

John Boccacino:

Hello and welcome back to the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast. I'm John Boccacino, senior internal communications specialist at Syracuse University.

Rachel Johnson:

The overall goal of Half Hood Half Holistic is to create what we call accessible healing. And so things that are either low and no cost, that are relevant to our community and that it is accessible in many different ways and many different platforms. And so really, the baby was born out of the fact that in my work with black and brown folks, as a therapist, therapy itself didn't seem very accessible. It didn't feel very relevant. I just was not, in my own practice, serving the community that I felt so close to.

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Our guest today on the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast is Rachel Johnson, an author who published a book that is very relevant to what a lot of people are going through when it comes to the issues that we face here. It's on self love, it's on holistic healing, and it's on the power of working on your mental self, your mental health, your mental wellbeing. She recently released a book detailing the importance of self-healing for black women, called the Self-Love Workbook for Black Women. She's also a two degree recipient from Syracuse University, got a dual from Falk and Child and Family Studies in social work in 2017, and she loved her time on the Hill so much, she got her master's degree in marriage and family therapy and social work from Falk in 2019.

Rachel, thank you for making the time to join us. How are you holding up these days?

Rachel Johnson:

Thank you so much for that warm introduction. I am doing the best that we can around here.

John Boccacino:

You've got a studio, that's pretty close to the central New York community that's based on a lot of the work that you're doing in holistic healing and holistic health. Let's start with that. You're the founder of Half Hood Half Holistic, this awesome sounding holistic wellness business. Tell us about the business and how you got started with that.

Rachel Johnson:

Yeah, absolutely. Thank you. Yeah, so Half Hood Half Holistic is my baby and currently has five arms, extensions to itself that include of course, direct services. As my background in mental health, I provide coaching, therapy. Also, I have a background in maternal health and so I provide maternal health support, doula services, et cetera. We also have other arms including consulting work for particularly non-profit organizations. I do a lot of non-profit leadership and community based stuff and consulting around diversity and equity. We also have a community based arm, which includes retreats and social wellness events and things like that.

But really, the overall goal of Half Hood Half Holistic is to create what we call accessible healing. And so things that are either low and no cost that are relevant to our community and that it is accessible in many different ways and many different platforms. And so really, the baby was born out of the fact that in my work with black and brown folks as a therapist, therapy itself didn't seem very accessible. It didn't feel very relevant. I just was not, in my own practice, serving the community that I felt so close to. And so wanted to create something that was very much relevant to that community that was culturally

sensitive and that was accessible. And so Half Hood Half Holistic has been the culmination of that dream and that vision and it keeps me busy.

John Boccacino:

What was the need? What did you find was the need for those services here in the Central New York community?

Rachel Johnson:

Well, I think the biggest need was around connection. So feeling connected to communities and feeling connected to maybe a larger community that was outside of the New York four walls, so to speak. And so, one of the things that we talk about, there is this thing that people will, if they want to go to an event or something, people in this community will say something like, "Who all going to be there?" And it is in an attempt to check for safety and comfortability and figure out, "Do I really want to be in this space?" And we like to say we create spaces where you don't have to ask, "Who all going to be there?" because it's supposed to be a space where this is your people. Those are my people.

If Half Hood Half Holistic speaks to you, then you're going to be with your people. And that sense of connectedness alone is really healing. And feeling connected to services and to providers that get you, that are your kind of people, that alone in Central New York, I feel like is a missed purpose. We have a lot of services, we have a lot of resources, but there's not that centered connectedness.

John Boccacino:

How did you come up with the name for the business and what do you mean when you say holistic health? What exactly does that mean to you?

Rachel Johnson:

Yeah, that's a good question. How did I come up with the name of it? It had been something that was like, it describes me, right? It's my personality. It is the duality of who I am as a black woman. It just encompasses that there are many different aspects or pieces to myself that I wish to bring into every space. It also is just a really cool name. And when I talk about holistic healing, that's really interesting because the term holistic has been, so to speak, commodified and has been trendy over the last several years. And people have either one, a reaction to the term holistic because they seem to center it in specific things like specific practices or rituals. From my point of view, when I talk about holistic, I really mean all of the things that make you, you. Anything that is like a holistic framework, bring all of that with you.

