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**John Moe:** There are a lot of podcasts in the world, probably over like a dozen; I haven't counted. So, why should you listen to this one? To me? Well, you might find it useful in managing your mind. Because, look, we all get a challenge set out before us. And it's kind of a similar challenge for everybody: make sense of your life in order to manage it better. Come to terms with the meanings of your decisions. Come to terms also with the decisions that were made for you—those ones that you had nothing to do with, maybe made by those charged with taking care of you when you were a kid, or maybe just decisions made by people you run across in adulthood that have affected you a lot.

So, on this show here today, you and me, let's do this. Let's listen to how someone else handled their challenges. And maybe that will help with you handling your challenges and making sense of your past, so you can guide your future. It's like when you need to fix a window, so you watch a YouTube of someone else doing it. That's kind of us, I guess.

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

**Transition:** Spirited acoustic guitar.

**John Moe:** Youngmi Mayer is probably best known to the public these days as a comedian on stage doing standup or on TikTok, where her videos get millions of views.

**Clip:**

**Youngmi Mayer:** So, as a 36-year-old woman, I always lie about my age. I say that I'm 50, 'cause the compliments that I get—whew. It goes something like this.

“So, how old are you?”

Oh, I'm 50.

(*Beat.*) “What?”

I'm 50 years old.

(*With shock and awe.*) “You look amazing!”

**John Moe:** Youngmi Mayer is also the author of a new memoir, *I'm Laughing Because I'm Crying*. Here are some other things Youngmi has been in her life. A child of a White American father and Korean mother, growing up in Korea and Saipan; a person who escaped an abusive relationship and moved to America with just \$700 in her pocket and no real plans; a celebrity in the food scene running the restaurant Mission Chinese with her then-husband Danny Bowien; a survivor of rape and trauma; a mother; and a person with severe depression

and anxiety. This interview focuses on the culture-clash and the depression and the comedy. And for a brief, kind of confusing moment, Barry Gibb.

**Transition:** Spirited acoustic guitar.

**John Moe:** Youngmi Mayer, welcome to *Depresh Mode*.

**Youngmi Mayer:** Hi, how are you?

**John Moe:** I'm well, thanks. I read your book. I read *I'm Laughing Because I'm Crying*—a very moving book. One of the first stories you write about is about your great grandmother on your grandfather's side being kidnapped. And there's a lot of material about your family on both sides, and it goes back really far. Was this book a kind of a research project into your life?

**Youngmi Mayer:** The research aspect of it didn't take that much time, just because I hate research, and I have ADHD. So, it was based on basically like three stories that my mom told me as a kid. And I guess in terms of technical research, all I did was go back home and ask my mom about these stories again and then record her. And it took like an hour. I learned a few things that were new, but I never really looked at it like a research-heavy, just because I'm so—like, I hate anything of that sort.

**John Moe:** Okay. Okay. Well, what were you trying to do in writing this book? Because there's so much that you cover, and I know that you've dealt with—as you say—ADHD and anxiety and depression. What were you trying to—what was the story you were trying to tell?

**Youngmi Mayer:** When I was thinking about writing a memoir—I think like most people, you sort of go back and log all of the stories that you always imagined were going to be in your memoir. (*Chuckles.*) But I didn't want to just like write them into the book. I wanted like an overarching theme.

And so, I had this idea of what if I take like my very deep, dogmatic life principle, and bake that into the book, and make that the outline. Which is—and I never expressly say that this is the point of the book, but I do say it outright in the book, that my mom was raised on these principles of Dàojiā, which is Taoism.

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And it's funny, because she was raised in this way, and she's a born-again Christian. And so, she lives her life in this like Christian values sort of way. But I realized looking back at my childhood, even though she was Christian before—she like converted before I was born—all of the lessons and the philosophies and the way that I was taught to look at life was based on Taoism. And which is like—you know, like the obvious symbol is yin yang. It's like this idea that both sides of life always have to exist, and they always will exist no matter what you do. And it's about like finding the balance of that.

Which is very different than like Christian values, which is like, “Be good, and don't be bad.” You know? (*Chuckles.*) Like, her philosophy is like, “You are good, and you are bad. There's no way to not do that.”

