

[00:00:00] **John Moe:** A note to our listeners: this episode contains discussions of suicide and sexual assault that some might find difficult.

I don't know how closely you listen to the credits of this podcast every week, but if you listen all the way to the end, you'll hear me say that it's a production of Maximum Fun and Poputchik. Now, Maximum Fun, you probably know as the network that the show is on; it gets promoted a lot. We have the MaxFun Drive every year, established brand Maximum Fun. So, what's Poputchik? Well, see that's my company. I don't work for Maximum Fun. I work with Maximum Fun. It's a co-production. I also work with other organizations on podcast stuff.

So, okay, who cares? You don't care. But you ask what does that word mean, Poputchik? Is it like father of the chicks, the papa chick? No, it's spelled different. P-O-P-U-T-C-H-I-K. It's a Russian word, and it's for something that doesn't really have an English word. So, when you travel, you might meet someone in the seat next to you on a plane or a train or a bus, and you get to know them. You get to talking. You get to know their life story and why they're traveling and what they think of the experiences that they've had—their adventures and their misadventures, their glorious moments, their huge setbacks. You talk because you've got nothing else to do. You're just sitting there. And after a while you become friends, and then that part of the trip is over and then you go your separate ways.

You learn from these people, and you teach them, and their travel informs your travel, and you had this relationship with this person. And that person? That's your poputchik. A few years ago, I knew I'd be doing a mental health podcast with interviews, and I needed a name for the company, and I chose Poputchik because I knew I would be regularly bringing poputchiks to my listeners, talking about their mental health journeys on the show that became this one.

It's *Depresh Mode*. I'm John Moe. I'm glad you're here.

[00:02:10] **Music:** Cheerful, relaxed acoustic guitar.

[00:02:18] **John Moe:** This week's poputchik is Emi Nietfeld. She's the author of a memoir called *Acceptance*, which is soon out in paperback. Emi writes about her childhood in Minneapolis and a mother who was a compulsive hoarder—so much so that their home became uninhabitable when Emi was a teenager. Emi was hospitalized in inpatient psychiatric facilities for extended periods of time. She was in the foster care system in a highly restrictive home. She experienced homelessness as a teenager.

Emi eventually found her way to the famed arts school Interlochen, in Michigan, and was accepted into Harvard University. Emi writes about being sexually assaulted in the book, about a domineering, much older boyfriend, and finally about finding stability and a healthy relationship with her now husband.

I asked Emi Nietfeld why she chose to call her memoir *Acceptance*.

[00:03:08] **Music:** Peaceful acoustic guitar.

[00:03:20] **Emi Nietfeld:** I wrote this book over the course of either 7 or 12 years, depending on how you count it. And the title in my head was always *Acceptance*. At the beginning though, it was meant to be almost ironic, because as a teenager I was dealing with so many problems at home—with neglect, with my parents hoarding. And yet, I was in therapy where they told me the key to happiness is just to accept your circumstances.

[00:03:48] **John Moe:** Oh.

[00:03:49] **Emi Nietfeld:** And I mean, in some cases that's great advice. And then, in other cases like mine, I was like no fucking way. Like, I have to get out of here if I wanna survive.

[00:03:58] **John Moe:** Right. Right. And then there's a lot about college acceptance letters and a lot of events that at least confront you with whether to accept them or not, I suppose.

[00:04:10] **Emi Nietfeld:** Yeah, absolutely. So, over the last kind of decade, this title has really grown with me. And you know—and for a long time, I was thinking the only way that I can be a happy adult given some of these things that have happened is if I just accept them. Like, I get to the fifth stage of grief, I'm like, “This happened. I'm at peace with it.” And then I move on.

And writing the book, that was like the challenge that I gave myself. Like, how do I become this Zen person who's over everything traumatic that's ever happened to me? But that's not—that's actually not what the book title means in the end.

[00:04:45] **John Moe:** Yeah. Yeah. Well, let'—you know, let's check in after we hear a bit more of the story and then see how the acceptance is going.

(They chuckle.)

What was happening at home when you reached a point you could no longer live with your mother?

[00:05:00] **Emi Nietfeld:** Yeah, so I grew up in Minneapolis. My family was Evangelical Christian. And then, when I was nine, one of my parents came out as trans. And they had a bitter, horrible divorce that—my mom ended up winning full custody. My other parent moved across the country never to be seen again. By me, at least. And you know, my mom really fell into hoarding, and our house just devolved into squalor.

And so, we didn't have a place to shower. There were like waist-high piles of trash with narrow paths going between all the rooms. And you know—and my mom had taken me to therapy, because she could see that I was miserable. But my mom couldn't realize that her own hoarding was a big part of why I was struggling, and so instead I received therapy that wasn't really helpful.

I was given 12 different psychiatric medications over the course of two years, ranging from ADD meds to antipsychotics. And by the time that I was 14 and I left to go to the hospital—

which is kind of where *Acceptance* begins—I was just completely hopeless. I did not know how my life could ever be happy again or how life could even be worth living.

[00:06:24] **John Moe:** What did those meds do to you?

[00:06:28] **Emi Nietfeld:** When I took Concerta for the first time—which is a stimulant ADD medication—I became so incredibly antsy. I ended up hitting a kid on the head with a French textbook kind of in an anxiety attack. And I just—it was this experience like out of my body that I had never had before, and I thought that I was going crazy.

