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John Moe: A note to our listeners, there is a brief mention of suicide in this episode.

It's episode 156 of our show, and there are some things I've done a lot of times and will continue to do some more. I'm just going to keep doing them! One of them is to say it's *Depresh Mode*. I'm John Moe. I'm glad you're here.

Transition: Spirited acoustic guitar.

John Moe: Here are some other things I've done before over the last 155 episodes, plus another 70 or so of the old show, that I'm going to keep doing. I'm going to keep telling you that examining your childhood, examining how you got built is crucially important. It's not about living in the past; it's about knowing how your present and future work. I'm going to continue to advocate for writing that stuff down, even if you have no intention of publishing it or even showing it to other people. Selecting memories that stand out, forming them into narratives, is a great way to understand what the hell happened back there. I'm going to keep on encouraging you to find what's funny about the humanity we all share. And so, I'm definitely going to keep booking Gary Gulman, who I've interviewed a bunch of times already but will keep interviewing some more, including here in this episode. Gary is a comedian. His latest special is on HBO, and it's called *Born on Third Base*.

Clip:

Gary Gulman: I said to my dad, "I really want to play hockey."

He said, "If you really want to play hockey, I'll try to find the money for you to play this sport you've shown no potential in it. Not only have you shown no potential in hockey, but Jews have acquitted themselves with very little distinction, to be honest with you, Gary. Son, go grab the sports almanac. We're going to look at the hockey hall of fame. We will count the Jewish players in the hockey hall of fame." And we opened up the book. He said, "Okay, ready? Done."

(Laughter.)

This was 1978. There were zero Jewish players in the hockey hall of fame in 1978. Now there are zero Jewish players in the hockey hall of fame. My dad said, "Just for a point of comparison, son, more Jews have been the Messiah."

(Laughter and applause.)

John Moe: Gary Gulman is an author of the memoir *Misfit: Growing Up Awkward in the '80s*, and he's a mental health hero to a lot of people. Gary has dealt with intense major depressive disorder, been hospitalized for it, was unable to function for a time, and had to

move back in with his mom. He was in his late 40s. He eventually did find meds that worked for him. He got good therapy. Now he feels a lot better. And he talked about his experiences in the very important 2019 comedy special—kind of a special, kind of a one man play—called *The Great Depresh*. It's not easy to make comedy out of a subject like that, but Gary is an unusually gifted person. Yes, I will keep having Gary on, because he has a lot to say, has a big heart, he's smart. And in the context of mental health in 2024, he is important. Unlike other times I've interviewed him, this time Gary Gulman was wearing a very funky hat!

Transition: Spirited acoustic guitar.

John Moe: Gary Gulman, welcome back to *Depresh Mode*.

Gary Gulman: It is a pleasure. Thank you for having me back.

John Moe: This isn't something I normally ask about, because we are an audio show and not a—there's no video element to it. But could you please describe the hat that you're wearing?

Gary Gulman: Oh, it is a bucket hat style. And it is (*chuckles*) made of various denim patches. And I got it at a store up here. And I knew it was a bit of a reach in terms of my style, because it's a little bit funky. It's a little bit brash. But I've committed to it. And more than any other hat in my lifetime, I've gotten compliments on it. So, I'm very pleased with the reception. But also it feels like something that's out of my comfort zone in terms of stylishness.

John Moe: Yeah. It looks like if a bunch of distressed jeans got together and decided to form a hat.

Gary Gulman: (*Cackles.*) That is a great way to—that is the perfect way to put it. I love it. Yes.

John Moe: Yeah. Yeah, and like you say, it's surprising for somebody with an accounting degree to be wearing a hat like that. But you've come a long way, I think.

Gary Gulman: Yes. No, I'm very grateful for where I've found myself in terms of fashion acceptability. (*Cackles.*)

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John Moe: Okay, great. The book is *Misfit: Growing Up Awkward in the '80s*. You could write a book about a lot of things. And I read this book, and it's wonderful. Why specifically write a book about growing up?

Gary Gulman: Oh. I mean, I think I'm more focused and I hate to say obsessed with my childhood than the average person. It's a wonderful combination of trauma and happiness and joy and nostalgia. And I just—there were so many moments growing up where I would think to myself, “I will never forget this.” And I always found myself in a kind of mode of

recording things as if I were a writer. I think part of it was just being an avid reader and knowing what goes into a book and always kind of dreaming or aspiring to write a book. I was well aware of what books contained, because I read so many of them. So, I set about consciously and subconsciously collecting moments and events. And a lot of these events were narrated by a kid who, at least sometimes aloud, sometimes in my head, I would say, “I will never forget this.” And so, I have this unusual memory for details and specifics that lend itself well to writing really any kind of book, but particularly memoir. I think it's really helpful.

