

MASTERS by Winn Claybaugh, November 2022
Sam Eaton
Recklessly Alive: Addressing Suicide Prevention



Sam Eaton, is an author, speaker, and founder of Recklessly Alive, a suicide prevention organization sprinting toward a world with zero deaths by suicide. Interviewed by **Winn Claybaugh**, Sam shares his insights on why people are afraid to discuss suicide, how to support someone struggling with suicidal thoughts, and how to develop a mental wellness “toolbox.” As you navigate this topic, please remember to care for yourself. If you need support, one resource is the National Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, available 24/7 by calling or texting 988 or visiting www.988lifeline.org.

WC: Hi, this is Winn Claybaugh. As we navigate the subject matter today, I encourage you to care for yourself. If you need to reach out to speak with someone, please do so. One resource is the National Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, available 24 hours a day, by calling or texting 988. You can also reach out through their website at 988lifeline.org.

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WC: Hi everybody, Winn Claybaugh here and welcome to this issue of MASTERS. I am thrilled when I come across people such as this person that I get to interview today. By the way, his name is Sam Eaton and I'll tell you a little bit more about him in a minute but I'm thrilled because these are topics that I absolutely want to share with our audience. Yes, MASTERS is all about sharing the positive and sharing the fun, sharing the funny, getting to know people. I've interviewed celebrities, I've interviewed all kinds of people in the last 23 years and I also love being able to share very, very worthy information that's going to help people, that's going to absolutely be a resource for themselves, for their loved ones, for their circle of friends, for their communities, and that's what today is all about. So, Sam Eaton is an author, speaker and founder of Recklessly Alive—again, I love that title, that name, we'll talk about that—which is a suicide prevention organization sprinting toward a world with zero deaths by suicide. Sam has spoken at over 150 events throughout the U.S., sharing his story of battling depression and suicidal thoughts. Sam's first book, *Recklessly Alive: What My Suicide Attempt Taught Me About God and Living Life to the Fullest*, was released in January 2021 and reached the top 100 bestselling books on Amazon. He has amassed more than 125,000 followers on Instagram (and we hope to boost that a lot with this interview) and over 80,000 followers on TikTok under the handle @recklesslyalive. Sam's platform is around mental health, self-care, self-talk, and suicide prevention. So, I want everybody to know that, yes, this is a very sensitive topic but I also want you to know that nothing graphic will be shared

during this interview. Sam has been so wonderful in sharing his personal story, and that's not easy to do: to be transparent and share your stories of falling down and standing back up and what that looks like and what that means. I've said this over and over again: that I believe the best teachers, the best mentors, the best heroes are storytellers and oftentimes the story that we do tell is that story of personal struggle. Yes, we share the struggles and the stories of other people because those inspire us as well but when we, as leaders and as friends, as lovers, as family members, can be open and honest and again transparent in sharing our struggles, that's when we truly, truly build relationships, have meaningful impact, and that's what today is all about. So, Sam, thank you so much and welcome to MASTERS.

Sam: Thank you so much for having me.

Winn: So, again, you say that your platform is around mental health, self-care, self-talk, and suicide prevention. Now, I have a whole bunch of questions, but just with that being your platform, can you share with us a little bit about what that means?

Sam: So, I attempted suicide when I was 23. I'm 34 now, and at the time I felt completely alone in what I was facing and I didn't understand the statistics that one in six people in the U.S. will battle depression at some point, one in five people will battle mental illness, and just how prevalent that was. And I truly just needed someone to show me that this was okay, show me how to move through some of that stuff, give me little tips, a little encouragement, especially when my self-talk was so poor. I needed a voice and a presence in my life and so I wake up every day and try to be that for other people who might be in a dark place or they're trying to care for someone who's in a dark place so they can have a better understanding of what that person might be going through and also they know that there's so much hope and help available to anyone who is struggling.

Winn: Can I ask you, for you, then, what was that voice that you say that you needed?

Sam: Truthfully, part of it, for me, was God or just this idea of God: that something bigger than I was, that my life had more purpose than I thought. You know, I kind of believed that I was an accident and that I shouldn't exist. But at the time I didn't tell a single—I told two people in the whole world that I'd ever felt suicidal. The first one I told immediately cried and I saw this pain that I was causing her by sharing what I was going through so I didn't tell anyone again for five or six years, until the school that I was teaching in, we lost three students, a teacher, and a principal in about a year and a half and I was like, "I have to do something. I have to do something to help this massive issue in our world." I didn't know what that would be, so truthfully, I didn't have that voice for a long time but I do now and I'm so thankful that I get to be that for others.

Winn: So, talking about the ways that you fight depression and why it's a difficult illness to face, can you give us some insight on that?

