



The Millennial Life

podcast

with Liz Higgins

Episode 5: Modern Manhood: How to Be a “Good Guy” in the World Today A Conversation with Cleo Stiller, Award-Winning Author of [Modern Manhood](#)

Liz Higgins (00:00:02):

Hey, y'all! Liz Higgins here, and welcome to the Millennial Life Podcast, where my main goal is to share conversations that will inspire you and drive you toward the life and relationship you desire. I'm here to share what I've learned as a licensed therapist and relationship coach specializing in millennial relationships and wellness, as well as transformative conversations with other professionals. Thanks for listening, and enjoy today's episode!

Liz Higgins (00:00:32):

Welcome to the show! Today's episode is both informative and endearing. My conversation with Cleo Stiller - a Peabody Award-nominated, Emmy Award-nominated, and Gracie Award-winning reporter. She's got all the awards! - is one that you are not going to want to miss. As a self-identified 'relationship non-expert', Cleo has been obsessed with exploring stories about health, gender, and technology among millennials. She's had an acclaimed TV show called "Sex Right Now" with Cleo Stiller, which was on Univision's network Fusion, and was one of the network's highest performing series in prime time. So she knows how to draw an audience in, and I can vouch for that with the way this book was written and the way she captured the reader. And of course, me being a woman, like, I was really pulled into these concepts that she was touching on from the guys that she interviewed.

Liz Higgins (00:01:42)

So "Modern Manhood" is Cleo's first book with her publisher, and it chronicles the hopes, the fears and the confessions of men across the country, as they come to terms with what it means to be a good man today. It was a number one new release on Amazon within two weeks of its launch, which is amazing. And it's been covered by Fortune Magazine, Rolling Stone, Mother Jones, PBS, and ABC News, to name a few. I am really excited about having this conversation with Cleo because she's a reporter, she's a journalist. Her mission, her role in what she does is to listen to the stories, to take in the facts from other people's perspectives, to be the listener, and to then relay the message. And to, to put together a narrative that rings true to whatever topic she's exploring. And she has definitely earned the ability to talk on this subject of modern manhood.

Liz Higgins (00:02:50):

Some of y'all may be thinking, but she's a woman. Like, "Why are you having a woman come on and talk about the male experience?" Well, I mean, she has put a ton into this and she'll talk about the origins of this project and how it came to be that men were reaching out to her to share their experiences, their fears, and anxieties and challenges in trying to navigate being not just a good male, but, like, a good person in the context of everything that's been going on in the world. From my perspective, which, you know, historically as a therapist and a relationship

coach, I get to hear some of these stories and experiences from guys as well, but my role is very different than Cleo's. I'm not going, I'm not allowed... My ethics forbids me to go out and talk about that with anybody, share that, disclose that... Like, therapy is a confidential experience and maybe that's why men have been more open to coming and sharing some of the challenges that they have in the world, in their relationships, at work, in their friendships, wherever. I have generally found millennials - male and female, everybody - to be open to the therapy experience, open to working with a therapist or a coach and sharing intimate details about their life.

Liz Higgins (00:04:21):

But I'm also in somewhat of a biased position because those are the people that are actively choosing to seek this format out. So Cleo talks to lots of different men from different walks of life, from different cultures, ethnicities, religious backgrounds, like everything. She pulls into consideration the vast, just the vastness of all the different types of people there are in our world. And I love that, because it's a very inclusive book that holds space for all types of people, except for the ones that (like she says in her book) disagree with those self-evident truths that she so poignantly points out. So I think you're going to get a lot out of today's conversation. Definitely stick through to the end. We talk about men. We talk about her book. We also touch on women and what our role is in our relationships to men and how we can be a part of that healthy movement forward towards better relationships and a better understanding of each other. I think you're really going to love it. Thanks for tuning in! Hey, everyone. I am so excited to talk with today's guest. Ms. Cleo Stiller is with me today. Hi Cleo!

Cleo Stiller (00:05:43):

Hi! Thank you so much for having me.

Liz Higgins (00:05:45):

Yes. Thank you. And where we talking from today? I know you're a traveler.

Cleo Stiller (00:05:50):

So I'm often on the move. Um, when COVID is not in full swing, um, but I'm in New York City today. I split my time between New York City and Denver.

Liz Higgins (00:06:05):

Ooh, fabulous. A little variety there. Yeah.

Cleo Stiller (00:06:07):

Yes, yes. It's not bicoastal, but it's... There's, you know, urban concrete jungle with some, you know, like many pluses about living in New York, but then, um, Denver is just such a, it gives me access to so much nature and beauty, which as you know, is very healing. So I'm quite lucky.

Liz Higgins (00:06:29):

Oh my gosh. It's so is, and I know... Didn't y'all have like some real, real drastic weather changes recently. I think I saw that. I was like...

Cleo Stiller (00:06:38):

Well, it was crazy. I actually posted about it on Instagram because, so it was on a, yeah. On a Sunday, I was out in a tank top in shorts, riding my bike in 90 degree weather. And in 12 hours, the temperature dropped 50 degrees and we had snow by the next day. Uh, it was, I mean, honestly like coming from the East coast, we can have 20 degree temps, um, swings. 50, so wild.

Liz Higgins (00:07:14):

Yeah. Well you know I'm in Texas, so I'm like, yep. Yep. I, uh, I resonate. We have those moments here, but then a part of me just wants to be like, dude, 2020.

