



Conscious Life presents
**TRAUMA
SUPER CONFERENCE**

Real self-care to redefine wellness

Guest: Dr Pooja Lakshmin

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[00:00:10] Meagen Gibson

Hello and welcome to this interview. I'm Meagen Gibson, cohost of the Trauma Super Conference.

Today I'm speaking with Dr Pooja Lakshmin, a board certified psychiatrist, New York Times contributor, and the founder and CEO of Gemma, the physician led women's mental health community centering equity and impact. She's a leading voice at the intersection of mental health and gender, focused on challenging the tyranny of faux self-care.

Pooja maintains an active private practice where she treats women struggling with burnout, perfectionism and disillusionment, as well as clinical conditions like depression and anxiety. Her first book, *Real Self-Care: A Transformative Program For Redefining Wellness (Crystals, Cleanses, And Bubble Baths Not Included)*, is in stores in March of 2023 and is available for pre order right now.

Dr Pooja Lakshmin, thank you so much for being with us today.

Dr Pooja Lakshmin

It's such a pleasure to be here, Meagen. Thanks for having me.

Meagen Gibson

So I truly enjoyed your book, read it on my recent holiday and I'd love it if you could start by telling us what the wellness industry has gotten wrong about self-care and wellness.

Dr Pooja Lakshmin

Yes, it's a huge topic and I feel like we could talk about this for hours and hours, but I will just get on my soapbox really quickly to start out this conversation. The reason that I wrote this book is I'm a psychiatrist. I specialize in women's mental health. I have been practicing psychiatry for almost the past decade. But I have had my own wellness journey, which we can talk about.

And when I was younger, I just turned 39, so in my twenties and my early thirties, I really thought that there was going to be some sort of magical wellness solution that could save me, that could fix all of my problems. If I just went to yoga every day, if I just finally stayed on the wagon with

meditating, that would be the key. To be totally transparent, that's what self help sells us, right? That's what all these gurus say that you're supposed to do.

[00:02:22]

And I completely fell for that, even though I was a physician. I'm a physician and a psychiatrist. So I also just want to model compassion for myself, because we're going to talk about that, I'm sure, that it's understandable because this is what we're sold. But yet at the same time, just to kind of throw in some statistics here, 31 million Americans don't have health insurance, at least according to the numbers from 2020.

Income disparity is such a huge piece. Who has access to wellness? So there was a study looking at, across the board, if you are somebody who is in the top quarter of earnings, you have about a 90% chance of having paid sick leave at your job. Whereas if you're in the bottom quarter, you only have 50% chance of having an employer that actually gives you paid sick leave.

And then if we're talking about moms, that's my practice, I do women's mental health, most of my patients are mothers, not all of them, but the United States is the only high income country that doesn't have federal paid parental leave. Mothers have about, I think the number is 36 free minutes a day to themselves. So it's just outrageous that we're sold these solutions of, well, here's this meditation app or here's this new cleanse or this new diet.

The subtitle of the book is *Crystals, Cleanses, and Bubble Baths Not Included*. So there's so much wrong with wellness. There is the fact that it's only accessible to such a small portion of the population. There's the fact that wellness and self help really have not done a good job of incorporating race and identity, and the fact that if you are black, if you are native, if you are disabled, it's going to be much more difficult for you to access resources and practice these skills for yourself.

So I have a lot of beef with wellness. And at the same time, I've been there. In the book I talk about, I guess it was maybe in I think it was 2018, I was a resident at that time, and I saved up my money to go to one of those really super fancy wellness retreats, one of the ones that's on the coast, and it's gorgeous and beautiful. And I went after having saved up all this money to spend this week, I was super serious about journaling every morning and doing my meditation, and I had all these big life questions that I was going to get answered.

I was there to do work and at lunch one day I ran into a couple that was maybe in their sixties or seventies, and they were just like, oh no, we come here every year for our vacation. This is our vacation. And I was like, what? No, this is not a vacation. But when I was writing the book, what I really want to tell people is that, yes, we all need vacations. I'm not railing on the escape, because of course we all need that escape, but you have to really understand the purpose that it's serving.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. And I relate to your stories in the book and how you relate to it today, just to share briefly, because I think it's a thing a lot of people can relate to. Back in 2015, I was in the middle of a mental health crisis for sure, and went to go see my primary care physician, sat outside their office until they opened, like a weirdo, and was like, I need help. I don't know what's going on.

