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**John Moe:** It's *Depresh Mode*. I'm John Moe. I am glad you're here. You know, let's give Rhett Miller's opening music a week off and instead play a little bit of Open Mic Eagle.

**Music:** "WTF is Self Care" from the album *Anime, Trauma and Divorce* by Open Mic Eagle.

*(What the fuck is self-care?)*

*I think I get it, finally*

*It's like going to wineries*

*I think I kinda get it*

*Know what I mean? But like, what is it?*

*(What the fuck is self-care?)*

*It's like finding good smells*

*Or fine wood shelves*

*In my neighborhood, nobody sells that shit*

*So, oh, well*

*(What the fuck is self-care?)*

*I'm trying to make it smell flowery*

*I got allergies*

*(What the fuck is self-care?)*

*I'm in the spot, got a sweet roll*

*Trying to hold onto a tree pose*

*It's like seeing what my body needs*

*Maybe that's a lot of weed*

*Yeah, get a cup massage—that shit works, bro*

*Shit fucking hurt, though*

*(Fuck is self-care?)*

*(Music fades out.)*

**John Moe:** It's a good question, you know. What the fuck is self-care? Is it, as Open Mic facetiously says, expensive lotions or long walks on the ocean? I mean, there are certainly beauty product companies and certainly vacation destinations that would love to sell you on both those things and call it self-care. But is that just consumerism disguised as healthy self-regard? Can you purchase self-care? Is self-care located on the other end of a credit card transaction? Or does self-care mean something deeper, something less tangible, something without price tags?

This has been on Dr. Pooja Lakshmin mind a lot in recent years, so much so that she's written a book about it. *Real Self-Care: A Transformative Program for Redefining Wellness (Crystals, Cleanses and Bubble Baths Not Included)*. Dr. Lakshmin is a psychiatrist, and she's on the faculty at George Washington University.

**Transition:** Relaxed acoustic guitar.

**John Moe:** Dr. Pooja Lakshmin, welcome to *Depresh Mode*.

**Dr. Pooja Lakshmin:** Thank you so much for having me, John.

**John Moe:** We're going to talk about the idea of self-care and how to define it, but I think a lot of people would really benefit by hearing about your career in medicine. Because it took a bit of a detour when you were starting out down that road.

**Dr. Pooja Lakshmin:** Yes, yes, absolutely. Well, detour, I think, is a generous interpretation. So, thank you for that, John. *(Laughs.)*

**John Moe:** *(Chuckles.)* A hard swerve to the side.

**Dr. Pooja Lakshmin:** Yes, yes. Yeah. So, I—you know, here in 2023, I am almost 40 years old. I'm a board-certified psychiatrist. I have a private practice where I take care of folks who are dealing with things like depression, anxiety, ADHD. I'm an author. I write for the *New York Times*. I'm a professional person. But about a decade ago, I found myself seduced by extreme wellness and really went down the rabbit hole. You know, the context—which I always like to start with—at that time, I was in my late 20s. I was—you know, my parents are immigrants from India. My father is a now a retired physician.

You know, I'd done all the things that a good Indian girl was supposed to do. I was valedictorian in my class. I got into an Ivy League college. I became a doctor. I got married. You know, I checked off all the boxes, and I found myself—

**John Moe:** Everything everybody else wanted you to do.

**Dr. Pooja Lakshmin:** (*Laughs.*) Right, exactly! Exactly. Not that they were bad things to do. I don't want to throw my parents under the bus. They were immigrants. They wanted me to build a secure and safe life for myself. But I kind of looked around, and I was like, okay, well now let me try and figure out how to be happy. After I'd achieved everything. And of course, that didn't work, and I found myself really disillusioned with mainstream medicine and psychiatry. I was training to become a psychiatrist. And you know, I felt myself—you know, it was this very idealistic notion of becoming a doctor. Like, I thought that because I was a doctor, I would be able to fix all of my patients' problems. (*Chuckles.*) Silly me.

And this was, you know, back in like 2010 before people were really talking like they are now about social determinants of health and social justice and how race and identity impact the healthcare that you are getting. So, I was kind of seeing it as like, you know, a patient comes into the ER, and he's unhoused. And I can give him Zoloft, but I can't get him housing. Or like a patient, you know, gets discriminated against at her job. She gets fired, because she's pregnant. I can do psychotherapy with her, but I can't get her job back for her, and that's the thing that caused the problem. So, I was really angry, and I kind of just burned it all down. I blew up my marriage. I moved into this wellness commune in San Francisco that was focused on meditation and spirituality and female sexuality.

