

[00:00:00] **John Moe:** I'm not here to talk about endorheic basins today, you guys. Endorheic basins are drainage basins that are unconnected to the world's oceans. These are places a river feeds into without eventually flowing into the ocean. Inland seas, for instance, or the occasional desert. These are endorheic basins. And endorheic basins are not the subject of today's episode! Au contraire, quite the opposite. Today, we're talking about all the rivers that do flow to the ocean. Which is most of them. Which is almost all of them. And our discussion about rivers flowing into the oceans is in a metaphorical sense. The rivers represent the psychological tendencies and issues and, yes, even mental health difficulties that one experiences in life. And the ocean, well, that's your family of origin. Follow the rivers, you'll almost certainly get to the ocean. For now, you're here. It's *Depresh Mode*. I'm John Moe. I'm glad you're here!

[00:01:07] **Transition:** Spirited acoustic guitar.

[00:01:15] **John Moe:** It's important, I believe, to know your own mind. And to do that, it's necessary—I believe—to learn about how that mind got built. Which means going back and finding out what happened when you were a kid. This is not to blame your parents or siblings for the problems that you're having, it's just about knowing how you were formed so you can know what you're dealing with today. That way, if you have some problems you want to work on, you can know where the roots of those problems may be, and you can understand them better. And this can be tricky, especially with mental health, because for a really long time, families have approached mental health with a lot of secrecy, a lot of shame, a lot of fear. Maybe things have become a little more open here and there in recent years, but that's very new. So, getting to the truth of what happened in childhood can involve a hell of a lot of research, a lot of asking questions, requesting records, knocking on doors.

That's what my guest this week, Meg Kissinger, did. And she uncovered a lot about her family. It helped quite a bit that Meg happens to be one of the best investigative reporters out there, and she specializes in issues of mental health. Meg Kissinger is a visiting professor of journalism at Columbia University, a longtime reporter for the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, and winner of several awards for her reporting. She's the author of a new book, a memoir, and an investigation, called *While You Were Out*.

[00:02:47] **Transition:** Relaxed acoustic guitar.

[00:03:00] **John Moe:** Meg Kissinger, welcome to *Depresh Mode*.

[00:03:03] **Meg Kissinger:** Thank you so much. Glad to be here.

[00:03:04] **John Moe:** To stipulate for our listeners ahead of time, no relation to Henry.

[00:03:10] **Meg Kissinger:** No, but my parents had a French poodle—should have been a German Shepherd, but our dog was named Henry Kissinger.

*(John chuckles.)*

And it was always interesting when he was due to have a stool sample dropped off at the vet.

[00:03:21] **John Moe:** Right. I'm dropping off Henry Kissinger. He needs a stool sample.

*(They laugh.)*

Oh, man. The book is *While You Were Out: An Intimate Family Portrait of Mental Illness in an Era of Silence*. Give me a rundown on your family of origin. Who are we dealing with here?

[00:03:39] **Meg Kissinger:** Oh, we are dealing with quite a cast of characters. So, I'm the fourth oldest in a family of eight children, and we grew up in the 1960s and '70s. I feel like I'm still kind of growing up. But anyway, my mom and dad were wonderful people, but they did have their challenges. My mother struggled with depression and anxiety and my dad would later go on to be diagnosed as bipolar. And as I say in the book, you know, you take two people with those issues and have—let them have eight kids in 12 years. What could possibly go wrong?

And so, a lot did go wrong. A lot went right. But we just grew up in a time when we didn't talk about this stuff.

[00:04:24] **John Moe:** Yeah, I mean, mental health conditions are addressed one way or another, in a healthy way or in an unhealthy way. How were the conditions of your parents addressed?

[00:04:35] **Meg Kissinger:** Yeah, they were not addressed is the short answer. So, they didn't talk about it. So, I came to learn as I was putting this book together—I really wanted to kind of dig into the origin story of how my mom and dad even came together. And I discovered that it was my grandmother who fixed him up on a blind date, because she had wind that my mother came from money. So, that was really an orchestrated—not an arranged marriage. But anyway, my grandmother was sure motivated to have her son marry my mother. They did love each other very much, you know, I came to know. But anyway, in kind of diving into their backstories, I learned, you know, that my mother was really suffering from clinical depression back in the '40s. And she actually did see a psychiatrist.

And John, this is amazing to me. I was really looking at what that was like. So, what was it like to go to a psychiatrist in the 1940s in Milwaukee, Wisconsin? And they had—well, I'm going to ask you this. How many psychiatrists do you think were listed in the phone book in 1950 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin?

[00:05:45] **John Moe:** I'm guessing maybe five?

[00:05:46] **Meg Kissinger:** Okay, well, you're off by four. There was one. One listed.