And so bring all of the past you, the present you, the work you. All of those things influence your health, it influences your decision making, influencing your wellness, all of those things. I don't want people to present in their healing journey with just one piece of themselves. Some people feel like they have to just show up as one kind of person, then they start to perform in therapy. But really, it's like bring all of it, it's holistic. And so we like to target the vision for Half Hood Half Holistic is to be able to offer services that target all of the things, the mind, the body, the spirit, and work that into practices in a way that is maybe nontraditional.

John Boccacino:

It seems like there's such a stigma around mental health and mental wellness, more so with members of the African American community, African American men and women. It seems like there's this real

stigma. Would you agree that there is this kind of negative stereotype towards getting help for what's going on in your brain and with your mental wellbeing?

Rachel Johnson:

Absolutely. I think there's stigma across populations and I think that the United States particularly has a lot of work to do around supporting mental health and mental wellness. It is just recently something that has gained political attention, which then means that money will be backed between it. But I do think that overall, there is stigma. And then when we start to talk about a specialized population, such as black folks, there's a lot of historical context that influences that stigma or that reinforces that stigma, particularly around mental health and even physical health.

And so when you think about different sectors or sections of populations that have been traditionally traumatized in United States specifically, it does make it very difficult for people to even conceptualize mental health. Even to even conceptualize or think about or even be comfortable with the term, mental health or the phrase mental health, is a long journey for some.

And then what happens then when we have such a fragmented system that is not always culturally competent or fair or accessible or cost friendly, it makes it even more laborious for a specialized population to be able to recognize they need help and then to seek and gain access to that care. So I do think absolutely, there is a lot of stigma and I think it is about normalizing and having conversations that are not at a high level. It's being able to pair down some of these concepts and make it realistic and relevant to that population.

John Boccacino:

Do you think that one of the unintended side effects of COVID-19 was people had so much more time on their hands to think and maybe that realization that, "I can get help, I don't have to go through this by myself"? Do you think that the pandemic maybe helped to take a little bit of that stigma away and shine a light on these very important issues?

Rachel Johnson:

I do think that more recently, between COVID-19, it has highlighted mental health struggles for so much. And I think what really happens is the ways that people are normally used to coping, through work or through social work, social recreation or seeing family members, those all things were either taken away or restricted heavily. And so people were really at a place where I think really needed to come to terms with some of the things because their regular coping mechanisms or outlets had been taken away from them or restricted. And I truly think that during that time, this is when the accessibility of telepsych and teletherapy and talk and text therapy really kicked in. So I do think that in response to that, people started to say, "Well, let me try this thing." And I also felt like people probably were like, "Well, we don't have much else to do, so we might as well do this thing in the comfort our own home."

So I do think there were a lot of people that had started to fight that stigma and come into a space where they wanted to at least try the concept or the framework of therapy. I think people were also, again, looking for connectedness. People wanted to know that they were not alone. People wanted to know that there was somebody that was going to check in on them and that was going to keep tabs on them. And so with the accessibility of virtual services, I think that this is why we are now seeing this culture change around mental health.

John Boccacino:

You think about it, if you're out of shape, you want to go for a walk, you want to monitor what you eat, your intake. If you're having issues with your thoughts, you need to work on those. And there's a lot of resources out there to help you get that required help. How do we normalize going to see a therapist as much as we normalize going to see a medical doctor for an ailment?

Rachel Johnson:

Yeah. I think that's a perfect analogy. One of the things that I do is teach mental health first aid to community members, particularly focused on youth, but the curriculum expands outside of that. And the analogy, it's continuously bringing these parallels to, okay, everyone has mental health, just like everyone has a physical health. You can have poor mental health. There's a spectrum. And I think really, people having the ability to have that concept and grasping, okay, we all have mental health, we all have to do things to maintain our mental health. If we're not maintaining our mental health, then it may be poor mental health. And then there are subsets of the populations that have diagnoses, just like some people have diabetes, which means they have to manage their physical health in a different way. So it's the same thing for mental health support.