And like everything she's ever taught me has always been from that perspective. And so, I think that was the underlying message that I tried to play in the book. And every time I bring up a story, it's kind of like to play off that theme. Like, I have another one to counteract it. And then—that's why all the chapters like come in pairs, basically.

**John Moe:** Mm. To have that balance, to have the both things existing at the same time.

**Youngmi Mayer:** Yeah. And I try to do this thing. I don't know. Each chapter is named for something. And then it's actually—at the end of it, I say it's the other thing. Like, meaning both things are like the opposite and the same at the same time, kind of. So.

**John Moe:** Yeah. Yeah. As you write about in the book, your father is White, your mother is Korean. You were mostly raised in Korea. What did that multiracial identity mean for you growing up in Korea?

**Youngmi Mayer:** What it meant for me, being biracial, growing up in Korea in the '80s—right?—and '90s, and then I did go back for a little bit in the early 2000s. I think... I wanted to just share my experience, because it wasn't positive. It was negative. And back then and still now Korea is very homogenous ethnically, and it's seen as very bad to be biracial—especially, you know, when I was a kid. And there was a lot of stigma to that, and it was seen kind of like—I make a joke about this, but it was seen a deformity-adjacent thing, you know, to be biracial. Like, it's really weird and bad.

And I think part of the reason why I wanted to share that experience of it is, living in America, there's a very, very different view of biracial Asian/White people, or Wasians—as they're called, I guess, among the kids. Where, you know, like in America you're viewed as somebody that has a lot of privilege. Because, you know, a lot of us are like White passing, or it seems better to be part White, but that's just a very different experience than what I went through as a kid in Korea.

**John Moe:** Yeah, for people who haven't read the book—I don't know, and I don't know really where to begin with what you went through. But there was a lot of bullying. There was abuse. There was physical abuse. And I was struck by how much of it seemed—like, I couldn't really tell, and I'm coming from my own cultural vantage point, being a White American. I couldn't tell how much of that was cultural and how much of it is you just ran into some people who were particularly nasty to you. Like, how much of the hard times you went through were just baked into the culture, and how much was sort of individual to your experiences.

**Youngmi Mayer:** The interesting thing is—okay, so I must say that now, in modern day, I think the experience of somebody being part White or half White is mostly positive. But it was a gradual shift. And like I said, when I was a kid, it was still culturally considered very bad. And I've heard a lot of accounts of—I mean, it used to be very, very bad. Like, I bring up in the book that biracial children were just killed by the Korean military, because they

were stateless. But that was—you know, like I think Korea was moving out of that era by the time I was born, but it was still around. But I have heard a lot of accounts of people that are biracial that, you know, grew up outside of cities, like in the country. Like, their moms who were sex workers would go back to the farms.

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And basically, they would live their lives like in hiding. It was just really scary. I've heard accounts of people that went through that. I've heard accounts of people that are biracial that are half black that have way, way more difficult times than I did. So, I do think a lot of it was cultural. *(Clears throat.)* But that being said, I think it just depends on—you know, like the half-White kid that grew up in like Hannam-dong with all the, you know, diplomats and went to private school had a very different experience than the half-Black kid that grew up in the Korean countryside. So, I think it is cultural, but it just depends on everyone's experiences too.

**John Moe:** But if you're growing up half-White in Korea, even if they're moving out of this area where kids like you were routinely killed, and it was sort of overlooked, is that—? *(Sighs.)* I don't know; is that a baked-in trauma that you have to process and manage for the rest of your life?

**Youngmi Mayer:** I think it affected me in this way that is probably so deep and abstract that I can't even look at it like it's a concrete trauma. I almost see it like—because you know, I was born in Korea, and then I lived there until I was six, and then I went back later after living on Saipan.

I think that age of my development is just so deep, it's like really abstract. Like, I have this like deep-rooted feeling that there is something really wrong with me. *(Chuckles.)* Because Koreans literally were like, “There's something really wrong with you.” So, yeah.

*(They chuckle.)*

**John Moe:** Like, literally saying that to you?

**Youngmi Mayer:** *(Laughs.)* Yeah, they were like pointing at me like, “Oh my god!” Like, I just have like memories of Koreans when I was that young that would point at me at the market, and I was like terrified. So, I'm sure that it affects me somewhere, but it's almost like too deep that it's abstract.

