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213 — How to Reinvent Yourself with Hall of Fame Musician John Oates

Amy Morin:
Welcome to The Verywell Mind Podcast! I'm Amy Morin, the editor-in-chief of Verywell Mind. I'm also a psychotherapist and a best-selling author of four books on mental strength.

Every Monday, I introduce you to a mentally strong person whose story and mental strength tips can inspire you to think, feel, and do your best in life. And the fun part is we record the show from a sailboat in the Florida Keys! Don't forget to subscribe to the show on your favorite platform so you can get mental strength tips delivered to you every single week. Now, let's dive in today's episode!

Have you ever wished you could start over with a brand-new life? Do you ever think you can't shed certain labels that describe who you are? Do you feel scared to launch a new career, move to a new place, or start living a different kind of lifestyle? If you answered yes to any of those questions, today's episode is for you.
Sometimes people think that reinventing yourself is a sign of a midlife crisis, but quite often it’s a sign of personal growth. It means you’re learning, changing, and willing to try something new. Not that long ago, I lived in a cabin in the woods in rural Maine and I worked 40 hours a week as a therapist. Now I live on a sailboat in the Florida Keys and I work as an author and the editor-in-chief of Verywell Mind. I also used to hate public speaking. I was so shy that I rarely ever spoke in school. But now I get paid to give speeches for a living and I get to host this podcast.

I suspect that you have been thinking about changes in your life too. Some of them might be voluntary — like maybe you think that you might want to move to a new city. But maybe you've been through some changes that haven't been a 100% your choice — like a divorce. Reinventing yourself can be scary, but it can also be exciting. It can be a wonderful opportunity to reset some of your habits, to swap out your inner circle, and start fresh at building the kind of life that you want to live.

My guest today knows a thing or two about reinventing himself. I’m talking to John Oates. He’s a hall-of-fame musician who’s best known for his role in the duo, Hall & Oates. Since 1972, they’ve sold over 80 million albums, scored 10 number one records, and had over 20 hits that have landed on the Top 40 charts. Aside from being known for his music, John was also known for his mustache. But as you'll hear him talk about today, at some point in his career he decided to shave the mustache and completely reinvent himself.

Some of the things he talks about today are what therapy taught him, the steps he takes to manage his mental health now, and what he gained by reinventing himself. Make sure to stick around until the end of the episode for The Therapist's Take. It's the part of the show where I'll give you my take on John's strategies for reinventing yourself and building mental strengths. So here's John Oates on how to reinvent yourself!

Amy Morin:
John Oates, welcome to The Verywell Mind Podcast!

John Oates:
Hi, Amy. Nice to talk to you.

Amy Morin:
You as well. Obviously, you've had this iconic mustache for a really long time. You shaved it off, I don't know, how many years ago?

John Oates:
It was either '89 or early '90. I can't remember.

Amy Morin:
And then we hear it's making a comeback.

John Oates:
As you can see, I'm working on it. I think by November 1st, when Movember hits, it's going to be in its full-facial glory.

Amy Morin:
Your mustache is probably the most famous mustache in the world. You have a Facebook page dedicated to it. There's cartoons about it. You just Google it and it's the first thing that comes up, if you were to Google even the word mustache is you.

John Oates:
Yes, it's pretty funny. I like to ironically describe myself as the patron saint of facial hair at this point, especially with a younger generation, although I don't know if Tom Selleck or Burt Reynolds or a number of other people might agree. But anyway, I'll take it if everyone else wants to give me that title, that's okay.

Amy Morin:
And obviously that's not all that you're known for, right? I read you have 19 songs that made it into the top 10 charts in some way, shape, or form. 19? That is amazing.

John Oates:
Hall & Oates has an amazing career and we've had incredible commercial success and it's been over 50 years of recording. So yeah, I mean, it's a miracle that it's actually happening. It's been happening and still to this day, we still tour together and all that. It's pretty amazing to have this kind career and to be able to still be active and create outside of the group, so to speak.

Amy Morin:
And you're not done yet. You're still coming up with new music, right?

John Oates:
Even close, yeah.

Amy Morin:
How did you guys stand the test of time?