So I think that concept, being able to grasp, is an awesome one. I also think, talking about youth, kind of being able to go back into a way that we are having conversations with our youth and they are equipped to have conversations with each other around mental health. That is a really big one. I think about what it looks like to talk to your 3, 4, 5 year old about self-regulation, about being able to breathe, about coping skills. I imagine a world where our kiddos grow up and they're able to regulate and talk about their emotions and say, "I'm triggered right now, I need to step away." In a way that they're in control of their emotions and their emotions are not in control of them.

So that's the other thing that I like to tell people. Sometimes we're not so comfortable with our emotions and they're controlling us and we want to be in the driver's seat, right? We want to make sure that we are the ones that's in the driver's seat, that are you in full control of your body, your thoughts and your emotions. That's the goal. It's the only goal. You want to be able to get there. And once people can conceptualize, you're right, power and control is important to me. I want to be the one that dictates my actions. I don't want to be reactive to my emotions. People start to understand, "Okay, so then what are the tools that I need to get there?" And therapy and mental health support right now is one of those tools.

John Boccacino:

What are some things that people can do that are, at the very baseline level, if they've never gone to a therapist but they want to work on themselves? What's a starter kind of kit to get into this?

Rachel Johnson:

That's such a good question. I think there are a few things, and there's no one right or wrong way for sure, to people's wellness because it's holistic. I think the more immediate things, or the things that we hear about every day, are things like meditation and journaling. And I even think about, from a holistic standpoint, it is always, it's like what you eat, it's how you talk to yourself. It's being sure to catch some of those negative thoughts. It's maybe having an accountability partner. It's being connected and trying not to isolate. So it's setting boundaries. It's all of those things.

And I feel like one of the ways that people, in a more immediate way, have been able to find these tools, are through things like YouTube and podcasts and workbooks, things that are very accessible to them and get them to... The use of social media, TikTok, utilizing the resources in front of you to provide you

with a level of education or resources that may not be a therapy office. So none of those things are wrong. It is just important to find something and hopefully a collection of things. Your social wellness and your holistic wellness journey should have multiple entities. It shouldn't just be therapy or just be meditation. If you can create a regimen that works for you with a collection of all of the things, would be helpful.

John Boccacino:

Why do you think that something focused more on the holistic health approach might be better suited for modern mental health needs than say a traditional therapist?

Rachel Johnson:

There are people I think that do go for traditional forms of mental health support, like therapy or psychotropic medications or groups or those sorts of things. And those things absolutely work. And I think the reason why a holistic framework to wellbeing is really important is because in a holistic framework, you can enter from any point. And so you can enter from your physical wellness and then wind up at health. You can enter from your financial wellness, you can enter from your social wellness. It is all encompassing, it is relevant. I tell people all the time, with Half Hood Half Holistic, we offer plenty of services and some people start at what we call Tribe Check-Ins, which is a virtual online group that we host monthly. And so some people just come for Tribe Check-Ins.

Our motto at Half Hood Half Holistic is come for the vibes, stay for the healing. And that is what happens sometimes, that people come because they see themselves in the brand. It speaks to them, they like the people, they like me, they like the personality. They come because they want to learn a little bit more about yoga. They come because they want to learn a little bit more about this. And then they get there and they're like, "I will stick around. Oh, you offer coaching. Can you help me find a therapist?" Because then everyone in that space is rooted in this understanding of healing. And so maybe you come, we host non-traditional social wellness events in the city of Syracuse themselves.

And we recently had a tea party, a bougie tea party for black women. It was so cool. It was beautiful. People got the chance to dress up. But when we got there, we talked about sex, love, and relationships. We talked about how you learned about these things and why setting boundaries around these things are important and all of those things. And that community will stay. They will go to the next event and they will go to the next event. And if they want additional services, they will seek that out because they've found their community.