Sam: Absolutely. I had this breakthrough moment when I realized someone fighting depression is really battling a war on three different fronts. You're fighting what's happening in your physical body. That might be a chemical imbalance. That's how you're caring for yourself: nutrition and exercise is one of the biggest parts. I have to move my body every day just to feel pretty good. The way that we sleep, what we are eating, hydration. All of these things contribute to how you feel in your body, which is so tied to your mental health. There's a mental side of this discussion, which is things like trauma. Have you processed the worst things that you've been through? Talk therapy was really important in some of that for me. Learning how to set boundaries for yourself; not letting people in your life treat you poorly and learning how to stand up for yourself and the way that you talk to yourself. Are you your biggest fan, your biggest cheerleader, or are you constantly beating yourself up? And then there's a spiritual side, and that doesn't have to be a religion for anyone listening to this, but just this idea that maybe you're here for something more than just to work a job for 50 years and die. Like maybe there's a greater reason for your existence, whether that is helping other people or just maybe love is what you believe in and just being a source of light to the people in your world. But deciding some sort of something beyond yourself also is a part of this discussion and mental health. So, you're battling all three and that's one of the reasons why it's hard to give someone advice or even hard to find at times because there's no perfect answer. It's kind of this process of trial and error.

Winn: I was told many, many years ago that—and this made a lot of sense to me—that mental illness is the one disease where people can get mad at you for having that disease.

Sam: Mm.

Winn: They don't necessarily get mad at you for having cancer or for struggling with other illnesses, but when it comes to a struggle with mental health, that's the disease people get mad at you for having. But how did that thought, if that rings true to you, how did that help you navigate or actually maybe slow you down from seeking out the support and help that you needed?

Sam: Absolutely. I mean no one can deny that there is a stigma around mental health, specifically, versus physical health, right? Like you just mentioned, if someone has the flu we say, "Go rest, go take care of yourself, drink fluids." If someone has mental health struggles or depression we say, "Cheer up, try harder, your life isn't that bad." So, just the simple way that we even talk about that. When I started talking about suicide prevention about seven years ago, I faced a ton of backlash. I truly thought the people in my life would applaud my courage and really press in and, truthfully, the opposite was pretty true. My boss at work actually called me into his office and said, "You know, we're getting complaints about what you're sharing online. You should turn your things to private." I said, "Absolutely not!" I was a teacher at the time. There was a parent who called and asked if I was mentally stable and if I should be allowed in a classroom. And I

walked back to my room, almost in tears, honestly, and then it kind of just clicked for me and I was like, *Holy cow, imagine being that guy's kid who, someone can't even share seven or eight years later that they battle this, that they feel so threatened and so afraid.* I was like, *Okay, that just means I need to press harder,* and it truly has become this motivation for me of, *Okay, we have to break down this stigma.* And I'm strong enough now that I can do that work for the people who can't. Because people who are at their lowest, they don't have the energy to sometimes take a shower, let alone fight through the stigma. So, they need the rest of us to come to their aid and help fight that for them.

Winn: And we're going to get into that. You say we need for other people to step in and help us fight this, and we're going to get into that, but I noticed that you—because I follow you—I noticed that you still get that backlash. You still have a lot of haters out there that want to tell you—maybe they're total strangers, a lot of them are—that say, “Hey, buck up. Your life is not that bad. Why are you sharing? You're just trying to look for attention here.”

Sam: Mm hm.

Winn: You get that on a regular basis. You say that you're strong enough now but it has to have an impact.

Sam: A hundred percent. Truthfully, for me, now I have the perspective and I've done the therapy work to know that most of those people are hurting, too, and they—specifically around masculinity. We have a lot of work to do around restrictive masculinity, this idea that there's only one version or one type of a man that's right. And I've had to do a lot of that work myself. I'm not going to say it doesn't ever bother me. It's annoying, but at the end of the day it's just a pretty closed-minded view of the world and as one of—I'm not sure if this is okay to share but one of my favorite authors, Brené Brown, says, “Stop trying to win over the haters. You are not the jackass whisperer.”

Winn: [Laughs]

Sam: And I say that to myself almost every day. It's like, no, I don't have to win over someone who's like that. That's not my job. I'm just going to keep shining my light.

Winn: I like—you say, “It's annoying.” [Laughs]

Sam: [Laughs]

Winn: Back when you were saying that there was like this war where you're battling three different areas—the physical, the mental, and the spiritual—and under the mental you talked about talk therapy. What is that?

Sam: So, going to see a counselor or a therapist is really challenging. Truthfully, it's scary. It takes a lot of courage to trust someone with your story. I'm the perfect

person to tell everyone I think they should try therapy because I hated it and I fought against it so hard because who wants to go spend an hour every week talking about the worst moments of your life? But there's so much power in processing and working through that. Kind of like rubbing a bruise. You know, you go back over these things and it kind of hurts in the moment, but over time, maybe six months later, maybe a year later, you start to work through some of those things and they don't hurt as much. So, it wouldn't take me down every time something like that happened. It wasn't a three-day recovery process. And they can point out these things in your life that you might not even see. I mean, truthfully, one of my first rounds of therapy, I had to learn what a people pleaser I was and how I just kind of let all these people use me and walk all over me and I didn't really ever stand up for myself or have a lot of self-worth, so I happen to be a person that thinks everyone can benefit from talk therapy. Now it can be expensive and there are barriers to talk therapy but those who can and have the means, I couldn't recommend it any more.

Winn: You say that you used to let people walk all over you. What did that look like for you personally? You're a people pleaser and you let people walk all over you.

