

- Hey, and welcome to PCTY Talks. I'm your host Shari Simpson. During our time together, we'll stay close to the news and info you need to succeed as an HR pro and together we'll explore topics around HR thought leadership, compliance and real life HR situations we face every day. On today's episode, I have with me Stephen Sokoler, founder and CEO at Journey and he has just an amazing story in the mental health space. So, Stephen, thanks for taking a few minutes to chat with me today.

- It is my pleasure to be here. Thanks for having me.

- I'd love if you could start with sharing with our audience a little bit about your background and honestly your passion for mental wellbeing.

- Whew, how much time do we have? Yeah, so I grew up in Queens, New York, was always kinda hustling and starting different businesses and doing all different things and always wanted to like make a buck. It's like a very Queens thing, actually. And then I went to NYU where I studied business and pretty quickly graduated and started working at a company. And I realized that I didn't really have the skills and tool set that I needed to like live a happy, healthy, balanced life. I was doing like all the same things that like many young guys in New York were doing, going out and trying to work and trying to do, you know, and like I was like, "Okay, this is like fun but not fulfilling." And so I started reading books like Dale Carnegie's, "How to Win Friends and Influence People." which is like the worst title for like such a good quality book. Or "The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People." Just a whole bunch of stuff like that. And so I started on this journey, no pun intended, of like self-exploration, self-development, probably, I don't know. I guess I was in my early twenties, and then fast forward a bunch of years, I ended up moving to Australia to open an office for my previous company. And it was the first time I had lived outside of New York. I had all this space, like literally I wasn't living in a tiny studio, figuratively. I just had time. And I ended up getting into, well, really exploring a whole bunch of things, traveling throughout Asia. And I found this book or this book found me, this book on Buddhism and it really spoke to me. And I started, it was just very practical. Like it was just very like this is a good way to live life, right? Not like religious belief, like none of that, just like this is a good way to live life. And I was like, "Oh, okay, there's some good stuff here." I started meditating and that really transformed my life. And so like put into perspective for people, 'cause like to transform your life is like, I dunno, it's tied to like a blender or like a new, you know, desk, chair. Like I was heavy for most of my... I used to say most of my life, but I guess that's not true. So up to the time I was 22, I was very heavy. So I lost 85 pounds. I'm now 43. So I guess technically, almost half my life I have not been heavy. The transformation was bigger from once I started meditating as opposed to before, than it was from losing 85 pounds to

before. So it was a significant shift in the way I moved through the world. And yeah, from there I just said, "Okay, this is great stuff." I went deeper into a whole bunch of more things besides meditation. And then fast forward a few years later, moved back to New York, sold a company and thought, "Okay I think there might be an opportunity here to take all of these practices and things and community and bring it to people in a really simple, approachable way." And in 2015, it's crazy seven years ago, Journey was born.

- What an amazing story. And I'm so jelly, Australia is on my bucket list of places to go. So maybe offline I'll pick your brain about that because it just sounds fascinating. You know, as I think about, you know the world right now and the work that you've done with Journey. You know, your company focuses on, you know, really creating the world's largest, most supportive, inclusive, wellbeing community. And what I really loved about that and I'd love for you to share more about it is how did you land on, you know, community being the key when it comes to mental wellbeing?

