**Corey 00:00:00**

At just 19 years old Raven Saunders, aka 'Hulk' placed fifth in the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio. After returning home. She fell into a deep depression due to unresolved childhood traumas and she was hospitalized to address her mental health issues. Now in a much stronger place emotionally and physically, Raven is headed to the 2021 games in Tokyo. But this time she returns to the Olympics, not only as an athlete but also as an advocate for mental health awareness, I'm Corey Andrew Powell, your host and this is motivational Mondays.

**Corey 00:00:38**

So from there you become an Olympic Athlete and you're riding high off of that moment. You were in the Olympics at like 19, I believe you were the youngest female shot putter in the Olympics, at that time. You're riding on the high wave of that. And then you come back home and that's when you start to move into an emotional depression; back home dealing with unresolved childhood traumas.

**Raven 00:00:58**

Right. For me, I had been dealing with depression for pretty much as long as I could remember, and it wasn't until I actually got a therapist at the University of Mississippi that I actually had a name for what it was that I was going through. But after that Olympics, I was able to give it a name and identify what it was exactly and it was just like crazy. Because, you know, I transferred from a smaller school to the SCC, you know, since big school and it was just a lot of demands already over the whole entire year. Still hadn't had a break, and had to get back and move. But once I got to track season, I'm like okay, it's the Olympic Year,I got there. I mean I get a parade when I come home, everybody around campus knows me, my professors...

**Raven 00:01:37**

So, I'm at this level of, like, I'm riding like a super high, I didn't get a break. Literally, I got back from Rio on a Thursday, went home that Friday. Then I had to fly back that Sunday evening because I started school on Monday. So I had about like two weeks off from training, but I mean, I'm in the midst of like starting the beginning of semester. So everything is constantly going. And at this point, it's just like a lot on my plate. I remember like, when I got back in August, I'm still waiting on the check for the next month.

**Raven 00:02:07**

We don't get a check in August. So, those bills weren't covered, and it was just like a lot. One of my teammates was staying with me because he hadn't gotten his check yet. It was just, it was so much going on. Going into that year,mentally, I was drained. I made it back around to that 2017 year, things are going great. Started out great indoors, got hurt outdoors, missed most of my outdoor season. Came back, lost the NCAA's which I was the reigning Champion two times. And then that happened and I'm like, Oh my My God, like, what's going on?

**Raven 00:02:39**

Rebounded back with the USA title. Was good, London came around four world championships did pretty much horrible. I made the finals but not like our finals of our finals. After that, at that moment, I would always equivocate like my self worth to you know, how well I was doing in track or how many records I broke. How far I threw, things like that was how I equivocate my self-worth. So going through really hard outdoor season. Coming back and, you know, everybody's still putting all of the same amount of pressures on you not having a break since my sophomore year of high school and all actuality it was a lot. It was a whole lot on my plate.

**Corey 00:03:19**

Yeah, you really had no tools in which to navigate through that. Right? Because what you talked about often is that athletics are the priority for so many of the students and that's where all the focus would be, right? Even people who would normally support you — your teachers, your family, they're sort of always driving excellence in your field. Versus saying, "Baby are You okay?" You know? Like just stop in a moment like, "Baby are you okay, like emotionally?" Because I think it seems like the prize is the big payoff for athletes. So I think I understand why that would be the drive, but what you're saying is that there's not enough attention being paid to the emotional state?

**Raven 00:03:56**

It really wasn't, because I remember if I look back, like, honestly, the only time those questions, you know, with sincerity like, you know, "how are you doing?" type question? You're just like, okay, when people actually meant it was more like when I would go see my therapist. Outside of that, you know, everything was like, sport-related or school related or tutor related, or things like that, how's training, how's training, and not necessarily asking about how's the person behind all of this and how are you dealing with all these pressures?

**Corey 00:04:23**

But, you know, with that said, you do mention in your story off and how, what led you to find help, was that you reached out to a therapist, right? And you mentioned that you were having these thoughts. And so tell me about that and how you reached out to this therapist. It was a previous therapist from years back. So tell me a little bit about that and why you reached out.

**Raven 00:04:43**

So she was like my main therapist when I first got to Ole Miss. She was like working through the athletic department because we would have these like tests, whatever you take in, whatever happened like the test or whatever. And so I got a therapist when I was there and she actually had gotten promoted after that 2016 year. So going into my junior year. So I ended up getting a new therapist by the end of my junior year or like the second half of.

**Raven 00:05:08**

But when I was going through everything mentally, I think my therapy sessions had already ended for a minute, but my previous therapist before the last one I had, was the only person I felt comfortable enough saying everything to because she was the only person that knew exactly what I was dealing with. Be it like, you know, with coaches, or practice or with home life, or with family. She was the one person where I actually felt comfortable enough to release everything to because I knew it was a safe space and it couldn't leave the room.

