



**Episode #160:**

**J.O. Oliver on Being a Differently Wired,  
Stay-at-Home Dad**

June 6, 2019

Debbie: Hey JO, welcome to the podcast.

JO: Hey, thanks for having me, Debbie. I appreciate it.

Debbie: Yeah, I'm looking forward to having this conversation. I don't have a lot of dads on the show, but I know that we have a lot of dads in our audience and our community and it's a perspective that I think is important to share. And I think you have a really unique story, um, that also our listeners would find interesting. So I want to kind of go in depth into your personal story, but before we do that, could you even just give us like, you know, the, the elevator speech that you know, the quick description of who you are as a speaker and a writer and a dad?

JO: Oh, appreciate it. Absolutely. So I am a professional speaker. I used to speak with an organization called Rachel's Challenge and that's unfortunately the first person to lose a life in the Columbine shooting on April 20th, 1999 was Rachel Joy Scott. So for 250 days out of the year, I was on the road traveling as a speaker in schools and families and communities. From there I transitioned to becoming a stay at home dad, I'd written a book before that called *Impersonations* from my journey from boyhood to manhood. Then I decided to write a book about my experience of being a first time stay at home dad. So that book is titled *Joy In The Journey: 1st Year Chronicles From A Stay At Home Dad*, named after my oldest daughter Journey. But in the meantime I have always been gnawing on this book about Dyslexia and ADHD that I just had to birth out to really feel like I was sharing my honest wholeness with the world. And that's what I'm, I'm in the process of launching right now is *To the Little Boy in Me: Learning With Dyslexia & ADHD*. So I'm a stay at home dad of two beautiful daughters, Journey and Justice. I'll be celebrating my 10 year wedding anniversary on May 1st. And, um, I'm a guy that has a lot of positive, great things going on in life that I'm very fortunate to have.

Debbie: What a great introduction and congratulations on the ten year wedding anniversary coming up.

JO: Thank you. Thank you very much.

Debbie: Yeah, and I didn't realize that your speaking was surrounding that foundation related to Columbine. So that must have been really powerful important work.

JO: Oh, absolutely. Now with that being said, I speak beyond that. Like just last week I did a presentation to a group of athletes about suffering to become stronger and I'm doing a leadership type of speech coming up. So I'm a quote unquote speaker, but my main focus for six years was with Rachel's Challenge and the 20 year anniversary, unfortunately, is coming up this Saturday on the 20th and talk about having an opportunity to wake up every day and take a tragedy and turn it into a triumph was absolutely amazing. And it was one of the highlights of my life and I still sometimes want to go back and, and be affiliated and speaking for the

organization. But right now my first priority is being a father and really grooming and shepherding my two daughters, Journey and Justice.

Debbie: So you wrote this book *To the Little Boy in Me: Learning With Dyslexia & ADHD*, which I had a chance to take a look at and kind of get to know your story a little bit. Can you tell us first why you thought it was so important to share your story?

JO: The first thing for me, right off the bat, it was therapy. It was therapy. I have a great therapist, but I've always been a introspective type person. And I tell people for me, I'll often carry three people inside of me. I carry a little boy that likes to be spontaneous and have fun and play and be creative. I carry a present man that can capture the moment of what's happening in the moment. And then I carry this old man that's kind of wise and helps me kind of guide myself through life and not make too many foolish decisions. But the little boy has experienced the most pain. He's been isolated, abandoned, neglected, felt dumb, stupid, broken, not right. And I wanted to go back at this stage in my life while I feel like dyslexia is an absolute God given brilliant gift as well as ADHD. But at the time I didn't feel like that. I had so many horrible messages that I say to myself that I've thought about myself and I wanted to go back and get down on one knee and put my hand on this little boy's shoulder and look him in the eye and say, man, you are brilliant. You are beautiful.

These things that we struggle with when we were younger are now actually gifts that people pay us for, to come and share and connect and just give encouragement and inspiration to. So you are a champion. Nothing inside of you needs to be fixed and nothing inside of you is broken. And I wanted to just pick him up and put him on my shoulder and just walk out and just feel this connection with him and that's where I am right now. And then in the process, share that with other people that may have those same messages going on within about themselves or they know someone or, or just, just to share that with the community or families or corporations as a whole.