And so again, when I talk about holistic wellness and why this is non-traditional, because the people, they want, A, to feel like they've come to this on their own. That's a big one. The other reason is because people want it to be relevant to what they actually want and need. They want to be able to identify that for themselves. They don't want people to identify it for them. So going to non-traditional services, like therapy, would be an identification that you need help with your mental health. Going to a tea party and saying, "I want to be socially connected. And when I got there or when I got connected, I felt like there was additional growth that could happen."

John Boccacino:

How did you become so interested in this line of work? Because it's very evident that this is your passion. This is really something that you are so committed to. So how did you get connected with this?

Rachel Johnson:

That's a great question. I've always known that I wanted to support black and brown folks. That is an area of mine that I really was interested in. And I think what I learned very quickly, because of some of history and context around black and brown folks, particularly in the United States, it would be so important to create healing pathways that were more than just for therapy rooms. I learned very quickly that if you're going to be working with black and brown folks, we have to engage our bodies. We have to talk about what we're eating, we have to talk about who we're connected to. We have to set... There's just so much to be done and so much healing that needs to happen, particularly because black and brown folks deserve that. And so we deserve this non-traditional approach. And so that for me is what led me into my passion.

After I graduated from my studies at SU, I just went on and continued my studies in different things like becoming a doula and doing some maternal health support stuff. Became an herbalist at some point in time and got a really good understanding of what that looks like. And so it was finding other communities. I did a lot of public health stuff in the community and did some non-profit leadership stuff. I think always just furthering my understanding of the work that I like to do, for me, created this holistic platform. So now I can pull from here, I can pull from what I know as a doula, I can pull from what I know as a herbalist and I can get a really good picture or assessment of the work that needs to be done.

John Boccacino:

And again, for more information on the programs that are offered, the website is HalfHoodHalfHolistic.com. That's HalfHoodHalfHolistic.com. Besides being an entrepreneur, Rachel, you also have an author credit to your background and resume as well. Tell us about the involvement with the Self-Love Workbook for Black Women, how this came to be and what you hope to achieve with it.

Rachel Johnson:

Thank you so much. This is so interesting. That is also something that's cringey, is the author title. It feels so weird and so distant and I think, the Self-Love Workbook for Black Women, I would love to take credit for the initial thought process, but I cannot. In a way that, there was a publishing company, Costello Media had reached out to me, and I believe other subject matter experts, with air quotes, across the United States. My understanding is that they had an idea, they had conceptualized an idea, they had seen that people were looking for something of this nature. They had seen that self-help books were in, it was a trend. People were searching for and looking for self-help books. And they had seen that the specialized population in need was black women. And so they had reached out to, I believe a few subject matter experts in the area or across the United States and said, "Hey, just submit a writing sample. We think that you would be good at writing this book."

And I thought it was spam so I didn't respond. But something in my spirit was like, "Just look it up." And so I looked it up and I did the initial phone call with the woman that was like the talent scout, so to speak. We wound up doing the process out of nowhere. My writing sample had been chosen and they had it expressed that they really liked my tone and the way that I wrote the narrative and really just gave me a lot of creative control in creating this baby, which is the Self-Love Workbook for Black Women. And so for the next three months, I wrote this book in three months, it was meeting and missing numerous milestones in writing because you would've never told me that I would be an author.

When I got rid of school, when I graduated, I would never write another book, I mean another paper. So it was all of the things coming back to me, so to speak. And probably, I think a six month span, we had created this self-love workbook and it recently released in July as a virtual and in-person book. It was definitely a journey to write for a community that not only I love and appreciate, but one that I'm also a part of. So being able to create this workbook took a lot of reflection for myself as well. There was a

journey that I had to go through in order to produce this workbook and it also was a journey between... I think there was a lot of healing that had to go in between myself and a lot of the editors and thinking about how, this is a very vulnerable piece to write something and then put it out in the world. And so I'm very proud of it and so far has been okay. We're still at five stars, so we'll take that.

