

EPISODE 1510

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FT: So Money episode 1510, Elise Loehnen, author of *Our Best Behavior: The Seven Deadly Sins and the Price Women Pay to be Good*.

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[INTRO]

[00:01:19]

FT: Welcome to So Money, everybody. I'm Farnoosh Torabi. We are exploring the relationship between the seven deadly sins and the pressures women experience today to be "good." Our guest is Elise Loehnen, the author of a new book called *On Our Best Behavior*, where she does a deep dive into the history of female evolution, looking at ancient ideas of morality that still control and distort women's lives today, in particular how we think about money, power, and greed.

Elise is a writer, editor, and podcast host of Pulling the Thread, focused on pulling apart the stories we tell about who we are and then putting those threads back together. She's co-written 12 books, including five New York Times bestsellers. Elise used to be the chief content officer of goop. There, she co-hosted The goop Podcast, The Goop Lab on Netflix, and led the brand's content strategy and programming. Her book – Here's Elise Loehnen.

[INTERVIEW]

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FT: Elise Loehnen, welcome to So Money. This is such a treat for me because you were generous. You invited me on your podcast when you were at goop years ago. It was a huge deal for me. That drove so much interest and an audience to my work. I hope that this podcast, this interview will do the same for you because you've written a very, very important book that I have marked up the wazoo. It's called *On Our Best Behavior: The Seven Deadly Sins and the Price Women Pay to be Good*. I love a title that alludes to money. You wrote this for me, right? Like you had me in mind as you were writing the subtitle.

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EL: Exactly, just you. I had you in my mind as the target demo. But, no, you really are in many ways the target demo for this book.

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FT: Based on my Post-It notes, clearly, I am. So this book is really an examination of how womanhood has been depicted in our society, the expectations placed on women. The lens through which you look at these pressures is through the seven deadly sins. So you take us on a journey through sort of biblical times and then also into other cultures and other philosophies to tell us, essentially, why we are the way we are or why we feel the need to show up in the world as women in a particular way.

Like all good stories, this starts with your own, a hyperventilation to be exact. Take us to that moment in your therapist's office when you had not just a moment of hyperventilation. This was like a 30-day-long – it was like a 30-day-long – we say 30-day-long cleanse. It was a 30-day-long hyperventilation.

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EL: The opposite of a cleanse. Yes. I mean, so I, starting in my 20s, started to have these bouts of anxiety. The first time that I had a hyperventilation episode, I went to the emergency room because I felt like I was going to die. I couldn't take a deep breath, which then creates a sense of panic, as you can imagine. The reality of them is that your lungs are actually oversaturated with oxygen. There's a disconnect between what's happening in your body and what's happening in your brain. So you start over breathing to compensate. It's different than sort of breathing into the paper bag, which I think a lot of people think is a hyperventilation episode.

I've had this problem really since beginning my working life, working life, and being out in the world, and responsible for my own safety and security. I've had it on and off. This particular episode was excruciatingly long. The thing about hyperventilation is that you appear to the world to be quite calm. You're yawning. You're sleepy. You are placid. You're not excited. But inside, it feels like death.

I was talking to my therapist, and I was essentially like how – I don't understand. I am a high-achieving, high-performing person. I try to be the best mother I can be, all of these things. I try to be a solid wife, et cetera. I cannot outrun this. I don't – I, in my mind, have always held out the possibility that there will be a finish line where I will feel good enough, safe, secure. This breathing will subside. I will feel like I am somehow safe, and yet I can't outrun it.

That was this revelation for me of what is it. What is this that is sitting on my chest and making me feel so awful? How am I going to move past this in my life? I recognize like I would – I had to face it. Otherwise, it would break me. It was certainly taking all of the joy out of living when you spend every day concentrated on whether you're going to breathe or not and when you can take another yawn.

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FT: By the way, you're not even able to yawn. It's like a half-yawn because you can't complete the yawn.

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EL: Yes. So you've experienced it. Yes, yes.