After that, I was given Xanax to calm me down. And then based on this bad reaction to ADD meds, my doctor was like, “Oh, you must be depressed.” And so that kind of started a cycle of side effects that threw me totally off balance. So, it was kind of like one drug after another, kind of trying to correct what went wrong. But at the same time, I was being told, you know, this very simplified version of mental health and mental illness, where they were like, “This is a biochemical imbalance, and like we’ll fix it with these meds.” And when the meds weren’t working, I became really hopeless and even suicidal, because I was like—you know, there’s something wrong with me that I can’t fix.

[00:07:39] **John Moe:** You were hospitalized. Was it at 14, you were hospitalized?

[00:07:44] **Emi Nietfeld:** And 13.

[00:07:45] **John Moe:** And 13. What led to that?

[00:07:50] **Emi Nietfeld:** I—right around my 13th birthday, I was in this medication spiral. I was feeling really, really down and began self-harming, like scratching myself with safety pins and stuff like that. And my mom’s solution to every problem was to call our health insurance’s nurse helpline. And I remember we called her and—we called her, you know, this one nurse who embodies all the nurses on this hotline who were kind and thoughtful. And she was like, “You know, you should go to a shelter. It doesn’t seem like your home is a good place for you.”

And I remember telling my mom this, and my mom was like, “You know, that’s—that’s fine. You can go there if you want to get molested.” And there was really this threat that anywhere besides home was going to lead to violence and was going to be even worse. And so instead, that really left the emergency room. And so, that’s where I ended up right after I turned 13. And once I got into the psych ward, I loved it.

[00:08:59] **John Moe:** What—why did you love it?

[00:09:01] **Emi Nietfeld:** Well, there was hot water. There were warm meals. It was like quiet and calm, and I could hear myself think, and it really made the chaos and just unsanitary conditions at my mom’s house really stand out.

[00:09:19] **John Moe:** What were you admitted for to the psych ward?

[00:09:22] **Emi Nietfeld:** The first time I was admitted for like self-harm behaviors. And then, as soon as I got out, I basically immediately went back, and then by the third time I was feeling suicidal. And then, I actually like made an attempt when I was withdrawing off of one antidepressant, and then eventually I was hospitalized for an eating disorder.

So, it was kind of a range of—a range of things that all were kind of stemming from the same problems and that all brought me to the same places.

[00:09:56] **John Moe:** The problem being the problem at home, the problem with your mother and the home that you had?

[00:10:02] **Emi Nietfeld:** Yeah. Yeah. And I think also, this way of thinking about it—right?—where I was being told by these adults that I had a—that I had like a problem deep within me with like who I was, what my makeup was, that was something that, you know, drugs might improve, but that was just like fundamentally broken. And that made me feel really, really hopeless.

[00:10:31] **John Moe:** A theme of the book—among the themes of the book is how powerless you were as a kid. Like, you need to make your own way from an early age. You need to take care of yourself, but you're at the mercy of people more powerful than you, by dint of the fact that they're adults. Did it take writing the book to make you aware of that? That that was such a theme in your life?

[00:10:54] **Emi Nietfeld:** I think I was always painfully aware of how powerless kids in America are, where we're told, you know, kind of no matter what we think is best for us, that our parents know better. And this was just so frustrating to me when I was younger and when I would like beg doctors and therapists like, “Just come to my house, like talk to my mom, like find out what's wrong with her.”

But it did take writing this book to kind of help me start to shake the sense that I was gonna get in trouble for criticizing some of the adults in my life. Like I still live in fear that by writing about what happened to me, like I'm gonna be punished.

[00:11:41] **John Moe:** Hmm. Like, why? Like, wh-what—what do you think's going to happen? Like—and I know that that's a gut feeling; that's not a considered, you know, logical thing, but what do you connect that to?

[00:11:58] **Emi Nietfeld:** One of the things that happened after I was hospitalized several times is I was sent to a residential treatment facility, which was this locked building for—you know—basically troubled teens. And there I was exposed to kind of a different view of mental health, where it was like, “Your actions as a teenager are the problem. And you need to learn to take absolute responsibility for everything happening in your life. And if you complain or if you blame anybody else, you will face consequences. Like not being able to call your parents or not being able to go outside or socialize with other people.”

And from that point onward, I kind of received those messages again and again that if you want help in America, you have to be endlessly positive. Like, no matter what's happening,

like if you complain, you're gonna get in trouble. And this definitely was not unique to my experience but is something that people don't realize about what's happening for a lot of youth who are branded as like problem children—that like they can't even be honest about what's happening at home, because somebody's gonna punish them for it.

[00:13:25] **John Moe:** So, do you learn to speak in code then, at that point? Do you learn to put on a performance as a plucky youngster who's going to get through all this?

[00:13:35] **Emi Nietfeld:** Yeah, absolutely. That was like a huge part of my training growing up. You know, I wasn't really learning like, “How do I take better care of myself? How do I make changes that are gonna help me feel better?” Instead, I was learning like, okay, you need to wash your hair. You need to like put on a cute outfit. You need to smile for the doctor or the—you know, whatever adult is gonna help you and basically play this game in order to get out of your situation.

And that's unfortunately really the only choice for so many people who are facing adversity in the United States.

[00:14:12] **John Moe:** Yeah. Like, looking back now at the meds you were taking, at the suicidality that you were experiencing, the institutionalization—how do you now understand what your mental health was at that age, during this—during your teenage years?