Sam: I operated out of this idea that I was lucky to have anyone who wanted to be around me instead of looking at something—like my phrase now is “access to my energy is a privilege” or “access to my life is a privilege.” No one gets a free pass to treat me like garbage. I don't care if you're a stranger at Walmart, I don't care if you've been in my family for 34 years. Nobody gets to treat me like crap and I'm going to stand up to you if you are going to try to treat me that way. And over time, if I ask you about this, we have discussions and you refuse to change, you refuse to apologize, well then, you don't get access to my mental health because I am worthy of good people in my life, I am worthy of belonging and people who truly have my best interest in heart. And that's so hard to—that's hard for anyone but let alone if you struggle with mental health. So, it's taken a long process to get here and I still, even just today, was having a discussion with one of my friends about this exact thing in someone else. But it's a process but truly it's one of the best things I've done for my mental health.

Winn: God, I love that, I love that. How I've worded it is that I love myself enough to stay away from you.

Sam: Yes.

Winn: You also—under mental, you talked about boundaries. Talk to us about your journey with that.

Sam: Absolutely. It's similar to many of the things that I just shared and it took a therapist to point some of those things out to me, but being able to tell people, “No, no.” I mean, I think of a conversation I had with a family member where they were just going off at me a number of years ago. Finally, I just said, “Nobody gets to talk to me this way. Call me back when you are calm,” and I hung up. And that

was such a breakthrough moment for me to not be this punching bag anymore and not be dragged into all this drama that just drains me and drains the precious energy that I have for the things that I love to do.

Winn: You talked about that third area of being spiritual and I like that you said that spiritual doesn't have to be about a religion. It could be about purpose. It could be about love or just a higher being, that I'm meant to be here today. I'm meant to be on this earth with purpose and passion and to make a difference. And that could be what the spiritual side of that is. And this might be kind of personal but were you raised with a religion and did you have to come to terms with that or shift your belief system? I mean, what did that look like for you?

Sam: Yeah, faith and religion has been a long journey for me. I grew up somewhat in the Episcopal church and Christianity and kind of came and went from that throughout my life. There was a core part of me, after my attempt, that gravitated back towards church. I lived and breathed church for a while in my recovery. And for me, that was just this man named Jesus who focused his entire life on loving other people. I don't care at all about the screaming and yelling that seems to happen in Christianity and the fighting but modeling my life after someone who wanted to just love and heal and help people: that was really helpful for me. And now I've also had some really awful experiences in the church. I'm not an everyday churchgoer these days but I still absolutely believe that there just is more to life and that the best thing that we can do with the time we're given is to love people and try to help them.

Winn: I'm going to quote one of your postings. You said, "Suicide at its most basic level is when someone's pain is higher than their ability to cope," and I felt like that was a really good definition. Can you expand on that?

Sam: Yeah, I have spent the last six years traveling all over the U.S., talking to many people who have attempted or who have lost someone, and nobody ever says that they wanted to go through the act of dying, that painful—they all say, "I wanted the pain to stop." And so, when we talk about suicide in those terms, everyone, myself included, can learn different ways to cope and to get out of these most painful situations. Now the trick with suicide and with mental illness is those people aren't experiencing the world as it really is. Their brain is sick. The best example I can come up with is like someone who is battling anorexia. It's an eating disorder where someone may stop eating altogether and you hear stories of people in treatment and they're wasting away. They're literally dying because they're not eating and they look in the mirror and they say, "I am fat," and they're not seeing what's really happening. And that's how mental illness is. It clouds the world as it really is. You're not experiencing pleasure. The things in your life that used to feel fun don't feel fun anymore. A lot of people refer to this as they feel numb. They don't feel good or bad, they just exist and they're tired of that. So, the trick is (a) recognizing that you don't have to believe everything that you think; that just because you're feeling a certain way doesn't mean that's how your life really is; our brain lies to us and tricks us. And then also knowing that there

are so many other ways to learn to cope and that your life won't always be as painful as it feels in the moment.

Winn: How important has it been for you to have that circle of people, of support? How did you find those people? Is that a large circle? Is that a small circle? I know this is a loaded question, but I truly, truly believe that it's all about relationships. So, what can you share with us in your personal experience with that?

Sam: It has been a long process of finding a few beautiful people who will allow me to be exactly who I am at every moment. You know, we have this saying in our world right now, like "good vibes only." Like everywhere you see this, "good vibes only," and I just wish so much that we could change that to "real vibes only" because when you say, "good vibes only" you're telling everyone in your life, "You can only come around me when you're happy and thriving," and that just isn't true. And nobody is that so it creates this shame of, "I wake up today and I say, 'You know what? I don't know why my brain is sad. I don't have the perfect answer. I'm fighting through it. Is it okay that we just hang out or distract my brain or watch a movie?'" And I need people who are okay with that, that they don't need me to be the life of the party at every moment of the day. And it has been a long journey of finding that and finding people that will allow me to change and grow. It's been very lonely at times. Truthfully, there's been a couple of seasons where I had to just let a lot of people go. And I'm not saying it was perfect and it was the right decision but, in the end, it created space for me to open myself up to new people and find the people that I have now, which, they're incredible and they're exactly the people that I needed. But it's taken a long time to get there.

Winn: Okay so that circle, is that 20 people? Is that 2 people? Because lots of people think, *Oh, I need a very large circle*, and yeah, you have 125,000 followers on Instagram. "Gosh, Sam's circle is huge!"

