

DON'T WHINE ABOUT SEX. DO THE DISHES. LOSE THE EGO

As more and more men say they're in crisis, step forward American divorcee John Kim, aka the Angry Therapist. He's winning a huge audience for his blunt advice telling male clients to man up and deal with their emotions

INTERVIEW Helena de Bertodano PORTRAIT Barry J Holmes



John Kim, 45,
photographed at
Pharos Athletics
Club in Los Angeles

“Do you trust me?” asks John Kim. It’s a relevant question: I am sitting on the back of his motorbike on Sunset Boulevard in the middle of LA Friday afternoon rush hour traffic and he is about to turn the key in the ignition. “Yes,” I say – because, really, what choice do I have?

But actually I do trust him: he’s a therapist, after all, and I have just read his warts-and-all book, *I Used to Be a Miserable F****, which is nothing if not revealing.

I know, for example, that he was the black sheep of his family – or, at least, he saw himself that way – that his marriage crumbled after five years, that his chosen career as a screenwriter petered out. So he trained as a therapist and ten years ago, at his lowest ebb, he wrote a blog post called My F***ing Feelings, which began and ended with the words, “Today I am sad.” “The day that I hit post, everything changed.”

On the back of his sudden following, he launched himself as the Angry Therapist, one who admitted to having feelings, sometimes disagreeable ones. “Therapists are trained to

lifting weights, and Kim introduces me to his friend Pieter, who is wearing a weighted vest, which looks like battle armour and is designed to give the exercise that extra edge.

So is Pieter – a Brit, as it happens – part of his target audience? “He’s just the kind of person I wrote this book for,” says Kim. “I think he has resistances, though. He’s a man’s man: beer, burgers and motorcycles. Loves Bruce Springsteen. He’s a really good friend, but he doesn’t ever talk about how he feels.”

Kim fully recognises that he has quite the uphill struggle if he wants men like Pieter to adopt the steps he recommends in his book, which is subtitled, *An Everyman’s Guide to a Meaningful Life*. “Men aren’t programmed to do this. We define ourselves as weak if we’re vulnerable. At first I was embarrassed to say that I was once miserable: the world puts happy on such a high shelf, but a lot of us have been in a dark place. And that’s OK.”

Never, he believes, has there been a better moment to try to engage men. “Men all over the world are having a giant midlife crisis, partly on the heels of the #MeToo movement. Then there’s technology and the swipe culture; the explosion of ‘wellness’. It’s just so ripe right

HIS FATHER, HE SAYS, WAS AN ALCOHOLIC. ‘HE WOULD COME HOME AND VENT ON THE FAMILY. HE NEVER TOLD ME I WAS GOOD’

be neutral,” he tells me, “because we’re creating a safe space. But then you become a cardboard cutout. You’re not really human. So I was the guy who went rogue. I said, ‘I’m sad. I’m broken. How can I help you?’” His unconventional approach has amassed him tens of thousands of social media followers, many of whom also tune into his regular podcasts.

He turns around to make sure my helmet is properly clipped on and tells me to hold on to him. I put my hands gingerly each side of his waist because, well, we’ve only just met. “Hold on to me properly,” he instructs firmly. “Don’t let go.”

And we’re off, my hands now locked around his midriff. He roars through the traffic, cutting past the stationary lines of cars at lights, classic rock blaring from his radio. We pass the endless vegan cafés, the vape shops, the Empathy Center and the House of Intuition (I’m not making this up – this is LA).

After a couple of miles we come to a halt in front of Pharos Athletics Club, where the photoshoot is due to take place and where Kim spends much of his time working out: fitness plays a big part in his approach to a meaningful life. The gym is filled with buff, tattooed men

now to have these conversations.” Many men, he maintains, are feeling scared. “And when you manoeuvre with fear, you’re not being yourself. You’re just treading on eggshells.”

In his book he goes further: “Women have suffered for far too long at the hands of boys who fail to grow up into men ... The root of the problems facing women is ... well, men.”

I start wondering if he isn’t being a little too hard on men. Women, I point out, are far from perfect. “Sure. I get all that. But at the end of the day, it you look at the stats, who’s sexually assaulting women? Not women. It’s men.”

But his book is not about sexual assault, more about general behaviour. In 66 brief chapters, more like long bullet points, Kim lays out his do’s and don’ts for men to improve themselves. Chapters have headings like, *Don’t Drive Like a Dick*, *Do Make Your Bed*, *Do Calm the F*** Down* and *Don’t Pee in the Shower* – which, he points out, is not just about peeing in the shower (something his ex-wife used to hate him doing) but also about “hairline cracks of trust”. In *Don’t be a Double Douche*, he gives examples of douchebag behaviour, which include “Purchasing a bright yellow Ferrari ... Checking yourself in every reflection ...



Screaming like you’re giving birth while you’re working out.” There are dozens more examples, and Kim is the first to admit that he has “punched holes on my douche card”.