[00:06:18]

And we started talking and I was like, I don't understand. I go to the gym five days a week. I eat really, really healthy. I was on a specific eating plan at that point. I have a gratitude journal. I do yoga. I named all the things. And I remember the doctor looked at me and he said, you're working really hard and it's not working. So we need to look at some other avenues. And I don't need to get into what those are.

But a lot of that included trauma therapy, when the things and the external thing... And don't get me wrong, I still work out, I still eat really well, I still have a gratitude journal. But I'm not looking for that to buoy bad mental health and things underlying core issues in addition to all the things that are out of my immediate personal control, which are like all the systemic things that you named earlier, notwithstanding my own personal privilege.

But I'm still impacted by the fact that I'm a woman and living in a society where insurance is not that great in America and healthcare in general.

Dr Pooja Lakshmin

I'm glad that you brought that up because one of the things that I talk about in the book, too, was how do we square self help and wellness with actual clinical mental health conditions? And as a psychiatrist, as somebody who works with patients who have diagnoses, like major depressive disorder or obsessive compulsive disorder or post traumatic stress disorder, how do we, in our minds, get a better understanding of what are things that you can actually be doing for your mental health?

And then when does it move into the category that you need to see a therapist or you need to take medication? And one place I want to pit stop is that I think the way that I talk about real self-care with my patients is that it's more of a thermometer as opposed to a solution, in that if you're somebody who does struggle with your mental health and does have diagnoses, when you find that it's too hard to do real self-care, that's a sign that maybe you need to be seeing your therapist twice a week instead of once a week.

Or maybe you need to make a change in your medication as opposed to beating yourself up because you're not working out or you're not doing whatever thing that's in your program. So I think there's kind of like a chicken and egg there that often gets tangled up when we're talking about it.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. So I'd love it if you can go through, specifically, the difference, the AB comparison, of here's an example of real self-care. Here's an example of fake/faux self-care.

Dr Pooja Lakshmin

Yes. So the way that I think about faux self-care versus real self-care is essentially faux self-care is always going to be something that is prescribed from the outside. So when we're talking about specific products, specific tasks, something that you can check off of a list, faux self-care is a noun. It's an actual thing that you do or you buy.

[00:09:44]

Real self-care on the other hand, is not a thing that you can just do or buy. It's actually a way to be. It's a verb. It's all of the decision making that actually gets you to the yoga class. And it's not that the yoga class is bad. So in the book I say it's not that I'm saying faux self-care is this evil, horrible thing.

The framework that I use, actually, to help explain it is Greg McKeown is a business author and he talks about methods versus principles. So faux self-care is a method and in one season of your life, yoga actually could be really helpful. So for me, I turned to yoga pretty deeply when I was in medical school and I was super burnt out. But then of course I brought my perfectionistic med student mind to yoga.

So there could be times in your life where yoga is really helpful, but then maybe you have kids, maybe you go through a transition and yoga isn't the thing anymore. So yoga is a method, but you need these principles. You need principles of real self-care that are internal, that you can apply over the span of your life and that can help you with your decision making.

The other thing, there's two other pieces that distinguish faux self-care from real self-care. So faux self-care is typically going to take you further away from yourself, from your authentic core values and who you see yourself to be, because it's always going to be something that because you're buying it, because it's something you have to check off the list. It will always bring you closer to what's called the quantified self. So the part of you that is saying, did I do enough? Am I doing a good job? Have I done all the things?

Versus real self-care, getting clear on your boundaries, understanding your values and making a map for yourself of how to make decisions, that's always going to bring you closer to the person that you really are as opposed to this person that you're trying to perform.

And then lastly, going back to the systemic, you taking a bubble bath, it's great and it's an escape, but it doesn't do anything to actually further the cause, the social justice causes, that are really, I think, probably the biggest questions and problems of this time for all of us. So real self-care, if you're practicing it, it's always going to lead to an interpersonal change, whether it's in your relationship with your partner, whether it's in how you relate to your kids or your parents or how you communicate with your boss and the system inside your workplace and the larger systems too.

So real self-care, when we practice it, leads to these cascade effects which then in turn will impact the larger community and our systems.