Debbie: Well it's so, you know, I feel this so deeply when, when you talk about connecting with your younger self. I mean it is so powerful and I, it's really interesting right now where we are as a society. You know, by the time, I don't know if this episode will air before or after this other one, but I recently spoke with someone about how so many adults are being diagnosed now, or identifying or learning more about who they are because of what they're going through with their children. But there is a mourning process that happens for so many of them, you know, connecting the dots and having to go back and consider pain or trauma, you know, that they suffered as children because of their needs not being met or just being misunderstood. So I think your message is so timely and could you tell us, I know that you, your ADHD, uh, identification happened recently, I believe. But would you tell us about your dyslexia? Tell us a little bit about your discovery of that and how that that came about and how was that received in your family and in your school?

JO: So I'd say kind of the bottom line in the whole process, I wasn't diagnosed with dyslexia until I was a junior in college, a pre-med major and I was a graduate and I graduated from high school with honors. My whole academic career was just a

grind. You know, I've always been a very large kid, so I tell people sometimes I'm literally 6'3 and a half, 225, 230 pounds. And I was that in high school. So I loved being around my friends and being in the hallways and playing sports and that whole just comradery of excitement. But when I walked into a classroom, I became the quietest person in the class or the most distracted person in the class because I did not want to be called upon to read out loud or anything where I was going to have to share some type of reading or connection in that regard.

If it was talking from my heart or giving a synopsis of something, that's in my wheelhouse all day. So standardized tests, tests in general, spelling, things of that nature. It was just agonizing for me, but I, I'd just grind it, grind it and work really hard. And when I was in school you had to pass a standardized test to graduate from high school and it was called the toss test in Texas at the time, I didn't pass this tests until I was in the last semester of my senior year in high school and I was, at the time, an AP advanced placement student. So here I am taking the math part the sixth time, the reading part the eighth time and the writing part the ninth time, struggling on this exam and I finally pass it.

: I get to college, I am taking genetics for the second time. I get so frustrated because I've studied everything you could possibly imagine on God's green earth about genetics, and here I am about to take this test for the second time and it's the exact same test I took the year before and I'm about to bomb it. So I flipped this test over and I wrote everything that I'd ever studied about genetics on the back of this test. Professor calls me to her office a couple of weeks later and she just says, JO, why didn't you write what you wrote on the back of the test on the front of the test? You would have been the only person in the class to have aced the test. I think you may have a learning disability. Well here I am playing college football, I'm a man, I'm big, I'm quote unquote strong. I don't have a disability. That's that sounds like weakness. So after about three weeks of humming and hawing and doing research and kind of skimming around this person's office, I went in and she did a bunch of diagnostic tests and things of that nature on me.

And the great thing about this lady, unfortunately she's passed on, but she knew me from taking a reading remedial course to even be accepted into college to prove that I was college material. So I already felt safe around her because I, I had a connection with her about a month before I started college. I went in and she did all these exams and three weeks later I meet with her and she has a smile on her face like it's Christmas morning. And she says, I know what's been going on. And I go, please tell me. And she says, JO, you're dyslexic. And I'm about to start crying because I literally looked at her and I said, I only had one question, am I stupid? And she said, JO, you may be the most intelligent person I've ever met in my life. She said, you can become an astronaut if you want to.

The only thing that you do is that you learn differently. She said, let me tell you how smart you are. She said you're so smart that you have innately taught yourself to learn. You have provided for yourself systems that if you would have been diagnosed earlier, these would have been the same system we would have given you, and you taught them to yourself. And then my next question was, is that what Theo had on The Cosby Show? She goes that's exactly what he had.

Debbie: I forgot about that. You're right.

JO: And from there, you know, I felt like, I felt like I was Cuba Gooding Jr at the bottom of the ocean in *Man of Honor*, trying to put something together in the dark while my hand was shaking crazy and all of a sudden the ocean just lit up and all the pieces just flew into where they were supposed to go. It began to click. Well fast forward six years later, I'm working on my dyslexia book, the one that we're talking about now, and I'm meeting with this lady named Gladys Kalinowski, she's a leading researcher for the Scottish Rite Hospital, Dallas, Texas on dyslexia. And she says, JO, I bet you drive your wife crazy, huh? And I said, well, it is our first year of marriage so I imagine I do. She goes, no, I'm talking about with your ADHD. I said, what do you mean ADHD? And she goes you haven't been diagnosed? And I go, no, I've never been diagnosed. Oh well 43% of people that have dyslexia have ADHD, you may want to get diagnosed. I got diagnosed, and guaranteed right on the money, test I never had to study for but I passed with flying colors, and I have ADHD. And it all began to click.