- Great question. Really excellent question. So a couple of ways, really. So I had mentioned the dieting thing, like how I lost all the weight, right? Or I mentioned that I lost the weight, but I didn't say how. People would always say, "Wow that's amazing. How'd you lose 85 pounds? Meaning like, what did you eat? Like, was it cabbage soup or something all the time?" It had nothing to do with what I was eating, it was the fact that I had support and accountability and a community that kept me coming back long enough for it to work. Because for anyone who's tried to lose weight you know, you try, you have a good week then you go off it and then you never go back to it. And it's like that with all these habits, right? Going to the gym or quitting smoking, things like that. And it's the same with meditation. So when we started Journey, Journey was actually Journey Meditation, right? We've since dropped the meditation and expanded to add cognitive behavioral therapy and positive psychology and neuroscience. But at the time I was very focused on that. And when I looked at what was out there at least digitally, right? You had products like Calm and Headspace, which are great. But when you talk to people, they say... And I'm curious about if you've ever used them. People say, "Oh, I tried Calm or I tried Headspace or I tried..." Fill in the blank, right? And that's because behavior change and habit formation is really hard to do on your own, right? And then when I looked at meditation, for thousands of years, it was practiced in communities. It was practiced with a teacher, with fellow students. And so it was like, "Okay, maybe there's something here. Like why can't we... We're evolving some of our life digitally but why can't we keep the community aspect, the support aspect?" And I think, you know, we see it now, like being able to go to somebody or having people that'll say, "Yeah, you're not alone in this experience." Like, "Oh, I'm suffering with COVID." Or Ukraine, or, you know, Roe V. Wade, or fill in the blank, whatever's gonna come next, right? Having somebody be

like, "I'm with you." Like, "I understand how hard that is." That in and of itself doesn't solve the problem, but it really lightens the load, right? And so the idea was the community can be such a critical piece to helping people with their mental and emotional wellbeing.

- You know, it's interesting that you talked about just the variance in people and the things that they need to have those experiences in community. You know, I've tried meditation, and it was interesting, it didn't click with me until somebody had mentioned that my view of what meditation should be was defined by all these external things and the way that my brain works and the way I meditate is much different. You know, I don't have that where I can sit and be still and be calm for 20 minutes at a time. It's different for me. I have a different experience with that but I wouldn't have learned that unless I had had some of these community conversations about, you know, how does it work for you? Like my brain's always going, how do you find the space and the calm? And so that really resonates with me that, you know, when you're on a journey together with somebody, it makes it so much better.

- Yeah, and I'll say one other thing like one of the great learnings for us, I mean, it's been seven years. That's a long time to be doing something, was like our mission was and is to help all people live happier, healthier, less stress lives. And the all part is really important 'cause it's not simply folks who are wealthy, folks on the coast, folks who are privileged, right? How do we reach into communities that haven't had access to mental health practices in a way that's culturally relevant, that's respectful, et cetera? Right? So the access part was really important. And when we started, I mentioned we were focused on meditation but what we learned, I mean, this is not... You know, some of these learnings are like, "Yeah, go figure." It's not necessarily for everyone, right? There might be other practices that could be more beneficial. So the same way, you know, you might go to the gym and do yoga and I might lift weights and my wife might run, right? You might love journaling, and somebody else might love cognitive behavioral therapy and somebody else might love breath work. We're agnostic when it comes to the practice, right? It's really do people have the tools that they need to navigate this crazy thing called life. So that's what one of the learnings, you know, over the years

- You know, the last two years have really taught us a lot about mental wellbeing and, you know, managing that ourselves, and setting boundaries. And I feel like towards the beginning of the pandemic, resiliency was like this hot topic, this buzzword, right? So now two years later, it seems like one of the most important skills anyone can have no matter, you know, what role you have for work, or what you do, you know, how do you go about building resiliency now amid everything we've experienced? 'Cause I think at the beginning of the pandemic it was like, "Oh yeah, resiliency's A, B, and C." I think it's something

way different now. And so, you know, what's your advice in that space?

- It's really hard. And by that, I mean like it's very easy for somebody to say, "Hey, you should do this." Right? And it's like, "Okay, that's great, but like I have three kids, I'm working two jobs I have like..." Right? And so I think if there's small things that one can incorporate into their life, like it might be, "Hey I don't have 10 minutes to do a morning meditation." Okay, do you have five minutes to write down, you know, to do some journaling, right? Just to get what what's out of your head onto paper. No? Okay, do you have two minutes to take a few breaths? Do you have 60 seconds to think of three things you're grateful for? Do you have a minute to just check in, right? What's going on? Right, can you incorporate that? Can you find community? Can you find... You know, therapists are really hard to find nowadays because there's such a huge need, right? Like the demand is so high and the supply is so low especially if you're a person of color or a member of the LGBTQ plus community or, you know, it's really hard to find a therapist. So are there tools and support that are available to you? whether that's through your company, or on your own, or any community organization. But I think it's... The thing for me is can I do something small on a day-to-day basis? So similar to exercise, right? Not, "Let me wait until Sunday and then do this one big workout." What can I do every day consistently? Even if it's small, just to keep the movement, right? And you do that long enough, and you end up getting to a place of good health, right? And now depends on the starting point, right? Like similar with mental health, like there are people that need more help than that, right? But if we're talking about the vast majority of people, right? Just doing something consistent can make a huge difference in terms of feeling really good, feeling centered and grounded on a day-to-day basis.