**John Moe:** Wow. I want to talk about your parents a little bit. And I think that the detail that stood out to me most was your mom and her interest in Barry Gibb.

*(They laugh.)*

Which ended up being sort of significant to a bunch of choices that she made. Can you explain that?

**Youngmi Mayer:** I didn't even know his name. I never looked it up. So, thank you.

**John Moe:** The lead singer of the Bee Gees, we'll call him.

**Youngmi Mayer:** (*Giggling.*) It's so funny that—this is proving how much I hate research. I didn't even Google what his name was, but I just call him the lead singer of the Bee Gees.

**John Moe:** (*Laughs.*) Wait, are you just now in this interview finding out that his name is Barry Gibb?

**Youngmi Mayer:** Yes! I literally didn't look it up!

(*They laugh.*)

I hate research. You could even be making that up, and I would just—I'd be like, “It's Barry Gibb! Barry Gibb is the lead singer!”

(*They laugh.*)

**John Moe:** I wouldn't do that to you. I wouldn't mislead you about Bee Gees' nomenclature.

**Music:** “You Should Be Dancing” from the album *Tales from the Brothers Gibb: A History in Song* by the Bee Gees.

*My woman, give me power*

*Go right down to my blood*

(*Music continues under the dialogue.*)

**John Moe:** More with Youngmi Mayer in a moment.

**Music:**

*What you doing on your back?*

*Hey*

*What you doing on your back?*

*Hey*

*You should be dancing, yeah*

*Dancing, yeah*

*What you doing on your back?*

*What you do doing on your back?*

*(Music fades out.)*

**Transition:** Gentle acoustic guitar.

**John Moe:** Back with comedian Youngmi Mayer, author of *I'm Laughing Because I'm Crying*. Her parents met, she implies in the book, because her dad looked like Barry Gibb—the lead singer of the Bee Gees. That's funny, of course, but it highlights the importance of appearance and cultural identity in her story. And I think it enhances the sense of alienation one can feel from living in more than one country, more than one culture.

**Youngmi Mayer:** I mean, it was just like a joke that I made at one point, but I guess the joke—what I'm trying to express with that is my mom did make a lot of choices based on—I guess I was trying to express the ridiculousness, because I think a lot of people do this. If you hear—you know, I know that show *90 Day Fiancé* is really popular now. And I think I grew up around a lot of people—especially back in those days, probably less so now—that we're like obsessed with American culture, because of like the soft power propaganda. You know?

And it's so interesting how powerful that is. Because like these Korean kids growing up in the '50s and '60s, like my mom in the Korean countryside, would watch one performance of the Bee Gees on TV or the Beatles or somebody, and they'd be like, “*(Gasps.)* Wow!” You know, like “This is America.” And I think the Bee Gees and the Beatles are not even American. *(Chuckles.)*

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But you know what I mean? Like, that's what—

**John Moe:** Culturally similar, I guess.

**Youngmi Mayer:** Yeah. Like, or Elvis, I think my mom said. You know, she remembers when Elvis showed up in Korea, and people were obsessed. And for a lot of people that are living in these like war-torn or poverty-stricken places that South Korea was back then, those tiny, little, weird things become the reason that they think they want to go to America. You know, and it seems very childish, but I think a lot of people think that way. You know, like even if you're not a kid that's having fantasies in war-torn South Korea, like I think a lot of people are like, “I'm going to move to Paris, because I saw this movie, And like, this is what I imagine.” You know?

And I think when I was making the joke that my mom sort of liked my dad because he looked like the lead singer of the Bee Gees, or maybe that's why she wanted to move to America,

because men look like that there or something—I was just using it as this example of, I think, something that's very common among people.

**John Moe:** So, how did your parents meet?

**Youngmi Mayer:** So, in the book, I write about it. And it's always been this point that's very interesting to me. Because both my parents—like I say in the book—they don't have, or they didn't have, really a life plan. They just kind of went with the wind everywhere. And so, my parents met at like a bar, like a dive bar. Because my mom was working at Baskin Robbins, and she had just gotten divorced from her first husband, who was a US military man.

And she was a single mom living in Fairbanks, Alaska, working at Baskin Robbins. And she like stopped at a dive bar to get a sandwich after work. And I'm assuming maybe it was because it was the only place I was open still. And my dad was there drinking. (*Chuckles.*) And like literally, you know, they talked, and he gave her, or she gave him her phone number. And then they started dating, I guess.

