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Lily Cornell Silver: I'm Lily Cornell Silver and welcome to *Mind Wide Open*, my mental health-focused interview series. Today, I am talking to Mason Spector, who is one of the founders of the clothing brand Madhappy and their mental health platform called the Local Optimist. Mason and I talked about our personal journeys with mental health and how we translate that into mental health advocacy. Thank you so much for watching and I hope you enjoy. Well, thank you so much for being here, Mason.

Mason: Yes, of course. Thank you for having me. You're back in school, right?

Lily: Yes, I'm back in online school back in Seattle.

Mason: Okay, cool.

Lily: It's been a little bit. I would love to hear just how you came up with the vision and the idea for Madhappy, the mission statement behind it, your goals for it. Just give the overview. I would love to hear that.

Mason: For sure. It was definitely a collective effort. I have partners and a team who I'm super grateful for and we all work really well together. It's definitely part of what makes us successful and grow and why we've able to get to where we are. I think to talk about the mission and where it comes from, I have to back up a little bit with my personal story obviously. I was born in 1994 in Colorado. My parents were both pretty young.

Before I was a year old, my biological father, I don't know too much about him, but I know he just wasn't really ready to have a son and commit in that regard. Him and my mom split up before I was even one year old. Me and my mom went from Colorado back to Michigan where she was from and where she grew up, but we moved in with my grandmother. Around the same time, my mom started to date this guy who was one of her family friends who had also just gotten out of a marriage.

It was like, "Oh, you just got divorced, you just got divorced. You guys should go have coffee or whatever." They ended up doing that and they fell in love as partners. That is the man who I call my dad, who's technically my stepdad, but he adopted me and is who I refer to as my father for the rest of the story. He had two kids from a previous marriage and my mom had me from her marriage, so it was the three of us. We moved to Los Angeles for a job opportunity for him.

The three of us moved to LA from Michigan. He still has his two kids from his first marriage in Michigan. We're going back and forth to Michigan every month to see my



stepbrother and sister, who I called just my brother and sister. Unfortunately, very tragically, his first wife and their mother passed away in 2002 from brain cancer. When that happened, the two of them moved to LA to live with us, and then, simultaneously, my mom and my dad had two kids of their own. We have a family of seven.

Lily: Very blended. [laughs]

Mason: Yes, I have four brothers and sisters who I love with all my heart and that's our blended family situation. In 2010, my dad came out of the closet to all of us and my parents got a divorce, so that was actually like the 10-year anniversary was this past summer. The reason I'm telling you all this, I think, is just because from what I've learned, family of origin is the most important thing of how we are the way we are and really who we are and the why and all these things.

I think it's the thing that we can't control and just happens to us and it's like the cards that we're dealt and we have to deal with. Through a lot of my work, the more for me to learn about myself and understand myself and where I want to go, I have to learn about them and where I came from, right?

Lily: Totally.

Mason: So many dynamics there. I was the oldest and then I became the middle child. I had just a bunch of really hard stuff that I didn't really understand at the time that led to me feeling super insecure about myself and struggling a lot with depression and just feeling so misunderstood and an outcast, which turned to me looking to drugs and alcohol and women and all these kinds of external things. I went to Indiana for one semester. I was looking around at the juniors and the seniors.

It was just like this doesn't feel like me and this doesn't feel right for me and this doesn't feel good. I don't want my life to look like that when I'm at that age. I spoke to my parents. I ended up dropping out of school, super blessed to have just a transparent, honest relationship with them where I could express that to them because I feel like so many kids just do what they think they're supposed to do and never stop and talk to their support system and be like, "Hey, does this feel right for me? Let's talk about this."

From there, I tried going to community college. Again, just wasn't really working or making sense for me. I started a clothing company probably back when I was 20/21 with one of my partners now. His name is Noah. We were just two kids who really felt misunderstood and were creative and wanted to express ourselves and we learned a lot. We just hit the streets of downtown LA. That somewhat fizzled out. We had a little bit of success, but it was more just a great learning experience.

We were in another low period where it was just like, "Fuck, I shouldn't have dropped out of college. We just failed. What am I doing?" I feel terrible about myself. I went to one of my friend's college basketball games and it was his last year as a senior. I remember this super vividly. I was in my car after by myself in the parking lot, sending him a text, congratulating him. I was just like, "Yo, I'm mad happy for you."

