John Moe: Hey, a little later on the show, we're gonna talk about kids and what they need in terms of mental health support during this challenging time. But first, let's talk about love.

To start with, specifically, let's talk about romantic love: falling in love, being in love, the swooning, and the smooching, and the everything. It's wonderful. No qualifying statement here. It's wonderful! When you meet someone and there's just something about them, you just want to keep looking at them and talking to them and experiencing them. And best of all, maybe they feel the same way. Ah, love! Hooray. And if you're really extra lucky, you can end up together for a long time as partners, spouses. And what a life that is. It's a great thing! And a rare thing. It's hard to find, so we pursue it! We pursue it with our vulnerable hearts, with ourselves on the line, because of course we do.

Now, what do we do when we want something? We use information and tools and technology, right? If we want to get a great car at a great price, we go on websites; we compare; we research. Looking for a new job? Well, in our modern world, that might involve LinkedIn, job sites, snazzing up the resume, information, tools, technology. And so, of course we apply that thinking to looking for love. Why wouldn't we? Why lurk in a bar or a produce section when you can go on the apps or the websites and see vast parades of humans who are at least interested enough to be in that same arena. Then there's the profile cultivation, of course: picking out pictures, then the swiping, the messages.

Okay, I want you to recognize that I kept this all very positive and sweet for a good couple of minutes here! And I insist on receiving credit for that. It turns out that if you use the dating apps and websites—at least in certain ways—you're much more likely to have problems with depression and anxiety. I'm so sorry! There's this really huge amount of research that now tells us this. But here's what we're going to do. Let's find out how best to look for love—hooray, love; still!—without mentally suffering for it. And if you use those apps looking for mostly sex and not necessarily love? It works for that too. See, I turned it positive again.

So, yes, there are hazards. Pitfalls. Let's learn to swing over the pitfalls on a rope and not get eaten by crocodiles. Dang it, there I go again getting negative. It's *Depresh Mode*. I'm John Moe. I'm glad you're here.

Transition: Spirited acoustic guitar.

John Moe: Liesel Sharabi is a professor in the Hugh Downs School of Human Communication at the Institute for Social Science at Arizona State University. And I'm quoting her official bio here: she "studies how communication technologies are used in mate selection and relationship development." Liesel has also led a new meta-analysis of many, many studies of the mental health of people who use digital tools for dating.

Transition: Spirited acoustic guitar.

John Moe: Liesel Sharabi, welcome to *Depresh Mode*.

Liesel Sharabi: Thanks for having me on.

John Moe: You recently released a meta-analysis on the psychological and mental health impact of online dating platforms. Let's tease the results here a little bit while I first ask you what goes into a meta-analysis? What all were you looking at, and what does that term mean?

Liesel Sharabi: So, what we were doing here was essentially aggregating the literature. So, there have been individual studies looking at the associations between dating abuse and psychological health. And so, we wanted to say, okay, across these studies, are we seeing any consistent trends when we actually put all of this information and all of this evidence together? And so, that was what we did. We aggregated all of the literature on dating app use and mental health that's been

published since dating apps were first brought to market, back in approximately 2007. And then we were able to make some broader claims about the literature based on that.

John Moe: And it's like—I think I saw 26,000 subjects in all that that were evaluated?

Liesel Sharabi: Yeah, so it also meant that, you know, the sample size was huge. Because again, we're aggregating across studies, which just provides more powerful evidence for some of the claims that we're making in this specific study.

John Moe: And what did your meta-analysis conclude about these online dating platforms and the effect on mental health?

Liesel Sharabi: So, our results showed that, consistent with some of the trends that we'd been observing in the literature, people who were using dating apps reported worse psychological health and worse well-being than people who do not use dating apps. And that's across a whole variety of outcomes: things like depression and anxiety and loneliness. So, users were just faring a little bit worse than people that were not on the apps.

John Moe: Tell me a little bit about the differentiations in the groups that were studied. I know there was— You looked at dating website use versus dating app use. Like you know, were there variations in gender, in sexual orientation?

Liesel Sharabi: Yeah, and so we looked at some of those potential—we call them moderators. We looked at differences based on some of those categories, like whether

they were using a dating app or a dating site. You know, whether they were single or not—because of course, not everybody who's on a dating app is actually single.

John Moe: Yyyyep.

Liesel Sharabi: *(Chuckles.)* We looked at sexual orientation. We looked at cultural context where the research was conducted. And what we found was that there were differences, but they weren't significant. Which is essentially saying that our results were robust across these different categories of users. They weren't specific to any one demographic group. And instead, what we were seeing was that negative outcomes were experienced by users just more broadly.

John Moe: Is that consistent with what we know about single people in general? Like, are people going about it—you know, going to bars or asking friends to set them up on blind dates, are they faring any better with their mental health?