John Boccacino:

With a name like your book, it's obvious that you've had some really strong relationships with women in your life, growing up. What role did some of those really strong black women in your family and in your life play in helping you become the person you are today?

Rachel Johnson:

That's such a great question. Thank you for that. I will mention, one of my favorite parts about the book is that I intentionally utilize, there are case examples in the workbook, and I use the names of my nieces to give them a head nod and pay homage to them. All my nieces are black women in the making, black girls. And then at some point in time I transition to giving a head nod, like a sign of respect, a thing that says, "Hey, I see you," to some of the influential black women in my life. And so throughout the book, the names, not the stories so to speak, but the names in the book really speak to the black women that are really in my life and have influenced me in some way, shape, or form. So I just want to mention that because that was very intentional. I didn't just create any names. Those are my babies.

But to your point, how black women have been influential in supporting me, there is no door that's been open for Rachel Johnson that didn't involve a black woman. And I think about the first time that, when I was an undergrad, I think about how there were black women that covered me and held me. There were black women in financial aid, that made sure that I had the things that I needed and the resources that I needed. I remember finding mentors in the community, in the Syracuse larger community, that were able to create a narrative that I had not seen before around what it meant for me to be a black woman. I remember my promotions and the first contract that I was ever awarded, the first grant that Half Hood Half Holistic was awarded, came from a black woman, came from a black woman that was investing in me, in the vision.

And so again, without black women, there's no Rachel Johnson, there is no Half Hood Half Holistic, there is no workbook. I actually serve a good amount of black men in my practice, but a lot of my clients, the people that are rooting for me, the people that are sharing my posts, the people that are liking the comments and all of the things, those are black women. Those are the ones that are supporting me. And so there is no me, there's no work that I do without black women at the center of it.

John Boccacino:

I want to make a difficult but important segue in this conversation because we're talking about community, we're talking about finding community, we're talking about working on ourselves and the things we want to do to improve. There has been so many instances of racial hatred and bias and discrimination. Our country has a very complicated history with race and it's been very evident since the pandemic about a lot of the crimes that have taken place. From the deaths of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd to Ahmaud Arbery and Ma'Khia Bryant. There have been so many examples that we've seen of racial injustice towards members of our black community. And one of your areas of knowledge that you talk about is holistic healing and how it can help with racial healing. What role do you think holistic healing can play in trying to help our country and our communities deal with and heal from these wounds that we've suffered?

Rachel Johnson:

Yeah. There will be no healing if it is not holistic. Because I think about even what it feels like in your body to hear the news that someone had been killed by an unarmed person, black person being killed, what that even sounds like, what it feels like coming out of your voice, your body's reaction to that. And so we could talk all day about what it may look like or our thoughts around that. But if our body's not included into that, if we're not thinking about what that then means when we go home, how does that impact our sleep, how does that impact what we're eating, then there will not be, any attempts at healing will be short. They will be short.

And so I think holistic healing and racial healing very much go hand in hand. And part of that is because in order to get to holistic healing, you have to recognize that there is a whole person. The basis of holistic healing recognizes that you are more than just one thing or just one kind of person. And that is where racial trauma starts to happen is because we have not, as a country and as individuals, recognize black folks to be human or to be more than one thing.

And so holistic healing would consider that we are more than just our trauma, that we are more than just what we're portrayed to be, that we are more than just beings, we're more than just things that things are happening to that we are human and we have a range of emotions and we have a range of reactions and we also have a range of needs. And so really, I think holistic healing also would have to encompass not just the present day us, we would need to be talking about some of the history and context, the historical marginalization and traumatization of black folks that would need to be included in the conversation and then what that then means for future generations. So I think without the framework of holistic healing, racial healing will not be able to be achieved.

John Boccacino:

I want to again make a segue here from a very serious topic to something that might be a little bit more lighthearted, with your university choice of coming to Syracuse. What drew you to the Orange in the first place?