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I dropped out of my residency program. And I spent two years with this group kind of really going deep into alternative medicine and everything woo-woo that you could really think of.

**John Moe:** Yeah, you used the term “extreme wellness”. What does that mean?

**Dr. Pooja Lakshmin:** (*Chuckles.*) Yeah, you know, I think—when I say extreme, I think I'm pointing to the ways in which I left mainstream society, that I kind of really ran from all of the institutions that previously had defined my life. And in those two years, you know, by the end of it, I found that alternative medicine—that wellness has the same hypocrisies and contradictions as mainstream medicine do, and that you really can't—you can't run away from your problems. There's no quick fix. There's no magic pill on either side, in psychiatry or in the woo-woo wellness space. And ultimately I kind of had to admit defeat and came back to medicine. You know, I turned 30 in my old childhood bedroom. It was not a pretty or glamorous sight. (*Laughs.*)

**John Moe:** So, you dropped out of this organization that you were with and moved back in with your folks.

**Dr. Pooja Lakshmin:** Yes, yes. Which was a privilege that my parents, you know, were able to, that I had a family to come back to. And then I decided to come back to medicine. And part of it was sort of like making my peace and grieving that idealistic notion of what a doctor can do and also coming back as a different person. Because this time when I came back to my career as a physician, I came back knowing that I wasn't going to lose myself again. And that's where I started to really—that's where like the seeds of my book, *Real Self-Care*, really were planted. Because I came to understand that this was really about staying true to yourself.

**John Moe:** Would it be going too far to say that it was a cult that you were in?

**Dr. Pooja Lakshmin:** (*Chuckles.*) It has been called a cult. And you know, it's still hard for me to talk about it for sure. But from everything that I've seen since, I do think it's a cult. Yes.

**John Moe:** Okay. So, were you looking for how to help people be happy? Or were you looking for how to be happy yourself? Because one is outward focused, and one is more inward focused.

**Dr. Pooja Lakshmin:** Yeah, that is a question that I've grappled with in my own psychotherapy for years and years. And I think I still land in the place of both.

**John Moe:** So, then when you left the group, the organization, the affiliation, did that shift? Did it shift to a mission of like “Now I'm going to go out and guide myself, as opposed to being guided by this group”?

**Dr. Pooja Lakshmin:** Yeah, absolutely! Like I kind of was mentioning, I came to understand that you really can't look for answers outside of yourself—whether it's a guru, whether it's a juice cleanse, whether it's a new workout app. You know, I think my story is certainly extreme in the way that I kind of ran away from the real world. But I think anyone who's listening can think of a time in your life where you had this fantasy that there would be some new—again, whether it's like a bullet journal, or whether it's like cleaning your closet—you know, something that's really going to save you, that's going to fix all of the chaos in your life or the problems in your life.

And during that time, you know, I would say that I'm not an easy case. (*Laughs.*) You know, it was a hard lesson to learn, right? But there is no shortcut. And it was interesting, because around the time that I came back to medicine and finished my training—you know, I graduated in 2016, came on the faculty at George Washington University. And it was around that time that, in medicine, people were talking a lot about healthcare worker burnout. And there were all these kind of like resilience trainings and like lunchtime meditation and all this stuff. And I was kind of realizing like the worker isn't the problem; it's the system that's the problem!

(*John agrees.*)

And it's because our systems are not aligned with our human values, whether we're talking about healthcare, whether we're talking about finance, whether we're talking about, you know, the childcare industry. Right? Like, there's so many different places where this shows up. It's not just in healthcare. But I—as any geriatric millennial would do, I took to social media and started an Instagram account and started doing education about women's mental health. And that led to writing for the *New York Times*. And then that led to me writing this book, which is definitely a self-help book.

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The sub-subtitle is *Crystals, Cleanses, and Bubble Baths Not Included*. I hadn't originally set out to write a self-help book, but once I started writing, that's what came out. Because it felt like I was talking to my patients. And I realized that the thing—the place where I could be most useful is to help folks understand like, yes, the world is a mess. Like, the world is a shit show. Yes, that is true. And. And there's things that we can do to buffer ourselves and to make sure that we aren't taking on the residue of this terrible world. And that we kind of name for ourselves what's most important and, as much as possible, move in that direction. Like, it's never gonna be perfect, for sure. And there's gonna be all these reasons why it's hard, yes, and you fall off. But there are ways to sort of center yourself and ground yourself. And they don't involve a juice cleanse.