Liesel Sharabi: So, this is an excellent question. And this kind of gets at some of the explanations for these findings, right? Because I don't think it's necessarily safe to assume that, okay, dating apps are terrible, and they're hurting people's mental health, their well-being. Because there are—

John Moe: It'd be very depressing if that was the case, because that's how so many people are meeting right now!

Liesel Sharabi: Absolutely. It's <u>such</u> a common way that we meet. And so, it could also be the case that, you know, there's selection effects; that it comes down to <u>who</u> is opting into using dating apps. And so, you have a large population of singles. We

know that people who are single tend to report worse mental health and well-being than people who are in relationships. And so, in some ways that kind of makes sense. So, if we were to look at just people who are single dating in the world more broadly, we also know that that tends to make you vulnerable to some of these same negative outcomes.

John Moe: Is there a difference also between— I think I read this in your research, that people who are using these apps—I don't want to say compulsively, but using them a lot, scrolling through them a lot—have worse outcomes than people who actually go on dates. Like, the two—you know, the people who meet someone and go out and, you know, have human contact in meat-space are doing better than the ones who are just Treating it like a video game, is that fair to say?

Liesel Sharabi: This is an excellent question to ask. And this is where I think there's room for research to build on what we've kind of started with this meta-analysis. Because we're looking at dating app users versus non-users, but not necessarily looking at different types of use, right? Because there is a difference. Somebody who is compulsively swiping versus somebody who sets limits, somebody who's going on dates and meeting people versus somebody who is not. So, that's the nuance that still needs to be looked at in terms of why some people might be, you know, not doing so well when they're on the apps. Because I also know from research I've conducted that some people have great outcomes, right? Like, they find the love of their life on these platforms. And so, it's not like it's all gloom and doom. Yeah.

John Moe: How is this consistent with— I mean, this is sort of your beat. You study relationships. How is this consistent with what you've observed in the work you've done previously about mental health? Was this confirming what you already suspected, or did this surprise you?

Liesel Sharabi: It was confirming what I already suspected, and especially in recent years. I mean, I've also done research looking at burnout on dating apps and found that, across the board, the longer people are using dating apps, the more burnout—the more emotionally exhausted they feel. Typically, by definition, you haven't found what you're looking for if you're still using them. And that's worse for people with pre-existing vulnerabilities. So, people who are already struggling with mental health and well-being also tend to burn out even more over time.

And so, knowing that, knowing some of the in findings from individual studies that have been popping up in the literature showing that people that are using apps compulsively aren't doing so well in terms of their psychological health, I suspected that we would find something—which was what led us to do the meta-analysis. And I expected that we would find what we actually did. And so, yeah. The question is how is this changing over time, right? Like, the platforms have changed, the way they match people has changed, the people who use them have also changed. And so, there are all of these possible explanations for some of the results that we've been seeing. But in terms of whether I was surprised, unfortunately, no.

John Moe: Not so much.

Liesel Sharabi: Yeah, not so much.

John Moe: Well, I wonder about this. And you know, full disclosure, I've been married for a very long time. *(Chuckling.)* Since well before this phase. So, I'm kind of coming at this whole thing anthropologically instead of experientially. But it seems like it's a lot of marketing that goes into this—a lot of self-marketing, self-branding, and kind of establishing either a completely different identity than yourself, I'm sure, in some cases or a very limited glimpse at one aspect of yourself in order to make yourself more attractive. It almost seems like you're trying to do better in a video game of sorts. Does that create a dissonance when it's not the real you being put on here? Does that affect people's mental health in the long term?

Liesel Sharabi: Oh, I mean you would have to suspect that it would, just in the sense of not— For a lot of people, I think it's not feeling like you can really represent yourself authentically, because you have to put forward such a positive version in order to actually achieve results. Like, I think for so many people— You know, success stories aside, for so many people, they're on these apps and they're swiping, they're spending money, they're spending time. And they're not getting the results that they want. And so, I think at a certain point, you know, it's natural to internalize some of that and also to start adjusting your self-presentation in ways that maybe no longer feel true to yourself but feel like something you have to do in order to actually, you know, get matches and go on dates and everything.

John Moe: How, um—*(sighs)* eh, I'll just put it this way, what the heck? How evil—

(They laugh.)

—are the companies that run these things? I can't imagine a tech company has, at their heart, the stated corporate goal of helping people find love. Like, there's gotta be— You know, are they mining the algorithms here? Are they trying to guide people towards spending more money or seeing more ads or being stickier on the platform? Like, how does that work?

