

More That Matters: Mental Health

With Alfonso Holmes

Diane (00:00):

Mental health matters now more than ever, so that's our subject today on More That Matters.

Clay (00:14):

We use the term mental health a lot these days, but that's only because it's so important to our community and individual health. In the US alone, we're facing a mental health crisis that must be addressed and resolved. Here to help us understand mental health at its core is Alfonso Holmes, a licensed mental health counselor. Thank you so much for being with us, Alfonso. Let's start at the beginning. This is a subject that I am very proud to say people are more comfortable having or, or talking about, and that is mental health. But let's give a clear definition. What is mental health?

Alfonso (00:49):

Um, so mental health, um, typically includes anything that's dealing with our emotions, um, our psychological state, um, our social wellbeing. Um, it pretty much affects how we think, feel and act. Um, so many times when people are having maybe stressful days, um, or they, you know, a long workload week, that's why I'm, I'm grateful for people being able to have mental health days now than they have in the past, um, because those things affect how we operate from day to day.

Clay (01:27):

Mm-hmm.

Alfonso (01:28):

So I mean, it wouldn't help to have someone at work and they're not at their best.

Clay (01:33):

Right. Right.

Diane (01:34):

And that is, and that is critical. I'm glad you said that because so many times people would, in the past, would kind of joke about, "Oh, I need a mental health day." No, that is important.

Clay (01:44):

It is.

Alfonso (01:44):

Mm-hmm.

Diane (01:44):

And that is critical not only to the individual, but to the work environment, to everybody that person has contact with. Do you find, Alfonso, that people when they talk about mental health, they think, "Well, you know, mental health, mental illness, mental health"? There is a distinct difference between the two, is there not?

Alfonso (02:06):

Absolutely. Um, mental health, um, are all the things that I described. Um, but mental illness are diagnosed conditions, um, that affect all of those things, so your thoughts, your behaviors. You know, you have different, you know, mood disorders, anxiety disorders, personality disorders, and psychotic disorders. Um, um, things that, that have been affected by the brain outside, um, um, stimuli. They have been affected... Uh, they they have affected the brain and have caused some, what people call maladaptive, um, or pathological behaviors, um, when it comes to mental illness. So that's why it's always important to, um, check with a therapist or a psychiatrist or even your doctor-

Diane (02:59):

Mm-hmm.

Alfonso (03:00):

... 'cause even at the doctor's office, they give you, um, assessments, um, to determine whether you are experiencing some anxiety, um, or depression.

Diane (03:10):

And some anxiety and some depression, that's not a bad thing.

Clay (03:14):

Right.

Alfonso (03:15):

Mm-hmm.

Diane (03:15):

It's just, it's not a bad thing. It's when it starts to tip the scale, when it goes to the... too far to the right or too far to the left, that's when we get into, as you said, maybe an assessment is necessary.

Alfonso (03:30):

Absolutely. Absolutely.

Clay (03:31):

It's so interesting, we hear so many discussions now about mental health and so many people are talking about it. And, and we're talking the last 15, 20 years, so this has not been going on for a long time. And I said in the open, I'm, I'm so proud that we are doing this, and I don't know how for so many generations we suppressed discussions about this-

Diane (03:53):

Right.

Clay (03:54):

... because there are tens of thousands of lives that could have been saved or, or maintained if, if people had, had the freedom or the license to just say, "I'm not okay."

Diane (04:07):

Or just comfortable saying it. Yeah.

Clay (04:07):

Right, right.

Alfonso (04:07):

Yeah.

Clay (04:07):

And, and, or even the stigma that goes along with it, it, you know, being co- I had a conversation with someone who runs an agency that deals with mental health a few, uh, health a few days ago and talked about that whole thing and the, the, the generation of being told, "Suck it up. That's just life-

Diane (04:22):

Hmm.

Clay (04:22):

... move on." And that ha- that's cost us lives over a long period of time. Um, talk about how mental health, if you will, Al- Alfonso, affects a person's physical health.

Alfonso (04:37):

Um, absolutely. When... because, because our brain sends out various types of, um, hormones, and when those hormones are, are in excess or insufficient-

Clay (04:51):

Mm-hmm.

Alfonso (04:51):

... um, from the, a normal, or I'll put those in quotations, "normal" amount required-

Clay (04:55):

Sure.

Alfonso (04:56):

... um, they many times cause stress on the body, um, which long-term stress causes emotional imbalance, um, which may lead to pains like hypertension, um, and cause emotional eating, which can lead to diseases like diabetes.

Clay (05:17):

Mm-hmm.

Diane (05:17):

And that really does kind of become a domino effect, doesn't it?

Alfonso (05:21):

Mm-hmm.

Diane (05:21):

When you have one thing that leads to another that leads to another, that sometimes might be contributing or contributing factors to that kind of a downward spiral.

Clay (05:31):

Oh, excessive drinking, drug addiction.

Diane (05:34):

Yes, yeah.