[00:14:31] **Emi Nietfeld:** Well, I absolutely was depressed. I'm not sure it's—you know, it's complicated, because it's not necessarily a disorder when it's a realistic reflection of life.

[00:14:47] **John Moe:** Right.

(They chuckle.)

When it's realism,

[00:14:52] **Emi Nietfeld:** Yeah, exactly, and I've had—I now have this hindsight, because I requested thousands of pages of medical records, and I read everything I could get my hands on from every doctor and every therapist. And I believe, you know, everybody had good intentions and was trying to do what would be helpful, but that it really was so quick between going into the therapist, receiving a diagnosis, and then going into a doctor's office and getting medication. And effective medication management is really hard to do. Like it requires a lot more than like a one-hour assessment of a child to get a diagnosis and then like 15 minutes in the office to write a prescription.

But unfortunately, that was what happened for me. And I happen to be somebody whose body is really sensitive. And so, I think that it—basically, a cycle began where I was taking—eventually I was taking these drugs like antipsychotics, and a doctor would see it on my history, and then they were even less likely to trust me and trust my story about what kind of things were going on at home that really needed to be addressed alongside, you know, whatever medication or therapy was happening.

[00:16:17] **John Moe:** As your teenage years go on, you become very—“interested” is sort of a mild way of talking about your interest in the Ivy League, in getting into a great college, getting into an Ivy League college specifically. When did that fix fixation, I guess, develop? And why do you think it was so strong from such an early age?

[00:16:39] **Emi Nietfeld:** Part of my family's mythology was that my mom had always wanted to go to Stanford. And when she was a young girl, Stanford was the only really elite college that was co-ed and accepted women. And so, I grew up hearing all these stories about how, you know, “I almost got into Stanford,” my mom would tell me, and like, “My life would be completely different if I had gotten in.”

And I loved school. I loved books. I loved reading. I loved getting out of the house to go hang out with teachers. But as this mental health crisis set in, I kind of lost hope that that could be my future. But then, at 14 I was sent to this eating disorder unit, and I was suddenly surrounded by people who were from a totally different economic class than I was. Like, these really pretty white girls from the suburb who were taking all these AP classes and playing field hockey. And there, the psychiatrist really took an interest in like, “Where do you wanna go to college? What do you wanna be when you grow up?” And we had this conversation that probably lasted five minutes, but it made me think over the months that followed, like what if I could go to an Ivy League school?

It felt totally unrealistic, but I was also, you know, confined to an institution where I had to ask to the bathroom. So, I was like if I'm gonna get out of here and I'm gonna live, then I might as well try to do what I have dreamed about doing.

[00:18:22] **John Moe:** It was interesting to me when I read about it, because there was so much happening in your life that could have broken you—or at least could have—could have depressed you further. You're in a foster care home, and they kind of take away your livelihood, and you're trying to have a relationship with your mother and with your other parent, and it's going so, so poorly.

But there needs to be this extraordinary confidence that Harvard or Yale or somewhere like that might still lie ahead. Like, how do you square that? That you were so beaten down, but still so—had this optimism, really?

[00:19:08] **Emi Nietfeld:** I credit my mom with some of that, because she just had this totally irrational optimism her whole life. Like, it wasn't—it was never phrased as “I got rejected from Stanford.” It was always “I almost got into Stanford.” Even though it's the same—it's the same letter you get in the mail, right? And also, I grew up really religious, and I believed in like a personal Jesus Christ who was there like watching me, who wanted me to achieve my dreams, who was going to make me into like a pop star or Christian comedian or whatever fit with like His Plan—like capital H, capital P.

And so, I kind of had this template where even when I lost my faith—and in *Acceptance*, I write about kind of chasing that idea of this personal God. I kind of kept that feeling in my heart, and it was always kind of there for me.

[00:20:10] **John Moe:** Yeah. Did you reach a point ever, where you're going through some of these things and you think, “Well, it's time to give up on the Ivy League dream and maybe just try to go to Kalamazoo State or community college or something.”

[00:20:25] **Emi Nietfeld:** Yeah, well, that almost happened when I was 15, and I was in foster care, and I saw this opportunity to potentially get out of foster care by attending a small campus at the University of Minnesota super early. And that was my mom's alma mater. And I thought—you know, I just told myself like, “I'm gonna be happy with that.” And—but at the same—you know, at the same time for me, once I decided like I want to go to get away to college, whether that was the University of Minnesota or the Ivy League, to me, the alternative was death. Like, I wrote all these letters where I was like, “Will I succeed, or will I end my life?” You know?

And as an adult, I have a little more perspective to be like those are not the only two options. And I wish I could tell my younger self to just like chill out a little bit about the future. But I think—I think I knew that getting into a better place emotionally really meant putting a big distance between myself and my family of origin just in order to heal or stop getting hurt.

[00:21:45] **Music:** Sweet, slow acoustic guitar.

[00:21:48] **John Moe:** More with Emi Nietfeld in just a moment.

(Music fades out.)

[00:21:58] **Promo:**

Music: Plucky orchestral music.

Mark Gagliardi: What is up people of the world? Do you have an argument that you keep having with your friends and you just can't seem to settle it, and you're sitting there arguing about whether it's *Star Trek* or *Star Wars*? Or you can't decide what is the best nut! Or can't agree on what is the best cheese.

Hal Lublin: Stop doing that. Listen to *We Got This with Mark and Hal*, only on MaxFun.