And after coming out of the depression, I spent a lot of time analyzing what got me there and how long had it been going on and what were the sort of the triggers but also the symptoms that were on display early on. So, after I started to recover, it became natural that I would want to share this story. It's sort of a prequel to *The Great Depression*.

John Moe: Yeah. (*Laughs.*) Yeah, yeah. It's an origin story, I suppose. How would a sympathetic and wise and caring adult have described young Gary? Tell us about the character that you are in this book.

Gary Gulman: It's interesting. A thoughtful adult would say he is beautifully sensitive. Whereas the adults I had in my life—except for my dad, really—would have said he's oversensitive, he's hypersensitive, he's ultra-sensitive. Which just means that he's not great at tolerating criticism and insults and commentary. So, I think a thoughtful adult would say he's very sensitive, but also—and it's funny that I would just hear this in a book I'm listening to by Adam Gopnik. He talks about, I guess, 8-year-olds. He describes them as being over-aware and indignant. And that really captured sort of my idea that I was thinking about everything all the time. And I was outraged by what I was seeing and what I was going through and just the injustices of it all. And I think it—again, it lends itself to a writer, which is you're noticing things and you're observing. And then the indignation, I think, is really helpful in motivating the sentences in which you declare the injustice and the imbalance.

John Moe: It's a form of escape, really, isn't it? Like, if you can see the broader picture of how ridiculous your situation is and how ridiculous the other kids are and the grownups supposedly in charge, you can kind of rise above a little bit—even if it's only in your mind.

Gary Gulman: Yeah, that's a great point. It gives you some distance, at least in your head, where you can be sort of arrogant about it and being “this is beneath me”, and “how should I be treated this way?” But it also—and I think comedy was this great salve too—was that you could take these injustices and these traumas and in writing gain some revenge or in comedy you make it into a joke. And you think at least I am in control of the laughter, and I am sort of redeeming the situation by bringing some lightness and laughter to others. So, it's sort of an alchemy in which you're turning this garbage into gold.

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John Moe: Were you described as sensitive? Because I remember being a kid and being described as sensitive. And it occurred to me like, wait, sensitive is a put down? (*Chuckling.*) It's a pejorative term.

Gary Gulman: Yes, yes! I think that it wasn't until I really got ahead of my depression and adopted this sort of—or not adopted it, but learned to accept aspects of myself instead of deriding them or hiding them. And I was able to find, oh, this thing where you're sensitive has been really helpful for you artistically. But more importantly, it's made you a more empathetic, kinder person. And so, looking back, the people who were calling me sensitive and the way they would say it, and the way people continue to do this—I forget where—I think it was in a book by my friend Will Schwalbe, and he was talking about, in a book he wrote called *The End of Your Life Book Club*, and then he wrote kind of a follow up to it, which is called *Books for Living*. And he was talking about being called sensitive as a kid, and even later as an adult. And it was this label that people gave you to—any sensitivity was oversensitivity in their eyes.

So, if you were—people were calling him oversensitive, and he realized that they just mean you're sensitive, and they get to judge this and decide what you should be upset about. And it's just—it seems pretty hostile. And he put it so well in this book. And I guess I relied so long—before I had a lot of relationships and deep relationships, I relied on reading to kind of help me figure out how other people were going about living their lives. Because you're expected to figure out how to live a life. And religion and faith can help some, but for the most part, you're on your own, and you develop these personal philosophies and ideas. And it's very frustrating, because there's no right way to live a life, and you're constantly figuring it out and making adjustments. And so, the books were very helpful to me.

And that's why when I wrote this book, I did not take it lightly, because I have such a high regard for authors and books in general that I didn't want to—I'd been bilked by a number of comedians who just typed up their act, and I just refused to be one of those. Because it just—it felt like a betrayal to me as a fan of the comedian and then a betrayal of the art form of literature and writing and memoir.

John Moe: Was there a particular chapter in your life or event that led you to want to write about your early life? Was there like a pivotal anecdote or something that happened that really led to this?