**Raven 00:05:38**

But when I was in the midst of, on my way to this drop-off of where I pretty much had decided where I was going to follow through with my suicide attempt, she was the only person I texted. I actually still have the messages till this day, and my old phone of what I texted her. And literally, I sent the message, not knowing, if it was still her number, not knowing if, you know, it was disconnected or whatever the case may be, and I had already made it up in my mind if she doesn't respond, or if this isn't her number then hey, that's a sign. But literally, it was like two lights before. It was like a drop off of where, you know, how they have the highways and then some of them don't have side barriers?

But you see like a lot of trees and like a dive kind of? Like,that's pretty much how I had decided. So I already have my mind set up, and what it was that I was going to do. And it's an intersection. If you go to the right, you go to my house, if you go to the left, the drop off is on a way to campus, and I already had done a big loop around campus, and it was on the straightaway heading towards that intersection. Where I texted her. I got caught at a light and I was texting her and stuff like that. And I was finishing up as I was driving and I clicked “Send” and not even like, I don't even think it was like, a full like, two, three minutes later. She texted me back and that literally saved my life.

**Corey 00:06:53**

I think with people of color, specifically African-Americans, there's a stigma in that community — our community, where we don't go get help. We don't talk about our problems. Did you ever have that sort of dynamic at all when you were looking for therapists?

**Raven 00:07:06**

I didn't actually start looking for him until I got well, and I was given one when I got to college. So initially for me, I remember meeting with her. And I was like, kind of like, you know, who are you like, you know what I mean? Like, I know what I'm going through like, you know, initially and then, like, I think it was like, the second session I was just like, hey, well, alright here, it all is. And, like you said in our community because even in my particular household or family, we would never necessarily talk about anything mental, and it wasn't until I went into my first institution where they actually flew my mom out. Then we got to have a conversation that I found out that my grandmother suffered from depression.

**Raven 00:07:43**

So it's something that could have been genetic and a lot of things in association with mental health were never discussed outside of, "Oh you're crazy," or like "that's a crazy house," or "that's for white people." You know, that's not something we do. In all actuality, I feel like so many of us are holding onto so much that needs to be released that it comes out in other ways, shapes and forms that we don't even necessarily realize the connection and that's what happened to me.

**Corey 00:08:09**

Now, another story that interested me, that sort of fuels why you came public with your mental health struggles was the story of Bryce Gowdy and I know that you read an article about him in 2020 and he was a 17 year-old, African-American from Deerfield Beach Florida. And I know that he had been living through some hardships with his family and going through some things. But tell me why, those dots were connected for you between your story and his, and tell people a little bit about what his story was and how you connected to it.

**Raven 00:08:39**

The thing was, he was a young African-American dealing with so many struggles in life and he lost his battle. And for me being in a position where I understand what it's like to go through hard things at home and then coming into environment being clouded with so much and feeling like I have to take my life in order for all of this to be done with and all the struggles and all the pain to be over with. And I was fortunate enough to still be here, and that really made me realize, like, I already knew that so many people are dealing with it, but also seeing another athlete end his life so soon and seeing, you know, my transformation even up until that point. I mean, I was coming back from hip surgery and everything. I felt like I had to say something because I felt like if there was some athlete somewhere or whatever, who may be looking up to me, or knows who I am a little bit, that may be going through the exact same thing that could take something away from my story.

**Raven 00:09:38**

Because it was something I like I battled with myself back and forth for a little bit about posting because it was something so personal and so vulnerable. And so many people really weren't talking about it, you know it was still like you know on its way up. And I was like I have to say something. I have to say something and then I think it was like a two-year anniversary from the last time I competed indoors, like two, three years, three year anniversary actually since my last indoor competition and realizing what happened I was like yo, I got to say something. I have to help somebody or, you know,I need somebody.

**Raven 00:10:09**

You know, it definitely put me in a very vulnerable space when I first opened up about it. But thankfully my support system knew that you know with me opening up to the world pretty much about my story that you know, I would need as much support that was around me so people call and check in and things like that. Like how are you doing? And then over time as I got a chance to talk about it you know a lot more it didn't have such as heavy as a burden on me.

**Corey 00:10:34**

More recently, Naomi Osaka is having that conversation. So do you think in any way or some small way hopefully that the sports industry has taken notice and is listening to the fact that athletes are saying hey we need someone to help us balance our lives more emotionally as we go and try and get that gold medal for the country, can you make sure that I'm okay? Like, is that a good support system coming from all of this now?

**Raven 00:10:58**

Now, yes, I feel like now more than in the past, there's definitely a lot more support and a lot more understanding. And the fact that like more athletes and Elite level athletes are speaking up because it's athletes, everyone always tells us, it's 90%, you know, mental 10% physical, but for so long in the past it's always been promoting the 90% physical aspect. And only ten percent mental. You know, I'm better than you mentally, but look at what I can do physically. When all actuality, it's really the mentality that gets you the physical ability, but when that mental starts to dwindle or something happens to it or whatever the case may be, then people don't pay attention to it, but you're still having to deal with it yourself.