Cleo Stiller (00:07:25):

I know. Well that, and that I just, my mom was like, "Oh, make sure you, you know, double up on layers". And I was like, "I'm not leaving the house. Are you kidding me?" Like, I'm, this could be a, the pre-apocalyptic phase. Like I'm not coming out until it goes back up at least by 20 or 30 degrees. No way, the way this year is going.

Liz Higgins (00:07:48):

I know, I know. And I hate that. So many of us, I think, feel that way, but it is just where we're at. And I, I'm just so pumped to talk to you today because I think, gosh, it's like, even though your book came out almost a year ago now (congratulations!), I feel like it couldn't be more relevant still with everything going on. And for those of y'all listening, you know, that I've, I've talked a little about some of the accolades and, um, nominations that Cleo's had, but so she's the author of "Modern Manhood: Conversations About the Complicated World of Being a Good Man Today". And yeah, I just think we never could have imagined where we'd be in 2020 with everything going on. And so honestly, the first thing I want to ask you is how do you think that your book and the themes from it are even more relevant now?

Cleo Stiller (00:08:44):

Yeah, that's a really great question. Um, and there's a couple of ways, uh, things that come to mind. So on the one hand, when folks first started going into quarantine back in March, I heard from a lot of people who I had interviewed for the book saying, I want to follow up on our question that we had this year because, um, you know, I was having this dynamic either in my marriage or my relationship or with my boss at work, um, specific to how men and women are interacting. But now that COVID is happened and we're in quarantine, this is even, it's compounded, right? Because there were, you know, uh, partners who are working on top of each other. There's no childcare, there's no parent care (if you were taking care of elderly parents). And so it's interesting because I think there's this underlying belief that, um, conversations about equality, like, with men and women - also race is so relevant this year -

Cleo Stiller (00:09:53):

So we can say that as well, but that sort of these conversations take a back seat during times of crisis. There's a view, at least at companies, right? With like DNI, um, initiatives that during a crisis it's just bare bones. Like back, back to the, you know, very simple ways of doing the business survival, survival mode, but actually the ways that we're interacting are being

exacerbated right now. So this kind of, these kind of conversations, they're always important, but they're even more important during unprecedented times, right? Because the worst of our unchecked behavior can come out. So that's one way that the book has sort of come to the forefront. And then also of course, with conversations about anti-racism and BLM, there's so many parallels to how men were coming to me. Um, you know, while I was writing this book being like, "I have a lot to say about this, but I'm kind of afraid to say anything publicly.

Cleo Stiller (00:10:56):

I just find this all very confusing, what the hell". Um, and I think a lot of white folks, depending on where they are with their journey with anti-racism this year in particular are like, "Wait, I thought we were good on this. Like, are you telling me ...what do I do so...

Liz Higgins (00:11:12):

I can tell I totally see that. Yeah, I see that. I hear that from clients. I feel that in myself you're right. The word parallel. It's so true. It's just a totally different context, I guess, but the same theme of having to really get in touch with your inner knowing and what you thought was your reality and truth about things, but having to tune in to the reality of others that are different than you and yeah. Very powerful themes there.

Cleo Stiller (00:11:43):

Hugely. Yeah. So that's where we find ourselves. Yeah.

Liz Higgins (00:11:54):

Okay well, I'd love for you to share more of the origins of this project, because I know as a journalist, as a writer, I mean, you've had some history there... Just diving into lots of different subjects and things, but what, what kind of sparked you on this journey to create "Modern Manhood"?

Cleo Stiller (00:12:10):

Yeah, I mean, and that, and that's really important to understanding the final product. So I, for five years was at Univision, um, and hosted a television show for them called Sex Right Now with Cleo Stiller that sort of took a look at the way that technology and then shifting cultural attitudes among millennials was shaping and reshaping. Right? Um, the ways that we were meeting, hooking up, relating to each other, what we had available to us information-wise, um, and how, in some ways it was changing our lives in unprecedented ways. And how, in other ways, there were just these themes that from generation to generation were still around, right? So basically like, you know, the elevator pitches, like it was Sex Ed or Relationship Ed for adults. And we did get the Peabody Award nomination for that. So very kind of relevant information. And the show was done by an entirely, um, female-identified or non-binary identified team. Um, but it really took a look from both the female and male and non-binary perspective. And our audience was about 60% male and 40% female. So. Wow. Yeah. And that was interesting too. Um, so, but a lot of stories about women's health, a lot of stories about reproductive rights. Um, and yet the male audience was extremely engaged and also it was the second highest performing show on the network. So quite popular!

Liz Higgins (00:13:49):

Yeah. What do you think that that was about? The actual, I mean, there were more men tuning in.

Cleo Stiller (00:13:56):

So this was, um, Univision's English speaking network called Fusion, and I think it was, it did the whole... Overall the network trended a little bit more towards men. However, I think there was also this curiosity factor of this wasn't a show, (even though the name was very provocative because we just knew in the TV guide, we were like, everyone's going to see that and they'll watch the show), but then yeah. But then once you started watching the show, you realize that we were treating these concepts with such earnest respect and such deep and thorough reporting that you, it kind of, you were like, "Oh wait, I have been having this conversation with my friends for years. Like, let's see, okay. Now I want to see how, you know, young twenties are handling this in Ohio or in South Central LA or in rural, rural North Carolina."

