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John Moe: My daughter is about to start her senior year of high school, which is something that older folks say. When did that happen that I became an older folk? Oh, that's right. It happened incrementally in a linear fashion—irreversibly, constantly, defining predictability just like it does always. That's right, I forgot: my daughter heading into senior year, thinking about colleges and tests and—let's face it—adulthood, was heading into second grade 10 years ago when I began to kick around an idea for a podcast. Yes, she was barely out of first grade when I started to reflect on all the conversation I'd been having with comedians and musicians over the past several years, all the interviews I'd done with folks like that, and about how often—how remarkably often—depression came up in those conversations and that research.

I had been hosting this show called *Wits*—a national radio show, comedy and music show, big live event here in St. Paul—where we'd have these great musicians and comedians each week. More about that show later in this episode. And depression kept coming up as I learned about these folks we were having on, as I did my research. Especially the comedians. And the public radio guy in me, the journalist, the liberal arts grad in me, the guy who notices things that seem odd or interesting and wants to know more—because that instinct had served me well in life, it made life richer and more rewarding, and it made me better at my job in public radio. That instinct started going off.

I'll give you an example of that instinct. When I commuted to work to KUOW, the public radio station in Seattle where I lived, I would go through a little corner of Woodland Park over by Green Lake, the north part of the city. And sometimes when I drove by, I would notice several rabbits hanging out, eating grass and clover. Can't not notice them. They're cute as hell. But then sometimes I would see no rabbits at all. Sometimes lots, sometimes none. What's going on with that? I pitched a story about this conundrum to one of the national shows on public radio where I proposed I would go and try to figure this out. And they bit, so I went to discover the answer.

I talked to naturalists, park rangers, experts. Turns out there are waves of breeding for those rabbits in that park. And when the rabbits go away—or it appears to me they've gone away—it's because that wave gets wiped out by birds of prey—eagles, hawks, and coyotes! And the predator animals had a habit—get this—of eating the bunny brains first, because apparently that's where the really good nutrients are. Then scavenger animals would swiftly move in and pick up the rest. Then another breeding wave would hit, more bunnies appear, and this weird circle of life spins again. I'll have a little coda to this story in the closing credits. Stay tuned.

So, anyway, years later—living in St. Paul, Minnesota, now—I wondered about comedians and musicians and depression. I wondered this: are there more depressed comedians than depressed people in other professions? Does being a comedian in fact make someone depressed? Or am I misreading it? And I knew a lot of comedians by this point, so I could just go ask them. But what if, I thought, I recorded me asking them? Because other people might be curious about the same thing. Too specific for radio, yes. But maybe this is perfect for a podcast.

I started putting together a show I called *The Hilarious World of Depression*, and I pretty quickly realized that my questions were going to be super hard to answer, if not impossible. There wasn't any hard data. I couldn't get a big enough sample size. No university research team would take this project on. So, okay. So, great. The fundamental meta question of the show was irreversibly moot. Cool. However, what I began to learn was that comedians and songwriters had a certain set of skills. They could encapsulate experiences in the form of jokes, stories, lyrics, melodic arrangements, and do it in a succinct way that resonated with audiences, that made it personal, that echoed for people.

That's their job. And in those hugely competitive fields, the ones that make a living at it tend to be really good at that skill. Wouldn't it be a cool service, I thought, to have them apply that to explaining depression in clear, human, humane, resonant terms? So, we launched the show.

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And it quickly went to number two overall on the Apple Podcast charts. Or among shows where no one gets murdered, number one. I did that show for a few years. COVID hit. Layoffs hit. I was hit with a layoff, and I got a call for Maximum Fun to keep going with the same type of show over here. And here we are. And my daughter's going to be a senior. And it's *Depresh Mode*. I'm John Moe. I'm glad you're here!

Transition: Spirited acoustic guitar.

John Moe: I still wonder about the connection between depression and comedy. So, I still do a Google search once in a while about comedy and comedians and depression. And I see a lot of the same names, a lot of people I've interviewed. Patton Oswald, Maria Bamford, Gary Gulman, Dick Cavett. I see episodes of podcasts I've hosted. I see my book, *The Hilarious World of Depression*. And when I did this search the other day, for the first time in a while, I saw a new name. Aaron Foster.

Clip:

Aaron Foster: I don't wanna start off on the wrong foot here, but I feel like I should let you know. I don't really like... uh, I guess the word is people.

(Laughter. A playful musical stinger.)

For those of you who missed it in the first joke, I will give you a little hint that I've recently been diagnosed with clinical depression!

(Laughter.)

Yeah, I'm not super happy about it.

(Laughter and woots.)

