

**Depression and Suicide Among Ex-Offenders_It's Not All
Bad!_Frank King**

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[music]

00:05 Matt Duhamel: Welcome to Solitary Nation. My name is Matt Duhamel, your host, and this week we are talking with the public speaker, the comedian, the author, the writer, he does a lot of things, his name is Frank King. He has written for Jay Leno, Joan Rivers, and Dennis Miller. Frank King, welcome to Solitary Nation.

00:26 Frank King: Well, thank you very much, nice to be here.

00:28 MD: Nice to meet you. And give us a background of how did you get involved with public speaking, and all the things that you do? And you also talk about more the serious stuff, about depression and suicide. Give us a background of how you got started with that.

00:44 FK: I started comedy in the fourth grade. My teacher... I had these glasses that I had to wear, but didn't like them, 'cause I'm old, I'm 60, so we're talking 1965 or six, there were no fashion frames. It was Buddy Holly, black plastic. I'm terribly vain, still am. The teacher decided to introduce me and my glasses to the entire class at the same moment. She had me come to the front of the class, turn away from the students, put on my glasses, turn back to the students, sort of desensitized everybody, same time. And she looked down at me, she goes, "See, you look intelligent." And I said, "Yes, that would explain all the laughter..."

[chuckle]

01:26 FK: She excused herself to go to the teachers lounge, and years later, I saw her at the Winn-Dixie grocery store. She goes, "Frank, do you any idea why I left the room that morning, to go to the teachers lounge?" I go, "I have no idea, Ms Dark." She goes, "Because the thing you said to me, 'That would explain all the laughter,' was the funniest thing a child had ever said to me, and I was afraid, if I laughed in your face, you would be terribly hurt. So I had to quickly excuse myself, and go down to the teachers lounge, and share that story with everybody else." That was my first show, and then I went to... Did the high school talent show. Nobody had ever done standup at the high school senior talent show, so I did 15 minutes of high school humor, sneaking out to lunch, that kinda stuff. And I won the talent show, and I told my mom, "Well, I'm gonna be a comedian." She goes, "No, you're going to college. You can be a goat herder when you get done, but you're gonna be a goat herder with a degree."

02:19 FK: I started going to the comedy clubs, to amateur nights. And my first wife, that was not her vision for what I should be doing, so after about four years, 11 months, eighteen days, who's counting, we separated, and... 'Cause I flat out told her, "I was gonna be a standup comedian." And then within probably 11 or 12 months, I had booked 10 professional weeks of comedy on the road, and that began what became a 2,629 night in a row comedy club road trip. And yeah, we were on the road for seven years and change with no home, just a post office box, and an answering service,

and opened up for Seinfeld, and Ron White, and Foxworthy, and Dana Carvey, and Kevin Nealon, and Dennis Miller. And then fast forward to 2014, when I did my TEDx talk on depression and suicide. At that point, I went from being a funny speaker, to a speaker who was funny, because now, I had something to talk about. And since 2014, I've been focusing my speaking on depression and suicide, prevention, post-vention. And of course, being a comedian, there's humor in there. It's organic. It's not jokes. It's just, there is humor in most everything, and if done well, it's a great... You can't really talk about depression and suicide for 45 minutes without giving 'em some relief.

03:51 MD: I think everybody thinks about it at... Everybody thinks about it at one point. Wouldn't you say? I mean, maybe not seriously, but it comes up in their brain.

04:01 FK: Oh, yeah.

04:02 MD: In their mind.

04:03 FK: The thing about me and my family, it comes up in my TED talk, I say... What's his name, Seth Godin said, "To do a TED talk, you need an idea worth spreading." The way to get an idea worth spreading is, find your tribe, and my tribe is people who battle mental illness, and for whom the idea of suicide is always on the menu. And then find a vacuum, and the vacuum I found was not nearly enough people are talking about it. And when I say it's on the menu, I mean for the simplest of things. My car broke down a couple of months ago and I had three thoughts, unbidden. Thought one was, get it fixed. Thought two was, I could buy a new one. Thought three was, or I could just kill myself. It just pops into my head. It's not a serious thought. I don't act on it, but it's always there. And I spoke at a big college convention, where 300 or 400 schools, kids come with their budgets, they hire comedians and jugglers, they also hire speakers: Date rape, alcohol awareness, and suicide prevention. So I did my 15 minute sampler of my keynote, a woman came up afterwards, young woman, 21, 22. She goes, "You made me cry." I said, "How did I make you cry?" She said, "Because when you said, 'You could get the car fixed, you could buy a new car, or you could just kill yourself,' " she said, "For the first time in my life, I realized that I was not the only one on the planet who thought that way." That was really a long answer, Matt, to a short question.

