

# BOYS DON'T CRY

HealHaus cofounder Darian Hall explains the value of emotional safe spaces for those who fear them most

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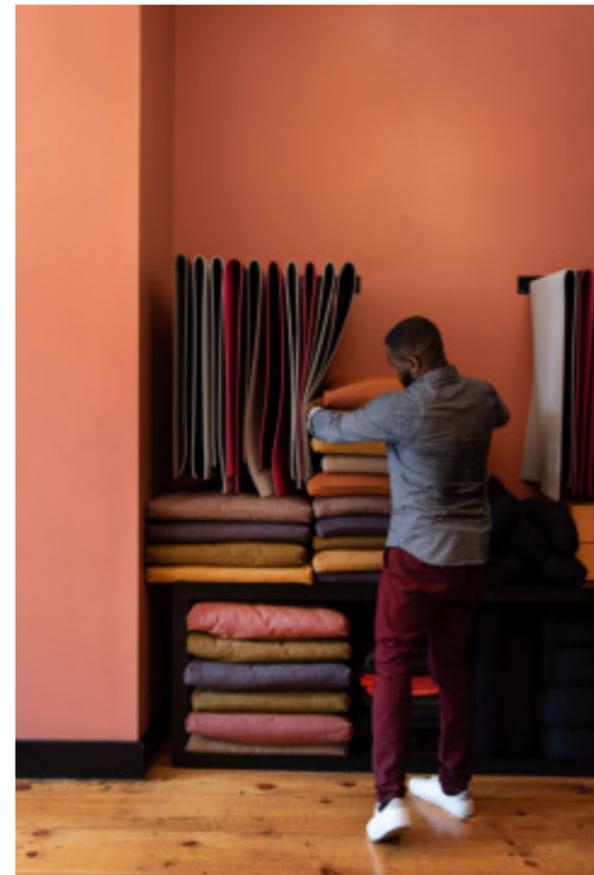
Six months was what it took. Six months alone with only his thoughts; a rare opportunity to devote time solely to looking within. That time changed everything.

Until that point, DUMBO House member Darian Hall had been working a 'regular' job in the medical field, with the pressures that we're all familiar with. Then came the extended trip. He came back to New York changed. Curious. Ready to ask his mother who his father was.

Hall was 36 years old when he found his father online. 'It was a huge transformational experience for a man to have,' he says. The life-changing trip to California to meet him opened up a well. 'It was emotional. It was healing. Meeting him, along with a whole side of a family I didn't know, ended up being a huge, beautiful journey.'

As well as finding his father online, Hall also documented the experience via social media. 'When I posted about that journey on social media, the feedback was overwhelming,' he says. 'Through this post, a moment of vulnerable, unrestrained candour, all these conversations started happening with my friends. They began venting about things that we had never really talked about: family dynamics, difficult relationships, problems at work, the difficulties of being a new father – the full, mind-shattering, overwhelming gamut of this human experience – all the stifling things they'd been dealing with in silence. They were speaking, expressing these bottled-up tensions and traumas for the first time, because I allowed them the space to be able to talk about it and be vulnerable, by just being vulnerable myself.' It wasn't meant to be a movement. At least not consciously.

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What struck Hall most was that these messages were predominantly from men. 'There's a particular stigma attached to trying to heal one's mind and body, a stigma to our attempts to vocalise and talk about our various stresses and traumas. We find it hard to speak those kinds of words out loud and to let others hear them. This is an issue feared by the status quo broadly, but felt particularly by men.'

'HealHaus – or the concept of it at least – began when I met my father,' Hall affirms. 'By far one of the biggest things to emerge from that experience was the recognition of a gap, a missing space for men to talk. Why didn't we have these reparative spaces, areas for healing and connection, which are inclusive and accessible, where people – regardless of gender – would be able to participate in emotional and sensory healing?'

Hall envisioned a location that someone like him, with no background in wellness, would want to spend time. 'Somewhere inviting with a vibe to it,' he says, 'where I could see myself reflected and feel represented.'

This vision is deeply felt by Hall, who reiterates the idea that, contrary to popular belief, wellness does not have one defined look. 'Undeniably, the public-facing version of wellness we are exposed to looks not only female, but also very white. There aren't typically a lot of men or people of colour in these spaces, and rarely practitioners that look like that.'

Hall reasons that the lack of representation in 'healer' roles also reinforces the feeling that opportunities for wellness are primarily for a certain type of person. 'We wanted to rewrite some parts of the wellness narrative,' he says. 'Though we are not exclusively for men or people of colour, we aimed to create a space that felt safer for these people. We try to be inclusive in every way because healing, as a practice, should be.'

Hall's vision was a breath of fresh air to his business partner, Elisa Shankle, an interior designer whose spiritual practice became a larger part of her life after suffering bouts of depression and the life-changing trauma of losing her brother. 'She chose to survive, to thrive,' says Hall.

Together, Hall and Shankle have tried to re-envision the concept of the wellness space itself. HealHaus offers its clientele a series of therapies that use the senses to help unlock and heal each individuals' tightly held traumas. Using techniques including reiki, massage and acupuncture, patients – who are predominantly men – experience sensations of touch that they may not encounter in their daily lives, and are listened to via therapy and psychotherapy. They can participate in daily yoga and meditation classes, as well as more specific treatments to help deal with grief, such as trauma workshops and breathwork.

Making these therapies accessible to men has been somewhat revolutionary. 'One of our first clients kept telling me, "You really don't understand how important this space is." And, I suppose, I didn't at first,' says Hall. 'It transpired that this client had recently been thinking about seriously harming himself because of the pressure of being newly married and not being happy at his job. It really made an impact on me because, although I had only met him five minutes prior, he was sharing the most personal and intimate part of himself that he had probably never shared with anyone up until that moment.'

This single encounter made it clear to Hall just how much he had tapped into something necessary; for the very first time, this man was able to get something off his chest that he had been carrying alone for a long time. It impacted the way he saw the future of HealHaus. 'The overall picture is to normalise the healing process, in its many forms, and to destigmatise the vulnerability and emotional honesty we all fear so much,' he says. 'Let's shift the culture together.' ■

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