And I was 30 years old so that was nine years ago, but I still, Debbie carried this shame with me. So just because I knew the answers and I knew where I belonged, that there was a name for it, I still hadn't got these messages out of my head. So within the last, I'd say three years, I've gotten to the point and one other was writing a letter to myself. In 2006, I wrote a forgiveness letter to myself and I addressed it, dear Jonathan, all of it. And I wrote this letter about all the hangups and habits and shame and stuff that I carry with myself and I gave myself permission to have grace and compassion and forgiveness towards myself so that I wouldn't have to carry this around. That started that healing process. And then that just kind of catapulted me into the whole completion of the book and where we are right now.

Debbie: Wow. I love this idea of writing a letter to yourself. I think that can be super powerful. What other ways have you found to, to heal that, that pain? You know the, and to help the child in you who was never understood, kind of feel seen?

JO: So, phenomenal question, by the way, this is a great question. I say this jokingly, but I say this out of complete honesty. What I used to get in trouble with for and struggle with as a kid is what I get paid for now. Be quiet, sit down, stop moving. You have too much energy. All these things. And no knock on my teachers, okay. I, where I am in my life is because I had three teachers that particularly believed in me. You know, I had a second grade teacher named Mrs Dodge who made learning fun, so I knew that it was possible to have fun while you were learning. I had a AP chemistry teacher while I was a senior in high school that was not amused when he knew that I was wearing the class clown mask. And he simply just kind of pulled me to the side and, not shaming me, and just said Oliver, I think you have more to offer that you're not giving us right now.

And then I had a AP English teacher that has passed on who said when you get to college, she had already spoken to my life places where she knew that I was going to go beyond where I was at that present moment. Just, just that little message of when you get to college connected with me. So, you know Abraham

Lincoln once said, I didn't try so hard because I believed in myself, I tried so hard because I didn't want to let the people down who believed in me the most. And these are my big three that I knew that believed in me when I was on academic probation or things of that nature. But where I am now what I give back is, well I'm a speaker. So dyslexia is a super power for me because literally I'm a visual learner and I'm an audio type person. So I connect with stories. I'm a storyteller.

I suggest that when I speak and share with people that resonates with them, that leaves an impression with them. With the ADHD I have this energy, I have this charisma to light up the room and to bring this type of connection and this passion. And it can easily be felt across this phone as we're speaking right now, as I'm talking, I'm literally walking around in my office right now. Well, guess what? When I show up to speak to 3000 people, they're not paying me to stand behind a podium. They want me to come and speak as if I'm speaking directly to them. Well, I'm going to move so much in that room. Not wasteful movement, but just in movement in general that you're going to feel that, you know? And the cool thing is when you a stay at home dad, you got two kids under four, ADHD is a pretty cool tool to have.

Debbie: Say more about that. How does your, how is your ADHD a super power as a stay at home dad?

JO: Oh my goodness. My daughter, my three year old, my daughter Journey is running laps around our living room just cause of the energy that she has. We wake up and we do things. We, we're, we get things done. We have fun, we have adventures. We, we go places, we try different things. You know, we start out with affirmations in the morning, but we just have excitement and learning and experimenting that I know that I have this, this energy that can connect with them on that level. And if, and it shows in the way that daddy and daughter have this bond together. My wife is a, is a scientist, she's a cardiologist. So I often tell people she work on the heart, I work in the heart. And she, she doesn't say this, like I'm not saying this, what I'm saying about her out of cockiness or arrogance. I'm saying this because I've heard her say it and it's out of love and appreciation. She's like, sweetheart, you were designed for this role of being a stay at home dad. She like this is your calling. There's no way that I could do and have what you have with these, with the kids, the way you interact with them.