Cleo Stiller (00:14:56):

Right. So it was kind of what, yeah, and I think there's a little bit of a feeling for men of, um, just the way that we framed this show as no stigma, no judgment. And we trusted our viewers to make their own best decisions for their lives. I think women are, are used to... Not often do people talk to women about their intimate sex lives, but when they do, people tend to trust women more to make those decisions. Whereas conversations from men about sexuality are often a little more salacious, a little more titillating. And so I think the tone really, like, drew. They were like, "Oh, okay, are you talking to me? Like let's learn. So we had the trust of our audience, which is important to understanding how "Modern Manhood" the book came about - because we were doing the show. And then in 2017, the Harvey Weinstein scandal hits the mainstream.

Cleo Stiller (00:15:56):

And a lot of men who watched my show started writing into me, "Are you going to do a season on this? Because I have so much to say about what's happening right now, but I'm kind of afraid to say anything." And there were a lot of questions. They kind of ran the gamut from, you know, I'm single and I'm terrified to approach women. I feel like everything I was raised to do is now considered creepy or worse or, you know, um, I'm a first time parent. And frankly, when we found out we were having a boy, I kind of freaked out because I don't even know what it means to raise a good man anymore. Or, um, people who were bosses, right? Like managers at their companies writing into me, being like, listen, I don't even want to say this publicly. Right? But I don't feel like hiring any new female staff.

Cleo Stiller (00:16:52):

It does not feel worth the risk.

Liz Higgins (00:16:54):

Wow. What was that like for you to be receiving these inquiries like this and hearing these real truths that men were experiencing around that time?

Cleo Stiller (00:17:06):

It was so overwhelming to me, you know, it was overwhelming as a human because I was in so many spaces and I was reporting so many stories for the show where women and survivors are having these really important conversations. And then they would look around the room and say, "Where are the men? There are no men, men don't care about this." And I knew men do care about this because their messages are piling up in my inbox. And I know what to say, right? No one has the answer to these huge questions that we're asking, but there's so much work to be done. And we gotta, you know, we gotta do something about this, right. So it was overwhelming Liz.

Liz Higgins (00:17:59):

Like it's like you were witnessing the, the cultural and the generational fight or flight response. The men were kind of like frozen. Like "what do I do? This sucks that it's happening, but that's not me, but I don't know what I'm supposed to do differently or where to start that wouldn't offend somebody." And exactly. And then that pole of, "Hey, we need to fight. We need to push forward and figure this out." Like just, yeah, very paradoxical,

Cleo Stiller (00:18:28):

Precisely. And there was no single resource to point anyone to when these questions would come in, and all I could do really was kind of walk around just holding, um, the way of knowing that there are two parallel, at least two parallel, conversations happening about this. And neither of the two should meet. Right? Because I was hearing from them that they are having these conversations on group texts with their other male buddies. And they're just kind of debating it amongst themselves. Some were like bringing the conversations home to their partners and they were, they were like, well, that rarely ended well for me. And then, you know, and then there was a very public narrative that was happening on Twitter and social. Um, and so Simon & Schuster, which is my publisher, they came to me about doing a book deal and I pitched them on three ideas.

Cleo Stiller (00:19:23):

And this one was the very last one because I just thought like, this is such a mammoth project. Like, I don't even know if I actually want to do it. And they were like, of course they were like "that one. And also we need it this year, like it has to be now." So that's what I, so I'd done that in a massive project of just interviewing nearly a hundred men across the country, ranging from ages of 16 to, Oh, sorry, 18 to 62. And again, very similar to the television show. I mean, these, these, it was so critical that we got the stories from men, cultural, ethnic background, diversity, regional diversity... Because what a white, American, Wall Street banker who's 42, born and raised in the Northeast, thinks about masculinity and how he's showing up in his life, is likely to, in some ways, be so different than a Guatemalan American, a first gen immigrant, who's 18 down in Miami. Right? And all of the back devs are so important and you have to, in some ways they're very similar and in other ways, they're so different. So for this project to have integrity, we had to kind of like tap all of that.

Liz Higgins (00:20:48):

Oh yeah. Well, and I'm just, I, I'm relating to what you're saying, or it's really resonating just in that, that wide age range that you were interviewing and hearing these stories from. I just think about who I work with, which is like 90% millennials, you know, that's my demographic that I

hone in on. And the youngest millennials, as compared to the older of the millennials, they're very different. It's like, almost like within the millennial generation, there's many generations. So I'm even wondering about that. Like what differences did you notice from like millennial men to maybe older men, gen X?

Cleo Stiller (00:21:28):

So I think the assumption that we'd all make is that millennials, and even younger, would have much more progressive attitudes than previous generations - than the gen X or as I spoke to, or even some boomers.

Liz Higgins (00:21:47):

But it's very interesting. We, we know, and the studies show, that not to necessarily be true even when it comes to sex.

