

## **Conversations About Aging**

**Jack, 74**

**April 8, 2019**

### **Diane narration**

About two years ago, Jack, who's 74, was hospitalized for severe depression. He'd dealt with depression and anxiety his entire life — mental health issues run in his family. One of his sisters died by suicide. He was always able to manage his own symptoms, but this last time was different.

**Jack** Because two years ago I was so suicidal. But I always would stop myself from wanting to go do something. I didn't want to get up, you know, and one of my sister, my sister Bernie, who was the one who was manic depressive, who was suicidal, who did commit take her life. I remember this time she told me she was so sick in bed that she couldn't even get up to go to the bathroom.

**Diane** So you have that image? I've, I've always had those images, yes. So, two summers ago, it was the first time I ever got that bad that I was that suicidal.

**Diane narration** Jack is doing much better now. He talks about his struggles and his successes, his youth and his

life now in this episode of *Conversations About Aging*, a Catching Health podcast.

One of his biggest regrets is that he never got to build a good relationship with his dad. He's the youngest of five and the only boy. His parents split up shortly after he was born. Jack says he came to realize that he had some misconceptions about his father, but by the time he thought about getting to know him better, his father died.

He says his sisters helped him gain some understanding.

**Jack** They were old enough to know, to have my father around the house. I often wondered what he was like. When I started asking my sisters ... Daddy, no, he never hit us. He was great. And I started feeling, oh my God, I had it all wrong.

**Diane** So that's a loss in your childhood to never ...

**Jack** Oh yeah, I was, I always felt the absence of a father

**Diane** And not just the absence, but you're talking about you had a different notion of who he was.

**Jack** Oh, absolutely. Right.

**Diane** So that's one of the questions that I usually ask later on is if you had the chance to go back in time and do something over, what would it be? Would it be to get to know your father better?

**Jack** Oh, much better, yeah. See, unfortunately, when I, the times I felt that he was reaching out for me, I rebuffed him and vice versa. Now we would've, before he passed away, and I'll try to be brief about this, he was gone from my life and then he came back when I was the end of my freshman year. He was still shipping out, so he'd be at home then he'd be gone for long trips. And as he got older, I think he was about 50 when he came back into my life, the way I figured it out judging by the dates and I was 15 or so and he was 50, you know, and it was like the old bull coming in and the young bull meeting the old bull, you know.

**Diane** So there's a lesson in this story for other people, I think. When you talk about two bulls, but you talk about being stubborn, having preconceived notions. So if you were to talk to your younger self, it would be to ease up a little bit. Maybe forgive him, you've forgiven him now.

**Jack** I had to forgive myself, because I had it all wrong. I thought he terrorized the family and all this stuff. It's just he and my mother fought. He didn't hurt my sisters at all and I was just a baby, you know, by the time they split up, so he certainly wasn't gonna hurt me and um I had it wrong.

**Diane** So did you ever get to know him at all?

**Jack** Never talked to. Never got to know him to talk about any of that stuff, and it was mostly, we just really didn't have a healthy relationship between us.

**Diane narration** Jack's dad died of a massive heart attack at the age of 50. Had he lived longer, he thinks maybe they could have patched things up. His relationship with his mother was also not always great, but when she developed Alzheimer's disease, he put his house up for rent and moved in with his mother for a couple of years to care for her.

**Diane** How was that?

**Jack** I loved doing it for her and in fact it was one of the greatest things I did was to be able to take care of my

mother in her time of need. It was rough and the longer it went on, the harder it got because the worse she got.

**Diane narration** Jack's mother died in 1993. In addition to taking care of her, he also helped look out for two of his sisters.

**Diane** So you had two sisters who were seriously ill. Very hard. Yeah. So you watched out for your two sisters and then you took care of your mother. Right. What a good son and brother you are.

**Jack** Well, it was a lot. A lot to it, yeah.

**Diane** So what lesson do you think you learned because of that experience that you might be able to pass onto a person?

