

Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & Emmeline Clein

JVN Hey curious people. I'm Jonathan Van Ness, and welcome to Getting Curious. Okay, so before we get into this episode, this episode is going to be about eating disorders and disordered eating more generally. So if you didn't clock that already from reading the title of this episode, it could just be that you don't want to listen to this episode and it's not for you. It could be Trigger City. I'm going to be talking about my experience with, my relationship with food. And we will be talking about eating disorders generally. So, just so you know, that's happening. So if you don't want to listen this episode, I totally get it. But we'll miss you and we'll see you next time. But if you do listen to this episode, welcome to Getting Curious. So lately I have been, doing some good work in therapy. And I've also been realizing that, you know, if you've ever read my book, over the top, I talk a lot about internal family systems and parts therapy and my food part and my eating part has just been really coming out to soothe me lately. I have just noticed in these last few weeks I don't know if it's coming to the city. I don't know if it's, you know, bringing the dogs or just what it is, but I have just my binge eating has been on 50,000, and I am curious about where we are in our culture of understanding eating disorders, where we are in our culture of treating eating disorders. I'm also curious about like how eating disorders are embedded in our culture. Like if there is I mean, I think I see it for sure, like in, you know, social media and, and and just in TV in a lot of ways, movies. But I'm curious if there's other ways that it's embedded in our culture that I may not even know. And I'm just curious that you know where we are as a culture when it comes to speaking about eating disorders, having eating disorders, where are we? So to learn about all of this and more, we're bringing in Emmeline Clein. Emmeline Clein's writing has appeared in The New York Times Magazine, The Yale Review, The Nation, Smithsonian, Berlin Quarterly, vice, BuzzFeed, catapult, and anti-gravity, among other publications. Her chapbook toxic was published by ChuChu press in 2022. She received her MFA, which is a masters of Fine Arts from Columbia University School of the Arts, and she lives in New York. Her first book, *Dead Weight*, is out now, and today we're asking, are eating disorders embedded in our culture? Emmeline, thank you for coming on. Getting Curious. How are you?

EMMELINE CLEIN I'm great. I'm so happy to be here. Thank you for having me.

JVN Thank you so much for coming. My brain just thought like 18 things at once. But your work is so important and I think it is I. And just reading your bio. Congratulations, honey. I'm just really blown away as well with like, the breadth of your writing. So I just want to say like congratulations on dead weight. So exciting. I like because this is your first like full book, isn't it?

EMMELINE CLEIN Is my first book.

JVN And it and then when did it come out?

EMMELINE CLEIN It came out at the end of February. So she is she's a little over six months old. She's like, I don't know what babies are doing at that age because I certainly don't have one. But maybe she's crawling, but she's definitely not talking.

JVN I don't know of six months old crawl at all.

EMMELINE CLEIN Okay? They just sit there. Well, that's that's perfect, cause she's a book, so she does sort of just.

JVN So anyway, it's giving it's part memoir, it's part cultural research and it's part history. But before we get into the layers and the nuances, can you, of the book, can you give us a broad definition of eating disorders?

EMMELINE CLEIN Yes, I would love to. So I, I think that it's like that is sort of a very straightforward question. It's also a complicated one, because eating disorders have been so misunderstood in our broader culture and also by the medical establishment, sort of since they began to be, treated or, and diagnosed. I think the sort of most simple explanation that is accepted by the medical establishment would be that an eating disorder is any sort of. Disturbance in your eating behaviors that is accompanied by, a lot of mental distress. And depending on which eating disorder you get diagnosed with, it will also come with. Specific manifestations of those behaviors, whether it's a starvation manifestation in anorexia or a binge in purge manifestation in bulimia, or just bingeing with binge eating disorder, or having an assortment of those symptoms of eating disorder not otherwise specified, which is actually the most common eating disorder. And part of what my project is to do is to point out that all of that micro separation actually ends up creating, a lot of hierarchy between the eating disorders and sort of separating people who are suffering from the same psychological problems, by kind of pitting them against each other because we sort of love to pit women against each other in the society. Not that this is a disease that only afflicts women, which we'll get into. But to me, what an eating disorder really is is sort of it's all about the relationship between nourishing your body and the way that that act of nourishing your body is connected to the way your body is received by the world, if that makes sense. And sort of the like, painful tangle of emotions that come with that relationship for most people. I've personally ever spoken to about this, and definitely for myself. And I think eating disorders are really sort of a often they are construed in the public imagination and in the medical imagination as this sort of like act of control in a chaotic world or this very sort of like individualized, pathological overinvestment in a beauty standard. Right? And like devoting yourself to that beauty standard with this, like pathological fervor, when in fact, I think what an eating disorder really is, is sort of a coping mechanism developed in thrall to a beauty standard that has been bombarding us on all sides, really across the gender spectrum, if you ask me. But like the thin ideal is just so prevalent. And so I feel like eating disorders are really these sort of coping mechanisms that are also diseases that we have to kind of understand as actually kind of a rational response to the society we live in, but one that is, in the end, going to harm us more than it is going to help us yet.

JVN Oh my God, that's so true. Okay, so then also one other thing I was, curious about. We got to do this fun episode earlier on, like the cultural history of the calorie with, doctor at the end. Chowdhary, who were obsessed with, but she was telling me about this one that I hadn't heard. I think it's called, like, it's like orthorexia.