Meagen Gibson

I love the way that you said all of that. If anybody saw me looking down, I was not texting, I was writing. I was writing notes, because there's a lot of things that I want to come back to. The simplicity of noun versus verb. I love that. Things versus actions. And then processes, right, a process, a lifestyle of self-care. And who you are versus who you perform. That one's going to be stuck in my brain for a while.

And it reminds me that these things allow you to just bypass what's difficult and bypass what's overwhelming, bypass your feelings or decisions you need to make or things that you need to get

into your core values about. And I was reminded of that last year and not everyone has the luxury of access to all of these things either, whether it be from ability access or even time.

[00:13:58]

I can't imagine a lot of the first responders on the front lines were taking a lot of yoga in 2020. And I was reminded of that last summer. I was sick for like three months and all of those things were taken away. And thankfully I have a good personal self-care process so I was able to rely on all the things that I did still have. But without that, if I was unable to exercise, I didn't have access to the kind of food that would nourish my body because I couldn't take care of myself for a few months, so when all of those things, even if it's access or ability to consume them, are taken away, that's really when the rubber meets the road, if you will.

Dr Pooja Lakshmin

Yeah, absolutely. It reminds me of a story from my book, or one of my patients, who the way that this became clear for her was when she had her first baby and of course she had imagined herself to breastfeed because that's the thing that we're sort of sold as the best thing. And she is somebody who had depression, had anxiety, we were treating that in therapy together with medication as well, but she ended up going into labor early and her daughter was born, I think it was like a full month early, so her daughter was in the NICU for a while.

And so she was trying to do triple feeds where she was trying to breastfeed...

Meagen Gibson

I remember the story from the book, yeah. With the pump...

Dr Pooja Lakshmin

The pump and all these things. And she realized that she was becoming more and more resentful of her baby because her daughter clearly did not like breastfeeding. That was not the thing that was going to help her. And previously my patient's self-care methods was working out, she loved to do her treadmill, be on her treadmill, and then she did have a support group that she went to, but when she was going through this crisis, she couldn't work out because she was postpartum.

And she found that the support group actually ended up triggering her because she was comparing the other baby's development with what was going on for her daughter. So ultimately, for her going through the real self-care process, the decision making ended up that she switched to formula. And that was the right choice for her. And it ultimately led to a better relationship with her baby and also with her husband because she'd become really resentful that her husband wasn't having to deal with this torture.

Dr Pooja Lakshmin

And then she was able to get back into working out and she felt better about going to her support group. So it's like you have to really tailor it for yourself. I'm not telling anybody who is listening and is like, oh my gosh...

[00:16:53] Meagen Gibson

'Don't breastfeed'. That's not what we're saying.

Dr Pooja Lakshmin

Right! That's not the message. The message is you have to really dig deep inside yourself and figure out what the decision is that needs to be made.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely.

Dr Pooja Lakshmin

And it's so hard. It's not easy.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah. And I often hear from parents that I just want a book to tell me how to do it. And I'm like, well, unfortunately for all of us, every single kid is different and every single parent child relationship is different. And so you've got to have that ability to tune in and make the best decisions for yourself and those that you affect.

But it might be a good time for us to talk about guilt and self-compassion, which I know are big points in your book as well.

Dr Pooja Lakshmin

Yeah. So I think guilt is probably the biggest thing, especially when it comes to women and women's mental health, because when we're talking about real self-care, of course, the first principle is setting boundaries. And everybody knows that you're supposed to set boundaries. We see that everywhere. But the big problem is you feel bad, you're letting people down, and the way that I think about this and talk about this with my patients is that guilt is, essentially, a faulty check engine light that is running all the time, but it does not actually give you any meaningful information about your decisions.

Meagen Gibson

It's like one of those generic exclamation points on your dash and you're like, great, I don't know what that means. I don't have a manual.

Dr Pooja Lakshmin

Right. And a lot of my conceptualization of guilt comes from Martha Beck, who I'm sure a lot of folks know. I love Martha Beck. I've read many of her books, and she wrote a blurb, actually, for my book, which was peak... That was just like...

Meagen Gibson

Peak fangirl moment.