Sam: Oh no, it's real small, real small. Maybe, I mean, four people who get to know everything and the good and the bad.

Winn: The real vibes only.

Sam: Yup.

Winn: I saw the interview that you did about that: real vibes only. That was really profound. Could you expand on that a little bit more because you're right: people want to be around you or they want to be around someone only when things are happy and joyous because I guess they're looking for that, too. You know, I experience that because I'm the boss. I would show up and people say, "Oh my gosh, Winn, I'm so glad you're here because I had a really rough weekend and I'm so glad you're here because you can cheer me up." Cool, I get that. I like to be that for people but that's not my only responsibility and sometimes—and maybe at times I even put the questions back onto them, but I was always thinking, *Okay, well, over the weekend, your rough weekend, what I did was I got*

a lot of sleep, I went to the gym, I ate really good food, I hung out with people that I love, people that love me and support me. So, that's what I did so that I had a wonderful weekend. What did you do? What was your responsibility in all of this?

Sam: *[Laughs]* Absolutely. I've come to learn—I am still shocked when I see how many people follow me on these social media things because I'm just kind of this quiet guy in Minnesota who is just trying to help. But, at the end of the day, I think we are all craving authenticity. We are craving people who are (a) brave enough to share what they've been through, brave enough to be exactly who they are. They're not pretending, they're not trying to put on a show. So much of our social media has become that. It's people either bragging or putting on a play about what they think their life should be. And truthfully, the best gift you can give anyone is that authenticity piece and that vulnerability. When you are brave enough to share, "Hey, I went through this hard thing at this time in my life," I guarantee 9 times out of 10 someone's going to say—they're going to meet you there and they're going to share something hard that they went through because it gives them permission to open up to who they are. So, we don't have to wake up every day and tell every single person, "Everything's the best. I am the best. You're the best. The world's the best." We can just show up and say, "Yeah, man, I'm going through it a little bit but I'm so glad to see you and I'm so glad that we get to spend this time together."

Winn: This is a very interesting conversation and I'm thinking about when my little family, we were on vacation in Tulum, and we're on the beach and we saw this girl—and I'm not exaggerating—I think she spent at least a good hour trying to set up the perfect photo.

Sam: Mm hm.

Winn: So, there she is on the beach, adjusting her bathing suit and adjusting the lighting and the camera and then this and then that. And we were sitting there kind of laughing a little bit inside that this is taking so long to get the perfect image for her to then put out there. And not that my entire audience here for my MASTERS podcast is within the beauty industry, because it absolutely is not, but that's where I started and I have a lot of future professionals and team members who listen to this every single month. And so, you're talking about authenticity and yet we do use social media to build a brand, to build a business, and sometimes that brand is about image and it's what we put out there. What advice do you have? How do you balance between authenticity and yet still producing a brand that people want to buy into? And by the way you can tell me, "Winn, I have no idea." *[laughs]*

Sam: *[Laughs]* No, oh gosh, I have all the answers, Winn *[laughs]*. No.

Winn: *[Laughs]*

Sam: But I do have an idea for this. For me, it's making sure that you are posting how your life really is. So, it is a hundred percent okay and probably better for your brand to say something like—like I did this the other day—"How is your mental health today? People," you know, "friends, family, how is your mental health today?" I posted it on social media and then I followed it up with, "You know, my mental health is a 4 out of 10. I've been going through this, I've been going through that. Here's what I'm going to do to move through that." So, you know, your platform might not be around mental health but what are the ways that you are showing your audience that your life isn't perfect? It's okay to say, "I had a stressful weekend with my kids," right? You don't have to just post happy Santa pictures of your children. You can also post things in the captions that say what everyone's going through with, because it's going to build brand trust. It's going to build this likeability of you and this relatability that is so much more important than just a hundred perfect photos.

Winn: So, I know that I'm asking some of these questions over again, and maybe just in different ways, and you have responded and answered, and of course I just want to dig deeper. Sam, maybe you've experienced this. You can stand on the stage for two hours, sharing all the resources, all the tools, this is what you need to do, this is what got me here, this is how I overcame that. You share all those resources and then somebody, after your seminar, comes up and says, "Can you tell me how I can feel better in the morning? Can you please give me some tools?" and you're thinking, *Wait a minute. I just spent two hours doing that.* So, I just want to cover all the bases and I want to cover them over and over again. So, how have you experienced this stigma of mental health in your personal and professional life? You shared with us that—I don't know if you got fired from that job or you moved on from that job because they were asking you to remove those postings of those messages. Can you share with us a little bit more about that?

Sam: Yeah, I did not get fired, although it kept coming up and they were certainly not very supportive of my suicide prevention work, which is still shocking to me. But you know, sometimes the stigma is just, you know, people phasing you out of their life because of what you're going through. I had a lot of people, and I still have people like this, who will say, "I don't want to know about that." And that is another form of the stigma around trauma and other things. That's, "I'm sorry you went through that but I don't want to know." What do you mean? What you're saying is you don't want to know me and you don't want to know the tough parts. Now what I'm not telling everyone listening is to go dump your trauma on everyone, but the people who you are closest with need to know what has shaped your view of the world and for me that has been going through these tough things of sometimes not wanting to be alive. So, my inner circle cannot include people who don't have the capacity to know me truthfully. I mean, it's to know the rough parts of me. And so, I think sometimes the stigma just shows up like that.

