

# Keyon Dooling: On “Mental Health in the NBA” & More

Keyon Dooling is a former NBA player, current Player Wellness Counselor., author, and founder of the Respect Foundation. A childhood victim of sexual assault, Keyon experienced a mental breakdown while playing for the Celtics in 2012, which has unleashed his mission to promote the importance of mental health. In this talk, Keyon discusses his personal experience with mental health, his mission to increase awareness on mental health and wellness, as well as what the NBA is doing to support the mental health of its players.

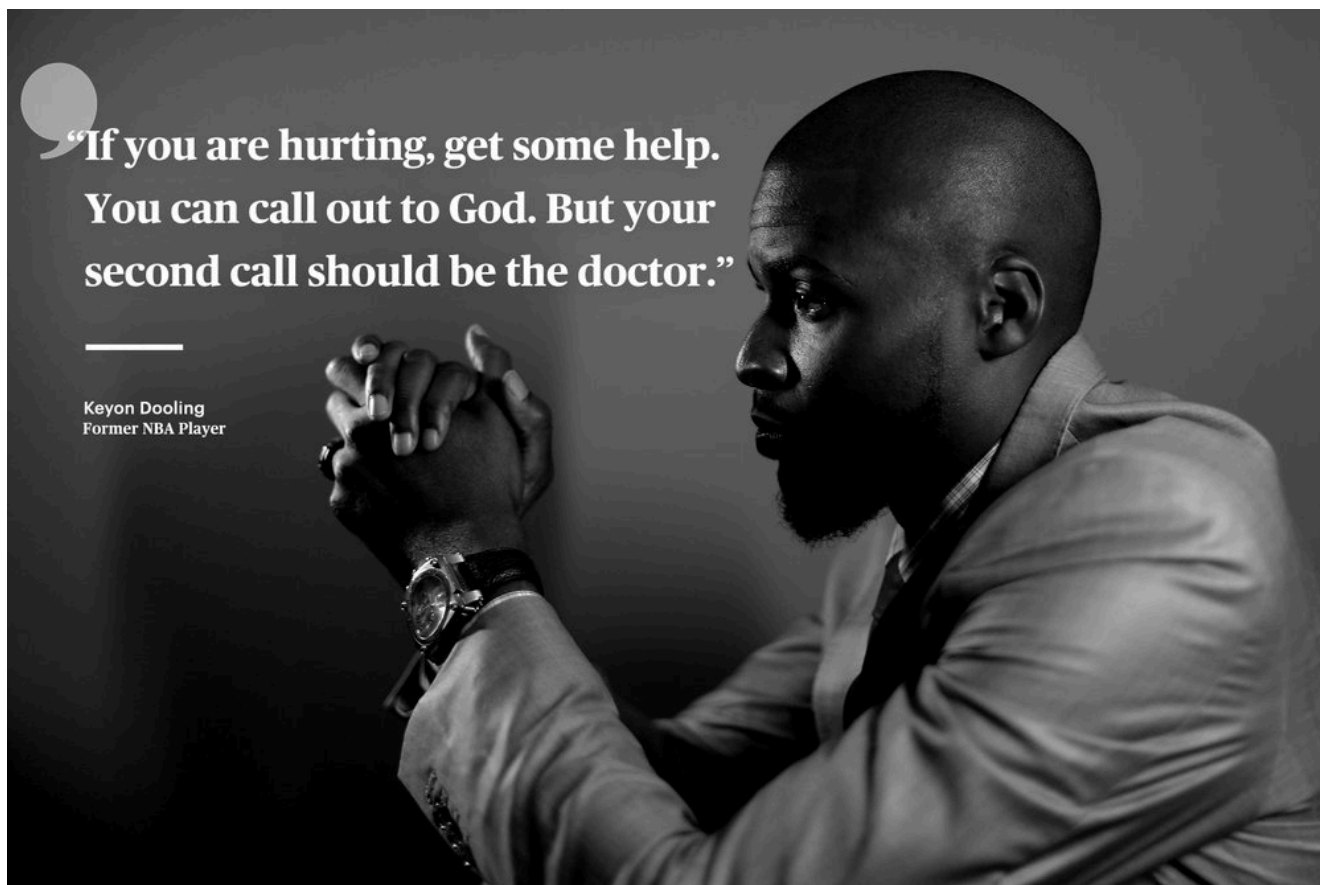
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*“I couldn't eat. I couldn't sleep. And I couldn't play ball anymore. It didn't make sense to anyone else because I still hadn't talked about the trauma.”*