Mark: Your topics asked and answered objectively, definitively, for all time.

Hal: So, don't worry, everybody!

Mark & Hal: *(In unison.)* We got this.

Music: *We got this!*

[00:22:32] **Music:** Thoughtful acoustic guitar.

[00:22:37] **John Moe:** back with Emi Nietfeld, author of *Acceptance*.

(Music ends.)

When did you come to understand the trauma of the events that you had experienced? You know, you are unable to live with your mother. You experience homelessness. You spend years trying to figure out where you're gonna sleep next. Uh, you are raped. You described being raped in the book. When did you come to understand that this was trauma? That these things stay with you, that these things are, you know, stored in you?

[00:23:16] **Emi Nietfeld:** I think it was a couple years after I graduated from college, when my life was really—

[00:23:21] **John Moe:** Really?

[00:23:23] **Emi Nietfeld:** Yeah, yeah. When my life was really kind of picture perfect. Like, I was engaged to be married to a classmate from Harvard. I was working at Google, making six figures. And yet, I was deeply unsettled. I never wanted to be at home. Just like being in my own apartment like freaked me out. I always wanted to be out and about doing anything, doing something.

And one night I was on the subway in New York City, where I had moved, and I got separated from Byron, my fiancé. And he had my phone, and I didn't have like a book with me or a piece of paper. And so, I was gonna be alone by myself with my thoughts for like five to ten minutes before I could make it home. And I basically had a panic attack. Like, I didn't know how I could just be alone with myself for ten minutes. And I was like, you know, is this normal? Like, is this how most people are moving through their lives?

[00:24:34] **John Moe:** Hm. So, until that point—like all the way through your teenage years, all the way through graduating from Harvard, four years at Harvard—you had always kind of had a mentality of, “Okay, what comes next? What else is going on?” Like, you were—you're scrambling.

[00:24:53] **Emi Nietfeld:** Well, I always funneled my feelings into productivity, and that was part of my superpower in getting out of my home life and getting into the Ivy League. But then, it also made it really, really hard to see that something was wrong. Because people like me are praised all the time for our responses, right?

Like, when we're talking to young people and telling them like, “Be resilient,” I'm like a poster child for that just because of the way that I kind of naturally respond to hardship. But there are really big downsides to that as well. And at times, I've really hurt myself with some of my impulses to like be productive, be the best, and handle my trauma in that way.

[00:25:44] **John Moe:** When you're at Interlochen, in the book—you know, you go away to this sort of idyllic colony of a school. And later at Harvard, you're surrounded by these people whose—as you say, whose circumstances were very different, whose paths I guess

were—at least on the surface—much better paved. What did that dissonance of your background and theirs due to your managing of all the trauma you had experienced?

[00:26:15] **Emi Nietfeld:** I remember one of my first days at Harvard—it might have been move-in day actually—where I went to my room, and I met these seven or eight other girls who were going to be my hallmates. And just seeing how like perfect and pristine they were, and it—like Harvard actually has—you know, they have students from different economic backgrounds. A lot of people are on financial aid. But the dominant culture is very much set by like the wealthy private school crowd.

And I remember one of my classmates trying to get to know me better, like inviting me to her room. And I was just mortified, because I was like, “If she knew the truth about my past, she would never want to be friends with me.” And that was when I decided I just have to—I have to bury everything that has happened, and I'm gonna pretend like my life has been normal up to this point.

And I really—I really stuck with that for like five or six years! Like, I did not tell anybody about high school or my family.

[00:27:33] **John Moe:** You're back to the performance thing. It's like being in the hospital when you were young, like trying to figure out when to smile and what cute outfit to wear.

[00:27:41] **Emi Nietfeld:** Exactly. (*Chuckles.*) Even though my outfits weren't that cute at Harvard. I could have used a little—a few lessons about how to dress like a prep.

[00:27:49] **John Moe:** (*Chuckles.*) Wow. Okay. So, were you ashamed of your past?

[00:27:54] **Emi Nietfeld:** I was really ashamed. I was really, really ashamed. And you know, it's sad in hindsight. Because now—you know, now those people, they know my story, and they don't seem to judge me for it. Like everybody has a past of some sort. As a teenager, it's a lot harder to see that. But I think also I had been—I had really been taught like by my mom, “Don't talk about the hoarding. Don't let anybody inside.”

And I had experienced again and again just like being disbelieved, being treated like I was crazy. And especially after, you know, I was sexually assaulted, when I was 17, and you know, traveling by myself without a stable place to stay. And in the aftermath of the rape, my mentor was basically like, “What do you expect happens to girls who are by themselves?” And it was such—like, it was such a humiliating experience that I felt like—I felt like if I tell somebody anything about the last five years of my life, they're gonna know like exactly what happened to me. Like, every detail of this assault.

[00:29:22] **John Moe:** Did shame over your past translate into shame over yourself about who you fundamentally were?

[00:29:33] **Emi Nietfeld:** Yeah! I kind of disowned this person I had been, but I had always been. And I was like, “I'm gonna become a Harvard person now, and I'm gonna get new interests, new hobbies, new haircut. And I'm gonna be this new version of myself.”

I still struggle with figuring out what is authentically me and what is this Ivy League persona that I learned to put on.

[00:30:01] **John Moe:** So, who are you? Who are you really?