Winn: So, back to this “real vibes only,” give us a script. What are things that we could ask somebody? So, we have a friend, we have a family member, a loved one who we can tell, we can sense it that they are struggling. Give us some words to use, some questions to ask, so that they know that we are there for them, that we are open to these conversations.

Sam: So, one of the best things that you can do to help us fight this stigma is be willing to talk about mental health and suicide when it comes up naturally in the world. So, studies show that talking about suicide doesn’t make it any more likely that someone will attempt and makes it much more likely that they’ll seek help. So, step one is when there is a show on Netflix that includes suicide or when we lose someone and it makes the news—unfortunately, it’s just celebrities or athletes who tend to make the news for this—but when that happens, be willing to talk about it with the people in your life and have a conversation. Have you ever felt that way? Do you know other people who’ve felt that way? So, that’s step one. Are you willing to be brave enough to talk about it?

Winn: Now, why do you do that? Is that just to let people know that, hey, if it ever comes up, I am willing to have these conversations, I am open to this dialogue?

Sam: One hundred percent. So, we are losing nearly 50,000 people to suicide every year in the U.S. right now. That’s one—

Winn: What’s the top age group, by the way?

Sam: So, it is the second leading cause of death for young people ages 10 to 24. It is the tenth leading cause of death for adults. Men tend to complete suicide three times more likely than women but women are much more likely to attempt.

Winn: Okay. It’s important. That’s hard to hear. What you just shared is very overwhelming to hear but we need to know.

Sam: Absolutely and we have to talk about it, starting at a much earlier age. And the start of it is just getting the information out there of “your brain can get sick.” It’s getting people to share stories. One of my dreams is every young person hears many stories of people who’ve faced this and have gotten through it, so if they ever get there they can say, “Oh yes.” It’s not a complete shock like it was to me. They don’t feel crazy. They’ve seen people who’ve gotten through it.

Winn: Can I ask you: was there a belief system or statistics or was it just stigma that if you talk about suicide people are more prone to attempt? Because that’s usually the excuse that people use. “No, if we talk about it, if we create the dialogue and open up these conversations, it’s going to give people the idea.” Where did that come from?

Sam: Truthfully, I have no idea because, as I’ve mentioned before, there is no study that shows that. And when I actually learned that, when I learned that talking about it isn’t going to make it worse, that was the moment where I was like, okay,

I can do this. I don't know what it's going to look like but I can launch into it. And if you're wondering, *How do I bring this up?* they analyzed 75 million text messages from the suicide text line. By the way, anyone listening if you ever feel suicidal there's a text line and there is a 1-800 number you can call. You now can call 988 in most states and that will connect you to help. So, there's always someone you can talk to 24 hours a day if you ever feel that way. But they analyzed all of the text messages—well, 75 million of them—from this and they found the best way to bring it up is to use it as an expression of care. So, especially if you know someone who has been suicidal in the past, you might say something like, “Hey, sometimes when people are going through a really tough breakup they might have thoughts of dying. Have you ever had a thought like that?” And for me, if someone says to me, even the people who are close, “Are you suicidal today?” that doesn't feel good. But when you express care, “I'm here for you, I'm not going anywhere, I don't understand what you're going through but I'm here whenever you need me, what can I do to help?” Those are the gamechangers for a lot of people like me.

Winn: So, that's the script. It's not, “Hey Sam, are you suicidal today?” The script is—tell us.

Sam: Yeah. So, sometimes when people lose someone who's close to them, maybe they just had a death in their family, they might have thoughts of death or dying. “Have you had any thoughts like that? I just want to check and make sure you're doing okay.”

Winn: Got it, because I do believe that the scripting is important.

Sam: Absolutely and it's okay to admit that it's a little awkward, right? It's okay to say to someone, “Hey, I don't know the perfect way to ask this. I just want to make sure that you're doing okay and that you have the help that you need.” And that's another great way. It's back to authenticity. It's back to vulnerability. “I don't know what the perfect way to say this, either, but I'm here for you, I want to make sure you're good.”

Winn: That's great because maybe what happens is we wait till we have the right sentiment or the right words and that waiting, waiting, waiting could be catastrophic.

Sam: When I was at my worst, one of the closest people to me at the time, who I'm not really close to anymore, said, “We knew you were hurting but we didn't know what to do or say,” and I didn't hear from them for four or five months and that was the worst thing that they could have done, right? Like, you knew I was struggling to stay alive and your response was, “We knew it but we didn't know what to do so we did nothing.” Just show up. Just text. You know, just drop off a meal. There are a million ways to care and love for someone and we don't have to be afraid of them or getting close to them if they struggle with mental health.

Winn: And I'm sure these aren't bad, horrible people who are out to get you, and that's why we're doing this interview.

Sam: Absolutely.

Winn: Because I would think, I believe, that the majority of us, most of us, want to be that resource. We want to be the person who someone will feel comfortable with, someone feel that they can confide in us. We want to be those things, which is why we're doing this interview.