EMMELINE CLEIN Orthorexia. That's like health and wellness. Yeah.

JVN So, like, so that one, I was also like, she was telling me some centers of that. I was like, ooh, that is like a resonating. I feel like I went to the eating disorder buffet because like at different points in my life.

EMMELINE CLEIN This is the thing we've all mostly been at the eating disorder buffet. It's actually even though we this is part of our thinking about these disorders are so misunderstood like we think of it as. Yeah. You're at like a prefix mill and you get your diagnosis and then you do your linear trajectory of healing through all the stages in the courses, when in fact most people are totally at an eating disorder buffet. And the research shows that there's so much crossover, like half of people that I get diagnosed with anorexia end up with binge eating disorder symptoms almost similar, statistics on the reverse way, most people that have bulimia or binge eating disorder develop those binging tendencies in the wake of a starvation diet or an anorexic period, because your body's evolutionary response to feeling, to being starved is to experience extreme hunger that will then lead you to binge. And so there's all this cross-over. And yet instead of addressing the crossover and sort of creating just a category in the DSM for disordered eating overarching that could allow those of us suffering from all its different forms to kind of like commune and realize ways in which were similar. We're all siloed off into these separate categories, and then those categories themselves have their own kind of hierarchical connotations where like anorexia becomes the like good girls eating disorder and bulimia becomes the sort of like spoiled, greedy one. And binge eating disorder gets coated with all these fatphobic. Yeah, problematic associations. And it's just the buffet gets dicey fast.

JVN I'm writing my new like I'm working on like new material for, comedy. Like I'm finishing up like my old, like, material for, like, the last time. And I'm, like, starting to write, like, my new stuff. And I've been writing a lot about how, like, I tried, like the pill version of Ozempic, like rebelliousness. And it didn't work for me. Like, I literally ate through it because, I am such a binger that, like, I could, like, even if my body was like, it's going to make you have diarrhea and throw up, I'd be like, I'm eating this pizza no matter what. Girl. Like, totally. I need my comfort. And so like, it's like funny, but it's also like sad and so and then and then I kind of didn't actually come to this like place of like eMDR, eMDR, healing, where I was like, really? I just want to be healthy and like, my knees fucking hurt and like, my body just hurts from like the binging. So it's like it really just is more about like how I feel like, not how I look, but there. But I'd be lying if I said that that part wasn't like that. I wasn't aware of the part that wants to look a certain way, you know, or like totally.

EMMELINE CLEIN And I think that like, our desire to like, I think there there's this interesting tension in like the current place we are in, like feminism and like, whatever liberal politics in general where you, there's, there's a desire that people we've recognized that the beauty standard we're aspiring to is highly racist and misogynistic. Right. And so like and people understand that it's like not going to align with their politics to like admit how badly they want to fit that beauty standard. And I think that we've the way we've talked about eating disorders has made people feel so blamed and shamed for their desire to fit that beauty standard. And just like they're not good enough feminists or like they're not strong enough to resist that, when in fact I think it's much more cathartic, empowering, and genuinely healing to be like. It is not shameful to admit that you might want to look away, that you're not politically feeling great about the fact that you want to look that way. And what is actually important politically, I think, is to ask yourself, wait, when did I learn that? And why do I feel that way? I'm like, how

can I change it? And who's profiting? What array of companies are making money off of how badly I want to feel that way, and how badly everyone else wants to feel that way? Well, not talking about it, because that's how we end up with something like orthorexia, which is like this obsession with health and wellness, where it's sort of like, okay, we realize that we're not supposed to be like vain and just desperately trying to be skinny. So now we've come up with all this coded, euphemistic language around health and wellness so that we can, like, do all these things that basically just are highly restrictive diets, but pretend we're doing them for our health. And what I think is really interesting is how has long and historically rooted that effort is like one thing I found really interesting in my research is like, you know, are you familiar with the sort of like hot girl IBS trend? Yeah, I'm sure. So I was like, okay, what is good with that? It's sort of seeming to me like, probably hot girls have IBS because they've been starving themselves and bingeing and purging their whole lives. And it's not just like random, but let's sort of like fuck around and find out. And it does turn out to be really interesting. And IBS is highly, highly prevalent in people who have had eating disorders, because any type of eating disorder really fucks up your digestive tract, whether you're restricting or bingeing or throwing up or whatever it damn it. And also once you but also the the the idea of IBS can also function as a really useful disguise for saying you can't eat things that you really could right? For, like setting yourself up with a really restrictive diet. And there was this very interesting sort of parallel craze in the literal Victorian. ERA about this idea of auto intoxication, which was basically this fear everyone had that like if you ate the wrong foods, they would rot in your gut and like ferment and like poison your blood. But a lot of that same language that they were using in the Victorian era crops up in this kind of like obsession with colonics on TikTok and in a sort of like goopy coated wellness space, and in both their highly sort of like euphemistically, like racially charged with these ideas of, like a delicate digestive system that was like originally invented as like a myth in the Victorian era, like separate to like discipline white women and like, make them obsess over what they could and could not eat while, like degrading black women by casting them as, like, able to eat anything, if that makes sense. And so all of that is just to say, there are all these ways in which the beauty standard we all aspire to, we know is politically wrong, but it's politically wrong and much more complicated ways than we talk about, because we're so afraid to admit it, because we are so stuck in these individual narratives of shame and blame. Whereas I want to argue that disordered eating is like really a structural issue, in the same way that we think about any other mental illness that is this prevalent, like 1 in 10 people will be diagnosed with an eating disorder. Yes, in their lives. And that's an undercount because it's so hard to get a diagnosis. Over 10,000 people in the US die of an eating disorder every year, and that's also an undercount. Any mental illness with these types of statistics like opioid addiction, depression, alcoholism gets the sort of like, wait, let's look at this structurally and contextually kind of let's see how capitalism, racism and all these forces play into it. Treatment in a nonfiction book perspective. Yet with eating disorders, they've only been treated really in memoir or in self-help or in these highly individualized narratives, which leads to the experience you had where people are clocking something and getting mad at one individual, rather than seeing that person as part of a societal sickness that, like, we need to find the root cause, if that makes sense.