[00:18:53] Dr Pooja Lakshmin

Exactly. But in her wonderful, I think it's her first book, *Breaking Point*, where she talks about all of these contradictory expectations that are coming from the outside, especially for women. You're supposed to be high achieving. You're supposed to be able to be this professional who can excel in the workplace, but you're also supposed to be baking brownies from scratch and making baby food and exclusively breastfeeding and only organic and...

Meagen Gibson

Getting your kid to read by three.

Dr Pooja Lakshmin

Right. Just crazy stuff that is also completely contradictory. If you follow ABC, you're not going to do XYZ, so which one's right? And so what happens is women internalize that, and women are statistically more likely to internalize. So we blame ourselves, we see all these expectations and we turn it on to ourselves, and we feel guilty. No matter what decision we make, we feel guilty, whether it's in our home life or our professional life.

And that's why I say if you use guilt as your compass, you're never going to win. You just can't. It's not useful. So I think when it comes to guilt, we have to just accept that it's always going to be there. And the goal is not to get rid of it. The goal is just to understand, okay, there's the guilt monster. Great. Awesome. He's here, he's hanging out. But I don't need to listen to his podcast. I can switch to a different podcast. He's not really doing anything for me.

And once you recognize that guilt is not something that needs to be your moral compass, then it opens up a whole new world of possibilities and opportunities that were not available before.

That opens up compassion, which, being completely transparent, I'm somebody who always used to roll my eyes at compassion because it just felt very like, woo-woo. And you're sort of just letting yourself off the hook. And it just never really worked for me until I read the work of Kristin Neff, who I'm sure many folks also are huge fan girls of.

And she talks about the distinction between self-esteem versus self-compassion. And so, for example, if we're talking about something like even the patient who switched to formula or who was breastfeeding, when you reach a goal, instead of focusing on the ego hit of I did something good, or I did something that made me proud, instead, focus more on the process of how you got to that goal.

I feel good about how I treated myself when I was making that really hard decision, or I feel proud of myself when I was going up to get that job promotion, that I did it in a way that was authentic and bold and I faced hard conversations. So instead of always focusing on the outcome, you're kind of speaking to yourself from a place of kindness in relation to the process.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. I can 100% cosign that, I had two situations just last fall where I had to have extremely, excruciatingly difficult conversations with people in my life and the feeling that remains with me

after them, and they both turned out well, but that's pure luck, I did not know how the outcome was going to come from either of those conversations, I have so much pride from the process of being able to speak, the difficulty from being able to sit with the discomfort, from being just brave enough to shoulder the outcome.

[00:23:05]

That's what matters to me. I'm like, holy cow, I was able to sit in a storm and still be myself and hold what's important and valuable to me. I didn't compromise myself at all. That's what mattered. But that only comes from a lot of practice. And one of the things that you call the guilt, for me, it's like a massive discomfort. Nobody talks about when you set a boundary that that's not the actual work. The work is after you set the boundary.

I usually don't think about it as guilt. I think about it as literal, visceral, chest, stomach, like, oh, God, holding this is going to hurt so much, even though I know it's right.

Dr Pooja Lakshmin

And you just want to put it somewhere and just get it out.

Meagen Gibson

Which is why we often try to placate or reverse, well, it's actually not that big of a deal, or that's okay, it's okay, never mind. Which I don't do anymore. But that's why we want to do that, because we're trying to alleviate our own discomfort around somebody else's discomfort.

Dr Pooja Lakshmin

Yes. And I would just venture to say it probably wasn't just luck that those conversations went well!

Meagen Gibson

Thank you, Doctor.

I guess what I'm saying is I wasn't in control of the outcome. That's what I mean by luck. It's like I didn't have difficult conversations that had guaranteed outcomes. I didn't know they were going to turn out favorably for me.

Dr Pooja Lakshmin

Yeah. And that actually reminds me, one of the pieces in the book, because I talk about the yellow flags on the path to real self-care, because it's so easy to get kind of seduced back into the faux self-care model. And one of them is that this is always going to be a risk. Anybody that tells you that it's not a risk is not being completely real with you, because it is a risk. You don't know how the conversations are going to go.

People are going to be upset with you. The people that are going to be the most upset with you are the people that have been getting a lot of your time and energy for free. And when you start to change your behavior or when you start to make different decisions, they're going to be like, hey,

wait a second, Meagen. I like how the old way was. Let's stay there. And you have to take the risk to trust yourself that it's worth practicing.