*(John laughs.)*

So, it just wasn't talked about. And I remember my mom telling me a story about when she and my dad were about to get married, and she was really nervous. And she thought, "Oh my god, you know—what if this is just—" My dad was a real character. He was a party boy, and

she was very shy, but she had—they had a lot of fun together, but still she was nervous. And they told the story about how my mom sat down with my dad right before they got married to reveal this deep, dark secret. And my dad thought she was going to say that she was pregnant. And he knew that he was not the father, if that was the case. Apparently, they did not have those kind of relations back in those days. Anyway, at least that's the story they told us.

What she revealed to him, ultimately, was—you know—something in her mind to be more scandalous than being pregnant, and that was that she had seen a psychiatrist. And she told my dad, like, “This is your get out of jail free card, you know, if this is too much for you. The fact that I have seen a psychiatrist, and then I'm on medication for that.” And he didn't know what to make of it. He'd never known anybody who'd ever gone to a psychiatrist or much less, you know, talked about it.

So, that was the backdrop. That was the climate in which this union began. And then we came along bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, in lickety-split fashion. And we just—yeah, we just didn't talk about the many elephants in the room.

[00:07:25] **John Moe:** Yeah, and I want to get into some of the issues that individual members of your family had. But growing up, was there a cloud over things? Was there a sense that something was wrong, or was it an idyllic childhood?

[00:07:38] **Meg Kissinger:** You know, I think it was so much fun. I had a blast growing up in my family! Now, that's not to say we didn't have heartbreak. I mean, and certainly as the years rolled on, yes, things got very tense and very sorrowful. But we had lots and lots of fun. We were lucky, you know. We had privilege. My dad had a good job, so we didn't have to worry about money in the early going. That later changed, but we had—you know, we had lots of resources. My parents were—we grew up in a neighborhood with lots of big, old Irish Catholic families. So, there were plenty of moving parts, you know. If seven brothers and sisters weren't enough in the way of playmates, you could always just walk down the block and run into a family of eight or nine or ten kids. So, I look back on growing up as really a lot of fun.

And our house was kind of the place where everybody met, you know, to hang out and play kickball. We had a pool in our backyard. So, that made us even more popular. And then, if that weren't enough, our next-door neighbor was a guy by the name of Frazier Thomas, who was the children's TV show host. WGNTV in Chicago had a show called *Garfield Goose and Friends*. And, and anyway, Frazier Thomas, our next-door neighbor was the host. So, our house was full of life, and it was fun and rollicking, and we had many great adventures. My parents were really adventurous. I mean, taking us on ski trips and out to the mountains in Colorado. We had a lot of fun.

[00:09:18] **John Moe:** When your sister's mental health deteriorated, what happened and what was your understanding of what was happening?

[00:09:27] **Meg Kissinger:** Right. So, Nancy was four years older than I. So, again, I'm the fourth. Nancy was the second oldest, and her problems emerged really early, I would say. I think by the time she was 12, she was starting to get into a lot of trouble. She was acting out. She had had some suicide attempts, even as young as 12 or 13. We didn't ever know about

that in any kind of formal way. You know, my parents never sat us down and discussed that, but it's what we could overhear. Ultimately, she went on to, you know, be in psychiatric care. As I note in the book, you know, she and my mom shared a psychiatrist, which is not a good idea.

*(John agrees.)*

But, you know, in those days—again, I think—*(Chuckles.)* Yeah, you're shaking your head. And I understand why. It's just crazy to me that that that would be the case. Anyway, Nancy just got sicker and sicker, and ultimately ended up really with a very serious suicide attempt after she came back from her sophomore year at the University of Colorado. And that was kind of the point of no return for her. You know, she was—she had locked herself in the bathroom and tried to drown herself after taking a bunch of sleeping pills. And that really—you know, the police were called and the fire department, and it's very public. It was a very public spectacle. And so, word was out, you know, that Nancy Kissinger had tried to kill herself.

And she therein, for the next five years, in and out of one hospital after another. Ultimately, my parents ran out of money. They paid for her to go to the Menninger Clinic in Topeka, Kansas, that at the time was really the premier or one of the premier psychiatric facilities in the country. Very expensive. Anyway. It all ended very sadly. She did end up dying by suicide when she was 24 years old. And as I recall in the book—my father, on the night that Nancy died, you know, he called us all into the living room and said in no uncertain terms, “If anybody asks, this was an accident.” And he had his reasons for doing that. It was—you know, he was afraid that she wasn't going to be able to have a funeral, that the Catholic Church was going to frown on allowing her to be buried in our family cemetery plot. So, there was real—I would say, a strong strain of coverup and secrecy and shame.

[00:12:17] **John Moe:** Did you see her descent for what it was at the time? Or did you—were you aware enough of what was happening with her health to see the road she was going down?

