

**Tough Truths and Tender Guys By Jeremie Saunders**  
**End Well Symposium, December 6, 2018**

Start of Transcript

[Crowd Applauding]

By a round of applause, if you — all right, all right, here we go...if you are giving the appropriate amount of time, by a round of applause, how many of you think you could recall the most delicious meal you've ever eaten?

[Crowd Applauding]

Okay. By round of applause, how many of you think you could recall the most beautiful sunrise or sunset you've ever witnessed?

[Crowd Applauding]

Okay. How about this one, by a round of applause, how many of you think you could recall the most mind-melting orgasm you ever had?

[Crowd Laughing & Applauding]

Okay! Thank you for your honesty. Well, I'm willing to bet that the majority of you would have a bit of a harder time recalling the most satisfying breath you've ever taken. This idea of breath appreciation, it's something I work with every single day and there's this simple little exercise that I love to do and I haven't done it yet today **[00:01:00]** and figured now would be a better time than ever, I'm actually gonna get all of you to do it with me. But I'll explain it first and then we'll go through it, okay?

So what we're gonna do is we're gonna take a nice long drawn-in inhale. We're gonna draw it for right about 4 to 5 seconds... and at the top of that inhale, I'm gonna ask that you pause and in that moment of pause, just see if you can tune in to the physical sensations of that breath. See if you can feel how your diaphragm is dropped, pull the air in, see if you can tap into that feeling of the oxygen-rich blood as it courses through your veins and then after that brief moment, altogether we'll exhale it out on a big sigh. Okay?

So come up to the edge of your seat, plant both of your feet. Feel grounded. Let your shoulders soften and rest your hands, let your belly relax, close your eyes, and together, take one long inhale, hold it for a moment... and then let it go [Sighs] **[00:02:00]** Now to me, that is more delicious than the best meal I've ever tasted. It's far more beautiful than the most miraculous sunrise or sunset I've ever witnessed. Hell! To me that felt better than the best orgasm I've ever had... nah.

[Crowd Laughing]

Come on. That's a bit debatable. But I think you get the idea, right? Breath appreciation is important to me because I live with cystic fibrosis and a very real part in living with cystic fibrosis is knowing that my time on this earth is much more limited than your average person. I'm 30 years old and I already know that I only so many of those long, rich, deep breaths left. My lungs currently function at about the 50% range which isn't bad, okay? I learned back in high school, 50% still considered the passing grade so...

[Crowd Laughing]

Things could be much worse. But for a moment just consider **[00:03:00]** what it means to apply 50% to your ability to breathe. It can have some profound effects in the way that you live your life.

And for the past 10 years or so, my lungs had been on this very slow but very steady decline... which is kind of a buzzkill. Right? It depends on how you look at it. And for me, my perspective, cystic fibrosis is the ultimate gift. It has afforded me this world view where I can embrace the fact that I don't have much time left... and I'm okay with that. In fact, this is the driving force that propels me forward just to squeeze out every last bit of life that I can while I'm still here on this earth. It might feel a little bit weird to hear this but I can stand here today and say that without a doubt, cystic fibrosis is the best thing that has ever happened to me. It has made me who I am and at the risk of sounding, you know, full of myself, I love who I am. I often hear people say **[00:04:00]** how they would never want their illness to define them. Not me. I proudly let my illness define me, but I let it define me on my own terms. And I think this mindset comes from my lifelong infinity for laughter.

When I was growing up, my heroes were not people like Wayne Gretzky or Michael Jordan, my heroes were people like George Carlin.

[Crowd Applauding]

Yeah! Or Chris Farley. Maya Rudolph. Adam Sandler, when he was funny...

[Crowd Laughing]

And it was through their writing, their characters and their stand up that they gave me this ability to see the world through this lens of mockery and satire. And in turn I could look at my life and what I've gone through and find elements of that that brought a smile to my face. That laughter became this incredibly powerful form of therapy for me.

I wanna share with you this sort of **[00:05:00]** an example of how I put this to use by telling you about the scariest moment of my life, which is actually quite recent. It was about a year ago in October 2017 I had a big hospital scare, I was rushed in, I had this condition called intussusception, not to be confused with the popular Christopher Nolan movie *Inception*...

[Crowd Chuckles]

You know a dream within a dream within a dream, but intussusception actually isn't that much different. It's an intestine within an intestine, within an intestine, so essentially my large intestine started to swallow up my small intestine; like how you'd roll up a pair of socks. And this is not good, you can die from this. So I was brought in for this emergency surgery and they went in and pulled out 75% of my large intestine and threw it away.