[00:25:31]

Because the other piece, like, you just said, it is practice. It feels terrible in the beginning. It's so hard and it takes a long time and you will totally get it wrong and it will be something that you will have to do forever. I wrote this book and while writing the book, I was going through IVF to get pregnant with my son, who is now almost eight months old, which is wonderful. IVF is just such a grueling process, the fertility treatments, and I fell off the real self-care wagon many times when I was writing this book.

And each time I was just like Pooja, I'm not going to be a hypocrite here. I need to practice what I'm preaching. I'm going to get off of my schedule, I'm going to be behind with the chapters. It's okay. So I guess I just want to say for folks that are listening, that just knowing that this is hard, again, it's a verb. It's not something that you just check off, but when you practice, the stomach pain gets less each time.

Meagen Gibson

Exactly. And like you said, it's just like anything else, like eating well, making good choices for our own bodies, movement, things like that. Like coming back to it, it's not that this is some regimented, super controlled way of being. It's returning to it in the seasons where you're able to and there's space for that. There's always going to be a place.

I mean, writing a book is a lot of work and I'm sure you didn't close down your psychiatry practice while you were doing that. It was a both and, and the IVF treatments. Something has to give. And in some instances, self-care means I cannot be all things to all people right now, including myself, so how can I inch my way back into it?

Which actually brings me to my next question, which is how did you start small? Because we can't just lump everything, but we're like, okay, I'm back on the self-care train and here's all the things at once. So how are you integrating real, small self-care strategies day to day?

Dr Pooja Lakshmin

Yeah, whenever I get this question, I'm always torn because part of me wants to be like and here's the rule, here's the thing, because I feel like it is so much easier to get it handed down from someone else. But then we all know that that never works in the long run and it's so much easier to tell people what to do and then to actually put it into practice for yourself.

So coming back to the fact that real self-care is a verb, it's a way of being. So for me, this is all about working with my mind, working with my thoughts. And I see a therapist. I actually have been in psychoanalysis for, I guess, almost eight years now. My therapist is retiring next year.

Meagen Gibson

I'm devastated for you. I'm vicariously sad for you.

[00:28:48] Dr Pooja Lakshmin

I see a therapist. I take medication. There's all these things that are part of it. And the piece that I always come back to is that it's a verb. So I always have an overflowing to do list of all the things that I want to get done and contribute to the world. And I say to myself, okay, well, how can I come to this in a real self-care way?

How can I approach this task in a way that allows me to connect with my values and the values that are really important for me, at least in the season of my life where I have my first book coming out and I'm taking on all these creative endeavors? Actually, similar to what you said, Meagen. Wanting to show up as authentic, wanting to really be the person that I am, the human Pooja who also happens to be a psychiatrist, but is just learning how to do this whole book thing.

So authenticity and transparency are values. So then how do I, when I have this to do list of sending off the email, how do I come to that email from those values? And that, I think, to me, makes it lighter because it's not, again, it's not a task that I check off. It's the things that I have to do. But how do I be myself? How do I bring myself to those things? For me, that feels easier. It's less of a burden and it's more just the way in which I carry myself, the way I think about things.

Which is one of the important crux of the book, is getting clear on your values, what are your values, and that's different from your goals. So does that answer your question?

Meagen Gibson

Yeah, it starts to, for sure. And we keep talking about values and just your own personal value. And it's been such a theme of my life for 2022. And I had a joke with a friend of mine who's 80, and she's like my adopted, I call her my fairy godmother, because she's the person that comes into my life and waves her magic wand and makes sure I know how awesome I am. Everybody needs one of those people in my life.

And I told her, if you keep doing this, it's going to get dangerous for everybody else, because if I realize how valuable I really am, everyone around me is going to suffer. And she was like, oh, I can't wait to see that. But it reminds me that it's such a personal process for each person and for me, I know, I can speak to this as I start to listen to what I'm not doing, that makes me me.

And one of my first signals is I'm not singing. Now, don't worry, I'm not a professional singer. I don't have, what do they call it? What does everybody on Twitter post about their song platform, whatever... I'm aging myself here.