*(They laugh.)*

**John Moe:** Yeah. Yeah. You disclaim the—you know, there's an implication of disclaiming the essential oils and expensive candles. But it's all implied there. But you do embrace the term self-help book and the title of the book is *Real Self-Care*. What is the difference between self-care as we hear it used today and real self-care?

**Dr. Pooja Lakshmin:** Yes. The soundbite that I've been using a lot is that you can't meditate your way out of a 40-hour workweek with no childcare. Like, that's not how wellness works. So, I've kind of turned this faux self-care, these Band-Aid solutions that America—not just America, but globally we've sort of collectively decided that the individual is responsible for services and support that really should be coming from the top. And so, when we talk about things like meditation or yoga—like, basically like the current faux self-care definition is kind of like this consumeristic notion of like buying a good or paying for a service in order to make yourself feel better. It's closely aligned with the concept of hedonic wellbeing.

So, hedonic wellbeing is focused on the absence of suffering or the experience of pleasure, right? It's like the Starbucks like 600 calorie latte that's actually a milkshake, but they're calling it a latte. Right? *(Chuckles.)* That's hedonic.

**John Moe:** It's coffee, so it'll help you work harder for your employers!

**Dr. Pooja Lakshmin:** Right. Exactly. Exactly. And that's—and I'm not trying to—you know, for all the folks that are listening that like love their yoga and their crystals, I'm not trying to like demonize this. What I'm saying is that it's an escape, and we all need that escape once in a while, but you can't expect it to solve your problems. Like, you can't really expect it to change your life if you're just doing that superficial faux self-care. And so, the book is this manual for how to do the work of real self-care, which is focused on eudaimonic wellbeing. So, this is a different type of wellbeing, and it's not focused on the pursuit of pleasure or the escape of suffering. It's focused on meaning and purpose and naming what your values are and what matters the most to you.

**Transition:** Relaxed acoustic guitar.

**John Moe:** More with Dr. Pooja Lakshmin in just a moment.

(ADVERTISEMENT)

**Promo:**

**Music:** Exciting rock music.

**Jordan Crucchiola:** I'm Jordan Crucchiola, host of *Feeling Seen*, where we start by asking our guests just one question: what movie character made you feel seen?

[00:15:00]

**Speaker 1:** I knew exactly what it was!

**Speaker 2:** Clementine from *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*.

**Speaker 3:** Joy Wang/Jobu Tupaki.

**Jordan:** That one question launches amazing conversations about their lives, the movies they love, and about the past, present, and future of entertainment.

**Speaker 4:** Roy in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*.

**Speaker 5:** I worry about what this might say about me, but I've brought Tracy Flick in the film *Election*.

**Jordan:** So, if you like movies, diverse perspectives, and great conversations, check us out!

**Speaker 6:** Oof, this is real.

**Jordan:** New episodes of *Feeling Seen* drop every week on [MaximumFun.org](https://www.maximumfun.org).

*(Music fades out.)*

**Transition:** Relaxed acoustic guitar.

**John Moe:** Back with Dr. Pooja Lakshmin, author of the book *Real Self-Care*. She says real self-care has four principles.

**Dr. Pooja Lakshmin:** So, the four principles of real self-care are boundaries, compassion, values, and power. And the kind of maybe like a little bit tricky part of this is that since it's an internal process, you can do real self-care, and that could lead you to a yoga class. It's actually about like all of the decision-making work, the boundary setting, the way that you talk to yourself that gets you to the thing. And then once you show up there, you're experiencing it really differently if you've done that internal, real self-care work.

**John Moe:** Well, let's walk through the boundaries, compassion, values, and power. Because those are powerful words. Those are very evocative words. They're things that people can jot down in their notes in listening to this episode, but I think we probably need to go into a little bit of how they're actionable in someone's life to bring about some change that is meaningful and can help. So, what do you mean when you talk about boundaries in this context?

**Dr. Pooja Lakshmin:** Yeah. And I like, John, that you mentioned that, you know, someone can jot this down. And like for sure. It's so easy to take these bullets and say, "Okay, now this is what I'm going to do."

**John Moe:** "Remember to have boundaries. Okay!"

*(They chuckle.)*

**Dr. Pooja Lakshmin:** Right. Right. And that's not the goal. The goal is that there's not some magic rule book that you follow outside of yourself. It's more like—I wrote this book as like kind of a starting to have a new conversation with yourself, and you're the only one who knows the answers. So, I think boundaries is my favorite bit of this, because it's where everybody struggles. It's one of the hardest things to wrap your head around, especially in like our world where everyone's just like a workaholic and taking care of their kids or their elderly parents or—you know, there's just so many responsibilities. So, it feels like everything is nonnegotiable.