John Moe: You can't catch Aaron's special on Netflix. He will not be headlining 2,000-seat theaters near you. Not just yet anyway. He's not even based in LA or New York. He lives in Reno. But I was intrigued by Aaron's story. He had been through some very hard experiences. Aaron's father had bipolar disorder and was abusive to Aaron's mom and brother. Aaron's brother eventually died by suicide. And as you heard in that clip, Aaron—yes—has been diagnosed with depression. He has been an occasional actor, hosted a show on HGTV for a little while, opened and ran a couple of restaurants, made some short films that you can find on YouTube. Had a lot of success, actually, as a visual artist too.

And Aaron always loved comedy. Did it here and there over the years. But now in his 50s, he has quit everything else to chase the profession of standup comedian. He chooses to talk about his mental health in his act. I wanted to know more about all that. Still. Kind of an old school episode this week, then. I want you to listen for a couple of voices in my interview with Aaron: Aaron talking about a lot of kind self-care, healthy goals and perspectives; and the second voice, Aaron's depression, who tries to shoot Aaron down. It's tricky, because as is the case with all of our depressions, the voices sound exactly the same.

Transition: Spirited acoustic guitar.

John Moe: Aaron Foster, welcome to *Depresh Mode*.

Aaron Foster: Thanks so much for having me. Happy to be here.

John Moe: So, when I look at your comedy clips, a lot of them—a lot of the more recent ones—seem to start with this recent diagnosis of depression that you received. Can you tell me what went into that appointment that got you diagnosed and tell me the full-length story of that diagnosis happening?

Aaron Foster: Ohhh. The full-length story. I don't know if we have time for that.

(John chuckles.)

It's just, I—you know, I mean the diagnosis—I think I phrase it a lot in my standup as, you know, "I've been recently diagnosed." It's not that recent. I mean, maybe the official diagnosis is probably eight or nine years ago. But I've been in and out of—you know, started going to therapy as a teenager. Got into some trouble. And you know, police. And my mother was very concerned. And grades, you know, going downhill, and all that kind of stuff. So, part of all that was my mom sending me to see a therapist. So, I've been in and out for, you know, most of my life and have been on and off meds and sort of have tried a little bit of everything at some point or another.

And, yeah, I think the official diagnosis was about nine or ten years ago. Just coming out of, you know—like I said, seeing a lot of doctors and... One of the ways I tend to look at it and

talk about it of like there's a difference between sort of being depressed and having depression. And like depressed is like—there's a reason. You know, you lost your job, your partner broke up with you, whatever. And then depression is sort of like there's not a reason. It just sort of is what it is. 'Cause my life, you know, on paper has been pretty great for a really long time in a lot of ways. So, I could never understand like what's the problem? Like, in my own head, the discussion was like, “Well, you have all these things going for you, so why are you not happy? Or why are you sad?”

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“Why do you sometimes not leave the house for days/weeks at a time?” And then eventually, you know, that sort of led to the official diagnosis, even though I think I had known it for a long time. It certainly runs in my family. And in the big picture, I feel like to just have clinical depression at my house is kind of like winning the lottery. It's pretty minor compared to some of the other stuff going on. So.

John Moe: Compared to other stuff going on with your family of origin?

Aaron Foster: Yeah. I mean, my father was bipolar. I have a schizophrenic brother. You know, as I say in my act, I have a vegan uncle. You know, it's a lot—there's a lot going on. Right?

(John chuckles.)

Not to pitch material at you. But, uh. *(Chuckles.)*

John Moe: Yeah, no, that's fine. So, I have to ask. You said getting into some trouble with the law when you were a teenager. What kind of trouble?

Aaron Foster: Uh you know, it sounds fun. Kids don't do this. It's not a good idea. It didn't end up well for me. My buddy and I organized a scavenger hunt in high school in which everything on the list had to be stolen. Turned out at the end of the night, about \$35,000 worth of stuff was stolen, including the light bar off the top of a police car, which did not go well with the local police. And you know, things like that. Seemed like fun on the front side, and then the morning after you sort of realize like, “Yeah, that... that could have gone really bad,” also. You know, sort of...

John Moe: Yeah! Yeah. Well, it sounds like it went pretty bad. When you were—you alluded—you mentioned other people in your family having mental health conditions. In that situation—yeah, I just always think it's interesting how when you grow up in something, you don't realize that it's abnormal, because it's the only normal that you know. Did you grow up thinking that the depression that you were experiencing was just the way the world was? Or did you grow up thinking that you were actually really healthy compared to other people in your family?

Aaron Foster: *(Sighs.)* I think the first. I think I just thought—I mean, I thought my family was normal to an extent, 'cause I didn't have anything to compare it to when I was younger.