Liesel Sharabi: So, this gets at something that I think has been on the minds of a lot of folks that are using dating apps. And I will tell you, there was a lawsuit actually that was filed against Match Group back in 2024—two years ago on Valentine's Day. A class action lawsuit where they claim that a lot of these big dating apps were not actually designed to help people but were designed to benefit/profit from compulsive use and to be addictive. And so, I think a lot of people are starting to question, "Okay, what are these apps incentivized to do?" Because if you help people find relationships, that means that you lose users, right? Yet your users want that. Like, the goal for most people who use dating apps is to not have to use them anymore.

John Moe: Delete the app, yeah.

Liesel Sharabi: Right. You want to get off of them, but how is that a good business model? And so, I think that there might be a bit of a disconnect in terms of what benefits the platform versus what actually benefits the individual user.

John Moe: How does it work in terms of— And I keep getting back to this sort of idea of metrics of self-objectifying, of self-marketing. Like, how do the algorithms work? Are they showing you different people based on what you've shown a preference for in the past? Like, how does the math work?

Liesel Sharabi: Yeah, so a lot of the apps are using something called collaborative filtering, which is the idea that they are making recommendations based on your behavior and based on the behavior of people who seem to have the same taste as you. So, as an example, maybe I download a dating app, and I start swiping. They're able to immediately make recommendations to me without knowing a whole lot about me or my preferences, because they know who people like me tend to swipe on. So, if I swipe right on anything I like the first few profiles that I see, they can then say, "Okay. Well, people who like those individuals also like these other people. So, let's serve them up as recommendations."

And I mean, if that sounds familiar, it's the same kind of technology that Netflix uses to recommend television shows, Amazon uses to recommend products. And so, you can also see where maybe some of the dehumanization comes into play where people are being recommended the same way that products are recommended to us. Which is kind of an interesting thing to think about *(chuckling)* in terms of our experiences on these apps.

John Moe: I'll tell you what it's bad for. It's bad for the whole concept of romantic comedies. Because a romantic comedy sort of depends on, you know, the one person

meeting somebody who's completely different from them in every way. But still, they somehow find love. And this is not gonna be the case. *(Chuckling.)* But outside of Lifetime movies, it's kind of creepy. Because just like with Netflix and Amazon and these other things, it's reinforcing— It's not encouraging you to step outside of a comfort zone. It's not allowing you to be a new type of individual. It's not allowing you to, you know, discover a potential romance of somebody from a different walk of life. And I wonder if that reinforcement of sameness is contributing to that spike in depression and anxiety that you're seeing.

Liesel Sharabi: I mean, this is very interesting, and it very well could be. Like, a lot of these matching algorithms are really designed to show you people who are like you and also people who match your preferences. And that assumes that we know what those preferences are, as well; that we know exactly what we're looking for, and it's just a matter of finding it. When in fact, we do sometimes go for people that are a little bit different than maybe we thought our ideal partner would look. We also judge people based on different qualities than we tend to evaluate them on on dating apps. And so, all of those things can be frustrating for the people who use them and also—like, I would agree—contribute potentially to some of these adverse effects that we're seeing in the literature.

Transition: Spirited acoustic guitar.

John Moe: Now you might be thinking, "If we're talking about technology, when do we talk about AI?! When do we get to the fireworks factory?" Oh, we'll talk about AI. Aaaand it's troubling. After the break.

Transition: Gentle acoustic guitar.

John Moe: We're back talking with Liesel Sharabi from Arizona State University about the bad mental health among some people who use dating apps and websites: why it's happening and what to do about it.

If somebody doesn't have a partner, if they don't have a boyfriend or girlfriend or spouse and they want one, they are going on an app or they're going on a website. Maybe there's something that they feel is missing in their life. It seems like that would be a person more likely to be experiencing depression, anxiety, lowered self-esteem, because they feel something's missing in their life. So, I just wonder where the chicken and egg here is. Like, do the apps and websites make people more depressed, or are the depressed people more likely to use the apps and websites?

Liesel Sharabi: Yeah. And this is the million-dollar question. And if I had to guess, I would say it's probably a combination of both. But you cannot discount the selection effects: the idea that people that might already be struggling with some of these things are also the same people that might be incentivized to use a dating app in the first place. So, it makes it really, really difficult to know is it the app that's responsible? Is it the way these apps are gamified? Is it the way they make the recommendations? Is it that they're designed to encourage people to use them compulsively? Or is it, you know, the type of person or some other factor that's leading people download them in the first place? And I think—as with anything that we study in the social sciences—it often ends up being a combination of both these individual factors and also some of these contextual factors like what you see the dating apps doing in terms of their design and their recommendation systems.

John Moe: What about people who have good experiences? I mean, I've been to weddings *(chuckling)* where people have met through an app, and there they are getting hitched and seem very happy. What do people who have good experiences have in common?