[00:12:29] **Meg Kissinger:** Uh, yes and no. I would say the no part is that I was a bratty younger sister, and I was very angry that she was creating such a stir and, you know, grabbing all the oxygen in the room and making my father cry and my mother pace the floor at night. And there went my college fund and everybody else's college funds, you know, to paying for this private psychiatric care that was doing no good. So, it was frustrating. I was very angry. These are not—I'm not proud of these emotions. I see them now, you know, as a 66-year-old lady writing about this. I look back on my 14-year-old self and I think, “What—why were you—?”

I mean, I understand it. I was young. It was a different era. But I wasn't as gracious in my thoughts about it then as I am now.

[00:13:28] **John Moe:** Years later, your brother Danny began having problems. What was happening with him? And how long afterwards was this?

[00:13:37] **Meg Kissinger:** Yeah, so Danny was the second youngest. So, Danny was 14 when Nancy died. And when my dad told us that, um, you know, if anybody asked, it was an accident, Danny's the only guy who abided that. You know, we all thought like, oh my god, nobody's going to believe that. But Danny was very embarrassed. And he did tell people that she died in an accident. And Danny was very—I think, you know, in hindsight—very fearful of his own emerging mental illness, and so he covered that up by a lot of bravado and some pretty immature behavior that ended up getting him in a lot of trouble and just denial with a capital D.

And anytime you would approach him and say, you know, “Are you sick and in need of treatment?” He would lash out, you know. “I'm not crazy, you're crazy.” So, he was very resistant to any kind of discussion about his own mental health. And you know, even then, John—even all those years later—you know, him not talking about his own issues, I mean, it just seems shocking to me that we didn't—we still weren't able to have franker, fuller, more helpful conversations.

[00:15:07] **John Moe:** Yeah. Why did you want to tell their stories and your family's stories in a book like this?

[00:15:17] **Meg Kissinger:** I've asked myself that about a million times.

[00:15:19] **John Moe:** It's a lot of work.

[00:15:20] **Meg Kissinger:** Like, wouldn't it have been—whoo!—so much easier to just not write about this? But I guess the storyteller in me, you know, really felt like there was an important lesson here. You know, I've been a reporter for 100 years—really 45. More specifically, 45. But most of those years—

[00:15:36] **John Moe:** Feels like 100, I'm sure. Yeah.

[00:15:38] **Meg Kissinger:** Yeah, most of those years, it was as—you know, writing about our nation's crappy mental health system. Which is not a system, as you know; it's a collection of siloed entities that do not work together. But anyway, I guess I feel like I've made a living out of asking people to tell me their stories so that we could understand the world in a better way. And I always knew that kind of to me, the sexiest story or the one with the most crackle was in my own family. That, you know, my brothers and sisters and my whole family, we are interesting, compassionate, funny, warm, loving people. But we're also very troubled.

And I think we're at such an age now where it's not like we don't give a shit, but we have the humility. I think we have the grace of old age that we can just tell it the way it really was, and hope that by bearing witness that will help other people who are going through this now understand and feel less alone.

[00:16:56] **Transition:** Quiet, thoughtful guitar.

[00:17:01] **John Moe:** Just ahead, some of the family secrets Meg uncovered when she was investigating. That's after the break.

*(Music ends.)*

[00:17:20] **Promo:**

**Griffin McElroy:** Throughout history, sirens have captured men's attention, enticed men with their feminine wiles, and fulfilled men's primal needs. The sirens allure persists—

**Travis McElroy:** Uh, they have not! Unless the primal need is “I need to be smashed on the rocks”.

**Griffin McElroy:** Yeah, smash me. *(Laughing.)* Smash me, Mama!

**Travis McElroy:** Smash me, Mommy.

**Justin McElroy:** Smash me, Mommy!

*(They cackle.)*

**Griffin McElroy:** The siren's a little—*(laughs)*.

**Travis McElroy:** Why do we do this to ourselves?!

**Justin McElroy:** Strand me, baby! Strand me, Mom!

**Travis McElroy:** Strand me, baby!

**Music:** “My Life is Better with You” by Montaigne, a bright, energetic song.

**Justin McElroy:** So, yeah, listen to *My Brother, My Brother and Me*, from Maximum Fun on Mondays. It's just like... that. *(Laughing.)* It's just like that, but more—it's just like that, but more of it. There's—there's just more of that.

*(Music fades out.)*

[00:18:06] **Transition:** Relaxed acoustic guitar.

[00:18:10] **John Moe:** Back with Meg Kissinger, investigative reporter who investigated her own family's mental health history for the book *While You Were Out*.

*(Music ends.)*

What are some of the discoveries about your family that you made? The truth that you uncovered through your very personal investigative reporting here?

