

John Moe: This is not a repeat of last week's episode. This is not the episode of the show with Emily Nagoski where we talk about burnout. That was last week. It's also not the episode of the show from a while back where we talked with Emily about sex. No, this episode does not feature Emily Nagoski at all. Quit asking for Emily. She is not on this week!

But after doing the research for this episode, I did think of one key concept that Emily referenced last week.

Emily Nagoski: —bubble of love!

John Moe: Not in the sense of a romantic evening listening to Don Ho music, but in the sense of incrementalism. It's *Depress Mode*. I'm John Moe. I'm glad you're here.

Music: “Tiny Bubbles” from the album *Tiny Bubbles* by Don Ho.

Tiny bubbles

And wine

Make me happy

Make me feel fine

Tiny bubbles...

(Music fades out.)

John Moe: Thank you to Don Ho—a sentence I never expected to say on this podcast. Or anywhere in life, really.

Emily said that bubbles of love—tiny bubbles, if you will—are a preventative against burnout; and maybe a remedy, if you're experiencing it. So, instead of taking on the world, instead of trying to fix everything with one huge move by yourself, you find little groups of people with whom you have affinity. Little bubbles. And you make incremental change. So, it's not curing world hunger all on your own. It's getting with friends and neighbors, having a fundraiser for a local food bank. It's not single-handedly trying to achieve world peace but educating yourself and others and talking about issues and seeing what you can do about them. Bubbles of love.

I thought about that incremental approach with this week's conversation too. Eric Zimmer is a podcaster, author, and coach. He hosts the very popular podcast *The One You Feed*. He explains that title in our conversation. Eric is also the author of the new book *How a Little Becomes a Lot*, which is his guide to making small changes in your life to build to better mental health, better physical health, overall well-being. Eric is not a doctor or a psychologist. He writes about change from lived experience, having built up from a pretty rough set of circumstances a few years back.

Transition: Spirited acoustic guitar.

John Moe: Eric Zimmer, welcome to *Depress Mode!*

Eric Zimmer: Thanks, John. (*Chuckles softly.*) Just hearing that title makes me smile and be happy!

John Moe: (*Laughs.*) It was the one that made my wife laugh the most, so that's what I went with.

I don't normally do this, but let's let the Google algorithm guide our first question. Because this is what comes up when I search your name, and it gets to kind of the origin story of a lot of the work you've been doing, I think.

You're 24 years old, and things aren't going well. Who are you at that point, and what happens?

Eric Zimmer: Yeah. At 24, I'm a homeless heroin addict. I weigh 100 pounds. My skin is yellow, jaundiced from hepatitis C. Prosecutor's telling me I'm facing 50 years in jail. So, yes. Not going well is—yes. I think—

John Moe: What's the charge? Why are you going to jail?

Eric Zimmer: Grand theft and forgery, a bunch of counts.

John Moe: So, then what happens?

Eric Zimmer: So, the main reason that I have just been hauled out of my work in handcuffs—and I happened to stay in a van behind the restaurant as my home, and now that was gone—and I had no way to make money, and I had a big dope habit. And so, I went to treatment—detox—and they told me I needed to go on to long-term treatment, which I did make the decision to do. And that was really the turning point.

John Moe: How much did you know about recovery, about substance use disorder at this point?

Eric Zimmer: I'd been in treatment before. I'd been in inpatient treatment a couple times. I'd made my way in and out of Narcotics Anonymous meetings, so I knew something.

John Moe: How far back did your usage go in your life? Like, how young were you when you started?

Eric Zimmer: I actually got started kind of late. I drank a few times in high school, and I drank strangely. And by that I mean I would drink, wake up the next morning,

there'd be vodka left over, I'd pour it into orange juice, and I would drink it. Or I would drink bottles of Scope. I would get the church youth group drunk on bottles of Scope. So, it was all very odd. But then I had started a tutoring program for disadvantaged children during that period, and I saw what alcohol and drugs did in their lives. And I was like, "I'm not touching that," and I became kind of straight edge.

But then when I was 18, my best friend started dating my girlfriend. And... that hurt, as you might imagine. And somebody offered me a drink, and I feel like it was off to the races from then. It was like I was shot out of a cannon. I think heroin addiction maybe had been three or four years at that point.