Liesel Sharabi: You know, *(sighs)* I don't— I could not answer that question for you. In terms of like— Well, in thinking about, you know, what makes it so that somebody

has a great experience versus ends up in a group where they're swiping endlessly, and they're burning out, and they're not finding what they're looking for— Like, I don't know what the differentiating factors are. But I can tell you that there are plenty of people who have had great success with dating apps. And you know, they do end up meeting somebody really special and really important to them. So, it's not like they're all bad. And there are things that dating apps do really well, right? But there is this dark side in terms of also, you know, some of the behaviors they encourage that maybe aren't so great for us.

John Moe: Like what?

Liesel Sharabi: I think it's the compulsivity. Like, the constant need to feel like you should be checking the app, the notifications pulling you back in. Even when you meet somebody, the idea that maybe somebody better is out there if I just keep looking. Like, these things that kind of tether us to the app instead of encouraging us to look outside the app to actually connect with people, to give people a chance. You know, sometimes I worry a little bit that it kind of makes people treat each other like they're disposable, because you know that there's this pool that you can always draw from. So, at the first sign of trouble, you know, it's easy to bail out and just get back on the apps. And so, that type of thing also obviously wouldn't be very good for wellbeing if that started happening. You know.

John Moe: Yeah. I mean, you use the term gamifying. It does sound like a video game at a certain point. And a depersonalization like you mentioned, of like, "Oh, these are these are real human beings with hopes and dreams and pasts and futures." And I wonder if that loss of humanity through the gamification is contributing to the depression and anxiety. Is that—when you use the term burnout, is that what you're talking about? Sort of a forgetting that this is even meaningful at all?

Liesel Sharabi: Dehumanization is certainly part of it when we think about some of the factors involved in burnout. Also, just feeling emotionally exhausted and depleted. Like, if you're swiping and you just feel tired, kind of sick of it, kind of drained, as opposed to feeling energized. Like, "Oh, I'm on an app and I'm looking for my person." And then also just feeling ineffective, like you're putting in the time, potentially putting in the money, and not able to achieve the outcomes that you want.

John Moe: I mean, I think too about how we didn't used to have dating apps. I think we had singles bars; we had bowling leagues and softball teams; we had church functions. And then the technology evolved to where we are now. But I gotta think it's gonna keep evolving, and it's gonna turn into something new. And then like, you know, in 50 years we'll tell stories of dating apps like we're talking about Model T Ford or something. Where do you see this going in the future? This is a booming industry. People are always going to want to find love or at least companionship. What's next?

Liesel Sharabi: I mean, some of this I think could also be a signal that we're kind of at a turning point when it comes to dating apps. Because a lot of people are frustrated with them. There hasn't been a lot of big innovation in quite some time. And so, I think people are looking ahead and asking this question of what comes next and how can we improve this experience for people. I mean, I think the obvious answer is AI. Like, that's already happening where people are using AI to write profiles and to help them with messages and to help them decode other people's behavior. And so, I think that how the industry responds to that usage is really gonna determine whether dating apps become part of our future or something that we look back on as, you know, "I remember with the days when people used to swipe." *(Chuckles.)*

And I— You know, the thing I worry about with AI is that right now one of the biggest concerns people have about using dating apps is that they're gonna get catfished or that people are lying or misrepresenting themselves. With AI, I think it makes it even harder to know exactly who you're talking to and how much they are,

you know, relying on AI to help them present themselves and to help them communicate. And so, I almost wonder if there's gonna be this like full-circle moment where it actually pushes people to meet face to face again, because that's the only way you can actually tell who it is you're talking to.

John Moe: And if you're even the one doing the talking. Like, I could see this advancing to a point where your generated person is talking to another generated person, and they don't even need you anymore. *(Chuckles.)* I mean, that's very depressing to me to think about. I could see that happening.

Liesel Sharabi: There are startups that are playing with that idea of having AI dating concierges.

John Moe: Oh noooo. Liesel, nooo.

Liesel Sharabi: *(Chuckling.)* Yeah, so you train an AI to represent yourself, and then it can just go on all the dates for you, and it can interact with people.

(They laugh.)

And then it can tell you who you're gonna match and be compatible with. I mean, these are the conversations that people are having. And so, when I think about the future, you know, it's just kind of funny. Because sometimes it feels like the more technology we throw at the problem, the more it just kind of takes us back to where we started. And I just wonder if this is gonna be like that final push that takes us back to just traditional ways of meeting face-to-face.

John Moe: Can I ask how you got interested in in the topic? I don't think I've ever met anybody with your academic specialty before. But it's a really interesting look at the way we live and the way we connect as humans. How did you get into this field?

Liesel Sharabi: I am just really, really fascinated by compatibility. And I actually started studying this topic because I was interested in marriage and had read some of John Gottman's work. I don't know if you're familiar here.

John Moe: Yeah, I know John Gottman.