And then, you know, my issues with depression—yeah, I mean I always found myself kind of confused at sort of—I dunno—somebody getting, you know, over the top, jumping up and down because their football team scored a touchdown. Like, what? What? Why are you so excited? And not to pick on football or sports in particular, but just sort of these grandiose levels of excitement.

And that, again, I've had a lot of good things happen to me. I made a great living as an artist for 20 years and had a few huge deals that come with that. And you get these big checks, and it's like, *(blandly)* “Oh, well that's nice. I wonder when people are gonna figure out that I'm full of shit.” *(Chuckles.)* So, you know, I got cast, got hired to host my own television show within a year of moving to LA. And you know, it was exciting for about an hour.

So, yeah. I think—you know, one of the first times I realized things maybe were different at my house, I asked my neighbor—you know, we were like 11 or 12—I was like, “Hey, when your dad comes home from work and you don't know if he's in a good mood or not, like where do you hide?”

And he was like, “What are you talking about? Like, I don't know. Why would I hide from my dad?” *(Chuckles.)*

So, I think there's a process of discovery that, you know, other families are different than yours. You sort of just—you know, all you know is all you know until you know more.

John Moe: So, then I'm curious. Because you're—what? 50? Early fifties now?

Aaron Foster: I'm 53. Yeah. I just turned 53.

John Moe: You're 53, okay. And you've been an artist, you've been a TV host, you've opened restaurants?! Is that right?

Aaron Foster: That is right. Yeah. I've opened two restaurants, as I was sort of—had stepped away from show business, whatever you wanna call it, pursuing that career of— You know, I had lived in LA for about five years to be an actor and did a little bit of standup when I lived there, but that was back in '09. But yeah, in my 40s, I kind of learned how to cook food and took some classes. And then the more I learned how to make food that I liked, the more angry I got when I went out to eat at restaurants and decided that I could do it better. And I think I did it pretty well, but also realized like this is a really hard way to live, to make a living, a lifestyle.

And I think it sort of... You know, I opened my second restaurant in Reno, Nevada a month before COVID hit. So, that was—became very, very challenging very quickly.

John Moe: Mm. Good timing. Yeah.

Aaron Foster: And I got through it great, but I got through it by way of social media and doing all kinds of silly things on social media, and also making really, really good pizza in my opinion. And to-go, and my parents were stuck at my house.

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So, it was just the three of us doing everything. So, the community really embraced us. But I'm doing all this social media. And these silly sort of spoofs and skits and checking in everyday kind of made me fall back in love with acting and writing and creating, and then I started doing standup again in January 2023, when I sold my restaurant. Yeah. So, yeah, I've bounced around a lot, but acting and standup has always been the thing I always wanted to do but was always too afraid to really do most of my life.

John Moe: It's a rough industry. It can chew people up. So, then I think a lot of people would look at this and say, "Okay, he's depressed. He's also hosted a TV show. He's opened businesses. He's been—he's made a living as an artist. He's on TV doing comedy. How does this square with major depressive disorder, which can be so debilitating? So, is it that you've conquered it, that you've managed it, or that you're—that you were kind of suffering the whole time while you did all those things?

Aaron Foster: I think, yeah. I think it's that one. I definitely haven't conquered it. There are times when I feel like it's managed, and a lot of that has to do with kind of how busy I am. And when I lock into something I do pretty well. I mean, when COVID hit, and I'd just opened a restaurant; I had my life savings sunk into this place. I was like, "I'm gonna win. I'm gonna get through this somehow. "And I did find a way, and I did get through it okay. And I did—to a certain extent—I think, for a restaurant during COVID, certainly won. So, there's that aspect of working really hard and the goal of, "If I get really good at something, then I will feel better about myself, and I'll feel better overall."

And of course, that doesn't—that never works out as well as you think.

(John agrees.)

You know, you sort of—you know, you set a goal, you achieve it, and then you sort of look around and you're like, "Yeah, it's still me. Still me here, living. You know, doing my life by myself." So, that's an aspect of it that sometimes I think about comedy and it's like, alright, well that's gonna take at least 10 years to get—you know, whatever; a Netflix special or, you know, to get like really, really, really successful ats. Like, alright, well that's 10 years that I'll think that I'm working towards happiness. *(Chuckling.)* And that'll keep me occupied more than anything else. And if I ever am fortunate enough to—you know, whatever; tape a Netflix special or, you know, whatever the pinnacle might be— You know, that's so far off. And then I can deal with the fact that it didn't solve—you know, it didn't fill the hole in my soul.