But before all that fun stuff, I went in for a round of preliminary test. We're trying to narrow it down what is actually happening in my body. And one of these tests was a **[00:06:00]** rectal exam. So I'm in the office waiting and the doctor enters, I looked up and there's this 6 foot 5, 250 pound beast of a man with...

[Crowd Laughing]

...mits for hands and these huge sausage-fingers and I'm thinking, "This guy?!"

[Crowd Continues Laughing]

I'm gonna get a rectal exam from this guy? And he goes, "No, no, no." And he ushers in the resident surgeon, "She'll be giving it to you." And there's this petite, young woman with regular human-sized hands, whew! Okay, all right. So she grabs up, takes her finger, buries it knuckle deep into my butt — I'm not gonna lie. I'm not a stranger to having a finger in my butt, okay?

[Crowd Laughing]

But I'm not so familiar with having a stranger's finger up my butt but here's the thing. She's not so much a stranger, I feel like I know this woman. I just can't quite put my finger on it. Pun fully intended.

[Crowd Continues Laughing]

So [Chuckles] **[00:07:00]**, anyway she finishes the exam and pulls her finger out, walks to the end of the hallway to deliberate about whatever you deliberate about after you have your finger in someone's ass and then momentarily she walks back in. I say, you know what, screw it, I'm gonna ask her! So I say, "Ma'am, how do I know you?"

And she looks at me, this is the first time she made eye contact, she looks at me and goes, "Yeahh...you were my yoga instructor."

[Crowd Bursting Into Laughter]

I've been teaching yoga for the last 8 years and well, needless to say, she has not been back to the studio ever since. [Chuckles] Did I say scariest moment of my life? I think I meant most embarrassing moment of my life. But this is exactly what *Sickboy Podcast* is all about. *Sickboy* is a project that I started three years ago with my two best friends Brian Stever and Taylor MacGillivray... and the original idea, simply put, was a podcast where we talk to people who were sick but with a twist, it's a comedy podcast and **[00:08:00]** to be honest with you, when we started this, it really started as a joke. It was an excuse for the three of us to sit down and try to make each other laugh.

Our first episode, actually the first recording we ever did it was just the three of us, we recorded it for about an hour and it was basically a free pass for Brian and Taylor to ask all the questions that they'd ever wanna ask a sick person. And after that recording we went home and we listened back to what we had done and we thought to ourselves, "Hey, maybe we're on to something here." You know? This was the first time that we had heard a conversations surrounding illness that wasn't a complete bummer. It was funny, it was really informative, and there was something about it that was really uplifting and empowering. But we thought, "Okay, well maybe this is a fluke." You know, we are three best friends after all, we have this very dialled-in dynamic, can we recreate this with somebody else? So we put our heads together and we thought, "Who's the sickest person we know?"

[Crowd Laughing]

And it happened to be my friend, Matthew Amyotte, and at the time he just had a surgery **[00:09:00]** to remove a brain tumor. Matt agreed to come in and he sat down in the mics with us and that was the moment where we realized, "Whoa! This is going to be much greater than anything we ever intended." This is much more important than just a couple of friends trying to make each other laugh. Matthew was so open to being vulnerable with us. He almost

immediately invited us into sharing and hearing some of the most intimate and private thoughts. He chronicled his cancer journey. He dived into the challenges of facing his own mortality. He talked about how he barely recognised himself anymore when he looked in the mirror. How this recent experience had somehow stripped him of his own self confidence. And that conversation was so raw. It was so powerfully authentic and it sounds heavy but it wasn't **[00:10:00]**. It was light. It was so full of playful curiosity. It was so full of inappropriate humor.

And it was this conversation with Matthew that taught us that laughter can be this beautiful tool to really get to the heart of the real stuff, the stuff that matters. Not to be used as a crutch but rather to be used as this bridge, to more easily access the things that we find hard to be open about.

Fast forward to today, three years later, we have recorded over 200 episodes of *Sickboy*. We've spoken to people who from all across Canada down to the United States, we've covered everything from cystic fibrosis to terminal cancer, PTSD, bi-polar, schizophrenia, spinal macular atrophy, endometriosis, I mean you name it, we've touched on it and if we haven't, we will. There's a list of over 800 people from across the world who've applied to **[00:11:00]** come on the show and share their experience. And as you can imagine, over the last 3 years, out of all of these conversations, there has been a lot of learning opportunity for us. But I'll have to say that we could narrow it down to three big takeaways and I wanna share them with you. I call them my three A-ha moments.