Clay (05:34):

All these things that may start-

Diane (05:34):

Smoking, yeah.

Clay (05:35):

... with, with having an undiagnosed mental issue. 'Cause I have found that sometimes people put these restrictions on themselves because of what they perceive other's reaction to them expressing themselves to be.

Alfonso (05:48):

Yeah.

Clay (05:48):

And I do believe in people being encouraged to say, "If you are not okay, it's okay to say you're not okay."

Diane (05:54):

Yes. Yeah.

Clay (05:54):

Right? Talk a little bit about that though, where we have grown to as a society where we are encouraging, as Di said, you know, mental health days and being able to do that and why that's so important.

Alfonso (06:04):

I think that it becomes, um, even though it's, it's changing the narrative of mental health, um, and it's, it's importance. Because there was a time where it was more so like a secret, like, "Don't tell anybody that you're having this issue because it's embarrassing to the family." Um, you know, we don't want, you know, eyes on us or see, see, see ourselves as imperfect, um, in any way. And it's evolving, um, like you mentioned before, like, through generations, coming from the generation where they're like, "Don't say that. You know, don't, um, tell people that you're, you know, tired all the time. They'll think you're crazy," and things of that nature.

Alfonso (06:49):

Um, I think it, it helps change the narrative because people are becoming more emotionally aware, especially, um, after a lot of the events over the past decade or so, um, like with politics, um, sexism, racism, all those other things that come along with that. Um, and people are more so being able to just sit with themselves a little bit more than previously. Because I mean, suicide rates have gone up.

Diane (07:24):

Oh, gosh. And I think we're gonna touch on that in just a little bit. Especially with young people, that is, oh, that is so heartbreaking. What, what are your thoughts as far as, I know we talk a lot about statistics, you know, but everyone, you know, there, there's... No one is, is a statistic, but people sometimes are grouped in that. What are your thoughts about the people, the number of people impacted by mental health issues, whether it be in the US or here in our home state in Louisiana, Alfonso?

Alfonso (08:00):

Um, well, I mean, I, I've read some, um, statistics, um, and there are more than (laughs)... It's, it's, it's an overwhelming amount, amount of numbers that are there.

Diane (08:11):

Yeah.

Alfonso (08:12):

Um.

Diane (08:12):

Hmm.

Alfonso (08:13):

But the reality of that is that, truly, these numbers change every day. And, and when I say change, they increase.

Diane (08:21):

They increase.

Alfonso (08:21):

Um.

Diane (08:22):

Going the wrong way then, oh gosh.

Alfonso (08:25):

So, yeah. 'Cause, 'cause couldn't really give a like specific number. Um, if I gave you a number yesterday, today's da- date, number would be dif- different.

Diane (08:33):

Hmm.

Alfonso (08:35):

You know, so there are very, like, high rates, um, of depression in teens or what people call tweens between the age of 11 and 17-

Clay (08:44):

Yeah.

Alfonso (08:45):

... um, suffering from major depressive episodes. Um-

Diane (08:50):

And they're so susceptible.

Alfonso (08:52):

Yeah.

Diane (08:52):

You know, the, the young people, those, oh my gosh. And they take everything to heart, and they're... Oh.

Clay (08:59):

Yeah, it's bad. You know, one of the statistics that Emma gave us talks about in 2020, that there were about 52.9, nearly 53 million people dealing with mental illness, and 2020 was such a, a, a, a crazy year. And, and I use that term in terms of the trauma that it created for humans of every spectrum because of the COVID virus-

Alfonso (09:20):

Mm-hmm.

Clay (09:20):

... and what we dealt with. Talk, can you talk a little bit about the impact on that even now in 2023? Because there's still people dealing with the trauma of loss and change, and transition based upon the coronavirus and its impact on society.

Alfonso (09:37):

Yeah. I definitely, um, and just even talking about, um, COVID, um, is definitely reflective for me because I was just saying, um, to a... I was speaking to a colleague and an old professor, um, from graduate school, um, and discussing how the culture has changed, um, uh, significantly since the beginning of, uh, COVID-19, or even during the, um, the shutdown.

Clay (10:08):

Yeah.

Alfonso (10:08):

Um, a lot of people have experienced, um, relationship issues that they never probably knew existed. Um, families have been even torn apart. Um, I, I get a lot of people who, yes, they are still grieving the loss of jobs, loss of family. Um, I think that's kind of the biggest (laughs) thing when people talk about, you know, um, the job market today-

Clay (10:32):

Yeah.

Alfonso (10:33):

... and how, you know, they'll lack... there, there's lacking help in certain, um, areas and certain places. But, um, someone had to, um, really bring it to perspective and say, "Well, let's remember that a lot of people died."

Clay (10:46):

Yeah.

Diane (10:46):

Yeah.

Clay (10:47):

Yeah.

Alfonso (10:47):

You know, we don't know that we don't... Really, we're still trying to grasp that concept of understanding that a lot of people died, not only died, but lost jobs-

Clay (10:57):

Yeah.

