Dr. Niobe Way: The number one complaint from people around the country is that they don't feel listened to. A lot of people feel that way. Lily, we're just so self-absorbed, so the reason why we don't feel listened to is because nobody's listening, because we're all so pissed off nobody's listening to us, but if we only understood that if I listened to you, you will be able to listen to me.

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Lily Cornell Silver: Hi, everyone I'm Lily Cornell Silver, and welcome to *Mind Wide Open*, my mental health focus interview series. Today, I am talking to Dr. Niobe Way, who is an accredited author, a professor of applied psychology at NYU and the founder of the Project for the Advancement of Our Common Humanity. Dr. Way's work in human connection spans decades, and is so profound, especially in this period of isolation and disconnection that we've been in since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. I truly believe that every single person who watches this interview will get something out of it about connection and vulnerability. I really hope you enjoy and thank you so much for watching.

It's so lovely to meet you, Dr. Way. Thank you so much for being here.

Dr. Way: No, thanks for having me on, it's wonderful.

Lily: Of course, I'm so excited to talk about human connection. Obviously it's a very important topic to me, it's an important topic to everybody. I would love to start just by hearing about how you got into that field because I think many people, myself included, like I didn't even know that was a specific field of research, a specific field of study. I'd love to hear about that from you.

Dr. Way: I was a doctoral student at Harvard in the '80s and I wanted to study, I wanted to be counselor, and part of my training as a counselor in a doctoral program is I worked in a high school as a counselor, and I started hearing. I had a lot of boys in my practice, teenage boys and I started to hear a lot about their friendships. They were talking about the struggle to find close friendships, and the betrayals by their guy friends, and they're sensitive, and their desire for closeness and emotional intimacy, and I was just blown away. I was like, "Wait a minute, what?"

I was taking a lot of adolescent development classes at Harvard, and learning about adolescents, and none of this was in my classes none of it. I was learning about like all sorts of things that you learn about when you learn about teenagers, but nobody was talking about friendships. I realized that we were telling the wrong story about human development and that we were focusing on separation, and the need for separation, and the need to be autonomous, and independent.

All these things, which is all beautiful things, they are important needs in human development, but it was totally missing that the desire for human connection, totally missing. I became fascinated and obsessed in some ways, I become obsessed with things. I do. I became obsessed with basically researching friendships and I switched into a doctoral program on human development. I got my PhD in human

development at Harvard, and I basically spent the next 30 years, it's been 30 years now, focused on human connection as a core need of human thriving.

Lily: That's amazing. That's something that I've talked about so much on this series is the need for emotional intelligence, and for like human connection structures to be integrated into the education system and into the workplace, like it needs to be integrated societally.

Dr. Way: Basically, my data then started showing off. For many years, I've studied thousands of teenagers and I follow as a developmentalist, I follow the same people over time. I'll start interviewing them when they're 11 or 12, and then I'll follow them until about 19 or 20. I get to hear the changes as they get older, and the boys at 12, 13 and 14 are very clear about their need for emotionally expressive friendships and for emotionally intimate friendships. That's the first part of the story that they communicate when you talk to them, especially in early adolescence.

Then the second part of the story, you begin to hear how culture, our modern culture gets in the way of our human nature. You start to hear the stories of the importance of manning up, and so young men, as they get older, they start to, in the interviews, you start to hear them really go underground with their desire for friendships. They start to say, "It doesn't matter. I don't care, whatever," in terms of talking about their friendships, but there's a definite major theme of sadness.

What you begin to hear at 16 years old, 15, 16 years old is right at the age in which they start to talk about how they struggled to hold on to close friendships or to find close friendships, is right when boys start committing suicide at much, much higher rates than girls. The suicide rate just explodes for boys around that age. Also violence. Boys' expressions of violence, school shootings and stuff, start happening at about that age. It really is exactly the age in which they're told that to somehow to have close male friendships is weird.

Then the third part of the story is the clash between our culture and our nature, causes what I call a crisis of connection, where we're disconnected from ourselves on each other and that's a crisis of connection. The fourth part of the story is the consequences of the crisis is everything you talk about. It's depression, anxiety, violence, suicide, loneliness, isolation, all that is the consequences of this crisis of connection. You want connection but you can't find it.