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Lily: [laughs]

Mason: Literally, and I just stopped and it was one of those “aha moments” like we say, and I was just like, “Wow, this feels really powerful. This feels really special. This feels like exactly where I am in this moment of my life. This feels just like the essence of life in a way that everyone could relate to on some level, and it just felt really right. I immediately went home and called Noah and told him about the name and he loved it. From there, we got my two other partners, Peiman and Josh, involved and we built this thing with really that messaging. Yes, now, we are three, four years later and it’s crazy. That was a really long answer.

Lily: Amazing. No, no, that’s perfect. Thank you. Thank you. I really appreciate your emphasis on family of origin because I think that’s such a real thing, especially the way you see parental figures demonstrate how they deal with mental health. That’s how I learned what you do when you’re struggling with your mental health and what kind of openness you have, what kind of honesty you have about it.

Mason: Totally. I think, for me, I always say it’s my blessing and my curse. When my sibling’s mother had passed away in 2002, I mentioned that’s when my mom first put me in therapy. I was like seven years old. I don’t remember, but she tells me that I was asking questions of just not really understanding death like, “Does this mean that you’re going to die, mom?” things like that. That was really instilled in me in a super young age of just like, “Feel inside and see how you feel and talk about how you feel. Ask these questions and don’t run away from it and don’t be shy.”

It’s just something that has always stuck with me and something that has always felt really right and normal for me. It’s almost, like I said, my blessing and my curse has hurt me at times when I’ve gone too deep and too dark. Depression has felt like a comfortable place for me and it can feel like it’s just a part of you. Yes, I’m definitely thankful for her that I’ve just always been lucky to know that it’s okay to just talk about shit.

Lily: I started therapy when I was seven as well actually.

Mason: Oh really?

Lily: That shaped so much of my outlook towards mental health, but also how I talk about mental health because from that young age being provided with a vocabulary to be able to talk to others confidently. Do you know what I mean? It’s like, “Oh, I know what I’m experiencing,” and I’m able to convey that without tripping over my words or not understanding what’s going on in my head. I think that’s such a huge-- everyone deserves that. Do you know what I mean?

Mason: Yes, that’s such a big part of it. Two years ago, I had-- or a little over two years ago, the summer of '18, I had my rock-bottom moment. I went away to treatment. So much of what I still take from that experience was just like building my emotional and mental toolbox of having these things that we can use, these words, and these exercises to be able to articulate it and vocalize it and identify it.



Because just like you said, it's like everyone feels stuff and people don't know how to get it out. That's so much part of what the thing is that we're trying to do at Madhappy and that you're trying to do with this. It's like we need to identify and understand these things so people can talk about them. Otherwise, you just feel frustrated and you have a drink because you just don't know what else to do.

Lily: Right, or you didn't learn any other tools of externalization or that's what your parents did. We used to have our parents get angry, they go get a drink. That's how you've learned. That's such a huge part of it that I'm really glad you touched on. You said earlier that depression and low self-esteem was something that you struggled with from a young age. Do you mind talking about what that felt from being a younger person?

Mason: Yes. One of my brothers, my dad's son from his previous marriage, is only six months older than me. I basically grew up with a twin.

Lily: Totally.

Mason: When you're a kid, it's super hard not to just compare yourself and measure yourself. He's someone who's just a natural genius and so intellectual and just really good in school. I felt growing up, that was the only way I knew how to measure feeling good about myself or success. Even to this day, I still struggle with just feeling dumb or feeling stupid or just not really being good at that part of life.

I think when I was younger, that part of life seemed so much more important. That seemed like the only way to really measure success and feeling good about yourself. I think that set me off on a path of just always feeling less than and inferior, and then just led to just me being more quiet and introverted, and then I had to discover, what is going to make me feel good and where can I find my value? Unfortunately, for me, that started with girls at a young age.

I would go just kind of now like what I battle in my sex and love addiction that I struggle with is just finding my internal value from external things, which was females for me at a young age. Before I started to enter high school and get into drinking and smoking and then paired with that just doesn't help anyone who struggles with depression at all. That's where it started and then, unfortunately, my coping mechanisms just pushed me deeper in the hole if that makes sense.

