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**John Moe:** A note to listeners: this episode contains discussion of suicide and suicidal ideation.

It would be easier, in many ways, to do a podcast episode about pickleball. How to play, where to play, equipment you need, why it's so popular, why to play at all. It would be simple. Accessible. Easy to discuss. But this episode isn't about pickleball. It's about something that isn't simple or easy to discuss. We're going to talk about sex.

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

**Transition:** Spirited acoustic guitar.

**John Moe:** We're going to talk about sex, because it's part of health, and it's part of mental health. And we're going to talk about it, because we as a society—and probably we as a show—don't talk about it enough. It's a huge part of people's lives, sex. For some, it can be quite wonderful—a big source of happiness and contentment and joy.

Sex can also be a source of frustration and loneliness and pain. A lot of emotions going on there. A major role in our mental framework. In a Venn Diagram, the sexual health circle and mental health circle overlap quite a lot. And if you have an interesting mind—if you deal with depression, anxiety, other mental disorders—sex can be an even more complicated issue.

We don't talk about it, I guess, because doing so can be difficult. It's a guarded, private thing. It's vulnerable. It's not like pickleball. (*To himself.*) John, stop talking about pickleball. We need to talk about sex.

Dr. Emily Nagoski is a sex educator and researcher. She's the author of the bestselling—groundbreaking, really—2015 book, *Come As You Are: The Surprising New Science That Will Transform Your Sex Life*. It was focused on how women's sexuality works. Her new book is *Come Together: The Science and Art of Creating Lasting Sexual Connections*, which is more built around people in long-term sexual relationships, the challenges they face, and what can be done about those challenges.

**Transition:** Spirited acoustic guitar.

**John Moe:** Emily Nagoski, welcome to *Depresh Mode*.

**Emily Nagoski:** I am so thrilled to be speaking with you.

**John Moe:** I have to ask, what led to you writing this book at this time?

**Emily Nagoski:** So, fascinatingly—in my opinion—it was writing my very first book, *Come As You Are*. So, you might think that writing and talking and reading and thinking about sex all the time could be really sexy? But I mean, you've written books; you know what it's like!

**John Moe:** Not sexy!

**Emily Nagoski:** It was sooo stressful that I lost all interest in having any sex with my newlywed husband. This is back in like 2013. We got married in 2012. I finished the book; things got a lot better. I went on a book tour. Things got a lot worse.

So, I tried following my own advice, which is recognizing that responsive desire is a thing. And if you just like put your body in the bed, you let your skin touch your partner's skin, your body will wake up and go, “Oh, right. This is a good idea. I like this. I like this person. This is a great idea!”

And instead, I put my body in the bed. I'd let my skin touch my partner's skin, and I would cry and fall asleep. And I thought, “I need more advice than I give in my own book.”

So, I did what anyone would do. I went to Google Scholar! And I looked at the peer reviewed research on how couples sustain a strong sexual connection over the long-term, and what sex looks like for people who self-identify as having extraordinary sex lives. And what I found there contradicted the entire mainstream cultural narrative about sex and long-term relationships.

You might be familiar with the sort of like—there's a dichotomy among therapists. On the one hand, you've got the people who are like, “Intimacy is the enemy of the erotic. You need distance in order to keep the spark alive.” And there's other people who are like, “Intimacy is the foundation of the erotic. You need connection to keep the spark alive.”

And when you talk to people who actually do sustain strong sexual connections over the long-term, they do not talk about spark! They don't talk about desire hardly at all. It scrapes into like 10th place in the characteristics of great sex. Like, desire is not the thing. You know what the thing is?

**John Moe:** What's the thing?

**Emily Nagoski:** Pleasure. Pleasure is the thing!

**John Moe:** Yeah, in my notes here, I have written the question, “Could the whole book also just be titled *Pleasure*?”

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**Emily Nagoski:** Yeah! Yeah. Pleasure is the thing. And it sounds very simple, but in fact, pleasure is quite complex. Because I don't know about you, but I grew up in a culture that told me that pleasure is a waste of time, and self-indulgent, and how dare I spend time just

enjoying an experience of any kind that's pleasurable when I could be being productive? Or especially as someone who was raised as a girl, taking care of other people and enhancing their pleasure instead of prioritizing my own?