John Oates:
It's interesting. I think everyone wants to know how a duo, what's the dynamics and how it functions, because it's very similar to people who have a romantic relationship or a marriage or whatever or a professional partnership. It's an interesting dynamic. Every duo, so to speak, has its own way of working.

John Oates:
And you look at songwriting duos, you look at Lennon and McCartney, Jagger and Richards, Ira and George Gershwin, I mean, it goes back. Anyway, it's always an interesting dynamic. I think Daryl and I are very different as people, but at the same time, we have a lot of similarities in our musical vocabulary because we listened to the same music growing up as kids, even before we knew each other. So we had a real
commonality when it came to roots, the roots of what we could draw from to create something new. And I think that's the glue that kind of holds it together.

John Oates:
And we live our lives in completely different ways. I think we have different philosophies and different goals for what we want to achieve in our life. So we don't step on each other's toes in that regard on the personal side and we keep it professional, so far it's worked.

Amy Morin:
Interesting. My podcast producer works in the music industry when he is not working on this podcast. And we were just having this conversation before you joined about whether it would be more difficult to be in a duo versus a band versus a solo artist and the complications that must come when there's two of you. And yet, you still have very successful careers as solo artist, yet you have to work together and figure out that without competing. I don't know.

John Oates:
Well, it's very unique that we are able to really have individual solo careers. Not many people in duos or groups are able to achieve that so that's definitely a unique accomplishment. I'm really proud of that as well.

Amy Morin:
As you should be. And something else I read about you is that while so many other artists back in the day were getting into drugs and alcohol, you managed to avoid that, which is probably one of the reasons why you're still able to talk to us and still able to come out with new music today.

John Oates:
Yeah, it has a lot to do with that. Unfortunately, I've seen a lot of contemporaries go by the wayside for any number of reasons like that and it's sad.
John Oates: 

I just have to credit my upbringing. I had really solid parents, very, very solid, lower-middle class working parents who instilled in me, I guess, a good work ethic and also some basic common sense.

Amy Morin: 

But how did you avoid it when so many other artists were dabbling in drugs and alcohol and developing serious addictions? Was there times when it was tempting too?

John Oates: 

Yeah, I mean, listen, don't get me wrong, there was a lot of fun along the way in the '70s and '80s, being on tour all over the world. But at the same time, my personal feeling was I've always wanted to be a musician. I always wanted to be my life's work. I never wanted to compromise that in any way, and especially as I said earlier, as I saw various other musicians and creative people, contemporaries kind of fall by the wayside.

John Oates: 

I thought to myself, I won't do this for the rest of my life, I have to keep it together up here and I have to keep it together here. And so that was more important to me than the kind of temporary bliss or fun of getting high and getting stoned or whatever.

Amy Morin: 

And how did you keep it together from a mental health standpoint? As you're becoming famous, you're on the road all the time and you have this recognizable voice, this recognizable face, you probably couldn't go anywhere for a really long time without mobs of people. How do you hold it together?

John Oates: 

People ask me that all the time. All the guy, all the people I work with here in Nashville, every time we go in the studio, they go, "You're one of the most normal rock stars I've ever met." I don't know. Here again, I'll go back to my parents, I'll go back to my upbringing.
John Oates:

And the other thing about not being mobbed or not having to deal with that sort of thing is I've always lived in places where people don't care about celebrities. I've lived in New York City, I was born in New York City, I lived in Aspen, Colorado, which is full of stars, and people see them all the time in the streets and the shops. And now I live in Nashville, which is also full of stars. So it's not that big a deal.

John Oates:

I mean, you go to Whole Foods and I see one of the Everly Brothers walking around buying bananas or whatever. So it's not unusual and I think it's a very comfortable place to be when, especially Nashville, when it's a music-centric city, the whole city revolves around music. So yeah, it's very comfortable and cool. And I keep a low profile, plus I'm short. And so I can kind of juke and jive around and people don't seem to notice me too much.

Amy Morin:

Interesting. So let's go back to in the day when I understand you went to see a therapist, you shaved your mustache. Can you share that story with us?

John Oates:

Well, that's a lot of stories right there. If you want to go back to the shaving of the mustache thing, by the end of the '80s, a lot of things had changed for me personally and also career-wise. I got divorced, our longtime manager had left and gone on to work at one of the big record companies. So in a sense, I think professionally, Daryl and I were kind of floundering a little bit and not really having a lot of direction.