[00:18:32] **Meg Kissinger:** Yeah, I learned a lot. I think—well, one thing that just rattled me but I'm grateful for—the sister next in line to me, my sister Patty, who is a brilliant lady. She's a scientist. She's an epidemiologist before that was the cool thing to be (*chuckles*) from covid. But she was—um, anyway, what I never knew is that she had such a reaction to our sister Nancy's suicide. She felt so much guilt—because Patty had been with her that day, the day that Nancy died—that she really suffered by not talking about it. And she ended up in a psych hospital in Milwaukee. She was then a student at Marquette University in nursing.

I learned this a year and a half ago, John. This is like—we are—this is my dear sister that we have—you know, I consider her one of my best friends in the whole world. We talk about everything. I didn't know that she had been hospitalized for really what I guess you would call kind of a breakdown. And here I had spent all these years later on, you know, many years later, writing about the mental health system in Milwaukee, never knowing that my own sister had been a patient there. So, that was one thing. And then, I learned some stuff about my uncle who died in World War II—that we'd always been told that he just, he died. You know, we thought it was in action, but it wasn't. It was a pilot error, and there was a lot of shame surrounding that. Which kind of doesn't really have anything to do with the mental health system, but it has to do with shame and family secrets.

But the biggest thing I learned—and this like actually sent me to like to the hammock with a bottle of sangria. I had to like really process this—was that on the day that my sister died, and Nancy had been suicidal for years. And the morning that she died, she had swallowed some sleeping pills for the umpteenth time. And my mom called the paramedics, the paramedics came. It was just—they were on kind of autopilot at this point, because there'd been so many suicide attempts. And they ended up not taking her to the hospital. They just pumped her stomach. And I think in part because my mom said, “Well, we'll handle it from here,” I think she just won't have to pay the ambulance fee. You know, they'd already been tapped so dry from all of her hospital care that my mom just said, “We'll watch her here.” And what I found out in the course of researching this book—because again, my family never sat down to talk about the day that Nancy died.

So here we are, you know, 40+ years later, reconstructing this day. And all of us now in our dotage, you know, sitting around talking about how that day went down. And I came to learn that my mother wasn't even there the day—when later in that day, Nancy slipped out the back door and walked towards the train tracks. And what I never knew is that my mother had left that day. Even though Nancy had just attempted suicide, she didn't stay to watch her. She went out and ran errands. And I think where she went was to the hairdresser. So, that was quite a discovery, and it really flattened me. And John, you know, I was so mad at my—I was so angry with my mother. Now, my mother's been dead for 30 years. So, how can you be angry at a ghost? You know, but it just really floored me.

But as I spent more time, you know, writing and polishing this book and thinking about my mom's own struggles and what a mother goes through when a child—and in her case, many children—you know, suffer from chronic mental illness, I ended up finding—I found myself just very forgiving of her and letting that go, you know, and just realizing that we can't—you can't babysit somebody 24/7 their whole life. You know, at a certain point you just have to

kind of just take a step back yourself. And I'm not suggesting that my mom set that up knowing that Nancy would come to the end, you know, that she did. But there was no sense in me like harboring anger or resentment. It's not going to change the outcome. You know, it's just life.

And the fact of the matter is, you know, living with mental illness is quite a burden. And there's a lot that's really hard and sad about it. But as I think my family would attest, you know, there's also a lot of love. There's a lot of affection. There's a lot of—we have a lot of fun together. So, that's what—I don't know how I just went off on a big rant there. But—

[00:23:42] **John Moe:** No, no. Well, how hard was it to get to forgiveness? And I mean, I think about people listening to our show and who might be in similar situations with memories of family members and of parents from a generation before this was such an open topic as it is now. How did you get to forgiveness for your mom leaving your sister alone that day?

[00:24:09] **Meg Kissinger:** You know, I just thought about all that she had been through in her life. You know, her mother died when she was young. Her father had depression and was really kind of a closed down guy. She had no sisters. She had to raise all of us really on her own. My dad traveled a lot for work. And when he was home, he was a piece of work. I mean, my dad was a totally complicated character. Hilarious and very loving but very flawed. We all are! I mean, if you really examine thoughtfully and honestly all of our lives, I mean, we come with all kinds of quirks. And anyway, the more I just got to thinking about—I'll focus on, you know, forgiving my mom—you know, she did so many things so well.

I came across this letter that she wrote me when I had—my first newspaper job was in upstate New York. I didn't know where the hell I was. I didn't pay attention in geography class. When they said New York, I thought Bloomingdale's and Broadway. It was not. It was seven and a half hours away in the hinterland, and it literally snowed on the 3rd of July. But anyway. Here I was, 21 years old, scared, just really—Nancy had just died the year before. I was really a hot mess, and my mom wrote me the sweetest note all about, you know, “Get some plants. The plants will be your friends.” It was just so cheerful. And I thought like my poor mom, you know, she had to be so many things to all of us. And, okay, so she went to the hairdresser the day that Nancy died. Like, she did so many other things so well. And I think, you know, it's just like I had to put it all in perspective and in proportion.