Liesel Sharabi: Yeah, he published a lot on, you know, what makes relationships succeed or fail over time.

John Moe: He was he was the one who said that he could tell within like 30 seconds whether a couple was gonna stay together or not. Was that Gottman?

Liesel Sharabi: Yeah, watching short conflict conversations between married couples, he could predict divorce with a very high degree of accuracy. And so, when I look at online dating—like some of the earliest sites, like eHarmony, their goal was to lower the divorce rate by intervening and helping people make better decisions, by using algorithms to match people with more compatible partners. So, you know, these platforms—some of them have really lofty missions. Like, they're out there to change the world. Have they done that? *(Chuckles.)* You know, this conversation we're having, like, have they helped? Have they harmed us? Like, you know, that's up for debate. But yeah, that's originally what led me to this topic was this potential to actually help people find love. And now I think it's this question of have we done that? Has the industry done that? And also, how could we make this experience better for people?

John Moe: Is the experience getting worse for people? In terms of their mental health, the users?

Liesel Sharabi: I mean, based on the research we conducted, it certainly doesn't look great. Like, we don't have a point of comparison in terms of what this looked like in the early days of online dating. But yeah. I mean, in the current moment, it looks like a lot of people are frustrated.

John Moe: Well, what do you recommend as best practices for people who are looking for love and, you know, they just want to meet a nice person. And this is the reality of the world that we're in now. Like, these things are how that's done. What do you tell people so that it doesn't become as depressing or as anxious?

Liesel Sharabi: I mean, I definitely wouldn't tell people based on the study we did that you need to go deleting the apps entirely. Because they are such a common way to meet that if you do that, you're really cutting yourself off from a lot of options that you might not otherwise have. But I do think not relying on them as your sole way of meeting is important. So, still taking other steps to try to get yourself in front of new people that you might potentially be interested in. Because the one thing that dating apps do really well is just broaden the dating pool. But you can broaden your dating pool in other ways, like joining clubs, asking friends to set you up. So, still doing those things and having dating apps just be one option.

Also, I think setting limits in terms of swiping. Like, if you're spending so much time on the apps that the faces are blurring together, that you feel drained when you step away from your phone, I think that's a sign that maybe it's time to set some limits. Because that's also not helpful when it comes to evaluating profiles and thinking about who you might click with. Like, you really have to be in the right headspace, I think, to do that. And so, setting limits—you know, easier said than done. But I think those little steps are things that we can do to try to protect ourselves and also to have just a better, more productive experience.

John Moe: I mean, I think about people I went to high school with, who I connect with on Facebook, and I'm kind of reluctant to even do that. And it seems to go—Like, thinking about what's at stake with online dating—like, love! *(Chuckling.)* You know, potential long-term commitment, that kind of thing. Is it sort of like a deeper version—? It's a more powerful social network, but some of the same guidelines apply: use it sparingly, don't make it the center of your world, try to stay human during it.

Liesel Sharabi: Absolutely. Absolutely, yeah. I mean, you know similar steps that you would take with a lot of these technologies, where we're having conversations about how compulsive usage—how our overreliance on it—is starting to become harmful. Like, I think that dating apps are just one of the latest examples of that, but that there are things that we can do, like I said, to protect our mental health, protect our well-being without having to just cut ourselves off completely.

John Moe: It's a big world out there! *(Laughs uncomfortably.)* Thank you so much, Liesel Sharabi, for guiding us through it. And thanks for the metadata—the meta study that you coordinated.

Liesel Sharabi: Thank you so much for having me on.

Transition: Spirited acoustic guitar.

John Moe: Hey, stick around, okay? Because Whitney Houston was right. The children are our future, and we're going to talk about how to help them.

Promo:

Music: Bright, jazzy synth.

Jordan Crucchiola: I am Jordan Crucchiola, and I host *Feeling Seen*. I'm here with Maximum Fun member of the month, Khalil Goodman. Hi, Khalil!

Khalil: Hi, Jordan. Thank you for having me. So great to see you.

Jordan: I gotta know what's made you feel seen if you— I figure you've thought about this if you've listened to the show a bunch!

Khalil: I read *X-Men* when I was six. When you're a kid who makes art—which I am—and you're a queer kid, like there's this feeling of like "something is different," but you don't know what it is. You can be different, but it can be a superpower.

Jordan: What would you say to others who might be considering supporting the show? What would be your sales pitch to them?

Khalil: If you love this thing, if you are getting all of this joy and comfort from this thing, make sure that this thing that you like will continue.

Jordan: Yeah. Thank you so much, Khalil, for taking the time to talk to me today! And for listening to the show, oh my god! It means a lot to just know people are really listening and valuing what they're hearing.

Khalil: Thank you so much.

Speaker: Become a Maximum Fun member now at MaximumFun.org/join.