Then finally the solutions, the fifth part of the story that boys tell us implicitly and explicitly too, sometimes, is that the solution is to get back to who we are as humans, which is to nurture our nature. Build a culture that nurtures our nature rather than gets in the way.

Lily: Where do you feel like that stems from, that disconnection between our natural being and how we're taught to operate in the world or how we're told to operate in the world? Where do you think that comes from?

Dr. Way: We made what is human, which is thinking and feeling, which is a human thing, we made thinking into masculine and feeling into feminine. The minute we took what is human and put a gender on it, it made it so that all of a sudden, the value of thinking was prioritized, and the value of feeling, because it was feminized, was seen as less important. Once we did that, and we gendered a core human capacity and need, we were lost as a culture. We're lost as a culture. It's rooted in our division of what is masculine and what is feminine and then disconnected from what is feminine, even though what is feminine is actually the root of our humanity.

Lily: It speaks to the arbitrariness of how those things got labeled that way and that the gender binary is a social construct anyway. It's all so arbitrary and none of it is natural.

Dr. Way: We have socially constructed our notions of being a man and a woman. We have suffering because we don't value what is associated with being a woman. We only value what's associated with being a man. That means everybody suffers, not just women, but actually in fact, I would say, in this respect men even more so, because if they act soft in any ways, they're considered not a man.

Lily: There's that stigma around men being vulnerable.

Dr. Way: Exactly. That makes us disconnect from each other. If I'm in a relationship with a guy and I think that the guys are of course going to be an emotional idiot, then that's not great for my relationship if I'm going to assume that has no emotional acuity. It's not great for the guy if he thinks that I am the only person he can talk to about his feelings, because he can't talk to his guy friends, that's not good for him either. It hurts the relationship, it hurts friendships. It hurts all human relationships.

Lily: The research that you're discussing from the story that the boys were telling, that's published in a book of yours, right?

Dr. Way: Yes. It comes from a book called *Deep Secrets: Boys' Friendships and the Crisis of Connection*. I just have to say, Lily, there was a research done at the Harvard Center for Making Caring Common, and they found that 80% of parents across the nation said that academic achievement was more important than kindness. If we live in that kind of country, where parents are thinking academic achievement is more important than kindness, we shouldn't be surprised that there's a mental health crisis.

They do this beautiful experiment at UVA where they have people, they wear a backpack, the subjects wear a backpack, and they look at the steepness of a hill. They have to estimate the steepness of the hill. UVA, it's a real hill, but otherwise they do it at a computer model. Then you're supposed to estimate how steep the hills. Then they have a condition where you're standing alone, estimating the steepness of the hill. You're standing with a person who you don't know, a person-- and another condition is a person you know well, and a person who's your best friend.

The people who are standing next to their best friend see the hill as less steep. Is that crazy? That's crazy. Basically what they're discovering is that your perception of difficulty, of task difficulty is shaped by who's standing next to you. We need friendships from the day we're born. Maybe after the first year of life, but the day we're born until the day we die, we need them. It's about the ways we connect and it can't just be your romantic partner. Ideally it's different people in your life. It's people older than you, younger than you, different walks of life. Ideally, it's different types of people and different types of friendships. As you know, Lily, each friendship is distinctive.

Lily: A few weeks ago I did an interview with Jack Osborne, Ozzy and Sharon's son, and he was applying this theoretically to his experiences with rehab, but he recommended this book called *Tribe,* by Sebastian Junger. I'm only halfway through it, but what you're saying speaks directly to that as well, and it's in our nature to build that network of diverse range of people and that's how we thrive, that's how we succeed. That's how we survive, really.

Dr. Way: Of course and the other thing I just, to make it a little deeper, is that because I'm a developmental psychologist, so I'm really focused on specifically what type of connection we need. I'm really talking about, I call it thick love. It's really having a relationship where you feel seen and listened to by me, and you feel like I see your full humanity. I see you, and so that whole sense of genuinely feeling listened to, and seen, and heard, is what we're looking for in the connection.