**Jack** Well, I can tell them that one of the greatest things I did was to be able to take care of one of my parents, the way they took care of me when I was a baby and particularly my mother.

**Diane** From my perspective. You say you reaped all these rewards, but it seems like you really gave back.

**Jack** I had to pay for it.

**Diane** You paid.

**Jack** I paid back I guess, but my sisters were always good to me. We always had good relationships. I was very, very strained with all the mental illness, but it was so, we all care for each other. We always had a good relationship, basically.

**Diane narration** As for other relationships, he's never been married, never had children.

**Jack** I've been able to go without relationships. I had a lot of involvements over the years and I've done a lot and I'm at the point where you slow down in your life at this point anyway, at 74. So I look back on that and I was loved and I have loved and lost, you know, and I can live with it.

**Diane** Well, at 74 do you think you could love again?

**Jack** I think I have it in me to love again. I don't know if I'm ready for another breakup though. I don't know. I don't know if I could handle another breakup.

**Diane** So you're going to be sort of fatalistic about it. You're going to assume that if you find a good woman that she's going to break up with you?

**Jack** If you go wrong, sure. Or I'll sabotage it. I've done that with some relationships before so in many ways a lot of ways I've been kind of self destructive in a lot of my behaviors and getting relationships to break up, you know, and stuff like that.

**Diane** Do you think that people can change even if they're 74?

**Jack** I'm sure they can and it might be awfully hard, but I'm sure people can.

**Diane narration** He may not be in a romantic relationship at the moment, but Jack has lots of people who love him. The helped him get through it when he was at his worst. The first was a friend he had reconnected with before he was hospitalized. The friend also struggled with mental health issues and they had started meeting in town every now and again.

**Jack** Then I went into this bad bad two years ago, depression, anxiety period, and he was there for me and

uh, he, he's one of the ones, people that saved my life, you know. He kept saying, come on, you can do it, get up, I'll meet you whatever, whatever, always there for me.

2:47

**Diane narration** Jack's depression was so bad two years ago he was suicidal and ended up in the hospital and a couple of treatment centers.

**Jack** I was thinking all those different things I could do, but yet wasn't attempting it. Then luckily I hung in there and luckily we finally got the right and the right medications that started to work for me.

**Diane** So did this come on suddenly like one day you felt fine?

**Jack** It's almost suddenly. I mean, I dealt with all kinds of things that I could feel down about, but nothing that led to a severe depression or major depression. And so anything that I might've been experiencing was nothing I'd never experienced before. The loss of my mother, different things that have happened, I didn't completely break down. I was able to handle and get beyond it. Why this happened to me that time two years ago, I don't know. I

don't know why it escalated and kept going and I could not stop it from snowballing into a major depression, anxiety. Then I started to see some light, you know, the head of the forest, whatever. And then finally, I, for the past year or so, I've been in a better state.

**Diane narration**

The right medications made a huge difference, and so did a lot of people who loved him.

**Jack** As a matter of fact, people come out of the woodwork. People saying Jackie, hang in there. You're a good guy. We all love you and ... People come out of the woodwork.

**Diane** That's amazing. That's amazing.

**Jack** Yeah. I mean all people I knew, but some people I didn't really know that closely.

**Diane** But somebody put the word out.

**Jack** The word got out. Yeah. And, wow, the response was unbelievable.

**Diane** Diane So that helped you?

**Jack** It was nice to know that that many people cared. Especially when, especially when I can think of some people that I could probably think, well, I don't think they care about me that much, you know, and to find out. no, hey love you buddy, come on.

**Diane narration** The friend he had reconnected with, who also struggled with mental illness, told Jack about the art program at Shalom House. Shalom House provides safe housing and other services, including a comprehensive art program, for people living with severe mental illness. Jack joined the art program and loves it.