It turns out pleasure is even neurologically really complicated. There's a researcher named Charles Carver who has suggested that pleasure is a signal that you can stop paying attention to something, because it means you fixed whatever the problem was, and now it feels good. And so, now you can move on to whatever's wrong in a different domain in your life.

Which kind of makes sense from an evolutionary standpoint. But it means that if we want to learn to pay attention to pleasure, it's a skill we're going to have to cultivate in contradiction of everything our culture has ever taught us about how we're supposed to engage with our own senses.

**John Moe:** Okay. So, what does that mean in terms of a roadmap for how a couple who's been together for a while and is maybe—maybe things aren't burning up in the bedroom? (*Chuckles.*) How does that form a roadmap for what they can be doing to get to a happier life?

**Emily Nagoski:** Oh, there's so many things you can do. Let's start with three exercises. The first one is the four questions exercise. Question number one: What is it that I want when I want sex?

People will jokingly be like, “Orgasm,” but 95% of people can have an orgasm by themselves. If you are among the 5% who don't, there are whole workshops and books just about that. But if you're among the 95% who do, then like orgasm is not the thing. You could do that on your own. So, what is it about sex with this other person that you want when you want sex with them? That's the first question.

Also, what is it that you like when you like sex? What is it that you don't want when you don't want sex? And fourth, what is it that you don't like when you don't like sex?

Answer these questions on your own. Have a partner answer these questions. And then, oh my gosh, yes; I'm going to say communication is important! Talk about your answers with your partner. That's the hardest part. So, these questions dig so much deeper and go so much further than a conversation like, “Why don't we have sex more often?” Which is—because it's not about frequency.

When you talk to people who have great sex lives, they're not having sex very frequently, necessarily. In fact, usually they're not having sex at the like average frequency. So, whatever the number is in your mind of like “this is how often people who have sex often have sex”—whatever that number is, they're having sex less often than that. So, it's not about frequency. It's about liking the sex that you have whenever you have it.

So, having that conversation, that's the first activity. The second one is recognizing that the mechanism in your brain that controls sexual response is called the dual control mechanism, because it's got two parts. There's the accelerator that notices all the sexy information in the

environment—everything from your exteroceptive senses, everything you see, hear, smell, touch, or taste; everything you think, believe, or imagine; and all of your internal body sensations. And it sends that turn-on signal that a lot of us are familiar with.

And then there's the break, the second mechanism. The break notices all the good reasons not to be turned on right now. Like, we're talking about sex; it's a tiny bit of sex-related information, so there's a tiny bit of turn-on signal being sent. But unfortunately, there's all this other stuff. Everything you see, hear, smell, touch, taste; everything you think, believe, or imagine; and all of your internal body sensations that your brain interprets as potential threats, reasons to stay vigilant. And that mechanism sends the turn-off signal.

So, the process of becoming aroused is this dual process of turning on the ons, and also, more importantly, turning off the offs. So, the second activity is recognizing what are the things that activate my accelerator, and what are the things that hit my brakes.

So, for some people, activates my accelerator: the smell of my partner, watching my partner do something they're really good at or do something that contributes to the household, watching my partner mow the lawn, or like the sensation of my partner touching whatever specific body part of mine.

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And then on the brakes side, for somebody else, it might be: the smell of my partner, watching my partner mow the lawn, being touched in a particular body part.

*(John chuckles.)*

Right? Because people vary tremendously, and what is an accelerator/activator for some people is gonna be a brakes-hitter for other people. So, you gotta write your own list.

And then the third activity, if you're struggling to sort of imagine which things activate the accelerator and which things hit the brake, think through three times when it was comparatively easy to want or like the sex available in your relationship. And think through what was happening in the larger context of my life, as well as in the smaller context of that experience that made it easy for my brain to interpret what was happening as sexy and good.

So, this is going to be your own physical and mental wellbeing. It's going to be characteristics of your partner that were relevant. It's going to be relationship characteristics. So, those are three exercises that people can try to open the door to conversations that go a lot further than, “Hey, you know what? I noticed you've been having sex less frequently. And I was thinking maybe we should try having sex more frequently.”

**John Moe:** Right. *(Chuckles.)* Should try—yeah! Come on, come on!

**Emily Nagoski:** Yeah! “What? Why don't we just do that? Why isn't it easy?” I wish it were easy. I wish I— And like, as a person who does this job for a living, I really wish I could just be like, “Here's the like secret, magic, instantaneous something-or-other.”