If he were to pick one piece of advice for men it would be No 24: *Do Respond, Don’t React*. Trump, he says, is the ultimate walking reaction – no pause between how he feels and how he behaves. “Most men are kneejerk reactions. If you can put in an emotional speed bump and can actually respond instead of react, I think that changes everything.”

Now 45, he has never had a conventional office for his therapy sessions. “I’m not ‘professional’. I don’t have the wrinkle-free pants. I’m just trying to be me. I meet people at coffee shops, do CrossFit, go on hikes.

There’s a lake right here in Los Angeles that takes exactly 50 minutes to walk around. I take clients on it and they’re like, “This is amazing.”

Perhaps surprisingly, given that his target audience is men, he has more female than male clients. The biggest complaint he hears from women is that men don’t communicate. “I see a lot of women who have done a lot of therapy and are sick and tired of the clinical model. Many of them have been in abusive and toxic relationships.”

At a book signing a few days later, the majority of those who turn up are women. But there are lots of men too, including a former member of the US navy, William Downing, who came across one of Kim’s early online posts while serving in Afghanistan years ago.

“I didn’t know anything about therapy,” says Downing, “but I found him very accessible and honest. I was going through some really dark times and it seemed like he was talking directly to me. I looked forward to his posts. They made me feel energised. I used to share them with others over there and they were like, ‘Where are you getting this crap from? It’s great.’”

This is the key to Kim: much of his appeal lies in his down-to-earth directness – which is evident in his podcasts and his writing. “Finally I’m noticing trees and shit,” might not be the sort of statement you’d expect in a traditional self-help book, but it works. That, combined with the fact that he doesn’t preach perfection: “Eat greens. But have a f***ing doughnut once in a while and be OK with it.” ➡

DOs and DON’Ts

DON’T PEE IN THE SHOWER

DON’T WHINE

I used to whine because I didn’t get sex, but it wasn’t about sex. I was whining because I wasn’t happy. I wasn’t where I wanted to be in my career. I didn’t like myself. Ask yourself if you’re generally happy. Or if, like I was, you’re a miserable f***. If it’s the latter, your whining is a sign that it’s time to change yourself and your life.

DON’T BE THE DUNNO GUY

As men, we never want to be wrong. If we’re wrong, it means we have failed. So we put a lot of weight on making the “right” decision. So much so that sometimes we don’t make a decision at all. But making decisions takes courage. And it’s that courage that makes a man.

DO LOSE THE EGO

DO SWEAT EVERY DAY

Men used to wake up at dawn and spend the day hunting for their dinner. We used to run, climb, swim, jump and sweat. Today, we cruise in cars. Sweating reminds us that we aren’t machines or hamsters on a loop. Sweat is a shot of empowerment. This stimulates self-esteem, crushes false beliefs and generates testosterone.

DO THINGS THAT MAKE YOU FEEL ALIVE

A safe job, a comfortable relationship, 20 minutes on a treadmill. These things don’t require much effort. If you want to feel alive, there must be an element of fear. We might get injured. We might lose money. We might be rejected, labelled or fired. We might be wrong. But with risk comes reward. We must seek it or we will start to feel dead. Get out of your comfort zone.

DO THE DISHES

You are not helping her when you do the dishes. You are not helping her when you do the laundry. You use the dishes, too. The days of women’s work and men’s work around the house are long gone.

DO HAVE A FIRM HANDSHAKE

A man with a limp handshake doesn’t know what to order on the menu; he is selfish in bed and runs funny. All this from a handshake? Yes.

In the comments below one of his Instagram posts, one reader – Holly Beth – describes the effect the book is having on her boyfriend. “For a conservative, close-minded, small-town guy, never did I think he’d listen, but he actually is. I think it’s because you’re so honest, real and open that he can relate. It’s like from one Miserable F*** to another Miserable F***.”

Kim puts it best himself at the beginning of each of his podcasts: “I’m putting self-betterment into a shot glass, because, let’s face it, who’s got that much time these days. I come unpolished, unrehearsed, on purpose. If you’re looking for more of a wine glass, you’ve come to the wrong place.”

To understand how different Kim is from the Californian norm, you only have to drop into nearby Café Gratitude – vegan, of course – which adorns its walls with vacuous slogans such as, “I know I am divine” and, “I adore myself and everyone else.” Kim is not having any of it. “We ought to be allowed to say, ‘I don’t have gratitude right now. I don’t have compassion. I’m in a dark place.’”

Kim didn’t grow up with a great male role model. His father, he says, was an alcoholic. “He would come home and vent on the family.” He wanted Kim to become a doctor or lawyer. “It came from a place of love, but he never told me I was good. I didn’t get any emotional milk.”

To this day, he says, his parents have no idea what he does. “They’re older and they don’t have any concept of the internet or anything. They only speak broken English.” Kim was three when his parents left Korea with \$500 in their pocket to start a new life in the States. He has an older brother, who manages a car dealership. “He was always the responsible one. Very good with numbers. I’ve always been the black sheep. He got married; he has the 2.2 kids, the picket fence and the Norman Rockwell painting.”