Alfonso (10:57):

... or refused to go back to jobs that were not, um, certain and well. So the culture of, of sitting with yourself even till to- today, um, has really... Um, I think, I really, honestly believe social media has a really big impact-

Diane (11:14):

Absolutely, yeah.

Alfonso (11:17):

... um, on this subject of since COVID has become a thing.

Diane (11:20):

And you know, as you were saying too, everything that happened in 2020, 2021, that isolation factor-

Alfonso (11:27):

Yes.

Diane (11:28):

... you know, so many people working from home, and people who are type A personalities, they thrive on other people. They do... And it was just, it was so hard and, and has been hard because a lot of workplaces have changed the dynamic of what they do now. So that, that, that all feeds on your mental health. Are you finding that people are more comfortable now since it seems like, you know, everyone has been touched in some way, shape or form because of COVID and because of all this, the mental health, not only here, but you know, worldwide? I mean, this is the pandemic. Are people more forthcoming about getting help, being more open to help, being able to admit, I've got a little bit of an issue here? Don't know if it's an issue, but if it is, help me. I, I, I need somebody to talk to.

Alfonso (12:17):

Yeah. I would definitely say even from a personal standpoint is that a lot of people have been, like, calling me-

Diane (12:25):

Yeah.

Alfonso (12:25):

... more than before, far more than before. Um, even some of my colleagues say that they're swamped. And it's, it's unfortunate because, um, sometimes because, you know, you only have so many therapists to care for so many people. Um, and yes, people are more forthcoming about what may be going on with them or what, like you said, what they may think may be going on, um, uh, with themselves or even with their family or their connections with other people. Um, a lot of people

have, you know, I, I like to call it a... now it seems more of a healing culture, like let's, you know, let's heal. Let's really-

Diane (13:06):

Oh, I like that. That sounds good. Yeah.

Alfonso (13:08):

... you know, do this, let's do this thing that we have avoided, or we've been told to avoid for so long, um, so that we can be in a place where we can enjoy life a little bit better and appreciate it more-

Diane (13:21):

Right.

Alfonso (13:22):

... because again, a lot of people lost their lives. So I think people are more, um, more appreciative and more, uh, grateful than they were before.

Diane (13:32):

And I think sometimes, you know, that people, those of us who are here, we're talking about this, having an open and honest conversation, there's a little bit when you have that guilt of survivor.

Clay (13:43):

Right.

Diane (13:43):

You know, you just, that's, that's sometimes with a lot of people, that is an impact that it's hard to kind of move forward-

Clay (13:54):

Right.

Diane (13:54):

... and continue to move on. So not only with the conversation and being open and honest, how do you, how are you open and honest with yourself when you say, "Oh gosh, I, I'm thinking I'm starting to get, uh, a little bit of a situation here, you know?"

Clay (14:09):

Yeah.

Diane (14:09):

When does stress, we all have stress-

Clay (14:13):

Yeah.

Diane (14:13):

I mean, that's (laughs), you know, that's the, you know, that's the state of a human being, of life, but when does it become something more than stress? What do we need to look for? Our listeners, you know, stressful lives with, with family, children, workplace, all of that, but when does it become more, Alfonso?

Alfonso (14:29):

Mm-hmm. And, and like you said, like, a stress, anything can cause stress, right?

Diane (14:35):

Absolutely.

Alfonso (14:36):

Anything can cause stress. I, uh, I get stressed when I'm driving, okay.

Diane (14:42):

(laughs) Amen to that, brother. Oh geez, yeah.

Alfonso (14:46):

(laughs) 'Cause I honestly forget, I feel like some people forgot to drive, how to drive-

Diane (14:48):

Yeah, yeah.

Alfonso (14:48):

... after the shutdown. Um, but yeah. But so, stress becomes an issue, um, uh, when it starts to become harmful is when it starts to affect your day-to-day life, you know?

Diane (15:03):

Mm-hmm.

Alfonso (15:03):

It, it affects you daily. Um, sometimes at home, you know, when you may have forgot to cook dinner or forgot to eat because you've been working all day. Um, maybe, you know, not remembering things as often as you used to, um, or even like not being available, not only just to yourself but to those that you love and care about.

Clay (15:29):

Right.

Alfonso (15:30):

Um, and also when it affects your health. Um, that was one of the biggest things in one of my, uh, previ- well, past clients. Like, he didn't start coming to therapy until stress was actually affecting his physical health-

Diane (15:45):
Hmm.

Alfonso (15:46):
... because his doctor is like, "You're starting to have heart issues."

Diane (15:49):
Oh, gosh.

Alfonso (15:51):
Um, and you know, a lot of this is, is phy- Although it's physical, it's also psychological as well.

Diane (15:59):
Mm-hmm.

Alfonso (16:00):
You know, because of stress that he was having at work, at home, et cetera, et cetera, but always been told, you know, "Be a man."