Lily: No, absolutely. That's the negative feedback loop of all of it. It's a temporary relief that ultimately makes it worse and so you rely heavier on the temporary relief, which only makes the original problem worse. Just out of curiosity, are you the only child from your mom and biological dad?

Mason: Yes.

Lily: I'm the exact same. I am the only kid for my mom and biological dad, but I have three older step-siblings and two younger half-siblings and so I'm the total same sandwiched in the middle.



Mason: You're one of six.

Lily: Yes, [laughs] I have to count it out. Yes, yes, yes.

Mason: You're one of six, I'm one of five.

Lily: Yes, but with the older step-siblings and the younger half.

Mason: Technically, we're both only children and we both started therapy at age seven.

Lily: Yes, [laughs] and we have all sorts of other siblings, but yes, I'm the same way and always considered by step or half or whatever like my half-siblings.

Mason: It's weird technically being an only child, but also being part of a huge family.

Lily: Right, but I'm curious to hear more about your experiences with self-medication in whatever forms because that's something that I see a lot of young people and a lot of my peers struggle with. That's also something like I grew up in the music industry. My dad took his own life and was an addict for many years. That's something that I've been really curious and understanding more about is self-medication as a form of coping.

Mason: Totally. I can definitely only speak for myself obviously, but for me, it was just like I wanted to feel better. And I didn't have this wealth of information and knowledge and support system behind me like we talked about before like that toolbox at the time. When you're just a 14, 15, 16-year-old kid and it's not really cool or sexy to tell your friends that you were going to therapy, at least it wasn't like back in 2009 when I started high school, right?

I think it's just like a natural human instinct is like, "I don't feel good. I want to feel better. What is around me that can make me feel better the fastest, that involves the least amount of effort?" Usually, those are the most unhealthy things. It's obviously so much more complicated than that for me to understand it and that's really what it comes down to.

Lily: Absolutely. Did you ever feel-- Being a young man, did you feel that created blocks for you to be vulnerable with your peers? Because I know there's a difference in that gender spectrum.

Mason: Totally. I think that's a great point that you bring up because even just a little side note, so much of what I'm passionate about now is really defining what the modern man is. Nothing brings me more joy than talking to younger men who are in middle school and who are in high school and explaining to them that they don't have to be that tough macho man that I grew up thinking I had to be. You're not classified as like, "All right, you either play sports or you're in theater or you're over here."



It's like you can do all these things and I'm someone who loves playing sports and is athletic, but I'm also a huge, sensitive crybaby. Definitely growing up, I was a shy, sensitive kid and definitely didn't feel like I was really a strong, masculine dude who could feel good about himself. Those were definitely the kind of boys that were seeming to be the most normal, I guess. I'm super fascinated by just gender roles in general and how they're changing for the better, especially when it comes to what it means to be a man.

Lily: I'm so appreciative to have your voice on this series and have had a few other men around my age talking about this because I think it is so important to open that dialogue because I think the dialogue has been especially closed for male-identifying people.

Mason: It's silly to even think about it now, but how could any smart person ever think that talking about how you felt made you weak or how could any person ever think that crying makes you weak? That's an expression just as laughing is or something. To just think that strength and stability and all these things comes from ignoring stuff, that's the dumbest thing that I've ever heard. Do you know what I mean?

Lily: To weigh that as masculine whereas somehow being emotional became a feminine trait.

Mason: Yes, no one says it better than Brené Brown, obviously, who's just vulnerability is the biggest act of courage possible. That's what we need to keep spreading. It's like there is nothing stronger and more brave than being vulnerable. If being a man is all about being strong and brave, then we should be the most vulnerable.

Lily: Right, right, practicing radical vulnerability. Absolutely. When it comes back to you guys launching Madhappy, obviously, could you talk a little bit more about the mission statement for people who might not know?

Mason: For sure, yes. Obviously, with the name Madhappy, it's just reminding people to really value both sides of life and the ups and the downs. There are times where we're going to be really sad and that's completely okay. We have to acknowledge those times and value those times just as much as we do when we're happy because they couldn't really exist without each other.