Sam: Absolutely and you're right. This was not a bad person. This was a very loving, good person but they got stuck in that stigma and that fear of not talking about it and now, hopefully, you know, everyone listening to this, they know better. They know it's okay. Press in. Don't just ghost someone when they're going through a tough time.

Winn: So, we have the words to use and we're going to be forthcoming, even though we might feel like we're not ready or we don't have the right words. That's okay. Even being authentic and honest: "Hey, I don't know the words to use but can I just ask you." So, that's great advice. So, what should we do if someone shares with us that they are having thoughts of hurting themselves?

Sam: The best gift you can give someone who's suicidal is sometimes just a listening, empathetic ear. You don't have to fix it. All you have to do is listen and acknowledge, "Wow, I am so sorry. Yeah that sounds so tough. Tell me more about that." If somebody does share, first and foremost, remain calm, don't freak out, don't try to shame them for what they're feeling, don't try to give them a quick fix. You know, "Oh, it's going to be fine. You're just thinking too much of yourself." Don't jump to those quick fixes. Listen, acknowledge the pain, ask more questions so you can understand. If they are in immediate danger, you might have to take a step like getting 911 involved or something along those lines: connecting them to a resource, whether that's the talk line, the text line, helping them find a counselor, connecting them with resources in your area. Another really important thing is to not promise to keep it a secret. Make sure, and I would say this: "Let's choose one or two other people to tell," whether that is a doctor, whether that is a therapist, whether that is a loved one. Nobody can handle—even a professional—can handle taking on all of that themselves. So, while, yes, please press in and be a part of it, also know that it's not your sole job to save anyone and you can't save everyone, you know? They have to want to get help, too. So, it's this give and take between care and helping but just listen and remain calm and keep checking in on them and help connect them to the help that they need.

Winn: You did this other posting that I really liked where the title of your posting was "Suicide Is Selfish."

Sam: Mmm.

Winn: Can you talk about that? Because you do hear that a lot. You know, “How could they do this?” You know, “They left behind, they hurt so many people. Suicide is so selfish.” And why are you so adamant with that message? You were strong. You were direct. Suicide is selfish and why that is not true.

Sam: Yeah, so, the post was, “Stop saying suicide is selfish” and I will fight and debate anyone who wants to have this debate with me and people online would love to have this debate with me. The point behind this is if you could feel the amount of pain I was in when I was thinking about ending my life, a pain so deep I didn’t care what happened to my friends and family. Truthfully, I believed they were better off without me. A pain so deep you would hurt yourself, go through immense pain to get to the other side for it all to stop. And I think most people cannot imagine a pain that deep. So, if you have never yourself experienced what that is like and how sick your brain can get, you should not be telling other people it’s selfish. Truthfully, if you could feel that amount of pain, even for a minute, I can guarantee you would say, “I don’t think it’s selfish, Sam. In fact, I get it. I get it.” And it comes back to your pain is higher than your ability to cope. That is what suicide is and—now, the people who say that oftentimes have lost someone and I do not ever want to negate those feelings. I’ve worked with so many families. Oftentimes when I speak, that’s who’s brought me in. They’re trying to work through their grief and it is a pain that never heals. However, when we focus on the selfish and the guilt, (a) it’s not helping anyone and (b) it’s not true. It was the exact opposite of that. I truly thought I was doing my family a favor, and that couldn’t have been more wrong.

Winn: Wow. That’s powerful. I like that you also have directed your messaging, the training that you do, the input that you provide, towards companies. So, what is the rule that a company can take when it comes to suicide prevention in the workplace?

Sam: That is a tricky one for sure. Hopefully, I pray that all companies are (a) willing to have the conversation. You know, every September is Suicide Prevention Month. Every May is Mental Health Awareness Month. Finding ways to normalize that conversation in your business. I mean, one would be making a plan so anytime someone encounters someone in your business who is suicidal, that there’s a plan, that there are very tangible resources available that maybe even in your break room or in a common space you have suicide prevention numbers posted. You’ve got areas, maybe cards of different organizations around where your business is. NAME, the National Alliance for Mental Illness is incredible. NAFSP, National Association for Suicide Prevention, is really great one. So, it’s getting people resources. It’s being willing to talk about that and truthfully finding ways in your business to break down those barriers to care, whether that’s, you know, choosing a health insurance plan that supports mental health. Many don’t. Many don’t cover their fees. So making sure that your business is set up in a way that your people can get help because when their mental health is in a great spot, guess what? Your business is going to be in a better spot and the work that they’re doing is going to be in a better spot. So, your investment in suicide

prevention and mental health services for your people is only going to come back tenfold in the amount of business that you do.

Winn: I've seen lots of companies who are providing what they call mental health days.

Sam: Mm hm.

Winn: So, every company probably, maybe by law, they have to provide sick days. So, "I'm sick, I can't come to work today." Cool, you're covered, you're taken care of. What about prevention? And so, I love seeing these companies who, guess what? Everybody, the whole company, we don't care if you're sick or not, we don't care if you're struggling mentally or not, we want everybody to have a mental health day. Go enjoy your day.

Sam: One hundred percent. A lot of school districts are adopting that, too. I know the state of Illinois now gives all students a certain number of mental health days. I do think that that is a huge, huge part and it just shows how much that you care that people take care of themselves.