**John Moe:** That was before you were born. She wasn't a single mom with you; that was with your sister.

**Youngmi Mayer:** No, my sister. Yep.

**John Moe:** Gosh, there's so many places to go. How did you end up on Saipan?

**Youngmi Mayer:** Because my parents just had like (*laughs*) no reason for their life. And I mean, this is why I think they're interesting people. And I do think for a lot of the reasons, I'm kind of like this. And my life has been kind of interesting, because I'm the same way.

I think part of the reason was because, you know, my dad really likes being this eccentric person that's like a world traveler. And you know, he spent most of his adult life in Kenya and Ethiopia and Angola, even when I was a kid, just working on the continent of Africa and then Alaska. And I think part of the reason was my dad just was consciously making an effort to be like, “I want to live in these like off-the-grid places. You know, what's next?” You know, he moved here, and then he was in Korea in the '80s, you know, when there were not that many White people that weren't military. And then, ooh, this like remote island in Micronesia. I feel like that fit his narrative.

But also, Saipan—the island that I grew up on—is like a three-and-a-half-hour plane ride from Korea, and they speak English on Saipan, because it's an American Commonwealth. And so, I think my parents thought, “Well, we'll be close to Korea, and then she'll learn English.” Because at that time, I didn't speak English.

**John Moe:** Why did you move to America when you were 20?

**Youngmi Mayer:** This was, I guess, something that I had to look at when I was writing the book, because in my telling of it, I always tell people that I had no reason to move. Like, I was just—I bought a plane ticket, and I was visiting my friend, and I stayed. Because she was

going to San Francisco. So, I planned to meet her there. But then looking back, I realized that I was in a very bad, abusive relationship. At that time I was 20 and with somebody a little older, and I had been in that relationship since I was in high school. And I think in the back of my head, I was trying to escape that.

**John Moe:** I mean, you talk about kind of this cultural affinity for America when people had seen Elvis or seen, you know, Western performers like the Beatles or the Bee Gees. Did America hold a special allure for you, or did it just seem like a place to run away to because it wasn't Korea?

**Youngmi Mayer:** (*Clicks teeth.*) You know, that is like such an interesting thing, because I feel like maybe I should have wrote about that in the book. But it is—it did play a big role in my life. So, I was—okay, I think the other part of this equation, before I explain my view on America is that—

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—yeah, my mom loved things about America culturally. And she probably as a kid looked up to it. And then I think when she lived here for a little bit—because she lived here probably around a little less than 10 years total—she saw the reality, you know, of this is not the place where Bee Gees just walk around all the time.

(*They chuckle.*)

But the other half of that is that my father grew up—he's from New Jersey, and he grew up in Jersey City. And he hates America. He fucking hates America. And so, my entire life, I was brought up thinking that America was the worst place in the world, right? And every time he talked about it, he was like, “It's so bad, and everyone's so shitty and cruel, and they shoot each other, and blah, blah, blah.” And like, just talking so much shit about America.

You know, I had like a tumultuous relationship with both my parents, but part of it, I was just kind of like, “I don't know if I believe my dad, and I kind of want to see it for myself.” (*Chuckles.*) But my dad was very consciously keeping me and my sister away from America throughout our entire childhoods. And I think coming here, maybe part of it had to do with just like being like, “I don't believe my dad.”

But having lived here now for almost 19 years, I think my dad was right in a lot of ways. (*Laughs.*) Give it up for my dad. He was speaking the truth. But I think in a lot of ways, Korea is too difficult for me to live in more. So.

**John Moe:** Why is that?

**Youngmi Mayer:** I think it's difficult, because... well, first of all, I'm biracial. So, there is already a way that I'm different that plays into everyday life there. It's very difficult to live in Korea and be a Korean person that's different. You know, it's very different than being a Western person, right? Or like a foreign person.



Because if you went to Korea, people would immediately make room for things that you don't know. But because I'm like fluent in Korean, and I act in a very Korean way, it's like they're constantly disappointed in me. (*Chuckles.*) You know? Like, it's like—which is like every Korean person, I think. There's a lot more pressure.