Promo:

Music: An exciting, upbeat track.

Drea Clark: If you wanna know what's going on in the world of movies, you should be listening to *Maximum Film* so we can tell you all about it!

Kevin Avery: Okay, but what if you already know what's going on in the world of movies? What if you're kind of obsessed with movies? Like, maybe you have a problem?

Alonso Duralde: Well, then you should definitely be listening to *Maximum Film*! Because we too have that problem, and it's important you know you are not alone.

Drea: We're talking indies you'll wanna seek out!

Kevin: Blockbusters and blockbusting wannabes.

Alonso: Classics we can't get enough of.

Kevin: I'm comedian and writer Kevin Avery.

Alonso: I'm film critic Alonso Duralde.

Drea: I'm festival programmer and producer Drea Clark.

John Moe: Together, we're *Maximum Film*. Smart about movies in Hollywood, so you don't have to be.

Kevin: But if you already are, that's also great. And hey, we see you.

Drea: new episodes every week on MaximumFun.org.

(Music fades out.)

Transition: Gentle acoustic guitar.

John Moe: Did you watch the Super Bowl? Not a very exciting game. But I was pleased, because my Seahawks won—Sam Darnold redemption arc. A disturbing number of AI ads. Bad Bunny halftime show! Which was great, and it featured a little boy that a lot of people thought was Liam Conejo Ramos, but it wasn't. Liam, of course, is the five-year-old who was taken by ice in Columbia Heights here in

Minnesota, grabbed on his way home from school. He was transported to what is said to be a hellhole of a detention facility; drew national attention, because he's five and because of his big, blue, bunny winter hat and Spider-Man backpack. Conejo means rabbit in Spanish. And because his family was here legally from Ecuador, seeking asylum.

Liam was eventually brought back home, which is great. But hundreds more kids, including some of Liam's classmates, are still being held. But Liam getting home is wonderful. And people thought that was him at the Super Bowl, hanging out with Bad Bunny, smiling, looking healthy. But Liam was at home in Minnesota, and according to news reports, not doing well at all. He's not back in school. Everything isn't okay. *(Beat.)* Liam's father said the truth is he's not the same boy he was before. Ever since he went in there, he suffered psychological trauma. He's very scared. He can't sleep well at night. He wakes up three or four times a night screaming, "Daddy, Daddy."

Now look, we're not a political show. We're not an immigration law show. But we are a mental health show. And what's been happening—including very much here in Minnesota, where I live—is a mental health situation. For Liam, yes, but for all kids. It's terrifying, and they are extremely vulnerable. Are they reassured by seeing parents fanning out at arrival and dismissal from school watching out for SUVs and ICE vehicles? Or is that a sign that, to them, they are under threat? And how is a kid supposed to process all that? We reached out to someone who would know to try to make sense of all this.

Transition: Gentle acoustic guitar.

John Moe: Dr. Sarah Jerstad is the Medical Director of Outpatient Mental Health Services at Children's Minnesota in the Twin Cities. Dr. Jerstad, welcome to the show.

Dr. Sarah Jerstad: Thank you so much for having me.

John Moe: What have kids been experiencing to this point in Minnesota during the ICE surge? In terms of their mental health, in terms of what's going on in their minds.

Dr. Sarah Jerstad: Yeah, kids have been struggling with mental health—really, that's been increasing quite a bit over the last year. And then—so, if you think about what's been happening with ICE, it's added a level of uncertainty. And for kids who already have mental health struggles—so, it could be young kids or kind of tweens/teenagers—that uncertainty tends to aggravate mental health concerns. Kids who have anxiety might be worrying, "What's going to happen to me?" You know, kids who feel depression might kind of have an increase in hopelessness.

So, whenever some kind of crisis in a community happens, I do worry a lot about our kids who already have mental health struggles. And then for kids who maybe don't have—at least clinical—mental health struggles, they are certainly not immune from feeling fear or worry or stress related to what's been happening.

John Moe: And what can happen for a kid—and maybe what happens for a kid different than what happens to an adult—when those things compound? When they build up over time? What are the what are the effects?

Dr. Sarah Jerstad: So, it's really developmental. For our little kids, one of the things that feels <u>most</u> important is a sense of safety and security. And little kids look to the adults in their life to kind of get a sense of "do I feel safe and secure?" So, if kids who have families who are impacted by what's happening with ICE see that their families are anxious—maybe they're not going to work; maybe these kids are even having to stay home and do school from home—that's going to be a cue that something doesn't feel right or it doesn't feel safe. Or kids who are going to school and noticing, "Hey, my classmates—some of my classmates are not here, or we've even seen ICE around maybe schools," they're going to feel unsafe.