Clay (16:10):
Right.

Alfonso (16:11):
You know, you're supposed to be able to take it.

Clay (16:12):
Right.

Alfonso (16:12):
You're supposed to be able to handle, you know, take care of your family. A man's supposed to be able to take care of his home. You know, he didn't think that this was something that was, he needed, something he needed, you know?

Clay (16:23):
That's the stigma that goes along with-

Diane (16:26):
Yeah.

Clay (16:26):

... asking for help or even talking about it and, and these fake, almost cartoonish caricatures of what masculinity should be versus the (laughs) reality of how it impacts you internally. Let's talk-

Diane (16:38):

Yeah. A lot of people put on a mask, Clay.

Clay (16:40):

Oh, yeah.

Diane (16:40):

You know, they're fine, they're fine, they're fine to the outside world, to everybody.

Clay (16:43):

Right.

Diane (16:44):

And inside, it's almost like they're imploding-

Clay (16:47):

Yeah.

Diane (16:47):

... or on the, on the verge of imploding, but... And that's what I think is so critical too-

Clay (16:51):

Sure, sure.

Diane (16:51):

... that other people who know them, it's like, now there's something-

Clay (16:54):

Something's not right.

Diane (16:55):

Yeah. Let's talk about it. We need to have time for one another-

Clay (16:58):

Right.

Diane (16:58):

... especially when you're talking about the isolation factor.

Clay (17:01):

Mm-hmm.

Diane (17:01):

We're all trying to reconnect now, and it's... that is, that's an important factor.

Clay (17:05):

You know, it's, and I'd love to hear this from the, the perspective of a clinician, someone who, who does this. There is such toxicity out there right now.

Diane (17:13):

Mm-hmm.

Clay (17:14):

Especially, hate to say it, I know people are going to go, here you go, on social media-

Diane (17:19):

Oh.

Clay (17:19):

.. There's so much of it. And I think it's important for people to have boundaries for themselves-

Alfonso (17:24):

Mm-hmm.

Clay (17:25):

... not just for others. Like, okay, I'm not... I'm only going to go this far in terms of accumulating information on social, or I'm on- I'm on- I'm gonna step away from watching the news, uh, for a day to protect my own mental health.

Diane (17:35):

Yeah.

Clay (17:36):

Or, uh, or maybe I'll spend a day, uh, i- in a quiet place to make certain that my mental is okay. I think you have to be proactive-

Diane (17:43):

Yes, you do.

Clay (17:44):

... to protect your own mental health and not just hope it's gonna go okay. Hope is certainly not a plan, so (laughs) uh, just going there. What about triggers for anxiety? 'Cause, 'cause I know for a lot of people listening, some things just happen, right-

Diane (17:56):
Yep. Mm-hmm.

Clay (17:57):
... that you don't see coming. But are there trig- are there proactive measures a person can take to avoid anxiety?

Alfonso (18:04):
Um, honestly, yes, there are.

Clay (18:09):
Okay, good.

Diane (18:09):
That's encouraging.

Alfonso (18:09):
(laughs)

Diane (18:09):
That is encouraging.

Clay (18:12):
I thought that was going the, the other way for a second. You had me worried.

Diane (18:17):
Yeah.

Alfonso (18:17):
But I was gonna add an addition of, of saying, understanding that, um, anxiety, ha- having anxiety about certain specific things-

Clay (18:24):
Mm-hmm.

Alfonso (18:25):
... um, is normal.

Clay (18:27):

Okay.

Alfonso (18:28):

You know?

Diane (18:28):

That's a good, that's a good thing to mention, yes.

Clay (18:31):

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Alfonso (18:31):

Understanding that, that anxiety is normal.

Diane (18:31):

Yeah, it's normal.

Alfonso (18:34):

I think, um, there are things, there may be levels of anxiety, higher levels of anxiety that may stem from a lot of things that, the unresolved issues, right, sometimes?

Clay (18:45):

Yeah.

Alfonso (18:46):

Um, whether it be adverse childhood experiences. Even inheriting it from generational trauma, you know, um, that's a thing. Like, that's something that a lot of people may not be aware of, of what that means. Um, and honestly, sometimes diet plays a role in people's anxiety.

Clay (19:06):

Get out.

Alfonso (19:07):

What they eat, what they consume, you know, may trigger, um, some, um, feeling of, feelings of nervousness and anxiousness. Um, and also-

Diane (19:16):

And that-

Alfonso (19:17):

... being able... Like, being in a place where you adopt unhealthy, um, patterns. But, yeah, definitely, um, preventing anxiety, um, about other things is, is about changing, reframing your mindset, right? Um, like, the fear factor of, like, specific things, um, because it stems from other things. So we, many

times we're triggered, um, because of things that we have experienced or things that we have been taught or learned. Um, and so it's reframing your relationship with anxiety.

Diane (19:50):

Hmm.

Alfonso (19:50):

Right?