JVN Yes. How do people get diagnosed with eating disorders? Like, how do you have to go about it?

EMMELINE CLEIN Well, so there's I mean, there's a few ways and pretty much all of them, in my opinion, are failing us. I mean, you could go to the doctor yourself and. No, you're sick and you could still not get diagnosed. But basically the way you are, in order to get diagnosed with anorexia specifically, you have to hit a certain low body weight in order to get diagnosed with bulimia or eating disorder not otherwise specified or binge eating disorder. You can sort of like go to your doctor with like a descriptive set of symptoms, but it's much harder to get your insurance to pay for treatment if you don't have anorexia, like if you have atypical anorexia or eating disorder not otherwise specified, which is what I had, which is basically where they tell you like. Yes. You have all the psychological symptoms of this eating disorder, and you're in so much pain and you are starving yourself. And often people that get diagnosed with those have lots of physical symptoms too. Their hair can be coming out. They can like lose their periods if they're people who have periods. And yet you don't have the low body weight. But you are then diagnosed with atypical, atypical anorexia or eating disorder not otherwise specified. And then your insurance is much less willing to pay for your treatment. And if you and you're either forced to pay out of pocket or you're literally a lot of people get a lot sicker and just come back months or years later and can get the treatment paid for when they're much sicker, at which point it's much less likely to work. And so we have this entire kind of system that actually like eating disorders. The logic and symptomatology of eating disorders is highly numerical, right? Like often you're obsessed with calories and you're obsessed with your weight. And then our diagnostic system actually reinforces that when in fact you show it. And then the way once you're in treatment, you're being weighed every day. And even if they're not telling you your weight and it's being hidden from you, you know how it's going because you would get kicked out of the treatment the minute you hit the weight that your insurance deems healed, which is actually obviously when you need holistic psychiatric care the most because you're finally living in the body, you were just starving yourself not to live in. And when you're in these treatment centers, you would think that you would be taught to like, eat in a way that sort of like taught tools to eat in the context of your life, but instead you're only taught this sort of like very specific language around eating and this theatrical and regimented way of eating in the center that you can't really bring out with you. And that actually reinforces the obsession with eating right. Instead of talking about like, why do I have this obsession with eating? And then also because of all of this over categorization, it also comes from these like sort of highly colonial impulses that we were talking about earlier. And a lot of people in eating disorder treatment centers that have different eating disorders are separated from each other. And there's a lot of policing of speech so that like you're P, they're afraid you're going to trigger each other with your conversation. And it's sort of like. The world is triggering. Two girls having a conversation about their shared experience. Might actually be a lot more cathartic than it is triggering. But we're all taught in these treatment centers to distrust each other and to be afraid that someone's going to, like, teach you how to do your eating disorder better. And it's sort of like, is this whole force that to me, really like. Kind of casts, like what could be like a really like solidarity forward form of bonding and a lot of female friendship as this like toxic incubator of disease that actually makes us all a lot sicker because it makes us scared of each other, rather than scared of the forces that we're not talking about that taught us all the same desires.

JVN That makes so much sense. It also, is it's an example of it, like when I got on rebelliousness, like if I had been like 10 pounds heavier when I got on it, I would have like qualified. For it to be covered by insurance. But since I wasn't like, I just had to like, you

know, pay for it out of pocket, which is like, fine, I could afford it. But then, interestingly, it made me feel so bad. And then I just like ate more and it like, didn't even work. And also, coincidentally, the year before I had like, lost a bunch of weight for the very reasons that we were just talking about. Like I was like my knees hurt, I gained a bunch of weight and I just but I did it from just like I had gotten a nutritionist and I did have to use like My Fitness Pal. And I didn't feel insane about it. I wasn't checking my calories like 50 million times a day or anything. Like I just tracked them and, and it felt pretty good. But then when I got to where I wanted. I was like, I. Then I stopped tracking and actually everything went really good until like I had like just a bunch of life stress, like death in the family and all these other things happen. And then my little binger, like, came out to, like, help me self-soothe. And then it's just kind of been a little bit out of control since then. I've just been like a year and a half, you know, so it's like and just kind of coming back to this fucking topic and it just like I do wish, but so, so okay, so enough about me. Let's talk more about the book. So when you're researching the book how and we've talked a little bit about like how far this policing went back. But I also think like how are eating disorders embedded in our culture. And also with what you were just saying about treatment, is that like the idea of like, of like I have a lot of friends who have done like treatment for eating disorders. I was in treatment for like, other things. But is that like, just like, you know, like having to sit down and having to do it in this certain way and like one thing I'm.

