

Opening comments

Each of the following reflections draws on Tim's conversation and connects it to broader research, other voices from the show, and the lived experience of men navigating midlife. As always, these are not prescriptions — they are invitations. Take what resonates, leave what doesn't, and consider the experiment that follows each one.

6 Reflections, 2 Experiments

1. The Armour We Forget We're Wearing

Tim spent 20 years in what he describes as fear, shame, ignorance, and embarrassment — all while presenting as a high-achiever on the outside. The suit. The title. The performance. Brené Brown calls this armour, and Tim's story is a masterclass in what happens when armour becomes a way of life rather than a strategy for a moment. The tragedy is not that men wear armour — it's that they forget they're wearing it.

This resonates deeply with research from Joseph Pleck, whose work on male role strain identified how the very masculine norms that help men perform in certain contexts — stoicism, self-reliance, emotional control — become the same forces that prevent them from seeking help when they need it most. Tim's 20 years of panic attacks, survived in cubicles and hidden from colleagues, is not an anomaly. It is, sadly, one of the most common stories in men's mental health.

In our earlier episode with Gillian Coote, she spoke of the men she works with in family law who often arrive in her office emotionally unprepared for what divorce surfaces — because they had never been invited to take the armour off. Tim's story is a reminder that the longer we wait, the heavier it gets.

Experiment

This week, sit quietly for 15 minutes with a single question: **What am I performing that I am no longer sure I believe?** Write it down. You don't have to share it with anyone. But name it.

2. Crisis as Catalyst — or Why Men Need a Forcing Function

Tim is clear: he probably would have "happily, obliviously, and ignorantly" continued down the same path had his marriage not ended. And he's not alone in this. Research consistently shows that men are significantly less likely than women to proactively seek mental health support, and far more likely to act only when a crisis demands it — divorce, redundancy, illness, bereavement. Tim calls this the midlife reality for most men: you don't really wake up until your forties, and usually something has to shake you awake.

Our guest from a previous episode, Dr Andrea Maier, reminded us that longevity without intention is not a gift — it's a longer runway to the same destination. Tim's story adds a relational dimension to that: if we don't do the inner work, we don't just shorten our own lives — we diminish the quality of life for everyone around us.

The question for midlife men is not "do I need to change?" — most of us already know the answer. The question is whether we are going to wait for a forcing function, or choose to be our own catalyst.

Experiment

Identify one area of your life where you are currently tolerating rather than addressing. Not catastrophising — just honestly noticing. **Then ask yourself: what would I do if a crisis forced my hand right now? Begin that thing, this week, before the crisis arrives.**



3. Who You Are vs. What You Do — The Identity Trap

For 27 years, Tim's identity was his job title. The suit and tie weren't just clothes — they were a self-concept. When he finally stepped away from financial services, he had to face what so many men face in midlife: who am I when the role is gone?

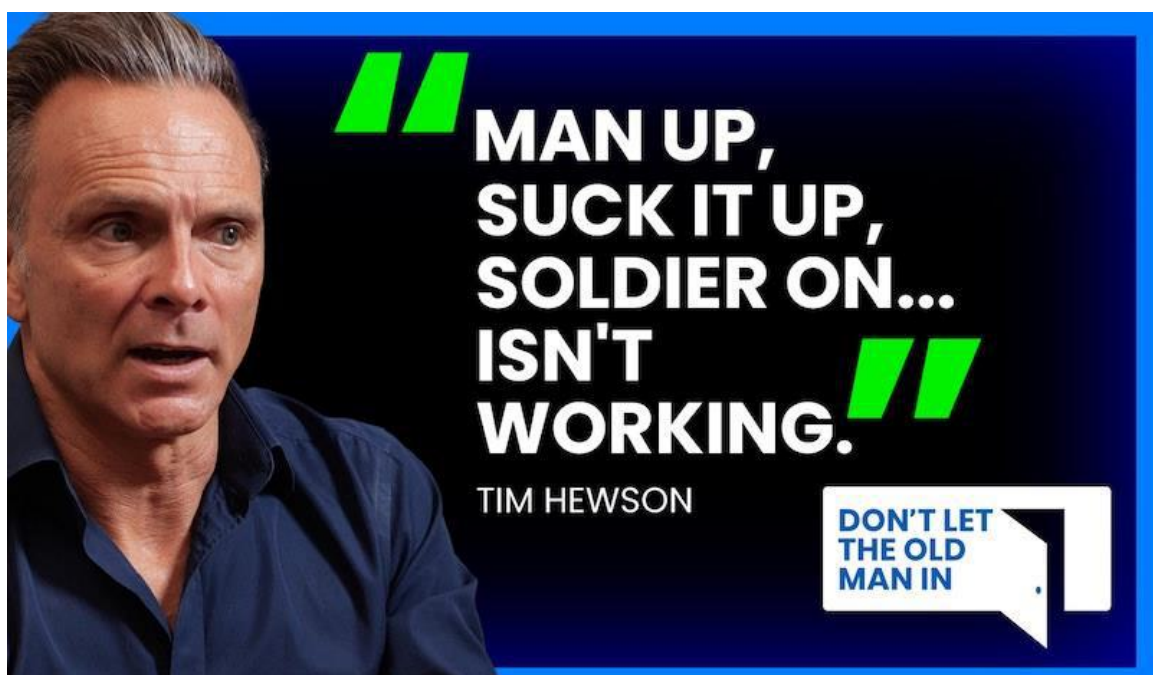
David Whyte, the poet and philosopher whose work I often return to, describes this as the moment we must decide whether to wave our flags or burn them. Tim chose, eventually, to put his down quietly and walk toward something new — not away from himself, but toward a more authentic version of himself. He calls this Timmy 2.0. We might simply call it growing up.