Dr Pooja Lakshmin

I don't know what it is either.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah, every time somebody on Twitter blows up, they're like, I don't have a... It's like a song streaming service. Anyway, we're getting off... We're losing the plot. Don't worry, I'm not going to break out in opera songs or anything for you, but I just sing throughout my day. I was singing before you came on, thank God I have to admit you to the Zoom Room so you can't hear me. I sing in the shower. I make up songs about my plants. It's just something I do.

[00:32:21]

And if I'm not singing, I know we're in trouble. If I'm not using my voice in that way, if my nervous system is not in tune and balanced and harmonized with my being in the way that I show up in the world, that's the first thing to go. And so for me, it's noticing what I'm not doing that makes me fully me and then figuring out, oh, okay, so what do I need to take away? Or what boundaries do I need to set to make room for that thing that makes me me again?

Dr Pooja Lakshmin

Yes, I love that. And it always comes back to the first step, always, has to be the boundaries, because it's always about making the space. I think that that's really valuable, too, for folks to sort of meditate a little bit on. What are those things that you know, when you're feeling good, that you're doing? And when they're missing, that is a sign.

Meagen Gibson

And it can be something as simple as laughter, right? Am I laughing at my kid's ridiculous jokes? My ten year old loves to make up yo mama jokes. It makes him happy. Is laughter readily and easily available to me? Simple things like that.

Dr Pooja Lakshmin

Yeah. I think for me, also, one of the other things, and this, of course, always ties back to boundaries, but when someone asks me to do something very simple, like if my partner is just like, hey, can you grab me that cup of coffee? And I am like, ugh, then I'm like, uh oh, we need to recalibrate here. That's also another red flag for me.

Or if I get an email that, again, is a little bit annoying, but not a big deal, but my reaction is sort of outsized, that's a sign that things need to be balanced and I'm doing too much. Because especially for women, it's always coming back to like, you're doing too much. We're always doing too much. If you're wondering if you're doing too much, you are doing too much.

Meagen Gibson

You are, right. Yeah, absolutely. Totally right. And is there a reserve when you get asked to do something? Are you of an attitude of yes, or are you just an immediately, like, rah, those are those signals. It occurs to me that this is your first book, you're a psychiatrist, and I'm sure that this brought forth a lot for you.

So what is the process like, as a psychiatrist who also wrote about her own mental health journey, what was that like and what did you learn through that process?

Dr Pooja Lakshmin

Yeah, it's something that I think was really important for me as just the person that I am. My whole journey in psychiatry has been one of, I'll say, conflict in that I was always sort of confused as to why, especially in psychiatry, I think people sort of hold themselves back. And I understand, I'm in psychoanalysis, I have an analyst, I understand the blank slate, all of that type of thing, but I think

the world has changed so much and there's so many misconceptions too, when it comes to psychiatry that for me, it has been important over this past, I would say maybe, six years or so as I've been doing more writing for the general public to really model transparency. And with my patients in the room with them, I don't talk about my stuff.

[00:36:20] Meagen Gibson

You don't make it about you.

Dr Pooja Lakshmin

Right. And some of my patients do follow me on social media. Some of them don't. Some of them read my New York Times stuff, and when I write something, they'll email me and be like, oh, this is great. Some of them have no idea of the other stuff that I do. And I think for me, it's also always been about impact. And it also goes back to that structural piece. I'm a psychiatrist. I prescribe medication. I do therapy with my patients, but I can only see so many patients one on one.

And I never had the desire to open a big group practice and hire a bunch of other people underneath me. That just never sounded fun to have to be managing a whole bunch of employees

Meagen Gibson

Instead of training people?

Dr Pooja Lakshmin

Right. So there was only so much that I could grow from that standpoint. So then it was like, okay, how can I bring what I'm doing, with so much of it being teaching, to more folks that I can't see one on one? And that's what kind of took me to social media and took me to writing for the New York Times and ultimately to writing this book.

And the last piece on that is also being burnt out myself in academics and wanting to do something where I could connect with my own authentic voice, as opposed to writing super dry, research papers that nobody was ever going to read and that were so hard to get published. And that's a whole nother thing, but...

Meagen Gibson

I read them, especially when I'm struggling to sleep, I read them.

Dr Pooja Lakshmin

Well, they serve that purpose for many.