But yeah, I understand like it does not make sense to look at my life on paper and to be like, "What? What are you—? What are you not happy about?" Which is part of the frustrating aspect of it.

John Moe: Yeah. That's interesting. That's really resonant with me from my experiences and from a lot of people I've talked to. And I have talked to a lot of people. This idea of "if I could just reach this thing"—if I could reach this goal, if I could just do this thing, then that will fill the hole, that will solve the problem, then I'll feel fine forevermore. And

unanimously, *(laughs)* people who've then reached that thing have found, “Uh-oh. The hole's still there.”

Transition: Spirited acoustic guitar.

John Moe: More with Aaron Foster in a moment. By the way, I mentioned *Wits* earlier in that intro. In the spirit of my interests never going away, we're doing a *Wits* reunion show on September 30th at the Fitzgerald Theater in St. Paul. Same cast. Special, amazing secret guest stars. One very funny guest star who deals with depression. Tickets can be purchased through FirstAvenue.com.

Clip:

Aaron Foster: Well. I was reminded today, as I often am, of the words of 18th century French philosopher Charles de Montesquieu.

(Laughter.)

And by the way, stop me if you've heard this. But, uh—

(Laughter.)

Charlie said we should weep for men at their birth, not at their death. *(Beat.)* So, who's ready to laugh?

(Laughter and scattered applause.)

Transition: Gentle acoustic guitar.

John Moe: Back with comedian Aaron Foster. We were talking about his belief—so common in depression—that if you can just achieve certain life goals, career goals, relationship goals, that the depression will go away. But then you do, and it doesn't.

Aaron Foster: Yeah. I mean, it does seem to be a very common thread, *(playfully)* and I'm sure it'll be different for me when I achieve my goals. I'm sure it'll be fine. But, uh.

(They chuckle.)

John Moe: Yeah, you'll be the one person who breaks the mold.

Aaron Foster: Yeeeah. Pr-prob-probably not, but yeah.

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It's a very frustrating thing to sort of—I think, you know, I have—I mean, I can't say that I've achieved everything that I've wanted. I haven't, you know, become a movie star or a famous comedian or whatever. But you know, I've done pretty well in a lot of different areas. And so, it's sort of frustrating to realize like, no, you have to fix the inside. Or at least, you know, find some form of peace with that, regardless of what might be happening on the outside.

And I have moments of understanding that very clearly. Of—you know, I first moved to Reno, I did a local play here, sort of regional theater. And it was one of the funnest, most rewarding things I've ever done. And it's—you know, nobody's gonna see me at the local Reno theater and, you know, pick me out to be in their Hollywood movie or anything like that. But it was just very, very rewarding in the moment. And then, of course, that ends, and then you gotta kind of move on to the next thing. But.

John Moe: Yeah, I was struck, as I looked into your material and kind of what you've been saying, that at—I dunno if it was at 50 or just in your early 50s—you quit everything to become a comedian.

(Aaron confirms.)

And it's a bold choice, but is it a form of—I don't wanna say self-medicating, but of self-therapy? Like, are you looking for better mental health through pursuing the comedy dream?

Aaron Foster: Um. God, that's a good question. I mean, oh, I hope not. *(Laughs softly.)* You know, it's something I've always wanted to do. I fell in love with comedy when I was a kid, a teenager in the '80s, and watching, you know, *Evening at the Improv*. And there's something about a comedian, the one person onstage alone. And you know, being able to say kind of whatever you want. And the thing about that that really resonated me as a kid was there was, obviously, the funny aspect of it and the aspect of like, “Oh, I never thought about that in that way before.” But then there's also like, “I have thought about that in that way before, but I didn't know anybody would ever say it out loud.” And also, like made me sort of feel a little bit less alone. Like, “Oh, I didn't know other people felt like that.”

And you know, as I've gotten older— You know, I wouldn't ever go so far as to say that like the comedians that I really like who do talk about mental health have like saved my life, but they've made it a lot better, and they've made me feel less alone. And somewhere I got this idea like, “Oh, I want—maybe I could do that for somebody?” Which sounds very—I don't know, pretentious and sort of high-and-mighty. But ultimately, yeah, it is doing something for me in a way that I can connect with people, also in a way that I can control a little bit. Even though you never know what's gonna happen on a standup stage, there still is—I'm the one with the microphone onstage, and you are theoretically listening to me. So, I can tell you my story in my way, very clearly and very specifically, and yeah.

John Moe: Isn't that interesting that you have this thought of “maybe I can help other people”—which is a very noble and selfless thought—and you immediately said, you know, what if this is pretentious? And I forgot the word you used. Self-aggrandizing?

(Aaron confirms.)