[00:30:06] **Emi Nietfeld:** (*Sighs.*) I don't know. I work through it every single day, but it's so—it's so deeply ingrained in me. And I think where people go to go to college shapes them a lot as a person. And so, it's like—I'm trying to get more in touch though with who I was as a teenager, and I think writing this book was really huge in recognizing the beauty and the strength and the ambition of my younger self, even though I was ashamed of her greasy hair, her lack of social skills, like her cavities. It helped me see beyond that.

[00:30:47] **John Moe:** Well, yeah, I mean it—I read it as a hero! (*Chuckling.*) Like, this person who's confronted—I mean, there's like a Dickensian element to it. Like, uh, you are plucky; you are getting through this, except maybe a little more eye rolling and swearing under your breath in the average Dickens character.

[00:31:08] **Emi Nietfeld:** (*Chuckles.*) Thank you for that. Yeah.

[00:31:10] **John Moe:** You say you've been writing this in some form for 12 years?

[00:31:15] **Emi Nietfeld:** So, I—as a high school senior—after I submitted my college applications, where—you know, I was still in the thick of things, and I was trying to explain it all to colleges in a thousand words and sell myself as this amazing overcomer. I felt like that was so dehumanizing and impossible to do that I wrote an essay that basically was the seed for *Acceptance*. And then I really—I really picked it back up shortly after graduating from Harvard, back in 2015. And that was when I started really writing in earnest, you know, every day for then almost seven years until it finally came out.

[00:32:00] **John Moe:** Why was it so important that you write it down?

[00:32:06] **Emi Nietfeld:** For the first couple of years, I honestly was trying to tell that story about like, “Look at me. Look how much I grew from all of this. I'm such an amazing, incredible person who deserved to get into Harvard and now have this elite job.” I was trying to tell that narrative and kind of prove to myself and to Harvard that I like deserved it.

And then, as I was writing, that just became increasingly impossible to say that that was the whole story. And so, I was desperately trying to like make peace with what happened in one way or another, and I knew that I had so much work to do to figure out like what did this really mean, and why do I think about this every single day?

[00:33:07] **John Moe:** Yeah. I wonder if you could talk about the difference between your application to—I believe it was Yale—and your application to Harvard and what was left in and what was left out.

[00:33:20] **Emi Nietfeld:** I applied early to Yale, and at the time my college counselor said, “You know, I think honesty is the best policy, and so we are just gonna write out—you're

gonna write out like everything that happened with your mental health, like when you were hospitalized, what diagnosis you got.” And her logic was that that would show Yale how bad my circumstances were. Like, if you could see how it affected me mentally, then you would understand how bad it was. And then, I was rejected. And a few different people called people that they knew, and basically the hypothesis that we had at the end was that I had raised too many red flags. It was too much information, and that I looked like a suicide risk if I were allowed on campus.

And this was like a week before the regular application deadline. And so, I went to my other applications, and I was like, “I’m going to eradicate mental illness from these.” And so, there was no hospitalizations, like no mental health struggles. You know, it was just like this appropriate amount of struggle followed by ultimate triumph.

[00:34:37] **John Moe:** Hm, the narrative.

[00:34:39] **Emi Nietfeld:** And that was what got—the narrative! Yeah. (*Chuckles.*) And that was what got me into Harvard.

[00:34:44] **John Moe:** Huh. Do you... so the—so, it's discrimination against mental illness.

[00:34:53] **Emi Nietfeld:** I think—and I think it's really complicated and hard. Like, I had—let me rephrase that. I have a lot of empathy for college admissions officers, and I think that they have a really, really hard job. And I also am very grateful that I had adults in my life who were able to give me this guidance about like, “Here's what to include, here's what to leave out.” And I'm grateful that I was able to leave out the mental health stuff. Like, I write about it in *Acceptance*, but it was only because of the way my transcripts were written that I was able to avoid disclosing like, “Hey, I spent nine months in a locked facility as a freshman.”

And a lot of young people, they just do not have that opportunity. Like, they have to—they have to tell colleges. And the people who are most likely to need to tell colleges are the people who have less privilege. Like, if you are a wealthy teenager in America, there's a very good chance that your school will cover for you. Which I—honestly, I think is great, I think—but I think it's what all young people deserve. And until that happens, I really want to raise awareness among parents and students and especially admissions officers and guidance counselors about like, “Here's the reality of how mental illness is treated in college applications, and here's how you should proceed in order to secure your best future.”

[00:36:28] **Music:** Relaxed acoustic guitar.

[00:36:32] **John Moe:** We'll be back with more from Emi Nietfeld right after the break.

(*Music ends.*)

[00:36:42] **Promo:**

Music: Ominous, low, rumbling tones.

John Hodgman: They can be anywhere. At your office, in your car. And they. Are. Wrong.

Speaker 1: My mom says that the Grey House didn't exist, but she's wrong!

Speaker 2: He just does it wrong.

Jesse Thorn: Someone in your life is wrong about something. Something small, something weird, something vitally important. Only one person has the courage to tell them just how wrong they are.

John: You know what you did was wrong, but your daughter is a liar who eats garbage.

(They laugh.)

Music: Instantly transitions to a relaxed, bouncy synth.

John: They call me Judge John Hodgman. Listen to me on the *Judge John Hodgman* podcast.

Jesse: If someone in your life is doing you wrong, don't just take it. Take it to court. Submit your case at MaximumFun.org/jjho.

(Three gavel bangs.)