EMMELINE CLEIN Like, well, first to first, make it about you a little bit more, if you don't mind. I mean, I think that's that the way you freezer at the bench or the self soother coming out is like such an important phrasing because like these, it's I think and is related to the latter half of your question. What I was talking about treatment is that like a lot of the ways that eating disorders are talked about in treatment is you're supposed to understand the eating disorder as this like evil invader in your mind, and this like artificial consciousness that you have to like, do all these like cognitive behavioral therapy, like talking to to like tell that that to to like treat teach yourself that that voice is crazy. You know and like you're catastrophizing or you're overvaluing thinness or like whatever. And some places will make you write a letter, like saying goodbye to it. And it's all about like it's this, like really intense experience. For a lot of people can feel like gaslighting because it's sort of like teaching you to find that self-soothing self soother to to reconstruct themselves to their voice as like an evil enemy, when in fact, I think it can be more cathartic to say to someone, hey, no, you're not crazy. The self soother voice that wants you to binge, and the self and the coping mechanism voice that wants you to starve yourself are all just like parts of yourself that are actually very intelligent. They're not crazy, they're not vain, they're not overreacting. Eating disorders are so embedded in our culture as we'll get into, and they're just literally like they reading the. Signals that they've been bombarded with their entire life. That tell them thinness is important, that tells them that addictive food tastes good. That tells you all of these, like, highly painful messages and is just trying to somehow metabolize those messages into a way that into a into a lifestyle that can, like, forge a body that can move through the world more smoothly. Right. And yet what I, what we what, what I think we should be doing. And while what could be helpful to say is actually even if my body can move through the world more smoothly when I'm starving myself, I can't. And the pain is not worth it. And the pain it's causing to other women and other people isn't worth it. Because by pretending that I'm moving through this world more smoothly, when in fact it takes so much self harm, I'm teaching the next time I'm embedding eating disorders into the culture. By teaching the next generation of young girls that it's possible to look like that without massive

amounts of self harm. Right? And so to the question of how eating disorders are embedded in this culture, it's like we have across fiction, high literature, characters like, you know, a Gene Reese heroine or a low code low so-called low culture character like Marissa Cooper in *The O.C.* or, you know, Nicole Richie and Paris Hilton back in the day, or the characters on *skins* or whatever it is. We have this, like iconic, skinny, sexy, sad girl figure that is sort of wasting away in a very highly glamorized way. And we also have, on the flip side, the sort of Gwyneth Paltrow wellness character who's just as thin, but in a highly like, health coded way. And we have an extreme amount of diet culture that is across the gender spectrum. That's just like teaching us that we should be like optimizing our bodies the same way we would optimize an app or whatever else with this, like sort of my Fitness Pal tracking efficiency coded language. And honestly, all of this together is like creating what I mean, I don't even I think that the I think that the fact that we have the phrase diet culture and that the phrase diet culture has become so normalized, and it's used so widely, actually reflects how embedded eating disorders are in our culture, because it's not diet culture. This is a culture of appetite suppression, a culture of starvation, a culture that literally kills, as I said, over 10,000 people a year. And that's an undercount. Like, imagine if we used instead of like by using the word diet culture we're calling what are actually lifelong and often fatal diseases, temporary lifestyle choices. And we do that because our culture is obsessed with propping up an artificial boundary between a diet and an eating disorder. And I'm trying to sort of like deconstruct that boundary, because we know that 30 it's like something over 30% of diets become obsessive, and a quarter of those go on to become full fledged eating disorders. And majority of ten year old girls have been on a diet in this country. Right. So that's imagine it sort of is like, imagine if we called instead of saying rape culture, we called it cult culture or something, you know, like using the most minor version of the problem in the terminology, I think reflects how embedded less than ideal is and how much we don't want to admit it, because we'd have to then literally deconstruct our entire system. Hey.

JVN So when we think about, like the modern history, I think one place where I see it so embedded is like it used to be. If I wanted to go feel really bad about my body, I had to like go to the mall and go look at like Abercrombie and Fitch or like, you know, look at like an underwear aisle, like a department store to see, like the shirtless models. Now I can just turn on my Instagram or my, like, see FYP and like, TikTok and like it, I mean, there is just shirtless fucking men with perfect bodies all over the fucking place all the time, like all the time. And women, I mean, all like, just you can't. You can't look anywhere without seeing some hot person on at least my algorithm. But that's just like one very superficial way.

EMMELINE CLEIN I mean, your point about social media, I actually think that there's what's really interesting and sort of very terrifying and insidious to me about the way that, you know, disordered eating is embedded in today's social media. Is that like it does require me to go back ever so slightly to a sort of Y2K moment? Briefly, if that's.

JVN Yes, please.