They really are two important pieces that make us whole. That's really what the ethos of the brand is in that sense of just like, "We're going to have really bad days and months and weeks and we could even have a bad year." That's inevitable and that's okay. We need to talk about that and value that and be open about that to really live our best lives and move forward in a way that we want to.

Lily: That's been very central to the work I've had to do for myself in terms of healing, is not being afraid of what are classified as negative emotions. When I do feel that depressive episode or waves of grief or ways of PTSD or whatever it is, I do tend toward like, what can I do to alleviate myself right in this moment? What can I



do to make this feeling stopped right now? When in reality, there's no need to feel afraid of those emotions because they're not permanent.

Mason: Yes, it definitely gets complicated. It's totally a balance because it's like you do want to welcome it. It's like if you feel that way, feel that way. You don't need to ignore the feeling. You don't need to fight it. I always try and give myself goals of like, "All right, if I'm feeling like this, let me feel this for today and just really sit in it and then tomorrow, I can come up with a plan," or like, what are some things that I can do so I'm not consciously feeling it for too long where I could get stuck? Definitely, I think it's so important to just feel what we're feeling and not just try and deflect it out of the way all the time.

Lily: Right, and I think that's something that, societally, you're a lot more rewarded for being high functioning and so there's that notion that's like, "Okay, if I'm feeling depressed, I still have to get all my shit done, then I still have to keep myself together and put up an appearance that I'm still doing well." That's why I appreciate what you guys are doing and that's where I'm trying to make changes as well is shifting that narrative that you have to put up that front all the time.

Mason: Yes, I think, unfortunately, one of the biggest things that has perpetuated that front is social media, obviously, where we just look at the highlights of people's lives. It's just a competition as to who can seem like they're doing better virtually. I've had my own complicated relationship with Instagram over the years of having it and not having it and really using it and being public or private and whatever. Obviously, I think there's a lot of benefits that social media has given us as well even in the mental health space, but definitely not when it comes to putting up this front like everything's okay and competing with each other and using it as a way to feel good about ourselves through reassurance of likes or something.

Lily: I'm curious for you because you said a couple of years ago was when you felt like you were at your lowest. Well, that was after you'd launched Matt Happy?

Mason: Yes.

Lily: I'm curious because I've come into this a little bit in trying to work in the mental health space, doing the series trying to bolster others and help others, and then there are times where I feel like my mental health is so trash. I'm like, "My mental health is so bad right now," and here I am trying to be like, "Oh, you're going to be fine." I'm curious how that was for you feeling like you were at your lowest point in life while also trying to maintain a mental health platform.

Mason: It's always easier to tell other people what to do than to do it yourself. You know what I mean? Not even to tell other people what to do, but to just help our friends. I'm always able to tell people what I think and speak on my own experience. I'm so, so bad at practicing what I preach for whatever reason. I was living just a really unhealthy life. I was in a really unhealthy relationship, where I wasn't being respectful of my partner and boundaries because I was just still really sick with my addiction that hadn't really been treated or diagnosed yet and some other things that I

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hadn't really learned about my mental health and whatnot. I was just kind of bullshit-ing. I was totally talking the talk and not walking the walk. That eventually caught up with me. I had a really ugly breakup that all of my happiness was invested in. I got to a place where I was having a lot of suicidal ideation and whatnot. I didn't feel like I could really live without this person and didn't like myself enough to live on my own.

That was the hardest time of my life, obviously, but it's also the biggest blessing of my life. I went to a great recovery center in Tennessee that completely changed my life. I stopped using drugs and alcohol and have been sober ever since in the summer of 2018. I've never really thought about it paired with my professional life. That is weird to think about, I guess.

Lily: [laughs] I think just in the sense of that mental health is such a personal thing. That's just been my experience in wanting to create this open narrative about mental health and then sometimes I'm not practicing what I'm preaching is like this weird duality.

Mason: I think also just because we're working in the space and we can talk about it and have some more knowledge maybe, that doesn't mean we're the model citizen to never struggle. You know what I mean?

Lily: Right.