And that's one of the things that— You know, adults can feel unsafe as well, but we have a little more cognitive capacity to start to understand how to cope with that. Younger kids have more trouble, and they look to the adults around them.

John Moe: Yeah. Yeah. Well, and adults have the capacity to make themselves more safe, that kids don't really have.

Dr. Sarah Jerstad: Absolutely.

John Moe: Yeah. So, I mean does that—do you see, as a result of that, lashing out? Do you see retreating? Like, what kind of behaviors, maybe especially—if people are listening—behaviors that they can try to spot in their own kid to signal that they're being affected in that way?

Dr. Sarah Jerstad: Yeah, I mean kids show their emotions through their behavior, especially young kids. But even as kids get a little bit older, that is how it shows up. So, for parents, you know your kid really well. And if you start to notice something is different; they're isolating more; maybe they're asking not to go or participate in things; they're worrying about their peers; or you just see maybe some of the functioning that they're doing—maybe they don't they don't want to play as much, maybe they don't want to eat as much food. These are all signals that something is off.

Younger kids don't always have the language to say, "I'm worried about what's happening. I don't understand what's happening. It makes me feel scared." Older kids—so, kind of middle school and high school—one of the things I've noticed is they are talking about it. And I think one of the encouraging things that I've seen— One of the trends I have seen over the last couple of years is less stigma around mental health. More and more kids are talking about it, and parents are willing to talk about it with their kids. So, I <u>have</u> seen— You know, I've worked with kids who've kind of come in and said, "This does feel scary."

And parents have said, "Yeah, we've been talking about it."

To me, when you start hearing kids asking, worrying, wondering, that is a signal that things feel hard and different, and it's also a signal to engage in that conversation.

John Moe: Now, I know about families here in the Twin Cities: immigrant families who are here legally who have gone into hiding. They're hiding in other people's homes. Kids, like you said, are noticing their friends suddenly missing from school, because they've been taken or because they're just hiding. And on this show, you know, we talk all the time about examining your childhood—not to blame anybody, because that's when your worldview gets set. What about the long-term effect of this? Are people who have been through something like this more likely to suffer depression, anxiety, other long-term mental health problems as adults and beyond?

Dr. Sarah Jerstad: Yeah, we do know that, in general, significant incidents that happen—so, people who've gone through even things like 9/11 or riots or COVID or those sorts of things—can leave an impact that's lasting. So, having gone through what kids have gone through with ICE, I would consider that another pretty significant community incident. And yes, in the long run, if kids don't have an opportunity to deal with—appropriately—their feelings, their worries, their stress about it, some kids tend to internalize their feelings. That will show up at a later point in time.

You know, fortunately, humans are resilient. Right? So, even if at a later point in time, mental health concerns show up as a result of that, that's not hopeless. People can get help. <u>But</u> that's why it's important for adults to really cue in to their kids and to the young people around them. Because even if they kind of seem nonchalant and asking questions, it means they're worried or they're wondering. And this is a great opportunity to draw them out and start to really talk about it.

John Moe: Yeah. What can parents do and what can non-parents do? You know, like so much of what we've seen in Minnesota is coming together as a community. Like,

it's really a village, and we're helping each other out. Which is great. But what can adults do for kids right now and going forward to help them?

Dr. Sarah Jerstad: One of the things adults can do is to remember what it's like to be a kid. As adults, we often talk a lot with one another about what's happening and "what do you think?" and worries about it. And kids need some regularity; some just daily structure, fun, opportunities to feel like life is also going along as normal. And so, if a kid feels like all we're doing is talking about it and worrying, that's going to probably heighten some anxiety. It's not to say the parent should avoid this topic, but to make sure that kids see, you know, we're still going to do school; we're going to go out and play and do those things that we regularly do.

Second, depending on the age of the kid, some kids get curious and interested. "Is there something I can do to help?" And if there's something tangible that it feels safe for a parent to have a child do, that is so immensely helpful. Kids love to be able to contribute to their community.

John Moe: It's empowering, I would think.

Dr. Sarah Jerstad: Yeah, absolutely. It makes you feel like you're doing something.

John Moe: So, we've seen— Like, you said, things were rough for kids with mental health for a while. There was the pandemic to worry about. And you know, around here, the George Floyd situation happened right around the same time. Like, are you— But then also this mitigating factor of this more open generation that's coming up and more in touch with kind of their mental health. How are you feeling about public health in regard to mental health right now—being in the position you are, here in Minnesota?

Dr. Sarah Jerstad: There's a few things that encourage me, and one of them is that we are much more open about mental health. I think this generation of parents, compared to maybe a previous generation or two generations ago, is much more open to talking with their child about what their child's concerns are and even being open about their own concerns with mental health and normalizing that. So, that to me is encouraging. The things that I worry about are we do not have enough providers really to address the concerns that are out there. So, I worry about kids and families who maybe have more trouble accessing resources getting the help that they need.