Diane (19:53):

I like that term, reframing a relationship.

Alfonso (19:56):

Yep.

Diane (19:56):

And when you were talking about, you know, food and eating, that's where those eating disorders come from.

Alfonso (20:01):

Mm-hmm.

Diane (20:01):

Because it's so, sometimes I think a person might feel they're so out of control, that that is something they can control, but they're way off the scale of how they go about doing it, Alfonso.

Alfonso (20:12):

Mm-hmm, absolutely. I mean, and like I said, many times people, they emotionally eat.

Diane (20:19):

Yes.

Alfonso (20:20):

You know, because it gives them comfort. That's why we have what we call comfort food.

Diane (20:25):

Mm-hmm.

Alfonso (20:26):

You know? Um, and it's nothing wrong with having comfort food because you... I mean, the issue, you can do things in moderation.

Diane (20:34):

Right.

Alfonso (20:36):

You know? But it, when you find yourself daily, you know, eating things that may, it mentally not... they have an adverse effect on your body and your health, then that becomes an issue.

Clay (20:47):

Glad you said that 'cause I can't give up steak.

Diane (20:53):

(laughs)

Clay (20:53):

So, uh...

Diane (20:53):

That's his comfort food, okay. Now we know.

Clay (20:54):

That's right (laughs). Um, you talked about a client earlier, and therapy, again, is one of those things now that people are more open to talk about or even express that... I was in a conversation with someone recently who had just gone through a significant transition and talked openly about seeing their therapist to work through the emotions. What role does therapy play in helping someone address a mental health issue or mental illness?

Alfonso (21:20):

So, therapy gives a person someone to, um, process from an unbiased standpoint, right? 'Cause a lot of people will say, "Well, you know what? I have a friend, my best friend does therapy. You know, they talk to me and..." But it, it's still open for bias to come in, right?

Diane (21:41):

Right, yeah.

Alfonso (21:42):

'Cause they've known this person for X amount of years.

Clay (21:43):

Right.

Diane (21:45):

And you don't want to talk about some of your private things to friends and family.

Clay (21:48):

Sure, sure.

Alfonso (21:48):

Right.

Diane (21:48):

You don't wanna go there.

Clay (21:49):

Right.

Alfonso (21:50):

Yeah, absolutely. And so, you know, what it does is give... And, and being an expert on mental health and mental wellness, it helps to give that, um, expertise of, like, understanding, you know, behaviors and emotions and things of that nature. Because I mean, people go to their doctor when they're not feeling well, right?

Clay (22:13):

Mm-hmm.

Alfonso (22:14):

They get a six month or year checkup, you know?

Clay (22:18):

Yeah.

Diane (22:18):

Right, yeah.

Alfonso (22:18):

You know, so why not be able to do the same with a therapist, you know?

Clay (22:22):

For your mind.

Diane (22:22):

Mm-hmm.

Alfonso (22:23):

I mean, or even more often for some people, you know?

Clay (22:27):

Sure.

Diane (22:29):

And you know, I've had friends that have been in therapy, and I have one particular friend who just, just said, "It literally saved my life."

Clay (22:37):

Wow.

Diane (22:38):

It literally saved my life. Because she said, "Diane, you're in a room. You're one on one." And like you said, no judgment, no nothing. And the room was her safe place.

Clay (22:49):

Mm-hmm.

Diane (22:49):

She said, "I could cry. I could scream. I could laugh, and no judgment." And the ther- She said, "You have no idea how much it helped me." And she said she stayed in it for quite a while because she said, in her life, as she was progressing and getting better and getting to a better place, everything changed, you know? She had people say, "You know, stay with it, stay with it, because you're not in the same place you were six months ago."

Clay (23:17):

Right.

Diane (23:17):

Six months later, you're doing better, but you still have this little challenge six months later. So she was... I have goosebumps just thinking about how well she is and what a beautiful woman she is. And she attributes it, you know, to the mental health. She knew there was an issue. She went and she said, "That safe space in my therapist's office," she said, "I have tears just thinking about how much my therapist helped me." So thank you-

Clay (23:43):

Wow.

Diane (23:44):

... on behalf of so many people of what you do-

Clay (23:46):

Right.

Diane (23:47):

... and what therapy can do for people.

Clay (23:49):

I, I... you know, that's so well said and such a great story. And, and again, you know, I do a lot of work in, in the community with kids and young people of, of all ages.

Diane (24:00):

Mm-hmm.

Clay (24:00):

And you see the struggles that these kids are going, going through and the, the weight that is on them because of society and things now. And you find that there are younger individuals seeking therapy and, or talking to a counselor to deal with what's happening with them?

Alfonso (24:22):

Um, I do see that there are a lot of... and, and just from my experience, I, I get a lot of parents who say, "My son, or my daughter, needs someone to talk to. Um, I notice this is going on." You know, which is a big step for parents, so-

Clay (24:42):

Yeah.