**John Moe:** Yeah, yeah. You say in the book, “Being in a perpetual state of anxiety throughout my childhood had the opposite effect on me. It manifested as debilitating depression in my early adulthood, causing me to lie catatonically in bed for years.”

Have your experiences with depression—do you think that traces pretty neatly back to the anxiety of your childhood in Korea and Saipan?

**Youngmi Mayer:** Yeah, I think—you know, I've done a lot of therapy, and I think if I were—yeah, exactly in the way that you say. But I think if I were to explain how, it's kind of like all of those like negative emotions, like anxiety and sadness and anger were present. I was not allowed to show them. There was no place for my emotions. And you know, I bottled them up inside. And I think—like, when I think about my depression, it's very obvious that was the source of it. And the weight of that and having that like trapped inside me without even really realizing led me to become severely depressed in my 20s and early 30s. And then—yes, like to answer your question, yes. I definitely trace it back directly to that.

**John Moe:** Yeah. How did—when did that start showing up in your 20s? Was that—? Presumably that was after you moved to America.

**Youngmi Mayer:** If I'm gonna be honest, I think I was just depressed straight from like childhood into my 20s, as a teenager. It's all throughout my 20s. Every day was a struggle. You know, it was like—I think there was this one time where I tried to like see a free therapist, like a free clinic. And they were like, “This sounds like—” I think there's like bipolar depression and then there's like one that's just you're always depressed. (*Chuckles.*) And they're like, “This just sounds like—”

**John Moe:** Unipolar depression.

**Youngmi Mayer:** Yeah, that makes sense. So, I had like that. Like, I was always depressed. And you know, I said in my 20s, I couldn't get out of bed, but that was throughout my teenage years. Like, it was—every single day was like this—like, it was so hard for me to get up and do stuff. And I always—you know, like I say in the book, my mom was just like, “Oh, it's 'cause you're lazy.” And I just thought I was lazy! Like, I'm just like, I just don't have energy to get out of bed every day like my dad. (*Laughs.*)

**John Moe:** Wow.

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When did you start to think it was (*chuckles*) maybe something other than a character flaw on your part?

**Youngmi Mayer:** Well, I remember like being in the fourth grade and seeing like an ad for depression. And I was just like—part of me, I was like, “Oh my god, I have depression.” But then another part of me was like, “Well, that’s how everyone feels, and that’s normal. Like, what are they saying?” But then another part of me was like, “No, I don’t have depression. I’m just lazy.” You know?

But then I think I was aware that the thing that I’m feeling is called depression. But then there was another part of my brain that was like, “That’s not real. Like, that’s just somebody being lazy and trying to like (*chuckling*) say that they have a disease.”

**John Moe:** Come up with an excuse.

**Youngmi Mayer:** Yeah. (*Laughs.*) And so, all of those like opinions were in my head. And I think that’s probably part of the reason why it took me so long to start doing therapy in my early 30s. And even then, when I started doing therapy, it was only because I gave birth to my son. And I thought, well, if this is a disease or there’s something wrong with me, then I have to fix it for my son. It wasn’t even like, okay, I have to help myself. You know?

**John Moe:** You had devalued yourself that you weren’t worth fixing, but he was worth you fixing yourself.

**Youngmi Mayer:** Yes, I was like, “I don’t want to fuck the kid up. I gotta do this!” (*Laughs.*) So, I was like, well, I’m gonna go check it out. Maybe you can help me with how lazy I am. But.

**John Moe:** God, it’s so insidious. Depression is so insidious, because it covers for itself. Like, it’s like a parasite. You know? It perfectly disguises itself, so you think that it’s all your fault. Which is, of course, a symptom of the depression itself. It’s an evil genius.

**Transition:** Spirited acoustic guitar.

**John Moe:** More with Youngmi Mayer in a moment

**Promo:**

**Music:** Fun, exciting music.

**Kirk Hamilton:** Say you like video games—

**Jason Schreier:** And who doesn’t?

**Maddy Myers:** I mean some people probably don’t.

**Kirk:** Okay, but a lot of people do. So, say you’re one of those people, and you feel like you don’t really have anyone to talk to about the games that you like.

**Jason:** Well, you should get some better friends.

**Kirk:** Yes, you should get some better friends, but you could also listen to *Triple Click*. (*Click, click, click!*) A weekly podcast about video games hosted by me, Kirk Hamilton.