Gary Gulman: I think it's just more of me realizing that my—I hate to call them obsessions; I'd rather call them passions. My passions are a pretty good compass for what I write well and joke about well. And so, one of my passions is just my reintroducing ideas from my childhood and examining them and sharing them. I find it's not a universal experience, my experience, but the overall idea of being a kid and growing up and going to school, there are a lot of—there's a lot of intersection, which is so hard to find in this millennium. But I wouldn't say there was one particular moment. It was just a lot of—again, I keep relying on other books. I was recently listening to a book about the making of Bruce Springsteen's *Nebraska* album, which is—

John Moe: Oh yeah, Warren Zanes.

Gary Gulman: And this man wrote a book just about that. But it was about everything, and everything about Bruce Springsteen and music and art. And it was just—I think it's called *Deliver Me From Nowhere*. Bruce Springsteen was saying about his childhood that it destroyed him, and it also made him. And I thought, man, I wish that was what I had written

instead of somebody else, because that's exactly how I would describe it. My childhood made me into the frightened, insecure, and overly cautious, and—

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—almost to the point of paranoia adult that I was for so long. But in many ways it made me into the compassionate, empathetic, creative person that I am. So, it's difficult for me to— difficult for me to say, “I wish none of that ever happened.” I just wish it didn't last as long. I guess that's my plea, because I wouldn't be, I don't think, as human or creative as I am. Because you figure out these coping mechanisms, and one of them for me was to get a lot of dopamine and serotonin by entertaining people either within my family or at school or on a sports team. And that made me feel better. It wasn't the answer, but it was sort of a byproduct of my severe anxiety and depression.

John Moe: When thinking back on your childhood and, like you say, you recorded all these things in a kind of mental hard drive—childhoods, like you say, last a very long time. How did you decide what was going to go in the book and what wasn't? Was it all about how your mental health was formed later on? Was that the criteria?

Gary Gulman: I mean, that was part of it. I wanted to be able to consider these situations that led to my undoing. But also when you write a book, you have to select stories that pay off or that can be described in sort of visual terms. It's almost like curating a—writing a screenplay. And so, I had to dismiss certain things that were difficult to describe in words or pictures. The beauty of the limitations is that it's actually so conducive to creativity. If you tell me you can write about anything, I won't be able to write about anything sometimes. It just—I get overwhelmed by the choice. But if you say you have to stick to this period of your life, and also these stories have to be on theme and topic, and they also have to have a—they don't necessarily have to have a resolution. But if there isn't a resolution, it's important to, I guess, point it out or recognize it or analyze it or examine it in some way and try to find what the—at least what the emotional resolution was to it.

Because certain things are—for instance, in fourth grade I had this great teacher, and I was looking forward to seeing him again the next year, and I never saw him again in the rest of my life. And it's something that's so—it was like a death. It was unresolved. And I remember I would—almost every day, I would walk by the office or his classroom and think, “Oh, this will be the day he returns.” And he just never—he never came back. And it was really interesting and a weird thing. Because I never mentioned it to anyone until I wrote the book. I never felt comfortable sharing it with anyone, because at the time, it was weird to have sort of a—what would have been considered a crush on a teacher. The teacher was sort of the enemy or the authority figures. And then by the time I was comfortable sharing it with anyone, it didn't seem as important or if anybody would listen.

I guess part of it is it almost reminds me of my—writing the book almost reminds me of the first time I went to therapy when I was a freshman in college, when I had all these stories of my life and just in the—you know, at that time, just from 16 to 18, basically. And I had never shared them with anybody. And it was such a relief. And that's what I keep coming back to regarding writing memoirs is most people will not write a memoir, and they will not even keep a journal. And I know what their reasons are. It's not that easy. And we're busy all the

time. But my regret is that I waited until I was given a contract to write it. It was so helpful to put these things down, and it was so helpful when I would bring these ideas to my therapist and go over them and get perspective and insight. And so, I'm brought back again to my favorite author, Kurt Vonnegut, who says you should practice some kind of art, whether it's painting or journals or comedy or whatever it is, because it helps your soul grow. And I think in the case of memoir and journaling—

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I think it is also a valuable component for maintaining or increasing mental health.

Transition: Spirited acoustic guitar.

John Moe: More with Gary Gulman about learning from your past and about food after the break.

Transition: Relaxed acoustic guitar.

John Moe: Back with Gary Gulman, comedian and author of the memoir, *Misfit: Growing Up Awkward in the '80s*.

Something that I learned through therapy, and I learned through writing a memoir, actually, because I had a memoir that came out a few years ago. I think you're in my memoir.

Gary Gulman: It was wonderful. I love that book.