In 2012 Keyon Dooling lost everything. The 11-year NBA veteran had just re-signed with the Boston Celtics when a chance encounter with a stranger suddenly sent his world spiraling out of control. In a matter of a few weeks the man with a reputation for exemplary behavior both on and off the court – a model for younger players entering the league – abruptly quit basketball and checked himself into a psychiatric

hospital. It was there that he was forced to confront childhood memories he had suppressed for decades. By the time he recovered from his breakdown, he had lost basketball – but he had also found himself. In this episode of The Rematch, Keyon shares his powerful story and his fresh perspective on life.



Jed Jacobsohn/The Players' Tribune

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## Running from a Ghost

It was my second day in the mental institution, and I was

suffering from paranoid delusions and shivering in the fetal position. All of a sudden, the nurse came into my room and told me that I had a visitor.

The guy walked in the room, and the look in his eyes said it all.

He wasn't looking at me like, *Keyon's lost his damn mind.*

He wasn't looking at me like, *Keyon's a psychopath.*

He was looking at me like, *Keyon, what's going on? What can I do to help, my friend?*

It was Doc Rivers.

I will remember that look for the rest of my life.

When Doc heard that I had committed myself to the hospital, he flew up to Boston to see me, all the way from his summer house in Florida, at the drop of a hat. I can't imagine what he must have thought, seeing me like that.

Doc asked me what was *really* going on. Just like he had asked me so many times before. Just like my wife had been asking me. Just like *everybody* close to me had been asking me.

He said, "Keyon, do you want to tell me something? What

happened, son?"

I said, "I don't know, Doc."

I was lying, of course.

A week before, I had walked into Danny Ainge's office and told him that I was done with basketball. Out of the blue, just like that. Done.

It didn't make any sense. We had just lost to Miami in seven games in the 2012 Eastern Conference finals. I had just signed a new \$1.4 million contract. We were a month away from training camp. I was in amazing shape, on the outside at least. Inside, I was falling apart.

My two-year-old son K.J. was with me. I took him along, because he loved coming to the gym with me. I remember holding him in my arms and telling Danny that I was done. I was telling Danny a whole lot of other things, too. Really paranoid, off-the-wall things. I was ranting about God and about the darkness all around us. Eventually, Danny made a phone call. A couple minutes later, two of my best friends on the team appeared in the doorway.

It was Rajon Rondo and Avery Bradley. They were super calm, and they did their best to get to me relax. Rajon took my son from me and told me they were going to show him around the facility. Then Avery walked me out to his car and told me he was going to drive me back home.

On the ride home, I started calling everybody in my phone – literally every number from the top – and pleading with them to find God.

I was screaming, “We’ve got to come to the Lord!”



Matt Slocum/AP Images

Everyone probably thought that I had lost my mind. Everyone except for Avery, Rajon, Danny, Doc and my wife, Natosha. Sometimes a look says everything, you know what I mean? Sometimes a look means more than words.

Avery, Rajon, Danny, Doc, my wife ... they all gave me the same look. In their eyes, I didn't see judgement or fear. I only saw kindness and confusion. They just wanted to help me, because they knew that something terrible must have happened

to the man they knew. *You are trapped in a nightmare. You are a caged animal now.*

I will never forget that feeling of support. It saved my life. They kept saying, "It's gonna be O.K. Let's just get you some help."

