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**Hari Kondabolu:** *(With a tune riffed from the Folger's coffee theme.)* The best part of waking up is going back to sleep!

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

**Transition:** Spirited acoustic guitar.

**John Moe:** That clip you just heard was from Hari Kondabolu. It's a jingle he wrote, he says, for depression. Hari is a standup comedian, podcaster, and writer based in New York. He performs at clubs around the country. He's been on *Conan*, *Letterman*, *Jimmy Kimmel*. He's a guest panelist on NPR's *Wait, Wait, Don't Tell Me*.

In 2017, Hari's documentary, *The Problem With Apu*, premiered. It examined the *Simpsons* character Apu within the framework of the minstrel archetype and racial and ethnic stereotypes. And Hari Kondabolu is a person who deals with depression. Has for a very long time, although he hasn't often talked about it much in interviews or in his comedy. And that is starting to change. He's starting to open up. This clip is from November 2024.

**Clip:**

**Hari Kondabolu:** I'm in therapy. I've been in therapy for well over a decade. I love therapy. It's basically—

*(Scattered applause from the audience.)*

Yeah. It's a class you take about yourself, basically. It's pass/fail.

*(Laughter.)*

Honestly, it's more pass/fail for the therapist, to be perfectly honest.

You know, I'm medicated, right? For the longest time, I wouldn't take antidepressants, anti-anxiety medication. It felt like I was selling out like, as if like they're like a major label, and I'm an indie band. You know what I mean? Like, "I don't need Paxil! What's wrong with sunshine and calling your friends?!" You know?

*(Laughter.)*

"Why do I need this fucking Lexapro?!"

I remember, a friend came into my house once and saw my pills and was like, “What are those?”

And I'm like, “They're antidepressants.”

And he's like, “Oh, fuck, I'd never put those in my body.”

I'm like, “I've seen you drunk and high!” (*Mockingly.*) The only pills I use have to be unprescribed and from the internet.

What are you talking about?

**Transition:** Spirited acoustic guitar.

**John Moe:** Hari Kondabolu, welcome to *Depresh Mode*.

**Hari Kondabolu:** Oh, thanks for having me, John. It's good to be here.

**John Moe:** How are you today? Like, really, how are you?

**Hari Kondabolu:** (*Laughs loudly.*) It's nice to know that that question can be asked, and I can give an honest answer. As opposed to the game we all play, right? Like, I'm fine, or—

**John Moe:** I'm fine. I'm doing great!

**Hari Kondabolu:** “Hanging in there” is the closest I'll ever give to an honest answer. One time I was at a coffee shop, and the person asked, “how are you,” and I just wasn't in it.

And I was like, “Do you really want to know?” And that—it felt like the whole coffee shop froze. I felt like I had disrupted like the world order, and no one knew what— And I just kind of was like, “That's alright, it's fine. I'll have an Americano.”

**John Moe:** (*Laughs.*) A single spoon hit a dish and echoed throughout the whole room.

**Hari Kondabolu:** (*Laughs.*) But yeah, I'm doing okay as of right this second. Last week was a little more up and down, but right now I'm starting the week off at a neutral, which is fine.

**John Moe:** Okay! Yeah. We'll take neutral. We'll take fair.

**Hari Kondabolu:** I'll take the numbing of antidepressants (*laughs*) over the possibility of slipping way under. So, this is—I'm functional. I still have a sense of humor. I'm able to do a podcast with you right now, so those are all good signs.

**John Moe:** Hey, C's get degrees, my friend. You know?

**Hari Kondabolu:** (*Cackles.*) That's very funny, and no South Asian parent I know has ever heard that expression. So.

**John Moe:** (*Laughs.*) When did depression first show up in your life?

**Hari Kondabolu:** I obviously have thought about this a great deal, because it gets confusing. Like, you know—I don't know if this is true with other people. When depression actually started for me—because sometimes I wonder like was that teenage angst, or was that depression, you know? The semester where I was in love with a girl and stopped doing homework, how much of that was not knowing how to deal with that kind of—the feeling of love and longing? And how much of it was setting the precedent for what depression was going to look like for me?

Which was kind of an all-encompassing, nonfunctioning kind of way of life.

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Like, like when depression was at its worst for me, I just didn't do anything. And I feel like, in high school, I saw—you know, that kind of behavior start, during that junior year when I was like 16. And then I think going up to college, I'm not sure how much of it was just the loneliness of being a brown person in Maine and like feeling very lost and confused and alone.

And there's something about the... a Maine winter, you know, with snow, that really did not serve me well. Do you know what I mean?

So, you know, would I say that it started there? I mean, it was definitely in those years; I'll say that. Between the age of 16 and 21, where I think I felt it for the first time.

**John Moe:** Would it shut you down for like weeks at a time, months at a time, a year at a time? Or just for a day or two here and there?