That's, that's my ADHD. Now do I struggle reading Dr Seuss? Absolutely. Okay? I'm not going to read Dr Seuss. I struggle reading books and things of that nature, but when we're going and we're having that connection and I'm multitasking but still trying to be a mindful parent, so I got a bottle being warmed up. I know her nap time is getting ready to happen. I got a diaper being changed over here while I'm also knowing the troll music has been playing for the 15th time in the background. And um, I'm getting ready to defrost some food so I can cook dinner around four o'clock in the afternoon. When all of that is happening, I'm not flipping out, I'm not like overwhelmed, I'm in my normality. But with somebody else who may not have ADHD, and I don't even like the D part of it, disorder. I like to say challenged at the end of it.

They may walk into that environment and be like, it is too much going on here, I need a break. When I walk into an environment I'm like, okay, well once I get that done then I want to do this, and then I want to do that, and then I also told Journey that I'm going to read this book with her and then I promised her after she wakes up in quiet time, we're going to watch Dr. McStuffins. And then yes and then I want to make sure I have the house in a certain way so when my wife comes home, she doesn't have to feel like the house is a disaster. Okay, cool. It's Thursday.

Debbie: That's great. I love that. I'm curious if you have any hacks. You know, I, I'm always curious about when, when people make their or, you know, just embrace their neuro difference as a gift. But also, you know, I know with ADHD in particular, a lot of people have formulated their own systems and hacks that kind of make the difference work for them. So do you have any?

JO: Oh, I have tons of them. So, right now when I, when I write, formal writing for example, when I used to write, I'd try to write like Ernest Hemingway. Worst thing ever, worst thing ever. And then I transitioned to writing, like I speak into my iPhone and I would send it to myself and then it, then my wife would dictate it. Now I advanced to where I would literally do a video into my iPhone of what I want that chapter to be. And I'm literally speaking it out as, as I, as if I'm writing it, I send it to my assistant and she just transcribes it for me. Changes the game completely. I have a master calendar that I'm looking at right now in my office. If it's something where I need to have a, like a time meeting, like right now I knew we had a time meeting, that's boxed in yellow on my master calendar. And then, and the number is, is kind of boxed around in, in the highlighted yellow.

If it's where my mammy's coming, that's in pink. And, and I, I leave that over to my actual iPhone, but I know where I can look at things right then and there. But those are just, you know, simple little, little things. Now I will say this, there are challenges with being ADHD. You know, I, I lose lip chap all the time. I'm always misplacing my keys. Uh, sometimes my wife and I wake up at four o'clock in the morning to workout. There are times if I push my wife too early and she haven't had coffee and I'm asking her what she dreamed about the night before, she's like, look, you need to chill. You know, it's, it can be a lot. I've lost, I've lost \$300 before in my wallet because I bought something and I've misplaced my wallet and I went back to the place where I misplaced my wallet and my wallet was there and the money was gone. Like there's times when we're getting ready to leave a table or a restaurant or something and my wife will say, do you have your wallet? Do you have your phone? Do you have your keys? Do you have your credit card? Okay, cool.

Because I've lost, I've left my, this is an old Blackberry. I left it on an outside patio table after we finished eating in South Beach, went back to where we were staying, realized it 35 minutes later, went back and the phone was still in the same spot because the table hadn't been busted yet. That stuff happens all the time, you know? So, but for the hacks, the biggest one I've learned, and this is the one that's the most tender to me, is to give myself grace. Like to really give myself grace. And I'm a visual person so I have quotes that are taped around my

mirror when I wake up in the morning and one of them is "If today was the day you were going to die, would you want to do what you're about to do today?" You know, I, I give myself grace to, to be careful because before my feet hit the ground, if I'm not mindful, I'll already start playing that negative tape that I'm not enough, that I'm not, I'm not this, I'm not that.

And I've given myself enough grace to say, you're amazing. I love you. You're brilliant. You're doing great things. You know, breathe. Be nice to yourself. Now if I'm doing something boring, like an expense report that I know I don't want to do, I put some classical music on in the background, some instrumental music on in the background. Work on my report while the music is playing. If I'm working on a project and I know I'm going to get overwhelmed pretty quickly, I might work on it for 15 minutes, get up, go do something more exciting, come back and then go work on it for 15 more minutes. And then I might find myself in a rhythm and I look up and I've been working on it for 45 minutes. Um, I don't try to read a whole book in a day anymore, which I'd never could anyway.