John Moe: Okay, so you get into this— Was getting into some sort of recovery like a jail intervention kind of thing? Like, you could do this or go to jail, and that's why you chose it?

Eric Zimmer: It wasn't there yet, but it was not lost on me that that would look good to show up in court and be like, "Hey, I've been in treatment." So, as I said, I went because I was kind of desperate. And then while I was there— They actually first said, "You need to go to long-term treatment," and I said, "No, thank you." (*Laughs.*) I think 100 out of a 100 people, if you polled them—

John Moe: (*Playfully.*) Because clearly, you had this under control.

Eric Zimmer: Exactly. I think if you polled 100 people, they would all have been like, "This guy needs long-term treatment." You can't get 100 people to agree on anything, but they would have agreed on that.

But then I went back to my room, and I had—in recovery, we call it a moment of clarity. Where I just saw. I was like, "I'm going to die or go to jail soon if I leave

here.” Right? I mean, 100 pounds is emaciated. You know, I had hepatitis C and I was not doing well. So, then I went back to them. And I said, “Okay, I’ll go to treatment.” And that was the turning point. And I think I had the perfect blend of, I think, what you need for recovery. Which is, there’s gotta be some degree of consequence. You don’t give up something that you love just because. There’s gotta be some degree of consequence. But at the same time, there has to be a certain degree of hope, I think. And for whatever reason, I had gotten it back then in treatment. And so, I think the two of those things were fertile enough soil. And the fact that it was a 30-day program helped, which I ended up staying in for 45 days. But.

John Moe: Were you able to stay clean? I know that there are often relapses. It’s not as direct a line as a lot of people think it is.

Eric Zimmer: I stayed clean for eight years that time. And then I... decided I could probably drink again. You know, my mindset was like, “Well, you know, heroin’s a bad idea. We can all agree on that. And look, I make good choices in my life. I go to work every day. I work out. I’m a good dad. I’m successful. I’m sure it’s fine.” This is what I told myself.

Well, I had to get sober again. Which was 18 years ago. So, I’ve been abstinent again for 18 years—which tells you how well that experiment went, that I had to get sober again. I didn’t go back to the opiates. But what I realized was, for me, it doesn’t matter. I was just as sick when I was in my 30s, good job, good house—you know, everything on the outside looks great. I was just as sick as I was at 24. It’s just that alcohol is—you know, it’s fine. Go get it. Nobody cares. Right? Where heroin is problematic in that way. And certainly, more dangerous today.

John Moe: Well, I want to talk about the book, *How a Little Becomes a Lot*. I want to talk about your podcast, *The One You Feed*. But let’s connect this line then. So, you get

sober. You get sober again. But how do you go from being 100 pounds in rehab, hepatitis C, to being this successful author/podcast host/coach? Like, what's the career ascent, but what's the mindset that leads you on that career ascent?

Eric Zimmer: I mean, it's a long story. There's a lot of years in there. My career was software world. So, I found my way into a software startup, luckily—because I had no qualifications for anything—and did that long enough that I started to have qualifications. And I just built a whole career out of that.

John Moe: In software.

Eric Zimmer: In software. And then I started a solar energy company in Ohio in 2008, which was a profoundly bad idea. But we made it work for about five years, and then I shut it down. And I was struggling at that point. I was back in the software world, but I was depressed; I'd shut down this company that I worked so hard on; I was in a marriage that wasn't good; I was a few years sober after—I think it was about five years sober at that point. And I just got the idea one day.

I was like, “You know, I'm reading these kinds of books,”—books like mine, books about Buddhism, different books to try and better myself—“Why not just start a podcast and interview the people that write those books? And it'll be good for me to swim in that water all day. And it'll be good— My best friend, Chris, is an audio engineer. And so, he and I can spend time together.”

So, I started it as a whim basically. And it turned out that A) I loved it. And B) people started listening. And people started liking it. And it started being incredibly helpful to people. And that's based on the emails that I'm getting. Right? And so, at a certain point, somebody started saying like, “Do you ever do coaching work with people?”