**Maddy:** Me, Maddy Myers.

**Jason:** And me, Jason Schreier. We talk about new releases, old classics, industry news, and whatever, really.

**Maddy:** We'll show you new things to love about games, and maybe even help you find new friends to talk to about them.

**Kirk:** *Triple Click*. (*Click, click, click!*) It's kinda like we're your friends. Find us at [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) or wherever you get your podcasts.

*(Music fades out.)*

## **Promo:**

**Music:** Playful ukulele.

**Jesse Thorn:** Hi, I'm Jesse Thorn, the founder of Maximum Fun. And I have a special announcement. I'm no longer embarrassed by *My Brother, My Brother and Me*. You know, for years, each new episode of this supposed advice show was a fresh insult, a depraved jumble of erection jokes, ghost humor, and—frankly this is for the best—very little actionable advice. But now, as they enter their twilight years, I'm as surprised as anyone to admit that it's gotten kind of good. Justin, Travis, and Griffin's witticisms are more refined, like a humor column in a fancy magazine. And they hardly ever say "bazinga" anymore. So, after you've completely finished listening to every single one of all of our other shows, why not join the McElroy brothers every week for *My Brother, My Brother and Me*?

*(Music fades out.)*

**Transition:** Gentle acoustic guitar.

**John Moe:** Back with Youngmi Mayer, who was talking about—after years of trauma and anxiety and depression—she finally got to therapy. This was after her son was born. This is kind of a classic depression move, actually. She didn't feel like she was worth fixing for herself, but was worth getting help because of her son.

What happened in therapy?

**Youngmi Mayer:** So, I always try to explain this. And I think a lot of people—because, I just want to say that I feel like I'm somebody that recovered from depression, which I don't even know if I can say that—if that's the way to say that. But. And whenever I tell people that, they ask me, you know, “How did you do it?” ‘Cause they want to do it without paying for the therapy. But—

*(They laugh.)*

**John Moe:** It's like directions to the post office or something.

**Youngmi Mayer:** You're like writing it down. Like, “Okay, and then—and then—”

But unfortunately, it's like one of those things. It's like practice, you know. It's like playing the piano. Like, I can tell you how I learned how to play piano, but you have to like practice playing the piano.

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So, basically, my depression—like I said, I understood that it was stemming from all these negative emotions that I had bottled up inside me as a kid that I was not allowed to express, and they were being withheld inside me. And I like to think of it like sediment. Like, when you get like natural wine or something, there's like that sediment that's like in the bottle, and it's building pressure.

And what had happened was that I was like... not trained; what's the word for it? I was conditioned to—

**John Moe:** Conditioned, yeah.

**Youngmi Mayer:** Yeah, I was conditioned to—whenever I feel a negative feeling, to like pat it down. You know? Like, push it down. And so, as an adult, when I had negative feelings—the bigger they were, especially, the more I like pushed it down. To the point where I wasn't even able to like name a negative feeling—emotion when I had it.

And so, I think the therapeutic practice was, you know, me going in and being like, “I was really depressed this week, and I don't know why.”

And then my therapist being like, “When did it start? And what happened around that time?”

And then me being like, “I had a fight with my friend, but I don't really care. It's not—it doesn't bother me.” Or like sometimes I wouldn't even realize something had happened. And it took me years to be like—(*chuckles*) which sounds really ridiculous, but to be like, “Oh yeah, like something happened, and I felt bad.” You know?

So, the therapeutic practice was like me basically getting back in touch with negative emotions and knowing when they happened. And I think once I—that was part of the practice, and then the other part of the practice was like going back into my childhood, into places that I felt really angry or sad or scared. Because you know, I was like left alone a lot. And feeling those feelings and letting them out. And I think once I started doing therapy and releasing those emotions, there were like— There was like a long stretch, which I think I'm just finally coming out of, where I was just angry for years. Just angry, you know?

And at some point—I felt like it was never going to end, but it did end. I feel like I had to burn off all of the stuff that was inside of me, and it's completely changed the way I move in this world, the way I think. It's like so profoundly different. And you know, like you said, when you have depression, the scary thing about it is that you think it's normal, and it tells you that it's your fault or something. And then, only after you sort of recover from it is when you realize how different and not good!—(laughs) you know, not good you felt during it.