[00:37:27] **Music:** Fun acoustic guitar.

[00:37:29] **John Moe:** Back with author Emi Nietfeld.

(Music ends.)

Something I've talked about on this show before—and apologies to listeners who are sick of hearing about it—but, uh, when I wrote a memoir, I found there was so much that was sort of revealed just by the act of writing, so many connections I was able to make like, “Oh, this weird thing happened when I was 15, and that explains why this other weird thing happened when I was 35.” You know? Like, I was able to kind of see the plot a lot clearer than by just living it and thinking back and having memories. Did you have those surprise connections, those sort of novelistic plot arcs that snuck up on you?

[00:38:19] **Emi Nietfeld:** Absolutely. I especially encountered this when I went into fact check, where I read every email that I sent as a teenager.

[00:38:29] **John Moe:** Oh my god!

[00:38:29] **Emi Nietfeld:** Like, I went through over 10 thousand—yeah.

(John laughs.)

If you wanna torture yourself, just read every email you sent as a teenager.

[00:38:34] **John Moe:** That sounds like if you die and go to hell, that's—

(They laugh.)

[00:38:38] **Emi Nietfeld:** Essentially! Essentially. And yeah. And there were—there were so many times where I remembered the feeling, but I didn't remember why. Like, I had totally forgotten the why. Like, with this college application thing, I remembered clearly that I submitted these applications, and I felt extreme shame about them and was having nightmares. I like started abusing Adderall like again. And just having all of these symptoms. And I didn't remember like what was so upsetting about it. And then, when I read through these emails, I was like, oh, it's because I edited out this mental health stuff, and I felt like I was lying by omission.

And so, it's just wild like the things that you can forget about your own life. And those stories really—like they serve your narrative that you have like going through the world, but sometimes that narrative is not accurate.

[00:39:39] **John Moe:** Did going through all those emails and did writing the book and going through all the fact checking do anything to alleviate the shame that you've been carrying?

[00:39:52] **Emi Nietfeld:** Yeah, I think so. I like to joke that if writing is therapy, it's bad therapy.

(They chuckle.)

And it's a very roundabout way to do things, to write a memoir and do all these steps. But at the very least, it was like extremely powerful exposure therapy. Because I would open up my laptop, like read about a doctor calling me histrionic and dramatic. And I remember just snapping it shut and being like, “Okay, well now I have to kill myself, because I can't live with the fact that that's what they said about me.” And then, you know, by the next day, I was annoyed, but I was like, “I guess I could keep living.” And then, after a few months or years, you're like, “Yeah, that's what it said. Here's why.”

And it gave me the tools to kind of piece everything back together in a way that really made sense. Like, especially after being told by my mom and other adults—like, after hearing their version of the story for so long, it really gave me a chance to be like, “Okay, this is my version of the story. And other people will have totally different interpretations of what happened, and that's fine. That's their prerogative, but I get to have my version too.”

[00:41:15] **John Moe:** I'm going to use a pretty nebulous psychology term here that I'm not crazy about, but I'm gonna use it anyway. Have you processed the trauma of your youth?

[00:41:28] **Emi Nietfeld:** (*Beat.*) Can you tell me what you mean by that?

[00:41:31] **John Moe:** Have you come to a point of managing the meaning of what you went through and understanding the effect that it has on you today?

[00:41:44] **Emi Nietfeld:** I definitely have gotten to a place where I am living what I believe is a full life. Like, there were definitely a couple years where I was—I had severe PTSD, and I was making so many decisions based on like managing these symptoms and wasn't sleeping through the night, like was over-exercising to cope.

And I'm definitely through that. And I think that the stuff that happened will always affect me and that part of being where I'm at is continually learning like how these events have shaped my present-day responses, especially when it comes to being in relationship with other people. Right? Like when it's really hard to trust or when I'm afraid of punishment, as we talked about before.

But I think that's also okay. You know? I have seen so many messages that tell trauma survivors like, you know, success is being made stronger by what happened to you. And it's great when that works out that way! But I really don't think that that's realistic. And I only started to really get better when I decided, you know, I get to be as upset as I am. And if I feel permanently broken by this stuff, like that's okay. And that was actually really the key to being able to kind of move beyond it.

[00:43:22] **John Moe:** In the book, you write about a boyfriend that you had while you were at Harvard who was older than you, who was a dick.

(*They laugh.*)

I can't think of any other way to put it. A bad—a bad relationship, or at least a problematic relationship. Given everything that you had been through in your younger days and in that relationship, what did it take to build what seems to be a very strong and healthy relationship with your now husband?

[00:43:55] **Emi Nietfeld:** I love that question. Um, when I was dating my ex, we really treated each other like we were computers. Like, he had studied economics, and at the time I was very interested in behavioral economics. And there was so much like bargaining with each other, where it's like, “You need to change in this way, and in exchange I'll change in that way.” And that led to so many unhealthy dynamics, a lot of like abuse of power. And so, when I ended up meeting Byron the summer before my senior year of college, I was like, “I'm not gonna treat him like a computer. I'm gonna treat him like a dolphin. And I am just going to just only—”

[00:44:46] **John Moe:** (*Chuckling.*) That's not what I was expecting you were going to say.

[00:44:48] **Emi Nietfeld:** (*Laughing.*) No? Really?! You didn't expect that?

[00:44:50] **John Moe:** How so?