And I thought, “Weeell, I mean... no?” But I got asked a couple of times. I was like, “You know what? I’m game. I’ll try something.” And when I did it, I instantly was like, “Oh, this is like sponsoring somebody in AA. I’ve done this 100 times. You know, for free.” It’s a similar concept. It’s a very similar idea. And then I was naturally kind of good at it. And so, that was the first five years of the podcast. And then eventually, after I was— I was still working in software all this time, but about five/five and a half years in was when I got to the point where I felt like, “Okay, this thing could— I could do this full time.”

So, I’m doing the podcast, I’m doing coaching work with people, and eventually I realized that the coaching has got me into a slightly different corner—which is I’m so booked coaching that it’s far better than what I was doing, but I’m still a little stuck here. And so, I started developing programs. And one of those programs that did well really laid the stage for what the book is all about.

John Moe: As you moved into doing these interviews, as you moved into coaching, you talk about having been a sponsor in AA. Did you find that you approached everything the same way that you approached AA, like this person has a fundamental problem that needs to be solved?

Eric Zimmer: (*Chuckling warmly.*) No.

John Moe: Or is it more of a gestalt? More of like, “Here’s everything about this person. How can we improve it?” Or do you start from this— And I haven’t been through AA, so I don’t know for sure, but do you start from this “here’s a central problem that needs to be addressed?”

Eric Zimmer: It’s more of the latter. I certainly don’t start from “everybody’s got a fundamental problem.” I actually believe very much the opposite. I was a behavior coach is what people came to me for. I didn’t do a lot in recovery. I mostly did people

who are trying to make some sort of change in their life, and they're just— They're struggling to make it. They're trying to be more productive at work, but they procrastinate all day. They're trying to build an exercise habit; they just can't do it. They're trying to write a novel; they're not writing regularly. So, I kind of thought of myself as a behavior coach.

And one of my big beliefs is that learning to change a behavior is a skill. Right? Which means there's not a fundamental problem. But that's what we all think, right? We all think when we don't change something, there's something wrong with us. “I'm lazy. I'm undisciplined. I'm not motivated. I just don't start things. You know, I never finish anything. I start.” There's all that mindset. So, a lot of the work I end up doing is trying to get people out of that mindset, because it becomes self-referential at a certain point, right? You start to go, “I'm not the kind of person who can stick with anything.” And thus, when you are doing well, you're just waiting for it to fall apart.

John Moe: So, this approach— And we're going to talk about the book next I think, here—*How a Little Becomes a Lot*. And you're thinking there is that people can change; the approach is to do it gradually; a little becomes a lot. Is that based on the conversations you've had with a lot of people? Or is that based on your own experience in recovery?

Eric Zimmer: In many ways, my recovery was not “a little.” I went into a 45-day treatment program. That is not—

John Moe: That's a lot!

Eric Zimmer: That is not a little, right?

John Moe: (*Chuckling.*) It's definitionally a lot, yeah.

Eric Zimmer: And so, the book is not designed for people that are in that dire of straights. It's not a book about how to get sober. It's a book about how to make the sort of changes most of us want to make day-to-day. I just listed some of them: exercise more, eat better, go to bed at the right time, be more productive, do that thing I've always been wanting to do. That kind of change. And that kind of change does respond most often to a little-by-little approach. Now I mean something specific when I say little-by-little. I mean low resistance actions done consistently over time in the same direction.

And what I mean by low resistance is you can get yourself to do it. So, that'll look very different. "Little" may look very different for different people. Somebody might be in somewhat decent shape, so what their beginning place for exercise might be very different than somebody who hasn't worked out in a decade. Their "little"s are going to look different. So, low resistance, you can get yourself to do it, done consistently over time, you keep doing it, and then in the same direction.

Transition: Spirited acoustic guitar.

John Moe: More with Eric Zimmer in a moment.

(ADVERTISEMENT)

Transition: Gentle acoustic guitar.

John Moe: Back with Eric Zimmer, author of *A Little Becomes a Lot*. We were talking about steps to change. Low resistance—so you can get yourself to do the thing—doing it consistently over time and taking steps that move in the same direction.

Eric Zimmer: And this is particularly true if what we're trying to do is change aspects of the way we think, the way we relate to the world. When we're trying to change that sort of thing, part of the modern problem is you could, on Instagram in

an hour, get 40 different ideas of what you should change. You should be cold plunging; you should do sound baths; you should be meditating; you should be journaling; you should be collaging; you should be doing cognitive behavioral therapy or dialectical behavior—I mean, it goes on and on and on. And the problem is, if you do little-by-little in 50 different directions, that does not add up to a lot. It doesn't go anywhere. And so, that's what I mean by little-by-little.