Mason: It's real. That's part of why we talk about it and why we're so passionate about it because it's real and no one's better than anyone else. We're just like everyone else in the whole world. We all struggle and we all feel really shitty about ourselves sometimes. Even if we're talking about it every day, that doesn't mean that we're guaranteed to feel better all the time.

Lily: That's actually so true because I'm thinking about when I first experienced suicidal ideation was the summer of 2018. That was where I was at my lowest and feeling-- yes, just experiencing suicidal ideation for the first time and I've always had anxiety, but it started manifesting for me as dissociation. I felt like I was on drugs all the time. There's nothing you could do to gain clarity. That's where I feel like I definitely learned the value of being open and honest about it.

My mom is so open and I'd always had vocabulary around mental health, but I've never experienced dissociation and I've never experienced suicidal ideation. I didn't talk about it with anybody because I was harboring this idea of like, "There's definitely something wrong with me." I'm just going to try to wait for it to go away. I wouldn't anyway because I wasn't addressing it. I was pushing the open dialog thing so, so, so much.

Mason: I didn't even know what dissociating was until I went to treatment two years ago. I don't know if you knew what it was or not, but how can you talk about something that you're feeling if you don't know what it is? You know what I mean? It was almost like you were put in an impossible situation of like you can't self-diagnose



yourself. You're just a kid who doesn't understand what this super complicated medical term is.

How are you going to know what the hell to do? Unfortunately, like it did for me and most people, is it takes a really bad episode or something really tragic to happen that pushed me to the brink of my life to really get the help. That's one of the biggest things that I think need to change is getting people just to help on a more constant basis where it doesn't take us all to have these horror stories that nearly end our lives to be able to finally turn it around. We have to be able to find a way to turn it around earlier on that road.

When I first went to treatment, I actually learned something really beautiful that it really relates to this because there were some people there when I first got there who had really much more tragic stories than myself, or who were there for much more severe reasons, things that I could never even imagine. My first week or two, it was really hard because I kept finding myself comparing my story to their story.

It was just like, "Wow, I should not be as sad as they are. They have the right to struggle way more than me." What I learned, thanks to the help of some people there, at the end of the day, we are both humans. We're all humans. We can only feel this same range of emotions, whether it's like six, seven, eight of these core emotions. Everything relates back to those emotions. The way that they release chemicals in our brains and the way that they make us feel is really the same, whether you lost a loved one or you lost a pet or your favorite sports team lost, not even to make a joke, comparing it to things like that.

If you are really sad and you're really depressed, then that's just how you feel. It can come from any number of things. It doesn't matter where it comes from or why you're feeling it. It just matters that you're feeling it and you're going to talk about it. I think that's something that's really beautiful that can really connect us all on just the human level and have empathy for each other and really go through this together. I think we'll feel much more united and be able to get much more work done.

Lily: Completely. I completely agree. That comparison is such an ugly game. It only ends in more pain and more hurt for both parties. That doesn't help anybody to do that sort of comparison. In that vein, I wanted to talk about the Local Optimist, which is something that you guys launched through Madhappy. I just think it's like the coolest shit ever. All the wealth of resources on there and the interviews and everything, I think, is so amazing. Did that come after Madhappy?

Mason: That definitely came after. Like I said before, where I was mentally and what we wanted the company to be about, what we started with, we didn't really have our full brand identity fleshed out obviously in the beginning. I think that came as we went along and started to make products and have pop-ups and build our community and let it take on a life of its own.

The Local Optimist, we launched it in January at the top of the year. It's something that we really just wanted to provide a mental health resource for people to come. It's

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free and have just a bunch of different kind of information. Some of it is more re-searched and medical stuff. Some of it is just people sharing their stories, all different kinds of things.

I think it's so important to know what you know and know what you don't know. We know that we're not professionals and we're not experts. We're just happy to talk about it and want to be a part of the conversation of raising awareness about it. That's really our place where we collaborate with a bunch of people and work with a bunch of organizations and just give people a cool place to come to learn about mental health. We take submissions all the time so people can just write in their own stories that we'll publish for them. That's something that we're super, super proud of and definitely excited to continue to grow.

