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**John Moe:** I'll be honest, usually the bio part of these introductions is the easy part. I mean, for the rest of it, I try to think of some unifying theme, some kind of underlying lesson of the interview that you're about to hear, a reason why you should be listening at all, really. I don't take your ears, your attention, your beautiful and often unusual brain for granted, so I frame things out. And a lot of the time, that takes a while to write. So, in terms of that for this episode—well, here we go. It is good for your mental health to seek out more peace and reduce stress, even if that means being not-as-famous.

Okay, well, alright, that part was easy this week. But the bio for the guest this week is tricky. The bio is a few lines of the guest's most notable accomplishments—how fancy their job title is, what TV shows and movies they've been in, how successful their band has been. Two or three sentences of that, then into the heart of the podcast.

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

**Transition:** Spirited acoustic guitar.

**John Moe:** See, the type of episode this is, this week with Chris Gethard, puts me at a crossroads in regard to the bio that I have to write. So, I'm going to give you two versions. First, the standard one that communicates that this is an important, famous person who you should stick around and listen to.

Chris Gethard is an actor, comedian, and writer. He hosted the *Chris Gethard Show* on cable television. He hosts the popular podcast *Beautiful Stories from Anonymous People*. His one-man off-Broadway show, *Career Suicide*, became an HBO special. It dealt with his depression and bipolar disorder, his suicide attempt. Chris has written several books, been in a bunch of TV shows and movies. He was on *The Office*. He was in *Parks and Rec*.

Okay, so that's bio number one. Now, having talked to Chris for this episode and listened back to the interview and thought about it a lot, I am going to offer this alternative version of the bio.

Chris Gethard is a husband and father who lives in New Jersey, which is right next to New York City, yet somehow far, far away. He works for a nonprofit called Wellness Together on a project called Laughing Together, which he cares about deeply. He has health insurance and owns a home. He's still a standup comedian, and his teeth are better now than they were. That part will make sense later on.

Now, these two bios are different, but they're equally true. See, Chris has made some changes in his life recently, stepping back to some degree from the constant hustle of show business to establish and honor some other priorities in his life and to seek better health.

**Transition:** Spirited acoustic guitar.

**John Moe:** Chris Gethard, welcome to *Depresh Mode*.

**Chris Gethard:** Thanks so much for having me. It's good to talk to you again.

**John Moe:** Good to see you. I want to talk about you, and I want to talk about this project that you've been working on. So, let's do the project first. What is Laughing Together?

**Chris Gethard:** Laughing Together is something deeply meaningful to me. I'm very proud of it. Basically, a few years ago, I was in this position that I bet you've been in too—where occasionally I'll get an organization that reaches out to me and says, “Hey, will you come speak for us?” And I'm always happy to go help. And there's a lot of opportunities to go speak with organizations that are about mental health. And I liked doing it. But you know, I quickly realized that there's like a little bit of a circuit and a little bit of a racket, I might almost say, in a way where I was going woah! There's this world here where there's people out here preparing talks.

And also if people want to go out and do it and people are using it to make money, who am I to judge? But I started to feel a little strange about it, you know? Then a few years—

**John Moe:** Like you were taking advantage of people's problems or something?

**Chris Gethard:** Or almost that—how would I put it? And it's strange considering how often I've done this. But where I was going, I don't feel great about commodifying my mental health story into a packaged, “Yeah, if you give me X amount of money, I can come give you a thing.” And there's people—

**John Moe:** “I'll tell you about the worst things that have ever happened to me, and you can write me a check.”

**Chris Gethard:** And there's people out there—just to be clear, there's people out there asking for amounts of money to speak at conferences and things like this where you'd sit there and go, “Woah! What?!” Like, it's kind of dark. So, I started becoming very selective. I wound up linking up with this organization called Wellness Together. They're California based. They place mental health services in schools.

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And when I saw that was their specific focus, I was like this is really interesting. And I wound up speaking for them at a conference. I'm proud to say, I did not exploit them, and along the way just became more and more impressed. They basically have gotten a system where schools can work with them, and they can get counselors into schools, and the kids can see it free of charge. And they do a lot of things specifically to try to get kids to be able to go in there in a way where it cuts through the stigma, especially if you have a family that's maybe hanging on to stigma. The kids are not charged for it. They actually don't prescribe medications, because a lot of parents draw the line at that. So, they say, “Fine, we don't even do that. But maybe in the course of working with our counselors, you might go see a doctor that is open to that, because your family will see the positive effects.”

All these things where I was just like, wow, this is really forward thinking, really cool. I wish that this existed when I was in school. And I wound up staying in touch with them, and eventually we came together and built Laughing Together. Laughing Together is basically—I'm of the background—you know, I came out of UCB, so I was used to teaching improv.

**John Moe:** Upright Citizens Brigade.

**Chris Gethard:** Speaking of another system that has been accused of being exploitative at times. But where I think—I look back and I go, “Man, when I was 19 and I was depressed, I was finding my voice through comedy.” I didn't see a shrink until I was 22. But I was going into New York and going up on stage when I was 19. And I don't think comedy is therapy. I think that's a very dangerous equation to make. But I think it can be very empowering. I think it can help introverted people find their voice. I think it can help you have an outlet to sort out things that are sitting in your guts and you don't have another outlet for. And basically, I've linked up with the clinical team from Wellness Together, a lot of very smart psychologists who specifically look at what young people need. And they gathered up a ton of research on how drama therapy and specifically comedy can be a really useful tool for certain things with kids.

And in a post COVID world, it's really pressing to try to get people making eye contact again, communicating clearly—verbally and nonverbally—getting comfortable with failure again, getting comfortable expressing yourself in front of your peers and not fearing judgment. All these things that comedy can focus on. And I've basically helped build a series of curriculums and started gathering a bunch of artists. And we've been going into schools teaching these workshops that are comedy workshops, and they feel like comedy classes. They feel like somebody—where if you were interested in an improv class, you'd be doing exercises like this. But what the participants don't necessarily know is that a team of people who are not comedians, but who work looking at mental health in schools have gone through and said, “Okay, well these exercises are focused on putting on a good show. These are less useful. But if we focus on these ones that are utilized to get people really connected and not dropping communication with each other, that's something that kids desperately need.”