John Moe: Okay, so you're talking about, instead of doing a little in 50 directions, doing 50 steps in the same progression.

Eric Zimmer: Yes. Mm-hm.

John Moe: How do you establish those 50 steps?

Eric Zimmer: Well, the good news is you can—you know, your car only sees like six feet ahead of you, but you can drive across the country that way at night, right? There are headlights—your headlights—you don't have to see the whole path. You just see what's eight to ten/six feet out in front of you and you just keep going. The same way with things that we want to change. We don't need to see the whole path. We need to get started in a direction and then adjust as we go.

Let's move away from exercise and move to another habit that a lot of people who listened to my show have wanted to do, which is meditate. I wanted to meditate. I wanted to meditate when I was 18 years old. That was a long time ago. There was no internet. All you had were books and some weird guy in Columbus who taught transcendental meditation. Those were your choices. And so, I would read these books, and they'd say you should meditate for 30 minutes to an hour a day. So, I would try and do that. Well—

John Moe: It's really hard.

Eric Zimmer: Yeah, my brain was pandemonium when I would sit down to do 30 minutes to an hour a day. It was like the dark circus rolled into town. So, doing that was incredibly hard for me, which meant I needed to have really high motivation to do it. So, I might be able to get myself to do it for a week, maybe a month at the longest. But inevitably, I would fall off. And when I would fall off, I would give up. I wouldn't just kind of half fall off. I'd be like, "I can't do this. I'm not going to do it."

Eventually one day, I was like, "You know what? I'm going to—" It was right after I started this podcast. And I had an interview with someone, and they talked a little bit about this idea. And I thought, "You know what? I'm just going to meditate for three minutes, but I'm going to do it every day." And that worked. Three minutes I could do. I could sit through three minutes of my brain. And as I did that, I slowly became able to do five minutes with about the same degree of effort. And then 10 minutes. And then— I mean, today I have a 20-to-30-minute meditation practice, but I've had periods in the past where I've had an hour/two hours a day of meditation. I've sat multiple long retreats. And all that came because I was willing to start really small and build.

And the reason that part of that is so important is— I often say to people, "I'd rather have you meditate three minutes a day and do it seven days a week than try and meditate for 30 minutes a day but only do it two days a week." Now, if you add the numbers up, you'll go, "Wait, the second scenario is more minutes of meditation." The problem is if you're trying to do it seven and you only do it two, you're going to spend all this time feeling bad about the five days you didn't do it.

Motivation goes up when we feel good about our chances of success. It goes down when we don't believe in ourselves and we don't think we can succeed. So, the method where you succeed every day allows you to start to build a little confidence, a little bit

of momentum. You start to feel like, “Oh, I'm making and keeping promises to myself.” And that all leads to an upward spiral.

John Moe: So then, as the little becomes a lot—as the title of the book indicates—is the goal to meditate longer and longer and longer? Or is just doing it a lot—whether it's three minutes a day indefinitely, that's what becomes a lot? Like, is it just the repetition or is it growing it?

Eric Zimmer: It's different for different people and it's different depending on the behavior. In some cases, doing a little bit and continuing to just do it makes sense. If you're saving money, that's really the way you do it, right? You put a little bit aside; you start young, and you just keep doing it. And suddenly before you know it, there's a lot. But it's also the building block. So, someone might say— If I were working with a client who was really out of shape, I'd be like, “Okay, your job is to go around the block once a week.” (*Correcting himself.*) Or I'm sorry, “Go around the block every day this week. Just take a walk around the block.”

Now, in the grand scheme of things, going around their block once a day is not going to radically change their health. But it's a platform that we could build on so that they could start doing more. Now, where that point gets— I mean, different exercise people will debate. Some would be like, “You should be doing, you know, five days a week for an hour.” But other people will be like, “You know what? If you're moving your body, you know, semi-vigorously for 15 minutes a day? That's great.” So, everybody's goals are going to be different. So, whether it's compounding or it's allowing you to build to something bigger depends on what you're trying to do.

John Moe: Are we talking about changing what you do or changing who you are?