Cleo Stiller (00:21:55):

Yes. Okay. And so this is the thing! It was really interesting too, because like we talked about, so this the way Me Too obviously started. Well, not obviously, but it was started much earlier than 2017, by a woman named Toronto Burke who created this movement to draw attention to the abuse and lack of justice for, um, women of color and assault. When it became a mainstream story, it was a story about this rich white guy named Harvey Weinstein, abusing beautiful young actresses in Hollywood. Right? And so that became a quick topic. Uh, that's like hits on, um, work and it hits on sex, but in the interviews, it became so obvious that how it had transformed was just in every way. I mean, it was affecting parenting conversations, conversations that men were thinking about how their friends interacted, like where are they supposed to start policing their friends? Um, so friendships. So just like started hitting all of these areas of our personal lives and how the generations reacted to these different buckets in some ways, will, you know... When it came to, for example, when it came to things like work or dating, there was kind of more of a generational, uh, millennials and younger seemed to be more comfortable with the idea that we didn't have to stick to this like sort of binary models of like men do this and women do this right?

Cleo Stiller (00:23:42):

But where I stopped so much of, "If you're like this age, this is how you're going to feel about this. And if you're at this stage this is how you're gonna feel about that" is actually just the overall concept of masculinity. And the reason why I thought it was really interesting is because, um, you know, people who do a lot of men's work, they refer to something called the Man Box. Have you heard of that?

Liz Higgins (00:24:07):

I learned of it in your book. Okay. Where did you hear? Yes. But explain it, explain it a little for listen.

Cleo Stiller (00:24:14):

Okay, great. So I'll say for all the men listening here, this, this Man Box concept was so intriguing to the men who read my book and then reached out to me about it. They were like,

Whoa, I've never heard of that, but it makes so much sense. So it's actually, unfortunately you can't see the visual, but if you just imagine a physically drawn box - within it, people who talk about this stuff, right?

Cleo Stiller (00:24:39):

List qualities of the stereotypical, iconic good "man". What does that mean? Um, and the qualities that go into that are like a leader does not need help, does not rely on anyone, does not ask questions. Self-sufficient... Self sufficient, sort of a lone wolf, and not gay, uh, not feminine, uh, not vulnerable and it can get worse too. It goes on like, uh, views, views, women as sex objects and things to be, um, subjugated. So there are now, again, some of that towards the end, I think doesn't always jive for people, but there are more subtle ways that you realize you have a bias around an idea. So anyway,

Liz Higgins (00:25:40):

And I think too, am I, am I right here, Cleo, that some of these characteristics you were just describing in this Man Box, they kind of are wrapped in the pretty bow of what we present day are calling out to be toxic masculinity?

Cleo Stiller (00:25:56):

Yes, but I, okay. So I don't say that term ever in the book, because I find, I have found that men hate that term and I don't blame them. So I, I'm wary of that, but exactly. You're right. So these are quality -

Liz Higgins (00:26:13):

Why do guys hate that term? I think that is important for us to hear because, also, I should have said this at the beginning - I'm very aware that you and I are two women, sitting here talking about men. But, I also like to think that being a therapist and relationship coach, this really helps me be in check on my biases and understanding my very real limits - who am I, where I come from, what I believe. But yeah,

Liz Higgins (00:26:44):

Yeah, that notion of toxic masculinity, I've heard it more and more, I think, over these past couple of years than I ever had in my life. And even in some therapy models, you've got people talking about this and how we need to address this. And I think that motion in and of itself is trying to head in a good direction, but I have heard the same as what you're saying, that that term, it doesn't jive for a lot of those "good men" out there. And so I'm curious about that. What did you hear from guys?

Cleo Stiller (00:27:14):

Well, I do want to say, I mean, and you probably know this, but the American Psychological Association, I think it was two years ago, came out with a public statement that said typical masculinity, as we think about it is toxic. It's isolating, it's men are in crisis. Um, and we know that we're called deaths of despair, which are related to, um, self-harm or drug or alcohol overdosing. Those are on the rise in America for men. And it's related to feelings of over all isolation, depression, unchecked anger, and fear. Right? So this is real and you can't argue with

that, but the way we talk about it is really important because when men hear the term toxic masculinity, they don't think, well from the men I interviewed, but I think this is, you know, if you're a man or practitioner, you're probably going to resonate with us, you don't sep-

Cleo Stiller (00:28:25):

that term doesn't separate. Oh, there is. I mean, there's good things about masculinity, but some of it is toxic. It just sounds like you're saying "men are toxic" and I don't have to explain any further about why someone would not like that. Right, right. Yeah. So I did not use that term anywhere in the book. I, my publishers of course, wanted to put it all over the press release and all over the book cover. And they were like, this is the term that everyone knows. And I was like, no man is going to buy this book if we have it written on there. And so, and we don't. And so there are so many ways to talk about what's really like... The Man box is a much better way, I have found, to talk about these conversations without using that term that I think understandably people find really harmful and alienating.

Liz Higgins (00:29:21):

Well, right. And it's like, everything that you're talking about here, it's, it's highlighting a systemic experience, you know? And so yeah. To slap a label I think just does. Yeah. I don't, I don't think it goes that path of looking at the full scope and full spectrum of the topics that you explore in this book.

Cleo Stiller (00:29:45):

Well, that's what made me, so what we started to talk about was generations, right. And the one box. And what was really interesting to me is that when we were talking about the concepts within the Man Box and the idea about masculinity in general, what I started hearing from some men in their forties, fifties, and sixties, that surprised me was they were like, "Listen, I don't have the language that you guys do. Like, we didn't talk about this stuff when I was young, but what you are describing, I never fit in that box. I never lived that experience. And I was dinged over and over and over again, growing up in my era for not being a "manly man", which is also a good man. Right. So I never felt like that. And that's why, you know, I struggle because again, we didn't talk about that. We don't have that kind of language in my generation, but everything you're saying resonates for me. "Well, yeah. So not, I mean, not every man, some, some men in their sixties were like, I don't know what your kids are talking about. This is bunk, but that was not a generationally true thing because the human experience of not fitting in to the designated Man Box or the designated Woman Box - that has gone on for generations.