[laughter]

05:35 MD: And that's it, thank you for listening. No, I'm just kidding. Well, I wanna switch gears a little bit, because what we are talking about, the criminal justice system, and you know, about depression, you suffer from it, and you talk about suicide prevention. And one of the groups in society facing that problem, are people that have been through the criminal justice system. And I'm not sure if you're familiar with a gentlemen named Kalief Browder. He's been in the news a lot, and a really sad story, and I'll just read briefly about what happened.

06:06 FK: Okay.

06:06 MD: He was an American who was arrested at the age of 16 for allegedly... He says he was innocent the whole time. Allegedly stealing a backpack. He was in prison for three years on Rikers

Island, which is closing now.

06:18 FK: Thankfully.

06:19 MD: He never got a trial... Yes. Thankfully... He never got a trial. He spent most of his time in solitary confinement. During his imprisonment, Browder was severely abused, and repeatedly beaten by officers and inmates. Basically, he had a horrific experience. Two years after his release, Browder died by suicide. In November 2013, Browder attempted to commit suicide by slitting his wrists. Once more, this is the first attempt. This time with a steak knife, but was stopped by a friend. And then, on June 5th, 2015, he wrote a brief note to his mom, "Mom, I can't take it anymore." The next day, Browder committed suicide by hanging himself and that was two years after his release.

07:09 MD: And, really, I was looking at the statistics, Frank, about people after being released. The suicide rates for people that have been in state or federal prisons, if I have this correct... At least, for male prisoners, it's eight times higher than the national average for suicides. But the good news is the rate of state prison suicide, nationally, has been steady over the past decade, averaging about 15 incidents per 100,000 inmates nationwide. That's actually down from 30 years ago, but still a major issue. I know families are involved when they have a loved one incarcerated. They go through, I'm sure, depression, and perhaps, I hope not, but thoughts of suicide. Any tips? Anything that you could say to people that have been incarcerated or families who have been affected by incarceration? What can you tell them?

08:12 FK: Yeah. Two things. One is... I'm also an auctioneer and I just did an auction for the Newberg, Oregon Noon Rotary. And they raised money for something that used to be called, let's see... Thugs Off Drugs. That was the 1970s name. It's now called Helping Hands. And what it is, is it's... And we raised somewhere close to \$75,000. It's an organization for people who have just been discharged from the prison system, state or federal, and have nowhere to go, no job, no family, no social support system. And they provide housing, training, detox, whatever you need. I would encourage people who have a loved one coming out of the system to hit the Google machine, and see if there are any social service organizations, either government or not-for-profits, that offer services for former inmates.

09:23 FK: The second thing would be for family members, is... I think I mentioned earlier that there's an old wives tale about, "You never mention the word 'suicide' to somebody who's depressed. You need to ask if they're depressed, and then, if they are in fact depressed, if they're willing to admit they're depressed, the second question is always, "Are you having thoughts of suicide?" And that's a difficult one to do. And I tell people, when I do my keynoting and training, I say, "Look, that's a difficult question to ask, 'Are you having thoughts of suicide?' I would practice that in the mirror a few times, before you ask the person you're worried about, so that it comes out of your mouth as easily as possible." And I also tell 'em, "You need to brace yourself. You don't want to react or overreact to whatever they say. You wanna be prepared for something that is perhaps horrific, so you don't go, 'Oh, dear God!' Yeah, ask 'em if they're depressed, ask if they're having thoughts of suicide, and then, if they say, 'Yes, they're having thoughts of suicide,' the next question is always, 'Do you have a plan?' And if they're depressed, and they're having thoughts of suicide, and they have a plan, then the next step is never leave them alone."