John Oates:

And with being divorced, I got to the point where I felt like a caricature of myself, it's hard to describe, but just this thing about the mustache and all, in the MTV videos really reinforce that kind of jumping around and wearing silly clothes and that '80s, well, dare I say goofy kind of approach to a lot of things. And I felt I was changing personally.
John Oates:

And to me, the mustache represented that guy and I didn't want to be that guy anymore. It was kind of a rebellion in a way and I remember what happened. We were in Tokyo to do a tribute to John Lennon, I think on the 10th anniversary of John Lennon's death. And there was a lot of big stars, Lenny Kravitz, Miles Davis, a whole bunch of people. And we had done the show and it was for Yoko Ono, she was there of course.

John Oates:

And I came back to the room and the next day we were flying home. And I went back to my room in Tokyo and I looked at myself in the mirror and I just took the razor and just shaved it off. It was a rebirth, it was almost like a butterfly coming out of its cocoon. I just felt it was time. I didn't want to be that guy anymore.

John Oates:

And I knew that something was going to be different going forth into the '90s. I knew that Daryl and I wouldn't be working together quite as much. I knew that we had done what we had done in the '80s and there was no way to replicate it because the only way to go... This is just me talking, I felt like after the tremendous success that we had, the only way to go was down. And I didn't want to try to desperately clinging on to this '80s pop star thing because I knew it was just transient. It was something that was of the moment and it was never going to be replicated.

John Oates:

And so rather than try that and be frustrated or disappointed or whatever, I just said, "I'm going to do something else." And that's when a lot of other things changed, which leads to I guess the therapy part. I'd gone to couples therapy with my wife when we were contemplating things weren't going well. We'd been together for about eight years. And she was a great gal, really great gal. She wanted her life to go in one direction. I wanted my life to go in another direction. It wasn't the right time for us at the time.
So just to kind of try, I agreed to go to this couples therapy and it was a dead-end street. It just wasn't going to happen. And we eventually separated and proceeded to get divorced, but afterwards, I had some issues where a lot of realizations about my professional situation. And I ended up going back to that same therapist. And it was funny because he kind of smirked when I showed up because he said, I had a feeling you were going to come back.

Amy Morin:
Oh, interesting.

John Oates:
Yeah. And in fact, I have a chapter in my book that I wrote, and the chapter's entitled Guys Like You, because that's what he said to me. He goes, "I know a lot of guys like you." He says, "I see a lot of guys like you. You're going down this road and if you continue down this road that you're on, now that you're actually being truthful with me," which of course, I wasn't during the couples therapy part and I finally accepted that maybe I could get something out of this. And he said, "If you continue doing what you're doing, I'm going to tell you what's going to happen to you. So it's your choice, you're in crossroads. You have a chance to reinvent yourself, reinvent your life."

John Oates:
And I bought into it and I never thought I would buy into therapy. I wasn't never believed in it, I didn't think it could help me. I thought like a lot of people or a lot of guys, I think in particular, since we're talking about Movember, a lot of guys want to just hold it all in and kind of do it themselves or ignore it, whatever.

John Oates:
But anyway, the point being is that we began to do things like visualization exercises and talking about dreams and talking about trying to... I think to really sum it up, because it was obviously very intense. It was to visualize how I could go forward in my life and what it was going to take. And it was a bunch of exercise. And it's kind of interesting because one of the things that I came up with, which he kind of led me
toward, he said he wanted me to visualize where I wanted to live and remove the people and the toxic reason in my life that were preventing me from getting.

John Oates:

And so I began to visualize myself. I had a little condo in Aspen, Colorado that I used for when I went out there for... And so I didn't envision myself in a condo, I envisioned myself in a cabin in the mountains with a brown-and-black dog. And I envisioned myself sitting on the porch and I envisioned people coming toward me. All these people in my life, these business people, these lawyers, these accountants, these toxic people that I was very, very much involved in coming toward me down this long road and coming past me. And as they passed me, they disappeared. And I did that for quite a while. And as it turned out, after I'd finally moved to Colorado and met my future wife, we built a log cabin in the woods. And I had a brown-and-black dog. And it's kind of unbelievable to really tell the story.