[00:25:59] **John Moe:** You're a very distinguished investigative reporter and a professor of journalism. So, putting on your instructor hat for a minute, if somebody listened to this wants to try to uncover some truths about their family, try to dig through the secrecy and get to what actually happened in their own family, what advice would you give?

[00:26:23] **Meg Kissinger:** Yeah, great. Well, our best friend is the open records law. So, the Freedom of Information Act—we call them FOIAs. So, FOIA, FOIA, and more FOIA. So, in my case, I had to be declared executor of my sister Nancy's estate. She died in 1978. She had zero dollars and zero cents. So, it wasn't like this was a big ploy for me to like grab, you know, her estate. But I did have to go through legal channels. I had to hire a lawyer, and we had to go to court, and I had to get my other brothers and sisters to sign off on letting me be



her executor so that I could have access to her medical records. And that was one of my favorite parts of this book was what I found.

Amazingly, I got my sister Nancy's medical records from 1976. And this is like in ancient times, you know. There weren't many records, but what I got was so juicy. You know, it was like the way they described her as a needy patient, you know, it was very *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*-y. You know, and this one social worker who wrote these notes talking about how my sister was acting out, so they put her in restraints and sedated her. It was really disturbing to think of actually, but I'm super proud of myself to have found the social worker who wrote those notes. She's now in her 90s, and I don't know, I just put on my little investigative reporter hat and just found her. And I called her up. I cold called her, and she was in her apartment in Chicago making spaghetti. And her name is Ursula. And I said, "Ursula," and I explained what I was all about, and she helped me understand, you know, what it was like in a psych ward. My sister Nancy was at a place, Chicago-Read, which was a public psych facility with a pretty creepy past.

So, my advice is: get the records. You know, follow the trail. I got—I was able to get my dad's medical records, Danny's—my brother Danny's and my sister Nancy's. Sadly, I could not get my mom's. I would have loved to have gotten my mom's. But anyway, whatever you can get by way of medical records, great. I did have to get the police reports of my brother and sister's suicide. That was another bottle of sangria on the hammock. You know, I had to read that, those. That was not fun, but I felt like I needed to understand it. Police records, legal files. My brother Danny had some big-time legal issues that I accessed his legal files. And then just talking to people. I found our old babysitter from 1961, and she was wonderful. She remembered a lot about us as little kids, and that was gold.

So, you know, it's not for the faint of heart, but I got a lot of comfort and a lot of peace in slow walking through what happened to my family. And you know, as I say in the book, you just can't fast forward grief. You know, you really need to process it. And it's never too late to do so. I mean, here I am all these years later, you know, finally coming to terms. Not that I'm not sad about it all. I will always be sad about it. But I got to ask a lot of—I didn't get all the answers, but I got to ask all the questions that I wanted to.

[00:30:20] **John Moe:** Mm. Yeah, they all say it's a matter of prepositions. You can't get over a grief or you can't get around grief. You got to go through the grief.

(*Meg agrees.*)

Yeah. What does the title refer to, *While You Were Out*?

[00:30:33] **Meg Kissinger:** Oh, so kind of a goofy story. Uh, when I was a freshman in college, I came back from to the dorm from Intro to Poli Sci. And of course, this is long before cell phones, so if you wanted to—if your family's trying to reach you in the dorm, they had to call the switchboard. And there was a little pink slip in my mail slot with two words. It just said, "while you were out", and the two words were, "Grandma died". And I was like, Grandma died?! (*Chuckles.*) Anyway, I ran down the hall to the pay phone and called my mother, and she's like, "Oh, yeah, sorry about that." You know, like I didn't think she'd bring like a grief counselor, but you know, Grandma was 84, and she'd been in bad health. But I

thought like, wow, you know, talk about shorthand. Like, can't we have a little more nuanced discussion about the fact that my grandmother is now dead? And I also felt like a little guilty, like, oh wow, like while I was so cavalierly out at class, my grandma kicked the bucket. So, like, a little guilt there.

So, I kind of felt like that was a metaphor for how our family dealt with heavy topics. It was just like, "Oh yeah, while you were out." And of course, as I later learned, you know, while my mother was out, Nancy died. And while my father was out, Danny died. And you know, if I want to get on a soapbox, I'll say that, you know, what we need to do is not to be out and not to be looking the other way. We need to be present, and we need to be in and helping and caring for the people who are suffering.

[00:32:12] **Transition:** Gentle acoustic guitar.

[00:32:14] **John Moe:** More with Meg Kissinger in just a moment.