10:40 FK: "If you have to go somewhere, at that point, do your best to get somebody else to come in to be with them. And your job, at that point, is like a mental health first responder. You're like a mental health paramedic. You're not there to fix them, you're just there to stabilize 'em, and then get them talking to somebody, a mental health professional. Your job, at that point, is to get 'em on the phone to one of the suicide hotlines, or if it's a younger person, get them texting. Now, you can text back and forth with the suicide hotlines. And they often have teenagers on the other end of the texting, so it's very much age appropriate, generationally. If you can't get the phone into the hand of the person who is considering suicide and has a plan, you pick up the phone, you dial the hotline number, and the volunteer on the other end will undoubtedly work very hard to get the phone into the hand of the person who is in crisis."

11:33 FK: "The last step is... " And this is always a question I get, "When do you call the cops?" "You don't dial 9-1-1, unless they are an immediate threat to themselves or others."

11:43 MD: Sure. Good advice. Definitely. I was searching for this last night, and researching depression, and generational... Is that what it's called, generational depression or generational suicide?

11:56 FK: Yeah, generational depression and suicide. In my family, we've got the daily double.

12:01 MD: Okay. There was a question on Yahoo that was posted on July 2011 and it says, "Should I commit suicide, because of my felony record?" I mean this person just posted this and opened it up to the world. And I just wanna read this, it's very sad actually. He says, "I have screwed up in my life so much in four years ago and with second degree of burglary, because of my 'friend' and I still cut myself all the time, because I can't get a job based on my skill. I am so depressed, because I will never have a good life. Everyone hates me, because I'm a felon, so I think my life should end. I think I don't deserve a second chance, so I feel I wanna terminate my life, so it would solve the problem. My parents have been telling me that I am a worthless piece of crap. I had a good life, until four years ago, as a junior year in college. I was kicked out of college, because of felony conviction, so I don't have a degree and I have to work at McDonalds. How can I get out of this, and do the job based on my computer skill, or should I just kill myself? I would just use the kitchen knife and stab it into myself."

13:11 FK: No!

13:11 MD: A little graphic, but yeah, "How possible... " And I'm reading this how he wrote it, so his writing is a little off, but, "How possible is that felons can become successful and rich?" Obviously, a very depressed person and I hope that he never went through it. This was 5 years ago or 6 years ago. It's very sad. It's very sad and you've been talking to a lot of people, maybe not necessarily ex-felons, but does this type of talk surprise you? Have you seen this a lot in your relationships with people?

13:49 FK: If he's reaching out like that, it sounds like he's ambivalent, and Matt, roughly eight out of 10 people are ambivalent about committing suicide. The other two, there's probably nothing you

can do to stop them. There's a... If you go online, type in Kevin Hines, H-I-N-E-S. He's got a YouTube video. Schizophrenic, I believe. Schizoaffective disorder, depending where you are on the timeline, in terms of age. When I was younger, it was schizophrenia. Now, I think it's Schizoaffective disorder. And he was hearing voices, voices told him to commit suicide. He went on Google typed, "I live in San Francisco. I want to commit suicide." Of course, found a website that suggested a bridge and took a bus to the bridge. And says, in his talk, he was hoping somebody on the bus would ask him, "Are you okay?" And he said if somebody had asked, he said he would have spilled his guts, "No, I'm not okay. I'm on my way to the bridge to commit suicide. I need help." But nobody on the bus spoke, asked, tumbled to the fact that he was in this state... Got to the bridge, standing next to the bridge or next to the railing, a woman comes up and she goes, "Excuse me," and he's thinking, "Oh, finally." And she goes, "Could you take our picture?"

15:18 MD: Oh, my goodness.

15:18 FK: So he takes her picture, and they walk off, and he goes over the rail. And like most people who do that, he said, "As soon as he let go, he knew it was a mistake."

15:30 MD: Ah, man.

15:30 FK: Survived the drop... And here's where the comedy comes in. He survives the drop, he goes way down in the water, but he comes back up. His back is hurt pretty bad, but he's alive. He feels something under the water bump his leg and he thinks to himself, "Sharks? The website didn't mention sharks."