So, my take on boundaries is that a boundary isn't always saying no. A boundary is actually the pause. And then you decide yes, no, or negotiate. So, this became clear to me when I was first starting out on the faculty at George Washington University. My mentor took me out for lunch, and she was like, "Pooja." Like, it was my first day on the job. And she was like, "My piece of advice to you is that you don't have to answer your phone. You can let it go to voicemail and listen to what they want, decide, and then respond." And that was an "a-ha" for me, because I'd previously always equated boundaries with "no".

And no isn't always accessible, you know? Depending on how much money you have—you know, if you say no to your boss, you might lose your job. And that is a real consequence. Or if you're a Black woman in corporate America, if you say no, you're going to be viewed as the angry Black woman. Like, that's real. But the pause is always accessible. You can pause and then you can do the calculus of like, "What is the cost of no? Do I want to say no?" And you can think through and negotiate, if possible, asking questions like, "Oh, well, what is the workload for joining that committee?" Right? "Who else is going to be at this Thanksgiving potluck?"

*(They chuckle.)*

Right? Those are questions; that's negotiating. And if the no isn't possible, then what you can do is you can make a note for yourself. And you can say, you know what? A year from now, I want to be in a job where the no is closer, where the no is more accessible. And that's like something tangible that you can hold on to.

**John Moe:** So, I think boundaries is one of these things that is hard to—it's hard to manage for a lot of people, because there's an implication that you can set up boundaries for other people. Like, you can say what other people are allowed to do around you and what they're not allowed to do around you. And that gets a little dicey. But it seems like in your context, the boundary is a practice that you can use within yourself.

**Dr. Pooja Lakshmin:** Correct.

[00:20:00]

I like how you said that. (*Chuckles.*) It's a practice that you use within yourself. And other people, by definition, will have reactions to your boundary. You cannot control their reactions. You just can decide what actions you will take or what consequences will exist. So, that's one of the things I see often in my practice with patients where it's like, understandably, you kind of conflate the communication of the boundary and then people's emotional response coming back. So, you have to kind of understand that it's actually—there's two processes happening. Your job is to communicate the boundary clearly and gently and, you know, in a manner that is in line with the culture of your family.

And then the other person will have a reaction. And so, you can't expect them to take care of you. You can't expect them to be like, “Oh no, Pooja, it's okay that you decided you're not coming to Thanksgiving. It's okay. Like, we still love you.” They might get to that place eventually, but you can't expect it. You have to have somebody else to take your feelings to.

**John Moe:** Right, and you can't judge the efficacy or success of your boundary based on the response somebody else has to it.

(*Dr. Lakshmin agrees.*)

So, that helps with boundaries. That helps understand what's going on there. Let's get to compassion. What do you mean by compassion?

**Dr. Pooja Lakshmin:** So, the definition that I use for compassion comes from the work of Dr. Kristin Neff, who is a psychologist and one of the leading experts in researching compassion. So, she talks about compassion as the way that we talk to ourselves. Essentially, it's the conversation that you're having in your head all day, looking at that kind of inner monologue and paying attention to really the ways in which, you know, we're really mean and cruel to ourselves.

In my clinical practice, because I work with women, what I often see is this ping-ponging back and forth of a worry of being called selfish and sort of this internal monologue of like, “Well, I can't—I can't set that boundary. I can't make that choice, because then I would be selfish.” And then this kind of exalting—exaltation?—of being selfless. Right? This sort of like martyrdom, where you're kind of like giving and giving and giving and waiting for somebody else to take care of you instead of taking responsibility for the fact that you can ask for what you need and what you want.

So, I propose this path of good enough, which is kind of like this middle ground. Like, we don't want to be selfish, or we don't want to—but we also don't want to be selfless. Because what happens when you're afraid of being called selfish and you're constantly beating yourself up is then you end up kind of running yourself to the ground and being miserable and mean and angry. And everybody else can feel that. Like, it's not that—(*laughs*) people know that you are not happy with them, even if that's not what you're saying with your words.



**John Moe:** There seems to be some overlap between compassion or a lack of compassion and perfectionism here.

**Dr. Pooja Lakshmin:** Yeah. Yeah. I think that, you know, perfectionism is—it's another means of controlling. Controlling other people's reactions and also controlling your own emotions and your own view of the world. And interestingly, I think with perfectionism and compassion, like people that struggle with perfectionism—not that I would know anything about this—

*(They chuckle.)*

We often can be very hard on ourselves, and sometimes you don't even notice it! Like, it also doesn't have to be words. Like, sometimes it's images that you see or sort of like memories that pop up, you know? So, I think it's different for everybody in terms of the way that that—psychologists call it the inner critic—how it shows up. Sometimes it's like an actual sort of like, you know, mean things. Sometimes it's images. Yeah.