The connections we oftentimes have on social media doesn't fit that. The connections we oftentimes have in our lives doesn't fit that. It really is and it doesn't need to be more than necessarily a few people, and maybe even one person, you only have that one person who's that deep with you, but it's really that experience of feeling listened to and heard. The number one complaint from people around the country is that they don't feel listened to, and a lot of people feel that way.

Lily, we're just so self-absorbed. The reason why we don't feel listened to is because nobody's listening. We're all so pissed off that nobody's listening to us. If we only understood that if I listened to you, you will be able to listen to me.

Lily: Absolutely. I'm so curious. I launched the series. I launched Mind Wide Open in honor of my dad, but it was also like the seeds were very much sown in the pandemic and the lack of connection that we're all feeling and still feeling. I'm so curious just how that's impacted your research, and you were studying human connection way before this happened.

Dr. Way: Basically, the COVID has changed everything. I have to say the reason why it's changed everything for me professionally, and I'll talk personally, too, but professionally is that all of a sudden, I'm the cool kid on the block. I've been, as I said to you, my book has been getting a lot of mainstream media attention for a decade, but the past year, it's just exploded because all of a sudden it's like being an alcoholic. You have to be at the bottom of the barrel to recognize that you're an alcoholic. I think COVID has forced us as a culture to realize we have a problem.

I got COVID back in March and I've had COVID-related symptoms for almost a year now. It's been a very challenging year, but the beautiful thing about when you're challenged, and Lily, you know this, exactly what I'm talking about, is that it forces you to reach out. Even though I've been a friendship guru for decades, actually my friendships were fairly, my friends were just okay. I'm a single mom of two teenage kids, and basically I wasn't really paying attention to my friendship needs.

Since the COVID, I had an explosion of my own friendships. I have discovered for myself the joys of friendships which has been so beautiful, Lily, for my daughter to see. Now, I'm actually, her mom's actually walking the walk and not just lecturing her. I just think that whole beautiful thing about, which is part of your story too, Lily about how sometimes it really is true that you need the challenges in your life to force you to see things.

I really think COVID has allowed all of us to see that, how much we need each other. Quite frankly, Lily, not to be overly dramatic, but that we're starving for each other. We all think we're the only one starving and it's not true. All of us are. I have a beautiful story to tell you that I had the boys read the first part of *Deep Secrets,* I'll show you the book. The book is this, *Deep Secrets: Boys' Friendships and the Crisis of Connection*. There's a quote in there. Actually, could I read the quote?

Lily: Yes, please.

Dr. Way: This is one of them. His name is Justin, although it's of course, a pseudonym. I ask him about his friendships and this is his response, and he's 14. This is a typical response I get from 14-year-olds. "My best friend and I love each other. That's it. You have this thing that is deep, so deep it's within you. You can't explain it. It's just a thing that you know that that person is that person. I guess that is all that should be important in our friendship. I guess in life, sometimes two people can really, really understand each other and really have a trust, respect, and love for each other. It just happens. It's human nature."

I read that to a classroom full of 12-year-old boys. They started giggling. I knew why they were giggling, but I said, "Tell me why you're laughing." Nobody would say. Finally I said, "Come on, tell me why you're laughing. I know why you think that's funny," and then finally, one of the guys said, "Well, God, the dude sounds gay." I said, "Okay, well, let me tell you, I don't know whether he's gay, because I don't ask boys about their sexuality, but 85% of all the boys I've ever interviewed over 30 years sound like that when they're teenagers. That's what teenage boys sound like." They all like totally quiet. Imagine 12-year-old boys, they're usually squirming around in their seat.

Then finally, one of the boys says, "For real?" I said, "Oh, yes, that's what teenage boys sound like. That's what they sound like." You know what happened, Lily next? They all started sharing that they were just like Justin in the book. The only thing that they needed is for me to normalize the feelings. The minute I normalized it and said, "It became that's so gay," to, "Oh, no, that's me." I even had two boys in the classroom say, talk about how they had broken up in their friendship, in front of 22

other guys. They had broken up because one had hurt the other person's feelings. They talked about it in the classroom after I normalized it.

It's totally possible to do, to change the culture. You've just got to normalize it and make it a human thing not a boy thing, not a girl thing.