**Hari Kondabolu:** It was more like a day or two here and there. The weeks at a time, the months, that came with time. I think as the pressures of adulthood got greater, as I needed more coping strategies than I had available to me, when a therapist wasn't a choice but a necessity.

You know, like at this stage, I was dealing with stuff at home that was pretty heavy. Which I don't want to get into. Because it's that tricky ground where, uh, am I allowed to talk about the mental health states of other people that I love? You know what I mean? It's like not mine to tell, but certainly there's some of that woven into my story.

But yeah, those years... I just remember not knowing what to do with these feelings. Like, the depth of like, wow, it's the next day, and it still feels like the day before. That—when I

started to feel that, you know, you knew something was off. Because usually the day—when I was a kid, I remember the day resetting. And whatever I was upset about the day before generally disappears. And it stopped disappearing.

**John Moe:** What did mental health mean to you as a kid? Like, what were you raised on thinking depression was, or a mental health condition was?

**Hari Kondabolu:** I mean, there were no mental health conditions, you know? There was, you know, there were—like, you hear things in pop culture like schizophrenia, you know? Or somebody being psychotic. I didn't know what those meant. They all went under the umbrella of crazy. You have a therapist, because you're crazy.

And that word, “crazy”, is so dangerous, especially when it gets internalized. Right? And you know, I had parents both—you know, who were in the medical field. But the idea of mental health treatment, especially when we were younger, was not an option.

I remember once, probably in high school, I was really not feeling great, and I didn't know how to explain it to my mom. And I was upset because I'm like, “Mom, I'm not—I don't know how to explain this, but I've been feeling down for a long time.” And again, this is that period of time where I don't know whether this was angst or whether this was, you know, something greater.

And my mom, I remember her saying like, “What, do you want to see a therapist or something?” And she said it with such like... venom and disgust is too strong, but it was in the world of like (*scoffs*). It's just like that's the most absurd thing, you know? Like, do you think you need something that absurd, to that level?

And the idea that like, there's a level you have to get to get to that, and I'm not at that level. As opposed to, no, it's probably good to get it early. It's probably good to learn the vocabulary early, to understand where some of this stuff is coming from, to develop strategies so things don't escalate as they would later in my life.

So, yeah, it definitely— You know, I talk to my folks, my mother in particular, about this now, and she says like, “I didn't know.” She's like, “I went to med school in India. We had a—you know, we obviously studied psychiatry and psychiatric illnesses, but the idea of depression the way we talk about it now, it's like, that's not how we talked about it. That's not how we thought about it.”

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The idea of seeing a therapist was so taboo, seeing a psychiatrist was so taboo culturally—and in the US! Like, it wasn't something that they had the ability to talk about with me.

**John Moe:** So, did you carry that same way of thinking on yourself? Like, as you got more off on your own, off to college and out into the world, did you carry that stigma with you?

**Hari Kondabolu:** Yeah, I absolutely carried that stigma with me. I felt... I felt that my mental health, the way my brain was behaving, was embarrassing. It wasn't, "I have a problem, let's fix it." It was embarrassing. I can't figure this out. The idea that like I'm a logical person; I can think through things. The idea of a chemical imbalance, that there's something deeper going on, that doesn't enter your head.

It's like, "Well, it's in my mind, and I'm good at solving problems. I'm good at applying logic to things. I'm good at just coming up with ideas, and my brain is my strength. Like, I'm a critical thinker, so I will critically think and solve it."

And that's not how it works. You can't solve your mental health. You can't just come up with an answer and fix it. That's not how this works. And that's what I was—

**John Moe:** It must have been very frustrating.

**Hari Kondabolu:** Oh, it was—you were going around—it was going around in circles! That's what it ultimately is. Like, there's—and oftentimes, there's bits of logic that you feel are truth. And you don't question certain things that you've always believed were true. So, of course it's going to be circular logic. Of course, you're going to be stuck. Well, that's never going to change. So, I can't do anything about that. And I'm always going to be this way, so I need to find a way around this.

Like, it was critical thinking, but there were these huge barriers. And what a therapist allowed me to do is to see those barriers as barriers. To see them as things to gradually be moved. Things that, you know, are social constructs. Things that are not necessarily things I need to have in my life. But boundaries are a real thing.

**John Moe:** When did you finally get to see a therapist?

**Hari Kondabolu:** The first time I saw a therapist was in college, and it was more for some family stuff, and that's how I framed it. I wasn't doing particularly well, but I framed it as it was about a family member. Which, you know, there was some truth in that, but it was really about me. It was about how it's affecting me, right?

I remember that the man played soothing music. He had one of those sand things that you like rake, you know?

**John Moe:** Oh yeah, a Zen garden kind of thing? Yeah.

**Hari Kondabolu:** Yeah, he had a Zen garden. And I remember it feeling exactly like the caricature of a therapist I had in my head.