And the reality is that when people are struggling with any domain of their experience of sexuality, whether it's arousal, pleasure, orgasm—there's usually like a big, deep psychological something-or-other. If nothing else, it's cultural shame that's hitting the brakes and getting in the way.

**John Moe:** That's what I wanted to ask about is, you know, you—I think it's probably easier for you, Emily, to talk about this stuff than most people. Because you're really good at it, and you do it for a living.

**Emily Nagoski:** And I've been doing it for 30 years.

**John Moe:** And you've been at it for a while. What about the just struggle to have these conversations that people experience? Like, is it because of just concept of original sin, or puritanical beliefs, or—? Why is it so hard—especially for couples who've been together for a long time, who know each other well, and love each other very much—to have these conversations and to enact some of these plans and exercises that you're talking about?

**Emily Nagoski:** Yeah, I mean, it actually is like the whole puritanical “What's this?” Like, as an American, I'm actually descended from people who weren't on the Mayflower, but funded the Mayflower. Like, those are my people is the Puritans!

**John Moe:** (*Chuckling.*) The investors of the Mayflower.

**Emily Nagoski:** Lockjaw, New Englander, do not express any emotions. Yes, they're the people who thought Britain was too permissive!

**John Moe:** Let's flee 17th century Britain, because it's just a bunch of hippies around here.

**Emily Nagoski:** Let's move to a different continent, steal land from other people, and kill them and stuff.

**John Moe:** Starve and die, just so we can get—

**Emily Nagoski:** So that we can live in a place that is even more controlling of people's bodies, especially their reproductive bodies.

Yeah, that stuff lives deeply in our ancestral bodies. 100%. That's real. And undoing generations of shame around our sexual bodies is not going to happen instantaneously. So, a good place to start is by recognizing that if this feels like difficult, if the idea of even saying genital names out loud makes you blush and feel flustered—yeah! Yeah! Because for generations, if you're American—no matter how your ancestors got here—for generations they've been brainwashed into the idea that sex is dirty, dangerous, and disgusting. Yeah!

So, start practicing. So, say—one of the exercises I really like as like, if you truly—if you're even hearing me say as much as I've said so far, and you're like, (*in a strained whisper*) “I'm not sure I'm going to listen to the rest of this episode, because I don't know if it's okay,” what

I want you to do is: select a genital word that works for you and whisper it like you're whispering, "I love you" to a child.

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I want you to say, (*gentle whisper*) "Vagina," like you're saying goodnight to a beloved human being. (*Tenderly.*) "Penis," like it's sweet and supportive. This is a part of the human body that belongs to your body! Just, (*whispering*) "Elbow. Kneecap. Vulva. Clitoris."

And then try saying it just like you're saying hello to the person behind the counter at the grocery checkout. (*Casual and pleasant.*) "Vulva. Vagina. Scrotum. Testes." Just neutral. Just you're being friendly. You're just being friendly. And then—

**John Moe:** Around the house, not actually at the grocery store.

**Emily Nagoski:** Yes, please. For the sake of the person behind the counter, whose life is probably hard enough already, just say hello to the person behind the counter.

**John Moe:** (*Chuckling.*) Just say hello on that one.

**Emily Nagoski:** But as you're walking around the house, yeah. You can imagine that you're walking down the street, and you see a great friend that you haven't seen in so long! And you meet that person. And in the same voice that you would say, "Oh my gosh, hello! It's so great to see you!" say, "Vagina! Clitoris! Breast! Scrotum! What have you been up to?"

It's a place to start.

**Transition:** Spirited acoustic guitar.

**John Moe:** More with Dr. Emily Nagoski in just a moment.

**Transition:** Gentle acoustic guitar.

**John Moe:** We're back talking with Emily Nagoski, author of *Come Together*.

We have kind of this game plan of centering pleasure, and some of these exercises that we talked about—we have some ideas on how to kind of demystify these conversations and how to get a little bit looser with our terminology and with our openness about communicating with a partner.

What about when something like major depressive disorder comes into play? Which casts the big, gray, wet blanket over so many things.