*(Music ends.)*

[00:32:25] **Promo:**

**Music:** Suspenseful, orchestral music.

**Maddy Myers:** *The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom.*

**Kirk Hamilton:** *Diablo 4.*

**Jason Schreier:** *Final Fantasy XVI.*

**Maddy:** *Street Fighter 6.*

**Kirk:** *Baldur's Gate 3.*

**Jason:** *Starfield.*

**Kirk:** *Spider-Man 2!*

**Jason:** *Master Detective: Archive's Raincoat* for Nintendo Switch!? No? Is that just me?

*(They laugh.)*

**Maddy:** It's a huge time for video games.

**Kirk:** You need somebody to tell you what's good, what's not so good, and what's amazing.

**Jason:** I'm Jason Schreier.

**Maddy:** I'm Maddy Myers.

**Kirk:** And I'm Kirk Hamilton. We're the hosts of *Triple Click*, a videogame podcast for anyone who likes games.

**Maddy:** Find us at [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) or wherever you get your podcasts. Bye!

*(Music fades out.)*

[00:33:05] **Transition:** Gentle acoustic guitar.

[00:33:07] **John Moe:** Back with Meg Kissinger, who turned her investigative reporter skills to her own family after a career examining how mental health does or doesn't function in our society.

*(Music ends.)*

You've referenced this already, but you say in the book, “We claim to have a mental health care system in this country, but that's not true.” What do you mean by that?

[00:33:31] **Meg Kissinger:** Well, I mean—again, the definition of a system are entities that work together, and it doesn't in the United States of America. If you want to get clearance for mental health care—I don't know about your insurance company, but mine, you have to get a special clearance if you want to get mental health care versus, you know, a lump on your breast or a shortness of breath, whatever. It's that we have a two-tiered system for mental health care. And I know there's—you know, the Biden administration is working hard to get true equity, but it's not there yet. And even when you do so, insurance companies are very quick to reject claims. Physicians don't talk to each other very easily or well or at all. We're still in really nascent days of medication for people who suffer from mental illnesses. You know, these—a lot of medications aren't very effective and haven't really improved over the course of decades. So, there's a lot of really good people who are trying hard to bring good care to people who suffer.

I think we're also happily talking about mental illness more clearly. We're still not even really good about how we talk about it. We say mental health or mental illness, like our vernacular around it is still so clunky. I think there's still a shit ton of discrimination against people with mental illness. You know, I don't use the word stigma. It's a word that's often used with regard to mental illness. And—but I'm with Tom Ansell, you know, the former director of the National Institute of Mental Health. I think when you talk about stigma, that puts the onus on the person who's suffering with the mental illness, where really what the problem is are how they're treated by others and the discrimination that we still have against people with mental illness. So, when I say that there's not a system, it's because things still don't work well together. It's not coordinated enough.

[00:35:45] **John Moe:** Yeah. I mean, it seems like we have this growing openness. Like, we're not where we need to be in terms of openness about—open conversation about mental health, but it's certainly better than it has been. I kind of compare it to what we did with littering in the 1970s, how we all kind of got together and said, “The status quo sucks here with let's; let's, you know, clean up our parks.”

*(Meg agrees.)*

We seem to be doing that now with the secrecy around mental illness.

[00:36:14] **Meg Kissinger:** Well, absolutely. And shows like yours, John. I mean, I've always been a fan of your show.

*(John thanks her.)*

And you know, you make it approachable. I mean, the very title of it is wonderful. So, and really I'm inspired by what you do, and I think we need to—we all need to be talking about this in the same way—every guest of yours says this, but I'll just repeat it. Uh, you know, we just need to be talking about it the same way we talk about cancer and diabetes. And—but yeah, we still don't have that parity that we really need. And I think employers, you know, we're getting hipper. The pandemic has helped, you know, people become more empathetic and to really realize what it's like to be lonely and isolated.

[00:37:01] **John Moe:** Well, that's my question is in a societal way, we seem to be more enlightened about this kind of thing. But is our mental health care non-system—the framework of how people get care—is that commensurately getting better also? Is it getting more enlightened, or is it still stuck in the same bullshit that it's always had?

[00:37:23] **Meg Kissinger:** Yeah, it's probably both. You know, I mean, it's still hard to find somebody to see, you know. I mean, the phone calls that I used to get in the newsroom from parents just frantic to find help for their child. Or, you know, it could be husband or wife or, you know, parent. Whatever, their family member. And I'm like—I'm thinking to myself, “I'm a newspaper reporter! You know, I'm not a mental health professional.” That's how desperate people are. They're calling newsrooms to find out where to get help. And yeah, there's just—there is still not an easily accessed system of care, and we need to do better by that. The lack of practitioners, you know, especially child psychiatrists—you know, yes. Is it getting better? Yes. Is there more attention? Yes.