*(John chuckles.)*

And I left the experience being meh. I think I went one more time, and then I was like, "This isn't for me." And you know, that's my own prejudgments there too. But I went again when I

moved to Seattle. (*Sarcastically.*) Which of course, if you're a person that has depression, the first place you should go is the Pacific Northwest. That is the smartest thing you can do.

**John Moe:** Seattle's built on depression.

**Hari Kondabolu:** Right. (*Laughs.*) But you know, it's where my best friends were, and it's still the most—you know, outside of New York, it's the most important city in my life. And it's a city that will always have a special place in my life for so many reasons. But you know, sometime around 2006, I went to a therapist again, in Seattle, who was—she was... It was at that—you know how there's a phase in depression where you're not necessarily looking for answers; you just want to talk? And you just want to put it all out on the table. And there's something liberating about just saying certain things to other people that you've held in that you don't even share with friends.

And so, the idea of looking for answers is—we're not even there. We're not trying to figure—we're trying to figure out what's going on. And so, you just lay everything on the table. And I remember that's basically what that was. And I remember the therapist being a good hugger, and I appreciated that. I got a hug at the end of therapy. But I remember the last time I went was I was talking—we were getting deeper and deeper into like what issues I was having. And I started talking about my family. It was one of the first times I started digging into like some of the family stuff and expectation and things like that.

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And she was a White woman. I remember her making a comment, “Many times in Asian families—” And once I heard that, I shut off.

That was—she was really nice, but I remember cutting her off and being like, “We're not talking about Asian families, we're talking about my family. We're talking about the particulars of my family.”

And that was the last time. She was very nice. I actually bumped into her again when I was doing television for the first time on *Jimmy Kimmel Live*. I was getting a tour of the theater, and we walked outside, and there was a long line waiting to get into the theater. And my therapist and her husband were on the line.

(*John laughs and “wow”s.*)

And I hadn't seen her in months, because after the Asian families comment, I decided that was enough of that. But yeah, she was in line, waiting to see—

**John Moe:** Did you get another hug from her?

**Hari Kondabolu:** I did! (*Laughs.*)

**John Moe:** Nice!

**Hari Kondabolu:** One for the road.

But it was helpful. Therapy was definitely helpful to get it out. But again, I stopped going after that. And I didn't go again, probably until I was in my early 30s. Early 30s. And that's when it became a permanent part of my life.

I was working at a TV show; I was working at *Totally Biased* with W. Kamau Bell, and, dealing with a lot of personal things, plus work was incredibly stressful. And I felt... I felt like I was not my best self, and I wasn't functioning the way I needed to function for work. I felt like I wasn't functioning the way I needed to function for the people I loved. And went to a therapist, worked with them for maybe six months to a year. And then got a new therapist who I've been with ever since, who I've been with for now 12 years.

**Transition:** Spirited acoustic guitar.

**John Moe:** More with comedian Hari Kondabolu in just a moment.

**Transition:** Gentle acoustic guitar.

**John Moe:** We're back with Hari Kondabolu.

What brought you to Seattle?

**Hari Kondabolu:** My best friend, Sam, lived there. And there was an AmeriCorps program that I did that allowed me to work with immigrants and refugees.

**John Moe:** This is right out of college?

**Hari Kondabolu:** Right out of college. A year—I was at home for a year, which didn't help the mental health. And then I moved to Seattle. And I ended up working for now-Congresswoman Pramila Jayapal, who had started the organization. But she was an early mentor.

**John Moe:** Is that where comedy started, in Seattle?

**Hari Kondabolu:** Comedy started in high school and in college, but comedy became a serious venture in Seattle. That's when it became, "I'm doing this every day. This might be my life." Like, the first time those thoughts entered my head were really when I was in Seattle.

**John Moe:** So, there's some sort of transformation that is happening with young Hari here, because you're growing up with this stigma about mental health, and you seem to be on a very academic track. And then cut to: you're in Seattle, you're in therapy, you're doing standup comedy.

**Hari Kondabolu:** Oh, it's—the most transformative years of my life happened in those two years in Seattle. It almost felt like the way some people describe college, I feel like I got that in two years in Seattle. I learned how to be a performer. I learned how to be an adult. At least some of the early parts of being an adult. I learned what it was like to have fun. I learned how to—you know, to some degree, deal with depression. I had friends take me to my first session. I had this incredible support system that like I had never really had to the same degree before.

Because at this point it was like we're not dealing with a college campus. We're not dealing with parents always being there. These are your peers supporting each other. You know, like peers—you know, I had friends who were not—they did not exhibit toxic masculinity as we'd say now, right? They were—you know, my friends were huggers; they were emotional; they were willing to talk about what was on their mind; they didn't hide it.

They weren't people who would not look down upon therapy or insult me for going, but in fact, encourage it. And I was in a setting, you know, without my parents there, where I had to make choices that were good for my health.

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And I was an adult. And I had to take care of myself, and I was grateful for that.

**John Moe:** You're an adult, but you also—you changed things. Like, you kind of shuffled things up a little bit. And that's interesting how, even though it sounds like the depression was still with you, your frame of reference about how you're going to handle it changed.