Some families have more access to resources or have kind of the capability to push through and get on lists and do that. And some families are really just struggling to kind of get by. So, I guess one of the hopes that I have— I think about one of the places— You know, here at Children's Minnesota, we see patients; we have long wait lists, same as other organizations; we communicate with the other places in the community. There's wait lists all around. And I really have a hope that kids can also access support within their school systems. Some kids simply have amazing teachers who really cue into them and understand what's going on and can kind of recognize. And a lot of the schools have a counselor, but I just know those providers or those professionals are so overwhelmed and busy.

So, you know, my worry and also my hope is that, going forward as a mental health service, we can think about "how can we be able to provide more help for kids going forward?"

John Moe: So, talk about what's happening, also kick a soccer ball, and also get as much help as you can in this world that needs more people like you. Dr. Sarah Jerstad, thank you so much.

Dr. Sarah Jerstad: Thank you for having me.

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

John Moe: Just before we recorded that interview, it was announced that the surge in Minnesota would be ending. And we'll see. There were over 100 ICE-related incidents reported that day. One of them happened outside Nina's in St. Paul. Lovely neighborhood coffee shop, great place to meet friends, right over by the cathedral. I've been there a lot. I drove by Nina's later that day. I don't know why. I felt like I needed to. And it felt different. Yeah, Nina's would still be the place that I had written some of my books, had great times with pals. I'll go there again. But now it was ICE also. There would be a scar.

And that's what this whole period in Minnesota will do to us. Even if the last SUV—often with Texas plates—drove away, the damage is done. Call it trauma, call it PTSD, call it just bad memories of fear and anger. It's here with us now to stay. Minnesotans will remember how we came together to help each other, and I don't want to discount that. That's been wonderful.

But we'll remember.

There was this huge snowstorm on Halloween in 1991 that Minnesotans still talk about constantly. You don't even have to ask them about that snowstorm. They'll eventually tell you about it anyway. Minnesotans don't forget. Things are different now after ICE—if this is after ICE; if it eventually will be after ICE, which we don't know. But we'll laugh, we'll celebrate, we'll be together. We have all this new strength now. And it happened.

My mother-in-law lives in the Chicago area, and last year there was a fire in her condo building. It didn't last long. No one was physically injured, thank goodness. But since then, she's had to live somewhere else. The repairs are dragging on. There's all this hassle with insurance companies and lawyers. She wants to go home. It's a lot. She's 84, and the condo is nowhere near repaired. So, the fire didn't last very long. The aftermath is gonna go on for an incredibly long time. She's trying to laugh about it, because she says it preserves her sanity, and the only other option is to internalize it and thus have a stroke. And she doesn't want that. *(Chuckles dryly.)* But even when she moves back in, it will always be the place that had the fire. It will be the place that got repaired—eventually, I hope. And there's some healing there in knowing that. But it is what it is.

It's like Amanda Knox said on our show a couple weeks ago. You can't go back to who you were; you can only make peace with what you've become. So, it's not over in Minnesota and never will be. And I hope to whatever gods you may choose that it doesn't start up again in some other city. But we'll keep talking about it. We're Minnesotans, and we can't actually stop talking about anything!

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

John Moe: Our show exists out of the generosity of our listeners. That's the biggest source of funding. If you have been helped by this show, if you think other people have been helped by this show, the only way we can keep making it is with donations. It's really easy to do too. You just go to MaximumFun.org/join, and then you find a level that works for you—5 bucks, 10 bucks, 20, whatever per month. And then you select *Depresh Mode* from the list of shows. And then you're helping people. You're helping with whatever healing we can provide. And thank you. And if you've already given, thank you for that. Be sure to hit subscribe, give us five stars, write rave reviews. That gets the show out into the world where it can help. We like to help.

The 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline can be reached in the U.S. and Canada by calling or texting 988. It's free. It's available 24-7. We're on BlueSky at @DepreshMode. Our Instagram is @DepreshPod. Our newsletter is on Substack. Search that up. I'm on BlueSky and Instagram at @JohnMoe. Please use our electric mail address, DepreshMode@MaximumFun.org.

Hey, if you are in the Twin Cities, I'm teaching at the Loft Literary Center. I'm teaching podcast writing, and I'm teaching memoir writing. So, just google up Loft Literary Center and search there for John Moe. You'll find me. And you can sign up for a class, and we can hang out.

Hi, credits listeners. A lot of people say, "Oh, you folks in Minnesota are so brave through all this." I want to underline that I have never been interested in being brave. *(Chuckling uncomfortably.)* I don't want to be in situations where bravery is required. I'm conflict averse. Please know that this whole thing has been one massive hassle.

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:

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!