EMMELINE CLEIN Legal, yeah. But basically, like, I think that in order to understand why it's so dark now, we have to compare it to what we had then, which is when we think of as being like a darker period with all this stuff in terms of like a more kind of overt pro anorexia than what we might have now. But what I think is so fascinating about the way we treated that era is that so in like the 2000, when you had sort of the rise of these like pro anorexia online

forums on like blogs and Tumblr and various places, where that those spaces were treated in the media as, as like a huge moral panic. Right. So you had tabloids at the at this time, right. Eating, doing much more. We we currently like discipline and surveil celebrities bodies in the media, of course, but it was way more overt and like. Callous back then in terms of the like, literally sort of word choice, you know, because you would have Us Weekly being like how she lost the weight in ten days, like ten fattest celebrities, like ten like skin and bones diet here, like Nicole Richie, like Nicole Richie's, paradigmatic example I use in my book because it's like this was an era when starlets were literally, cruelly bullied for their weight up until the point that they literally, as I've been saying, read the room they were locked into, got super skinny, and then started a, women are expected to walk where were and are expected to walk this like teeny tiny balance beam. And that's as thin as the body we've been taught to want. That is like right between sickness and health. Right? And then as soon as they cross over, they're being bullied by the same media outlets as anorexics and as bad role models for girls. Right. And so, like Nicole Richie, for example, is getting put, getting bullied for being fat, and she loses a ton of weight and is getting put on the cover of Vanity Fair under the literal headline, Nicole weighs in, and the intro paragraph of the article is like wondering whether she's anorexic and then at the same time, she's her photo is being put on all these like pro anorexia websites, along with diets that are pulled directly from magazines like Vogue and, and tabloid magazines. And yet the people that create those blogs who are literal teenagers who are posting, like the picture of Nicole Richie and the diet on their blog, are being covered in literal mainstream news outlets like The New York Times and The Atlantic and all these places as though they're like as though it's like literally the Salem witch trials, like the crazed teenage girls trying to induct each other into suicide cults and all this stuff, when in fact, a lot of those places, while they did have a lot of bad, dangerous stuff, such as what was called inspiration images of extremely thin women that were supposed to inspire you to, like, get thin and extremely dangerous diets. These were things that were copied directly from, mainstream publications where a bunch of, like, 40 year old men in high rise offices signed up and it wasn't considered toxic and illness incubating when adult men did it. But as soon as a 12 year old girl typeset and like, puts a new name on it and like a glittery cursor, suddenly it's a virus spreading through the internet. And so a lot of those spaces were highly demonized and highly censored. Like Tumblr banned them and stuff. But what was interesting about those bases is I think we lost in all of that. The fact that in a lot of those spaces, there were also message boards where people to just help each other get through the day. I spoke to people in my research where, like somebody they met on a message board, kept them from killing themselves. Like there were a lot of things in these spaces where people were actually helping each other and weren't just giving each other diet tips, and especially people people who are queer, people who are now not white, who couldn't get diagnosed because the diagnosed diagnostic paradigms, as we've talked about, are so exclusionary. And unless you're an incredibly thin white girl, it's hard to get a diagnosis in the vacuum created by that diagnostic exclusionism. Some of those spaces were the only places that people suffering could be validated and be told by someone else like, no, I believe you, and I'm sick too. And people help each other recover. I'm apologize for the ramble. I'm gonna get to the point very shortly. But these spaces were also highly censored. They were censored by by the media, by the tech platforms, and then they were also managed by the people running them. Like you had to already have an eating disorder to, like, really find them. You had to know what search terms to search, right? Like you had to know how to search the pro-ana terms on Google. Whereas now in our algorithm age, people who aren't even searching the search terms that aren't already suffering from an

eating disorder, exactly what you're describing. Like you just opened your page and you're being confronted with, what are you eating a day that, like, literally is the caloric intake of a toddler. You're being confronted with an unbelievable number of unbelievably thin and usually white bodies. There have been investigations into TikTok and Instagram that have shown that they're literally suppressing content that isn't there, their shadow banning content by creators of color, there's shadow banning content by fat creators. And there's one really interesting WSJ investigation where they literally coded a bot as a 13 year old girl, just to see what would happen to a 13 year old Jeff Whip if she didn't even search for anything related to eating disorders, and if they had, it would automatically feed her things with like what the top hashtags are, which include things like skinny and if she just doesn't scroll past fast enough, like if she doesn't skip, skip the video and watches the video that is automatically fed to her within days, she's getting more and more extreme versions until she gets something within like three days called like the Corpse Bride diet. And so in that, in basically what we are, what I'm saying is what we have now, people don't have to seek it out in the way you used to have to seek it out. And we used to get demonized for seeking out the stuff that we were taught to seek out. And. Treated as though we young girls just trying to survive, a society that wants us to self-harm, and figuring out how to do what that society wants us to do when we didn't yet know that we shouldn't be doing it. We're getting demonized for that. Now we're being forced to, like, consume all this content at all times that we're not even looking for. And there are a lot of people that we'll search, even like girls that I spoke to that would search midsize body like try to find a body that matches their body, would then end up getting fed these like weight loss accounts. And so in both cases were never demonizing the actual media companies, whether it's TikTok, the tech platform, or Us Weekly. Who made the diet that a girl on a pro-ana forum reblogged like we're only demonizing like the people who are consuming the content, if that makes sense.

JVN Yes, I always think about that as the relationship between like individuals and systems, and I think that you really articulated something there for me, which I've never been able to, which is like when we take down a when we take out ideas about systems on individuals.