Winn: It just sends out a message that we care. And I like what you said earlier: it's not our job to fix somebody, it's our job to be a resource. It's our job to provide resources to be there for them. And so, just the simple advice that you gave where there are posters hanging in the lunchroom that give resources, that give phone numbers or websites of where somebody, if they are struggling, could find the help. Because you said it's how many? One in how many are struggling with some sort of mental health challenge?

Sam: One in five—

Winn: One in five.

Sam: —will face mental illness at some point in their life, yeah.

Winn: So, if we were considering everybody that we work with, everybody that we go to school with, wow, that's a lot more. And again, because of the stigma attached to this we're not talking about it. So, we're just assuming, "Well he said one in five but in my company this doesn't come up." Yes it does. You're just not talking about it.

Sam: Yeah, and depression is the number one cause of disability in our country. So, if you need financial motivation to find a way to help people, there it is.

Winn: Almost 20 years ago we launched a nonprofit organization called the Andrew Gomez Dream Foundation. And Andrew was a student of mine who then became an employee who, as everybody assumed, was the life of the party, was doing just great, but he unfortunately ended his life and it was just a huge shock to all of us but it immediately got us active and we had to start providing resources and educating ourselves. But just the fact that we launched a nonprofit organization

centered around mental health, suicide prevention, all of a sudden it sent out a message and what it did, and for a while, we were a bit overwhelmed but what it did was it gave people permission. All of a sudden, like the floodgates were open and it gave people permission to come forward, to say, "I'm struggling. Thanks for doing this. Thanks for thinking of this because I thought that I had nowhere to go. I thought that nobody in my work environment would understand what I'm struggling with."

Sam: That is incredible. And the other thing the research showing right now is the average time from onset of symptoms to treatment is 8 to 10 years. Most people will start experiencing some sort of mental health challenge and they won't seek help for 8 to 10 years. So, all of the work that your nonprofit is doing, all of this podcast, all these things we're trying to open up this conversation may help shorten that time and that's truly, truly the hope is that, you know, people will (a) recognize what this might look like, and (b) be willing to break through that stigma and seek the help that they need, knowing that their life could be so much more alive than it is today.

Winn: I don't think I've heard that statistic before: that it can take someone 8 to 10 years. Isn't that interesting because we have a little sniffle in our nose and we immediately run to the doctor. We call in sick that day. "Hey, I have a sniffle in my nose." "Oh, stay home, stay home, you're good we got you covered." But we can struggle with these things, we can struggle with depression, with sadness, with loneliness, with suicide thoughts, and yet we don't do anything about it. We don't seek the help that we need.

Sam: And that's partly because it's hard to recognize in ourselves and in others. So, just for anyone listening, the most common things to look for is a disturbance in your sleep. So, are you sleeping too much or not sleeping enough? A disturbance in your eating pattern. So, are you eating too much or not eating enough? Do you find yourself isolating and pulling away from people? Do you find yourself stopping doing the things that you used to love or the things that you love don't feel fun anymore? Do you feel sadness or do you have thoughts of, you know, maybe a passive suicidal thought, which is "I wish I hadn't been born" or "I wish I didn't exist"? Or an active suicidal thought, which is like, "How would I" or starting to Google? And if you ever get to that active point, that is the time to take action. And that's for me, too. If ever my brain is going there: "Okay, I have to call and get some help today." But the overall idea is that these things aren't as easy to spot as the flu. You know, we make excuses on why we don't get help or why we don't try because we think, *Oh, maybe it's not that bad*. But, you know, truthfully, one of the best things people can do if they're listening to this and thinking, *Ah this might be me or someone else*, just talking to your primary care doctor at your next physical appointment. They've got a questionnaire, 7 to 10 questions that they'll ask you, and that can just be a great place to start and to track, over time, how are you doing emotionally.

Winn: I love how you word this because as you're sharing this information you include yourself in this dialogue: "If I'm feeling this way." Because what I'm hearing from you is that you haven't graduated from this. You haven't mastered this; you can check this off the list and move on.

Sam: Oh gosh, no! You know, you want to try an exercise of self-perseverance, try starting a suicide prevention organization and then a few years later being suicidal again and trying to do the mental gymnastics of, "Shoot, I'm telling other people how to improve this and I'm struggling myself." But actually, that is the best time to be an advocate, you know? That is that authenticity piece. That is, "Yes, I'm battling this with you, too. Here's some things that have worked for me. What has worked for you?" And I still have hope every day that I won't continue to feel this way, but everyone has seasons of their life that are tough. Life is designed. You're going to lose someone. We are going to go through some painful things. No one gets to the end unscathed. That's just part of it. So, it's more of how do you care for yourself in those moments and what's the help that you might need to get through that if you're having a hard time moving through it on your own?

Winn: Wow. For as long as I've had an audience, and that audience could be just a friend or it's an audience on a stage in front of thousands, I have shared that, for me, being happy does not come naturally.

Sam: Mm.

Winn: To some people, happiness does seem to come naturally to them but to me, my whole life, even to this day, it never has. And by the way that used to piss me off. I used to think, *My gosh, how many more seminars do I have to go to? How many more therapy sessions? How many more books do I have to read? When can I just coast? Why do I have to work on this every single day?* And the reality is, I do. That's just how I am and it's something that I have to take on or something that I get to take on because I feel like that's what makes me authentic. It makes me have compassion and understanding into what other people are going through, and for that reason, maybe I'm approachable and people want to talk to me and people want to share with me and I like that. But it's absolutely something that I work on every single day.