When I first started writing about the mental health system—I'll call it a system generously, for purposes of this conversation. I felt like the old Maytag repair man in those old timey commercials where he was the loneliest guy in town, because nobody was writing about this stuff in daily newspapers, but I was lucky enough to work at the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, where my editor was a real champion on this issue. So, that was my sole job was writing about this stuff. But nobody else was. Now, my class at Columbia University is jammed. We have so many bright, young, talented, enthusiastic future and current journalists wanting to write about this stuff. So, I'm jazzed about that. I'm very excited and hopeful that there are going to be—there's a lot more attention being paid to this.

[00:39:17] **John Moe:** Has writing this book affected your view on the “nature vs. nurture” question of mental illness?

[00:39:24] **Meg Kissinger:** Oh, god! You know, I mean—*(laughs)* sorry about that emotional *(inaudible)*.

[00:39:31] **John Moe:** (*Chuckling.*) I think I struck a nerve there.

[00:39:32] **Meg Kissinger:** Yeah, I mean—well, I kind of feel like either way, I'm screwed, right? As I said in the book. So, did this—is this genetic? Did we inherit this from my mom and dad? I mean, well, it would seem! It would appear! You know, I mean, again, how could so many of us be struggling with various, you know, issues when our parents—you know, I mean, just common sense tells you we were sitting ducks, you know. But—and then we were raised by those same parents who had their own host of mental health challenges. So, I don't know in my case.

Again, nature or nurture, it's hard for me to tease that out. You know, because there's no blood tests and there's no x-ray and no easy way to identify who has bipolar, who has schizophrenia, who's got, you know, flat out depression. You know, it's hard to say the ideology of it, and we certainly don't have a cure. God in heaven, that's what I pray for every day is a cure. But we are so far away from that. Anyway, that's a big, fat, longwinded way of saying no, I haven't figured out nature vs. nurture.

[00:40:44] **John Moe:** How have your surviving siblings been about the creation of this book and having all these family secrets just out on a bookstore shelf?

[00:40:54] **Meg Kissinger:** Oh my god, they—I love them so much, and I just cannot tell you. That's been the most miraculous thing to me, John. And you know, as I say—my very first sentence in the book is, “If any of them pulled a stunt like this, I would file a restraining order against them.”

(*John chuckles.*)

I mean, can you imagine having a sibling call you, having your brother or sister call you and say, “Hey, can I write a book about all the shit that happened in our family? And I'm going to tell it like in the most unvarnished way. And it's going to be really embarrassing. And I'm going to unearth all these humiliating scenes from our lives and, you know, throw everybody—the spotlight on everybody.” And to a person, they said yes, you know. And I just thought, woah, that is grace right there. And that is generosity. And so, I'm trying to honor that by—you know, I checked in with them all along the way. ‘Cause I was nervous. Like, I don't want to re-traumatize them. You know, my brother, Jake, my older brother, lives in a group home for people with severe mental illness. He has depression. And he's just like the sweetest, loveliest guy. I'm—Jake is really my hero. And I don't mean that in a patronizing way in the slightest. I just mean that he's a good, good man who teaches me a lot by his example.

And I called him just because the book is coming out, and I'm nervous about how everybody's going to take it. And they're just like, “Will you shut up? We're fine about this. We're happy that you've done this.” And Jake said, “Meg, you have done a good thing by writing about this. It was painful for us, but it was—it's important. And we're now able to talk about this in ways that we had not been able to before.”

[00:42:49] **John Moe:** Would you recommend other people do what you did and investigate their families and try to write about it and try to process it that way?

[00:43:00] **Meg Kissinger:** Um, of course! If they have the awesome support. It takes a lot and a lot and a lot of scaffolding, you know? I mean, I have this amazing husband, so patient. Oh my god. As I say in the book, you know, he does—he's not at all religious. So, he certainly does not believe in saints, which is too bad because I feel like he is one. Anyway, he really held me up as I was writing this thing. My kids too. So, yes, I think if you're curious about your past, if you have the stamina for it.

I mean, so—oh! I forgot one of the most important things. Ah! So, what I did, John, finally, finally, finally, finally, is I got a therapist. Now you're going to think this is insane. Here I am, 66 years old, you know, brother died—

[00:43:49] **John Moe:** I probably wouldn't use the word “insane” in this context. (*Chuckles.*)

[00:43:55] **Meg Kissinger:** Oh, yeah. Okay, well, fill in your whatever it would be.

[00:43:56] **John Moe:** Unexpected. Delightful. Yes.