EMMELINE CLEIN Yes, yes, yes. And that is what we are doing all the time with eating disorders, both into the way we medically treat them and the way we talk about them. When we demonize a TikTok girl for making what I eat in a day that like that is clearly demonstrative of illness, like, why are we getting so mad at a girl that's obviously sick instead of mad at the platform that put that in a bunch of eight year olds feeds?

JVN I mean, my algorithm is like, I got carnivore diets, I got people doing fucking all sorts of shit that is not giving balanced. It's not giving. Like just my little alarm bells go off, you know, like, I mean, it really is just so in your goddamn face. And I think also on, you know, when it comes to like, man, it's like the beauty ideal for men. That's kind of where I was going earlier. It's like in the first part of my career, I was, you know, in my early 30s. I'm in my later 30s now. Like, I've never had like the body ideal of like a man. But even when I was like in my fitness, you know, form like, you know, some like smaller sizes, whatever. Like. The the expectation for men's. Bodies is outrageous. And it has I've, I've seen some press about like how it's changed. Like the expectation has changed and like there is more pressure. But I think we still I mean, I also see like, you know, testosterone optimization all the time on my algorithm. I know so many people who are on like that sort of thing to like it really in this pursuit of a physical ideal that like I think is really pervasive, especially in the queer

community. But what are other ways that we can think about, like eating disorders being embedded in our culture? And, and what do you think is also like what's like, how do we know that we don't have disordered eating?

EMMELINE CLEIN So I think that's an amazing question. I think it's a really important question to ask, because most of us in this society do struggle with some form of disordered eating, and it's really hard to figure out what non disordered eating looks like because we have so few models for it, and pretty much every model we have of eating is somewhat disordered. And because our culture is obsessed with things like with, with having so many different diet plans, the ones you are describing and seeing on your feed. But even like when we talk about like intuitive eating, that can also get so obsessive with the amount of like the true number of questions you're supposed to actually ask yourself while you're doing intuitive eating. I mean, I think that having not disordered eating, to me, it means when I go through a day without thinking that hard about what I am eating and when the things that are top of mind for me have nothing to do with food, that makes sense. And I think for so many of us, like we're thinking about food for such a larger portion of the day than we want to admit. We're thinking about it. And I think the way in which the beauty ideal is bombarding us from all sides. On social media, combined with the way that food companies and diet companies and the medical industry are obsessed with telling us how to eat, and that there is and that there are all these different diet plans, and you just have to find the perfect one that works for you. And like whether that's the one that like you find through the one that through like some like big tech, you know, take this blood test and learn your but your diet should be or whether it's like the Weight Watchers thing, like all of these things are just so rigid and so regimented. And I think it's that, like yearning for regimentation and control, that is inherently disordered because it's this like, I feel like, especially today, technologically infused desire to, like, transcend our, like, physical form, which has actually been part of the problem since like the platonic era when they were like in when like they were inventing sort of the mind body binary and coding that as masculine versus feminine with the masculine is like control and discipline and intellect, and the feminine is like, like oozy emotions and urges. And you see these like disordered notions of eating come up right from then on. When you get to the Christian saints where you have these fasting saints that are the only, the only way a woman can be like at all. You know, I like.

JVN I guess, or something.

EMMELINE CLEIN Yes, yes. Pious and pure and perfect is by completely denying her body. And you have Saint Catherine saying that like a full belly does not make for a chaste spirit. And like these notions of purity that have to do with truly self starvation. And then you have at the same time these myths about like nuns being possessed by the devil, that then.

JVN They were just hungry.

EMMELINE CLEIN Yeah. That then like raid the, the larder and like eat so much and then you see you just always see the starvation being valorized everywhere. You see it in like suffragette culture and the hunger strikes and obviously like political hunger striking is one thing, but it is. And I'm not trying to demean the the politics of that, but I think it's a, a good microcosm of how deeply embedded disordered eating is in our culture and the way in which

starving yourself and denying you're like animal body its needs is something we understand as morally good. On like for first for centuries.

JVN What are we going to do? I know who's doing good work about this. What did you find in your book?

EMMELINE CLEIN So one thing that. I really found. Is that, like, as depressing as all of this is and as it does, as much as like, the beauty ideals are changing so fucking fast. Also with like social media and the like, you know, one minute you're we're supposed to have a BBL body, which is just as unrealistic as the extraordinarily thin waif heroine. Chic body like both of them require different types of like different severe self harms. And no one can keep up. And the beauty ideals are becoming this sort of like insane, like Frankenstein.

JVN We was a country club, but or whatever.

EMMELINE CLEIN Yes. No, it's insane. And it's like it's this constantly. Like being rebuilt, like robot Franken Stasia that requires that is across the generations desire.

JVN I love that.

EMMELINE CLEIN My friend came up with that term. He's a genius.

JVN I want to be frank. And Stasia, that's totally what I want to be. I will be a little bit of lipo and fat transfer and I'll be good to go.

EMMELINE CLEIN No, it's literally it's it's literally like we all want to be frank.

JVN And then I'll be difficult.

EMMELINE CLEIN Not to be.

JVN Everyone will love me. All my problems will go away.