John Moe: Oh, thank you. Is that what happens in childhood forms a lot of tendencies that you have later on—which is not in itself a good thing or a bad thing—where in the fully-formed Gary of today do you see young Gary? Like, what are some things that young Gary was doing that you're like, “Oh, okay, I'm still doing that in this form now.”

Gary Gulman: Oh, that's a great question! And I keep coming across the expression, “The child is the father of the man.” Or the I'm sure it also is the mother or the parent of the adult. And that really resonates with me in that it just feels so accurate in terms of what I've become based on my childhood. And I just know one thing—and my word, it's not that different. But I happened to see a cartoon from *Sesame Street* today on Instagram on, on an account called Muppet History. And it was about an alligator king. Try and find it, because I think you'll love it. But it was a fable, and it was a moral, and it was a song, and it was funny, and it was clever, and it was meta. And I realized that so much of my personality and my entertainment interests and my ideas of how much I worship at the altar of humor and cleverness. And just—it's beautifully drawn, and the colors are very soothing.

John Moe: Let's drop in a little clip from that *Sesame Street* segment Gary's remembering: The Alligator King and his Seven Sons.

Clip:

Music: “The Alligator King” from *Sesame Street*.

The seventh son of the Alligator King was a thoughtful little whelp

He said, “Daddy, appears to me that you could use a little help”

Said the Alligator King to his seventh son

“My son, you win the crown

You didn't bring me diamonds or rubies

But you helped me up when I was down”

(Music fades out.)

John Moe: Okay. Back to Gary Gulman.

Gary Gulman: I didn't have a lot of attention. My mother was a very busy single mom and was overwrought. And so, I was spending a lot of time with *Sesame Street* and *Electric Company* and *Mr. Rogers* and a show called *Zoom*. And I got—when I was watching that today, I got the same feelings I got as a kid—just an idea of a comfort and a recognition of this beauty. I didn't realize I was being taught a lesson, but I understood that this was coming from a place of peace and warmth and thoughtfulness. And it just—it brought me a similar comfort today that it brought me so long ago. And I just—I'm sure there was as much chaos and hostility around that show as there is around everyone now. But it remains such an oasis around the insanity. But there's just a lot of what I got into as a kid that I lost touch with through my depressive years, because I didn't have the energy. Nor the capacity for joy.

There were a lot of years of anhedonia, where I could have played basketball all day long and I wouldn't have gotten any joy out of it, and I would have seen it as a chore. And now I play basketball, and it's just—I mean, it's not exhilarating. I'm not giggling the entire time or jumping for joy, but I recognize this thing that has Zen components and also cardiovascular health involved and also this idea of sticking with something and improving and seeing improvement. Like, that was something that always brought me great joy growing up.

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And I think, as adults, we find what we do for a living, and sometimes we don't even try to get better at that. But sometimes it's the only thing we try to get better at, and it's just—I think we're missing out, and we're limiting ourselves. And I understand a lot of what kept me from doing that was that I didn't have the energy, because of my depression, and also it would have brought no joy, because of my depression. So, it was not a winner. But I do know that subconsciously over the years, my brain was telling me to get back to playing basketball like

I did when I was a kid. Because when I was a kid, it brought me self-esteem, and it brought me around people and kids my age and older kids. And I remember just being outside in the sun, which is very healthy, and sweating. And it was just such an ideal antidepressant, and I just didn't recognize it as that as a kid. And I was driven in a way to be competitive and get better than other people rather than just competing with myself and improving and reaching my potential, which I got discouraged and didn't do.

And I think reaching my potential has become a much more reasonable goal than fame, stardom, and those sort of sad ideas that had captured me when I was a teenager. Because I thought in very broad terms that that was the answer to why I didn't feel good about myself, was that I hadn't done anything great. And the idea that you have to earn your self-esteem is—it's kind of an American idea, or maybe it's just a human idea. And it just couldn't be more wrong or damaging. As Mr. Rogers drummed into me every day, it's just enough to be you. You're—of course, it sounds maudlin and preachy and sugar coated and Pollyanna, but I think it's basic.

John Moe: Yeah, that's one that I've struggled with a lot too—this idea that you didn't— And I think that's why I got into so much performing and media and theatre and everything else is that I could get that acclaim that would validate me. That, you know, if I got this many listeners or this many downloads or, you know, a standing ovation somewhere, that then I was worthy. And I've really struggled with that later in life, because I think, okay, that's fucked up.

(Gary laughs.)