**Hari Kondabolu:** Yeah. Yeah, the idea that therapy was an option. I still wasn't sold on it by the end of that, but at least I understood like, hey, it helped.

It absolutely helped me get through something. And maybe I didn't dig deeper. It was more like, “Let's deal with the issues at hand” vs. “let's dig deep into why you are the way you are.” But it was so important that I went. And honestly, it was the fact that I went, and it was the fact that I had community behind me.

**Hari Kondabolu:** It felt less lonely. It felt less isolating. I felt—I didn't feel like—it felt like a doctor's visit more than it felt like I was a freak going to something that would like, you know, is embarrassing. Like, you know, I tell people I have a therapist, and I don't even hesitate. And... I don't assume they're going to judge me anymore. Like, in this era it just feels so normal. Depending on who you are. Maybe in the circles I'm in.

**John Moe:** Yeah, yeah. What part of Seattle did you live in?

**Hari Kondabolu:** I lived in the Central District and in Capitol Hill. I paid \$275 a month in rent.

**John Moe:** Nice.



**Hari Kondabolu:** Our house was robbed a lot, so it kind of worked out in the wash.

*(John laughs.)*

You know, kind of came out in the wash. But like, still. Still, it was \$275 a month.

**John Moe:** Nice, nice. Was standup a form of therapy? Were you looking to get something out of it along therapeutic lines? Or was it just getting up and making some jokes?

**Hari Kondabolu:** It was a little bit of both. I never talked about my personal life. It was something that I would talk about in broad strokes for the purpose of a joke. The idea of talking about depression and mental health, that didn't happen for many years. Like, maybe that started a decade ago with me. Being open about things like that. Probably less than a decade, to be honest. Probably eight years. But at that point the therapy was just the laughter. I wasn't talking about things in my life, I was still talking about the things I care about, like whether it's racism, or sexism, or—you know. I was dealing with immigrant and refugee rights and the violation of those rights every day, so there was a lot to talk about in my life.

But I didn't talk about the stuff that was affecting me, just... You know, I think a lot of comics start by talking about who they are first. I always felt more comfortable talking about bigger ideas. It felt like that was—it served as something I could almost hide behind while still confronting things that maybe other people would not be comfortable confronting. I was always comfortable confronting those things and not talking about myself.

But laughter is still therapeutic. It still felt good. There's something about making other people laugh; you get a high off that. And the idea that in some way or another you gave other people something they needed, you know, that in itself—there's something therapeutic in that feeling.

**John Moe:** And did you leave Seattle to get a bigger audience for comedy?

**Hari Kondabolu:** No, I went to London, and I got a master's degree in human rights. Yeah.

**John Moe:** Oh, okay. Sure. *(Chuckles.)* Every comic's arc! Gotta go get the London master's degree.

**Hari Kondabolu:** I mean, you gotta keep in mind, John, this was 2000 and—at this point 2007. And how many South Asians had had made it? Like, Russell Peters was a global comic. Aziz, I think, was on *Parks and Rec*, but it was early. Mindy Kaling wasn't a standup, but she obviously was a writer and actor on *The Office*. It was still fairly new. You had Kal Penn. I mean, I can list the people that were in the public space in any way, or in the entertainment industry.

I didn't find my... I didn't see me as someone who could break through in that way. Like, I'd been on television, I'd had nice audiences, I'd grown in Seattle. But the idea that I was someone that could actually have a career in it, I didn't believe in it. I just didn't believe it to

be possible. And you know, by the end of that year, I missed comedy, and I'd gotten flown out to do something on Comedy Central.

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And it was clear to me at that point like, “Oh, this isn't just a thing. People believe I have something to add.” But up to that point, I didn't trust it.

**John Moe:** Yeah. So, you finished the master's degree, and then what?

**Hari Kondabolu:** Finished the master's degree, moved back to Seattle for a minute to remember how to do standup, and then I've been in New York ever since. 2009 onwards. And you know, you take the bumps that come with New York standup.

**John Moe:** Yeah, yeah. Well, I have to ask—I listened to your appearance on the *Marc Maron Show*. Can you tell me about what happened when you went to Australia, with the panic attacks?

**Hari Kondabolu:** Sure, sure. I started developing panic attacks probably... I don't even know when the first time was, but it was definitely around 2010, probably? 2010, 2011 was the first time I started having them. It was the feeling of being trapped. It was almost like, um... it was almost like getting an error message. Like, you're putting info in but not getting anything out. Like, it just felt like I couldn't get (*stammers*)... it was like I was short circuiting almost. And chest would get heavy, couldn't breathe, hyperventilating, feeling really hot or really cold.

That's how they started. And I really, at this point, didn't want to deal with the possibility of medication. I was still in that phase where “I can solve this; this is just a matter of me figuring this out.”