EMMELINE CLEIN Like, here's what I found that even when you're Frank and Stasia, you might still find that actually, like, I think what I found overall in writing the book and in my own journey with my eating disorder, which I really could only get through because I was saved by other women, both like fictional characters. I loved women I never knew in real life, but that like, wrote things that changed my life. People on message boards that I knew on the internet, people in my real life. Like I think like I, I realized that when I was my version of Frank and Stasia, when I was like at my thinnest or whatever, and I was being treated very well by a lot of people that wouldn't otherwise treat me in that way. And then I. Was literally had I had a near-death experience or whatever, and I, I just realized, like, I actually don't want attention from people who are only going to give it to me for this, right? Like being being looked at. I think in our culture, a lot of times we we mistake being looked at for being listened to and they're like extraordinarily different. And what I actually want and what life is all about is like having a conversation with someone. And so I found that, like, really the answer is like as cringe as it is, like kind of is community and sort of like what I propose at the end of this book is sort of like a feminism of a tension of like, what I tried to do is give you

a project of attention and sort of like weave this like sort of hand off the mic to a ghost choir and like, let's hear a lot of, like a far more diverse array of stories about disordered eating than we've been listening to. Like, if you ask pretty much anyone in your life, hey, what has living in a body, nourishing that body and thinking about what nourishing it means for how it is received by the world you live in, meant to you pretty much every time. Like you have a conversation where you both laugh and you cry, and your live, laugh and loving and like you're realizing that so many more people are feeling the exact same type of same type of pain as you are, and like how crushing that pain is. And I found that realization is so cathartic and empowering because you realize that while this machine that we've been describing this whole time we've been talking, that is like muttered by like unbelievable billions of dollars and very powerful, the very powerful forces of capitalism and racism and misogyny. It's powerful. It's been running for centuries, but it's really fucking old. It's a really old machine, and it can get really fucked up by turning one screw. And it's pretty simple and obvious. And once you see it clearly, it's pretty easy to become like the cog that doesn't turn rather than just yet another cog. And you can do that, like sort of literally by talking like, I really do find that like community and friendship is kind of the answer. So I think that like one, talking about it with people in your life is important and to like and then also for people who are out there struggling like it's there are so many groups that are doing such amazing work and are trying to deconstruct those really, exclusionary diagnostic paradigms and be way more inclusive. So to organizations that are really good at that are Project Heal and the fed up collective, like highly gender inclusive, and recognize the racism encoded in the current diagnostic paradigms. and set up collective runs really good like online support groups that are really helpful. and. Yeah. So I think like also just. I think eating disorders are often. Motored by like extreme amounts of self-hatred that we've been taught. Right. And so it can be hard to motivate yourself to heal just out of pure self-love. Or at least I know it was for me. And so in moments where I find it coming back because it always comes back in waves and like any other sort of like addiction type thing, it is a lifelong journey. Like, I think like sometimes like motivating yourself out of solidarity and seeing the structural layers of it can be a much more powerful motivator to me than, you know, my own health. Like, if I can say to myself, like, I don't want my like, young cousin to think that I look this way by accident because then she'll hurt herself because and pretend that it is an accident, you know, like that. Like motivating ourselves out of, like, a sort of communal love and solidarity forward effort, I think can sometimes be really cathartic and, like, really liberating and make you feel like you have agency because the whole problem is that this you, that everything we've been describing feels so intractable and overwhelming and it can make you want to have an eating disorder because it can be like, okay, well, fuck it if this is the way the world is. I want to be frank and Stasia so I can like go say in the world. But then you realize that actually that's you're only giving the machine more power when you do that. And it can be it's actually exerting more agency to. Bravely and boldly survive in a slightly different body and find find the beauty in those bodies.

JVN What is the answer? Like, how are we going to untangle all this? Or is it or is it just really about like empowering yourself with the information, trying to make your best personal decision in such like a fucking outrageous place?

EMMELINE CLEIN I think it's honestly, I think there's, I think there's sort of a combination of the two. I think. It is really important. Empower yourself with all the information. I think like honestly, like just like we really a lot of people don't know about this, don't know the sort of

structural context in which eating disorders exist. And. I mean, imagine if in health class in seventh grade when they're doing all their fucking fearmongering about sex that they do in our health classes in this country. Imagine if they just had one unit where they were like, okay, here's the history of the beauty standard and BMI and all this stuff, and here's how it's racist and misogynistic, the beauty ideal that you might start seeing around you pretty soon. And also here is the history of how the human body works, and the way that pretty much any starvation diet eventually leads to binge eating disorder. And here are the statistics about eating disorders and how many people have them. And the fact that usually if you have one, you're going to end up with another one too. I think that if I had that information in seventh grade, I might not have embarked on the extreme diets I embarked upon. Because you are being you're seeing that diet information, the what I eat nowadays, the Dallas Cowboys, Cheerleaders, whatever is on your feed without any context. And I really think that it is as depressing as everything we've been talking about is if people, young people who are impressionable and so intelligent, were given some of this information earlier, we have no idea what type of world we live.

JVN So if we if you or someone that you love is going through this, how can we be helpful support systems for those in fear for those who are going through it, or if you're going through it yourself?