Eric Zimmer: Well, the book does both. As I looked at years of doing my podcast, and I looked at like “what are the things I keep coming back to? Like, what am I

naturally— What guests am I inviting on?” And they were people that were A) talking about behavior change. I was fascinated with “how do people change?” for an obvious reason. I had to do it to save my life. And I've seen other people get sober. And I've seen a lot of people die. And I'm curious. Like, why? How? So, I've been fascinated about change. So, I'm talking to people about that all the time.

But then I'm also talking with people a lot about our habits of thought. You know, the way that we think and we relate to ourselves and the world also. And so, the book has both. And the insight with changing how we think—our habits of thought—is a similar one to trying to change an external behavior. So, an example I give is—let's say you want to be more patient with your kids. And you snap at them on Sunday night, and you pick up a book on parenting, and you read a page, and you're like, “Yeah, okay, I'm gonna definitely do that.” And then that's it. And then Thursday, you snap at them again.

Versus: you pick up that book, and you write down on a little index card a couple of reflections about why that's important to you, and you set an alarm on your phone that goes off three times each day. You pull it out; you look at it for a minute; you read it; you put it back in your pocket. You're going to be less likely to snap at your kids in that second scenario, because you're retraining a thought pattern. Thought patterns don't change by epiphany. You don't suddenly go, “Oh, I see something. Now I have an insight. I have an epiphany of sorts. And now, I just—all the time, that's what I do.”

It's almost always we see something; there's a way we want to be, but it takes a lot of reps. It's a lot of reps to retrain a thought pattern. The good news is you can do it. The bad news is you got to do it a little bit at a time over and over and over again. And so, the book gives a method for how to do that.

John Moe: How does this apply to mental health? I know you mentioned in the book that you've dealt with depression. Obviously, you've dealt with substance use disorder. So, people listening to this show, someone's experiencing severe depression; someone has an anxiety disorder that's getting in the way of their functioning. Do you think that those things can be changed? Are you saying they can be solved through this incremental behavior modification?

Eric Zimmer: No. No, I'm not promising the moon. Depression and anxiety range from debilitating, crippling conditions to what I have more of now these days—which I just tend to call a tendency towards a low mood. So, I think all of that we end up sort of slotting under anxiety/depression. They're all on a big spectrum. And if you are at the bottom of a depression barrel, walking around the block once a day is not going to solve your problem. It's a help! One of my favorite phrases is, and I use it in the book is “Depression hates a moving target.” I mean, it is a phrase that I've used for years, because it tells me “Move.” When I'm depressed, I'm stuck. “Just move. Somewhere, somehow.”

John Moe: Physically moving.

Eric Zimmer: Physically moving. I don't necessarily mean running. Sometimes for me, it's just: get out the door, get off the couch, clean the house, anything. Any kind of movement for me helps. Now my depression is pretty well treated, and it's been pretty well treated with medication. So, I am not advocating like that this book solves those kinds of problems. But I do think that a part of what drives depression and anxiety is that... we don't feel in control of our ability to make changes in life. Like, if we can't— If we think, “Well, I want to do this,” and then I just consistently can't do it, that causes anxiety and depression. And I think anxiety and depression are also— part of the cause is the way we think.

And so, we can work on retraining thought patterns. I think all those things help, but I would not claim that they are a solution for. In my case, there are things that I know that make it more likely that, if I get a little bout of depression, that it will be mild. And those things are physical exercise. They're spending time with other people. They're getting outdoors. They're making sure that I play my guitar. There are actions that I take that help me manage my depression, but I certainly wouldn't say they cured it or they cure it. I think that would be a big overpromise that I would not want to do.

John Moe: I mean, there are people who would like to get out and move and play their guitar, but they are— It's too severe a condition for them to even do that. But it seems like a lot of what your work says, what your book says, is that the actions—the behaviors—are a path to controlling the thoughts. Is that fair?