[00:44:51] **Emi Nietfeld:** Um, because I was like, “I'm gonna—I'm gonna focus on our feelings, and I'm only gonna give you positive reinforcement.” And so, for the first six months that we were dating, I never said one negative thing to him.

And eventually he was like, “Knock it off, like stop manipulating me.” But it really led to this like culture of like if I have a problem with him and what he's doing, it's kind of like I can manage my own emotions. I can deal with it in a way that's like effective. And also, if he's not right for me, I can't really change that. Like, I can't ask him like, “Go become a different person.” At that point, we just have to break up. And that was kind of the wisdom that I got from this super toxic relationship before that. And it helps that, you know, Byron is a very stable person with a secure attachment style.

And he was also—when we met, he was desperate to be in a relationship. Like, he really wanted it. And that helped me to kind of trust him over the years as I put him through test after test, always ready to like—you know, I was ready to break up with him if it went south. And I feel just beyond fortunate that I do have such a happy relationship. Which like, regardless of most people's childhoods, like how many people get to say that?

(*John agrees.*)

It's really like the biggest blessing in my life.

[00:46:24] **John Moe:** You write with a lot of detail and a lot of honesty and a really tough section about being raped when you were in Europe. What goes into deciding how you're going to approach writing about that, how detailed you're going to be, what kind of—what kind of approach you're gonna take? What goes into that?

[00:46:45] **Emi Nietfeld:** Yeah. I'm really glad you asked me that, because nobody has. And I think that there's a lot of writers who are very sensitive to not re-traumatizing readers who might be survivors or who might have gone through a similar experience. And I definitely was aware of that, especially when it came to like eating disorder stuff, to just not putting in like unnecessary triggers that didn't really move the story forward.

But specifically, when it came to, you know, rape, I did not wanna write about it. I was at a point where I had like never told anybody the full story of what happened. And I had an earlier draft where I basically like, you know, alluded to like—you'd like said like, you know, this thing happened, like cut to black.

And I remember I gave it to a beta reader who was like a—I mean, he was one of my colleagues. He was like a 60-year-old dad of a teenage girl. And I remember he zoomed in on that, and he was like, “I don't think it could happen like that. Like I don't think somebody could really be assaulted in that way.” And he just kept saying like, you know, “I don't understand.”

And then I went and, you know, I was like—I wanted to jump off the roof, right? I was like so embarrassed and like ashamed. And then, I was kind of debriefing it with Byron, and he was—so, Byron's my husband, and he was like, “You know, I think that this guy was saying I don't understand, because he wants to understand. And when he says I don't know how it could happen like that, he literally means that he does not understand how it could happen like that.”

And at that point, I was kind of like angry and emboldened. And I was like I've carried the reader like so close to me for 300 pages. Like, what does it say if I'm suddenly like, “I'm not gonna talk about this.” And I felt like that would really kind of reinforce the shame and the stigma and the idea that like sexual assault is something that we can't talk about. And so, that was my—that was my choice in kind of describing what happened in more detail than most books have. Yeah.

And I've also found it really helpful for me in kind of making sense of my own experience to read about like very like specific things that have happened to other people. Because feeling like, “Oh, I'm the only person that this has ever happened to, like it must be something about me,”—that's so lonely and that's so isolating. And literally, just knowing like this one, crazy detail happened to somebody else has just like put my mind at ease and really let me be like, “Okay, that's a thing that happened. And like, I can move on. I can sleep through the night.” And so, I really hope that that—that it can do that for some other readers.

[00:50:01] **John Moe:** What is it like having that story out? Like somebody can go into a Barnes and Noble and read about the worst thing that's ever happened to you. What is it like having that story out in the world?

[00:50:14] **Emi Nietfeld:** I've both gotten very used to it and it's kind of weird, where I—it was such a shock like talking to people who had read the book but had never met me and being like, “Oh my god, you read this thing that very recently I would like not tell my therapist.” And it was super useful to just—to know firsthand that like, you know, you meet me, it actually doesn't matter like what preconceived notions you have about what type of a person I am because of this happening to me or like how broken I must be or anything like that. Like, I'm just who I am, and I literally don't have the bandwidth or time to be constantly thinking about like other people's reactions.

So, it helped me kind of like incorporate this. It's just like another thing that happened to me. And at the same time, like I do—I am like in bed at night being like, “Wow, did we really have to include all of that?” Like I was just waiting for my editor to like edit the scene. And then she's like no, I don't want to. She's like it's good.

And I'm—(*laughs*) and I just like—I trust her so much. I didn't push back. And now I'm like is my book banned in Florida? Like, I got like emails from librarians who are like, “Can you please tell me like in detail—like, does this book include sexual content?” And I'm like well, there's sexual assault and like a few chaste kisses, but like, you know. We'll see what the—we'll see what the censors say.

[00:51:48] **John Moe:** Yeah, it might be a badge of honor being banned in Florida. I'm not sure.

[00:51:52] **Emi Nietfeld:** But you don't know! They don't tell you. They don't tell you. And it was—the book is coming out in China, and it was censored in China. And I got the censor's edits, and it was like, “Damn, these are really good!”

(John laughs.)

I was like—I sent it to my editor and I'm like, “Could we do this for the paperback?”
(Laughs.)

[00:52:10] **John Moe:** Nice work, China.

[00:52:12] **Emi Nietfeld:** Yeah. *(Laughs.)*

[00:52:13] **John Moe:** My book was published in Slovakia, and I've gotten all these great emails from Slovakia. And I'm like, “That translator must be so fucking good.”