Meagen Gibson

It's a different kind of writing, isn't it? I know you also have a women's health platform which definitely speaks to how many people I can treat being limited. So tell me all about Gemma, your mental health platform for women.

[00:38:24] Dr Pooja Lakshmin

Absolutely. So Gemma actually was born, I founded Gemma in 2020, right as the pandemic was getting started. And it came out of my Instagram account, actually, because I had been on Instagram for about a year or so before that. And I found that there was so much misinformation about women's mental health, in particular. And again, coming back to the fact that there's not as many psychiatrists on social media.

So it was just like influencers, mom-fluencers, who were giving out all of this wellness advice. And so much of it too was focused on, in the women's space, was focused on kids and babies, but there really was nothing that was for women and for moms. So I started Gemma and I quickly knew that I wanted Gemma to be a place that was inclusive and was speaking to a diverse set of experiences.

So I got together with my colleague, Dr Kali Cyrus, she is a black, queer psychiatrist and focused on issues of identity and difference. And then my other colleague and friend, Dr Lucy Hutner, who is a reproductive psychiatrist in New York, and she actually was the lead editor of the very first American Psychiatric Association textbook on women's mental health, which was only published in 2022.

Meagen Gibson

Horrifying. Horrifying.

Dr Pooja Lakshmin

So we are together building Gemma. We're totally bootstrapped. But it was really a space, or it is a space, to kind of elevate the conversation that we're having right now. And we have a beta membership, it's only \$5 a month, and you get access to a couple of our courses and then these WhatsApp threads that Kali, Lucy and I are on. And that's our community.

And it's open to... We have members that are in that motherhood parenting space, but then we also have women that are in their twenties and dealing with dating and career and making those choices. And then we have women that are in their fifties and sixties and are people that don't have children. So we're really wanting it to be a community that you could come to and learn these skills and practice them and get support in a way that's facilitated and accessible.

Because not everybody has health insurance to be able to afford to pay and see somebody one on one. So it's not a substitute for therapy, it's not like treatment or diagnosis, but it's education and community. And yeah, you can reach us at [gemmawomen.com](https://www.gemmawomen.com). And we are really excited to be growing this new space and elevating these conversations.

Meagen Gibson

Awesome. And yes, social media platforms like yours, conferences like ours, are not a substitute for real healthcare, but they are, hopefully, bridging the accessibility gap that a lot of people have. And there's so many reasons for that gap, whether it be insurability. I was in an area 5, 10 years ago, literally where there was not another human being for an hour, before mental health care was online, before you could dial up a doctor from your phone. I was literally, physically, geographically isolated. So there's lots of reasons why people have accessibility issues and so... Not to mention

books. People still read books, and listen to them, for that matter. However you can get your information is great.

[00:42:18] Dr Pooja Lakshmin

And you can bring that. A conference like this, you learn so much, and you bring it into your therapy. I see that all the time with my patients. And so there's really this complementary relationship, I think, too.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. And that's what I wish I had had when I first started my trauma healing journey, was more information so that I could be an agent in my own health. I did not know enough to know what kind of therapist I should be looking for, how they should be certified, trained, or what their interests in treatment should be. I didn't know any of it. I just knew I needed help.

And so, you're exactly right. Through conferences and platforms and books and things, you're learning what the different methodologies of treatment are, what the different approaches of treatment are, and finding what might be best for you. And also that way, you can ask your doctor, and if they're not interested, engaged, or informed about what you're talking about, maybe they're just not the right fit for you.

Dr Pooja Lakshmin

Right.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. All right, Dr Pooja Lakshmin, thank you so much for being with us today. How can people find out more about you and your book?

Dr Pooja Lakshmin

Yeah, well, it's been just such a pleasure, Meagen. Thank you for having me. I am on Instagram [@poojalakshmin](#). My website is poojalakshmin.com and my book is called *Real Self-Care: A Transformative Program For Redefining Wellness (Crystals, Cleanses, And Bubble Baths Not Included)*. And you can pre-order from my website. It will be in stores on March 14th, and it's available for pre-order right now.

Meagen Gibson

And those pre-orders count, so anybody interested, go ahead and hit that little order button. All right. Thank you so much again for being with us today.

Dr Pooja Lakshmin

Thank you.