's what is gonna – that human connection, that's what's gonna get us through and make us not feel so alone on, in all fronts. So that's what I'm feeling hopeful about.

*Lily Cornell Silver:* Agreed. Agreed. Well, thank you so much for being here, Louis. It means the world to me.

*Louis Knight:* Thank you.

*[Music playing]*

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