That you hit upon this magnanimous notion, and then immediately turn around and start attacking yourself. That's the depression kind of biting you right there.

Aaron Foster: Yeah. Hi, John. I'm Aaron Foster. Nice to meet you.

(John laughs.)

Yeah, that's—*(chuckles)*. I mean, it's took me a really long time to even be able to say that in the context where this is what we're talking about. Because it does feel sort of ridiculous. But—and also to— You know, I mean there's five or six. There's Gary Gulman, there's Marc Maron, Mike Berbiglia, Maria Bamford, Taylor Tomlinson, and Neal Brennan. And I'm not comparing myself to any of those people, but those—you know, their work and them talking about the things they talk about gave me permission to talk about it and to joke about it. And they really have had a big impact on my life. And you know, obviously they make me laugh a lot. But also, again, like feeling a little bit less alone, it's just—it's really meant a lot to me.

And the very first time I told a joke about mental health— You know, I did stand up very briefly in '09 when I lived in LA, but I wasn't talking about any of this stuff. I did a dozen shows. You know, five minutes, whatever. So, when I started again in 2023, the very first joke that I tell and got a reaction, I was like, “Okay.” And just like that moment kind of blocked me in like, “Okay, I think this is possible to do this. And to—” And you know, and I—

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Believe me, I struggle. Like, sometimes people are not in the mood for that on a Wednesday night at 11 o'clock when they want dick jokes and crowd work or whatever. It's like, I don't do that. I don't do— I mean, I don't do crowd work, which is a big problem in and of itself. *(Laughs.)* But that's what everybody wants these days. But yeah, it's very helpful for me. So, there's a selfish aspect to it. But I talk to enough people, and I get enough emails. And I mean, this is—you know, this is not— You know, I sell out a 70-seat theater, and I'm ecstatic. I'm not playing any big places or anything like that. But the reactions I get— Like, I know my—the people that like my stuff seem to really like it. And then the people that don't like it, you know, don't like it at all. Which is fine too. But.

John Moe: *(Chuckles.)* If it helps you, that doesn't make it selfish!

Aaron Foster: *(Sighs.)* Well.

John Moe: Joining me *(laughing)* on the show this week are Aaron Foster and his depression. You'll hear from both of them over the course of this interview.

Aaron Foster: Yes. Yes, I am trying to work—yeah, go ahead. I'm sorry.

John Moe: Have you always found depression to be funny? Do you find depression to be funny?

Aaron Foster: I certainly have not always found it to be funny. It took me a long time to realize that it was something that I could talk and joke about. And you know, the biggest thing that helped me with that was—well, two things. Was seeing other comedians talk about it and joke about it. In 2009, when I first did standup, I took a comedy class, which everybody—you know, every sort of professional comedian tends to shit on. But it was the best thing that I could have done, and I fell back into this. It's really a writing group that's been around and people kind of come and go. It's been around for 15+ years in LA. And they, you know, really encourage you to write about anything, and it's a very safe place.

And that was the beginning of all this. I started that in January of 2023 and realized that I could make jokes about it and that they do resonate with people. So, finding the humor in it has been helpful for me in a big way. And finding that other people—you know, I always—people come up to me after a show sometimes, and they'll say, “Oh, I resonated with so much of what you talk about.”

It's like, “Oh, well—first of all, I'm sorry. And second of all, that's great.” That gives me maybe some career safety. But I think, you know, what else are you gonna do? Cry about it? I mean, I've tried that. That didn't seem to help anybody, so I try to go the other way now.

John Moe: What's been your journey in terms of addressing the depression? Do you do talk therapy? Do you do meds?

Aaron Foster: I have done talk therapy on and off for—I mean, like I said, since I was a teenager. And I've had long stretches—years—without it. And I'm not in it right now. I was all of 2023 and into early 2024, I was. And I stopped. although I'm thinking about going back. I feel like when I'm really— It's unfortunate that it's like, oh, I'm really doing—when I'm doing really poorly, then I'm not even able to sort of make the connection that I should do that. I've tried a ton of meds. I've tried ketamine. I've tried microdosing psilocybin, which makes me nervous, because I do have some, you know, schizophrenia in my family and things like that. So, I hesitate to do a full—what do they call it? A hero's dose of that—that I know has been a game changer for some people. So, I've tried all the meds. And my experience with the meds mostly has been: all the negative side effects kick in almost immediately, and two months in, I was like, “Maaaybe it's helping? But I'm not sure?”