The first one is be vulnerable. For whatever reason, we as a society, especially us as men, have been taught that vulnerability is this sign of weakness but I would argue with that. It pays to be vulnerable. Amen. It does! I mean, take a moment and think about when you truly know someone, what that's like. You know their deepest, darkest secrets. You know their wildest hopes and dreams. You know their greatest fears. You know their most embarrassing moment and those are the relationships that we value **[00:12:00]** in our lives.

And when we have a — someone come in to the studio, they enter as a stranger, but they leave as a true friend because they have chosen to put their trust in us and be vulnerable, and we have chosen to reciprocate that. It pays to be vulnerable.

Number two. Life is too short for small talk. I friggin' love this one! Taylor's got this amazing story, it was in the podcast, this one time he was in Utah snowboarding on this mountain and he sits on the chairlift and this older gentleman sits next to him. The chairlift starts up the mountain and Taylor's minding his own business, taking in the beauty of the scenery, and then the gentleman next to him said, "Hey, I'm Bill. Nice to meet you."

And Taylor says, "Hi, Bill. I'm Taylor. Nice to meet you."

And then Bill says, "Well, Taylor, what's the craziest thing you've ever done in your life?"

And Taylor's like [Huffs] "Whoa, what? God! Who opens a conversation like that?"

[Crowd Laughing]

"I don't know. I guess it was this time I was in Brazil and I've almost died **[00:13:00]**."

What a long story. And Bill follows that up with the craziest moment of his life. And then he follows that up with, "Well, Taylor, what do you like more, snowboarding or sex?"

[Scoffs] Oh my God! [Crowd Laughing]

“I don’t know. Snowboarding’s fun, I really like sex, it’s kind of a tossup.”

It’s like this all the way up the mountain like they continue this conversation. They get to the top of the mountain and I don’t know if you’ve ever been on a chairlift before but you choose to go right or you go left. Taylor goes right, and Bill goes left. And Taylor never saw Bill again but he’ll never forget the 5-minute conversation that they shared from the bottom of that mountain up to the top. Where Bill didn’t choose to talk about the weather, he chose to cut straight through to the shit that mattered. Life is too short for small talk.

And the final A-ha moment is everyone has an incredible story to share. We rarely have celebrities or people of note on the podcast, oftentimes we’re just **[00:14:00]** speaking to regular, everyday people. And when they feel like they’ve been given a platform to speak, when they feel like they have a voice that can be heard, we hear these incredibly rich life stories and each one of these stories, there are lessons to be learned. There’s something to glean from it. And all it takes is for someone to feel like they have the permission to speak and for somebody else, beyond the other end, to be truly listening to that person. Everyone, including each one of you here today has an incredible story to tell.

Our mission is to fundamentally change the way that the world deals with illness and death. But it goes further than that. This isn’t just about talking about what it’s like to be sick. We want this to be the catalyst to change the way that humans communicate about all of the things that we find challenging in our lives **[00:15:00]**. At the heart of what we were doing, it’s just trying to cultivate open, unpolished, unapologetic meaningful communication with the people in our lives so that we can make the most out of the time that we have left, so that we can really squeeze out that life while we’re still here on this earth.

Before I leave you I wanna just share with you this study that came our of Harvard University. It was one of the longest running social studies ever conducted. It started in 1939, it’s been almost 80 years. And it followed 268 Harvard sophomores and the study concluded that the building blocks of happiness are the relationships that we foster. So essentially if you want to live a life of longstanding happiness, then foster great relationships. Sounds easy, right? But to foster great relationships, you need to be able to communicate with meaning **[00:16:00]**. And I truly believe that this concept of meaningful communication, it’s not something we are born with. It is a skill that is learned through practice and repetition honed over the span of your lifetime. Before I leave you to go out into the world and to practice this meaningful communication, will you start a conversation that allows yourself to be vulnerable? Will you push yourself to cut straight through to the shit that matters? And are you absolutely willing to listen? Let’s just take one more moment to sit up tall, soften your bellies, relax your shoulders, close your eyes, and altogether take a nice big breath in [Inhales]... hold it for a moment **[00:17:00]**, and let it go [Sighs]. Thank you all so much.

[Crowd Applauding]

End of Transcript