**John Moe:** So, you talked about the anger. Did you have to process—did you have to fully feel all that anger that had been building up, that had been bottled up all those years?

**Youngmi Mayer:** Yes! And it was like this very long process. Because first, I had to be led to water to realize that something bad had happened to me, and I had the right to be angry. So, it was like this multi-step process where first it was like, “Well, your mom or dad did this when you're a kid? That's really fucked up! Like, you should not be okay with that. That's really fucking bad.”

And then me being like, “Nooo, it's not that bad. It wasn't that bad.” And then being like, “Okay, yeah. Actually, that's really bad.”

And then it's like the anger is not just the anger that I should have felt initially, or sadness that I should have felt initially, but it's plus this other anger of being gaslit my whole life, being told that was okay when it was absolutely not okay. And so, it's like the original anger, plus the anger of being lied to and being like... And then, you know, like most people that have tried to confront their parents, when you bring it up, they're like, “Come on, that's not that bad.”

And then there's more anger that comes with like the continual denial. And it's just like a river of anger. And then you try to talk to them, and more anger comes out. And like, yeah. It's like not just burn-off from old anger, but it's like new anger being created by their reactions, you know?

**John Moe:** Well, and you're from a culture too where that kind of anger is discouraged. It's not okay to get angry at your parents over the way they treated you.

(Youngmi agrees.)

How did you confront that? How did you confront that kind of cultural programming you have that wouldn't even let you recognize or feel the anger?

**Youngmi Mayer:** So, I have to say though—so, in Korean culture, you have to really—

[00:35:00]

—like you said, it's absolutely correct. Like, you can't—you have to really respect your parents. No matter what they do, you cannot like confront them or react to them. But there is a *(laughs)*—there is like a cultural thing about Korean people specifically that we are known to be very angry. You know, like there is this stereotype of Korean people that we are angry. And I have seen like people in my family like pop off on their parents, like after decades of holding it in. You know, like that kind of stuff.

But it's not—it is rare. It's very rare for a Korean person to talk back to their parents and rightfully place their anger in the place that it belongs. When I did it—you know, my mom is very understanding, and my mom is very emotionally intelligent, and I think my mom finally got it. My dad is just kind of like, “Oh, I don't know.”

I think the fact that I do live in America, and I do have a little bit of like a buffer there, that there's a little bit of an allowance for me to say or feel certain things. And I think maybe that helped. But I wasn't even thinking about that like culturally; I was just in like this feral animal mode of just like, “I'm angry!” *(Chuckling.)* You know?

**John Moe:** Yeah. Well, is that something that you do on the inside, or turn on and off? Because, you know, you do have people around you. You've got your son; you've got all these other people around you. How was that during this anger processing period?

**Youngmi Mayer:** Oh! Well, I mean, the anger processing period toward my parents was like over the phone, like phone conversations.

*(John affirms with a chuckle.)*

And like, it wasn't just like all day long, me like breaking doors down.

**John Moe:** Smashing things.

**Youngmi Mayer:** It was just like yelling at my mom on the phone. And then it was a lot of just me not talking to my parents, actually. I think that during that time, I just didn't talk to them. And yeah, so it wasn't—sorry, I didn't want to—I don't want to confuse people. *(Chuckling.)* It wasn't like me like punching my parents in the face for three years. It was just me not calling them, because I was angry. And if I did have a conversation, I would be screaming at them basically. *(Laughs.)*

**John Moe:** How are things with you and your parents now?

**Youngmi Mayer:** They're very, very good. They're way better. And you know, I say that because during all that processing, I did not think that it would—you know, it's never been

resolved, but it would never come back to this place that was like pretty okay. So. Yeah, things are good.

**John Moe:** Good. How did you get started in comedy?

**Youngmi Mayer:** I just—you know, I always wanted to do stand up all my life. And it's like one of the things that I also talk about in the book; I just felt like I wasn't really allowed to even try to do stuff that I wanted. And so, I never even said it out loud that that was like my dream. But I think after doing all this therapy and letting out this anger and all the emotions that I felt like I was not entitled to, everything else sort of came up too. Like, oh, all these things that I want to do that I can do. Like, I don't have to feel like I'm not entitled to them anymore.