EMMELINE CLEIN I think if you're if someone if you're worried about someone in your life, I think always think just talking to them about it in a way that is not accusatory and just like asking how they're doing and and reminding them that you're there for them through anything and that you're not judging and like, again, like the real like the problem with the way we've construed these diseases is like all the shame and blame we're talking about. It's like reminding someone that's going through that. It's like, this is not your fault. Like this is society's fault. And like there are ways to get help. You can recommend the organizations I mentioned before that, Collective and Project Heal are great ones. Project heal also has a lot of other outlets, that are on their website that can offer help. They sort of aggregate things as well as offering help themselves. And I think if you yourself are struggling, I just like what I always want to say to anybody. That is in in this type of pain. And if you like, just if you've ever blamed yourself for harming yourself in order to approach a beauty standard that you like politically are ashamed to want to embody, it's not your fault and you're not a bad person. And you're also not crazy at all. You're very sad and. You just. I just don't think. And you. I think that there is a way out and we can. And you can talk to the people in your life and you can seek help. And it ultimately just won't feel as good as we think it does. However, to be frank and stay with us sadly, and we need to be our human animal selves, and it actually feels better once you're during it and a lot freer. And that just really don't be scared to talk about it. And so many people love you, whoever you are, that is listening to us and in pain and would be listening to, would be willing to listen to you.

JVN Emmeline. And people are just like, falling in love with you in the last hour and a half, and they want to follow you and stay up to date with where you are and what you're doing and how they can follow. Are you, like on the TikTok the most, on the Instagram the most? Where can people follow along?

EMMELINE CLEIN So I am not. I'm ultimately not on TikTok because I got so scared on there, because my FYP obviously is out of because of the research I had to do, is one of the most triggering places you could ever.

JVN Mine is never recovered from our Trad Wife episode like almost two years ago. Like I have you know, I have so many like conservative like Turning Point USA, like scary shit. And because it's like watching a bus crash, it's like, I can't not watch it. And so I have a really my algorithm is fucked up. It's like Musk bangs and Republicans and then hair and me, I'm.

EMMELINE CLEIN Sure I'm sure it hasn't. And I, I wrote about tried wives last year and that also fucked up my algorithm too. But I am on Instagram and Twitter. Or X, formerly known as Twitter. Instagram is a LLC and my Twitter is m I my last name.

JVN Which one are you the most active on? Are do you really do both?

EMMELINE CLEIN I really do both. I'm a bit of a both. And girl, I love that.

JVN I love about you. And I love that. We'll put the links in episode description of whatever anyone's listening on so they can follow along. Perfect.

EMMELINE CLEIN And I post whenever I write things. And it's not all about eating disorders and it's not all depressing. The mushrooms.

JVN Emmeline I loved our time together. Thank you so much for coming and getting curious for the best of all time. Okay, so, as far as the question of our eating disorders or like, is, is disordered eating embedded in our culture? Yes. And what I thought was really interesting was how a lot of, my work is about like, untangling the murky border of diet culture and then just, like eating disorders, because, like, diet culture is, like, praised or in a lot of ways it's praised and not necessarily demonized. Whereas like disordered eating or eating disorders like are and so that's really important, I think in terms of like healing and identifying what role, this plays in, in our culture and how we take things in a lot of this history we have covered on the pod. So if you haven't listened to those episodes, please go back and listen to it, because there's so much important background information that I think is important to understand in this conversation. And recovery culture, we say, you know, a relapse is easier to stop when it's a tiny snowball at the top of a mountain, but once it's all the way at the bottom of the mountain, it's like this huge, gigantic, like, you know, ten person sized, you know, ball. It's like way harder to stop, you know, that avalanche. And at this point, like the eating disorder avalanche is it has like, you know, the economy of like fast food of, you know, all these different, you know, lobbyists like, you know, with the USDA and, you know, all these different powerful food giants that have so much money to be made or lost. So it's like, it's not like people are regulating us to be more healthy. It's really about money. And that's a scary thing to kind of understand and detangle. I thought that the investigations around Instagram and TikTok were really interesting around like suppressing content by plus size creators. I'm very curious about that and want to hear more about that and do a future episode about that. Oh, I'm also curious that like disordered eat or like eating disorder treatment now and like why people get so pissed off at people? And I'm also curious if like if I've used my platform poorly, like, was that episode really that damaging that snacks episode? I hope it wasn't, but I do, you know, wonder about that. So okay, I love you guys, I

think, but I think we learned so much about eating disorders today. And how much do we love Emmeline Clein's work? They mean doing it, I think. I don't know how old they are, but they're giving me like leader of their generation, like voice of a nation, like coming through future leaders. So and we love Emmeline. We love, her work and we love you guys. Thanks for listening to Getting Curious. And we'll catch you next time.

You've been listening to Getting Curious with me, Jonathan Van Ness. You can learn more about this week's guest and their area of expertise in the episode description and follow us on Instagram @CuriousWithJVN You can catch us here every Wednesday and make sure to tune in every Monday for episodes of Pretty Curious which we love. It's our pod pass on all things beauty. Get into it. Still can't get enough and you want to get a little spicy with us. You can subscribe to Extra Curious on Apple podcasts for commercial free listening and our subscription only show, Ask JVN where we're talking sex relationships are really just whatever is on my mind. That week, our theme music is Freak by Quinn. Thank you so much to her for letting us use it. Our editor and engineer is Nathaniel McClure. Getting Curious is produced by me, Chris McClure and Julia Melfi with production support from Julie Carrillo, Anne Currie and Chad Hall.