**John Moe:** Still using cognitive skills to get your way out of the situation.

**Hari Kondabolu:** Oh, absolutely! Like, I'm gonna find an answer. That's all this was, was a giant mystery. Like, why am I like this? I'll figure it out, and we'll be good.

**John Moe:** It's a story problem.

**Hari Kondabolu:** Exactly. And at that point I went to Australia. There was a lot of very serious things happening at home. Things that, you know, I'm not ready to share at this point, but definitely stuff that I think a lot of families deal with. And it can be really difficult and taxing and all-consuming.

In a relationship that wasn't the right relationship for either of us. And... I was also not my best self in that relationship. You know, I'm embarrassed when I think about it. Just—yeah, I had become a person who “I'm miserable. Why are you not miserable?” I never thought I'd be that person, but I would be upset when my partner didn't feel the pain the way I felt pain.

Like, aren't you feeling this? Don't you feel upset? Aren't you upset? I'm upset. You should be upset.

And you know, even at the time I knew it didn't make any sense, but I felt so lost and angry. And just—

**John Moe:** Would you try to make them miserable like you?

**Hari Kondabolu:** I don't think I had the plan to, but I feel like that's what I was doing. You know, it's not that I want—I don't think it was an active decision, I feel like. But in effect that's what was happening.

The other—I mean, and I know she did the best she could, you know, to really try to get me out of where I was. But you can't. It's not—you know, depression isn't just a matter of cheering somebody up. Do you know what I mean? Obviously, you do.

*(John confirms with a chuckle.)*

This isn't just a headache that you can cure with some aspirin. That's not how this thing works. And so, when I went to Australia, I was carrying a lot of that. I was, you know, like everybody else in this industry, feeling very insecure about my career and not liking where it was. And you know, everything felt like—and looking at it in hindsight, everything wasn't falling apart, but it sure felt that way. And that's all that really mattered, right?

And when I got to Australia, I was sick. I don't know what I had, but it was something. I got something. And that was made worse by the panic attacks, which I started having in that hotel room I stayed at. Tour life is very uncomfortable for me, unless I'm with a friend. And I started, you know—

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Years after this, I started bringing openers with me wherever I went, just 'cause you'd have a friend with you, somebody who shared the experience with you. But I spent most of my time on the road alone in hotels and not having friends where I was. And also, I'm in Australia, the furthest I've ever been from home. And I have home life falling apart, I have a relationship falling apart.

I'm trying to put on a professional front. I was doing shows every night.

**John Moe:** And you have no medication in your system at all.

**Hari Kondabolu:** No medication, because I refused—I'm like, "I don't need it." Right?

**John Moe:** *(Chuckling.)* Because the status quo was going so well.

**Hari Kondabolu:** Yeah, this is gonna—I'm gonna figure this out. I mean, because the idea of medication, it felt—in some way, it felt like I was cheating. Or I didn't understand what it did. I don't think I understood, and I still don't completely understand. But I knew the idea of happy pills. That's not what they are. You know, these aren't—these are things that are, you know... there are things that you naturally have that you're not getting enough of. And this is helping you get what you need to get, what you should be getting.

And I didn't have any level of understanding. And I just felt that it was weak to take this. I was acting weak, taking pills, when I could solve this on my own. Looking at it now, it's ridiculous. It's an absurd idea. It's the same logic I had with not going to therapy. I can handle this on my own. I don't need a crutch. I don't need other people. I'm self-reliant. I am self-efficient. You know, I'm self-sufficient. I don't need other people.

The sense of, you know, an adult means you don't need help all the time. An adult means you do it on your own. It's false, but that's kind of what I felt at the time. And so, I kept going to the doctor during those two weeks in Australia, because something was wrong with me. And I wouldn't—I didn't want to admit what was wrong with me wasn't that I was sick. Maybe I was when I got to Australia, but I had gotten past that. You know, I was in bed having these panic attacks, crying, screaming into a pillow, and then passing out. And then waking up and going through it again, and passing out, and then waking—

It was this never-ending cycle of panic attacks, and I would not leave the room. And then I would have to perform that night. And I was on a showcase with Cristela Alonso, Mike Kaplan, and Wyatt Cenac. And I didn't tell any of them. I didn't tell any of them what was going on. They had no idea. They still—I don't think—I think Cristela might know, but I don't think the other two have any idea what was going on with me.

Because I was at the show. I did my set. It was sometimes good, sometimes sufficient. I'd go back to my hotel room, go through the whole thing again. There was no nightlife in Australia. There was no exploring Australia. There was me losing my mind in that hotel room and thinking of ways to kill myself in that hotel room. And then having a panic attack, because I didn't feel I had the strength to kill myself in that hotel room. Like, it was this awful, awful experience which nobody knew I was having.

And I finally missed a show, because I just couldn't hold out. And I went to the doctor again. They prescribed something, but it was like—it wasn't for what I needed it for. You know? I went three times to the doctor on that trip. Three times they ran tests and couldn't figure out what was going on. And I took... How I got on that plane back to the US when I finished the two weeks, I don't know. I took something and passed out.