Another person I often return to is the psychologist Dan McAdams, who has spent decades studying identity and life narrative, argues that the men who flourish in midlife are those who can revise their personal story — who can hold what they were with appreciation, and release what no longer fits with courage. Tim's shift from financier to community builder is a beautiful example of what McAdams calls "narrative identity renewal."

Our episode with Matt Bunker on military-to-civilian transition explored exactly this terrain: the challenge of leaving behind an identity built around role, rank, and belonging — and the necessity of finding new structures of meaning.

A regular exercise I suggest to my coaching clients is a sentence completion exercise. It simply asks you to complete this sentence without using your job title or professional role: **"I am someone who..."**

I get them to write at least five completions. Notice which ones feel true, which feel aspirational, and which feel like you're still reading from the old script.



4. The Brave Space — Movement, Mateship, and the Art of Shoulder-to-Shoulder

One of Tim's central insights is almost embarrassingly simple: men talk better when they're moving. Walking beside someone — not sitting across from them — lowers defences, reduces the performance pressure of direct eye contact, and creates what Tim calls a "brave space." The conversation deepens because the activity gives it permission to.

This is backed by a growing body of research. A 2021 study published in the International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health found that green exercise — physical activity in natural environments — significantly reduced psychological stress and improved mood, particularly in men. The shoulder-to-shoulder model of male connection is not new: it is, in fact, how men have communicated for most of human history. We sat around fires, we walked trails, we worked side by side. The problem is that modern life removed the activity — and with it, the conversation.

Tim's Mongrel Men are doing something profound by building those conditions intentionally. And it needn't be a charity. It can be a walk with a mate. A regular Sunday surf. A weekly run where the unspoken rule is: this is where we talk about real things.

As simple as this sounds can you identify one person in your life you haven't had a meaningful conversation with in a while. Invite them not for a coffee or a beer — invite them for a walk. No agenda. Just movement and time. See what surfaces.

5. Structure Is Not Optional — It's Survival

Tim makes an observation that deserves to be underlined and returned to: men are extraordinary at building structures in the workplace — financial frameworks, organisational systems, project timelines — but when those structures are removed, many collapse. Divorce, retirement, redundancy, or even the end of a football season can leave men adrift in ways they never anticipated.

My own reflection on his son losing the structure of the cathedral choir during COVID captures this perfectly. The choir wasn't just music. It was rhythm, routine, identity, community, and accountability — all wrapped in one activity. When it stopped, everything wobbled.



The NHS in England is now actively redesigning the delivery of men's health services to account for this — recognising that a service designed primarily by women, for a population that includes men, may need to look structurally different to be effective. Structure reduces anxiety about the unknown. It lowers the barrier to entry. It makes showing up feel manageable.

James Clear, in *Atomic Habits*, describes this as the power of the scheduled, predictable environment — the same time, same place, same expectation. Mongrel Men has built this into its DNA: same day, same meeting point, same welcome. Men know what to expect, and that alone makes showing up possible.

6. Be Brave, Be Bold, Be Curious — and Be Kind to Yourself

When asked what his 75-year-old self would say to him now, Tim doesn't hesitate: **be brave, be bold, be curious — and be kind**. Not just to others, he adds, but to yourself. "We are so hard on ourselves."

This is perhaps the most quietly radical thing Tim says in the entire conversation. Men are often socialised to direct their harshest criticism inward — to hold themselves to impossible standards, to catalogue their failures rather than their growth, and to defer self-compassion as something they'll earn when they're finally good enough. The research of Dr Kristin Neff on self-compassion suggests this strategy not only doesn't work — it actively undermines performance, resilience, and mental health.

Tim closes with the Dalai Lama's observation: when we talk, we only tell someone something we already know; when we listen, we might actually learn something. There is a kindness embedded in that — a willingness to be changed by what we encounter, rather than defending the story we arrived with.

His mother's note on the fridge — "what we survive makes us stronger" — is not a platitude. It is a map. And Tim's life, in its second half, is the proof of it.



Final Word From Me

Tim Hewson is, in the best sense of the word, a mongrel — imperfect, resilient, a little bit of this and a little bit of that, and stronger for it. His journey from high-functioning depressive to community builder is not a story about arriving somewhere. It's a story about choosing, again and again, to stay in the arena.

If you know a man who is struggling — or quietly disappearing — share this episode with them. And if that man is you, know this: the brave space Tim is building exists because he needed one, and didn't find it. You don't have to wait that long.

Find Mongrel Men at mongrelmen.com.au and His Story through the Mongrel Men channels. You'll be glad you did.

"When we talk, we are only telling somebody something we already know. When we listen, we might actually learn something." — Dalai Lama



DLTOMI is a podcast brought to you by Pod O'Sullivan, where he has real and candid conversations with experts, celebrities and ordinary men about navigating midlife. The ups, the downs, the surprises, the opportunities, the secrets and how to do it on your terms, gracefully or even disgracefully!



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