Lily: Especially from that young age, with the notion that once it we get to like 15, 16, 17, that's when that starts to get beaten out of them.

Dr. Way: Exactly, yes. To just talk about girls and young women for a second, too. It's obviously true for girls and young women. I would say the challenge for girls and young women in their friendships, which Lily, you're going to know more than I will at this point, I would say the challenge in watching my daughter, but also doing a lot of research with girls, too, is to have authentic friendships. Girls and women know how to fake it really well. You know that, Lily. I can say this directly to a girl, a young woman, because you know exactly what I'm going to say. In the social skills I have, I can make you feel like you're my best friend within a second.

Because I'm so skilled socially that I know how to do that game of drawing you into me, and making you feel very close to me, even though I don't feel close to you. Those skills should really be saved for the people that we're really seeking close relationships with.

Lily: It's so interesting because that was going to be-- I was going to ask you that because as, before you even brought up the fact that that's something that happens typically for young women. I find myself really wanting to have connection with my friends, with my family, with whoever, but I tend to have difficulty being truly vulnerable and feeling like I am connected to other people. I'm wondering, because I think, part of it is it's exacerbated by COVID obviously, but I think it's a much deeper rooted thing than that.

Dr. Way: No, totally. No, because ultimately, in the scheme of things, Lily, to put on my feminist hat, which I normally always wear, is that in a culture that doesn't value girls and women, as much as it does boys and men, what it means is that we have been taught also, even though we were taught relational skills, we've taught that those relationship skills aren't very valuable. Also Lily, we live in a hypermasculine culture, so why would you want to be vulnerable? We hate vulnerability, the whole culture hates vulnerability. We think it's lame.

Lily: It's so interesting because I find it easier almost to be vulnerable on this platform, to strangers, than I do to like having lunch with a friend. It's such a strange phenomenon.

Dr. Way: No. By the way, when you interview people, it's the same thing. People will tell me and my team stuff, they would never have told anybody else. The reality is is that you've provided, Lily, a structure by which I can tell you this and be vulnerable. In our friendships, weirdly enough, we don't provide that structure oftentimes. We don't normalize the vulnerability. We're either wanting to process something that hurt

us, but we're not willing to really go vulnerable, or we just don't want to talk about it, or we don't want to--

I'm always aware, even in my friendships, even my grown-up friendships, that I don't want to be a burden on someone. I don't want to be weighing them down and depressing them, and then they won't hang out with me because I'm so depressing. You know what I mean? Lily**:** That's the internal loop, yes. I know exactly what you mean. [crosstalk]

Dr. Way: That's just sad because what it means is-- that's what I meant before COVID. What it means is that I'm not really close with anybody. COVID, and being sick, Lily, forced me, because I realized if I don't reach out and actually create real bonds, I'm going to be alone in my house, sick, like I'm going to be totally on my own. It was like almost a survival response of like, I got to actually start being more vulnerable with people so that I can have genuine friendships, for survival reasons.

Lily: Briefly, I want to touch on the Project of the Advancement of Our Common Humanity. Niobe, that's obviously borne of this entire conversation and I want to hear what you're doing with that and all of that.

Dr. Way: Yes. Basically it was a think-and-do tank I started in 2013 because of this story that the boys were telling, and I realized I need to change that, we need to change the framework of the culture. It's a think-and-do tank. We have lots of members, and people who do work on social connection but trying to impose this-- or impose is too aggressive, trying to instill this framework and the way we think about things, this five-part story that I told you about. One of the main projects we do at PACH, the acronym is PACH, is pach.org, is we do The Listening Project.

The Listening Project, we embed it in English curriculums in middle schools across the city. It's not extracurricular, it's not afterschool, it's embedded in an English classrooms. It's a whole unit for two months where they're learning the skills of what we call transformative interviewing. You learn the skills and it's where they're interviewing and learning the skills of interviewing with their peers, teachers, family members. Then they do a biography project when they present their biography at the end of the semester. It's a beautiful thing. I have seventh graders interview. My doctoral students and my doctoral students interview my seventh graders. Guess who's a better interviewer, Lily? Who do you think is a better interviewer, seriously who?