A few days later, I checked myself into a mental institution in Boston. I was put in a little room on the bottom floor – the area where they kept the most severe cases. Outside the door, I could hear all these people screaming and crying. I could feel the weight of suffering all around me. It was like a horror movie.

A lot of this was a blur, almost like a bad dream, because I was having paranoid delusions and hallucinations. But at one point I remember thinking very clearly:

How in the world did you get here?

*You.*

You, who came from nothing.

You, who made it to the very top of your field.

The NBA star.

The American dream.

You are trapped in a nightmare. You are a caged animal now.

I broke down weeping, and I asked God to help me.

After a few hours, I convinced the nurses that I was well enough to be moved up a few floors, to a nicer room with a window. I remember the next morning, the sunlight was streaming in, and I huddled against the window so that I could feel the warmth on my face. And I thought, *At least I'm out of hell now.*

Later that day, Doc came to see me, and I just decided that I'd finally had enough. I'd run away from the ghosts for so long, and they finally caught up to me in that room. I faced the truth, for the first time in my life.

Doc said, "Is there anything you want to talk about?"

I said, "Yes."

"What's going on, son?"

"Something bad happened to me when I was a kid. Real bad. I blocked it out. And now it's all coming back, Doc."



“For 25 years, I didn’t tell a soul  
what had happened to me.”

Keyon Dooling  
Former NBA Player

Jed Jacobson *The Players’ Tribune*

I was seven years old. It was a real gloomy summer day in Ft. Lauderdale, and I was on my way to the elementary school playground to shoot hoops with my best friend. We were about halfway there when the clouds got dark. I had two whole dollars on me. I was *balling* out that day. So we decided to go to the corner store and get two sodas and wait for the rain to pass.

On our way back to the playground, it started really pouring. We were getting soaked. Just as we were walking past some apartment buildings, this kid shouted out to us from the window, “Hey, what you doing? Come outta the rain and hang out in here for a while.”

I knew him. He was a friend of my older brother. He was about 14, and he seemed cool. I mean, every older kid seems cool



when you're seven. So we went inside the apartment, and we were chilling for a while. All the adults were at work, so we were listening to hip-hop and going around in a circle trying to freestyle.

Then, all of a sudden, the older kid turned on the TV, and he started playing a porn video. It didn't freak me out because I had older brothers, and I had seen their magazines and stuff. I was too young to really "get it," but I *got* it, you know what I mean?

When the scene got to the end, the older kid pointed to the screen and said, "You know, I can do that too."

He started making me and my friend touch him. And then he forced us to perform oral sex on him. I didn't know what to think or what was going on. I was just confused, and angry. I was a kid.

When it was all over, I ran out the door and got out of there as fast as possible. I didn't even look behind me for my friend, because I was just too scared. When I got home, I didn't tell a soul what happened. I was too embarrassed and ashamed. I just got in the shower and started crying. And I kept crying and crying.

I kept thinking, *We just wanted to play basketball. Why did this happen? I just got in the shower and started crying. And I kept crying and crying.*

I remember when I finally got out of the shower and I didn't

have any tears left in me, I got dressed and went outside and I threw my bike down on the grass. Back in the day, the handlebars were hollow and they had that thick rubber grip protecting them. I cut open the rubber on the right handlebar so I could hide something inside. My father was a florist, and he kept all kinds of knives around the house. I took one of his small blades, and I slid it inside the handlebar, then I covered the hole back up.

I got on my bike, and I went riding around the neighborhood.

On that day, something inside me changed.

I woke up that morning as the most happy-go-lucky kid in the world. Always dancing, always playing hide-and-seek and freeze-tag in the neighborhood. Always saying hello to everybody. Always smiling.

When I got on that bike with my knife, I locked away all my feelings deep down inside. I told myself, at seven years old: You have to be tough. You have to be so tough that nobody can ever hurt you.