And then I was about to—I was going to take a few days off and then embark on the longest tour I'd ever done. About—I think it was like three weeks or a month in a row of touring. 'Cause I thought that was a good idea.

**John Moe:** Right. (*Chuckles.*) 'Cause it had gone so well.

**Hari Kondabolu:** Everything was going so well. And historically, what I had begun to do is when I had problems in my relationships or at home, I would book more shows. I would just leave.

**John Moe:** Why?

**Hari Kondabolu:** To get away!

**John Moe:** To get away. To escape from it.

**Hari Kondabolu:** To escape from it.

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And then being on the road created its own issues.

**John Moe:** Yeah. 'Cause travel's a huge trigger.

**Hari Kondabolu:** It's a trigger. So, it became like, well, I'm miserable here; I'm miserable there. It's two different types of misery, but it's awful.

I stay in Seattle for a few days. I figure that that's done it. I'm good. I'll be fine.

I get up. My first show is at Lewis & Clark University in Portland, Oregon. I get on the Amtrak to get down to Portland. I don't make it. I start having a panic attack. I go to the diner cart. I tell them I'm not feeling well. They give me some ginger ale, which obviously didn't fix it.

Next thing I know, I'm in a hospital in Olympia. Like, an ambulance showed up; they stopped the train; I hear them saying there's a sick passenger, is there's a doctor on board? It takes me a second to realize I'm the sick passenger. And I'm in the ER in Olympia, Washington, and the doctors run a bunch of tests, bloodwork, all that stuff. Nothing.

And I remember this is the only doctor that said, "I'm not sure what this is, but I think you've worn yourself out."

And I'm like, "I have a tour. I'm supposed to be touring. I am supposed to—is this something I can't do?"

And I remember them saying, "I think you need a break." And I think the doctor knew something bigger was going on and didn't know what. But thank god he said that. Because I almost needed permission. I needed permission to stop. And this doctor gave me permission.

**John Moe:** Because it's a doctor saying it.

**Hari Kondabolu:** It's a doctor saying it. God, it's funny, I'd never even thought about the fact that's why I stopped.

Uh, went back to Seattle, and went back to New York after that, and started taking antidepressants. Which was not immediate. The results were not immediate. I remember I moved back to my parents' place for a few weeks, and it was the first time my folks had taken care of me since I was a kid. You know what I mean? But I needed it. I was absolutely losing it constantly.

You know, when I'd gotten back to Seattle initially, after I'd gotten taken from that emergency room in Olympia—my friends drove from Seattle down to pick me up in Olympia and then drive me back. They basically like rotated who was going to spend time with me for the next few days, because I would start having a crying fit and a panic attack while I was with them, and then I'd pass out. And then eventually somebody else would take over and sit with me.

It was like so much love. But I was not healthy. I remember being at a restaurant and having a panic attack in the middle of breakfast and having to go outside and breathe, and my friend paying it, and just putting his hand on my shoulder and like helped me get through it. I was paranoid, because—you know, Seattle's where I started. People would see me having a panic attack. People would see me not having a good time, and they'd have judgments.

Like, it was terrible. But once those antidepressants started to work, I remember the first day. I remember waking up, and I literally thought to myself, "This is the next day. Like, holy shit, it's the next day!"

**John Moe:** That feeling that eluded you so often when you were younger, that feeling where the day just wouldn't reset. It finally reset.

**Hari Kondabolu:** It reset. It was like—I remember like not knowing what to do. 'Cause I remember just feeling fine. Fine! Like, it wasn't that anything had happened. I just—

**John Moe:** Yeah. C's get degrees, my friend! (*Chuckles.*)

**Hari Kondabolu:** It just—I felt clear headed. I didn't feel weighed down. My problems were still there. All the things that had been on my mind and heart were still there. But in that moment, there was nothing I could do about them. And I wasn't ruminating. You know, which so much of it is just ruminating the same thoughts over and over and over until you work yourself into a panic attack, and then the panic attack takes over, and that's what you become.

And I wasn't anywhere near that. And that started—you know, this is ten years. This March or April, I think, will be ten years since Australia.

(*John "wow"s.*)

And I mark that as kind of my life kind of starting over.

[00:40:00]

And I usually kind of see that like 2005 is a very—2015 rather. 2015's a very big year for me, 'cause it's the year that I decided to keep going.

**John Moe:** Yeah, yeah. It's the year you got reborn; it sounds like.

**Hari Kondabolu:** I mean, I decided to stay alive. I mean, there's... and it really did feel like a decision. Like, that's the part that's wild to think about. It felt like I made a choice.

**Transition:** Spirited acoustic guitar.

**John Moe:** Back in a moment with more of my conversation with Hari Kondabolu.

**Promo:**

**Music:** Funky, upbeat banjo music.

**Dan McCoy:** *The Flop House* is a podcast where we watch a bad movie, and then we talk about it.

**Elliott Kalan:** Robert Shaw in *Jaws*, and they're trying to figure out how to get rid of the ghoulies. And he scratches his nails and goes, "I'll get you, ghoulie."