[chuckle]

15:48 FK: "I survived the drop and I'm gonna be eaten by sharks?" [laughter]

15:53 MD: Like he should be worried about that, right? [chuckle]

15:55 FK: Yeah. I turns out that it was a sea lion...

[chuckle]

16:00 FK: But yeah... But see, he was was ambivalent. Even though he's been hearing these voices and they've been telling him to kill himself, still he was ambivalent. If someone had spoken to him on the way there, he would have just opened up and would have avoided the jump. In my TED talk, I say like, "Here's what you don't say: 'Turn that frown upside down. Pull yourself up by your boot straps.'" The thing to say is, "Okay, I'm here for you and mean it. I know you're not lazy, crazy, or self-absorbed. I understand that depression is an illness. The good news is, with time and treatment, things will get better, and I will take the time, and mean it, and help you get the treatment, and mean it." And then, of course, the next question is, "Are you having thoughts of suicide?" If I was talking to that young man right this minute, I'd go... We'd talk about his situation. I would tell him, "I do believe there's life after felony."

16:53 MD: In your TED talk, this is kind of funny, you hold up a shirt as an example.

17:00 FK: Yeah.

17:00 MD: And it says, "Normies just don't get it."

17:03 FK: Well, 'normies' is a term that people who battle mental illness call 'normal people.' Yes, some people call 'em 'normal.' Some call 'em 'neuro-normal.' That's one of the problems with mental illness, depression, thoughts of suicide, is 85% of the population has never experienced a major depressive disorder. So they can't really wrap their minds around the whole idea of that, and then the thoughts of suicide. I just spoke for the Oregon Funeral Director's Association, and I talked about suicide prevention and post-vention. Prevention, because, if you have a family who has lost a member to suicide, some of the other family members may be thinking, "Why should I go on? Why bother, now that so-and-so is gone?" Post-vention, how do you handle the family... Because if they died in an automobile accident, it's sudden, violent, and unexpected. If they die by suicide, it's sudden, often violent, unexpected, and the person chose to take their own life. And most normal people cannot conceive of a life so bad, that it would end by somebody taking their own life. You hear people say, "I can't believe he wanted to kill himself." He didn't wanna kill himself. He wanted the pain to end. If you get to pull the trigger tonight, and wake up tomorrow morning, and feel what most people feel normal, that would probably be his choice. Depression is like walking around in those lead filled boots. It's difficult to put one foot in front of the other.

18:43 MD: Yeah, and I remember hearing that in your TED talk, wearing lead shoes as an example of depression. It seems to me that it's an invisible illness that people just are afraid to talk about, especially, if you have a felony record or you've been in prison. It's like a double embarrassment, "Hey, I've been through prison. I have a felony, or even a misdemeanor, and I am very depressed." Do you find a lot of people just don't wanna talk about it?

19:13 FK: Well, men, specifically. I'm sure women feel the same way on some level, but I'm working with two psychologists on a book, an anthology, a Chicken Soup for the Soul sort of a book, men's stories on mental challenges, struggles. Not just mental illness, but dealing with aging parents, having a child with autism, dealing with drug or alcohol abuse. And what we're hoping is that, men will pick up the book, and the stories will begin... Like the young man, where everything was going good, until his junior year in college. We meet him and he's a contributing member of society, and then things go to hell in a handbasket, ends up in jail, and then spirals downward from there into depression, because he can't find a job. And then, hopefully, in these stories, there will be an element, "And then I figured out strategies to cope with these issues... I saw a psychiatrist, I got on an antidepressant, I found a program for felons to reintegrate into the workforce." So we're hoping men will pick up the book, read the story of that person, and see themselves in it. Yes, things were going well, then they ended up in prison, then after prison, they had great difficulty, and then, "Oh, this is how the guy coped. There's a program for felons to get reintegrated to the workforce?" We're collecting stories. We've got, I think, 28. We want 45 stories.

20:44 MD: Okay, so we'll put a link on Solitary Nation podcast, directly to where people can submit their stories.

20:52 FK: What they do, is they send out a SurveyMonkey survey and you put your name, your age... And it can be anonymous, by the way. Even though you give us your name, in the book, you don't have to publish your name. And then what we're asking for is a 200-word summation of your story, and then we'll pick the ones... And like I said, dealing with aging parents, dealing with an autistic child, drug and alcohol addiction, just a range... And in the survey, it shows you... In the cover letter, it talks about all these categories that your story might fall in. Most people have a story that overlaps a couple of them: Divorce, incarceration, LGBTQ.