**John Moe:** What kind of image? Like, things that happened in childhood?

**Dr. Pooja Lakshmin:** Yeah. It could be like things that happened in childhood, or it could be like sort of a quick association between like something like, “I'm not going to make homemade cupcakes for my kid's birthday party,” and then imagining about, you know, all of your mom friends sort of like talking shit about you behind your back or something like that. *(Laughs.)* Right? Like, it's sort of like can show up in that type of imagery. So, I guess Freud would say that it's like there can be some fantasy there.

**John Moe:** Right. Well, Freud would wonder what the cupcake represented too, I'm sure.

*(Dr. Lakshmin laughs.)*

Alright. So, it's setting up boundaries for yourself. It's having the compassion for yourself. Again, this is—we're all building around the idea of real self-care here.

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So, it's focused on the self. What about values? What can you tell us about how that fits into this, this rubric?

**Dr. Pooja Lakshmin:** Values are, I think, the hardest one out of all of these. One of the things that I find—and John, I don't know if you also have seen this, ‘cause I know you speak to a lot of folks in the mental health field, but I find that when you ask somebody like, “What are your values?”, usually you get kind of a canned response. Like, “Well, I value my family. Like, I value my kids.” You know. And that's actually—that's not helpful. That doesn't tell us anything. Because a value, it's not a goal. It's not a noun. A value actually is a quality. It's something that you embody as you're moving towards a goal. So, it should be like an adjective or an adverb.

So, like if your family—if you name your family as your value, like how do you show that you value your family? Is it because the value is like connection? And you really, with your kids, are deeply—like, you give them a lot of one-on-one attention, you're really present with them. Or like, another person, it could be a value is maybe like silliness or humor. And that shows up in your parenting in that you inject a lot of silliness. You're the goofy person. There's lots of like, you know, kind of spontaneous, unplanned time. Or maybe it's creativity, and that shows up in a certain way. Right?

So, it's not about the thing. It's how you move towards the thing. That's the value, but you have to kind of come to it indirectly. Again, because otherwise people just kind of are like, “Oh.” You kind of go with the rote thing. Or the other thing that happens is that you get angry that I'm even asking you this question. Because you're like, “Geez, Pooja, like I don't have time. Like, I'm thinking about like all the emails I need to respond to, what's for dinner tonight, like getting the kids to soccer practice.” And it's kind of like, who has the time to think about values, you know?

But my thesis is like, actually, if you take some time to sit back and reflect and do some of the exercises in the book, it's not going to solve all your problems, no. But it will help you feel more connected to like how you actually want to show up in your life. And my suggestion is that that's real self-care.

**John Moe:** So, how do you go about figuring out those values for yourself? And is it—let me ask you this first. Is it aspirational or is it realistic in the moment? Is it me saying, “Well, how am I living with my family? How am I living with my kids? Well, I do this. I guess that's my value.”—or is it, you know, “Here's what I want to be. Here's how I want to be with my kids,” and setting that up?

**Dr. Pooja Lakshmin:** Oh, that's a great question. I think it's somewhere in the middle of those two things. It's looking at what you really like when you're most at ease. So, maybe when you're taking some of that judgment of is it aspirational or is it reality-based away and just coming from a place of like “when I'm at my most natural, what is my first impulse?”

So, one of the exercises in the book is the dinner party exercise. And I know this—I always caveat it with “this sounds silly”. I know it sounds silly, but this is the way to kind of get to these things. ‘Cause otherwise we bring judgements and values to it—or not values, but you know, we kind of bring our judgments to it. So, imagine you have \$200 to throw a dinner party for yourself. What's that dinner party going to look like? Is it going to be a potluck where each of your friends bring a different dish from a continent that they just visited? Are you going to be—or are you going to focus a lot on the music, right? Do you have a friend that plays in a band, and are they going to come and play? Is it going to be outside? Is it going to be inside?

When you look around, how do you want people to be feeling and expressing yourself? Do you want everybody to be like laughing and just like really kind of cracking up? Or do you want people to be kind of like immersed in deep conversation with each other? And with this example, it's really easy to recognize that there's no best dinner party. There is the dinner party that you want, that you throw. So, from that—that image that you have in your mind of the dinner party—from that, try and pull out words, adjectives, adverbs. When I was doing

this exercise, recently talking to another woman, you know, she noticed for her it was dancing. She would have everybody dancing, and she realized that like her word was movement. Like, the physicality. Like, actually being in her body, the embodiment of it, and then taking that as a value and saying like how can I thread that through my life? And it can show up in terms of like the faux self-care.