John Oates:

And those people were all gone, I wasn't involved with them in any way. And that's when I started my life over again. And I basically recalibrated who I would be. I lived in the mountains, I sold everything I owned. I had a bicycle. I didn't have a car for two years. I rode my bike, I skied, I hiked in the mountains, I surrounded myself with a bunch of rocky mountain dirt bags who didn't care whether I played guitar or sang or not. It was like, "Can you keep up?", kind of thing.

John Oates:

So when I say dirt bags, I mean that in the nicest possible, but just lived the life of a mountain man. And it changed everything. And then of course, we did build a house, we got married, we had a kid. And throughout the '90s, that's the life I led. And there was really hardly any music involved.

Amy Morin:

So that is quite a story of how you took a break step back and did something completely different. And I happened to be a therapist, so I'm glad to hear that you found therapy
helpful. What do you think would've happened had you not done that? What kind of path were you headed down before this?

John Oates:
Well, he laid it out. He said a bunch of guys who have a lot of money, they have no relationship. They live vicariously through hookers and maybe drugs, maybe alcohol, maybe just kind of using, not so much their accomplishments, but using the things they can buy as a way to ease the pain. And that's what he told me. And I just said, "I'm not going to do that. That's not going to be me, one way or the other." So it was very interesting.

Amy Morin:
And I'm curious, what happened to your identity as a musician when you are living in this cabin in the woods and you're not doing as much with music? What was your mental health during that time?

John Oates:
It was fantastic. It was freeing. I did these incredible mountain experiences, backcountry treks through the wilderness. And I'd get up at the crack of dawn and it would be howling snowstorms. And I'd go out, be the first person on the ski lift, ski by myself.

John Oates:
And while I was in, one of the things that I did, which actually evolved into a song that I wrote, I remember it was so peaceful and so centering. I would be out there in the worst possible weather possible, no one wanted to be out there. And I'd be out there and I'd be sitting on the lift and I'd be looking at the trees and this howling snowstorm. And I would visualize this circle and I called it the circle of three, with myself, my wife, and my son.

John Oates:
And I actually wrote a song called Circle of Three, which I recorded in the early 2000s. And that was my mantra, it was kind of the way I centered myself. And I just thought
that now I have this family, I have this core that loves me and that I love them and it's unshakeable bond that I've created. So that was where I derived my personal power and it was meditative, I guess, in a way.

Amy Morin:
And what happened to your identity as a person now? You shaved this iconic mustache. You are no longer living this life where you're touring the world like you were before. Did you have this any sort of identity crisis of who's John Oates now?

John Oates:
No, I really didn't. I was very happy. I was really, really happy and that happiness set the tone. It enabled me to have this foundation where I could go back to music, which I did. As the ‘90s were on, I started to get back into it a little bit. I met some musicians in Colorado, I began to work with them. I never recorded a solo album, something that I had put on the back burner. And I thought, now I can do that because I kind of can discover who I am now.

John Oates:
And that led me to move to Nashville. And my wife and I moved to Nashville and our son went off to school and I started over again. I don't think I could've done that had I not spent that time in Colorado disengaging from that other guy.

Amy Morin:
And did you tell anybody that you went to therapy back then?

John Oates:
No. Told my wife, not my new one.

Amy Morin:
When did it come to me that you started talking about it now? Because I feel like obviously a lot has changed over the years where people are much more forthcoming to
talk about mental health, but not that long ago, nobody really wanted to talk about if they'd been to see a therapist.

John Oates:
Well, I think it's in the air, it's of the times. I notice it in sports and entertainment in general, that a lot of people who are pretty well-known are being much more outspoken and much more open about it, especially with a younger generation. You hear about it all the time.

John Oates:
And to be honest with you, had we not got involved with Movember, which I'm really proud to be part of, I don't know if I'd be talking, obviously, I probably wouldn't be talking to you about it. It's just something as part of my life. And I was very open about it when I wrote my book, Change of Seasons, available on Amazon.

Amy Morin:
Absolutely, we'll link to it.

John Oates:
How's that? But anyway, I was very open about it in the book, talked about it there, and I just left it. Here again, it's the cliche, I am an open book in a sense. If you really want to know anything about me, you can read that book. And there's a lot in there, here again, kind of wearing my heart on my sleeve to certain degree.

