

One-on-one with Sebastian Slovin

U-T profiles of notable local people

Nonprofit urges unplugging, reconnecting with nature

Q: What was your own relationship to digital media and devices like?

A: Another key inspiration for starting Nature Unplugged was my relationship with digital media and devices. Around 2010, I found myself increasingly drawn into the digital world, particularly social media. This left me feeling more distracted and disconnected from myself and those around me, including my wife.

Since founding Nature Unplugged in 2012, I've been on a journey to intentionally examine and improve my relationship with technology. My goal is to use devices in ways that support and benefit me, rather than as an escape. While it's an ongoing challenge and far from perfect, being mindful of my tech use has made a significant difference.

Q: In your work through Nature Unplugged, what have you learned about the connection between technology and mental health?

A: When we started in 2012, the research on this topic was just beginning to emerge. Fortunately, since then (and especially in the last few years), there has been more and more of a focus on this topic. There is now a ton of research on the topic, and indisputable evidence that tech overuse, with social media in particular, negatively affects our mental health. This is especially true of youth. In short, since the early 2010s we have seen a steady increase in youth anxiety, depression, attention disorders, self-harm, and suicide. I think it's also important to recognize that this is not just a youth issue. While the statistics are more staggering with youth, this is something that impacts most everyone, regardless of age.

Q: Can you talk about your organization's involvement in the county's suicide prevention work? How and why did Nature Unplugged become involved in these efforts?

A: My father's suicide had a huge impact on me from an early age. As I got older, I became more interested in understanding what happened to my dad. I began to study and learn everything I could on the topic. As I got more involved in suicide prevention, I ended up connecting with and becoming a member of the San Diego Suicide Prevention Coun-

Before he could even swim himself, Sebastian Slovin remembers his father hoisting a 6-year-old Sebastian on his back and swimming in the deeper waters at La Jolla Cove. It's how his relationship with nature began, with his dad, who was one of the best and fastest swimmers in the world at one time.

"He treated the ocean, and everything in it, as an extension of his family, and I learned to do the same. This became especially true to me after he died. We spread his ashes in the ocean at La Jolla Cove. After that, I really came to see the ocean and the beach as an extension of my family," he said. His father, Vernon Slovin, was a highly respected South African swimmer who died by suicide when Sebastian was 6. "When I went to the beach and ocean, I viewed it as a time to visit with my dad. Over time, my relationship with the ocean expanded to other aspects of nature. I started to view the trees and grass (and everything in nature, really) as an extension of my family. That's very much how my present relationship with nature is today."

Slovin's passion for nature and its healing benefits began after his father's passing, where he spent time outside as a way to heal. Nature continues to take a leading role in promoting his own mental health, which is why he started Nature Unplugged in 2012, a nonprofit organization focused on helping people to disconnect from their technology devices and reconnect with nature. They facilitate opportunities to engage in nature and, with his wife and co-founder, Sonya Mohamed, and her background in education and curriculum development, they also center their work around helping people develop healthy boundaries with technology and acquiring mental well-being through education. Earlier this month, the San Diego County Suicide Prevention Council released its "Report to the Community 2024," highlighting suicide prevention efforts and collected data; Nature Unplugged was included in the public release of this report, which includes information on resources and programs, and normalizing conversations and screenings on suicide and mental health.

Slovin, 40, is the director of programs and co-founder of Nature Unplugged, and lives in Encinitas with Mohamed and their son, Sy. He took some time to talk about their work to help people get outside more frequently and improve their mental health, and the ways that he's been able to establish his own boundaries with technology and improving his mental health.



WHAT I LOVE ABOUT ENCINITAS ...

I'm so grateful to live and work in Encinitas. We work in an amazing place at The Hive at Leightag Commons. We've got a wonderful community here, great schools, a lot of access to parks and nature spaces, and we're fortunate to be so close to the beach and have some of the best surf spots in the county!

... and that has been invaluable. I've been able to expand my skills and knowledge to be more effective and prepared in helping to prevent suicide. Being part of this group has made me aware of the incredible resources we have here in San Diego, but most impor-

tantly, it has become a community of like-minded individuals and organizations, which is so incredibly important in this work.

I view the work that we do at Nature Unplugged as suicide prevention. It's probably not how people typically view suicide

prevention, meaning it's not crisis intervention; our goal is to give people tools and resources to promote mental health early and ideally long before it reaches a crisis.

Q: In 2018, your book about your experience with your father's suicide was published, "Ashes in the Ocean: A Son's Story of Living Through and Learning From His Father's Suicide." Are you comfortable sharing what compelled you to write this book and share

the story of your experience with suicide?

A: Losing my father to suicide had an enormous impact on my life from a young age. I've seen firsthand the impact suicide can have on a family and what those left behind have to deal with. I was compelled to write this book because, for many years, I didn't talk about or deal with my dad's suicide; I did whatever I could to avoid it.

As a 6-year-old, I didn't fully understand what suicide was, but I knew right away there was something strange about what happened to my dad. That is, our family and extended family basically stopped talking about him. I could feel the stigma before I understood what it was.

Growing up under the cloud of this stigma, I struggled with my own mental health and thoughts of suicide as a teenager. I was very fortunate to have an experience when I was 17 that I think saved my life and completely changed my perspective on suicide. To make a long story short, I had the opportunity to meet and talk with one of my dad's best friends, who lived in Australia. He and my father grew up together in South Africa and were on the national swim team together. I didn't know it at the time, but his father also died by suicide when he was a boy. He essentially shared with me that this (my dad's suicide) was something that I could not run away from. Although it would be difficult to face in the short term, it would be much easier in the long run. By facing my dad's suicide and bringing it out of the shadows and into the light, I was able to break through the stigma and shame and begin to heal. I've been on that journey ever since.

Q: What is the best advice you've ever received?

A: Avoidance doesn't work; it's better to face things head on.

Q: What is one thing people would be surprised to find out about you?

A: I used to be a professional bodyboarder (boogieboarder). Like surfing, but less cool.

Q: Please describe your ideal San Diego weekend.

A: Staying close to home in Encinitas, spending time with my family and hanging out at the beach at Swamis. And, getting into the ocean!