So, that's been frustrating for me, 'cause I've avoided that for a long time, and then I get to a really bad enough place where I'm like, “Alright, let me try it.” And I just haven't—because I know it's a game changer for some people. You know, it's just—the way the ketamine infusions have been for some people too, and they just—nothing really seems to stick with me. So, for me, it's almost—I think they call it—what's?—I think the term these days is like stacking. It's just like—it's exercise, it's diet, it's sleep, it's keeping my house clean, it's being creative. It's sort of just this—you know. And I think for me the biggest things are exercise, sleep, and diet. But like that's—I don't know—60/70%? And then I sort of stack, you know, other things that get me a couple percent here and a couple percent there, if that makes sense.

So, it's a combination of things. Routine is a big deal for me and trying to police my own negative self-talk is one of my biggest challenges.

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And I struggle with that a lot. And I'm not—(*chuckling*) I don't have an answer for that one, but I've gotten better at it. But... that guy is persistent.

Transition: Spirited acoustic guitar.

John Moe: “That guy”, meaning Aaron's depression. Do you know what he's talking about? Is your guy or lady or person persistent? Mine is. Never takes a goddamn break. More with Aaron Foster in just a moment. Here's another clip from his standup work.

Clip:

Aaron Foster: Hey, thanks so much!

(*Applause.*)

Yeah, my name's Aaron. I am 52 years old, and I'm single.

(*A solitary woot followed by chuckling.*)

That's the correct response to that. Thank you.

(*Laughter.*)

You guys nailed it right outta the gate. Good job. Yeah. One of my buddies, his wife, she wanted to fix me up with her best friend, but then she got a little hesitant. She's like, “Look, I don't want her to get hurt. Are you good at relationships?”

I was like, “Am I good at relationships? I'm 52 years old. I'm single, and I've never been married. Are you good at math?!”

(*Laughter and scattered applause.*)

Yeah. I have gotten to the point in my life where I do feel like I have to accept the fact that I'm not. I'm not good at relationships. You guys are on board with that premise a little quicker than I would like.

(*Laughter.*)

“We've known you for 30 seconds. That tracks. Go on!”

John Moe: Back with comedian Aaron Foster.

You've been around the comedy business for a little while. You know, sometimes practicing, but it sounds like you've always been comedy-adjacent. When I first started to do my first mental health podcast, it was based on this idea of having met so many comedians, worked with a bunch of comedians, and I thought there are more depressed comedians than in other walks of life. Why are comedians so depressed? And I presented this idea to Patton Oswald in the first pilot we did for this podcast. And he said, "Well, I just disagree. I think there are just as many depressed dentists and accountants as there are depressed comedians. It's just that when you do comedy, you're more free to talk about it. Whereas if your dentist talked about suicidal ideation, you'd probably wanna go to a different dentist."

Do you think that the business of comedy attracts more depressed people or makes people more depressed? Do you think that the rate of depression is higher than with the rest of the population?

Promo:

Jackie Kashian: Jackie Kashian. Hi, and welcome to the MaximumFun.org podcast, *The Jackie and Laurie Show*, where we talk about standup comedy and how much we love it and how much it enrages us.

Laurie Kilmartin: We have a lot of experience, and a lot of stories, and a lot of time on our hands. So, check us out. It's one hour a week, and we drop it every Wednesday on MaximumFun.org.

Promo:

Music: Sophisticated electronic harpsichord.

Travis McElroy: Hello, Internet. I'm your husband host, Travis McElroy.

Teresa McElroy: And I'm your wife host, Teresa McElroy. And this is a promo for *Shmanners*. It's extraordinary etiquette—

Travis: —for ordinary occasions. Every week, we're going to tell you about a bit of culture, a bit of history, how etiquette still applies in the modern day. All that stuff!

Teresa: We also love to do biographies and histories of, and—you know, general procedurals: how to do etiquette in today's society.

Travis: So, come check it out every Friday on MaximumFun.org or wherever you find your podcasts.

Teresa: Manners, shmanners, get it?

(Music ends.)

Aaron Foster: Well, if I talked to anybody outside of comedy, I might have a better idea about that.

(John laughs.)

It's like I said, I don't get outta my house a whole lot. But I don't know. I think—I mean, Patton, I'm a huge fan of his as well. I think there's probably a lot of truth to that, of it's a profession where you talk about that stuff. You know, like I do these writing groups, and it's sort of like, “Oh, are you writing about depression? You're writing about depression this go-round? Alright. Maybe I'll try to write about something else.” We don't wanna show up and all talk about this sort of same topic, even though we have our own takes on it.