You know, you were already good enough. You know, you didn't need to earn personhood. You had personhood. It was birthright. But then also it's like—but god, all that striving has gotten me to a lot of places that I'm glad that I'm in. And so, I kind of struggle with, well, was it worth it? You know, like to get all those things that now you want, get to these places you want to go and meet these people you want to meet, but be kind of fucked up as a result.

Gary Gulman: Yeah, it's true. And again, it's that idea of it destroyed me, but it also made me.

(John agrees.)

So, I wouldn't have had this drive or motivation. But I guess the thing is that we didn't have to pay as much for it, psychically and emotionally, to get there. Our self-esteem shouldn't have been on the line when we were striving for these things. And there are people who I think strive for things and want things and ask for things, and their self-esteem is not on the line depending on the results. And it's so freeing. I think Steve Martin in a documentary, and I think in his book he also talked about the relaxed mind and how creative that can be—that this mind that is not trying to see what works and fighting for achievement, it just creates. And it's a pure form of creativity, and the creation is purer and with less desperation on it.

John Moe: How do you—*(sighs)*. Kind of a deep question here; I'm trying to find the right way to phrase it. How do you live alongside all those childhood memories? I mean, now that you've written them into a book—and a lot of people write them into books, and people do

their own things. But it's—you know, there's wonderful memories. There are—you know, there's the issue of regret. There's the issue of remorse. And it's—how do you live with that childhood as an adult?

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And have you figured out how to do that peacefully?

Gary Gulman: Man, that is a great question. And you asked it perfectly. I mean, there is at least one point during every day—or I would say five times a week—where I just cringe. I cringe at something obnoxious that I said, or something mean that I said or—unfortunately, I never really feel that sad about anything that happened to me anymore. I can get angry sometimes. But more I cringe at the way I treated somebody in second grade or some obnoxious thing, a brag that I said in high school or something. And I then take a deep breath and say, “Well, you're not alone. You're not alone.”

(Laughing.) And I say this all the time. One of the most helpful pieces of philosophy to me is Alanis Morissette's “You Learn”, where she just says these things that—about sticking your foot in your mouth or biting off more than you can chew and recommending it. And it's true! And I guess it's a matter of me getting some perspective on failure and understanding how important failure is in so many aspects of life, in terms of my creativity, but also in terms of my learning valuable lessons about how to live and how to behave and how to approach my life.

So, I think—as I look back, a lot of times I say, okay, I made these mistakes, but I learned from them. And then again, reading—if you read memoirs and novels, you're seeing that people have made complete messes of their lives. And maybe they didn't get a handle on it. Maybe they didn't find redemption on it. But we can learn from that and say either, one, everyone fucks up. I'm not alone in this, and because they've shared their story in that, it makes me feel empathy towards them but also empathy towards myself and also other people that have dealt with the same things. Like, I'm reading James McBride's memoir called *The Color of Water*, and he's talking about being 16 or 17 and just being kind of a hooligan, like getting into trouble and causing trouble and vandalizing. And so, sometimes I'll see teenagers acting up in the neighborhood on the subway, and it gives me perspective. And I say, oh, this is just what teenagers do. And sometimes they're troubled, and sometimes they have just a bad day. Should we have condemned James McBride for the worst exploits of his teenagehood? Which was basically being drunk in public? He was capable of great things. Which makes me think that any of these teenagers, all of these teenagers are capable of great things.

I don't know if that's the right reason to have empathy. I guess it's just that we don't know anything about the person. We just see the actions, and we judge, and we feel that they'll never learn. And it's just something that's been going on. I'm sure if we had seen Bruce Springsteen riding his motorcycle with long hair around town, we would have thought that he was an aimless hippie or something. And it turns out this man has written lyrics and music that has made life justifiable for many.

John Moe: Mm-hm. Yeah. Something that struck me when I was reading your book and talking about your childhood is that you did have a lot of love and sympathy for the character you were writing about. You know, you had a lot of understanding for this—for Gary as a character in a book. It was written very sympathetically, and it made me think of inner child work—of the idea that like, okay, if there was a child in that same situation that you're describing, would you put them down? Would you make fun of them? Would you condemn them? No, you would be kind and sympathetic. You would love that kid. You'd tell them things were going to be okay, that this is something that you can get through. Have you done inner child work in your own therapy? Have you gone into that kind of thinking before?

Gary Gulman: Not explicitly, but my therapist now and my therapist in college and a therapist I had for a few years in, Los Angeles—when I lived in Los Angeles, a guy who was really helpful— We've spent a lot of time, because I spend a lot of time in my head, reexamining these childhood traumas and issues.