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The, quote/unquote, “faux self-care” of like your escape hatch—like, what are you doing for yourself to kind of get through the week? I would say that's like the 101 version. But then the 400 level is like how do you apply that to some of the big choices in your life? Like, who you decide to partner with, or do you want a life partner? Do you want to have kids? You know, where do you want to live? All these other things that I know are like very deep and hard questions, and people get mad at me when I talk about them.

*(They chuckle.)*

**John Moe:** So, I had started to ask—and I'll come back to it—if somebody's looking for a way to establish what their values are, there are exercises in the book which are definitely worth participating in. Is there kind of a truism that they could keep in mind to kind of avoid these pitfalls of, you know, maybe your practices as opposed to your values or your habits or your tendencies as opposed to your values?

**Dr. Pooja Lakshmin:** Yeah, I think like what we talked about earlier of what are you doing when you're most comfortable? Who's around you? What does it feel like? One of the other things that you see often in values work is thinking back to kind of like childhood experiences, childhood activities. And it's not to say that if you loved finger painting as a kid, or if you loved puzzles, that it has to be exactly that same thing. So, it's more like what was the quality of that experience that made it so fulfilling at that time?

**John Moe:** Right. Finger painting is pretty awesome. I have to say.

**Dr. Pooja Lakshmin:** *(Laughs.)* I have an almost one-and-a-half-year-old. So, we are not there yet, but we will get there soon.

**John Moe:** Yes, exactly. Yeah. Lay down some throw rugs. That's... be prepared to make a mess.

Alright. So, we've talked about boundaries, compassion, and values. Now let's talk about power.

**Transition:** Upbeat acoustic guitar.

**John Moe:** After the break, we talk about power.

**Promo:**

**Music:** Playful rock music.

**Dave Holmes:** Oh my gosh. Hi! It's me, Dave Holmes, host of the pop culture game show *Troubled Waters*. On *Troubled Waters*, we play a whole host of games, like one where I describe a show using Limerick, and our guests have to figure out what it is. Let's do one right now. What show am I talking about?

This podcast has game after game and brilliant guests who come play 'em! The host is named Dave. It could be your fave! So, try it. Life won't be the same.

**Speaker 1:** Uh, a *Big Business*, starring Bette Midler and Lily Tomlin.

**Dave:** Close! But no.

**Speaker 2:** Oh, is it *Troubled Waters*, the pop culture quiz show with all your favorite comedians?

**Dave:** Yes!

*(Ding!)*

*Troubled Waters* is the answer.

**Speaker 1:** To this question and all of my life's problems.

**Dave:** Now, legally, we actually can't guarantee that. But! You can find it on [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) or wherever you get your podcasts.

*(Music fades out.)*

**Transition:** Spirited acoustic guitar.

**John Moe:** Back with Dr. Pooja Lakshmin, who has been talking about the four principles of real self-care. Boundaries, compassion, values, and the final one we'll discuss now, power.

I'm so excited to arrive at power.

**Dr. Pooja Lakshmin:** This is the controversial one, because I think there's some debate about whether this is real or not. So, my conceptualization of real self-care leans heavily on eudaimonic wellbeing, which I talked about earlier.

**John Moe:** Can you spell eudaimonic, by the way?

**Dr. Pooja Lakshmin:** Oh my gosh, I'm so bad at spelling. It's E-U-D-A-I-M-O-N-I-C.

**John Moe:** Eudaimonic. That did become a spelling bee there for a moment, didn't it? Yeah.

**Dr. Pooja Lakshmin:** (*Laughs.*) Yes, yes. I know. That was really on the spot. I was not expecting that in this conversation!

**John Moe:** (*Laughs.*) Okay. So, as you were saying about eudaimonic happiness.

**Dr. Pooja Lakshmin:** Yes. So, that's where a lot of this comes from, on that research and also the research in psychiatry and nursing about the origins of self-care. But also, on the work of Audre Lorde and Bell Hooks—Black, queer feminist thinkers from the 1950s and '60s, who talked about self-care as self-preservation. And of course, they were using it in reference to their marginalized identities as Black, queer people during that civil rights movement.