I just read, now I've just gotten to the point where I read five pages at a time. If I read more than five, cool. If I don't, I stop. Because I used to get so, I've got books that I've been wanting to read forever and I haven't. The only reason, I've been struggling to read *The Alchemist* for the last eight months and I think I've maybe got 50 pages to go. So just give myself grace. Just, you know, give myself some grace, give myself a hug, some encouragement. And when I do that, I show up better. I show up better for this, for this connection that we're having right now. I show up genuine, I show up compassionate, I show up with love and nurture versus sarcasm and criticism and, and anger and frustration with myself. When I show up like that, it shows up in my marriage. It shows up in my parenting style because I have no patience. And it shows up with the way I interact with, with people in society because I'm, I don't have any mindfulness of what they may be going through.

Debbie: Yeah, I love the, I love that. I mean that's, that's a lot of what we talk about in the Tilt community is just that intentionality, you know, in setting that intention every day. I go through phases where I do an affirmation first thing every day and I think those things really do make a difference. Those rituals and routines can, can really help set the tone. And it doesn't mean that we are going to have a flawless parenting day, but just setting that intention and knowing that that is our highest goal I think can really can really just help in all aspects of our life. So I love that you do that.

JO: I will. I will say this just briefly, one of the things I started doing about five years ago, and this is for, for the listeners, every morning I wake up and I have what my intention is for the day and I send it to 10 people, including my wife. That's my intention or my prayers for the day. And every night before I go to bed, I send to the same 10 people 10 things that I'm grateful for. And it's the way I start my day and I book in my day. I do it almost every single day except for probably on Saturday and Sunday because I don't want to make it like a legalistic type thing. That, that right there, that just changed my whole mindset of, of finding something to be grateful for.

And then lastly, my great grandmother taught me this when I was a little boy. I'm talking like five years old every day except for on Saturday and Sunday because I don't wanna make it a legalistic thing, every day I make up my bed, first thing I do when I get out of the bed. Because no matter what happens throughout the entire day at least I can say I got one thing accomplished. Even if I take a nap later on that afternoon in the same bed, I still make that up before I go throughout the rest of my day. And that's just who I am. But it makes a big difference on starting my day with one positive movement, by just making my bed

Debbie: Love that. So funny, you know, as you're saying that I'm thinking, on days, I too really like a nicely made bed and on days when I don't make the bed first thing, I often, if I had a crazy morning and I then left the house and I'd come back and then dinner, you know and then life goes on, it's 10 o'clock I go in my bedroom, the bed's unmade, I will often make it just so I can get in a nicely made bed. That gives you a little window into the, into my mind. Um, but, but I love that. Um, I love that. Starting it with that, starting your day with that. I want to ask you one question before we kind of wrap up too. So I'm curious to know, you know, how your family responded to this information, you know, when you were identified as being dyslexic and ADHD. I'm curious about that because I'm wondering if your family felt any sense of, oh gosh, we missed this, you know, what that was like. And then also as an African American man, I know that in the African American community there is a, you know, more stick about or not as much trust of certain diagnoses. So I'm just wondering what your experience was like in those situations.

JO: Two phenomenal questions. First, I remember telling my dad when I was a junior and, um, and keep in mind, you know, dyslexia is hereditary. So I probably got it from one of my parents and I could pretty much tell, maybe it was more than likely both of them, but probably more likely my dad. But would that being said, I remember telling my dad in a Walmart parking lot when I was in college and he just kind of had this, and I got this from him, he's like, okay, like, and we're just going to keep on growing. You know, that was his response. Um, my mom, we just talked about this three weeks ago and she was listening to some interviews I've done about the book and she called me. She just said, I feel like I let you down. I feel like, like I should have noticed.

And she, I could tell she was so, my mom, I'm a mama's boy. She has three boys. I'm the middle child. So I grew up watching Oprah with her. So that's why I'm very introspective. So, um, and I just told her, I said, no Mama, no, you didn't let me down. You didn't drop the ball. This is the way it was supposed to happen because I couldn't have a testimony if I didn't have a struggle. And so she kind of felt like she had let me down and I write about her in the book, how she works so hard with me reading it and helping me truly be nice to myself. Going to the African American community and just the black community as I would say. You know when I say the word therapy that can, you know, it's not a lot of people that I know of. I've surrounded myself with people that I've gotten older now.