**Emily Nagoski:** Over so many things.

**John Moe:** How does—yeah, yeah. What does one do then about—I mean—these same approaches?

**Emily Nagoski:** Let me start by recommending the book *Monster Under the Bed* by JoEllen Notte, which is specifically about the relationship between gender and sex in a relationship—the monster under the bed being, not depression itself, but the stigma and the shame that comes with the depression. The book is about how to collaborate with your partner to be honest about the impact that depression has on your sexuality, and how you can maintain some kind of sexual connection with your partner, even if it's not the same as it would be without your depression.

But if your depression is like mine—like, I have the kind of depression that's literally like from jump. It is the day I was born is the day my depression started. So, like there's no such thing for me as a sex life in the absence of depression, so I've had to learn how to do that stuff.

So, I call my depression my blueberry pie, because when it's at its worst, I feel like I'm floating in blueberry pie filling. Like, it's just filling up my lungs, and like I'm just floating in this dark, stick—

**John Moe:** This goo, sticky—

**Emily Nagoski:** 100%. So, my conversations with my partner recognize that the blueberry pie is sitting there, and sometimes the blueberry pie is sitting next to me, and sometimes I am deep inside the blueberry pie. So, that's part of it.

The other part is recognizing those pleasure-favorable spaces I was talking about—one of which is lust. And the goal of lust is to make you happy—ultimately, is to find yourself in the lust space. But if you try to go directly into the lust space in your brain, there's a thing called the ironic process, (*chuckles*) which does exactly what it sounds like.

The harder you try to like make your brain do something, the more difficult it becomes. This is why the yips happen to professional athletes. Like, the harder they try to do something, the more impossible it becomes. But fortunately, there are three other spaces that you can aim for. One is this play space. There are sooo many different kinds of play. And it's a mammalian thing. I don't know—(*realizing and correcting herself*) I do know that you're a dog person. You're a dog person!

**John Moe:** Yes, I am a dog person.

**Emily Nagoski:** You know when a dog goes—(*puffs out a happy sound*)? Right? And their butt's in the air, and their tail is wagging, and their face is soft, and their mouth is open, and their ears are relaxed, and their eyes are bright. And they put their elbows on the floor, and they're like, “Hey! Hey, John! Hey, John! Do you want to play?” It's called a play bow. It is an invitation that says, “Everything I do from this moment on is play.”

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Which means we've got nothing at stake. We got nothing to lose. If I do something that hurts you, just let me know; it's an accident, and I will back up, and we're just gonna play.

And so, there's rough and tumble play, which is what dogs love—rough and tumble play. There's also wordplay for humans, jokes. Also, like board games and stuff is actual—is straight-up play. There's object play—you know, when babies are like in the bath, and at first they're like, “What is this water?” And they're like patting the water and like, “What is this weird thing that's like all around me?!”

And then they figure it out and they realize that if they splash, sometimes they can splash you. And it goes from “what is this” to “what can I make this do”. And they explore with play and curiosity to see what they can make this do!

What would the world be like if our relationship with our partner's genitals was like, “What can I make this do? There's no performance demand. There's no expectation of any specific outcome. We got nothing to lose, nothing at stake. We all know everything's going to be fine, whatever happens. I just want to try a bunch of things and see what you like, and see what I like, and what does this do? Oh, oh, that's fun! That is a fun sensation.”

What if we only—what if we lived in a world where all of us only ever did sexual things that we liked? And here's the hard part: what if we didn't even feel bad for not having the sex we don't like? Wouldn't that be amazing?

**John Moe:** That would be kind of amazing.

**Emily Nagoski:** So, the play space is one of the other pleasure favorable spaces. I'm just talking so much, (*excited*) but I want to talk about the other two favorable spaces! There's the seeking space—which is curiosity, exploration. This takes so many different forms.

Friends of mine sold all their stuff and traveled around the world together, which sounds like a nightmare to me. I don't know how you feel about selling all your stuff and traveling around the world.

**John Moe:** I can see how it would appeal to some people.

**Emily Nagoski:** Right. I also see how it would—and they loved it. Stuff went wrong all the time, and they solved the problems together—usually in a place where neither of them spoke the language. And they had a great time, and they got the babies to prove it.

And you know. That's seeking exploration, curiosity. For some people, it's going to be a new recipe in the kitchen. That's a different kind of exploration. For some people, it's going to be reading books. For some people, it's going to be going to an art museum. For me, when I was in grad school—when I was in grad school, I dated other grad students. And talking about each other's research was basically foreplay.