Diane (24:42):

Absolutely.

Clay (24:43):

Yep.

Alfonso (24:43):

It's a... yeah. Um, 'cause I, I, I wouldn't have gotten that before, um, as much, rather, before. Um, that's a big step for parents to say that, you know, "I noticed some things. I see where may, I may have gone wrong with my child." So you know, they're open. I had a conversation... I always ask that question. I ask the parent, like, "Are they open to doing this?" You know, because otherwise, we can be sitting at a screen or sitting in front of each other just looking at each other-

Clay (25:16):

Right.

Alfonso (25:16):

... you know...

Clay (25:18):

Right.

Alfonso (25:18):

... talking around in circles. And, and sometimes it takes that, right?

Diane (25:22):

Right.

Alfonso (25:22):

'Cause it takes their uncomfartability and getting comfortable to get to a point where it's to say, "Well, you know what? I don't like my relationship with my parents." Or I don't like... I'm having relationship issues, and I don't feel comfortable talking to anybody else about it, you know? Um, but I do notice that, um, younger, um, people are definitely, um, they're aware and they're more, um, honestly (laughs), in my own opinion is that they, they seem more emotionally available-

Clay (25:57):

Yeah.

Alfonso (25:57):

... or intelligent than I've seen, like, children in the past or even when I was younger. Um-

Clay (26:05):

To what do you attribute that?

Alfonso (26:06):

So they, they don't mind. They know all of the terminology.

Clay (26:08):

Sure.

Alfonso (26:08):

I think maybe social media has, uh, informed them.

Diane (26:08):

I bet so. Yeah, yeah.

Alfonso (26:08):

Yeah.

Clay (26:12):

Yeah. I was gonna ask what you, what you attribute that to, but that's probably it, social media, because there's, that's so... They're so into those phones.

Diane (26:19):

Oh, gosh.

Clay (26:19):

And there's so much in front of them.

Diane (26:21):

They're part of their body.

Clay (26:22):

That's right (laughs).

Diane (26:22):

Yeah.

Clay (26:22):

And they're dialoguing with it.

Alfonso (26:23):

It's a major influence.

Diane (26:24):

Yeah. Yes, exactly.

Clay (26:26):

Right. You know, wha- what can someone do on a day-to-day basis to address their mental health, some tools that you would equip our listeners with to make sure they're okay? Or even if they're not okay, things that they can do or, or reach for that would help them. Whether it's a resource like yourself or something else, what tools do you have?

Alfonso (26:46):

So I, I always start with the basics, honestly, um, things that people wouldn't imagine, like, oh my God, I can't believe a simple thing as like the, the way to really express myself, or turn around, you know, some of my behaviors in thinking. But, um, some... the simplest thing is, is sitting quietly in a room alone. Um, and I, and I know that sometimes (laughs) it may sound, um, when people think about that, it may sound, it may sound like they're in an asylum or a padded-wall room or something like that, but it's, it... Those, those techniques or tools were not, uh, well-formed. But it, the idea was to give a person time to, to sit with themselves-

Clay (27:32):

Right.

Alfonso (27:32):

... and actually, notice their thoughts and their emotions, um, because they matter, right? Your, you, your mind or, is... You're speaking and thinking of things in your head that are probably likely important or they're probably something that bother, things that bother you. So I never... I always

encourage journaling, you know? And it doesn't have to be... I always say, "Look, journal sometimes. It doesn't have... It's not time sensitive, you know?"

Diane (27:59):

Mm-hmm.

Clay (28:00):

Right.

Alfonso (28:00):

Uh, it's not an assignment. I give homework, right? Um, journaling is one of those things, and it could be writing three things that you're grateful for, right? Um, taking a walk outside. I think a lot of people start, start to, um, pick up on that. Especially during, uh, the, the beginning of, like, uh, COVID and the shutdown, people were like saying, "Well, I need to walk more, um, get outside, get some sun." Meditating, yoga, weightlifting. Um, doing mindful things such as, you know, mindfully eating your food, smell your food, taste it, look at it, pay attention to it.

Diane (28:40):

Mm-hmm.

Alfonso (28:41):

Um, sip your favorite tea or coffee or whatever, you know? So those simple things matter, you know? Because a lot of times we're just working and moving and, you know, doing, you know chores and taking care of our kids. And you know, it's like, it's, it's, it's, uh, business as usual.

Diane (29:03):

Right.

Alfonso (29:03):

You know?

Diane (29:03):

Right.

Clay (29:04):

The whole day has gone by, and you don't notice.

Diane (29:06):

Yes.

Clay (29:06):

You know what-

Diane (29:06):

It, it's the appreciation of life.

Clay (29:08):

... I love, I love lunching alone a few times a month.

Diane (29:11):

Yeah.

Clay (29:11):

That's like, there's nothing better than that, just like going and having-

Diane (29:16):

Be- because you're with your, with yourself. Yeah.

Clay (29:16):

Oh, it's so, it's so great.