Yeah. I think, you know—*(sighs)* life is hard, man. *(Chuckles.)* I mean, not exactly an Aristotle-level of philosophy there, but I think it's hard for everybody. And I think it's, in a lot of ways, getting harder. You know, social media and all this kind of stuff that disconnects us from human interaction. You know, as much as I tend to shy away from that, it always ends up being a good thing. And, um... *(sighs)* I think it's just easier to talk about when you can—'cause we're talking about it in a way that hopefully is funny. You know, talking about it—I mean, I had somebody approach me after a show once.

[00:35:00]

And I do this—you called it a one-man show. I think it's 95% standup, but the woman approached me. I was putting the mic back in the stand, and she was making a beeline to me. And I thought, Oh, she's—she wants to tell me how much she connected with this and how much she liked it.” And she did not. She did not like it at all. And she said something to the effect of like, “I don't think you really are depressed. I think you're being performative.”

I was like, “Well, it is a performance.” I could say all that same stuff crying on the floor, but like people don't usually wanna pay money to see that. *(Chuckles.)* And they don't enjoy it. So, you know, it's a strange show.

John Moe: Can't do a show from my bed. It's—nobody would show up.

Aaron Foster: Yeah! If I could, I would. Believe me, I've thought about it. It's a strange magic trick, I think, to—I mean, standup I think is a magic trick, you know, period. No matter what you're talking about to a certain extent. But to talk about this darker stuff in a way that people can identify with and find funny—I feel like I've completely gotten off from what your question was. I'm sorry.

(They chuckle.)

John Moe: Do you think there's more depressed comedians than in other walks of life—other professions, for instance?

Aaron Foster: I don't. I just think they're more willing to talk about it openly. You know, I have my comedian friends I talk about everything with; my non comedian friends... eh, you know, we don't talk about that stuff. And I think it's still—as far as it's come in terms of talking about mental health and depression and things like that, as much more available as those conversations are, I think it's still—I think it's still pretty frowned upon in a lot of ways and a lot of contexts. And so, yeah, I think it's—

I mean, I have friends that are not comedians that, like I said, we don't talk about that. But like, I'm like, “Are you doing okay? 'Cause you don't seem like you're doing okay.” But it's still a challenging thing to talk about. Yeah.

John Moe: You mentioned things getting tougher. And I think for a lot of people, the world seems to be getting tougher. Like, the political situation, the environmental situation. Like, the world can just get to be a scarier and scarier place. What does that do—in your case—to somebody dealing with depression? Does it make everything harder? Do you have to work harder to function? Does it embolden you in some way? What is the effect of the ever more frightening world?

Aaron Foster: That's a good question. I don't know that I've thought about that. I think... I don't... I don't know that that affects my depression. Which seems like a crazy thing to say and maybe it's a very privileged thing to say, but—or maybe it comes across that way. I don't think that's what it is. I think it's just because my depression is just my brain being an asshole. It doesn't have anything to do with the fact that we're, you know, slipping into fascism here. I mean, that doesn't help. But I think, you know, it's—you know, my challenge is with that part of my brain that, you know, doesn't want me to get outta bed. And I—you know, I understand it through therapy and all this stuff.

And not to get it all into—like, be a, you know, armchair psychotherapist, but like—you know, I think it's a lot of it comes out of like there's a part of my brain that doesn't want me to leave the house, 'cause—you know—I might fail at something. It doesn't want me to just stand up. You might fail. You might get laughed at in the bad way. You might, you know, make fool of yourself. It's overprotective, right? It sees every sort of threat as like life and death, which is ridiculous. And I have to sort of have these conversations with it.

I mean, the world in general? *(Sighs.)* Man, I don't know that that has a huge impact on me—as it relates to my depression. Let me put it—let me be very specific. Like, it's something that I—I mean, as a history and political science major in college, and I have gone through ups and downs of being obsessed with American politics and where we're going and where we are and all that kind of stuff. But I honestly feel like it's almost a separate thing, in terms of my depression. Yeah. *(Beat.)* I don't like that! I don't like that answer at all!

(They laugh.)

(Joking.) How much editing do you guys do?

John Moe: How would you summarize that answer?

Aaron Foster: In my head, I just hear like, “Oh, that guy doesn't give a shit about, you know, the end of the world coming.” And I do! I do, very much so. But it's also like it's so much bigger than me. And I vote, and I donate money, and I try to do my part. But yeah, like I said, yeah, I don't like this. I don't like this answer at all.

(They laugh.)

[00:40:00]

John Moe: And so, we're talking over Zoom, and I see behind you this art piece made of license plates. And I know that's something that you—a medium that you worked in a lot, and you've done a lot of work in that regard. I see on the other side a bunch of note cards on a corkboard, which I assume has something to do with comedy. Then I see, down in the lower right corner of what I'm looking at, a completely passed out large, black dog with a white muzzle. And I want you to know, I have a dog exactly like that.