(*John chuckles.*)



And then, because I did a lot of therapy, I stopped dating grad students, and I married a cartoonist who doesn't have research and doesn't talk about affective neuroscience as foreplay.

The last pleasure favorable space is care, which is like attachment. So, this is when—imagine, it's like sitting in the living room on the couch in front of the fireplace and feeling snuggly and cozy, and your certain special someone touches you in a certain special way. And your brain goes, “I feel so cared for. And held and noticed and connected.” And basically, this couch we're sitting on turns immediately into a bed.

For a lot of people, feeling cared for and feeling motivated to care for someone as peers is immediately adjacent to the lust space. Not for me. And, oh yeah, I wasted a lot of time trying to make the care space connected to the lust space, because I felt like it “should” be connected. Heavy air quotes on that should.

One of the things sex educators say is stop should-ing on yourself. So, I tried to make care a thing. And care just isn't a way into the lust space for me.

So, that's a summary of what it takes me two solid chapters to explain. (*Laughs.*)

**John Moe:** Is this the emotional floor plan?

**Emily Nagoski:** This is the emotional floor plan, which was the thing that did it for me. The reason this was so important for me is because even though I was struggling to like get there—wherever there is; turns out there is a lust space—I knew that if I could just get there, I would really like the sex that was available to me.

One of the great things about being a sex educator is I'm a good communicator. I'm aware of my own body sensations, and I'm good at like letting my partner know what works for me. And I'm good at getting feedback from my partner about what works for them. And so, I would really like the sex.

But a lot of couples who are struggling, especially when there's a desire differential where one partner wants sex a lot more than the other one does, sometimes that lower desire partner isn't just lower desire, they're like, “Frankly, I'd be fine if we never had sex again.”

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Those are people who—this actually happened with some friends of mine. I was at a bar, and some friends of mine—five academic degrees between them and two children under five—and they were like, “Just out of curiosity—yeah, out of curiosity, how do couples sustain a strong sexual connection over the long-term?”

And I said the thing I say, which is “Responsive desire. You set up a time, you set up a time. You get the childcare and then you put your body in the bed, and you let your skin touch your partner's skin.” And as I said you let your skin touch your partner's skin, one of the people in this married couple pushed away from the bar and like had this disgusted look on her face.

And I was like, “Okay, so. We don't have a desire problem here; we have a pleasure problem. You don't like the sex available in your relationship, and it's not dysfunctional not to want sex you do not like.”

**John Moe:** The pleasure isn't there.

**Emily Nagoski:** Yeah, if you don't like the sex, of course you don't want it. You don't like it. You dread—like, if you put that in your calendar— People like me are always suggesting like schedule sex, put it in your calendar. But if you put it in your calendar, and you see it there, and it makes you feel like, “Ugh,” you're not a person who should be scheduling sex. You're a person who should be exploring what kind of sex is worth wanting.

**John Moe:** Yeah. Well, so if that person doesn't have a good relationship with pleasure, is there any hope for that couple?

**Emily Nagoski:** That is a complicated question. One, because in this particular case, it's not that she didn't have a good relationship with pleasure. It's that she did not feel listened to by her partner.

*(John “ah”s.)*

Like, from jump, from the very beginning of their relationship, she felt like he had not been listening to her. There's a certain style of feminist man who has one really great partner who teaches him a lot about how women's bodies work. And he feels like he has learned so much that now he knows everything. And he treats all the rest of his partners the same way that that partner wanted to be touched. And the deal is, we're all really different from each other. So, what worked for that one really great partner is not necessarily what's gonna work.

And so, he was doing with her all the things he learned from that previous partner. And she was like, “You need to listen to me about the things that work for me.” And he had not been doing that at all. They did ultimately get divorced.

So, it's not that she had a difficult relationship with pleasure. It's that she had a difficult relationship with him. But there absolutely are people for many different reasons who have a difficult relationship with pleasure in general and erotic pleasure in particular. Because Puritanism.

**John Moe:** Because puritanism. So—I mean, are those people then out of luck in terms of their future with sex, if they can't experience pleasure?

**Emily Nagoski:** Heck no! We believe in therapy here, right?

**John Moe:** Riiight.

**Emily Nagoski:** Nobody's born feeling ashamed of their sexual body. We had to learn that. You've got to be carefully taught, as they say in the South Pacific. You've been taught from the very beginning.