So, when I was 33, I told my therapist that I wanted to start comedy. And literally the next day, I just started doing open mics. And then I just did that, and that was in 2018. Right before—and then I was doing that for two years, and then the pandemic happened. So, I sort of transitioned into doing online content.

**John Moe:** Is comedy a way of working through all these things that you talked about? 'Cause it sounds like you were starting comedy and doing therapy kind of concurrently. Like, was there some overlap in that Venn diagram?

**Youngmi Mayer:** Yeah. I mean, I continue to do therapy, but I think the—what's that called? Like, the correlation between me having this like epiphany and like realizing that—which is like the big epiphany that helped me with my depression, like realizing I'm entitled to emotions, and I can do whatever I want or whatever—correlated with me starting standup.

**John Moe:** And you talk about your family a lot in your standup, right?

**Youngmi Mayer:** I talk about my mom, and I think I talk about just Korean culture. And then sometimes I talk about just being biracial. But I think mostly—it's more about like culturally like being Korean or biracial than my parents.

**John Moe:** Yeah. Do you get back to Korea much to visit?

**Youngmi Mayer:** So, I used to go all the time. I used to go probably once a year, minimally. But since COVID, I've only been back one time in 2023. It was like a year and a half ago, I think. Or—yeah, 2022. Yeah.

[00:40:00]

**John Moe:** Do you feel compelled to take your son there? And to kind of explain and explore Korea to him?

**Youngmi Mayer:** Yes. I feel... you know, I think my wish was that at some point he would live in Korea for a little bit of his childhood, like a year. I don't know if that's like possible. I mean, I'm going to try at least. But yeah, I do feel compelled that he knows his culture.

**John Moe:** With your guidance, so that he doesn't have to go through the same confusion you went through. It sounds like you're taking a very conscientious approach to that.

**Youngmi Mayer:** Yeah, I think his experience will be a lot different, because obviously it's a very different time. You know, the stuff that I write about when I was a kid, that was a long time ago; it was like in the '80s and '90s. Which isn't that long ago, but Korea...

**John Moe:** It's quite a while ago, yeah.

**Youngmi Mayer:** (*Chuckles.*) But Korea so rapidly changed. And in some ways it didn't at all, but it so rapidly has evolved into this other thing. And he also—even though he's part White, his dad is Korean. So, he very much reads as a Korean person. Which is another like challenge for him, because he doesn't speak Korean. And so, then it's going to be like, “Well, you're Korean, and you don't speak Korean. It's going to be a whole different kind of abuse.” (*Laughs.*)

**John Moe:** Well, we'll read his book when it comes out in a few decades here. But for now, we'll read yours. It's *I'm Laughing Because I'm Crying*. The author is Youngmi Mayer. Youngmi, thank you so much for being with us.

**Youngmi Mayer:** Thank you for having me!

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

**John Moe:** I like to think our show helps people. I hope that this episode helped you. I hope that it made you think about how you approach your past, and how you approach your memories, and how you approach the things that have happened to you, so that they can guide you into the future, and you can gain wisdom.

Getting this show out to the world so it can help other people—well, that does cost money, and we ask you to help support it with your dollars. So, it's really easy to do. All you need to do is go to [MaximumFun.org/join](https://MaximumFun.org/join), find a level that works for you, and then select *Depress Mode* from the list of shows. We really appreciate it if you've already donated. Again, thank you. Thank you so much. In this world that we are facing today, and in the world that we're going to be facing for a little while here in America, we need to help each other out. And that's all I have to say about that this week. That, and I hope you're doing okay.

Be sure to hit subscribe, give us five stars, write rave reviews. That gets the show out into the world where it can help more people.

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



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Hi, credits listeners. On one of Youngmi Mayer's TikToks, she mentions that teriyaki sauce is pretty much just soy sauce and sugar, and that kind of messed me up—in a good way, I think. At least I understand the world a little bit better. I sure do love teriyaki. I'm from Seattle, and in Seattle you can just get this really good chicken teriyaki aaall over the place. And nowhere else—as far as I can tell—in America has that kind of chicken teriyaki. So, as I record this, I'm going back there for a brief visit. And you know I'm hitting up that 'yaki.

*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*

[00:45:00]

*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*

**Jesse:** Jesse from Montreal. For the French speakers in the room, merci d'être toujours là. And for the non-French speakers, thank you for still being here.

*(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!