- You talked about, you know, building, building that muscle, and I think that's such the right framework that you're building resiliency. You know, the American psychological association, they've got this list, right? And it's things to do to build resiliency. So I'm gonna read it, it's not that long but, "prioritize relationships, join a group take care of your body, practice mindfulness, avoid negative outlets, help others, be proactive, move towards your goals, look for opportunities for self-discovery, keep things in perspective, accept change, maintain a hopeful outlook, and learn from your past." So as I was reading this list from the APA, I was like, okay, it doesn't seem like a long list but all those things can seem really overwhelming if you try to tackle all of them at once or maybe even four or five of them at once. You know, as I was reading through that list, what do you think are kind of the best ones to pull from that list that you might see the biggest impact in starting to strengthen that resiliency muscle?

- Great question. So as you said, there's a lot there, right? I think the right answer depends on the person, right? Like if we were just

giving this list to people, I would bet that people would resonate with different things, right? Some people would say, "Oh, for me, taking care of my body is really important." For other people, they might say, you know, "Being helpful of others, my church group or where I volunteer." Somebody might say, you know, "Moving towards my goals, right, I'm really career oriented." Or somebody else might say prioritizing relationships, right? "I take care of my, my child or my older parent." Right? So I think it's very person dependent. For me, I have this thing that I wrote probably back like probably 15, 20 years ago at this point called My Recipe for An Amazing Life, it's such a goofy name. And every time I like tell someone, I'm like, "I should probably just think of a different name." But that's what I called it, and so that's what I still call it. And it has things to do and things to remember and thinking about that list, there are differences between those. In other words, some of them are actions, right? Things to do for me are like get a good night's sleep, eat healthy, move my body consistently, things to remember, right? Looking at the list here might be maintain a hopeful outlook. Keep things in perspective, right? Like keeping things in perspective isn't a thing that you like check off your list as like you did it today. It's a continuous thing, right? So those are more things to remember. So I think when I heard that list, that's what came to mind for me was like just splitting the two between what are the things that I can do, what of the things that I need to, you know, incorporate into my mindset.

- What are your thoughts overall on how employers should be thinking about taking on mental wellness for their organizations?

- Employees are expecting different things from their employers now than they did pre-pandemic. And certainly than if you look, you know, generationally, than our parents did, you know, 20, 30, 40 years ago, right? And one of those things is to take care of their mental and emotional wellbeing. And so if you think about the spectrum from proactive care to reactive care, every company has, I shouldn't say every company, most companies have health insurance, right? So you have health insurance for when there's an issue, right? For you're being reactive. Most companies, all of the companies that we work with have an EAP, an employee assistance plan. Why? It's very helpful for when employees need assistance, right? So it's also reactive, right? What we as Journey do is we are a proactive tool. So we are a preventative mental health program. So not waiting until someone has an issue and needs to use the EAP or has a really more significant issue and needs prescriptions and things like that and needs to use the medical plan, right? What are we doing on a day-to-day basis to keep our employees mentally, emotionally fit? So I think having that support is helpful. But I'd say the other part, so that's like tools, resources, and support. The other part, which is equally, if not more important is having a culture where employees feel really seen and cared for and supported. And the way we think about that is reducing stigma so people can talk about mental health in the organization.