Sam: Thank you for sharing that. I mean, that spoke to me even just now because, especially looking at someone like you who've had the success that you've had, you've had this podcast for so long, most people wouldn't think that that is something that you struggle with and people say the same thing about me: that, you know, they look at the life that I have and they can't imagine that I have the struggles that I do. I mean, that's part of this conversation, too: that it doesn't discriminate against anyone, you know. It's out there and people are fighting it but they're not fighting it alone.

Winn: Wow. And I'm sure people call you a fraud because, wait a minute, you're out there preaching this and yet you haven't mastered it yourself. You're a fraud.

Sam: Mm. Yes, I mean people will say all sorts of nasty things to me.

Winn: *[Laughs]*

Sam: *[Laughs]* But I don't have time for that.

Winn: Wait, wait. Give us the Brené Brown quote again.

Sam: Yes! "Stop trying to win over the haters; you are not the jackass whisperer."

Winn: *[Laughs]* That needs to be a T-shirt.

Sam: *[Laughs]* It does. I'd wear it.

Winn: *[Laughs]* That's great! So, as we start to wrap this up, what do you want people to know about this? If you're feeling suicidal, what do you want people to know?

Sam: First and foremost, hear me again when I say that your brain can get sick, too, and you might not be seeing the world as it really is and that's okay. But please let my story be the proof that there's so much help. I mean, when I was 23, I had just broken up with the girl I thought I would marry. I was back living at home. I had \$90,000 of student loan debt because I wasn't smart about college. I was teaching. My first year of teaching was horrible, I hated my job. I was partying all the time. My whole life was centered around drinking and forgetting who I was. And I truly thought there would never be another day worth living. And when I tell you that I was so wrong, I mean I was so wrong. The things that have happened to me in the 11 years since: I have traveled the world. I spent a summer in Africa, in Zimbabwe. I have helped people in Haiti and Puerto Rico. I ran a marathon, which was awful. It was so awful: four hours and 40 minutes.

Winn: *[Laughs]*

Sam: But I never thought I could. I started this company and now I get to travel all over, helping other people. And I paid off every dollar of my student loans. All of the things at that time in my life that I said, "That will never be me," it's been hard work but I found a way through and so anyone who's listening to this who feels hopeless, I promise you. It might not be easy: you're going to have to fight. You're going to have to open up and ask for the help that you need but I 100 percent can promise that if you put in the work you can get through this, too. And there is this fully and recklessly alive life on the other side of all of that.

Winn: Wow, wow! I can add nothing to that except to challenge people to follow you again @recklesslyalive on Instagram, on TikTok. Oh, and I have to bring this up. Sam, at the end of your bio it says that you enjoy collecting vinyl records, lifting moderately heavy weights—moderately, that made me laugh.

Sam: [*Laughs*]

Winn: And trying every flavor of Oreos. I didn't know that they had more than one. When did this—

Sam: Oh, there are over 90.

Winn: WHAT?

Sam: There are over 90 flavors, Winn [*laughs*].

Winn: Ninety?

Sam: It is crazy, and the most annoying part is they're all pretty good [*laughs*].

Winn: Okay, well, I'm allergic to nuts so other than I'm sure that peanut butter is an important and a popular one, what other flavors do I need to be checking out?

Sam: Oh gosh! Around the Fourth of July you've gotta try the Fireworks ones. They have Pop Rocks in them so when you bite into them you get like the pop, pop, pop. Big fan of those.

Winn: Where do you buy these, because these are not at my grocery store?

Sam: Uh, Target, Walmart? I mean, I don't know, they're everywhere.

Winn: Wait. Is there like a pumpkin, Halloween, Thanksgiving one?

Sam: Of course! Yes, there's pumpkin.

Winn: Oh my gosh. Okay well—

Sam: Lady Gaga had her own Oreos. I mean, there's a lot.

Winn: Okay, one more question. Key lime pie is my favorite dessert. Is there a key lime pie version?

Sam: Ooh, we'd have to Google that but I can almost guarantee you there is. There's been basically every flavor of pie.

Winn: Well, Sam, I can't tell you what a pleasure this was and I knew after watching you for so long and following you, I knew that it would be this—I don't want to say easy—that it would be this profound, that it would be this remarkable. Your calmness and your humbleness through this message, through this topic really is engaging. It gives people permission to listen to you. It makes people feel comfortable to listen to you. It's nonthreatening, and that's not by accident. I know you work hard at that. That's true authenticity there and I'm so, so grateful to you for that.

Sam: Thank you so much. Yeah, it's been a complete honor. If anyone wants to learn more about me, my website's recklesslyalive.com. I do a lot of work on Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook. My book is *Recklessly Alive*. It's available on Amazon and it shares more of the story that you heard today so my attempt happens in the middle of the book. The first half is what led to that; you know, what leads a person to feeling that way and the second half, there's stories of things that I would have missed. And I'm really proud of how the book turned out and I think people will enjoy it.

Winn: That's awesome. Thanks, Sam.

Sam: Thank you.