21:38 MD: When do you think this book will be available?

21:41 FK: Let's see. We're hoping to have all the submissions in by the end of the month and I'm guessing it should be available 30 days later, maybe 60 at the most. I would say, by Labor Day, the book should be published.

21:56 MD: Okay, so men listening right now, go to the page, go to solitarynationpodcast.com. Find season two, episode six, Frank King, and then you'll see the link there, where you could submit your story. I also wanna talk about how people can find you, about what you do, and maybe come to one of your motivational talks. How can people find you, Frank?

22:19 FK: Not gonna happen.

22:20 MD: Not gonna happen?

[laughter]

22:22 MD: You're secret, you're not out there at all?

22:25 FK: I'm in the witness protection program.

22:26 MD: Oh, [chuckle] my goodness.

22:28 FK: No, I've got a website and people give me a hard time because the name is really long, but that's because they don't know, don't understand, that it's full of keywords. It's like a long tail keyword phrase. It's called the, T-H-E, suicidepreventionspeaker.com.

22:48 MD: Okay. That's not too bad. And then you have another one here. I'm on another website.

22:55 FK: I got a bunch of 'em, which one are you on?

22:58 MD: [laughter] Frankkingspeaking.com, you can also find you there too, it looks like.

23:03 FK: Yes, correct. 'Cause there are other topics I speak on. The networking, I've got a networking speech, 'cause my mother was a... I didn't know at the time, but it became very obvious later, when I learned that not everybody in the world did business the way my mom did,

networking, connecting people for no reward to herself, just because she could. So I got a networking speech, I've got a inspirational, motivational speech, because I've had three or four heart procedures, a bankruptcy. So I've got a resilience story of my own. And comedy, I'm gonna be going to the coast of Oregon here this month, to the Harley-Davidson Dealers Meeting, and just being funny. Sometimes, I'm just funny.

23:49 MD: Yeah, they say... People can get through the toughest times by being lighthearted, or just trying to, at least, laugh through the problem. And I have a tendency of doing that. You've been through some really tough times. I have been through some tough times. And I had a relative who was arrested about five years ago, tried to commit suicide twice, but he's happy now. Today, we laugh about it. It sounds weird, but we laugh about it, literally.

24:24 FK: I've been self-medicating with humor for decades, as well as my family. My sister's very funny, she said, "I would never commit suicide." I said, "How do you know that?" She said, "Because I'm a professional editor and I could never get the note just right." We're just all very funny that way. And there are punchlines in the pain, and the trick is to figure out where they lie. And, in terms of speaking, success stories, people are interested in, but they really wanna know about your messes, and stresses, and how you overcame. Like the person you were just talking about who went to prison, I guess. And then people wanna know about that, and then they wanna know, "How did he get to where he is today?" That's what the book's about, "How did you go from that to where you are?" 'Cause that may help someone else make that same leap, to know that somebody else did it.

25:26 MD: It's resiliency.

25:27 FK: Yeah. And sometimes, the right person with the right information, at the right time, can save a life. And it may be something as simple as, "Look, brother, I've been there and here's what I did. And I'll help you do the same."

25:41 MD: I'm gonna wrap up here, because I know you're busy.

25:44 FK: No. I got nothing going.

25:46 MD: But I do wanna thank you, Frank King, for coming on the show and spending time on Solitary Nation. Your advice, really, I'm sure, helped out a lot of people, and I appreciate you being out there, and talking about your personal story, and helping others. And that's what I'm trying to do here on this podcast. And I know you do a podcast as well, and you do so many things. And once again, you have several websites, frankkingspeaking.com... The other one is... Mention it one more time for us.

26:13 FK: Oh. It's the, T-H-E, suicidepreventionspeaker.com.

26:17 MD: Frank King, ladies and gentlemen. And you can find him, and information about how you can book him as a speaker, or go to one of his talks at those websites. My name is Matt Duhamel, host of Solitary Nation. Thanks for listening. I'll talk to you next week.