Lily: I would genuinely guess the seventh graders.

Dr. Way: Of course. Do you know why?

Lily: I feel like they just get more to the root of it. The honesty is there.

Dr. Way: Yes, and they're still connected to their natural curiosity. I'll tell you, I had seventh grade boys. They always have to interview me as part of the training, as a group. The question they first ask, this is how intense 12-year-old boys are when you

nurture their curiosity. Their first question was, "Are you married?" Which I find hilarious that 12-year-old boys are asking me if I'm married. They say, "Are you married?", and I was trying to be difficult because I wanted them to work at it, so I said, "No."

Then they said, well, have you ever been married? I said, "Yes." Then they all started laughing because they realized I was trying to be hard, difficult. Finally, anyways. Finally, they're asking me questions like this, Lily, and I'm not, I've had this experience so many times, but I just want your listeners to hear, these are the kinds of questions 12-year-old boys ask, okay? Are you ready? "Do you still love him? Does he know that you still love him? What do you do that makes him think that you still love him?"

These are from 12-year-old boys, raising their hand all like this, like, "Call on me, call on me." Then, "How did you support your children during the divorce?" Then little Matthew, he goes, "How did your kids support you when you were going through a divorce? How did your kids support you?" The questions that are socially unacceptable are always the questions you want to be asked, right? Like, do you still love him? That's a question I was starving to be asked because of course I felt like I did still love, I do still love him, but nobody ever asked me, so I'd never articulated it, you know?

It's really transformative for young people because they all, so many boys and a lot of girls, too, they don't necessarily see themselves as skilled in terms of building relationships, but they are. They're naturally skilled. Think about all those skills are just thrown in the garbage and seen as we need to focus on math and science.

Lily: I'm still floored by that statistic that the majority of parents were prioritizing academic performance, yes.

Dr. Way: Over kindness. I mean, Oh my God, the problem is often really middle-upper class, upper class, rich people, and middle-class people like myself that really have gone crazy, right? With the focus on this very hard notion of humanity. Whereas in some ways, I'm not trying to idealize working-class communities, but the beautiful thing about working-class communities is they've known the importance of community for a long time. There's much more a sense of having to rely on each other and I don't, I want to be careful. I don't want to idealize anybody, but I'm just saying.

Lily: It's the product of a capitalist structure.

Dr. Way: Totally. Oh, Lily, okay, you're talking about language. That's what I would say to my NYU students. It's capitalism, it's hardcore capitalism,.

Lily: I'm going to do a hard 180 from that topic. I would love to know what is something that is giving you hope right now.

Dr. Way: Personally, I love that I have been trying to walk the walk in the way I raise my kids and I have two kids, two teenage kids, that I tried to walk the walk by really instilling these kinds of values since they were little kids. I have two very, very emotionally and relationally astute, beautiful human beings in my children. It is so gratifying to see my daughter be such a good friend to her friends, and my son be such a good friend to his friends.

On a more professional level, the hope is that I actually think my message is really hopeful. I don't think it's depressing at all. My message is that the problem is our culture, not our nature. If the problem was our nature, it'd be super depressing. It'd be super depressing. If it's our culture, we can change it.

Lily: There's a visible solution, right.

Dr. Way: You guys can create the kind of culture you want. Just do it.

Lily: It's a message. It's hard work, but it's also huge possibility, that is absolutely.

Dr. Way: Your generation decides that we want to have this a core part of our education when we go to college, and you make that clear with your university, that you want part of your education to be like, I teach it as an undergraduate course at NYU called The Listening Project, that you want The Listening Project on your university and you want these things as part of your education, it will happen.

Lily: That is a beautiful and powerful message. I thank you so much for being here, Dr. Wade, this was one of my favorite interviews ever. This is so insightful. It speaks so directly to, I think my experience, but I would think to most people's experiences that will watch this. Thank you so much for being here.

Dr. Way: Oh, good. Good. Thanks so much, Lily. It was great to be interviewed, you're a great interviewer. You're pretty good.

Lily: Thank you. Thank you so much.

Dr. Way: Good. I had fun. Thanks, Lily.

[music]