[00:44:00] **Meg Kissinger:** Delightful. Yes. Enlightened. I finally engaged the services of a therapist. Now, how ironic is it that I spent the bulk of my career writing about the barriers to mental health care when guess who was the biggest barrier to my mental health? It was my own bad self, because I never—I went to a therapist one time, and then I chickened out. That's messed up. Like, why was I that way? I have no idea. Ego or whatever, fear? Probably both and other factors if I think long and hard enough about it. However, it shook out, I finally engaged the services of an awesome therapist, and she helped me really slow walk through this. Because I knew I was going to be unearthing some very rattling things. And I also knew that I might do something—do or say something—stupid to hurt my brothers and sisters and myself.

So, I told the wonderful Kate, my therapist, “Please, don't let me do anything stupid.” And guess what? She didn't. Bless her heart. So, yes, I would say if you're curious, go for it. But make sure that you have a support system right there.

[00:45:17] **John Moe:** The book is *While You Were Out: An Intimate Family Portrait of Mental Illness in an Era of Silence*. Meg Kissinger, thank you so much.

[00:45:24] **Meg Kissinger:** John Moe, thank you.

[00:45:28] **Music:** “Building Wings” by Rhett Miller, an up-tempo acoustic guitar song. The music continues quietly under the dialogue.

[00:45:35] **John Moe:** I really, sincerely enjoyed Meg's book. She's a great writer. It may have an effect on you, of course, reading this book. It may inspire you to start digging into your own family's past, start dragging some secrets out into the light. That can be treacherous and rewarding. You might run across people in your family who want you to cut it out. Of course, you may also discover a whole lot of truth that explains a whole lot of stuff. My interview with Meg Kissinger made me want to investigate my own family and write about

that. Then I remembered I already did that. My memoir, *The Hilarious World of Depression*, is available in paperback, hardcover, audio, eBook, whatever. I'm glad I wrote it.

Next time on *Depresh Mode*, life with perfectionism is far from perfect. Like, way far, far away from perfect.

[00:46:26] **Aparna Nancherla:** For me, my perfectionism, it sucks the joy out of things in that anything I do, I'm sort of either holding up an example of someone who did it better, or I'm saying like, "You could have done this better if you had started it earlier." Like, I'm both self-sabotaging and sort of self-prophesizing that anything I make will be bad, but then I'm kind of setting myself up to fail.

[00:46:51] **John Moe:** Comedian Aparna Nancherla is with us. Our program exists because people support it financially. If that stops, the show stops. Let's not stop the show. Let's keep the show going. To donate to *Depresh Mode*, to become a member of our show, to keep stories like this out there in the world where they can help people, all's you gotta do is go to [MaximumFun.org/join](https://MaximumFun.org/join), find a level that works for you, and then select *Depresh Mode* from the list of shows. It's just that easy. [MaximumFun.org/join](https://MaximumFun.org/join). If you go to [MaxFunStore.com](https://MaxFunStore.com), different URL, [MaxFunStore.com](https://MaxFunStore.com), you can find the merchandise store for all the Maximum Fun shows, including *Depresh Mode*. We have shirts, we have mugs, we have *Depresh Mode* sweatpants, which I think are hilarious. We have bucket hats, all sorts of cool stuff. That's at [MaxFunStore.com](https://MaxFunStore.com). Lots of cool things there. Hope you enjoy it. Be sure to hit subscribe, give us five stars, write rave reviews, that really helps us.

The Suicide and Crisis Lifeline is available 24/7 for free in the United States by calling 988. The Crisis Text Line, also free and always available, text "home" to 741741. Our Instagram and Twitter are both @DepreshPod. If you're on Facebook, look up our mental health discussion group, Preshies. Our *Depresh Mode* newsletter is available on Substack, search that up. I'm on Twitter [@JohnMoe](https://twitter.com/JohnMoe). Our electric mail address is [depreshmode@MaximumFun.org](mailto:depreshmode@MaximumFun.org).

Hi, credits listeners. I'm still laughing at the idea of scheduling stool samples for a dog named Henry Kissinger. I keep laughing about this. I'm—you know, like, I'm 12. *Depresh Mode* is made possible by your contributions. The show is produced by Gabe Mara. Our senior producer is Kevin Ferguson. We get booking help from Mara Davis. Rhett Miller wrote and performed our theme song, "Building Wings".

[00:48:47] **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*

[00:49:23] **Steve:** Hey, this is Steve, up in Portland, Maine. Just a reminder that you are so much more loved than you realize.

[00:49:34] **John Moe:** *Depresh Mode* is a production of Maximum Fun and Poputchik. I'm John Moe. Bye now.

*(Music ends.)*

[00:49:48] **Sound Effect:** Cheerful ukulele chord.

[00:49:49] **Speaker 1:** Maximum Fun.

[00:49:50] **Speaker 2:** A worker-owned network.

[00:49:51] **Speaker 3:** Of artist owned shows.

[00:49:53] **Speaker 4:** Supported—

[00:49:54] **Speaker 5:** —directly—

[00:49:55] **Speaker 6:** —by you!