Eric Zimmer: I wouldn't say it exactly like that, but you're close. I do think the cruel irony of depression is the thing that helps it the most is moving, and that's the hardest thing to do when you're depressed. Like, it's a cruel irony of it. I get it. I've been there. Um, I would not say that behavior controls our thoughts. I think everything we do is sort of a web of thoughts, behaviors, and emotions. Right? Those are sort of the three things that are kind of going on in there. Emotions do not have a lever that you can pull, right? There is simply no “reach in and pull the Be Happier lever.” It doesn't exist. Thoughts—we don't have a lever to control what comes into our head. Try and meditate for five minutes and you will see that. You are profoundly not in charge of what shows up. We do have some degree of control after the fact of what we want to engage with, what we want to cultivate. That takes effort, but it's doable. But behavior is a lever that we can pull more often.

Transition: Spirited acoustic guitar.

John Moe: More with Eric Zimmer in just a moment.

Promo:

Music: Bright, exciting rock.

Speaker: MaxFun Meetup Day is on Thursday, April 23rd. MaxFunsters from all over are getting together to hang out and celebrate their favorite podcasts. Want to go and meet some friends who like similar stuff and care about the same things as you? Head to MaximumFun.org/meetup to see where and when your local meetup is. Don't see one nearby? Host your own and make some new pals! All you need to do is pick a place that can hold a small group. A bar, cafe, park, library, wherever! Then fill out the form at MaximumFun.org/meetup. We'll add you to the page and help get the word out. So, go to MaximumFun.org/meetup and maybe we'll see you on April 23rd.

Promo:

Music: Playful synth.

Alden Ford: Hello, this is Alden Ford.

Moujan Zolfaghari: And Moujan Zolfaghari!

Alden: Two of the creators of *Mission to Zyxx*, your favorite improvised, obsessively sound-designed, sci-fi sitcom here on the MaxFun Network. And the news is...

Alden & Moujan: (*In unison.*) We're back!

Moujan: With an all-new miniseries set in the Zyxx universe! *The Young Old Derf Chronicles*. Will Derf find his own killer before it's too late?!

Alden: Oooh!

Moujan: To find out how that question could possibly make sense—well, you just have to tune in.

Alden: Yeah. And as always, it's ambitious and labor-intensive to—frankly—an absurd degree.

Moujan: Indeed!

Alden: So, if you are looking for a little break from your own galaxy, we would love for you to check it out.

Moujan: That's *The Young Old Derf Chronicles*. Search *Mission to Zyxx*, Z-Y-X-X, in your podcast app!

Alden: Or on MaximumFun.org.

Moujan: Keep it fresh!

(Music fades out with a sick guitar riff.)

Transition: Gentle acoustic guitar.

John Moe: Back with Eric Zimmer, host of the podcast *The One You Feed*.

Eric Zimmer: When I got sober early on, they said, “Sometimes you can't think your way into right action. You have to act your way into right thinking.” That was a really useful phrase for me! It was nothing that I could do that turned off the half of my

brain that was screaming to get high all the time. I didn't have a way to turn it off. I would get the thought; I would try and change the thought, and it would be back in four seconds, and I would do that. But what they said was, “Here's things you can do. Go to the meeting. You know, walk around and shake hands with everybody at the meeting”—which made me want to die. But after I did it, I felt better. “Read your big book, call your sponsor.” There were actions that I could take. And those actions had a way of helping. They had a way of helping. And so—

John Moe: Yeah. It felt like progress.

Eric Zimmer: Yes. And they started to change the way I thought and felt. You know, my sponsor saying, “Go around, shake everybody's hand in the room” sounds terrible, but I would do it. And by the end, I feel like I belong more. I couldn't have thought my way into feeling like I belonged there, right? That wouldn't work.

John Moe: So, is the book—? (*Chuckles.*) I mean, it's interesting to me, and I'm going to talk about the podcast in a second, because it's interesting to me. I've been doing a show for 10 years. I wrote a book. And I always kind of struggle with this idea of—you know, I don't want to portray that I've got things figured out. I do—I'm educated not from a degree, but just from some curiosity. Like, I was a journalist before I did this, and I would pursue stories that really interested me. I wanted to learn more about them. I'd go track down the people who knew a lot about them or had degrees, and I could record that conversation, contextualize it, play it back to people.

I'm still sort of doing that with mental health. But I always sort of stop short of giving advice. Because all I can really say is, “Well, this is what this person told me. This is what this thing is that I've observed.” Is that what you're doing? Or do you feel like you've come through it, you've had enough conversations—not through a

graduate degree program, but through life—that you could form a coherent philosophy? Is that your experience?