Liz Higgins (00:31:17):

Oh yeah. And, and that is huge. Gosh, I can just say, as a therapist, when you crack through the cement of what walls or defenses or ways of being that people have just locked themselves until you really get to the deeper heart of it, it's that piece people need to belong and we need each other, we need connection. We need understanding and belonging. And I, I loved that in your book. You covered that too. I mean, you really went there with some of the driving forces that these guys and men have had to just... How powerful that notion is of needing to belong. And in some ways maybe going along with the culture of the gender stereotype, because that was where they fit in, I guess that's the Man Box.

Cleo Stiller (00:32:16):

Yeah. And so that kind of becomes like the overarching takeaway of the book, which is that men were coming to me being like, "I do not know what it means to be a good man anymore." And so the question was like, okay, what is a good man? Like what does a good man do? And that's the book like, that's what we're exploring. And what the kind of takeaway really is is that, especially as these young, younger generations come up, some of them are completely doing away with the gender binary altogether. And so now I don't think that that is going to work for many people or for all people. So the book is just to give you information and then you figure out how it's best applicable to you. But with that in mind, what comes up as probably a more empowering way to be in this world right now is to worry less about what a good man does.

Cleo Stiller (00:33:21):

And I always hate podcast interviews cause I'm air quoting right now, but you, so; "good man" what a "good woman" does, just worry more about what a good person does. How do you want to show up in this world as a good person? And that will kind of, it will feel weird for some of us because we fit so well within these boxes. But if you've, so this is a really, really simple example, but it was crazy to me how many times this one came up in interviews. I heard from men over and over again, they were like, "I just feel like things are crazy right now. Like I get it coming, I get it going. Like if I don't even know whether hold open a door for a woman coming behind me" and I was like, "Well, why wouldn't you?"

Cleo Stiller (00:34:17):

And they were like, every, there's like an urban myth legend, basically that if you hold a door open for a woman, she might just freak out on you, um, and yell at you. Uh, and everyone had a story like either it had happened to them or it happened to a friend of theirs and it was just indicative of how this whole world is just going to hell in a hand basket. And so that, you know, I was like, I'm so I'm, I'm like just kind of chuckling over here that, that is the example that came up because that is the very example I have heard from male clients and people that I have known, it's this thing of, I held the door open for a woman and she kinda like, let me have it. I don't need you to do that. And it was, I mean it, through them, it was for, yeah.

Cleo Stiller (00:35:06):

And so, I mean, it is like, I'm sure that you probably felt like, wow, in 2019, like, is that the, is that the story that we have to talk about? But it's a good one because it's fresh on everyone's mind and um, yeah. It encapsulates this theme for sure. Exactly. So let's take that example and the question of whether to hold the, if you're a man, to hold the door open for the woman coming behind you. What is really, is underlying in that is, do you, do you want to hold the door open for the woman coming behind you? And if you do, that's good information, you know, like good. That's a good impulse to have. Now, can we just expand it to just hold the door open for anyone coming behind you? Because that's what a good person does. It's a polite thing to do. It's a neighborly thing to do.

Cleo Stiller (00:36:01):

It's a generous thing to do. So you don't need to make that judgment. Oh, it's a dude. So I'm just going to let the door slam in his face or it's a woman, so I'm going to hold it open for her. No, like

you're a good person. You would like for the person behind you to have a gentle way into the door. So you hold it open for anyone. And once you've paused and reflected on why you do that behavior, you are very clear about your motivations, right? It's not because they're a woman and they can't do it for themselves, or chivalry. And I don't even know, do we do chivalry anymore? Oh my God, no, you hold the door because you're a good person and you hold the door for anyone coming up behind you. And 10, you know, 9 out of 10 people are gonna say, "Oh, thanks so much." One person might lose it on you, but that has nothing to do with you. You can just confidently be in yourself at that moment. Say, I'm sorry, I hold the door open for everyone. Have a good day and move right on.

Liz Higgins (00:37:02):

Oh, I love that because you're kind of describing the epitome of what the work that I do with clients, which is that process I shared about in your book of Differentiation of Self - It's, like honing in on "What do I value? Well, I value being compassionate. I value being generous and treating humans, decently, and with respect and care, regardless of their gender or orientation or whatever. And so because of that, I'm going to hold the door open even in the midst of potential pushback and somebody chewing me out, because I still know I'm living congruently to my value system. When we can do that and sit in the discomfort of the pain, or the reaction, or whatever, from somebody else. That's when we're moving in this direction towards just healthier living and values based living. So I love that. And I feel like, I feel like generally speaking, our generation of millennials is really, we're trying to do that stuff. And it's amazing to see, just to see people standing up to some very systemically painful issues present day, but you know, it's hard. And there's divisiveness and it's going to be that way. But there's so many people when you stop and look at who's showing up and who is holding onto their value and living out compassion and, you know, equality, rights and love... It's amazing to see when you let that be what you're focused in on. Yes.