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And without exception, these men who I trusted and I admired viewed this kid in much more compassionate and generous terms than I ever did. And I found that so helpful. And I sort of did my best to adopt their attitudes towards my childhood self. And so, I would bring these things up. I would say, “I made fun of this girl when I was in third grade, and I made her cry. And I disrupted a movie at a movie theater, and it irritated the people sitting in front of me.” And when I was in my darkest states, those ideas were enough that I felt that I was not worthy of living anymore. It made me suicidal. Like, I was a bad person. I had done these horrible things. It was unforgivable.

And then these people, these objective people that I trusted were able to tell me that, “Yes, you shouldn't have made fun of that girl, and you should have behaved better at the movie theater when you were 16 or 17. But you were 10 and 17, and these aren't capital crimes, and I'm sure that person would forgive you. But more importantly, you need to forgive yourself.” And that self-forgiveness is such a crucial component in mental health, but also just in maintaining your self-esteem going forward. And it also enables you to be more compassionate with others when you're compassionate with yourself. But I think a lot of people lose sight of how we treat ourselves in our head or just in terms of how we behave.

I had a friend who was convinced he didn't deserve better than a single room occupancy dwelling. He could have afforded to live better, but he felt he was such a screw up that he didn't deserve any better than that. And so, he was punishing himself. And it just—and I don't think he would have even considered himself depressed or anxious or anything like that. He just had this idea that he wasn't deserving. And it's a very common human adult issue where we're not forgiving. We're not generous. We're not compassionate with our own selves.

Transition: Spirited acoustic guitar.

John Moe: Just ahead, comedy and food, comedy about food. Here's a little more from Gary's special, *Born on Third Base*.

Clip:

Gary Gulman: I'm going to use an analogy to clarify this. The tart is to the pop tart as the grizzly bear is to the gummy bear.

(Laughter and applause.)

That's a really strong analogy. And the irony of me coming up with such an apt analogy is that I flunked out of analogy school. And flunking out of analogy school is like—

(Laughter and applause.)

Transition: Spirited acoustic guitar.

John Moe: Back with comedian and author Gary Gulman, whose latest special is *Born on Third Base*. It's on HBO.

Comedy question for you. In your special, *Born on Third Base*, there is some discussion of Pop Tarts. You have told *Indiewire* that, at one point, you were a food-based comedian.

Gary Gulman: *(Cackles.)* Yes!

John Moe: Why was that?

Gary Gulman: Part of it was—there are different stages in a comedy career, and one of the stages is that nobody knows who you are. They don't have any context. They don't assume you're going to be funny. In fact, they assume you're not going to be funny, and you are required to be funny very quickly and in a way that the average mainstream comedy club goer would get. Which is basically just kind of your—when I first started, it was like your network television viewer. It wasn't—you couldn't be very—

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Not that I was capable of being anything but lower-middle brow, but the audiences were just not there for it. And then as I started to make jokes about food early on, I found that, 1) it was something everybody recognized. And 2) that a lot of these areas, at least the specific foods, my takes were original. So, that there weren't other comedians—because that was also a problem when I was starting out. I had this—and this was very positive. I had this insistence that everything I say be original and not— Because you would often go on a show where six or seven other comedians were, and a lot of them had already talked about dating or drunk driving or sex or pot or things like that. And so, I wanted to choose things that it would be the first thing—first person to talk about that subject. So, food early on was very helpful. Also talking about my elementary school. That was something that people could relate to and was fairly original.

But then I noticed there were other comedians who were talking about food a lot. And so, I thought, I don't want to be mistaken for them. And I don't want to be considered unoriginal because I'm also talking about the same thing. And by that time, I had a little bit more of an audience, because I've been on *Last Comic Standing*, so I could start to talk about things that were a little bit more obscure, esoteric. And that's how it eventually, probably in around 2013, I talked about this thing that I had written in my notebook like ten years earlier about how the states got their abbreviations. And then that brought me an audience that was into things like that—like sort of whimsical absurdist humor.

John Moe: Arcana.

Gary Gulman: Yeah. And then it was off to the races, and I could talk about anything I wanted. And luckily they were also a group of people who seem to be—I don't know whether it's an intersection of education or an intersection of sensitive people, but they were comfortable with me talking about my depression. And then that—to me, that was the crowning achievement of my comedic odyssey was to make this thing that was very difficult for me to share, to make that funny. And so, at this point, I feel like if I were to die tomorrow, I fulfilled some promise and some potential and served a purpose. And now I still try to have—I still try to make it kind of difficult in that I try to talk about things that are unusual or difficult to talk about or hard to make funny. But that's only because I've found just from experimenting that I like a little bit of a challenge. Not an enormous challenge that may break me, but a challenge where it's just not—it's not easy.