Lily: That's huge. That's super cool. I appreciate that emphasis on accessibility so much because that's something that's missing so much in the mental health space. With you guys with Madhappy, where do you see it being taken? What are some future goals in terms of the furthering of the mental health conversation or--

Mason: Our big pillar in the mental health conversation is optimism, right? I think there's so much in our life that is out of our control like our family of origin or just like all these cards that we get dealt that we don't have any control of that, I think, there's some real power in finding what we can take control of and really focusing on that. A big thing for us is our state of mind or our outlook on the world.

For us, that's all about optimism and choosing to look on the bright side of things and really leaning into that and seeing how it can really help us live more fulfilled and more grateful lives. I think that's our big pillar in the mental health space. Obviously, we want to just continue to grow our brand and keep creating conversation around mental health, whether it's through our products on the clothing side or whether it's through these experiences. We're super grateful that people are starting to pay attention to it more and respect it more and want to talk about it more and get involved. I'm super excited to see what happens, I guess.

Lily: Definitely, it was cool to see. Over the last couple of years, I found out about Madhappy because I started to see influencers wearing it. That's something I think social media has been missing for a long time. Now, we're finally seeing that more vulnerability and more honesty in that regard.

Mason: Totally. I think youth and that youthful energy runs the world. It really does. It sets the trends and it sets the tone for everything. It's been so cool to see that generation especially, be just really open and receptive to the mental health conversation.

Lily: Totally, totally. That's something just in doing this series, even in talking to mental health professionals that are 40, 50, 60. Even—they're professionals in the field and they have been for years, years and years, but still, there's that reservation to talk about their own experiences. There's that hesitance. When I encounter just younger people from younger generations, they're like, "Oh my God. Do you want to

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talk about my trauma?" "Yes, I don't even know your last name, but let's talk about it." [laughs] That's something that I think is-- People just are starved for that. People are so dehydrated for those kinds of vulnerable conversations.

Mason: I guess I just thought of a question for you if that's okay.

Lily: Of course.

Mason: Why do you think mental health is having this moment aside from just each generation getting better? I guess it seems like it's really having a big stake in the worldwide conversation.

Lily: At this point with so much shit going on in the world and the 24-hour media cycle and the amount of information that we have access to on a daily basis, I think people's lives are so much faster. I think it's more urgent to be-- People are like, "Oh shit, I really am not well." That's something that I think has made people be like, "Okay, we need to talk about it," because more and more people-- the rates of anxiety are way higher. The rates of suicide are way higher. The rates of depression are way higher. It's created that sense of urgency because life is so much faster now. That's my two cents on it, but what do you think?

Mason: Well, just to be more current, I think one of the things that I've been telling people when they ask like, "What's something good that's come out of the pandemic?" or something like that. For example, I think it's made people appreciate and understand the importance of mental health so much more. I think we were all forced to adapt and change our routines and really switch things up and lose a lot of control like I said. A lot of people hate not being in control.

Whether you're working from home or whether you lost your job or whether you had to move back into your parents' house, all these different kind of things bring up so many feelings and triggers and all these things that really come to the forefront of our lives. You have to deal with them. I think this has really allowed people to really not have a choice in dealing with their shit. Just for the average person who mental health wasn't a part of their life at all, this pandemic and just everything that's been going on has really forced people to just think about it and pay more attention to it, which I think is so valuable and so important.

Lily: That's definitely my experience and the experience of most everyone I know. It's a silver lining in a very shitty situation, but I would love to know what is something that is giving you hope right now.

Mason: I think people just feeling more empowered. I think people like taking control of their own lives more and not just falling in line with the way that things have been. I think of all of the protests this summer. I think of just the turnouts that we saw for this election. The most people voting ever, I think of a state like Georgia flipping. I think things like that and just people really taking control of their own lives. Not even politically or just professionally or personally, we all need to be the owner of our own life. That's just so important.

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Lily: Definitely. No, I wholeheartedly agree. Well, thank you. I'm so glad we finally made this happen.

Mason: I'm so glad that this all worked out.

Lily: Me too, so excited to see what you do with mental health going forward, so excited to see what Madhappy does with mental health going forward. Super exciting.

Mason: Of course. Thank you so much for having me. Keep it up on the show. It's been awesome. I can't wait to keep watching and good luck.

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