Cleo Stiller (00:38:41):

Understanding that it's going to be uncomfortable and you are definitely going to screw it up. Um, so, you know, that's kind of also came up in interviews, was this feeling of like, "Listen, I was onboard with the whole Me Too movement at first, but it's just gone too far now. And I'm tired of all the complaining. Like let's just like get on with it. Tell me what I'm supposed to do and let's move on." And I completely understand why we all want a rule book, but unfortunately this one is going to take decades and generations to create. And, and again, it's, it's impossible to give maximalist advice because one thing I always do when I lead workshops in corporate settings about this book, the first thing I ask is, (and these will be mixed gender groups, okay.) everyone here who does not mind or likes being complimented on their physical appearance at a work or in a work setting, raise your hand.

Cleo Stiller (00:39:51):

And it's important to do that because both men and women will raise their hand. And then I'll say, okay, now if you really do not like, or are genuinely uncomfortable with being complimented on your physical appearance in a work setting, raise your hand. And the same thing will happen again, some different portion of the group, but both genders will raise their hand. And I do that to illustrate that where we are right now is right in the thick of the gray area. And what worked in one situation is going to need to be adjusted for the next situation. You can't give maximalist advice with this stuff, but if you are committed to making changes to the system, (and what I

heard over and over again is that people are committed) they do, they did not realize how inequitable and unsafe everyday interactions were between men and women. And now that they are, they want to do better. And so if you're committed to that change that we want to see, you kind of have to strap in for the long haul and know you're gonna screw it up. You're gonna have to apologize. And that's okay. And mostly, you know, if your intentions are good, you will be met with a good response.

Liz Higgins (00:41:15):

I believe that what you're saying is so true also because I have witnessed that I've witnessed it because, you know, I think we think systemic change, creating a new generation, changing history... It feels so big and it feels so beyond us. But really where this begins, is in our own little cohort - in our partnerships and our relationship to ourself. And so it's just simple yet significant ways you shift the way you relate to your loved ones, to your spouse, or your girlfriend or your boyfriend or whatever it is, but also going in and maybe being able to do what I call the 'inner child work' - like really going deep and exploring who, who were you taught to become? What did the world tell you you needed to be to fit in and to make it. And as this grown adult, who do you want to become? And can you go in and take care of that, that little one that maybe was taught some wrong things or learned some unhealthy coping behaviors and stuff? I mean, I just bring that up because I think it's important for everybody to hear that if any of this stuff is resonating, there's a way to make shifts and we're not always permanently stuck.

Liz Higgins (00:42:49):

I just love how in the book you reference, I mean, obviously you worked alongside Dr. Helen Fisher and, or at least interviewed her for your book. I mean, she's like the real deal. In my perspective, she's anthropologist. Um, an anthropologist, a relationship expert, isn't she a researcher for match.com? I mean, she studies the biology behind - and the brain experience behind - why we connect the way we do in our intimate partnerships. And so you really highlighted some of the things that you learned from her and your book is just so integrated, Cleo. Like I seriously tell everybody I know to read it. It's excellent. And I want to ask you a couple of questions about women, if you don't mind. Because I know this book is about the male experience and diving into that stuff, but I'm thinking of this from, again, my perspective as a therapist and coach, and working with heterosexual couples where I still hear millennial women in our generation today, they come in and they say things like, "Well, that's just how guys are, you know, he's just being a dude. I know he'll never be able to like reach me in this emotional way because that's how guys are." And it's like a knife to my, to my gut because I'm like, ah, you know, we, we are still perpetuating the story to this narrative. So what do you think that women still maybe don't get or understand about men?

Cleo Stiller (00:44:32):

So I, I mean, we wrote the book for men, but it, for any woman who loves a man, I highly recommend this as well. Because as, as a woman... So mostly this book is done through the lens. You know, I have gotten my journalist hat on with my massively thick glasses and I'm just typing away, you know, as I'm doing these interviews. But one of the points where I just like the chapters where I just stopped and thought, 'Oh my God, um, as a woman', is in the friendship chapter of all chapters, which I will say, I was like, 'Ugh, God, men and their friends, like, do I really want to like go down that rabbit hole?' But what had come up basically was, uh, an influx

of messages from men saying, “Listen, I've got a friend. He's just one guy in the group. But he says these kinda like racist, sexist things.

Cleo Stiller (00:45:36):

Sometimes we kind of just like used to laugh it off, but with everything going on right now, it doesn't really feel like I can just laugh it off, but I also don't want to like call him out and then have him freak out at me and I lose and make it a big deal. Or what if he turns around at me and says like, what are you perfect? Cause I'm not perfect. So like, what do I do? Like, do I have to call them out or can I just improve my own behavior?” And we know that we need other men to work with other men for things to get better. Right? So actually this chapter is really important. And so the question is what's happening there? Like those that kind of like brazen, um, disrespectful conversations that happened between male friends. That's just locker room talk.

Cleo Stiller (00:46:25):

So, and we know because of current people in certain offices, that locker room talk has been like, what is locker room talk? Really? The question is why do men do locker room talk? What is that about? And the reason men do locker room talk, um, I learned is that... So I spoke with, um, a woman. She's a researcher of male adolescents for 30 years. Her name is Naomi Way. And she explained that when girls and boys are very young, they actually formed friendships in the same exact ways. They hug their friend. They kiss their friend. They tell their friend everything, they're whispering in their ear. And then when boys are quite young - playground age, they start getting policed by their teachers or their older siblings or their parents. “No, no, no, no, no, no, no. Don't do that. That's a girl thing. Okay. Boys, don't whisper to boys.