Eric Zimmer: This is a question that I wrestle with a little bit. And I think it's an important one. Because I think if I had a brand, my brand would be nuance. My brand would be— It's complicated, right?

John Moe: (*Playfully.*) And nothing sells better than nuance! (*Laughs.*)

Eric Zimmer: Oh, I know. Yes. God knows. God knows. You know, as I was writing the book, I kept being like, “Well, I want to caveat and hedge that. And I want to caveat that. And—well, but maybe not if you have—not in this; it wouldn't work there.” And eventually I was like, “Well, I'm basically writing a book that says, ‘It's complicated’ and handing it in.” And I'm like, “Well, that doesn't do any good.”

So, I think everybody's different. I'll give you an example. I used to have some coaching clients. Some clients are so hard on themselves; we need to find a way for them to be kinder. I have other clients who are in the habit of making excuses for everything. And what I need to help them do is hold themselves a little bit more accountable. Two different people need two different things. So, what I've tried to do in the book is set forth what I think are some principles and approaches that will be helpful for a lot of people. And again, it's not a book for somebody who's a 100-pound heroin addict. It's not a book for somebody who's got clinical depression and hasn't gotten out of bed in two weeks. I can't fix that. That would be—

So, I'm trying to both say something useful that's useful to most people while also realizing we're all a little different.

John Moe: Let's talk about your podcast a little bit, *The One You Feed*. Can you, first of all, explain the name?

Eric Zimmer: Yeah. The podcast is based on an old parable where we have two wolves inside of us that are always at battle. One's a good wolf; the other's a bad wolf. And the parable is, you know, which wolf wins is the one you feed. So, that's the core idea. And so, I've used a slightly expanded version of that parable at the beginning of every podcast. And the idea— I first heard that in some church basement in Columbus, Ohio a long, long time ago. And it obviously spoke to me at that point. I think what I love about the parable though is that it points to something really true, which is that we all feel competing forces within us. We all want a lot of different things. We value a lot of different things. There's a lot swirling inside of us. And so, I like the parable because it normalizes and names that.

John Moe: What makes one wolf good and one wolf bad?

Eric Zimmer: For somebody who is as middle-way kind of guy as I am to have a parable that is that binary is still kind of wrong in a way. The way I—

John Moe: (*Chuckles softly.*) Back to nuance.

Eric Zimmer: I would have described it would be—it's a term Buddhists use— skillful and unskillful. But skillful and unskillful wolves don't make for a very good parable, right? I mean. (*Chuckles.*) So, I just stick with it. But how do you know? That's for every person to figure out. That's part of the challenge of being human is figuring out what is important. And there are— I have things in the book where you can kind of try and get a sense of your values. I triangulate in on them a bunch of different ways to try and get a sense of what matters most to you. You know, “values” I define as the thing that the best part of us has decided is worth wanting. And then desires are just all the things that you just want, whether you want to want them or not. And so, there's always that pull going. I think in a good human life, there's a little bit of attention there.

And obviously, nobody's going to live all the time out of every value, every moment. There is a place for allowing your desires to be there. They're good. They add spice to life. They're the energy of a lot of things. But many of us are in the habit of trading what we want most—a value—for what we want now—a desire—a lot. And when we do that a lot, we start to feel... less good about ourselves.

John Moe: Yeah. I was listening to—I think a very recent episode of your podcast. You mentioned the idea of some of the things that went along with the bad wolf. One of them was fear. And I admit, I kind of bristled a little bit. Because I thought, “Well, fear is useful in avoiding danger.” But it's also just an emotion. We can't control what we feel, whereas the behavior is a choice. But I think it's easy to go from fear being bad to shaming someone for feeling fear. Like, are you drawing a distinction between what we feel and the actions that we take?

Eric Zimmer: Podcasts are longform because you have a chance to explore ideas a little bit deeper. And so, I would never actually think that any emotion is a bad emotion. They're just emotions, right? What we do with them has, I think—you know, depending on our own ethical/moral compass—that those things matter. And some of them are better for how we feel and how we relate to ourselves in the world in that way. But I would never say that any emotion is bad. I've got a whole chapter in the book about the middle way. And if you go back to like Aristotle, I think it was—I sometimes get my Greek philosophers mixed up; let's call it Aristotle—the golden mean. And the point was that something like courage is a middle point between being a chicken and being an idiot, right? Like, between “I'm too scared to do anything” or “I'm stupid. I'll do whatever, man.” Courage is a midpoint there.