Like, you get tired of—if you're a baseball hitter, I'm sure you get tired of seeing slow pitches that come right over the plate. It would be boring. So, you like to see a curve ball every once in a while to challenge yourself. But so, that's where I am now. But yeah, I was afraid of being labeled a food comic, which I don't even think that's a thing. I mean, there's like dirty comics and crowd work comics. But I don't—

John Moe: (*Laughing.*) A food comic.

Gary Gulman: I don't think there's a food comic comedy genre on Netflix.

John Moe: Well, there's a story that I've always loved that when Weird Al Yankovic wanted to do a song, a parody of Nirvana of “Smells Like Teen Spirit”, he actually met with—I think you've called Kurt Cobain or he met him backstage somewhere and said, “I'd like to do this, you know, parody of the song. Is that okay with you?”

And Kurt said, “Yeah, of course! God, we'd be honored. You know, a Weird Al song. Is it going to be about food?”

(*Gary cackles.*)

And Al said, “What do you mean?”

And he said, “Well, you have so many songs about food.”

And Al said, “I didn't realize that I was a—I did food material all the time, that I was a food guy.” (*Laughs.*)

Gary Gulman: Oh my god, that's so funny. Wow.

John Moe: Yeah. So, there is a food genre, I think!

(*Gary agrees.*)

And you and Al were both in it to some extent. (*Laughs.*)

Do you ever—? What's it like to carry this issue of depression with you? Because you know, you made such a big splash with your special *The Great Depresh*. What's it like to always, to some extent, be the depression guy to people?

Gary Gulman: (*Chuckles.*) I think it's a reward. I really—while I was dealing with it, I always hoped that I would be able to come out the other side and be able to make it funny—

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—and make people understand what it feels like, and also make people who suffered with it feel a little bit better and less alone. And so, when I do meet and greets after my show or I sign my books or I read my messages, there are people telling me on a daily basis how the special and the openness helped them. Either it allowed them to talk to their—in some cases, they'll have a child who suffered from it, and they'll understand where their child was coming from and what they were going through. Other times, people who suffer from it will say I showed this to my family, or my wife, or my girlfriend, or boyfriend, or partner, and they understood.

And we've probably discussed this before, there's such a—it's very frustrating, and David Foster Wallace put this so well in a short story he wrote called *The Depressed Person*. And it's this frustration of the limitation of our language to describe how it feels. And people telling me that I made it easier to get past that hurdle—and I never believed I did it perfectly. I must've gotten close, but I'm just so grateful for that. And I don't—I mean, I'm not a... I don't want to overstate the value, but I'm so grateful that I was able to participate in this, along with Maria Bamford and you and Chris Gethard and Aparna Nancherla. Just this idea that comedy can be helpful in this way and that people now come to me, and they thank me. And some people will say, “You got me to do this, you got me to do that.” And it's like, no, I gave you a model of somebody who tried some of these things, and then you did all the hard work. I just spoke about it. And I was compensated for that in countless ways. Most importantly, it just makes me feel worthwhile.

But I really—I hope the people know how strong they are. Because it's—I always say, “Well, you got to be a good patient.” But that's not easy! It's not easy to be a good patient. Because just like any disorder, there's a lot working against you. It's not easy, and it requires so much strength and willpower and dedication and also that self-forgiveness. Because there are days you are going to stay in bed and feel terrible, and the real strength is making it last maybe

three days instead of nine or whatever it takes. It's just hard. And I happen to have a situation where nothing horrific happened. I didn't lose a loved one while I was recovering. I lost a pet, and it threw me off course for a while.

But I learned something from this recovery, which was that don't wait until you've been in bed for two weeks to call your psychiatrist. Maybe after a day in bed, set up an appointment and tell him how you're feeling. And that's something that I just—I waited until the next appointment. By the time the next appointment came up, I was so deep and so far behind that it just—it made it that much harder. And I had been white knuckling, and it just—it was counterproductive.

John Moe: I've talked with Chris Gethard about this. And when he did his show about his own mental health journey, he talked about doing Q&A's after the performances. And he stopped doing them after a while, because it was hard not to take on psychic damage from people relating to the work that he did, from people opening up about the worst thing that's ever happened to them and the scariest moment in their lives with their mental health. And I've run into this a little bit myself. Have you run into that? Where it's like hearing the darkest parts of people's lives over and over, although they're offered in the best of faith, can still take on damage for you?