Amy Morin:
And have you gone back to therapy since then?

John Oates:
No.

Amy Morin:
And the physical transformation, so you shave your mustache. Did that help you get going on the road of saying, "All right, I'm this new person," and then therapy sort of kicked it into another gear where you saying, "I'm just not going to change how I look, but I'm going to change where I live and how I live."?

John Oates:
Well, when I took the mustache, when I shaved the mustache, I look different. I felt different. I looked different. I looked at myself differently. It was symbolic. Okay, look, it's kind of a shedding of the skin. It's similar to kind of I guess what the Native Americans did when they would go in a vision quest and then they would come out, go from a child to a man or whatever it might be. That's what it felt like to me. It felt like I was shedding my skin and I had the ability now to be whoever I wanted.

Amy Morin:
What was the reaction that people had to you when you shaved your mustache? Did they think you're just having this temporary crisis?

John Oates:
Everybody, when I walked into the airport that morning with the whole ensemble band and everything, I remember Miles Davis came up to me. And Miles Davis, he had a cut, I want to tell you, first of all, I remember what he said to Daryl. He went to Daryl, he said, "I tell my hairdresser, I want my hair to look just like Daryl." And then he came up to me and he got right in my face and he had these bloodshot red eyes and he just looked at me, he went... That's all he did.

Amy Morin:
And then after that, the people around you, what was the reaction that you got from most people?

John Oates:
Well, I left. That was it for me and Hall & Oates and all the people that surrounded with Hall & Oates. I was gone, I left. I left New York City. I sold everything I had. I had a lot of
stuff, apartments, house in Connecticut, airplane, collection of vintage cars. I sold everything. And all I had was a bicycle and a little tiny condo in Colorado. And I moved into the condo and I rode my bike to town and I went shopping and brought my food in a basket and went out into the mountains and that's it.

Amy Morin:
So you had this complete reset in your life, not just physically, but also I guess not just how your physical appearance looked, but where you lived, what you did, how you lived your life, and then you got back into it. And now, here we are today where you did get involved in the Movember campaign. How did that come about?

John Oates:
It came about through my social media folks. They reached out to me and they said, "Would you be interested?" And I said, "Yes, absolutely." And this was back in the summer and said, "Well, you better get that stache going up." And so in July, I kind of started to let my free flag fly a little bit more. So yeah, we're good. By November 1st, this baby's going to be rocking hard.

Amy Morin:
Definitely.

John Oates:
Yeah, so that's how it came about. I've been involved in a lot of charitable things. My wife and I did a big kind of on-internet telethon for Feeding America a year ago, and I've always tried to participate in local charities and everything. And I just thought it's just such a worthwhile thing to get involved in.

John Oates:
And here again, being the patron saint of facial hair, I thought it was just the... First thing I said when I met the folks in London last week, I said, "How come you didn't call me sooner? I don't get it, but I'm here now and that's good."
Amy Morin:
Yeah, that's the fair question. Why wouldn't they have called you sooner? But in terms of talking about men's health and encouraging mental health especially, why do you think this is so important that we are talking about this right now?

John Oates:
Because I think a lot of men still to this day are reluctant to reveal and face certain things. And here, again, even going to the doctors for checkups, men tend to not be quite... It's the thing. My wife, of course, she’s got me on a very good schedule and she keeps me...

John Oates:
I think perhaps if people know and are a little bit more aware that even people who are successful, success, obviously can be even a worse catalyst for mental health problems. But for people, someone like me who, yes, has had tons of success, a lot of notoriety, I still had issues and everyone has issues. And that's the song I wrote with Nathan Chapman, Pushing a Rock. That's exactly what that song's about.

John Oates:
That song is about using the metaphor of the Greek myth of Sisyphus pushing a rock uphill. And when it rolls down, if it rolls back down on you, you can't give up. You just got to roll with it. You got to figure out another way, another strategy. And that's what that song is all about. And when they asked me about Movember and I had that song, the synchronicity was perfect. It just seemed to be the right song for the right moment. And it spoke, hopefully, in an artistic way about what Movember's really about.