My thesis is that when self-care is internal, we have the possibility of getting to collective action and collective change. However, when self-care stays commercial, then we don't even have a chance of getting to collective action and change. I have a couple examples in the book, but you know, they all are stories of patients who went through these steps—boundaries, compassion, values—and then made a different choice in their lives, whether it was to take a leave of absence from work, or whether it was to ask for paid parental leave, like there was a risk involved based on working through these internal principles.

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And then change happened. Change happened either in their family or their workplace. And I'm not saying that that happens every time. But it's possible when you move through these steps that you will show up differently. You will make different choices in your relationships, and it has the potential to enact change in the communities that you live in or the places that you work. And one of the things that I talk about too, is that—so, for the example of the patient who was—you know, set boundaries with her partner and ultimately kind of advocated for him to ask for paid parental leave. You know, her take, it was that it's not like she was trying to be an activist or an advocate. She was just trying to not hate her husband and not get divorced.

And I'm a very practical person. I think that there's value in moving towards goals that are helping you in your own life and finding solutions that help you in your own life. Because the chances are it's probably going to help somebody else as well.

**John Moe:** And that's the power.

**Dr. Pooja Lakshmin:** Yes, that's the power. And that when we forget, we forget because we live in this world that's so cynical and everything's terrible and just go on social media. It's a terrible place. So, it's easy to kind of feel like, “Who am I to say something? Who am I to ask for something at my job or in my family?” But I think it's important to remember that the only time that things change is when people do things differently and ask for stuff and come together.

**John Moe:** Right. Asserting power in the world as it stands, as an act of defiance.

**Dr. Pooja Lakshmin:** Yes. Which, to be fair, is always a risk and takes on different connotations depending on how much privilege you have and how much oppression you have in your life. And there's definitely, I believe, a responsibility for those of us who have privilege to give back and to be willing to take more risks. And I think that it's also important to keep a flexible mindset with that. There might be times in your life where you're down and out and you need help, and then there's other times in your life where you have extra, and you can put more in, in terms of taking risks.

**John Moe:** Reading your book, I had to highlight a certain sentence that I saw that really stayed with me. “Real self-care is not a noun; it's a verb.” Can you explain the difference between self-care as a noun versus a verb?

**Dr. Pooja Lakshmin:** Yeah, I'm so glad that you like that line, because I love that line too. And I used it everywhere in the book proposal (*laughs*), and I feel like some people got it, and some people didn't. Well, it kind of speaks to the fact that real self-care is this inside job. It's this internal process. It's not one thing. It's not yoga. It's not SoulCycle. It might be for one person, but for another person it could be something else. Because it's this process, the boundaries, the compassion, the values, the power that you're moving through.

And it's also not—like, it's an active process. It's not something that you ever can say is done. Because in each season of your life, you're going to have to keep reasserting boundaries and compassion. And your values change! Some values stay the same, but also values change in different seasons of your life. And so, you know. For me, for example, I've been talking as—you know, since the book came out. I'm a different person now since the book came out. And I'm sure, John, maybe you've experienced this too, because you've written books. On the other side of it, you learn things about yourself and what the book actually is and what it means. And then you integrate that, and then if you're doing it right, you make changes. And you think about what you want for your career or for your life.

And I'm kind of in that stage right now. And I think that in some ways our society could call that failure, but I think that that's actually growth. Like, in each season of your life—after each big accomplishment that you kind of come back, and you look at this, and you reset.

**John Moe:** What do you know about self-care today, having written and published and promoted this book—and congratulations on all those things, because those are all verbs, for crying out loud. (*Chuckles.*)

**Dr. Pooja Lakshmin:** Yes, those are all very fraught things! (*Laughs.*)

**John Moe:** Yeah. What do you know about it now that maybe you weren't aware of when you sat down to the empty page at the very beginning?

**Dr. Pooja Lakshmin:** That's a good question. I mean, I think I believe even more strongly that there is no one answer and that you really have to learn for yourself, that it really is an

experiential process. And even though I have these, you know, four principles and there's exercises in the book and things like that, on purpose they are very... they're more reflective.

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It's a lot of questions to ask yourself and think about, as opposed to me telling you what to do because of my own personal history and experience and knowing that it can't come from the outside. And so, I think I believe that even more strongly now—that success, wellbeing, self-care—what it looks like really has to come from the individual.

**John Moe:** And we're not saying that you need to get rid of all your candles.

**Dr. Pooja Lakshmin:** (*Laughs.*) No. I do not want you to get an influx of hate mail, John, about people complaining without their candles or their crystals. Or—no.