After that day, I had a huge chip on my shoulder, and huge secret in my heart. My childhood was effectively over.

By 10, I was drinking.

By 11, I was smoking weed.

By 12, my friends and I were riding around in stolen cars.

By 13, I was having sex with older girls in the neighborhood.

I was compensating for the anxiety and fear that I had to keep suppressed. I channeled all my rage and anger into sports. I had to show everybody that I was strong. That I was an alpha. That I was nobody to mess with.

I stayed locked inside my thoughts, so I got incredibly good at visualizing my future. I would be at the park playing ball, and my dreams of being in the NBA would be so vivid and real. It was how I would cope. Whenever my anxiety would flair up and I would get a flash of that trauma, I would suppress it with alcohol, or with women, or with competition.

For 25 years, I didn't tell a soul what had happened to me. I went to the University of Missouri. I went to the NBA. I married the girl I went to prom with, and we had four children. And if you asked anybody in the league, they'd all tell you the same thing: "Keyon Dooling is a stand-up guy."

Then, in September 2012, right as I was about to begin my 13th year in the NBA, I walked into a bathroom at a nice steakhouse in downtown Seattle, and I saw a ghost.



Sean Dougherty/SF Sun Sentinel/Polaris

I had just finished the prime rib. We were waiting on dessert, so I excused myself to go to the restroom. I was in town with Avery Bradley to help out with one of his charity initiatives, and we had just helped to feed 500 needy families in the area. We decided to go out to dinner with some of the sponsors that night, and we were enjoying ourselves.

When I walked into the bathroom, this older guy was at the urinal, and he was clearly drunk. He was peeing everywhere. So I slid right past him into one of the open stalls. I left the door open.

As I'm doing my thing, I felt a hand grab my butt, out of nowhere.

I turned around, and it was the drunk guy. I felt my heart drop.

I zipped up my pants and turned to face him, and I almost snapped. I held out my hands an inch away from his face, and I said, "Hey man, do you know I could *kill* you right now, with my bare hands? *Doyou?*"

He just laughed.

And then I said something that I had probably been waiting to say for 25 years: "What is it that you see in me that you would do that to me? Who do you think you *are*, that you would do that to *me?*"

He tried to joke his way out of it. I turned around and walked out. When I got back to the table, my heart felt like it was going to explode. I told everybody what had happened. They didn't believe me at first, and even when they did believe me, they weren't really taking it seriously.

I grew up watching *The Incredible Hulk*. In that moment, I felt like Lou Ferrigno. You know when Lou was about turn into the hulk, you'd hear that heavy heartbeat pumping?

*Doon-doon. Doon-doon. Doon-doon.*

And his form would start to change.

That was me. I was about to explode.

So I tried to laugh it off, like, "O.K. guys, phew, man ... I need that crème brûlée and a glass of red wine *right now*, because I need to calm down."

The sponsors laughed. But I felt it building: *Doon-doon. Doon-doon.*

My heart was pounding. I excused myself from the table and went outside to get some air. Just as I walked out of the restaurant, I saw the drunk guy standing there ... and I went into a blackout rage. I grabbed him by the throat, and I could feel his windpipe in the palm of my hands. Part of me wanted to kill him right there.

Thank God, one of my friends had followed me outside and pulled me off the guy before I did any damage, and he got me to calm down.

When I got back to my hotel room that night, it was like the walls were closing in on me. My heart wouldn't slow down. My chest was tight. When I tried to go to sleep, I started having these flashes in my mind. Dark memories.

The rainy summer day. The elementary school playground. The two sodas. The apartment. The porno. The older kid. The knife in my handlebars. The shame. The pain.

*We just wanted to play basketball.*





Jed Jacobsohn/The Players' Tribune

Then it got even worse.

All these images started flooding my mind, and I couldn't tune them out. I had this horrible, crushing anxiety wash over me.