There was a woman in—I was doing book tour stuff in Europe, and a woman came up to me after an event and said that she read *Come As You Are*, and then she watched her adult brother changing his baby daughter's diaper. And this dad turns away for a second to pick up a diaper, and when he turns back, the little baby is touching her genitals, and he goes, “Ah-ah! Don't touch that!”

And this woman telling this story was like, “What would he have done if his baby had had a penis instead? What would he have said? Or what if she'd just been touching her feet?” A lot of us have a self-critical part that tells us we're terrible people for all kinds of reasons, including for the ways that we experience pleasure.

So, this little baby had this one experience, and she's not going to remember, 'cause she's a tiny little baby. But it's going to accumulate with countless other similar experiences, until she gets to adulthood, and she experiences a genital sensation, and there's like a voice in her brain that says, “You're a bad person if you experience that sensation. Ah-ah, don't touch that. That's not yours. That doesn't belong to you.” Or there's a dark place.

And me, I have a self-critical part like everybody does that tells me I'm a bad person. And it's easy for me to make up a story that—I've accomplished a lot, and I beat myself up, and it's easy for me to think I accomplished a lot because I beat myself up. But actually, I was going to do all that anyway.

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And what if—far from accomplishing stuff because I beat the crap out of myself, what if, actually, I'm just using up extra energy beating myself up and then trying to heal from the damage I have inflicted on myself? What would happen if I not only stopped wasting energy beating myself up, but also healed from all of that damage?! Oh, what could happen? What would I be capable of the—both at work and in my sexual life—if I didn't have self-critical thoughts about my body and my sexual response, and the ways I experience pleasure, and “I should be able to have orgasm from this kind of stimulation, and I don't”, and “I should want sex more often”, and “I'm a bad wife”, and all the noise in my head. Everybody has that kind of noise in their head.

**Transition:** Spirited acoustic guitar.

**John Moe:** More with Emily Nagoski after a short break.

**Promo:**

**Music:** Bright, funky synth.

**Jeremy Bent:** Hey everybody, I'm Jeremy.

**Oskar Montoya:** I'm Oskar.

**Dimitry Pompée:** I'm Dimitry.

**Jeremy:** And we are the *Eurovangelists*.

**Oskar:** For a weekly podcast spreading the word of the Eurovision Song Contest, the most important music competition in the world.

**Jeremy:** Maybe you already heard Glen Weldon of NPR's *Pop Culture Happy Hour* talk up our coverage of this year's contest, but what do we talk about in the off season?

**Dimitry:** The rest of Eurovision, duh. There are nearly seven decades of pop music history to cover.

**Oskar:** Mm-hm. We've got thousands of amazing songs, inspiring competitors, and so much drama to discuss. And let me tell you: the drama is juicy.

**Dimitry:** Plus, all the gorillas and bread-baking grandmas that make Eurovision so special.

**Jeremy:** Check out *Eurovangelists*—available everywhere you get podcasts—and you could be a Eurovangelist too!

**Oskar:** Ooh, I wanna be one.

**Jeremy:** You already are, it's that easy.

**Oskar:** Oh, okay. Cool.

*(Music fades out.)*

**Promo:**

*(Sci-fi beeping.)*

**Adam Prianca:** *The Greatest Generation* has been going on for more than eight years, and while it's the world's most beloved *Star Trek* podcast, we know it can be a little impenetrable.

**Benjamin Harrison:** If you've been *Greatest Gen*-curious but have never taken the leap, you could be forgiven for being a little bit intimidated.

**Adam:** We recommend exploring your *Greatest Gen* curiosity in a safe, fun environment with partners you can trust. And right now is one of the best times ever to become a new listener.

**Benjamin:** That's because we just started covering a new series—*Star Trek Enterprise*, one of the weirdest editions of *Star Trek* ever released.

**Adam:** This is your chance to ease into the *Greatest Generation* lifestyle.

**Benjamin:** *The Greatest Generation*, now covering *Star Trek Enterprise*—the one with Scott Bakula—every Monday on MaximumFun.org or in your podcast app.