(They laugh.)

Because like the proportion of Slovakian responses to American responses. I'm like, “That's not me. That's gotta be the Slovakian doing something good there.”

[00:52:35] **Emi Nietfeld:** You should have the translator come on your show.

[00:52:37] **John Moe:** I really should! I should.

[00:52:38] **Emi Nietfeld:** I'd love that episode.

[00:52:41] **John Moe:** *(Laughs.)* Figure out how he's so much better at being me than I am. I'm not sure.

Couple questions about the present day. How's your mother?

[00:52:52] **Emi Nietfeld:** Um, I am not in touch with her.

[00:52:54] **John Moe:** Okay.

[00:52:55] **Emi Nietfeld:** Um, I think through the grapevine, I hear—you know, she's doing her thing, doing what she wants to do. And I'm happy for her with that and also happy that I don't have to be around to see it. Um, yeah.

[00:53:12] **John Moe:** And then, how are you taking care of yourself today?

[00:53:18] **Emi Nietfeld:** I am... okay, so—sorry, *(chuckles)* just a second. Um... I don't know why this—*(laughs)*. I did all the other questions, and this one's hard. Um, but... I'm really focusing on the basics, on like working out—not too much but enough to help my

mood, build my strength. Trying to focus on like sleep, like doing the crossword at night instead of watching *Saturday Night Live*. That's been a huge change that I made for the better. And eating—you know, eating less sugar, eating more protein. That stuff that's all so basic and obviously that's not gonna do the trick for everybody, but I've been startled by how much of a difference it's made for me when I've been able to like prioritize that, just like physical health stuff. I feel like a totally different person. And I go to therapy.

(They chuckle.)

Of course, of course!

[00:54:33] **John Moe:** How's therapy going?

[00:54:34] **Emi Nietfeld:** Oh, therapy is good. I was like—I went into this therapist, and I was like, “I don't want to be here for more than one year.” And now we're like four and a half years in, and I'm like, “You're probably gonna be my therapist for the rest of my life.”

(They laugh.)

[00:54:47] **John Moe:** What did you—why did you think that it would—it could only take a year? Like what adjustment did you make to your understanding of therapy?

[00:54:57] **Emi Nietfeld:** Yeah. Well, you know, I was burned as a teenager by some bad therapists. And as an adult too, I really struggled to find the right person and had some just like—I had some laughably bad first adult counselor, And so—and then I went through exposure therapy, which was like a 14-week, extraordinarily painful course of treatment for PTSD.

And so, after that I was like, “Those were the longest 14 weeks of my life. Like I can't do regular therapy for more than 52.”

(John chuckles.)

But then—you know, but then we were there, and it was like things just—they take as long as they take. You know? And I'm grateful to have the insurance and the financials to afford that, 'cause it's a big commitment to be in therapy for a number of years. But I feel like I'm uncovering new stuff all the time and like finally doing that like personal growth that people hope for from therapy. That was like—that was just always like outside of the scope of my imagination.

[00:56:02] **John Moe:** Emi Nietfeld, thanks so much for being with us.

[00:56:04] **Emi Nietfeld:** Thank you so, so much for having me, John.

[00:56:10] **Music:** “Building Wings” by Rhett Miller, an up-tempo acoustic guitar song. The music continues quietly under the dialogue.

[00:56:16] **John Moe:** Emi Nietfeld's book, *Acceptance*, is available in paperback on August 1st.

If people donate to our program, we can keep having a program. I like having a program. I like introducing you to weekly poputchiks. But to make that happen, people have to give. If you've already donated to the show, I really appreciate it. It helps make the show available to more people around the world where I think it is helping folks. If you haven't donated already, don't worry. It's easy to do. Just go to MaximumFun.org/join. Find a level that works for you and choose *Depresh Mode* from the list of shows.

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Hi, credits listeners. The original intro for this episode talked about how everyone is on a mental health journey, even the members of Journey—even Steve Perry and his replacements, Steve Augeri and Arnel Pineda. It gives me no pride that I can name three Journey lead singers off the top of my head with no notes. (*Beat.*) Okay, it gives me a little pride.

Depresh Mode is made possible by your contributions. The show is produced by Gabe Mara. Our senior producer is Kevin Ferguson. Our production intern is Clara Flesher. And we get booking help from Mara Davis. Rhett Miller wrote and performed our theme song, "Building Wings".

[00:58:44] **Music:** "Building Wings" by Rhett Miller.

I'm always falling off of cliffs, now

Building wings on the way down

I am figuring things out

Building wings, building wings, building wings

No one knows the reason

Maybe there's no reason

I just keep believing

No one knows the answer

Maybe there's no answer

I just keep on dancing

[00:59:20] **Mike:** Hi, this is Mike in Connecticut. I know it feels overwhelming. I know it's difficult, but I also know that when you're ready to talk, someone will be ready to listen.

[00:59:32] **John Moe:** *Depresh Mode* is a production of Maximum Fun and Poputchik. I'm John Moe. Bye now.

(Music fades out.)

[00:59:47] **Sound Effect:** Cheerful ukulele chord.

[00:59:48] **Speaker 1:** MaximumFun.org.

[00:59:49] **Speaker 2:** Comedy and culture.

[00:59:51] **Speaker 3:** Artist owned.

[00:59:52] **Speaker 4:** Audience supported.