Creating permission, so people can take the time they need when they need it. You know, people burn out. That's a real thing. There there was an article in the New York times about it today. There's stats about it all the time. People burn out 'cause they just keep going, "Oh, I can just do a little more." Until they can't, and that's when it's a major issue. But maybe if we had hit pause somewhere along the way and just taken an extra day or two, skipped a meeting here or there, right? Said, "Hey, I can't do another zoom. I need to keep my camera off." Hey, I need to take this, you know, the rest of the day off." Right? To reenter, to rebalance, will make a huge difference. And then the third part of that culture shift is training managers, especially in this very strange hybrid, work from home environment. Managers need to be the eyes and ears. They need to be trained in terms of what to look for and how to respond skillfully, right? So it's, I think both of those things are very important. Providing the tools and working to shift the culture.

- Have you seen more organizations fold in mental wellbeing as part of their overall business strategy?

- Yes, absolutely. So one of the cool things... I probably don't take as much time as I should to like sit and think about this, and appreciate this. When we started seven years ago, you know, there were companies like Google and LinkedIn and Facebook and companies that you would think would provide these types of benefits because they provide all types of benefits right? And so they're very progressive. Now, the companies that we work with are established companies. I mean, we still work with of course lots of tech companies, but we get calls from you know, manufacturing companies, industrial companies, companies that are not the typical company you would expect to be offering proactive mental health support. And the reason they're doing it is it just makes sense from a dollars and cents standpoint, let's forget the, like, "We wanna help you." Just put it aside for a second, right? Let's just look at how much does burnout cost, how much does turnover cost? Healthcare costs, right? Like healthcare is really expensive when people use it for mental health, right? So again, putting aside the like, "Hey we wanna help people. This is a good thing to do just, you know, from a humanitarian standpoint." Make some business sense. And it's very easy to make that case to say, "Hey, we're gonna help." Like, "We had a clinical study with Humana that showed that participants in the Journey Program missed 51% less work in the month following the program versus the month prior." Right? Absenteeism was way down, right? Like that actually saves you a lot of money. And so companies, they know this, right? They're realizing this. And so now you're seeing companies where from the board level, to the CEO they're saying, "This is a priority and it's incorporated into our business strategy."

- I think we're gonna see this more and more, not only mental health and wellbeing, but also things like big corporate social

responsibility initiatives. I think like you mentioned before, they used to be kind of in these more modern organizations. And now they're becoming table stakes a lot of times with things that it's just the right thing to do. And it makes business sense, so why are we not doing it? You know, as we wrap up our discussion, what is something that you're excited about in this space as there is this more intense focus on providing just really strong wellbeing resources for employees?

- What I'm really excited about is this becoming table stakes. Like back when I started the company, right? Seven years ago, this was like novel and interesting, right? And so like, I'd go to a party with my friends who worked in finance or law. And like, it was interesting to talk about, oh, mental health, meditation. Like I want it to be not interesting. Like that's just a standard thing that if somebody said, "Oh, I sell insurance." You're like, "Okay, good for you." Right? Like, it's not like, "Oh, wow, tell me more." Right? "Oh, we have this." You know, "Every company has this." It's a standard offering that companies have, the same way they have health insurance, right? The same way. And when you think about other benefits, things like family leave, right? The definition of that is changing to include, you know, men, to include loss, to include other things, right? Like it just makes sense, right? And so here, same thing. How can we make it? So this is a standard essential benefit that every employee is expecting. It's not even a question. And every employer is providing.

- And I think gen Z is definitely gonna push us there for sure, 'cause they definitely expect it. And rightfully so, if somebody wants to learn more about you and Journey, how do they get in touch with you?

- Sure, website is [journey.live](http://journey.live). So J-O-U-R-N-E-Y.L-I-V-E. My email is Stephen, S-T-E-P-H-E-N@journey.live. I'm sure we have an Instagram and a LinkedIn that our marketing VP, Lindsay is gonna kill me for not mentioning, but maybe we can put it in like some kind of show notes or something, but yeah, you can find us in a bunch of places there.

- And I'll make sure to include that on the show notes. So if you're looking for that stuff and you're listening, that's where you can find it. Stephen, thanks so much for a few minutes of your time today.

- This was a lot of fun, thanks, Shari.

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