Diane (29:16):

And it's quiet.

Clay (29:17):

Find a corner somewhere and just have a great meal, not always a steak meal, by the way, Diane.

Diane (29:21):

Not always (laughs). You know, I've even heard the saying, Alfonso, the, the biggest difference between hope and despair is sometimes just a good night's sleep, just to sleep.

Clay (29:33):

Yeah.

Diane (29:34):

And to get quality sleep, restorative sleep, rest your brain. You're weary, you're tired. You feel almost, you know, I can't go on. It's hopeless. And you wake up, and you're refreshed-

Clay (29:45):

Mm-hmm.

Diane (29:45):

... if you allow yourself to be. You know, we're talking about, before we end our, this session-

Clay (29:49):

Sure.

Diane (29:50):

... because this is very important for our listeners.

Clay (29:51):

Fantastic.

Diane (29:52):

Um, let's just, let's just touch a little bit on, like you said, the tweens and the teens and the low self-esteem that we're hearing in the news and the high suicide rate among this group of young people. What, what can be done about that?

Alfonso (30:07):

I- it's...

Diane (30:12):

I know it's a hard question, I'm sorry. I just... yeah.

Alfonso (30:14):

(laughs) It's, it's an ongoing issue, okay?

Diane (30:18):

Yeah.

Alfonso (30:18):

Um, but what I, I notice that helps most, because honestly, we were all teenagers at one point, right?

Diane (30:27):

Yep.

Clay (30:28):

Yep.

Alfonso (30:30):

We're all children at one point.

Clay (30:30):

Yep.

Alfonso (30:30):

Um, I dare to say that one of the biggest things that we would ha- would desire or have desired or enjoyed is when we were listened to, not heard, but listened to, you know? And when, and listening does not only mean with your ears. It also means with your eyes.

Diane (30:54):

Mm-hmm.

Alfonso (30:56):

Right?

Diane (30:56):

Right.

Alfonso (30:58):

And your feedback, that's, you know, that's why I encourage parents, "I may be seeing your child, but I need to see you too."

Clay (31:06):

Mm-hmm.

Diane (31:06):

You need to connect.

Alfonso (31:08):

'Cause you are there with them in their lives, and they, you're raising them to become adults and upstanding individuals in society. Um, listening to your children is very important because like... and even paying li- paying attention to their lifestyles and their lives, just to be aware of what's going on in society. Um, and I mean, obviously it's through media, social media now, um, more so than watching the news or reading the newspaper, you know, like people used to do. Um, it's being aware of what's going on so that you can connect, you know? Because they need us, you know (laughs)?

Clay (31:49):

Right.

Alfonso (31:52):

And it's not just, and it's not only parents, you also have teachers that... I mean, they're, they're with them most of the day, five days a week, you know? So that also is the parents' connection to the other adults that are raising them, honestly. You know, so-

Clay (32:07):

Uh, I want to ask here as, as we kind of round to a close a bit, for... because you've given so much great information ab- about this on, on multi-levels, not just teens, but for adults as well, for us adults as well. It can be hard if you notice someone is dealing with something, but are... 'cause as you said, some anxieties are normal, right?

Alfonso (32:31):

Mm-hmm.

Clay (32:31):

Some stresses are normal. And especially if you drive around the streets of Baton Rouge or New Orleans, you'll be stressed a little bit. But what are some things to look for if you are thinking someone actually may be on the brink of crisis or, or some really terrible mental health issue?

Alfonso (32:50):

Um, I, I always say, look for some... look for anything that you may deem as, um, concerning.

Clay (33:02):

Okay.

Alfonso (33:02):

Right? Acknowledge it, but be kind in the same-

Clay (33:06):

Yeah. Yeah, yeah. No judgment.

Alfonso (33:09):

No judgment, right. Be kind. You know, think about how you would want someone to say something to you-

Clay (33:14):

Right.

Alfonso (33:15):

... if they notice something, um, abnorm- what they consider abnormal, um, and ask, right? Because the biggest thing you don't wanna do is, like, say, "You should go see a therapist." Right?

Clay (33:26):

Right, right.

Alfonso (33:28):

That's not... that, that can be very difficult for the person who you may be concerned about. Um, I would say know, pay attention to some, some of the signs and symptoms and things that we look for and assessments we ask about, um, have you been under- you know, uh, have you had appetite issues, lack of appetite, or have you over- been overeating? Um, is it hard to go to sleep, stay asleep or fall asleep? You know? Um, are you more irritable around people than normal? Um, you know, somebody lashes out or is angry all the time or if they're, like, withdrawing. Maybe they're, like, away for, for like long periods of time. You know, it's good to just check in. Honestly, you can... And even a person who don't have those symptoms should still be checked in on. Those of us who may look normal-

Clay (34:24):

Right.

Alfonso (34:24):

... and don't have any, or may seem we don't have mental health issues, the people who are smiling and walking around and in good moods also need-

Diane (34:33):

That's exactly right.