(*Sci-fi beeping.*)

**Transition:** Gentle acoustic guitar.

**John Moe:** We're back with Dr. Emily Nagoski, author of *Come Together*.

To get back to the depression—and I don't know if this is something that you've wrestled with in a real, practical, and direct way or not with your depression—but is it a matter of isolating the depression and saying, okay, you know, here is the challenge that I have before me with having a good sex life with this person that I'm with; let me figure that out, and then also factor in depression additionally? Or is it part of a whole—I guess to use the psychological term—gestalt of the person?

**Emily Nagoski:** So, I have found a lot of power in an internal family systems approach, so I consider—I think about my depression as a part of me. It is the blueberry pie part. And sometimes I am unblended from it very well, but sometimes it takes over me. So, I notice the times that I am just swamped by my depression, and I've worked very hard over many years to learn the skill of how to get through the blueberry pie.

I like surrender to it, essentially. I—UGH, I turn toward it with kindness, compassion, and curiosity, and I allow it to exist. And so, I surrender to it, and I soften so that I am denser than the blueberry pie, which means that I sink. I sink down through the bottom of the blueberry pie, and I drop down—bloop!—onto a beach where the ocean waves wash away all the leftover goo of the blueberry pie.

And then sometimes I'm not in the blueberry pie; the blueberry pie is in me. And that's a time when it is muuuch easier for me to get to a play state. So, we've been together for 14 years about, and the very—like, we met in August, and my depression gets way worse in the

winter. So, like a few months into our relationship, he got to see me in full seasonal affective disorder, double depression.

He developed a hatred for the *Lord of the Rings*.

[00:35:00]

Because that was my comfort watch that winter.

*(They laugh.)*

I would just lie on the couch, crying, watching *Lord of the Rings*. So, like he got to know like right up—very early in our relationship, he knew what was up. And so, I can talk with him explicitly about like, “Here's where I am relative to my depression.”

And like, when I'm that deep in it, nothing is—like, I do not have access to pleasure. My brain is not capable of experiencing—like, I can't taste food. Right?

**John Moe:** There's nowhere on the floor plan that you can find a doorway that leads to the place.

**Emily Nagoski:** Yeah, I am just in the panic. So, on my floor plan, panic grief is outside the house of my emotional floor plan. There is not a way in. I just need to like bloop out until I plop onto that beach in my mind. And then I can make a choice about like which space I want to return to. And I usually return to the care space first, and then I go to the play space. So, I feel connected, and then I can go to the play space.

And if this all sounds complicated, I apologize. I know. When you—like, we're making a deck. We're making a card deck, so you can like lay out the different rooms and see like where can I go in my emotional spaces in my brain that has a doorway into lust? And it makes so much more sense when it's like physically laid out.

*(A cat meows in the background.)*

Developing a relationship with your depression so that you can have sort of like a friendly relationship where you have respect for it, you understand what its role is, and trying to like help you survive. And it understands that it is an ancient and probably ill-informed part. Like, it doesn't know that you're an adult who can take care of yourself now; it thinks it's still keeping you safe somehow.

And you're like, “Nah. Nah, dude, you're just making it so that I have less fun and cannot fuck this human that I LOVE! This is my favorite person; I super wanna fuck this person!” And you're like, “Can you go on vacation this week, depression? So that I can fuck this person that I love!?! Please?”

**John Moe:** Your book comes out at a time when—and we talked about this a little bit before we started rolling with tape—where there's some stress in the world. A new administration has taken power, and a lot of people are scared; a lot of people feel under attack.

How do we understand some of your teachings, and in terms of like navigating something as intimate and that has such abandon to it as sex, with all the fear and anxiety that is going on in the world right now?

**Emily Nagoski:** Yeah. So, currently LA is still on fire, and there's a blizzard in Houston, and we just withdrew from the Paris Climate Accord.

*(Sarcastically.)* Cool. Neat. Fun.

And not to mention the long chain of executive orders dictating that there's two genders.

There's only two ideas in *Come Together* that were complicated enough for me to need two chapters. One was this affective neuroscience of the emotional floor plan, and the other one is basically the patriarchy. I call it the binary mirage, the idea that gender—like, there's two, and that's it! Because the most insidious and intrusive cultural monster that is messing with our sex lives really badly is the idea that there is one way for you to perform your gender. And if you fall short, then you are a bad person, and there's something wrong with you, and you don't deserve love. And you certainly don't deserve pleasure or eroticism.