Cleo Stiller (00:47:23):

Don't hug boys. Don't you don't, you don't need to, you don't need a friend like that. Okay. You're a boy you're on your own. My friend's girls do that.” And that message keeps getting compounded into adulthood. And so what Naomi does is she grabbed, she has like a pool of boys, that she'll get them right from eighth grade, leaving middle school, going into their freshman year of high school and she'll pull them aside and she'll say, “Do you have a best friend?” And they're like, “Oh yeah, for sure.” And they can point to that best friend immediately. And she's like, “Okay, well, what do you guys talk about?” And they talk about everything, right? They talk about their parents' divorce. They talk about issues they're having at home, or other stuff, right? Girls, grades. Then she pulls those same boys every year as they're advancing through high school, sophomore, junior. And by the time they get to senior year and she's doing that exit interview with them, she's like, this happens all the time, where that best friend is now a more generalized like “bud” group. And what do they talk about? Oh, you know, cars, girls, sports. She's like, “Well, I know that your aunt passed away. Um, and that, that was your primary caretaker. Like, does your, does any of your friends know about that?” Like, “Oh no, no, no. We don't talk about that. That's like, that's, that's deep stuff. Like we don't go there.”

Liz Higgins (00:48:49):

Ooh, what changes?

Cleo Stiller (00:48:50):

My God. And so to any woman, who's been in a new relationship with a man where you have looked at them and been like, "What are you feeling? Just tell me what you're feeling." And the man in your life looks at you like kind of like a deer in headlights, like, uh, and then storms out or verbally storms, and you just can't seem to have this like thoughtful, emotionally vulnerable conversation like you have with your girlfriends. This is why, this is why. And so when we know about, um, you know, how humans process emotion that, um, verbalizing your emotion is an important part of the cognitive process. And so when young boys get told, 'don't talk to your friends about how you feel', what ends up happening as they get older is they don't talk to anyone about how they feel. And so then they forget they feel anything. And then the only emotion that they have easy access to is rage and that's painful. It is painful.

Liz Higgins (00:50:17):

I can just say from a relational perspective, like what happens in a partnership when one partner is in that space, where that, that narrative has

Liz Higgins (00:50:28):

Shaped them to be very limited in their emotional expressiveness or responsiveness, the other partner, - which we'll just speak in general here. It's not all the time, but a lot of times tends to be the woman - becomes the overreactor and the overly emotional one. And then we start using those scary words that women hate to hear like nag and controlling, but they're just trying so freaking hard to get their partner to feel. But we're just not there yet in terms of understanding and really having this knowledge and education out there in the world that, that doesn't work. That's not going to invite the response that you're looking for. This is really about going a lot deeper.

Cleo Stiller (00:51:13):

So it's so deep and it's not to excuse behavior, but to empower everyone who learns this, like, Oh, this isn't personal living in this system. And there was, I mean, if you come out of this thing, undamaged and able, you know, like good for you. Because how the cards in many ways are stacked against us. And it's also just an eye opener of this Man Box. It hurts men and women. And so as a woman, loving men, working with men, it's, again, it's not to excuse their behavior, but it's so that you know, that how you were raised is sometimes fundamentally different than how they were raised. And this, you know, we have that, we have this running joke in my family. Always dad has no friends, Mom has a ton of friends, and dad's got the dog. And it was kind of funny, but it's actually not just a joke in my family.

Cleo Stiller (00:52:24):

It's in many families and actually very destructive. And so, you know, I think that knowing that about how, um, men are socialized. For me, as someone who loves men and, and dates them. Um, and in her, I mean, I live in America. So I interact with men all the time. It's very helpful for me to have that awareness and sensitivity. And so, you know, I also... Like my next partner, I will hope that they're in a men's group or I will strongly encourage that they join one, um, things like that.

Liz Higgins (00:53:06):
Oh, I think that's, that's awesome.

Liz Higgins (00:53:08):
Awesome. And what, to any of the female listeners that are tuned in right now? I mean, what do you, what would you say to them in terms of what their part is in this shift towards a healthier sense of masculinity that's embraced by all?

Cleo Stiller (00:53:24):
Um, it's I think, you know, one thing I've said over and over again is like the first thing I will say to women who feel like men don't care, men do care. They care about this in ways that prior, you know, I've, I've been doing this work for a decade now, and people who were previously disinterested or completely oblivious - that veil at least has been lifted. So men do care. And I think it's good to know that because it can take your resentment down a notch when you know that your partner likely actually does really care about this stuff and does want to support you in a way that they just haven't been trained or aware of. And so you can start there. And then also remember to come from a place of compassion - that this is going to be hard for you and hard for them, because things that you have seen your entire life, they are just waking up to.

Cleo Stiller (00:54:25):
And because of that, um, it's again, it's going to be uncomfortable and they're going to mess up and you're probably going to look at them and be like, 'I don't even know you like how, you know, who, who am I dealing with right now?' Um, but to work through that, um, because there is so much growth to be done. And also to know that you don't have to do, like, it is not your sole responsibility to do all this retraining again. And the silver lining for me, one of the silver linings for me when reporting this book was just learning that there really is, uh, a rise in popular culture of men's groups and of men kind of looking, um, at the way that their fathers raised them and being like, 'I don't really want to do that. I don't want to replicate that. So how can I do this better?