**John Moe:** I don't need the candle industry coming down on me, Pooja.

**Dr. Pooja Lakshmin:** (*Laughs.*) You know what? A good candle, when you smell it, it really can bring you into your body. It's about being discerning, right? And actually, the conscious decision making of what does this do for me? Why is it helpful? How am I coming to it? Are my expectations correct, also? So, it's asking us to—I think, again, this pause, right?—pause and reflect a little bit. And I think also not be so quick to judge and rush to the answer either. Because I think on either side of it, the folks that are really attached to their crystals and candles can get quite dogmatic. And then the folks who are really anti the crystals and the candles can also get really dogmatic, you know? And so, maybe there's a space for us to all acknowledge that it's okay for you to do your own critical thinking and think about your own perspective and what your values are, and then use that as your guide.

**John Moe:** It's kind of a—I don't want to say an anti-materialistic position, but it's defiant to the idea that you can purchase inner peace. It doesn't condemn the idea of the things that you can purchase necessarily, but it rejects the idea that that is the only path, that it's obligatory to whip out your credit card and buy these things.

**Dr. Pooja Lakshmin:** Yeah, yeah. I think it's a little bit of like a Buddhist sort of take to it too, in that everything is transient, and suffering is universal. (*Chuckles.*) And that there might be this temporary relief that comes when you take out your credit card and buy the thing. But it doesn't—it won't last.

**John Moe:** Because nothing does.

**Dr. Pooja Lakshmin:** Because nothing does. Yeah.

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

**John Moe:** The book is *Real Self-Care: A Transformative Program for Redefining Wellness (Crystals, Cleanses, and Bubble Baths Not Included)* by Dr. Pooja Lakshmin. Thank you so much, Dr. Lakshmin.

**Dr. Pooja Lakshmin:** It was such a pleasure. Thank you, John.

**John Moe:** Next time on *Depresh Mode*, Gabe and his friend Tim were close in college. Like, really close. Like, really, reeally close.

**Gabe Mollica:** We took like a million classes together. We lived together. We volunteered together. We did the Big Brothers, Big Sisters program. So, we like adopted a kid together. (*Chuckles.*) To be like this kid's uncles. And we'd take him to concerts and bowling and stuff like that. So, it was like a pretty unusual—I would say—friendship.

**John Moe:** Then, in one conversation, the friendship was over. Gabe Mollica joins us. Our program exists because people donate to the show. If people stop donating, then there is no show. If people keep donating and if more people donate, then we will be strong. Let us be strong! Let us keep making a show that can help people. If you've already donated, thank you. We really appreciate it. If you haven't done so yet, it's really easy to do. Just go to [MaximumFun.org/join](https://MaximumFun.org/join). You find a level that works for you, you select *Depresh Mode* from the list of shows, and boom. You're on your way, and you listen to the show differently knowing that you're one of the people who made it possible.

Be sure to stop by our merchandise store. The holidays are coming up; you need to do some shopping. That's at [MaxFunStore.com](https://MaxFunStore.com). We have—oh, we have “I'm glad you're here” shirts and mugs. We have *Depresh Mode* sweatpants, because you need sweatpants sometimes. That's all at [MaxFunStore.com](https://MaxFunStore.com). Be sure to hit subscribe, give us five stars, write rave reviews.

The 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline can be reached in the United States by calling or texting 988. Free and available 24/7.

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 and Instagram @JohnMoe. Our electric mail address is [DepreshMode@MaximumFun.org](mailto:DepreshMode@MaximumFun.org). We would love to hear from you.

Hi, credits listeners. The existence of the Millennium Falcon in *Star Wars* implies the existence of falcons existing a long, long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away.

[00:45:00]

Nice work, falcons. I'm impressed.

*Depresh Mode* is made possible by your contributions. Our production team includes Gabe Mara, Laura Swisher, Kevin Ferguson, and me. We get booking help from Mara Davis. Rhett Miller wrote and performed our theme song, “Building Wings”.



**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*

**Barbara Burray:** Hi, I’m Barbara Burray, from West Chester, Pennsylvania. We might not have met, but I know how you feel. And I’m on your side.

**John Moe:** *Depresh Mode* is a production of Maximum Fun and Poputchik. I’m John Moe. Bye now.

**Music:**

*I am figuring things out*

*Building wings, building wings, building wings*

*Building wings, building wings, building wings*

*(Music fades out.)*

**Sound Effect:** Cheerful ukulele chord.

**Speaker 1:** Maximum Fun.

**Speaker 2:** A worker-owned network.

**Speaker 3:** Of artist owned shows.

**Speaker 4:** Supported—

**Speaker 5:** —directly—

**Speaker 6:** —by you!