Amy Morin:
And I like that a lot because so often we think you're either mentally healthy or mentally ill and there's no gray area. The truth is, it's this continuum where we fall, and the continuum varies from day-to-day, moment-to-moment, depending on what's going on around us. And we have choices that we can make about how to take care of ourselves.
Amy Morin:

One last question for you. How do you take care of your mental health these days?

John Oates:

I started doing yoga and I've always meditated, but I started doing yoga very seriously during COVID when I was at home for a while. And I always wonder, why the heck did I not start that 30 years ago? But nevertheless, it's been amazing for me, it's a ritual. I do it every morning, first thing I do when I get out of bed, that's been a huge help.

John Oates:

The other thing I do is I love to go on hikes and bike rides by myself. It gives me a chance to think, it gives me a chance to recalibrate a lot of things. I think it has a lot to do with the oxygenation that happens in the brain. I think clearly and I can come back to my everyday life-work demands with a different perspective. So it's kind of my therapy really.

Amy Morin:

Well, thank you so much for sharing all of your wisdom with us and John Oates, thanks for being on the Verywell Mind Podcast.

John Oates:

It was my pleasure, thanks.

Amy Morin:

Welcome to The Therapist’s Take! This is the part of the show where I'll give you my take on John's strategies for reinventing yourself. Here are three of my favorite strategies that John shared.

**Number one: do something tangible to signify the new you.** John shaved his mustache as part of his reinvention. Despite being known for his facial hair, he took a chance and got rid of it. But doing so was a tangible reminder that he was entering into
a new phase of his life. There’s just something about getting a new hairstyle or a new hair color, swapping out your wardrobe, or just getting a new style of glasses that could help remind you and maybe everybody around you that you’re entering a new phase of your life. So while you don’t need to physically transform yourself, changing your appearance just a little bit might be a solid reminder that you’re doing things differently.

**Number two: think about what you want going forward.** John didn’t just passively wait to see what happened next. He talked to his therapist about visualizing the life that he wanted moving forward. He had to think about what he wanted to do in this next chapter of his life. Who did he want to be? Who did he want to spend time with? What did he want to spend his time doing? He took a break from being in the spotlight and he stopped performing so that he could focus on creating the kind of life that he wanted to make for himself. And for a long time, he spent time living a simple life that included riding his bicycle and living in the mountains. It’s tempting sometimes to just want to sit and wait for whatever opportunities come our way, but when you do that, you miss out on the chance to create the kind of life that you really want to live.

**Number three: create a solid foundation for yourself.** John spent a lot of time figuring out who he wanted to surround himself with, what habits he wanted to adopt, and which habits he wanted to avoid. That’s how you create a healthy foundation for yourself. And once you do that, you can probably reinvent yourself in lots of different ways and still live a happy life because the core of who you are doesn’t change even when you live a different lifestyle.

Reinventing yourself in a healthy way doesn’t mean that you have to abandon everything about yourself, and you don’t have to pretend to be something that you’re not. It just means shedding some old habits that don’t fit anymore. If you grew up believing that you were a loser, the new version of you might be proud of who you are. Or if you’ve always called yourself socially awkward, you might reinvent yourself as a friendly person. It’s up to you to decide how and when to reinvent yourself. So often I hear people say things like, “Well, that’s just who I am,” when someone points out that
they're quick to lose their temper or that they've been confronted with a bad habit. But every time we declare, "But that's just who I am," we lose out on an opportunity to grow stronger and become better by reinventing ourselves.

So those are three of John's strategies that I highly recommend. Do something tangible to signify the new you, think about who you want to be going forward, and create a solid foundation for yourself. To learn more about John and to hear some of his music, check out his website, johnoates.com.

If you know someone who could benefit from learning about how to reinvent themselves, share this message with them. Simply sharing a link to this episode could help someone feel better and grow stronger.

Amy Morin:

Do you want free access to my online course? It's called “10 Mental Strength Exercises That Will Help You Reach Your Greatest Potential.” To get your free pass, all you have to do is leave us a review on Apple Podcasts or Spotify. Then, send us a screenshot of your review. Our email address is podcast@verywell.com. We'll reply with your all-access pass to the course.

Thank you for hanging out with me today and for listening to The Verywell Mind Podcast! And as always, a big thank you to my show's producer (who I have no doubt could grow an impressive Movember mustache if he tried), Nick Valentin.