I called my mom. I called my wife. We prayed together over the phone. But the feeling wouldn't go away. Even when I got back home to Boston, I was a complete mess. I became paranoid. I couldn't eat. I couldn't sleep. It felt like there was some kind of danger right around the corner, and it was making me sick.

You know what it felt like?

It felt like my every waking moment was a low-shot-clock situation.

Every basketball player knows the exact feeling of anxiety that I'm talking about. It was like the clock kept resetting every seven seconds, and I had the ball in my hands, and it was always ticking down to zero, again and again and again.

The worst part was that I could see the fear in my children's eyes. They knew something was wrong with Daddy, and it was bad.

There was no relief. I genuinely felt like I was going die at any moment. The thought of playing basketball, on top of all this, was too much to bear. So that's when I grabbed my son and drove over to tell Danny Ainge that I was done.

Then I started ranting and raving.

And you know what's so interesting? You know what most people don't realize?

They all had my back.

Danny looked at me with kindness. Rajon and Avery looked at me with kindness. The whole Celtics organization looked at me with kindness.

I still hadn't told a soul what had triggered everything. Some



part of me was still too worried about what people would think of me. I guess I was afraid that they would perceive me as weak, or damaged, or somehow at fault for what had happened to me in that apartment when I was seven years old.

But the Celtics never stopped being loyal to me. They were unbelievable. They kept things quiet and let me get some help on my own terms. And honestly, getting help saved my life. Doc and Danny arranged for me to see some of the best specialists in the country, and that's when I finally made it to Harvard. Maybe it wasn't under the circumstances I expected, but I did it. When I walked into Dr. Timothy Benson's office at Harvard Medical School, I thought to myself, *We did it, dad. We made it to the Ivy league.*

Dr. Benson changed my life. That's where the healing truly began for me, because he explained to me that there was a name for the feeling that I was dealing with. I was actually experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder stemming from my childhood.

As hoopers, we never have time to process. We always have to keep moving on – to the next shot, to the next quarter, to the next city, to the next game. I spent 25 years of my life without a rearview mirror. I used alcohol and women and hoops to suppress all my emotions. But when I walked into that bathroom in Seattle, that was the trigger. Everything came rushing back.

I am not a unique case. But unfortunately, mental health and sexual abuse are still taboo subjects in my world. Not just in the NBA, but in the African American community as a whole. If you grew up in this community, you already know the words used

whenever the topic is brought up ...

“Head doctor.”

“Shrink.”

“I ain’t crazy!”

“I ain’t soft!”

When we have diabetes, we go get treated. When we tear our ACL, we go get surgery. But if our heart is broken, or if our soul is hurting, what do we do?

We just internalize it. We become *hard*. We spend our whole lives running from the ghost. Until one day, it catches up to us. And I can speak from personal experience that all the alcohol and all the women and all the money in the world will not solve the problem.

The only way to finally escape is to stop running and turn around and face the ghost.

If you are reading this right now and you have been suppressing a similar kind of trauma, I beg you to reach out and get professional help. When I was locked away in the bottom floor of the psych ward like a caged animal, I cried out to God to help me. And I most certainly have to thank God for helping me get through my pain. For helping me overcome

the trauma. For helping me become a better man. But I also have to thank Doc, Danny, Rajon, Avery, Dr. Benson, and of course, my wife. They looked at me with compassion and love when I needed it most. They didn't see a "crazy" person. They saw a friend in need.

I can say it now, after years of therapy and self-reflection and *work*: I was sexually assaulted as a child. It did not define me as a person. It did not hold me back from reaching my dreams or from raising four amazing children.

If you are hurting, get some help.

I'll say it again.

If you are hurting, get some help.

You can call out to God. But your second call should be the doctor.

(Sources: [www.Youtube.com](http://www.Youtube.com), [www.Theplayerstribune.com](http://www.Theplayerstribune.com))