Gary Gulman: No, that's a—it's a great question and also very interesting that you mentioned Chris, because Judd Apatow and Mike Bonfiglio were the producers on Chris's show too. And so, after we filmed my special, Mike reached out to Chris and said, "Could you talk to Gary about some of the things you've experienced afterwards, so that he's prepared?"

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And so, Mike was generous to do that. And then Chris was generous to meet with me for breakfast. And he showed me some of the emails and messages he had received. And he said, "I can't spend very much time interacting with these, because they're devastating, and they bring me down." Now, I get a lot of messages, but fortunately—and I think it's because my special did not talk a lot about any of my—it didn't talk a lot about my suicide ideations. I mean, I did mention it. And I did not, until the book, talk about my very—in retrospect—comical suicide attempts. One involved putting a plastic bag over my head from a toaster, and realizing it was a sleeve as my head emerged from the other side of the plastic. And it was just—

(John chuckles softly.)

It was something I was embarrassed to share but also thought was, at the time, so private and so upsetting and kind of embarrassing and heartbreaking to me that I wasn't able to share it. I saw that I could tell an audience almost anything, and they wouldn't recoil with horror or fear from *The Great Depresh*. So, I felt comfortable sharing that in the book. And so, what I'm saying is that the people who share their stories with me, there are some people who've attempted suicide or considered suicide. But it is not in that magnitude as Chris's was, so it's not as debilitating to me as it was for Chris, because the messages I'm getting aren't as dark.

But I, for the most part, have people telling me they got on medication or went back to medication, or they went to a psychiatric ward, or they went to ECT, or they're—

I get a lot of messages from psychiatrists and psychologists telling me that they either shared this special or shared the components of this special about ECT and medication with their patients. And I mean, that's a dream come true. I couldn't have written a better outcome for my suffering. Was it worth it in those terms? Yes, it definitely was. Again, I wish it was shorter and it wasn't as severe. But if you told me, okay, for two and a half years you will suffer; just stay alive, because at the end it will provide solace and a path to other people. I would say, alright. I would have to say yes.

John Moe: Okay. (*Chuckles.*) Well, keep up the good work, Gary. The book is *Misfit: Growing Up Awkward in the '80s*. The special is *Born on Third Base*. The guy is Gary Gulman. Gary, thank you.

Gary Gulman: Thank you! And thank you for liking my hat. It was—(*laughs*).

John Moe: It's an awesome hat.

Gary Gulman: Thank you. It was so nice to see you and talk to you again. And I probably say this every time we talk, but our first conversation on *The Hilarious World of Depression* was a major component in my recovery, and I'll never forget that.

Clip:

Music: “The Alligator King”

Take the crown, it's yours, my son

Hope you don't mind the dents

I got it on sale at a discount store

It cost me all of seven cents

Seven!

(Music ends.)

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

John Moe: My thanks, as always and constantly, to Gary Gulman.

We exist as a show because people help support it. People send in their donations. It's easy to do. If you've already done it, thank you. It's easy to do. Just go to MaximumFun.org/join, find a level that works for you, and then choose *Depresh Mode* from the list of shows. Be sure to hit subscribe, give us five stars, write rave reviews. It helps get the show out into the world.

The 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline can be reached in the United States and Canada by calling or texting 988. It's free. It's available 24/7.

Our Instagram and Twitter are both [@DepreshPod](https://www.instagram.com/DepreshPod). Our *Depresh Mode* newsletter is available on Substack. Search that up. I'm on Twitter and Instagram, [@JohnMoe](https://www.instagram.com/JohnMoe). Join our Preshies group, also. Swing by Facebook, look up Preshies, you'll find it. A lot of great conversation happening over there. Our electric mail address is DepreshMode@MaximumFun.org.

Hi, credits listeners. You should see the movie *Fashionista* if you possibly can. It's one of my favorite movies in a long time.

[00:55:00]

Depresh Mode is made possible by your contributions. Our production team includes Raghu Manavalan, Kevin Ferguson, and me. We get booking help from Mara Davis. Rhett Miller wrote and performed our theme song, "Building Wings". *Depresh Mode* is a production of Maximum Fun and Poputchik. I'm John Moe. Bye now!

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

Lainey: This is Lainey from Milwaukee, Wisconsin. You are so, so important, and I can't imagine a world without you.

(Music fades out.)

Transition: 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!