Clay (34:34):

Right.

Diane (34:35):

Yeah. We talked about those masks.

Clay (34:36):

Mm-hmm.

Alfonso (34:37):

Exactly. Like, "How is your mental health?"

Diane (34:38):

Yeah. And sometimes we're just, we're so, we're just so prone to say what people wanna hear.

Clay (34:44):

Mm-hmm.

Diane (34:45):

You know, we do, we do that well. We're actors and actresses. We, we know what people want to hear, what's expected of us, so we, you know, we're good at that.

Clay (34:53):

Right.

Diane (34:53):

And I, 'cause I know so many times that, y- you know, when I would have a little issue or have something going on, I'd call my mom and dad. And you know, my, my dad would maybe be, he wasn't available, and I'd talk to my mom. And mom said, "Well, you know, she's doing good. She's doing good." My dad would say, "But how does she sound? How does she sound?"

Clay (35:13):

Ah.

Diane (35:13):
Because your voice-

Clay (35:17):
Yeah.

Diane (35:17):
... you know, you can do a lot about, "Oh yeah, everything's fine. That's fine." But y- you know, people who know you, they know the, the tell, the signs, the tells. They know that. You know, before we close too, one last question I think that I'd like to ask you. If a person does need to get help, if a person does need a therapist, because that is critical for that patient to have the therapist or the person to have the therapist, that's a good fit.

Clay (35:42):
Right.

Diane (35:42):
Because you don't wanna just go talking to just anybody, and you think, "Well, I didn't feel comfortable."

Clay (35:47):
Right.

Diane (35:47):
How does a person go about doing that, Alfonso? How does a person go about finding help or finding a therapist that will fit them?

Alfonso (35:57):
Um, I always encourage to use the, um, many counselor Rolodex of internet, um, psychologytoday.com. You have, um, Melanin Mental Health for people of color or, or otherwise. Um, Therapy Den. Um, for crises, you know, now we have 988.

Diane (36:19):
Yes.

Alfonso (36:20):
And, you know, we have 211 for, uh, referrals.

Diane (36:23):
Yeah.

Alfonso (36:24):

And also, if they have insurance, to call their insurance. They, they will give them a whole list or, or send them a whole list of options of providers. Um, and even, and like, there, there is clinics that actually have, um, therapy available to anyone, even if you don't have insurance. You may not have anything, but they will do it at, at little to no cost. You know, you will have some sessions. They will, they will set up something, um, with you because, you know, it's, it's necessary. But I always tell people to do a consult.

Diane (36:59):

Right.

Alfonso (36:59):

You know, you can do a consultation with the therapist and just to see, you know, ask questions.

Clay (37:08):

Right.

Alfonso (37:08):

You know, write the questions down before you even have, meet with that therapist and ask questions and say, "Hey look, you know, what do you, what are you good at? Like, what do you do? Like, you know, how does this work?" You know, um, maybe you... And you can ask a therapist, like, their background, their professional background, and they may give you, they may give you some personal, you know, things about themselves, but not too deep. But just kinda see where you may fit, you know? We do consul- I do, um, free consultations, um, currently, so you know, if someone needs to have a consultation with me, I mean, they have 15 minutes, a 15-minute timeframe to just, you know, talk to me about anything that they want-

Diane (37:51):

Mm-hmm.

Clay (37:51):

That's right.

Alfonso (37:51):

... and I'll just give my feedback to them.

Clay (37:54):

That's great. And, uh, look, the work that you do is as essential as what law enforcement and teachers are doing-

Diane (38:01):

Exactly.

Clay (38:01):

... in communities right now. It is, it is very essential and, and I'll say again, I am increasingly proud of a society that accepts people being able to talk about not being okay and then us reaching for them before they do something to themselves or to others. And, and that is important. We still have a long way to go, but-

Diane (38:23):

We're getting there.

Clay (38:24):

... but at least we are moving now.

Diane (38:26):

We're getting... moving in the right direction.

Clay (38:28):

Yep, yep.

Diane (38:28):

And, Alfonso, I'd just like to say, again, thank you. Thank you for being with us today. And as a counselor, you please take care of yourself.

Clay (38:36):

Absolutely.

Diane (38:37):

You take care of your mental health-

Clay (38:38):

Yep.

Alfonso (38:38):

Thank you.

Diane (38:39):

... because you are critical-

Clay (38:40):

Yep.

Diane (38:40):

... to all of us.

Clay (38:41):

Yep.

Diane (38:41):

And this has been such a, a wonderful conversation-

Clay (38:43):

Absolutely.

Diane (38:45):

... as Clay and I've been talking about. Hopefully, our listeners have heard what they need to hear to take care of themselves-

Clay (38:51):

Right.

Diane (38:52):

... to take care of their friends and their families. And we can't thank you enough for spending this time with us. And again, to all of our listeners, we appreciate you all who joined us today for this special edition of More That Matters.