**Corey 00:11:42**

We're so concerned with living up to others' expectations. And delivering what they think we're supposed to be that we are neglecting the self-care aspect, right? And I think that's a part for you, too, because you didn't even stop and well, you didn't have the time really, right to stop?

**Raven 00:12:06**

Meetings, classes, tutors, traveling on a weekend, going all summer, coming back. Starting school, going, doing it all over again, year after year after year.

**Corey 00:12:10**

While I was waiting to have you log on I was able to check out some other stuff, and I discovered the 'Unstoppable" Gatorade video that just was amazing. So, tell me about that project and working with Gatorade in this little kind of autobiographical promo that I just happened to see today.

**Raven 00:12:28**

Yes, Gatorade did a wonderful job of capturing me and Trayvon Bromell's story and intertwining them. It was really nice to see and I really hope that when people take away from watching it that we're just like anybody else. A lot of the things that we've been through with our everyday challenges that so many people go through; injuries, you know, mental setbacks, all of those things, but it's not about what happens to you, but how you respond? And we were both able to go up to this really high level and then be brought back down to dang near below sea level. I mean, when it came to injuries and all these things and people counting us out and people not thinking that we would return. And now we're two of the best at what we do in our own respective events. That whole project is — I loved every bit of it and how it turned out. It was really, man, it was nice.

**Corey 00:13:16**

And you have a very similar project with PBS which is also amazing and they have a docu-series 'Out of the dark' and you also featured in that one as well. So it's got a very similar sort of project in which it's autobiographical and you're discussing some of your experiences?

**Raven 00:13:30**

Yes. So, the well-beings piece was more, so directly related to my mental health battle and my mental health journey in itself. And it pretty much stated like, you know, the highs and the lows and really, you get a chance to kind of see — trigger warning, if you watch the video they kind of take you through like the process when I'm talking about, you know, my suicidal ideologies and how I was actually on the way and being down that road. But that piece was the first piece that really kind of put out my story, out there, and they did a wonderful job of putting it into, you know, something that was visual for people to see that made it easier to kind of identify with certain parts of it.

**Raven 00:14:09**

My whole thing with it was that it's not the fact that you know I went through and then I got the help and now I'm cured. No, that's not how depression works. I suffer major depression, anxiety, and PTSD. Like that's not how it works at all. But the thing was that I learned different tools. I learned how to have different support, I learned how to communicate the things that I needed. Though my body and my mind would be like, no, don't say keep it to yourself. I learned how to break through certain things being in my depression or being at my anxiety with how to make it, you know, a lot easier on me. Yeah, just by using all those different things.

**Corey 00:14:48**

So, what advice would you give people who are still, sort of on the fence about coming forward with their mental health issues, and maybe the stigma attached to it, how would you tell them or advise them to get beyond that point?

**Raven 00:15:06**

The thing that I would tell them is especially when you're in your depression, you're uncomfortable, regardless of whatever it is, you're uncomfortable in the space you're in. And I would like to advise them that it's going to be uncomfortable to start breaking through those things; to reach out to someone, to go see a therapist. And if that therapist doesn't work, you know what I mean? Trying to go back and see another one, but the thing is — you're worth it, you're worthy. You have to constantly give yourself constant affirmations even when you don't feel like it. When your mind is sitting here telling you, you don't deserve to be here, you're not this, you're not that.

**Raven 00:15:35**

Me, I took upon myself to be like, I'm worthy, I'm worthy, I'm worthy. I will succeed. I will succeed. I will succeed. Even if, at that moment, I didn't believe it, after constantly waking up every day, or every time those thoughts would come in, reassuring myself of those things... eventually you break through and you're like, okay, I can do this, I can get up. I could at least try this. I can try to get out of the house and go, get some fresh air, and not sit in this dark room all day or for the next couple of days.

**Raven 00:16:05**

I can try to call that friend and at least attempt to explain like, well hey, I'm kind of going through something right now. I just want you to check in on me every once in a while. I just you know, I just need you to listen to me for a second. No judgment. Just listen and just really try to really just fight yourself on it because it's really an internal battle. It's not something that someone else can come in and do for you. So I really just advise you to keep pushing yourself. Keep believing in yourself.

**Raven 00:16:35**

Keep understanding that it's worth it and you're worthy and you're worthy of being here. And that if you keep pushing through it, there is going to be something big that happens for you're going to turn life around so completely. Because looking back on my story, if I had ended my life, I feel like I would not be on the path to being able to help change so many others, or help give someone else like, just that little glimmer of light to be like I can be here a little bit longer. I can be here longer and keep pushing and fighting for myself —at the very least.

**Corey 00:17:08**

Thank you to everyone listening today and don't forget you can find us everywhere you stream and download your favorite podcasts. We'll see you next week on Motivational Mondays.