**Dan:** He's just standing above the toilet with a harpoon. No, I was just looking forward to you going through the other ways in which *Wild Wild West* is historically inaccurate.

**Stuart Wellington:** You know how much movies cost nowadays?! When you add in your popped corn, and your bagel bites, and your cheese curders.

**Elliott:** Sure. You can't go wrong with a Henry Cavill mustache. Here at Henry Cavill Mustaches, the only supplier!

(They laugh.)

**Narrator:** *The Flop House*. New episodes every Saturday. Find it at [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org).

(Music fades out.)

**Promo:**

**Music:** Relaxed, playful guitar.

**John Hodgman:** Et ego sum John Hodgman.

**Janet Varney:** Et ego sum Janet Varney!

**John:** And we're the hosts of *E Pluribus Motto*, a podcast dedicated to exploring the mottos of every state in the Union.

**Janet:** Every episode, we will spotlight one state and discuss its official symbols—the motto, flowers, birds, beverages, songs, and even official state muffins.

**John:** Plus, we'll hear from guests whose lives have been inspired by the state's iconography and from residents who call that state home.

**Janet:** Bring some snacks, a map, and your travel journal. Because this podcast is a virtual journey like no other!

**John:** Audi nostrum *E Pluribus Motto*, quaeliba talia lunae du Maximum Fun!

**Janet:** Aaand for the Latin challenged among you and us, listen to *E Pluribus Motto* every other Monday on Maximum Fun.

*(Music fades out.)*

**Transition:** Gentle acoustic guitar.

**John Moe:** We're back, talking with comedian Hari Kondabolu.

Do you still live with the depression now? Is it still part of your daily life?

**Hari Kondabolu:** Yeah. Oh, absolutely. And there's some days where it's worse than others, you know. And I've had a pretty rough couple of years. You know, me and my partner split. We have a kid. And that is stressful, and that is painful.

There's certainly times where things have come up—you know, like having a panic attack for the first time in many years. Like, that was scary, like oh my god. Like, I stopped having these altogether. Now, it's the first one since that period in 2015.

But knowing how to get out of those panic attacks, learning how to recover and regroup—like, the decade of work was there. I mean, that's one thing that wasn't there in 2015. Because



I got very down about the fact that I did all this work and all of a sudden everything is falling apart. My life is falling apart, and all the mental health work I had done is falling apart. And it took a lot of friends and my therapist to remind me that's not true at all!

Like, you have all these things that you are using to keep yourself together, to be a father to your child, to function. That is from a decade's worth of work. So, it's still a factor in my life. Anxiety is still a factor in my life. But even the ability for me to talk about it with you—I would not have had the ability 10 years ago.

**John Moe:** Yeah. I wanted to ask about *The Problem With Apu*, especially the response to it. You faced some backlash to that. You made a lot of people—(chuckling) a lot of *Simpsons* fans, probably—upset about that, and I understand that they kind of let you have it in some quarters. What did that do to your mental state when that was the response?

**Hari Kondabolu:** (Sighs.) You know, initially, of course it was hard to get death threats from all over the world in multiple languages and have extra security at shows, 'cause people were contacting venues, and stuff that's just—really, when I look at now, is just absurd considering what it was: a documentary about a cartoon.

You know, initially it upset me. But there was so much going on. I think what was hard is that it kept going. Like, usually things have a media life, you know? Like, they have a cycle, and you go through the cycle, and then you're done.

**John Moe:** Documentary comes, and it goes. It fades away.

[00:45:00]

**Hari Kondabolu:** That was my thought. That was my hope! You know what I mean? I didn't think it would be the thing that would define me, which it seems like it has in my career. And the fact that even today, you know, I got multiple messages that I had to delete from people who were not wishing me well, who feel like I killed their favorite thing and that I ruined the show, or I'm an example of, you know, everything that's wrong with political correctness, or whatever. Whatever, you know, debate, part of cancel culture, whatever. Whatever people want to say. People that generally didn't see the documentary or look at it critically.

But it affects me more now, in a weird way, than it did when it came out. Just 'cause it—it's the dragging it—it's the fact it drags on. Like, still? Like, I still am getting this pushback for it? Or—

**John Moe:** Does that trigger depression for you, or panic attacks, or anything?

**Hari Kondabolu:** Sometimes. Not panic attacks, but it'll.... you know, performers' careers are up and down, right? All of us kind of have our ebbs and our flows. And you know, Chris Rock told me once, every career slump he's ever been in, he's written his way out of it. And I think that's what we're all trying to do. We're trying to write our way out of it. You know, like whatever it is that we're in, you know.