And so, I think for many of these things, fear is— It has a purpose. And for anybody that's dealt with anxiety to a certain degree, you realize like, “Okay, this thing has overrun its bounds, right? I'm—”

John Moe: I might have needed it at one point, but the threat is passed and it's still here.

Eric Zimmer: Of course you did. You know, or somebody with PTSD. Like, of course they feel frightened when they hear a loud noise. They should. But they're not actually in danger. And so, learning to be— You know, there's a whole chapter in the book about being kinder to ourselves—being compassionate to ourselves is really, really important. Both I think it's the biggest upgrade I've ever given my brain, and it's really important in our ability to change and be the people we want to be. And if we are shaming ourselves for having emotions, that's... that's not going to go well. I mean, shame is what drives addiction in my mind. I mean, it's one of the big drivers of addiction.

John Moe: How has it shaped you to do this podcast as often as you do? And you put out a lot of work. You're prolific. And all these conversations, all this reading you've talked about, writing this book, this sort of constant inquiry that is more than almost anybody else does. I try to provide a simulation of that through doing the show. People can be a listener to my show or your show and gain a lot. But I think there's something about being directly in the questions and answers that makes you evolve. How does that evolve your thinking?

Eric Zimmer: I was having this conversation with somebody this morning, and I was talking about an occupational hazard of this is that it makes it sometimes hard to want to engage with any of this material more than I already do as part of my work. *(Beat.)* And I think doing the podcast has been profound in shaping the person I am. I think I have a—if you were to give me one of the big five personality tests, I'd score fairly high on conscientiousness. Which means I have a real allergy to saying something but not also doing it. And so, there's an accountability I feel to my audience that if I'm

going to be talking about these things, I should be trying to do them. I mean, I don't do them perfectly, but I should be trying.

And so, that part has been really good for me. I do think that two episodes a week on essentially similar topics for a long time can be a lot. What I've realized about it is that once I start talking to somebody, I'm kind of in my happy place. You know? Like, I still love that, even 12 years on. And so, um... yeah, that would be my answer. It's been both good for me, but at times I think it's not ideal either. But mostly, on the whole, I would say it has been an unquestioned good for me to do this work.

John Moe: Okay. Alright. (*Laughs.*) Again, you've found the nuance.

Eric Zimmer: (*Bleakly.*) I know. It gets tiresome. It gets tired. I'm a cliché of myself.

John Moe: (*Laughs.*) No, the nuance is good. Eric Zimmer, thank you so much.

Eric Zimmer: Thank you, John. It's a pleasure. I admired the work you do for a long time, so I'm happy to be here.

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

John Moe: Hey, look, we're trying to help you and others and the world incrementally, step by step. But it does cost money to make the show. So please, if you haven't joined already, please do so. Individual donations are by far the largest chunk of our revenue that allow us to keep making the show. All you've got to do is go to MaximumFun.org/join. Be sure to hit subscribe. Give us rave reviews. Give us five stars. That gets the show out into the world as well. Anything you could do, it just

makes the show up more for other people. And that helps us grow, and that helps us help more folks.

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. Just search *Depresh Mode* or John Moe. I'm on BlueSky and Instagram at [@JohnMoe](#). Join our Preshies group on Facebook. Just search up the word Preshies. And we can open the door for you to come on in. And a lot of people hanging out there, talking mental health, talking dogs, talking jokes. (*Chuckles.*) It's a good hang. I'm there too. I'll see you there. Our electric mail address is DepreshMode@MaximumFun.org.

Hi, credits listeners. I think we're allowed at least one irrational fixation in life, provided we understand the psychological underpinnings of that fixation. It now seems likely that the NBA will expand and put a team back in Seattle, and that team will be called the Supersonics. And thus, I will be psychically repaired as my childhood team—and indeed my childhood, kidnapped in 2008, will be restored. I know this is preposterous. I'm going with it anyway. It's all a business. The NBA cares nothing about me. They don't know I exist. But this restoration will make me happy anyway. Ridiculous, but doesn't change my feelings.

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!