So, we've been doing workshops with teachers and with students. I taught the first workshop in November of 2023. You and I are recording in early May. We've now taught over 1,000 people. We've been to six different states. And I'm hoping that it can keep blowing up. Because I feel a real sense of purpose with it, and I feel like we're doing some genuine good. Yeah, I'll stop rambling, because you can tell I'm excited. I could ramble all day.

**John Moe:** (*Chuckles.*) It's wonderful how excited you are. I just have a few questions about it. So, what is the root of what happens in there? Is it the interconnectedness? Especially, you know, because the pandemic screwed up our young people so, so badly, and we're only now starting to realize how badly. Is it just putting people in touch with one another and kind of satisfying that need to connect with humans that's at the root of this?

**Chris Gethard:** I think the human connection side of it is really at the core of it. I think the idea that these exercises—and again, it's not hyperbolic. I've now been into schools and seen it. And I think a lot of—if there's anybody out there listening, who works in education, my guess is they would nod their head in agreement that just after COVID, even in schools that

really have their act together, that have all the advantages, whatever social issues or difficulties a kid might be facing right now? Crank it up a solid two or three notches from what you remember when you were in school. If you had a kid who was cripplingly shy, that definition is now much more severe than you remember. If you had a kid who was unable to focus, turn it up. And I mean, I've been in schools working with kids who are 11th, 12th grade, old enough that they are approaching young adulthood, where—

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—while speaking to them, they literally turn their backs and start wandering, their heads up into corners and looking around, and I'm going, “Wait, hold on, is everything okay?”

And they're turning around and going, “Oh yeah, wait, I forgot we were here right now.” Like that's happened to me. And these are not kids who were assigned to this because they're problem cases. That's—if you have a kid who has focus issues right now, they also spent two years not talking to anybody. So, now they're just staring into a corner mid-sentence, and they forgot they were in a room with other humans. It's really severe. And that's not every single kid, but I think every single school has seen their versions of it.

So, when you think about the good side of comedy, especially collaborative comedy, and when you can—I was making the joke before of, you know, UCB, I was there in the days when it was nothing. I was there in the glory days. And I was there when I think it had some real issues they needed to reconcile. But if you look at its core, a lot of what was so addictive about that style of comedy is that, man, you look other people in the eye the whole time. You're being trained to say things clearly in a way that lands. You're being trained to be an active listener and give someone else the signal that you know how to pick up what they're putting down. And those are all just very basic things that happen in improv.

And I was largely done with improv. I've not improvised much in the past 10 to 15 years. It was something of my past, but it's really come roaring back to life. 'Cause it has such a profound positive effect with students and also with teachers. I've also seen some situations with teachers. I mean, I taught a workshop myself about six weeks ago where we were working with a group of students. This was at a high school that was a trade high school. So, they had no arts presence. I was told there were no music classes, no theatre in the school. And about 20 minutes into it, one of the teachers who was there stepped out, because she started crying. And I was a little concerned when I heard that, but then I was told that there was one student in the room that was so cripplingly shy that she was really rooting for, and he came to life when it was in the context of comedy. Which feels fun and feels low pressure. All of a sudden, this kid was connecting with students, getting laughs, making eye contact, letting his guard down, his body language changed, and she started crying, because it was a kid she's really been rooting for. And all of a sudden, she saw the defense mechanisms melt. So, I'm not claiming that happens 100% of the time, but it's pretty profound the one time it does. And it's cool! It feels good. It feels good to do it.

**John Moe:** So, what actually happens? Like, do you give them a premise for a scene? Or is it suggestions from the audience and do an improv? Is it a freeze tag thing? What exactly kind of comedy are you doing?

**Chris Gethard:** A lot of it is starting with, you know, the stuff that happens on day one or two of an improv class. Let's do some exercises where we're passing a clap around or building shapes with our bodies, some of these very silly-feeling things.

And I'll be frank, doing them with a group of 30-year-olds who have all come from professionals, yes, can feel really silly. But doing it with a group of 14-year-olds, all of a sudden you realize, oh, they're working together as a group collaboratively. And I generally do a few things like that are some of the more abstract building block, like hey, let's look at nonverbal communication. Let's look at how powerful eye contact is. Let's look at how, you know, when something quote/unquote “gets messed up”, how you have a choice to either call out and start bickering about it—which happens all the time with kids—or you can figure out how to fix it on your feet as a group and move on. And it actually works out again. And we can worry less about that.

And I do about, you know, half the workshop will be focused on some of those building block things, and then a few exercises that start to feel like, yeah, let's do some scenes where you're getting a suggestion, but keep in mind all the other things we've looked at. And a lot of it is just sort of on the premise of if you view a lot of what goes into comedy outside of laughs. So much of it is about how do you make sure your ideas are getting across clearly, so that the audience understands? Any good standup, I think, will tell you: so much of honing a joke is not the funny part. Because you know the funny part! That's why it occurred to you. It's how do I get this lean and mean so that it lands, and they don't have to think too hard to figure out what I'm saying? So, those clear communication sides of it.

When it comes to the improv techniques, the idea of feeling connected to a larger group. For kids who spent two years learning remotely and who are very, very used to learning off devices, this idea of, “Hey, shake all that off and connect with these other eight or nine people” even for 15 minutes at a time, feels really—

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There is some adrenaline and some dopamine that they get out of that, and it's really cool to be there facilitating that and realizing, oh. A friend of mine who's teaching for the program said it best, he was like, “I used to teach improv and think that a lot of the technique was getting adults to remember how to play like kids. And we are sadly now in an era where we sort of need to remind kids how to play like kids.” And some of it's as basic as that. Just act like kids. Be goofy, be silly, mess around together, fail, it's okay. You'd be shocked how often you do these things, John, where they don't matter. They're very silly building block exercises, but the second they fail, you can see that everyone has this body language like the worst thing has just happened. And then you're the one who gets to remind them this doesn't matter. I'm asking you to pass an invisible ball around a circle. It doesn't matter. You're allowed to fail. And you realize how rarely kids hear that, that failure is a part of experimentation. Like, no, they're used to being raised in a way—

**John Moe:** It's not going on your transcript.

**Chris Gethard:** Exactly. This is not a test score. Your parents are not going to call and yell at your teacher if you go on with a B- in the invisible ball exercise. Some things in life

joyously do not matter that much! Let's have fun with that. Experiment. There's no right answer. There's no wrong answer. You're only failing when you let the people watching know you feel like you failed. So, just choose to not view it as failure and find something fun in the wake of what could have been failure. Like, these are very basic things from a comedy class, and to a lot of kids right now, you sort of feel like you're handing them the keys to a car and going, "You go, drive up and down the highway. Hit the gas, see what happens. Enjoy it. Enjoy the feeling of it."

**John Moe:** Yeah, I mean, I think back to being a kid. And in my case, being a kid dealing with depression and not even knowing that I was dealing with depression, just thinking I was a weirdo—and I became such a comedy nerd. Like, my whole life—especially as a kid, but then it just kind of stuck ever since. And I think part of what comedy does is it kind of loosens up your mind to different perspectives, to different potential realities and different options and different possibilities. And it kind of—especially for something like depression, when you're in such a rut and the world becomes so small and enclosed, it busts down a lot of walls.

And that must be really great for young people today, whether they're dealing with depression or not, just dealing with the world that we've placed them in.

**Chris Gethard:** 100%. And I think if a laugh is anything it's shared, right? It's someone sends something out, and once it is received, the receiver can sometimes laugh. And it's not voluntary. It's a gut thing. And we've all had that experience with movies and TV. And those of us who enjoy going to live comedy or doing live comedy know that when you're in the room, that communal feeling of "we're all sharing in this moment". We're all laughing our asses off right now. And part of what's joyous about it is not even necessarily the joke itself or the moment itself. It's the recognition that this is happening, and we're opting into being a part of it.

How many times have you been involved in live comedy, either as a performer yourself or in a room, where you go, "If I tried to explain this to anyone else who wasn't here, they'd sit there and go, 'I don't—what are you talking about?'" You wouldn't go and pitch it to Lorne Michaels, you know? But you were there. You were a part of it. You know for a fact that everybody was flipping out, that something happened in that room. I'm trying to take that feeling that I'm used to from comedy clubs and say, "Can we bring it to a school?" Especially, like I mentioned, a school that has no arts presence, where this is a tech school. Some of these kids are going into the trades, some of these kids—and then some of them, they tested into this. It was a New York City school. It was where they landed.

You sit there, you go—if you can bring that idea of joyous, communal connection—well, the laughs are one thing, but if comedy can teach you how to suss out those moments of joy and connection, that's really needed. That's really needed. Whether it's laughs or not, that idea that you can connect and have these shared moments, it's a beautiful thing.

**Transition:** Spirited acoustic guitar.

**John Moe:** Back with more from Chris Gethard—comedian, writer, actor, educator—in just a moment.

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I want you to show some respect to your ideas. That's right. Those ideas you come up with for a business or an artistic project or some kind of thing that you want to make to interact with the world. Respect those ideas that come from your mind. Give the ideas their due. Nurture them and give them a chance, because you have the power to build things.

(ADVERTISEMENT)

**Transition:** Gentle acoustic guitar.

**John Moe:** We are back talking to Chris Gethard.

I gotta say, since the last time I interviewed you about mental health—that was 2018.

(Chris agrees.)

You seem so much more grounded and driven and purposeful. And—not that you were not those things before, but it's curious that you were doing standup yourself. You were touring around doing one person shows. You know, you were doing—you had an HBO special, and you're—you know, you're living such a different life now. How is Chris today different than Chris when, you know—say in 2018, a few years ago, when you were like a touring comedian and performer?

**Chris Gethard:** I mean, I still tour. I still do that. I'm about to go out on tour with Eddie Pepitone. So, we're gonna have a real good mentally-ill-guys tour. Definitely real unhinged guys tour.

**John Moe:** (Chuckles.) Perfect.

**Chris Gethard:** But 2018, I was at the end of this two-year hot streak. I mean, I was hosting a show that was on cable. My HBO special aired in 2017. I had a book deal. I was in Mike Birbiglia's movie, *Don't Think Twice*, that blew up. I had a podcast, *Beautiful Anonymous*, that I still do today that got featured on *This American Life* and exploded. It was this two years where it was all eyes on me. And every dream I had came true, and I probably exceeded them. And the sad thing that so many of us realize is it didn't—going out and proving all that stuff didn't put out the fires in the way I always assumed they would. And sometimes people ask me—

**John Moe:** Couldn't achieve your way out of the fires?

**Chris Gethard:** It turns out. And also, I'll never forget, I got together—I haven't done a great job keeping in touch with my high school and college friends. And I remember once going—I live back in Jersey now. We moved back in 2020, and I got together with a bunch of guys from high school. And we were all hanging out in the backyard. And in my mind, I was like—I went out and went to New York and did the comedy thing. And it was like to like

prove that kids like us weren't pieces of shit, man. Like, prove that me and my friends who were this like crew of kind of weird, depressed kids—like, everybody was wrong about us. But then I'm in this backyard going none of them have been sitting around viewing me as being on this hero's journey. They've been working jobs, and having kids, and getting married and divorced, and living lives. And I'm the only one who had it in my head.

And that's all ego, and ego is not really gonna solve your problems. And in fact, I needed to learn how to unwrap myself from ego. Because, you know, I think about my TV show. And I sit there, and I go, “Objectively, in 2024, my life is not as hip, it's not as cool.” I'm not a Brooklyn tastemaker like I was when I was hosting my public access show. I'm kind of a boring dad in New Jersey who works on his lawn a lot. But you know what? I had my TV show when there was all this press about me and there were posters on the New York City subways with my face on them. And it's objectively cool, but it also caused me so much stress that two different times in the writer's room—I was grinding my teeth so hard all the time from stress—

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—that two different times, teeth fell out of my head in the writers' room of that show. So, is that a happier life? To be grinding your teeth out of your head? And you're eating so much sugar, because you need constant dopamine that you need to stay awake, and you're being pulled in so many different directions that it's constant sugar and grinding your teeth? And then your dentist is like, “What the hell's going on?” That's not a happier life by anybody's objective stretch.

So, I'm happy to hear you say that I seem more grounded and more purposeful. I sometimes sit around and have those ego moments and go, “Man, I was on a track where everything in my life was generally pretty cool. And now I feel like that's passed me by.” And sometimes that messes with my ego. But then I also take a breath and I go, “I live in a peaceful place. I have a son who I'm so proud of and so obsessed with playing with. And teeth aren't falling out of my head. My life is a lot more boring, but all of my teeth are safely planted in my skull now.” And I think that that's a pretty good trade for a guy who's coming up on 44.

And there's probably a handful of choices I would have made differently along the way, but overall, I feel good. And it's nice to be able to say that very genuinely. I also—and I am not someone who thinks getting off medication is any sort of victory, but I haven't been—I feel like I'm more at peace and tranquil than I've ever been. I also haven't been medicated in a couple years. If I ever need medication again, I will go back without any sense of stigma. A lot of it was that my medications had sort of become placebo, and my shrink was trying to find a new one for me and said, “Let's just see what happens if you just don't have them for a while.” And it turned out that everything was pretty even keeled. So, yeah, my life's demonstrably less cool, but exponentially more peaceful.

**John Moe:** And so, in terms of your depression, in terms of the anxiety, these other things that you've struggled with, are they gone? Or are they just really well managed?

**Chris Gethard:** I would say they're well managed. I'd never be—considering how deep things got for me at times and how in over my head I was, I'd be an outright fool to say it's



gone. I think I've structured my life in a way—and I've prioritized things differently, where some of it is managed... through priorities being different. Maybe even giving up on certain things in a way that offered release. And also simple things of “Do I want to continue being an actor?” Which is a good, cushy life and good for the ego, but often means that I have to leave my family to go to Vancouver and Los Angeles, two cities I don't live in? I think I'd rather hang out with my wife and my kid. And that might mess with my ego, but it certainly increases my happiness, you know? Like, do I want to stay up all night doing standup shows and go do three or four sets three or four nights a week and feel like, you know, that hustle culture of like, “If I'm not doing as much as I can, then other people are going to get better than me, and it's this competitive thing”? Or do I want to maybe go out once a week and do two or three sets and sleep a lot more and be a little more present in the morning for the people who love me?

Some of these were things where I had to take a deep breath and swallow a lot of ego and say, “It's okay if you don't hustle as hard as other standups. They're in their 20s; you're in your 40s. They have it in them to stay up late. Go get some sleep. Your wife doesn't need you being grumpy. Your kid doesn't need you being exhausted. Stop worrying about those things, and worry about these other things.” And some of that's victory.

And some people will listen to that and go, “It sounds sad! It sounds like you gave up on your dreams.” And that's an okay perspective on it. And I've had those days too. But overall, I feel like the priorities needed to shift. And I'm glad they did.

**John Moe:** Do you ever run into that kind of hustle, “got to achieve the next thing, got to be self-promoting at all times”—do you run into that mentality with your Laughing Together project? Like, it needs to get incredibly successful. It needs to be the most popular program out there.

**Chris Gethard:** (*Chuckles.*) It is funny you say that, because I don't feel any need for it to be like, “I need to stomp any other arts-focused mental health initiative!” That's like—that would be a silly—that would be a dark level of competitive, right?

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“I need to find the music therapists in this world and stomp them into the ground with my comedy!”

**John Moe:** Kick their asses! (*Chuckles.*)

**Chris Gethard:** But you know, the—(*chuckles*) yeah. “Who are these people out here?! Let me kick the ass of these people doing school assemblies! My workshop shall reign supreme!” But what I—you know what does? It freaked me out, because I'm like—man, the sad state of the world is that the way people are going to find out about it and the way that it's going to catch on is just how everything else spreads these days, which is TikTok, which is Instagram, which is Twitter. And I know that it's been done to death talking about how unhealthy those things can be, but I'll say I post a lot less than I used to on those things. And it's hand-in-hand with my personal relationship with being a little less ego driven and a little bit more peaceful.

So, the idea that I have this organization I really believe in and that we're doing work that I think is really, truly valuable and helping in schools, and I'm like, "Well, I might need to dive into TikTok to promote it. Because how else are people going to find out about it?" And that leaves this pit in my stomach of like I hope this doesn't lead to me spending six hours a day watching cooking videos. Because that's a thing I could easily do. I hope this doesn't lead to me watching other comedians I came up with and wondering why their videos have so many likes and feeling bad about myself. Because I could totally do that.

Some of it's the infrastructure of the world, where I'm still trying to figure out how to drive this thing and be the public face of it and not get sucked back into, you know, an infrastructure of promotion that is fundamentally unhealthy. And I want to kick all the puppeteers' asses. Anybody who's trying to teach kids through puppetry, I'm going to kick your ass.

**John Moe:** Oh man, come to St. Paul, Minnesota, Chris. Because puppetry is such a thing here.

**Chris Gethard:** Really?

**John Moe:** Yeah, I arrived in 2008, and my wife and I—one of the first things we noticed, we noticed three things. There's nuns everywhere. There's a lot of eyeglass stores. And there's constant puppetry all over the place. Any birthday party you go to, they bring in puppeteers. Any school you send your kid to, they come home talking about the puppet projects. This town can't get enough of puppets.

**Chris Gethard:** Listen, the Twin Cities have lived in the grip of terror driven by these puppeteers for far too long, and I'm coming in to free them with improv. Improv vs. puppetry, the war no one wants.

**John Moe:** (*Laughing.*) That's before everybody finds an excuse to not attend.

**Chris Gethard:** Yes, (*chuckles*) the war your friend begs you to come see their class show for that you will desperately avoid no matter what happens in your life.

**John Moe:** (*Chuckles.*) There is a professional day job equivalent to that TikTok anxiety, and that's LinkedIn. So, if—as a day job haver—you haven't yet got on LinkedIn, it's the place where everybody who does work like you is doing far better, and then you can just feel terrible about yourself.

**Chris Gethard:** Maybe I need to go sign up, so I have another thing to beat myself up over. How do I build out this LinkedIn in a way that's going to catch momentum?

**John Moe:** In your most recent book, *Dad at Peace*, you write so eloquently about being a father and what difference that has made. Can you explain the difference that becoming a father and spending time as a father and concentrating on your son has made in your mental wellbeing?

**Chris Gethard:** 100%. I also want to say too, there's other people in this world who don't want to become a parent, and I get it, and more power to you. I'm not trying to push it on anyone. I will say, for me—(*child yells*)—I mean, you can hear it. Do you hear him having a tantrum right behind me?

**John Moe:** No.

**Chris Gethard:** He's like actually yelling right downstairs.

**John Moe:** And he's 35.

**Chris Gethard:** He's 35 years old. We can't get him out of the fucking house.

(*John laughs.*)

No, he's 5 years old, and he's the best. I will say, as far as this idea of shifting all of my priorities, it was really amazing to me to just see the things that a kid needed along the way. And you compare it to mine—you know, you get that alert every week on your iPhone. “Here's how many hours a day you spend on your phone this week.” We all get that Sunday weekly report from Apple, right? And I don't think anybody's thrilled about that report when it comes in. You go, “What?! I was on my phone how much this week?” And you sit there—and I realized there were times where I'm sitting here going—my son's trying to play with me, and I'm going, “No, but I need to answer these four emails before the workday ends.” And then he'd be heartbroken, and it would give me this opportunity to go—

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“Wait, what really happens if those emails don't go out until the morning? What really happens?” Not much, you know. Seeing the things in my son's life that were unconditional were really eye opening. There's a thing I write about in the book where I was playing with him once—this was about a year and a half, two years ago. And he was climbing on some rocks, and he was forcing me to climb on the rocks, and he kept looking back at me. And I was like, “Dude, you gotta watch what you're doing, because you're going to fall. If you look back at me, you're going to fall.”

And he was like, “But I need to look out for you.” He said that to me. He's like, “Daddy, I got to look out for you.”

And I said, “No, no, no. I'm the dad. It's my job to look out for you. You just focus and don't fall, please.”

And he said, “Well, why do you have to look out for me?”

And I said, “Because you're little and I'm big. So, it's Daddy's job to look out for you.”

And he went, “Yeah, but I'm young and you're old, so I have to look out for you.”

And initially I was laughing about it, because I was like, “Man, my kid called me old to my face! I’m gonna get a standup bit out of this!” And this and that. And then I took a breath and went, “Don’t you dare make a bit out of this.” Like, he’s right. He’s right. I’m gonna look out for him, and he’s gonna look out for me. And I had this moment of peace where I was like I could sit here and try to write the bit about, “Hey everybody, listen to how my son looked me in the eye and told me I’m old.” And that’s the starting point of some rant, right? Or I could take a deep breath and go, “Holy shit. Like, that’s a love I didn’t even have to earn.” Like, You’re not even courting someone. They’re not opting in, they’re not choosing. Just his instinct is like, you look out for me, and I look out for you. And that’s how it is, Dad. Accept it.

And I did. And I did. And some of the moments like that along the way where you just go—so many things that I am convinced that they matter immensely. But if I look at it through his eyes, it all just feels sort of silly. He doesn’t care when the last time I had a late-night set was. He doesn’t care how many likes my reel got. He doesn’t care. And the level to which he doesn’t care makes me go, “It feels idiotic for me to care as much as I do. It doesn’t matter. I’ve convinced myself this matters. It doesn’t.”

**John Moe:** Right. Because it’s a construct. It’s something that you’ve built up as mattering, but at a basic level where he is, those things don’t matter.

**Chris Gethard:** Yeah. And then it creates this cascading level of questioning, right? Well, the likes do matter, because I’m being told that likes is now how comedy clubs find you and want to book you. Okay. Well, what if the comedy clubs don’t book me? Okay, I’ve had a long career. I’ve been doing this for 24 years. There’s clubs I know are gonna book me, so it means I might just spend less time on the road. Okay, what if I spend less time on the road? Well, it means you make less money. Okay, but I still make money through *Beautiful Anonymous*. And if I only made that money, would we be able to survive? Yeah. Things would be a lot tighter. But I’d be able to survive, and then the tradeoff would be that I’d only be gone one weekend a month instead of two or three.

What would I do with those two or three extra weekends a month? I’d be hanging out with my family more. That would help my wife feel less stress. That would make her feel like she wasn’t being asked to do all the household stuff in a way that she doesn’t love. It would mean that my son and I could probably go out and go to a diner on a Saturday morning and get brunch, just me and him. And mom would love the time off, and he would love the time with dad, and I’d love it all. And if that means that I don’t get booked in a club in Dayton, Ohio this year, and I make however much less—1,500/2,000 less because I didn’t go out that weekend, but we’d still survive, I think I’m okay with that.

You know, so the cascading questions. Well, if you don’t build momentum now, it might never—it might not ever come back. Okay, and what happens if my momentum never comes back? Well, people might forget about you. Great. What happens if they forget about me? On some level, again, it might mean less money and harder ways to find income through stuff that you’ve worked hard to get to a point of making your living as an artist. But maybe if people forget about you, it also means like—you know, I once went to Disney World and I was having lunch with my mom, and a guy came up to me and said, “Hey, you were on *The Office*, right?” And I was like, yeah. And he’s like, “Can I take a selfie with you?” And of course I did because I try to be polite, but I had a little bit of bitterness.

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Because I'm like, man, my mom's getting old. I kind of want to just have this. I'm eating lunch with my mom right now. And I don't—okay. So, if people forget who you are—again, less money, more privacy. Alright. You know, and the thing that you will not be shocked to hear is so many of the negatives come down to less money. And the positives are this really diverse array of things that sound appealing. And it almost makes you wonder about this rat race scramble of capitalism in the first place, of like everything that's stressful seems to somehow relate to money and the counterpoints to all of them are this like rich, varied tapestry of things. Which, again, I'm lucky. I've had some success. I've been able to buy a home. I've been able to put away some money from when I hosted my TV show where I have the ability where if things are slow to tap into some reserves.

Not everybody has that. I'm really, really lucky that I do. And a lot of that is related to hard work in the past. But so many of the downsides relate to money. All of the upsides are exciting and different and surprising. The downside is boring. It's money every time. It's boring.

**John Moe:** Is that part of why you took the job that's more of a day job than you've done in the past? So that the money can stabilize a little bit?

**Chris Gethard:** Yeah, so I actually—probably the last real stretch of crisis that I had that I can point to was in 2022.

**Transition:** Spirited acoustic guitar.

**John Moe:** Find out what happened in 2022 after a short break.

**Transition:** Gentle acoustic guitar.

**John Moe:** We're back talking with Chris Gethard who said that he hit something of a crisis two years back.

**Chris Gethard:** I was in a stretch where things were a little slow coming out of the COVID experience. I was older. I had tried to launch some things that didn't catch momentum. And I had an agent who was like, "You know, you crushed the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2016. And it helped lead to your HBO special in 2017. You haven't been back since. Why don't we get you back to Edinburgh? And we'll kind of get you back in that conversation of like the one-person show comedy hybrid stuff that comes out of Edinburgh and gets you some press and kind of re-grease the wheels that—you know, it was so good for you."

And you know, as a performer, since the beginning of time, everybody's always heard Edinburgh can be really great. And for me in 2016 it was. Or it can be a disaster. Like, everybody who's a performer knows, if you go to that Edinburgh festival, you might—it might be a real smackdown to your ego and to your financial bottom line. And I thought after 2016, where I was kind of the darling of the festival that year—I was like one of a dozen people or so, that everybody was talking about, my depression show. I thought, oh cool,

people will be psyched I'm back. And it bombed hard. It was rough. Kind of a nightmare. I mean, I was in a 150-seat room where there was one night where there were 17 people in it. I was like, shit, man. Two years ago I was hosting a TV show. An HBO special three years ago. I'm performing for 17 people. This is hurting my ego. And then on top of it, all these feelings of: I left my wife and kid on a different continent, flew across an ocean to try to recapture momentum. And not only did I not recapture the momentum, but the cold ice water dose of reality of it going this far in the opposite direction is killing the ego.

And it was scary! It was scary. And it stung. And when I got back, I actually applied to grad school. For social work. 'Cause I started thinking that's a three-year program, and I bet I can do that while still trying to perform and write and do all the things I do. And in three years, I think I'll have a sense of if this is a pendulum swing or if that Edinburgh experience was indicative of like, hey, you gotta get out, man. But I'll know within three years.

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And I got into grad school. My alma mater, Rutgers University, was willing to take me back. And my wife was like, "I don't really understand why you're doing this."

I'm like, "Well, I need to have a backup plan for our family." It's not about me. My wife is an artist as well. And I was like, "It's more for the kid." And it was right in that stretch that I was talking with somebody from Wellness Together, and I'd already done the speaking work for them. And I jokingly was like, "You guys employ a lot of social workers that you send into schools." I was like, "I think I might go get my degree. Maybe in a couple of years, you guys can hook me up with a gig." And it was like half facetious, you know, 75% facetious. And the next thing I know, I got a call from their CEO who was like, "What's this that you're going into social work?"

And I was like, telling him like, "Yeah, you know, I had this experience in Edinburgh that really shook me up. It's feeling like I need to figure out if I need to get out of entertainment."

And he was like, "You have a skillset between your comedy, some of the stuff you've spoken about, some of the activist side of things." He's like, "I could put you to work today if you're serious. You don't need to go to school for three years."

And I was very flattered by that. And I said, "Let's give it a shot."

And full disclosure, because why not? A big part of it was me going, you know, I still make money through touring. I still make money through my podcast. But as a lot of people now know about the artists after the writers and SAG strikes, it doesn't always add up to health insurance. And I have a kid, and I lost my health insurance at one point during the pandemic, as many artists did. I'm sitting here going, "My kid might not have health insurance, because I'm still trying to get acting gigs. Like, my kid might not have health insurance, because I can't book gigs like the weird janitor on *Space Force* or the men's rights guy on *Parks and Recreation*?"

Like, these are things I'm very proud of, but when I think about my kid's health insurance in relation to them, I sit there and I go, "Maybe I need to move on."

So, Wellness Together was like, "We can't give you a ton of money, but we can give you like a salary to make it worth the hours we're asking of you. And we'll give your family health insurance."

And I said, "You know what? Let's try it." And I get to feel like I'm doing something good. I find myself more excited about building this program from the ground up than I have about a lot of artistic pursuits. And on top of it, I don't feel the constant pressure to look for any gig that might count towards health insurance. Which, as you know, also means auditions where you're taping yourself and feeling bad about yourself. And you're reading the description of the character and going, "Oh, they are actively looking—" Like, they—you know, I'll never forget going on an audition for a commercial where the actual description of the character was "man who is unattractive to women".

And you sit there, and you go—like, as somebody who deals with real depression, and you've now set aside your day, and you go to this casting place, and you go, "Oh, cool, what's it going to be? I wonder if it's going to be funny or not." And then you read, well, they're literally looking for a guy who is unattractive to women. That's what they want. And they called me. And you sit there and go, "That's going to fuck with my head for months." Again, there's people who work really, really hard. I'm not a fan of when people complain about being in the entertainment industry, but I'm happy to have found a way to create a safety net where I'm not relying on it nearly as much, especially for health insurance. Which is—you know, it's wild. It's wild.

And I think I have a bad habit sometimes of coming off as complainy, and I don't mean to be complainy. Because one thing that I'm well aware of as I sit here, I go—as far as the entertainment side of things goes, not everybody hosts a TV show on cable, not everybody gets an HBO special. If it's this fucking hard for me to have health insurance when I've been very lucky and, by most people's definition, pretty consistently successful for a while, and it's this hard for me to have fucking health insurance? What's it like for people who didn't have HBO specials, who haven't hosted a goddamn TV show? This system is fucking tough! This is hard. Because I've been—by most people's definition, I've had a real good and lucky time of it, and I know that. So, if my kid is losing his health insurance for it, what the fuck is happening?

So, in a lot of ways those strikes were actually validating for me, because I didn't feel as insane. I was like, oh good, I'm not the only one sitting here going, "Wait, what the hell is happening? What is happening?" So, that was 2022. That was kind of the last stretch of real crisis that I had, but I got very active and very forward-thinking—

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—about make some changes that will create some stability. And I think that that stability is real.

**John Moe:** You keep using the word “lucky” for your success instead of fortunate or successful or something that I earned. Why is that?

**Chris Gethard:** It's a good question. Probably reflective of some imposter syndrome, some self-esteem stuff. But I think there's also truth to it, right? Like, anybody who's been in the comedy world long enough can point to someone who is supremely talented and eventually got frustrated and went away, because the break never came. I know I can. You can also point to people where you go, “That person's not that talented, and they went and fucking took over the world!” Like, everybody's got their stories of that too. Especially being at UCB from 2000 up until about, you know, 2015. Like, I was around a lot of people who were just getting launched. They'd go from New York to LA to TV. It was wild. It was cool to be a part of.

I do view it as lucky. I don't want to be out of touch with that. There was a lot of hard work that went into it. There was a lot of effort to try to have an original voice. There was a lot of risk taking, a lot of times where I feel like I stuck my neck out to try to do it the right way. A lot of factors that I'm proud of. I don't want to discount the fact that I worked my ass off. I worked my ass off to the point where I was consistently exhausted, and teeth were falling out of my head. You know, like that's hard work. That is hard work. I always had it in my head that my dad was a super hard-working guy, and I needed to work hard too. Or else I was in some way gonna—not let him down, but not match the bar that he had set.

So, yeah, I did work my ass off. And maybe I should recognize that more, but I don't think it changes the fact... you know. Whenever I hear a podcast where people are talking about how hard entertainment is, I go, “It is still a fundamentally lucky life to be a part of.” Not to be all fatalistic or overly Catholic about it or whatever—my Catholic background sometimes rears its head, but I'm like there's people who get stuck in coal mines. There's people who lose limbs in factories and warehouses. There's billion-dollar corporations that don't allow the people who work in their warehouses to take breaks to urinate, so they pee in bottles and leave them on the floor. Like, there's real hard-working people who have tough times right now. It is lucky at all to have walked the path I've walked.

In that macro sense, I maintain a lucky life. A lot of hard work went into it, risk taking, some times where I stuck my neck out in a way that was ill-advised, and I'm glad it worked out. But again, you start to take the bird's eye view of it, and you go, “If people in the entertainment industry are this stressed—” And you're hearing all these stories during the strikes of residual checks for 30 cents and everyone losing health insurance, or—you know, that actor that was on the *Cosby Show* that he got mocked on the internet, because people found out he was working in a supermarket. And then there was this backlash to that, and people going, “Do not mock someone for trying to earn money and take care of themselves and take care of their families.”

And you sit there, and you go, “God damn if it's this hard in entertainment, what's it like to work in a Walmart right now? What's it like to work on a dock right now? What's it like to work in an auto factory right now?” If we're feeling this squeeze and it feels valid? Holy shit. So, again, not trying to be too big for my britches or any sort of crusader. But yeah, it's a lucky thing to be a part of entertainment. It's a lucky thing. There's people who I haven't had those breaks and maybe should have, and I'm aware of that. And I think you probably have interviewed a few people at entertainment where you go—sometimes people lose touch of it.



And it's hard not to view them—

And I'm not trying to diagnose anybody or throw around stuff glibly on a mental health themed podcast, but sometimes you meet people in entertainment where you go, "Ooh, this turned you into a sociopath. You are out of touch with reality to a certain degree, because you think you deserve everything now, and you think that this is something that should just be handed out." And it feels creepy to me to not recognize like it's blessed, it's lucky.

**John Moe:** Or people who—people who see the metrics associated with show business as the metrics to determine their self-worth or their value as a human being.

[00:55:00]

I've talked with a few people like that, you know—whether it's downloads or album sales or box office or anything.

**Chris Gethard:** Clicks, listens. And the sad part is, I had—as I said earlier in our time together today—achievement has no end. And every time it doesn't put out the fires in you, you go, "Okay, I guess I need to get even bigger. I had a video with 1,000,000 likes? Maybe if I get to 5,000,000 likes, I'll fucking feel better about myself."

And then you get to 5,000,000 and you go, "God damn it, I guess it has to be 10." And then someday you drop dead, and you had a whole lot of likes. That's what you had. You had millions and millions of likes, and they didn't make you whole. At least for me.

**John Moe:** Have I ever told you about my friend, the baseball pitcher?

**Chris Gethard:** I'm not certain.

**John Moe:** This is Sean Doolittle, who is a major league closer for the Oakland A's and the Washington Nationals. And he's retired now, but he was saying—I interviewed him once, and he said that he thought that if he could just get to the major leagues, then all these problems he had would be gone. Because no major leaguer would be dealing with that level of anxiety and depression. And then he thought, "If I could just make it to the all-star game, then that would prove how good I am." And then it, you know, then that would all go away. "If I could just make it to two all-star games, then that'll prove the first one wasn't a fluke. If I could go to the World Series, then that would prove— If I could win the World Series." Dude wins the World Series. And then realizes, "Oh, that's not what it's about at all!" (*Laughs.*) It doesn't do anything.

**Chris Gethard:** And there's the comedy. I will say there's a weird thing in my life now that I'm really happy with, where occasionally I will just get a call from a younger comedian. Like, "Hey, we know each other in passing, and I'm dealing with this thing, and I feel like you've dealt with it." You know, people going, "I got offered a gig, and it's in an environment where I would not really be proud to be a part of it, but it pays really well, and I need the fucking money. What do you do?"

Like, I sometimes get the call from artists about stuff like that. And I feel flattered by that, you know? Or like someone's—you know, a young New Jersey comedian will call me. "There's this manager trying to call me, but I think they're maybe trying to take advantage of me."

And I go, "Well, tell me what they're saying." And I go, "Yeah, don't sign anything that that person—that person has bad intentions, you know?"

I'm happy to help, but I find myself in those conversations often pointing out like the metrics of happiness, you gotta separate them from the achievement culture. Because just like you said with baseball, there's a comedy version, right? Like, if you're a young improviser—"If I can just get on a team at UCB." Well, guess what? When you do, every student at that school wants your spot, and you will feel that pressure. If you're a stand up in New York—"If I could just get passed at the Comedy Cellar." Absolutely a feather in the cap; it's an awesome feeling. But guess what? I can tell you from experience, the first six months of performing at the Comedy Cellar, you will feel like, "Holy shit, I need to bring my A game for 15 minutes a night every night, 'cause every single person here is great, and if I fail, I'm gonna fuck this whole thing up." You know?

"If I could just get a special on TV." Yeah, okay, great, huge achievement. Well done. But now you need to read the entire internet's comments on your performance. That's gonna happen next, you know? There's no achievement that doesn't bring... whatever positive it brings, it also brings with it an elevated sense of consequence and judgment. Both self-judgment and outside judgment. And I was way too caught up in that achievement side of things for way too long. And I'll tell you, I mentioned that my dad was a super hard-working guy. And I just saw him two weekends ago, and he said something that meant a lot to me where he said to me—and it was a quiet moment, and I feel bad because I probably should have reacted more. But you know, I'm a repressed Irish Catholic.

But he said to me, he's like—he stayed with us a couple days, him and my mom, and he was like, "I'm really glad you're around a lot for Cal,"—who is my son. He's like, "You're just there a lot. You're playing with him a lot. You're finding time during the days." He's like, "I didn't—I just was working." He's like, "I just worked really hard. I wasn't there for you as much as you're just there for him."

And I was just like, "Aw, thanks so much. Yeah, I'm doing my best. I'm trying. I'm still too much of a workaholic." Like, I brushed it off, but I wish I had maybe slowed down and said to my dad, you know, that that means a lot.

[01:00:00]

And I bet it was tough for you to say. And a lot of that is I think my—I mean, my dad was a guy who, if he—if my dad—I look back now and realize like, well, if my dad fell down and broke his leg and wasn't earning money, we would have been living with relatives. It was real. It was real. It was a money thing.

I have the luxury to maybe slow down a little bit. And it felt good for him to call out like, "Hey, I see that you're slowing down a little bit. And I see the positive side of it." 'Cause

that's probably the person in the world that meant the most coming from. I wish I could have been a little more expressive of that emotion in receiving that.

**John Moe:** Yeah. Well, Chris Gethard, I want to thank you for the insight. I want to thank you for laughs that you provided. And I now want to thank you for the last that you are teaching other people to provide for still more people, because that's wonderful work you're doing.

You can learn more about Laughing Together at [LaughingTogether.org](http://LaughingTogether.org). You can learn more about Chris Gethard by going to Google.com and googling his name or YouTube.com, I suppose, and doing it that way as well.

*(Chris chuckles.)*

Chris Gethard. Thank you so much.

**Chris Gethard:** It's always a joy to talk to you, and thanks for doing the show and allowing conversations like this to happen. I hope I didn't complain too much. And you're really—you're doing your part. And Laughing Together is a similar thing. If I have a way that I can try to help, you go, you try to help. You know, and I think that's what this show has always been as well. And I think you help a lot of people, and I feel lucky to talk to you again.

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

**John Moe:** Often, one's professional life can be built around achievement, around fame and fortune. Even if you're not in the entertainment industry, fame can mean plenty of things. It can mean a fancier job title, more people under you at work. Your work can be like a game where you're trying to rack up the most points to win or something, to hit a specific set of goals.

What Chris Gethard presents for us is a different set of goals, whether you choose to see that as a game or not. Goals like taking care of his family, having peace, having calm. And the difference is that with these goals, it's not a matter of achieving something and then immediately needing to top that thing, or at least repeat it. You're not in a constant lunge. You can just win the game once, and then sort of stop playing. I'm going to think about this interview a lot.

Our program exists, because people help fund it. They make donations. That allows *Depresh Mode* to continue to exist, and hopefully help people who listen to it. We need your help in making that happen. If you've already donated to the show, if you're already a member, I really appreciate it. Thank you. If you're not already doing that—well, please do so, so we can keep making shows. It's easy. Just go to [MaximumFun.org/join](http://MaximumFun.org/join), find a level of giving that works for you, and then select *Depresh Mode* from the list of shows. Another way you can help: be sure to hit subscribe, hit that button that helps us out a lot. Give us five stars, write rave reviews. It helps get the show out into the world where it can help people.

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](#). Our *Depresh Mode* newsletter is on Substack. Search that up. I'm on Twitter and Instagram, [@JohnMoe](#). You can join our Presbies group on Facebook. A lot of good discussion happening over there—people helping each other out, making recommendations, looking for help, getting help.

Sometimes even talking about the show. Please use our electric mail address to get in touch with us. [DepreshMode@MaximumFun.org](mailto:DepreshMode@MaximumFun.org).

Hi, credits listeners. Fruit Loops are all one flavor. Different colors, same flavor. *Depresh Mode* is made possible by your contributions. Our production team includes Raghu Manavalan, Kevin Ferguson, and me. We got 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*

[01:05:00]

*I just keep believing*

*No one knows the answer*

*Maybe there's no answer*

*I just keep on dancing*

**Mary:** This is Mary from Maine, and I am cheering you on. You got this. I know you can do it.

*(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!