And they're not gonna (*stammering*)—you know, most careers don't go all the way up and continue to go up forever. You know, there's plateaus, and there's downs, and there's ups. And when I'm not feeling great about where I am—and there are moments where I feel like really proud of what I've accomplished and excited about what I'm working on next, and there are days where I'm feeling like everything is sinking, and I haven't met any of my goals.

And you know, during those moments, when you start receiving those messages of—those hateful messages? (*Laughs.*) Yeah, that doesn't help! It's like all of a sudden it feels different. It's not just some random loser or maniac who doesn't understand what reality is or, you know, hasn't seen the thing, or has seen the thing and doesn't know how to discuss it in a civil way.

It becomes exhausting at that point. Because—you know, the irony of it is, the documentary is about how much as a kid I hated being associated with this cartoon character.

**John Moe:** And then here you are.

**Hari Kondabolu:** Here I am. I'm forever associated with this cartoon character. And yeah, it's a bummer. (*Laughs.*) It's not my favorite thing in the world. So, I'm sick of the—obviously, still getting hate after all this time, it's just—it feels so ridiculous.

**John Moe:** Are you hopeful about your mental health going forward? Do you see sunnier days ahead?

**Hari Kondabolu:** Yeah. Yeah, I mean, I feel like my mental health will always ebb and flow, but I think that's normal. I think you're supposed to have days that are not the best days, and you're supposed to have days that are a lot better than those. And you know, I have had stretches of depression that I've broken through in the last few years, and I might always have stretches I have to break through. But this is a lot better than it was.

I know what it felt like to not feel hopeful. I know what it feels like to reject medication that might potentially get me out of it, you know. I also am aware that there is a part of it that is science, right? Like, perhaps the medication has run its course, and I need to try something different. Maybe there's another way of doing things. You know, like there's another medication perhaps.

Or you see—I've seen so many documentaries and things just about treatment with mushrooms and mescaline. And like, there's so many ways people have worked on their mental health that are ancient. Which actually, if anything, makes me think a lot about like, oh, there is this feeling that being crazy is this modern thing. People weren't like that when they were—not being crazy, but being depressed is a modern thing. And when people had, you know, bigger families, and people were closer together, and towns that were more close knit, you didn't deal with it as much. And it reminds me like, nah. People had their shit, you know.

**John Moe:** Yeah, people had their—I mean, Patton's got a line about, well, you know, John Wayne wasn't depressed.

[00:50:00]

And he says, “No, John Wayne smoked four packs of cigarettes a day. That's how (*inaudible*) that.”

**Hari Kondabolu:** that. Right, exactly.

**John Moe:** Hari Kondabolu, I want to thank you so much for spending time with us. I really appreciated hearing your story.

**Hari Kondabolu:** No, I appreciate you. And thanks for letting me be honest.

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

**John Moe:** You can find Hari online at [HariKondabolu.com](http://HariKondabolu.com). Quick correction from last week's show, Alex Goldman's newsletter is not called *One Cool Dude*. It's called *The Cool Dude Zone*.

Hey, have you ever wanted to make your own podcast? I'm teaching a one-day online class on February 1st, 2025, called “How to Write Your Podcast”. It's a writing class where you'll learn from me how to develop an idea, find your story, write it, and speak it. It's being done through the Loft Literary Center, but it's online. So, you can take the class wherever you are, wherever you can get to a computer. But space is limited. So, go to [LoftLiterary.org](http://LoftLiterary.org), search up my name for more details.

Our show exists because people donate to it. If the funding stopped, there would be no show. I want there to be a show, I think you do too, so we need to hear from you. Just go to [MaximumFun.org/join](http://MaximumFun.org/join). Find a level that works for you, maybe that's 5 bucks a month, or 10, or 20. You make that call, and then select *Depresh Mode* from the list of programs. If you've already donated to the show, thank you. We appreciate it deeply. Be sure to hit subscribe, give us five stars, write rave reviews. That gets the show out into the world.

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We're on BlueSky [@DepreshMode](https://bsky.app/profile/DepreshMode). Our Instagram is [@DepreshPod](https://www.instagram.com/DepreshPod). Our *Depresh Mode* newsletter is available on Substack; search that up. I'm on BlueSky and Instagram [@JohnMoe](https://www.instagram.com/JohnMoe). Be sure to join our Preshies group happening over there on Facebook. A lot of good people getting together, hanging out, talking about mental health, supporting each other, talking about the show sometimes—just having a good time, having a few laughs as well. I like to hang out there. So, just go to Facebook, look up Preshies and join in the fun. Our electric mail address is [DepreshMode@MaximumFun.org](mailto:DepreshMode@MaximumFun.org).

Hi, credits listeners. It hit 38 degrees last week in St. Paul, and everyone went running outside as quickly as possible to enjoy the pleasant balmy temperatures. Perhaps because they spotted the -11 in the forecast in a few days.

*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*

**Speaker:** Hi. This is your friend in the Pacific Northwest. You showed up today. And that's good enough.

*(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!