He spent a lot of time as a child at home alone while his father worked for a phone company and his mother ran a hamburger shack. “My parents worked like crazy. They bought me things, but they never took me camping or fishing.”

Kim did have ambitions – but not to be a lawyer. “My idea of what happy looked like was the beautiful wife, the house in the hills, the glittery things, the Porsche, the Range Rover. I really wanted to be successful as a screenwriter. My friends were very successful and getting rich. I was jealous. I was so miserable because I wasn’t living in the here and now. I was worried and I was always chasing. It was like *Death of a Salesman*.”

He did eventually find the beautiful wife – a model from Oregon – but his marriage quickly lost its lustre. “She had missed the fine print. I never made my bed. I peed in the

shower. I left little hairs in the sink after shaving. I lived in coffee shops, trying to write the million-dollar screenplay so I could be a ‘real man’ and we could ‘live the dream’. But of course that never happened. So I became unhappy. Insecure. Lost. Negative. Jealous. Controlling. And miserable.”

In retrospect, he says his divorce was the best thing that happened to him. “I was cut off at the knees. I had to go on Craigslist and find a roommate. I had nothing. The beauty of that is there’s nowhere left to fall. You start over.”

With his marriage over and his career in tatters, he started seeing his own therapist, who asked him what he wanted to do with his life. “I said, ‘I want to do what you’re doing. I love psychology. If I can’t move people by the masses [by screenwriting], I’m going to do it one at a time.’”

As part of his training, he worked at a charity for teenagers struggling with addictions. “I collided with 500-plus teenagers in that time and the one common thread in 95 per cent of the cases was the dad wasn’t home – either

should do. Most issues aren’t about gender; they’re about being human. For example, people used to think women cheat because they’re not getting the emotional fulfilment and men cheat because they’re just horny; they want sex. But now we’re learning that it’s often the other way around.”

One of the biggest relationship problems, he says, is the way people date – or don’t date – these days. “When I was younger, a date was a big deal. First you had to get the courage to ask a woman out. Then I would wake up early like it was Christmas and wash my car – by hand. I’d load the CDs in the disc changer. I would park my car, walk to the door and knock. I would open the car door for her. Then, if a date went well, I would make sure to call or buy her flowers. Now you’re almost weird if you do that.

“I think dating is dead. It’s ten minutes in Starbucks. Once you sit down, they’re judging you. Then it’s swipe again. So people become very disposable. A lot of my younger clients are ghosted: they engage with someone, it will be good and then the person just vanishes.

‘DATING IS DEAD. IT’S TEN MINUTES IN STARBUCKS. ONCE YOU SIT DOWN, THEY’RE JUDGING YOU. PEOPLE BECOME DISPOSABLE’

emotionally or physically gone. I learnt about a fatherless nation and it put a fire in my belly.”

We first meet at his Silver Lake apartment, which is minimalist and open plan with a view towards the Hollywood Hills. From the front door, you can see straight into his bedroom. One of the chapters in his book is titled *Do Make Your Bed* – so it is interesting to see that the bed looks, if not exactly unmade, a bit crumpled. “I don’t want to be too anal about it,” says Kim, laughing.

His girlfriend, Vanessa Smith Bennett, a therapist too, says that Kim “tries to” follow all the rules in his book. “But he’d be the first to tell you that he falls short sometimes. He leaves dishes in the sink, doesn’t pick up his things. He’s no slob, though.”

Kim describes his relationship with Bennett, whom he met last year on a blind date, as “very healthy and mature” and different from previous relationships. “I’m learning a lot about love myself. I could talk about love for days. Love before used to be for me just sex and date nights. Now I want to connect on different levels.”

He thinks that men and women are far more similar than is usually acknowledged. “It’s not about Mars and Venus. I think the Great Divide came from our definitions of what a man should do and what a woman

And it’s a mind f***. It’s happening everywhere. So people are scared to trust.”

Although he feels much more settled and positive these days, he says he still has his moments of depression. “He does have his days when he gets down,” confirms Bennett. “He doesn’t hide it, but he doesn’t project it. I think people are surprised when they meet him: he’s a bit of an introvert whereas I’m a ridiculous extrovert.”

“I’m not like Mr Happy now,” agrees Kim. “I’m just less miserable.” His dream is to settle down, buy a house in the hills and have a daughter. “I see me in a vintage truck driving her to get pancakes on Sunday. And talking to her about boys and life.”

By then, he hopes, men will have turned a corner. “The world desperately needs present fathers, loyal brothers, loving boyfriends, strong husbands, vulnerable leaders and sharp men to sharpen other men. It’s time for our return.”

So what would be his advice to a British man reading this in the pub on a Saturday afternoon? “Stop hiding. Show yourself. Just express your f***ing feelings.” ■

I Used to Be a Miserable F***. An Everyman’s Guide to a Meaningful Life by John Kim is published by Short Books on Thursday (£12.99)