When I was growing up, you didn't talk about therapy or going in therapy as a black person. They'd be like, what? Why do you want people to know your business? Why you want to share that, that type of stuff? And unfortunately also it was a lot of sometimes jokes made about, you know, so and so quote unquote had ADHD. It was like you need to go somewhere and sit down and take your medicine and then taking your Ritalin again or something like that. That's why they are bouncing off the wall. So there's a lot of shame and sarcasm put behind it. And I think it was not because it was intent to truly hurt an individual, even myself, I think it was because it was a lack of true understanding and knowledge. And that kind of left a gap on just speaking kind of from the cuff without really understanding the weight of what was being said.

And I do feel like even now there's a stigma behind dyslexia and ADHD because it can be implied that it may be a lack of education or intelligence behind it. And you know very well that that is the complete opposite, as well as the listeners. But if you're not familiar with that, you go oh, you got dyslexia. Okay then, that explains a lot. Well, what do you mean by a lot? Because actually it explains that I'm pretty much a genius. But I think that that would be my response, you know, is now where I am at almost 40 years old, there's still a lot of cringe in certain environments when you mention therapy. You know, my wife and I have a marriage therapist, I see a therapist. But truthfully, these things are part of the toolbox that allowed me to show up and be the better version, the best version of myself that I have to offer the world. So that's, that's kind of my response to that. That's a great question.

Debbie: I love that too. And I think it's so, you just being in, you know, you're writing about your experience, you're talking about it. And um, that's how I believe all this change happens. That's how we change these preconceptions about certain diagnoses or, or, or therapy or any of these things. It's talking openly about it without shame, and normalizing it. So you're doing really important work. Um, so one last question before we go. I, I'm curious because your work is, you cover so many different things, you're, you're really trying to support stay at home dads, you're sharing your story about your learning differences to help other people. Do you know what your big kind of 'why' is in the world? Like how, you know, if you could leave a legacy or change, uh, people in, in, in one way, what would that be?

JO: I often say this, Life is what you're born with, living is what you do with it. And I'm choosing to live.

Debbie: I love it. So, okay. Tell listeners then where they can connect with you and learn more about your work and your books.

JO: So the best way to get in contact with me is through my website, JonathanOliveronline.com. JonathanOliverOnline.com I do a great job of keeping my website up to date. It has links through all of my, uh, social media, uh, involvement in outlets as well as what's happening for us, events that come up for speaking things I've done in the past, podcasts and things of that nature. So Jonathan Oliver, online.com. My big hairy idea/goal is for this book *To the Little*

*Boy in Me: Learning with Dyslexia & ADHD* to become an Amazon bestseller so that I can get this positive message out into as many hands as possible. So that that little kid, that mom, that parent, that dad, that neighbor, that coworker, don't have to feel alone, don't have to feel stupid, don't have to feel like they're broken and need to be fixed or something's wrong inside of them, but that they're brilliant and that they're beautiful, and that they're wonderfully made. So that's one reason I wanted to be here with your listeners because I want to get this message out as much as possible.

Debbie: Well, thank you for sharing it with us today. And listeners, I'll include links to JO's website and to his book that we discussed *To the Little Boy in Me* and other resources we talked about of course in the show notes page. So you can just go to that, which I will leave the url at the end of this. Um, and go connect with JO and find out more about his work. So thank you so much for taking the time to chat with us today and sharing your journey. It was a moving conversation and I really appreciate it.

JO: Absolutely. Thank you for having me on as a guest.

**RESOURCES MENTIONED:**

- [Jonathan Oliver's website](#)
- [To the Little Boy in Me: Learning with Dyslexia & ADHD](#) by Jonathan Oliver
- [Jonathan Oliver on Instagram](#)
- [Jonathan Oliver on LinkedIn](#)
- [Jonathan Oliver on Facebook](#)
- [Jonathan Oliver on Twitter](#)
- [Jonathan Oliver on YouTube](#)