Rachel Johnson:

That's such an interesting question. I think a lot about my time in my trajectory. For someone who had originally, born in Buffalo, New York. So right down the road, not too far from here. And for someone who, when it was decision making time back when I was a senior, was not sure, did not know much about SU, was not one of those people that were like, "We need to go to SU." I had actually applied to numerous colleges, some of them HBCUs. And really, what it boiled down to was proximity to my family, was close enough and it was far enough at the same time. And it really, in realistic ways, came down to financial means, which sounds weird if you're like, "You went Syracuse University because it was financial means."

But I was very grateful for a program called Say Yes to Education that at that time had stemmed from Buffalo and really offered me free tuition, no cost tuition, and nothing in this life is free. No cost tuition, no cost to me either way to attend Syracuse University. It was the only private school that was on the list. And so for me it was pretty much a decision as a first generation and person to go to college in my immediate family or to go away for college, to do a four year institution, having to do all of the process by my myself, from the application to my own FAFSA, to figuring out where I was going to live and all of the room and board stuff. That was quite a process to navigate.

And then four years later, getting my degrees and advocating for being a nerd and being able to get two degrees at the time. And then again, going through the process and advocating for my right to have

another two dual degrees at my master's program. But I think it all made sense. The reasons why I always studied so many things is because I'm more than just one thing. If in fact my personality has not shined through at this point, there is no just me. There is no just a therapist, Rachel. There is not just one avenue or one thing that I like to study. And so if I can get it all, I will. So I went on and did my master's program and fell in love, of course, with the Falk community and have always felt supported even at this point in time from professors and fellow alumni and my colleagues. And so that's my Syracuse University story.

John Boccacino:

What's the biggest impact, the way that your time on the Hill, How did that impact your profession?

Rachel Johnson:

I was on the Hill, but I wanted to get off the Hill all the time. I always wanted to be to know about the surrounding community and be community-based. I was always at awe with of the integration and the collaboration that Syracuse University would offer, particularly through the Falk School, to be able to be integrated in the surrounding Syracuse community. And that has shaped my profession. When I graduated, I had already had ties and connections and a drive and a passion to serve the surrounding community from the Hill. And I think that entryway and having that door left open for me, from the Syracuse University landscape, really helped to further what my passions were. I've always been for the people. And so having access to the people and being introduced to the people, that for me has solidified my track consistently. So then transitioning into working in that community and then living in that community has been, what a very interesting journey.

John Boccacino:

And when someone finds out that you happen to be a Syracuse University alumna, what does it mean to you? What do you tell them about how those were formative years that really shaped and influenced you?

Rachel Johnson:

That's a good question. Particularly for young folks that see me in certain positions or in certain spaces and feeling like it's not accessible to them. I too did not feel like this was accessible, right? I too did not feel like I could attend a university such as Syracuse and then go on and obtain degrees and then go on. And even now, I'm still like, "An author? What does that mean? A professor? What does that mean?" There's a level of dissonance.

And being able to relate to those that don't feel like things are accessible. And then being able to create a pathway and let them know that things are truly accessible and that there are resources and there are people that as long as they believe in you and they believe in the vision, you can get there and you can obtain it. I think that's a big one, is just making sure that people understand that when we say "I am Orange," that means I too, as a black woman, as somebody that would not be able to traditionally attend this school, I am Orange as well and that there is different shades of Orange and different ways to become Orange. But at the end of the day, I am Orange. And that is really important to me.

John Boccacino:

And we are so thrilled that you are Orange. We are so thrilled that you found career success as the founder of Half Hood Half Holistic. Again, that website is HalfHoodHalfHolistic.com. Successful author of

the Self-Love Workbook for Black Women and just an all around fascinating person. Rachel Johnson, it's been my pleasure having you on the podcast. We wish you nothing but the best of luck with all your career ventures and thank you for taking the time today.

Rachel Johnson:

Thank you so much.

John Boccacino:

Thanks for checking out the latest installment of the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast. My name is John Boccacino, signing off for the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast.