

[00:00:00]

**John Moe:** A note to our listeners: this episode contains mentions of self-harm and a mention of suicide.

There are two things going on right now that I want to talk to you about. They're huge things. They can be all-consuming. They're unavoidable. Thing one we talk about almost constantly. It's inescapable. You may find that all your conversations eventually turn to this topic. Thing two, we barely talk about it at all. But there's a good chance you think about it. A lot.

Thing one is the upcoming US election. It dominates the news, social media, internet. Thing two—the one we don't talk about much—is the stress, the fear, the anxiety, the ongoing complex trauma of thinking about that election and its ramifications and its possible outcomes. The dread and the hope and the incredible, intense feelings about that election. Maybe it's even distracting you from parts of your life. You're unable to get as much work done. You can't concentrate. It's interfering with how you run things.

There's a term for this. Election stress disorder. It's not a diagnosis recognized by the medical community, but definitely it's familiar to people who are going through it. Maybe that's you. We don't talk about this for the same reason we don't talk much about mental health in general in our society. That's because it's scary. And this huge event coming in—just weeks away now—we don't know what will happen with the election. And that might be making you kind of a mess. And it's hard to know what to do about all that. It might even be hard to talk about.

Well, the talking part is where we come in with our show. It's *Depresh Mode*. I'm John Moe. I'm glad you're here.

**Transition:** Spirited acoustic guitar.

**John Moe:** The function of this program, the reason we work on it, is to name and discuss the sometimes-scary world of inner mental turbulence and maybe come up with some ways to address it—but at least identify what's going on, which might make the whole thing more manageable. A caveat here: I can't make election stress disorder go away for you. I can't tell you everything will be fine after the election. What I can do is engage in some dialogue to help understand what's going on inside people—where this comes from, what happens within you as a result—and offer some ideas on what you can do about it.

So, let's do that. I sat down for a lively and wide-ranging conversation with Theresa Nguyen. She's the Chief Research Officer for Mental Health America, one of the largest mental health advocacy organizations in the country. Theresa leads MHA's Center for Research and Innovation, and she's been a licensed clinical social worker for over 20 years. She's also a person with a history of depression and anxiety.

Theresa says, yeah, it's not just you; anxiety and stress are up sharply all over the country right now.

**Transition:** Spirited acoustic guitar.

**Theresa Nguyen:** Part of my job is to kind of evaluate trends that are happening. And we care very much about youth and specifically like what happens when young people start to have mental health conditions for the first time.

Elections, life, major life events, disasters, shootings, trauma. (*Laughs.*) These things—you know, there are only a few things that you can track that you can see major blips from a general trend, right? So, I would say, yeah. It feels—as I think we become more informed through the internet, have the capacity to read stuff at a younger age especially, we see these things really impact us. And I think everybody has experienced doom scrolling and (*chuckles*) falling into these patterns of traps that we can recognize when we get sicker or better.

**John Moe:** Is it helpful though, to think of it as, “Oh, what I'm feeling right now is stress,” to put that word on it? “What I'm feeling right now is anxiety. What I'm feeling right now is trauma.” Are there guideposts that we can use in navigating our own mental health to understand what's happening?

**Theresa Nguyen:** So, I mean, when I think about my anxiety and the way it runs up into my depression, you know, I think—when I was young, baby cakes in this space, I was just along for the ride. You know? You never knew until it was too late.

[00:05:00]

And your partner is telling you something is disastrously wrong, (*laughs*) that you have a problem. And I think as I've gotten older, it has been helpful. I know what it feels like to feel stressed now. But I have more awareness of how there are levels of stress. And I used to—and when I was young, they were rudimentary things. I would measure like the number of bleeding fingers that I had was a good sign of how stressed I was, right?

But I think as I got older, I got better at saying, “Okay, well, how much stress do I feel? And then does where my come from matter?” And I think that answer is yes. I mean, because for us—for me, I think having awareness or control comes to play a lot, right? Like, knowledge is power. So, if I can say, “Hey, well, I think my stress is coming from my lack of control, my feeling of not knowing the future.” (*Chuckles.*) Then what have I been doing lately? What am I consuming? How does that make me feel more out of control? And how is this real or not real? And all of those things matter.

**John Moe:** Well, control is a big part of it and a tricky part of it when it comes to something like a presidential election. Because I mean, by definition, you are at most one vote in a sea of votes. (*Chuckles.*)

**Theresa Nguyen:** Yeah, no control. Let's be honest.

**John Moe:** And that seems like—you know, that combined with intense stress and anxiety, that seems like a recipe for despair to me.

**Theresa Nguyen:** Yeah, that's the despair. (*Laughs.*) That's the exact trap we fall in, you know? I think we don't have—I think it's honest and fair to say we don't have a lot of control. And we do things to—different people can do different things or have energy to take certain kinds of action. Right? But something that big, it's not—like, it's important to be honest that you don't have control about the outcome. But that doesn't mean you don't have control about your environment.

**John Moe:** So, how do you take control of your environment?

**Theresa Nguyen:** Oh, man. I mean, you know, denial and deflection and avoidance are my super skill.

(*They laugh.*)

It's not always easy to apply, especially if it's your job. I mean, sometimes we're better than others. I definitely had a period back in 2021 where I realized I had, you know—you know, you have choices. You can kind of cope with horribly unhealthy ways. You know, using substances or taking things out on people. Or you realize you're kind of in a trap, and you say, “Well, I can also limit my access.”

I think when it comes to election or news—which falls in the same space, you know—I had a choice where I stopped reading the news. Which is weird. Like, I historically read the news every day. And now three years later, I don't consume the news the same as I used to, but I also feel guilty about it. You know, like am I abandoning my civic duty (*chuckles*) by not being informed?

**John Moe:** You say you don't consume it in the same way. How do you consume it?

**Theresa Nguyen:** Oh. (*Sighs.*) So, the controls I've set—you know, a bit like I'll read the front page. I'm more intentional about what I consume, so I'll read content. If I—I've known my traps. So, comment sections (*laughing*) can be an emotional trap. I have to be careful. I have to—I've changed the kinds of groups that I am in. Because I find that they're not healthy for me.

**John Moe:** In social media or in real life?

**Theresa Nguyen:** Social media, for sure. That's the easiest group, right? It's harder to find human friends to be friends with.

(*They laugh.*)

And then when I'm at my worst—like, if I just know I'm not in a good space, just giving myself the grace to say, “You know what? These things that you just know are not making you well? Like, they have to go first.” And it's okay. If it means that my self-care looks like I am puzzling (*laughs*) a lot more and not consuming news, that is the choice that I'm making. And I still struggle with the guilt. I do! And I have to ask myself like what is that bound up in?

[00:10:00]

You know, I think there's something there. Part of why—especially, I don't know—for me, part of it is work and an identity, you know? And so, you know, reading the news and being informed and working in policy and working in research, these are parts of my identity. So, what does that mean to say I'm going to limit or give up a core part of something, because I also know that it's really not making me well? I think there have been times where I've cut things out whole cloth, and I think—but you kind of bring stuff back when you know you're well.

So, when I'm in a good spot it's fine. I can come back into this space. And I think that's been an interesting journey to walk through. Because it's like—you know, very recently talked to—in my own brain and with other people. And like you can tell that this is bound up in trauma. Because at the intersection of what you read and the way you consume it, you also feel this tension between fear or hope. You know? It's like am I going to get exposed to something that makes me feel hopeful? Am I willing to let myself feel hope? Or do I double down on despair? *(Laughs.)*

Because it's safe. You know, it's safe to say—my favorite game is worst case scenario. So, if I just expect the worst to happen, then it happens, and I'm not disappointed. Right? Like—

**John Moe:** Oof. It's a lot of work! It's so much work to—

**Theresa Nguyen:** Depression is a lot of work, yeah! *(Giggles.)*

**John Moe:** Depression is a fulltime job. I mean, what do you tell—? Like, in your role as a— if you were in a role as a therapist, and someone came to you saying, “I don't know how to live in this moment without having this election stress disorder, without having all this anxiety and panic and trauma and all this,” what do you recommend somebody do?

**Theresa Nguyen:** I think building insight is the most important thing we can do. I'd probably ask them to start explaining to me what that looks like for them. What does your election stress look like? How are you consuming information? What are the thought processes that go through your mind about what's happening?

And more often than not, I think we tie these experiences to things that are personal. My friends who for whom policies feel very personal, you know, and the direction and the state of the country, like that often tells us a lot about why we're stressed. And so, where does it become personal? And that tells you a little bit about what matters to you. And when you get there, then after you kind of work through all that, I think there are practical things like what do you need to do to take care of yourself?

**Transition:** Spirited acoustic guitar.

**John Moe:** Just ahead. How can you not just sit there, but do something?

**Transition:** Gentle acoustic guitar.

**John Moe:** We're back and talking with Theresa Nguyen of Mental Health America about election stress disorder.

How about the idea that instead of worrying about an election, you go out and do something about it? You go volunteer. You volunteer to go door-to-door to write postcards, whatever it is. Is that something that you would recommend for everybody, or just a few people, or what?

**Theresa Nguyen:** (*Laughs.*) I think that people should do what they think brings them energy, that they have the energy for. And so, door knocking and calling—I'll just say, I don't know. I come from a place where I have a deep desire to want to do these things, like get involved. I have door-knocked. I have called.

But I don't know if it's the introvert in me. I don't know if it's the depression or the anxiety. But those things, they take the most energy from me to do. You know, especially if I'm not in a good spot. Like, sometimes all I have the energy to do is to finish my job. (*Chuckles.*) Like, I don't have the energy to do these high-level things. So, it's always—I think it's useful to be honest about what you can do and ask yourself when you do it, does it bring you joy? Does it bring you control? And does it give you more energy, or does this rob you in a way that it makes you feel shame or guilt? Right?

Because sometimes it's just easier for me to have five conversations with people who I think are on the fence and spend my time talking to these five people who I know, and then to say, “You know what? That's enough.”

[00:15:00]

That doesn't make me a bad person, because I didn't have the energy to put into all the things that I would have loved to do if I wasn't in an episode or dealing with all the other things that were on my table at the time.

**John Moe:** This feels like it has echoes of the idea of perfectionism. Because if you really care deeply about something like an election, you're going to say, “Well, I need to do everything I can.” But there are real limits to how much you can do, like logically speaking. But it feels like if someone has perfectionist tendencies, they're going to feel like no matter what they do, they're going to come up short of what they should be doing. And that seems like a real bear trap to fall into.

**Theresa Nguyen:** Yeah, absolutely. Those should-haves, I think of them like expectations. You know, we have expectations about all kinds of parts of our lives. And I think when we have election stress—more often than not, I find people who think about elections have a high value on civic duty. And that can come from a lot of different places, the way we feel the importance of contributing as civilians in that way. And so, what are your expectations that you have about why elections matter and how much energy you can put into it, where that comes from?

And I think a lot of distress comes from a mismatch in expectations. You want to be somewhere, and you're not. Or you can't be there, you know. And so, then you feel the

tension. Because we wouldn't be here if somebody had election stress and then were able to mobilize. You know, right away. And felt like—

I met some of my friends who, their brains are just different than mine. Like, they are in it to win it, you know? And they are infinitely positive and optimistic. It's amazing to watch them do that. They can do it. And I love them for it, because they fill that role, you know? I wish I was. (*Laughs.*)

**John Moe:** These are people who don't deal with depression and anxiety themselves is what you're saying. Yeah. Yeah.

**Theresa Nguyen:** Not at all! And you can tell! You can tell, you know. And that's the thing about mental illness, right? Like, we feel so shamed, because we can't—it's just to acknowledge and to have grace for the fact that some things are just harder. But it doesn't mean you're bad, you know. It's just like, well, what feels right? And letting that go. Because I think part of us wants to, and then part of us feels like we should.

**John Moe:** Right, right. Yeah. I mean, you can't blame a fish for not being able to climb a tree. (*Chuckles.*) You know, people have some limitations sometimes given the makeup that they have.

(*Theresa agrees.*)

Can I ask how far you go back with depression and anxiety? How long it's been in your life, Theresa?

**Theresa Nguyen:** I mean, the first time I had a panic attack, I was seven. The first time I thought about killing myself and have a strong memory of the people in my life at that time who were helping me, I was 11.

(*John "wow"s.*)

So, depression, addiction, psychosis—these are things that kind of run in my family. And it took a long time to understand the way that it was affecting my life personally and my family's life. So, a long time. I have not known life without mental health challenges. (*Laughs.*)

**John Moe:** Yeah, boy. Have you found over the years—? I mean, this feels like—it seems like every time there's a big national election, we're told this is the most important election of our lifetime. And you know, everything's on the line. And that is certainly happening right now. That's what we're hearing about the election that we're currently in. Have you found things that have been especially effective for you in previous elections that you're trying to apply to this one?

**Theresa Nguyen:** You know what? I will say, as I've gotten—(*chuckles*) I don't know if this is a function of having now lived in awareness through multiple election cycles. But the first-time election, you know, 18, joining the voting—I remember that feeling! And it was like the

excitement of that brought me there, you know, and that could carry you. But then with every next election cycle, you almost add to the story. And then now at, you know, in my 40s, I'm like, "Okay, I have the elections before me, and then I have the elections in front of me."

And what I have today is—I'm actually grateful that I can see it for what it is, in the perspective of my life, you know.

[00:20:00]

And I think about it more globally and to know that time will pass. And... then it's just weird, because then really a lot of big feelings kind of crush this election cycle, where you have sense of hope and dread and insecurity about the future. And this is what everybody says about these like recent elections and the times that we're living now. Because it doesn't feel like it's just election. It feels like the election is about freedom and security and—

**John Moe:** Democracy.

**Theresa Nguyen:** It's like your brain naturally goes to these catastrophic spaces where you're like—you know, what is—suddenly, like what does it look like in six years, and AI is taking over?!

And I think that's been an interesting shift. You know, where early, you're just kind of in the moment. And then when I wasn't able to manage my anxiety, I would catastrophize a lot.

**John Moe:** Mm. What did that look like?

**Theresa Nguyen:** I mean, it's just like—we're screwed, you know. Like, deep nihilism. Forget it. It's all doomed. Let me just eat all my (*giggles*) problems and give up. You know, like screw it. And that was in the worst moments. It was—I just let despair take over entirely.

Then I would say there was a period where I had to go into complete avoidance, because at least it kept me from the despair. And then... I would say when you're in—when I'm in a deep sense of stress, and it's basically moving into a survival space—like, it was okay for me to just be completely avoidant. Even—and that was true, you know, even as recent as six months ago. Just could not! Felt paralyzed to think about what. Because again, it's just like you aren't in control. And avoidance is a really important skill if it basically means you live or you don't live.

**John Moe:** Mm. What do you mean?

**Theresa Nguyen:** I just mean like if my depression is gonna kill me, and I have a choice to go into despair, because I'm also engaging in problematic behaviors—and by problematic behaviors, I don't just mean reading the news and having election stress; it means getting in the cycle in my brain that I do when I think about, "Well, forget it." Contingency planning, thinking about "Whatever, it's all screwed." I mean, I would say things to my kids like, "Why do you need to go to school? 'Cause you're not going to have any job."

And my husband's like, "What's wrong with you? You can't say that to our kids! You know?!" (*Laughs.*)

And I'm like, "Well, that's reality." You know?

(*John "wow"s.*)

And that's like—and you know, I have to step back and say, "Okay, wait. You know, I've really lost a sense of hope for my future. And for my children, and like why I had children. So, I need to have a sense of hope." And like that's important as a signal to listen to. And like whatever it is that keeps you from despair and maybe gives you hope, like that then it becomes even more important for you to say, you know, spend your energy finding that space. Because this is—that's what's bringing you life and not robbing you from life.

**John Moe:** Finding the hope.

**Theresa Nguyen:** Finding hope, finding what matters. And if you feel in despair, you know, then what does the shift mean for you and your brain about the way you need to pay attention to what is in your control, what is around you that lets you have hope, that lets you survive.

And if it's election, great. If it's not election, it's okay.

**John Moe:** Mm. Okay. I'm typing here as we're talking, and I keep typing the word "find". As in the advice that we might have for somebody. Find the hope, find the truth, find the thing that makes you feel good or strong.

**Theresa Nguyen:** Yeah. And that's really cool about elections, you know. I guess, because in the end, I think the beauty of civic duty is that it makes us feel like we're part of a community where our belonging or our voice matters. And when you're able to find that, it feels so good. Because I think that really taps into something human that we sometimes especially feel like we lose with technology. And so, you know, that's—how do I matter? How does my voice matter? What matters to me? And maybe it's like—you know, like a presidential election feels so big.

[00:25:00]

But something that we often talk about at MHA is like vote your mental health. Because we know mental health matters! (*Chuckles.*) For all of us who live with mental health conditions, we're like, "This does matter!"

So, if I'm not going to be—you know, I know I'm going to vote for, for president or whatever, these things. Maybe what I want to put my energy to is where something matters. So, do I know what policies are happening in my state that affect my mental health? Or is it about health care policy?



I found that sometimes that does bring me a sense of narrowing the vision enough and aligns with who I am, that it's the juice, right? That helps me feel like, oh, I'm contributing, and here's where it really matters. And because I also live with a mental health condition, it gives me enough of that energy that I can put it into that without feeling so much at a loss. You know, and that's pretty sweet.

**John Moe:** Instead of letting the energy build up inside you and take the form of anxiety and panic and stress.

**Theresa Nguyen:** Just more, catastrophizing, yeah. (*Laughs.*) More fear.

**Transition:** Spirited acoustic guitar.

**John Moe:** Just ahead: so, we have election stress. What is that doing to us?

**Transition:** Gentle acoustic guitar.

**John Moe:** Talking with Theresa Nguyen about election stress.

What do we know about what this increase in stress might be doing to our bodies? To you know, getting—I mean, there is no such thing as just mental health or just physical health. There's only health. But what is the—what could this be doing to us that we might not even be aware of?

**Theresa Nguyen:** Oh yeah. My sleep goes. (*Chuckles.*) I'm always tracking the amount of nightmares. I feel like I have the number of stress dreams I have. And I love—I don't know if, because I feel a sense of lack of control, that I've poured it into these kinds of analytical things. But the kinds of stress dreams I have also tell me the themes that I have in my stress dreams. As I said, the number of fingers that I have that are bleeding, because I'm a picker, or like how many scabs that I have that are open. Or you know, just—you know? (*Laughs.*)

**John Moe:** What have your dreams been, building up to this election?

**Theresa Nguyen:** Ohhh. I mean, I've had dreams where it almost feels like a post-apocalyptic scenario. You know, I've had dreams where I'm being hunted. I'm like, "What is this from?" Being hunted down. And that's hard, because it runs right against trauma. But there's like almost a—I've found that there's a difference between my dreams where I'm being hunted by a single killer versus like hiding in the woods, (*chuckles*) hiding from a group of killers.

**John Moe:** Uh-huh. Is one of those election related and the other isn't?

**Theresa Nguyen:** I think the group of killers. You know, 'cause that feels more broad, you know. It feels a little more like that movie you see where you're really like hiding from all the aliens, you know. And that feels really much more global than like, "I'm running from one person," which reminds me of my trauma—like, just not feeling even able to hide in a tight

space. Versus me running around in the woods, being like—you know, *Blair Witch Project* or whatever.

*(They laugh.)*

You know?

Tornadoes. Tornadoes. I have dreams of weird like tsunamis that act like tornadoes. These feel to me what I call my very large disaster dreams, where these are always the ones that come—that make—that are different than when I'm like driving on a road that moves in unnatural ways that I can't drive, you know. The disaster ones, I'm like, okay; I feel a global sense of lack of control. Like, and the world is dying. So, to me, those stress dreams come with election fear, climate change anxiety. Like, all the big guys.

**John Moe:** And so, do those dreams become less prevalent when you're doing these kinds of pieces of advice that we talked about? Finding the hope and finding the truth and self-care?

**Theresa Nguyen:** Healthcare. And self-care, 100%. 100%. 100. And I can almost—if I was very good at tracking it, I bet I could see like a plot point, you know.

**John Moe:** Yeah. You can chart that.

**Theresa Nguyen:** And generally the nightmares—by the time I'm having nightmares, and I'm having extreme sleep problems, and it's a risk factor for other things—you know, like an episode—I'm pretty good now at saying, “You know what? Red flag. Biiiiig red flag. You need to turn around right now and do extreme things to protect yourself.”

[00:30:00]

And I try to listen to that voice now, because I didn't before. You know? So. At least for me as part of my WRAP plan, my wellness recovery action plan. I know that when I know that when the nightmares and the poor sleep comes that this is a pretty end-stage before things get really more worse than I would like to, where I personally don't have control over all the other cascading things that will happen. Like, I'm going to act out in a not kind way with the loved ones in my life or with myself or start to struggle at work, and blah-blah-blah.

**John Moe:** Yeah. Yeah. As we tape this, we're about two months out from the election. How are you? *(Chuckles.)* Where do you stand today with your own mental health in relation to this election?

**Theresa Nguyen:** I... it's weird. I feel... I feel afraid to let myself decide.

**John Moe:** Decide what?

**Theresa Nguyen:** To let myself feel okay. You know? I can catch myself still wanting to play worst case scenario. Because I think that there's a part of that that protects you. You

know? I think that kind of coping mechanism to play worst case scenario is a protective factor for me.

So—you know. Everybody has their own thing. You know, I can tell that I don't wanna—I don't wanna say what I think I know what the answer is going to be, so that whatever way it turns out, I'll say, "Well, it's fine." Because I didn't bank on one way or the other.

**John Moe:** So, wait. You're—does the thinking of the worst-case scenario provide some comfort for you? Because you're ready for the worst that it could be?

**Theresa Nguyen:** Yeah. Yeah, I'm prepared. You know, that's the contingency planning. That's that anxiety voice that says if you prepare for the worst, then when the worst happens, you know you'll survive. You know? So, I can tell I'm really, really holding on to that.

But I think my depression also makes me think that optimism is foolish. (*Laughs.*) It's like—what is the adage that we talk about? Depression makes us realistic and that our realism is real, versus people who are not depressed, they're irrationally optimistic. You know?

**John Moe:** Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. No, it's hard when you're in the middle of depression—and our listeners know that that's something I've dealt with my whole life—it's hard to know what the distortion is and what the truth is, or if there is even a truth. Because depression does lie, but it's really fucking good at it. (*Laughs.*) It's really, really convincing.

(*Theresa agrees.*)

And so, you can't always—you don't know which is the funhouse mirror and which is the regular one.

**Theresa Nguyen:** That is the trickster of depression. I hate that about it, you know. Because it's true. You know, you talk to people who are optimistic, who don't struggle with depression. You think that they live in a world of lies, and you're kind of jealous about the world of lies they get to live in. And then—but when you're in that moment between falling into an episode—you know, I can recognize that some of the lies depression tells me are just flat out false. And then there are many of them that feel true!

And I think that it's really complicated when you think about anxiety and depression, which are basically best friends. Because anxiety makes you want to plan for everything, anticipate the what-ifs. You know. Like, thinks about safety and protection and control. And then you're like, okay, so my two best friends are fear and—(*laughs*).

**John Moe:** Dread.

**Theresa Nguyen:** Or like whatever depression is, you know—where it's filled with weird truths and lies. You know, so I would say, yeah. So, for my election, I can tell some of my friends, they want me to go one way or the other. You know? You know, they want you to commit.

**John Moe:** Mm. The friends of depression and anxiety, or real human friends?

**Theresa Nguyen:** My real human friends, my real human friends. You know, they're kind of caught up in a direction, in a wave. They want you to go with them. And you know, I can tell my ambivalence—or even if I was feeling despair—it's irritating to your friends. Because they're like, “What's wrong with you?!” You know?

*(They laugh.)*

**John Moe:** Right. Well, I've got these glasses on that I see the world through, and I can't take the glasses off.

So, you mentioned self-care. And I think it's really important in this context especially, and also because, as we've talked about on the show—

[00:35:00]

—it's a word that gets tossed around a lot, and I think sometimes inaccurately. As meaning like, you know, go to yoga more often or light scented candles. And it's a lot more nuanced than that. What do you recommend, especially for people who—you know, a lot of people who listen to the show deal with depression, deal with anxiety disorders. What kind of self-care do you think they need to keep in mind as this election gets even closer?

**Theresa Nguyen:** Yeah. So, I think specific to election, because—you know, elections are drawn to our community, our sense of belonging in a community. I think one of my favorite self-care that's associated to my stress about election is about ways I can build my own community. So, that's why I have to avoid certain forums. Like—right? That's going to break me up from community. It makes me dislike certain people. It doesn't make me feel connected. I'd say the things that—

**John Moe:** It doesn't make you feel safe.

**Theresa Nguyen:** It doesn't make me feel safe. It doesn't make me feel connected. So, the self-care that I found to be the most helpful are the ones that help me build connection regardless of... not regardless. I would say it helps me build connection and reminds me why I like people. I think that's also like a hard one, right? Because my depression is like, “You don't need anybody! Don't you love your bed?” *(Laughs.)*

And so, I started going to a puzzling group. And if I couldn't attend a puzzling event—which I didn't even know there were—I was at least part of a group where we were puzzling. And I just talked to people about this stuff and met people. If it meant, you know, volunteering anywhere where I was going to meet somebody and just connect with them—because I think we're made up of—like, humanity can be beautiful if you allow yourself to meet people and reach out about all the other things that matter to us. But I think with election and politics, something about society has made us have a desire for labels. You're this, or you're that.

And then we find comfort in labeling others. That's natural. That saved us when we were cave people.

And then technology allowed us to do that even more. To peg people. And I think systems, they profit! They benefit when we do that. When we can label and just be controlled in that way. But when we kind of fall back on our own humanity, and we learn how to be a community, I think that makes our community and people and democracy stronger. You know? And I think that's powerful. That can be more powerful than—and I think when people are in power, I think that those are the things that scare them. When people, ourselves—like, the power of democracy is a large group of people learning and being together and learning to be together.

You know, and so that does bring me hope. And it's not at the—sometimes it's not even bound to election. Right now, it's puzzling or whatever; volunteering somewhere where I'm meeting somebody else, you know? It's been different things in my life, but those kinds of experiences. They always make me feel that safety that I think is the opposite of what election stress feels.

**John Moe:** So, like jigsaw puzzles? What kind of puzzles are you doing in this group?

**Theresa Nguyen:** (*Giggling.*) I do jigsaw puzzles, yeah! I do jigsaws.

I mean, but it's been like—I think it's a lot of things for different people. It's church; it's volunteering at school, volunteering to meet up with older folks or, you know, feeding homeless people. Or—

**John Moe:** Dog shelters.

**Theresa Nguyen:** Dog shelters, absolutely. Going to a dog park> Sometimes I used to go to a dog park and didn't have a dog. AA group—in NA, it saved me for a long time. Just anywhere. Yeah.

**John Moe:** Yeah. Finding the community where you can find it, and drawing some strength from that. Because that is a human instinct. You're right. That's where we're programmed to find an answer to that anxiety, that protection from being part of a group. Yeah.

Theresa Nguyen is Mental Health America's Chief Research Officer and leads MHA's Center for Research and Innovation. Theresa, thank you.

**Theresa Nguyen:** Yes, thank you. This is really fun and a nice little therapy session about my election stress.

(*They laugh.*)

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

[00:40:00]

**John Moe:** I think we're not done talking about election stress on the show or in the world. Good luck out there. To recap: find the hope, find the truth, find the thing that makes you feel good or strong. Find how you matter in the world, and find other people. Maybe do some puzzles!

Our show is funded by our listeners, not by some huge mega-corporation. It's funded by folks like you who think that it's helping, and they want other people to hear the show so they can be helped too. So, we can all help each other out. If you have already joined *Depresh Mode*, thank you. Thank you. Thank you so much. If you have not yet done so, don't worry. It's easy to do. Just go to [MaximumFun.org/join](https://MaximumFun.org/join). You can find a level that works for you and then select *Depresh Mode* from the list of shows, and we sure appreciate it. Be sure to hit subscribe, give us five stars, write rave reviews. All that helps get the show 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](https://twitter.com/DepreshPod). Our newsletter is available on Substack. Search up *Depresh Mode* on Substack. I'm on Twitter and Instagram, [@JohnMoe](https://twitter.com/JohnMoe). Join our Preshies group, also. It's on Facebook. Facebook, a lot of people hanging out there talking about episodes of the show, talking about their lives, supporting one another on tough days. It's a good place to hang out full of good folks. Our electric mail address is [DepreshMode@MaximumFun.org](mailto:DepreshMode@MaximumFun.org).

Hi, credits listeners. As I record this here in St. Paul, it's almost hoodie and shorts weather, which is the best weather. *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*

**Miggs:** I'm Miggs from Southeast Asia. May your heart be your guiding key.

**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!