There's one chapter that's for everybody, and then there's one chapter about the patriarchy specifically for heterosexual type people, because I am worried about the straights. In the research, it's been quite clear for a couple of decades now that LGBTQIA2+ folks, lovingly known as the Alphabet Mafia, have higher quality sex. They have more orgasms. They have more oral sex. They're more likely to say, "I love you." They engage in a wider variety of sexual behaviors.

But straight people have more frequent sex. So, they have more frequent sex that they like less.

I am worried about the straights! So, they get their own chapter.

In terms of this political world that we live in—

[00:40:00]

I really am like actually begging all the cisgender heterosexual people to dive really deep into their understanding of their gender and their partner's gender and the ways they've been brainwashed that they are supposed to behave, especially as sexual people. Because the more we believe these lies that there's only one right way to be a man, and there's only one right way to be a woman; and if you are not those things, then you deserve all the bad things that happen to you. And when it's—well, it doesn't matter who it is; ultimately, you deserve to have the shit beat out of you physically. And if no one does that for you, you'll just go ahead and beat the shit out of yourself.

Because the clearer you get about the ways you have been lied to about your gender identity, and the more you embrace who you truly are as a gendered person and as a sexual person, the easier it will be for you to create space in your heart for our trans and nonbinary siblings, so that when shit hits the fan—which it will, and soon—you will have space in your heart. There will be no question in your body, no hesitation that these people deserve care and respect, and they belong in our lives, and they deserve to live in public.

I need that. I need straight people to get on board. This is work I've been doing for— 1999 is when I started working with and for the trans community. And seeing the ways there's been a reactionary backsliding has been agony. And I can only imagine what it is like for trans people who've been living through it and watching their rights pulled away.

So, (*stammering*) there are two chapters about gender, and if you're like, “But Emily, there are two!” I have an appendix just for you called *Because Biology* about the ways even the biology—even our sexes—there's not actually two. Because science. (*Frustrated noise.*) So, that's a thing for me.

**John Moe:** Okay. (*Chuckles*) How are you—?

**Emily Nagoski:** Like, I'm a sex educator. You don't know my politics, (*out of the corner of her mouth*) but you know my politics.

**John Moe:** Alright, Emily Nagoski.

**Emily Nagoski:** Can I fangirl now?!

**John Moe:** Go ahead.

**Emily Nagoski:** The book that's behind you, *The Hilarious World of Depression*?

**John Moe:** Yes.

**Emily Nagoski:** Because it was written by a person with depression. So, like many people with lifelong depression, I have totally had like that part of me that's like, “You know what would be cool is if you could be dead.” And that part always is like, “People will get over it.”

When I actually listen to it—because I feel like for somebody who's a podcaster, the audiobook is the correct way to consume their book. So, I listened to the audiobook, and it took away any lie that my brain tried to tell me that people would get over it.

And so, it is because of your book that I decided explicitly that I was never going to kill myself.

(*John “wow”s.*)



Certainly not until my mother was dead. ‘Cause I like, she would like—I could lie to myself, but she wouldn't ever get over it for the rest of her life. And I was not going to do that to her.

**John Moe:** I'm glad I wrote that book, Emily! (*Chuckles.*) I'm really glad I wrote that book!

**Emily Nagoski:** Yeah. It's really important. What you do is really important.

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

**John Moe:** Emily Nagoski, congratulations on your new book, and thanks so much for being with us.

**Emily Nagoski:** Thank you. It's truly my pleasure.

**John Moe:** Dr. Nagoski's book, *Come Together: The Science and Art of Creating Lasting Sexual Connections*, is available for preorder now. It arrives in stores and in mailboxes at your home next month.

Our show exists because people fund our show. That's the only reason our show exists. If that funding was to stop, no more show. We like show. We want more show. So, we need to hear from you.

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[00:45:00]

Join our Preshies group on Facebook, a lot of good discussion happening over there—people helping each other out with mental health issues, people talking about the show, people just talking about life and having a few laughs. I like to hang out there, too. Come and join us.

Our electric mail address is [DepreshMode@MaximumFun.org](mailto:DepreshMode@MaximumFun.org).

Hi, credits listeners. I made it all the way through the show without referencing that Salt N' Pepa song, "Let's Talk About Sex". I guess I just did reference it. Damn it.

*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*

**Kevin:** Hi, this is Kevin from Long Beach. I just wanted to say: whatever you're going through, you're not going through it alone.

*(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!