

A Mental Health Journey

An Interview with The Honorable Adam Smith, U.S. Congressman

EDITORS' NOTE Adam Smith is the member of Congress who represents the 9th District of the State of Washington. He was reelected to his 14th term in 2022 and has been the top Democrat on the House Armed Services Committee since 2011. He served as chair of the committee from 2018–2022. Smith received a degree in political science from Fordham University and earned his law degree from University of Washington School of Law. During his final year at UW, he decided to run for the State Senate in the 33rd Legislative District, where he grew up. He campaigned door to door, eventually doorbelling the entire district twice and defeating the 16-year incumbent in the 1990 election. When he took office in January 1991, Smith was 25 years old and the youngest State Senator in the country.



Adam Smith

What attracted you to public service?

I knew early in my life that I was ambitious and wanted to do something important with my life. I was always interested in public policy and problem-solving, and I was interested in politics in general. I was painfully shy as a child, so the idea of putting myself out there in a public position was not something that appealed to me in my early days, but the interest was there. I was always very connected to the community and the idea of being able to represent the people that I knew best was very appealing to me.

As someone who is focused on solving problems, how challenging is it to get things done in today's political environment?

It is increasingly challenging. We are primarily driven today by individual interests which does not give way to much flexibility. People are much more focused on their differences than on how to get along. I am focused on bringing people together and doing whatever I can to problem-solve with the many challenges the country is facing.

You have been public about your battle with mental health and chronic pain, and have written a book, *Lost and Broken*. What interested you in writing the book?

When I first started experiencing uncontrollable anxiety, it lasted a few months, and then when it came back years later, I knew it was a lasting problem. I also experienced chronic pain at a young age, which is something many people go through. I thought my experience could contribute to the conversation about how we can

find solutions to help people address their pain, anxiety, or depression. The country is facing a mental health crisis, including an opioid crisis in dealing with chronic pain, and my focus was on being a part of the conversation and trying to help people by sharing my own experience.

How critical is it to address the stigma around mental health?

When it comes to mental health, I have seen this line where a person is either considered normal or crazy – and it is assumed that if you are normal,

you don't have a mental health problem. When I think back on my life, it never occurred to me that I had a mental health problem, even when I was going through severe anxiety and severe depression. The reality is that when you are young, you have well-child doctor visits, and if you play sports you have to have a physical and get tested to be able to play. We are constantly focused on physical health. This does not happen with mental health.

With mental health, there is a concern that people will look at you differently, you may lose your friends, you may lose your job. I had this worry as a public official that people would not trust me. The conversation is changing around mental health, and it is my hope that this will help alleviate the stigma around it.

What are the keys to effectively addressing the mental health crisis?

It starts with the need for people to publicly talk about their experiences and their challenges, and this is beginning to happen. We have seen people like Senator Fetterman and Michael Phelps be very public about their experiences which has definitely helped with the conversation.

I think another key element is the need to let people know that there are ways to get better. When I was dealing with my mental health issues, my thought was that you go to a psychiatrist. When I first went to a psychiatrist in 2005, I wondered what this person was going to tell me. The conversation was mostly about what was wrong, and not about how to get better. People need to know that there are absolutely ways to get better. There are mental health treatments available that will help you deal with mental health challenges.

Many times, a person may be triggered by something that happens, and it makes them feel a certain way and they assume they can't change their reaction. The reality is that it is possible to

My Journey Back from Chronic Pain
and Crippling Anxiety

LOST and BROKEN

Congressman Adam Smith

teach your mind to react differently. You can teach your brain in the same way that if you want to build up your cardio, you go for a run or a swim or ride a bike. You teach your body how to have greater endurance that way. You can also teach your mind how to have greater endurance, and this is something that needs to be better understood and communicated.

How has your mental health journey changed you?

I mention in the opening chapter of the book that it has helped me understand what people are going through. We are constantly arguing today – we see road rage, arguments in grocery stores, arguments with neighbors – and there is a tendency to see the way a person is acting and say, “what a jackass.” Now, I think about what is going on with that person and what they may be dealing with that is causing their actions. It has also impacted the way I focus on public policy and how to solve problems peacefully, because with mental health, if you have something going on with you, you are going to be more disagreeable. I have a greater appreciation and sensitivity to what people may be dealing with, and it has been valuable in the way I handle interactions and decision-making.

Are you able to take moments to reflect on what you have experienced and how you have overcome these challenges?

I think that there are three important things about this question. First is that, as I said before, you can get better. I hope that is the message that people get from my experience. The mind and the body have an amazing capacity to heal. Second, struggle is a positive part of life. Struggle is one of the essential parts of being human. Third, as you are working through that struggle, you need to have persistence and never give up, and you need to have a sense of humor. Even in my darkest moments, I was able to have a sense of humor.

This is the essence of how I got through and persevered during my difficult times. ●