Cleo Stiller (00:55:13):
Um, and men kind of tuning in to each other, like I don't, I don't know, in the 1950s, for example, um, I mean, obviously there weren't text messages; but I've heard from a lot of guys, like "I'm on a group thread, I'm on my buddies and I, we group threads texts about this." And I don't know if in previous generations, um, you would have had men coming together to kind of be like, "What do you think about this?" So there's some hope here and you don't have to do it all on your own. And if you get the book, there are some very practical steps in terms of like interrelational dynamics, money, household divisions, we lay those things out for how you can practically put this stuff into practice.

Liz Higgins (00:56:01):
Yes, absolutely. And, you know, to go back to something you said, as we're kind of bringing everything full circle, you know, we were, you, you said kind of that worst thing that comes out of this whole experience could be a man who has unprocessed or untapped rage. And I think,

again, generally speaking in our world today, that's like the, the scariest version of this, this whole thing. And I just want to share with people at like the, we see stuff magnified on the news and those things are painful and hard to see happening, but bringing it back to your world in your life. Like, you know, we, we go through shitty breakups. We were in relationships with guys that seem maybe inaccessible or non-emotional. And that is not because they've got these diagnosable personality disorders. I mean, most of the time, the percentage of that being the case is really small.

Liz Higgins (00:57:04):

What that is, is the product of what Cleo's whole book touches on, which is these systemic issues that have played out for, for decades and for generations. And I bring that up because I think that when we can step back from just slapping labels on guys and saying that they're narcissists and that's the end of it, and can open our hearts and our minds to the history that we're uncovering here and the direction we're trying to take in our relationships. And that we are a part of that solution. And that maybe that is looking inward a little bit too, like, it really changes the script and it takes you from a place of powerlessness in your relationship to feeling maybe more empowered to, to find what you need, and to cultivate that kind of relationship. So Cleo, I just appreciate you so much for this conversation. And I don't know if I can ask you one more question, like, what do you feel like was the greatest personal transformation you had from this work that you did, personally.

Cleo Stiller (00:58:12):

Yeah. Oh man. Um, yeah, I guess so, you know how I told you at the beginning of this... Prior to signing the book deal, it was very overwhelming for me to hold the way of knowing that men had a lot of things to say and a lot of questions to ask and that there was a parallel conversation being had about them that they didn't care - that was overwhelming because

Cleo Stiller (00:58:45):

Then I would,

Cleo Stiller (00:58:47):

You know, just personally I would be in conversations with friends or family and it would come up and they would look at me because my job and they'd be like, "Well, what do you think?" And I would find it... So like, I didn't know where to start because there was just so much coming at me and again, never the two shall meet. Um, and so for me, the transformation has been actually being able to dive into this and let men tell their stories.

Cleo Stiller (00:59:19):

And put stories in the context of such necessary research that people just do not know about themselves so that when they read it, you know, it's not like some of the stories that people came to me with that are in the book are not nice stories. You know, they do not make you like the person who's telling them. And yet when, when couched in the context of the larger cultural conversation that I make sure this book is, you understand how we got to where we got. And I think that that's very important too, because even though where we are is in so many ways, so frustrating, just knowing the history of how it happened makes it easier for you to step back and

be like, 'Okay, this is structural, this is systemic. And even though it's overwhelming, um, how prevalent it is, we can do things about this.

Cleo Stiller (01:00:19):

We can start chipping away at this. And here's how, and here's how, and here's how', and so for a brain like mine, that likes to see the full picture and then start action on it, this book was very cathartic because it does just that. It, we like bundled it all. And then we said, 'Okay, now here's what you can actually start doing in your everyday life to make these changes'. And I have to feel, you know, my biggest fear with this time. Um, and I'm sure that a lot of people who do anti-racism work have the same fears is that we are, we have an opportunity right now where people care in ways they previously have not cared before, and we can either make movements to uplevel our behavior, or we can just bungle this whole thing and go right back to the way it was before.

Cleo Stiller (01:01:16):

And I'm just, you know, truly hoping that would, you know, not like my book is going to change the world, but with more conversations that happen, like what's happening right now, we won't go back just to doing what we were doing before.

Liz Higgins (01:01:34):

Oh yeah. I have so much hope for our generation. We were faced with a lot of challenge right now, but it's so much rich opportunity for us to make changes. And I don't see us going back. I certainly hope we don't. And I just have to say thank you to you and to other women and men that are having these very vulnerable conversations and interviews and bringing light to the systemic, the systemic experiences and issues, because it's from getting more knowledgeable about it and getting our own footing and where we are in everything that we can start taking steps in a different direction. Thank you so much, Cleo. I so appreciate this.

Cleo Stiller (01:02:20):

Thank you so much for having me!

Liz Higgins (01:02:23):

Wow. What a great conversation that I got to have today with Cleo Stiller. If you're interested in checking out her book, which I highly highly recommend, y'all go to Amazon and find modern manhood conversations about the complicated world of being a good man today. If you want to find Cleos website, reach out to her, learn more about her, you can go to cleostiller.net. And you can also find her on Instagram at @CleoMSF.

Thanks again for listening to the podcast. If you like the show, leave us five stars or write a review. If you're interested in learning more, sign up for my free ebook "The One Barrier to Commitment All Millennials Face" at millennialrelationships.com.

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