Aaron Foster: Oh, wonderful. Wonderful.

John Moe: Who at this moment is sleeping on the floor, beneath the desk that I'm sitting at, Can we talk about dogs for a minute? Like what—?

Aaron Foster: Absolutely!

John Moe: Tell me about your dog, and tell me about the effect of your dog on your mental health.

Aaron Foster: Yeah, so that's Bodhi, and he's the best thing ever. He's about nine. I've had him for six-and-a-half-ish, almost seven years. And you can't quite tell from there, but he has a very significant underbite, and he's got a kind of a crooked eye, and he's just the sweetest thing ever. Came to me from—there was a woman who was at some kind of a shelter where they—you know, he had like the red tag on his cage. And she's like, “What does that mean?”

He's like, “Oh, we're gonna put him down tomorrow.”

She's like, “No, no, no, no.”

So, he had a close call, but she couldn't keep him. So—but I've had him. He's amazing. Because, you know, I have been self-employed in some form or another for almost my entire life. Nobody really on the planet cares if I get out of bed in the morning, and nobody's really gonna call me if I don't. Except for him. So, we are up every morning. He go out, we drive up the hill 10 minutes to go for a hike for about an hour. And that—you know, and every once in a while I travel. And my folks moved to town a couple years ago. So, when I'm outta town, if

I'm on the road, my folks have him. Which is amazing. But if I come home late, and maybe I don't get him until the next morning—yeah. That's—getting outta bed when he's not around is a challenge. So, he's—I mean, he's been, you know—I don't know. I wouldn't go so far as to say literally a lifesaver, but certainly a quality-of-life-saver. 'Cause he's just—you know, you can't not take him out, can't not feed him, can't not take care of him. And that makes me—you know, certainly helps me take care of myself in a lot of different ways, and gets me outta the house, and gets me outta bed, and all that kind of stuff. So, yeah, he's amazing.

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

John Moe: Aaron Foster, thank you so much for your time.

Aaron Foster: Yeah, thank you for having me. Appreciate it.

John Moe: I love it when comedians have actual black dogs, because it works on a metaphoric and literal level. And that's funny. Here's one more taste of Aaron's standup.

Clip:

Aaron Foster: My therapist is actually really concerned about me doing this show tonight, because she said it seems like I get all of my self-worth from the opinions of other people. Which essentially means my emotional stability is basically dependent on any stranger or, you know, group of strangers that I may happen to interact with on any given day. But I want you to know that's my problem, not yours. Don't worry. No pressure.

(Laughter.)

John Moe: Hey, I mentioned the *Wits* show coming up. Hope to see you there. If you don't live in the Twin Cities, try to move here, because I have other stuff happening too. This fall I'll be teaching more writing classes, including podcast writing and memoir writing. I'm doing a four-week memoir class, and it's going to be so fun and supportive and helpful. Go to LoftLiterary.org for that, and search John Moe. Also, on September 21st, my band Math Emergency will play our final farewell “Our Guitarist Has Moved to Nebraska” concert at the Amsterdam in downtown St. Paul. Go to AmsterdamBarandHall.com for tickets. You know what? We'll have links. I'm giving you a lot of links. We'll have links to all these John Moe Autumn opportunities at this episode's page at MaximumFun.org.

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The 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline can be reached in the US and Canada by calling or texting 988. Free, available 24/7.

[00:45:00]

We're on BlueSky at [@DepreshMode](https://bsky.app/profile/depreshmode). Our Instagram is [@DepreshPod](https://www.instagram.com/depreshpod). Our *Depresh Mode* newsletter is on Substack. Search that up. I'm on BlueSky and Instagram at [@JohnMoe](https://www.instagram.com/johnmoe). Join our Preshies group on Facebook. A lot of fun people hanging out there, a lot of supportive people, a lot of great information and insight and comradery about mental health. And I'm there too. Go hang out. Just go to Facebook, search up Preshies, and—you know—you'll have to put in a request for an invitation, and we'll approve it. It's great. Our electric mail address, DepreshMode@MaximumFun.org.

Hi, credits listeners. Okay. Final part of the disappearing rabbit story. Predators eating rabbit brains, circle of life. In my reporting, I found one other reason why some of the rabbits disappeared. A lady from Everett, 25 miles away from the park, had been capturing some of the rabbits, spaying and neutering them, and bringing them home to a massive rabbit enclosure on her property with a wire roof, so birds couldn't get them and eat their brains. And they're not breeding, not serving a role in the food chain. These rabbits just hopped around, existing and doing nothing else until they died of natural causes. So, there's that.

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

(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!