**Diane** So, it's a wonderful program.

**Jack** It is.

**Diane** What do you get out of participating?

**Jack** I just love coming down. I like being around the people. It's a sense of security. I got all kinds of room to spread out to do my artwork. I've got different things I can do. Uh, whether it's acrylics or oil paints, if it falls on the floor, I don't have to worry about messing anything up like I would have to be very careful in my apartment. So it's

offered me that. It's offered me an environment that I can really function in.

**Diane narration** He had discovered art in his late 20s, almost by accident. He was doodling on some piles of paper he was shredding at work. A co-worker told him he was good and commissioned him to draw a portrait of his wife.

**Jack** I said I'll give it a try. So he brought in a photo of his wife and I did a drawing of her on a piece of cardboard. That's how I got into it. I was, I didn't know enough to get some nice drawing paper or something. I did it on a piece of cardboard. He loved it. Paid me \$25. So then I started thinking that hey, maybe I can find myself in doing art.

**Jack** I think once I got into it and that's what truly gave me more of a sense of identity about myself. Before that. I think I floundered it as to who's Jack Sullivan, a nobody, you know. Then I started to, and all the people responding to my work and everything, over the years just gave me more and more of a good feeling about myself. That I'm an artist.

**Diane narration** He also got involved with theater, painting murals and performing.

**Jack** I even got up on the stage in the production of wonderful musicals. 1776 about the signing of the declaration of independence as it was in the middle of the winter and I was in a major depression.

**Diane** But you got up on stage?

**Jack** Got up on the stage, got through it. Always pulling myself up by the bootstraps to get through it.

**Diane** So you have resilience. Jack, you do, you have resilience.

**Jack** Yeah. I try to give myself credit for that, you know, it's one of the things that uh, I have tried to fight things off, you know, such as the anxiety, the depression. I gave up drinking, I gave up smoking. I smoked and I quit years ago before that in 69, uh, quit drinking in 84. Um, I just to try to take care, better care of myself. 20:37

**Diane** What makes it a good day for you?

**Jack** A good day. Now, another thing I philosophize on such as I've always enjoyed people. I think the greatest thing to do is to help people out and be friendly and be

kind to people. That's something to me that's more to me than \$100,000 in the bank. Then on top of that, the joy of live theater, movies, good books, all the stuff you hear about, all the cultural things, you know, and in my particular case, the fact that I can draw and paint and all that stuff added up contributes to me having good feelings about life and what I can do and how I do things, how I participate with life.

Many times I just wanted to get out of the way of the world. Don't get me wrong, but there's things that keeps me in there is an enjoyment of people having really good friends, family, um, healthy, being healthy so you can do those things that you want to do.

**Diane narration** Knowing how much he liked being with people, his friend suggested that he join a group called H.O.P.E., which stands for Healing of Persons Exceptional.

**Jack** Once again, it's just like the art project. I have a place to go Wednesday, Wednesday, and Thursday nights to meet up with people that I can feel safe with. [Like I said, in that interview,] I can feel safe with them, meeting up with them and uh, talking about issues, etc. And I feel

really comfortable being able to come down to the art project and do artwork and participate with other people.

**Diane** So is there anything that I have not asked you and you're thinking why isn't she asking me this?

**Jack** No, not really. I think you're asking all the important questions.

**Diane** Here's your last chance to give any advice to anybody about anything.

**Jack** Yeah, I do want to say try to stay healthy and try to keep involved in things. You know, try to live your life to the fullest as best you can.

**Diane** That's good. Yeah. Does it feel okay. Yeah. All right.

**Diane narration** You've been listening to Conversations About Aging, a Catching Health podcast. I'm Diane Atwood. To hear more conversations about aging and to read my blog posts on health and wellness visit [CatchingHealth.com](http://CatchingHealth.com).

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And I'd also like to thank Tom Meuser for his support. He's Director of the Center for Excellence in Aging and Health at the University of New England. Tom will be using some of the interviews for research on aging issues in Maine.