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FT: When you wrote that, I was like, "Oh, that's happened to me." It wasn't a one-time thing. It was a sequence of events that led up to that, and it was usually – it was during a very stressful time.

Take us to your life, though. I mean, you're sort of talking about the stress and the overload. But like what were you doing?

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EL: At this moment?

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FT: Yes.

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EL: I've always had multiple jobs simultaneously. At this point, I was the chief content officer at goop, and we were releasing a TV show. I would co-host the podcast that you came on, and that was typically two episodes a week. I have two small kids. I've ghost-written or co-written 12 books, so I was always doing that on the side for extra money, and so constantly working all the time.

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FT: So just a few things. Just like a few things.

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EL: A few things, yes. These feelings of scarcity and I'll never have enough, and I'll never have enough money, and I'm the primary breadwinner. I mean, all things that I know that you relate to and your listeners relate to acutely. It's all on me, and there's some truth to that, and there's not truth to that. But, yes, that was what was present for me and this feeling of like I have it all under control, and yet I don't know how. Obviously, I don't because I feel like I'm going to die.

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FT: So you look into this. You're a natural curious person. You're a journalist. So like me, I would probably just start asking questions, trying to get to the root of it. You realize this predates you by a lot. We're talking Adam and Eve. As you're talking, I'm thinking, "Wow, Elise is now living her life where she's maybe following some of these deadly sins, like the deadly sins to avoid." But at the same time, maybe you're also living a life that is rejecting that, like the fact that you're a breadwinner.

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EL: Yes. No, totally. This is a really key distinction is that I think of myself as sort of an anti-patriarchal woman pushing against all of these structures, right? I have made my life in opposition in some ways to an idea of how I'm supposed to be, including being the primary breadwinner and that being very important to me to reverse my own parents' marriage, thinking that it would offer me some relief.

What I recognized as I was in that car is that this is in me. This is a psychological burden as much as a structural burden. There is all of this feeling alive in me about not being a good enough mother, not being a good enough woman, et cetera. That's what I really wanted to address. What is it in me that feels like I'm not good enough, and where does that come from? That's how I ended up at the seven deadly sins. I'm not – I wasn't raised in a religious household. I presumed that they were in the Bible. They're not. So I wanted to understand.

I knew a little bit about where patriarchy had come from and that it wasn't an inevitability. But I want wanted to understand when it became a moralizing force as well. To me, those are the two things that are happening. They're sort of the systemic oppression. But then somehow, it was

paired with this idea of goodness for women, power for men. That's what I think is so deep in us. We can see the systemic parts of it and reject them. But it is in us in a way that was invisible to me but felt, and that's what I wanted to really understand, all this programming. Where did it come from, and what is it?

That's where I landed at the sins. As I went through them, I was – I had sort of this – my stomach dropped. Sloth, pride, envy, greed, gluttony, lust, anger. I looked at them and had this, “Oh, my God. This is everything that every woman is trying not to be, and men are not policing themselves about these qualities at all. It's women.” Not only are we policing ourselves, but then we police each other. We're upholding this in culture. How do we get out of this really? Because I know we want a different future.

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FT: So it begs the question. The seven deadly sins created and crafted by men, but they're – was the intention that this is going to be for the women to follow? Or did it just end up being that way because we live in a patriarchal world?

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EL: Well, this is what the history of them is fascinating. I get into this in a little bit of detail. It's probably the densest chapter in the book, but it's important for people who really want to understand what happened. So the sins came out of the desert in the fourth century, this monk named Evagrius Ponticus. He's also credited, which is interesting concerning the topic of your book, fear. He created – he's one of the people credited with the Enneagram. Fear is one of the points on the Enneagram. People will then – the Enneagram will be like, “Oh, right. The sins are the Enneagram.”

He wrote them down. He would create these little chat books of scripture to circulate amongst other monks. There were eight thoughts, demonic thoughts, but not demon, not meaning what we think of it today. But actually sort of a distracting thought, something that pulls you out of prayer. They're very human impulses. So he wrote them down in a book. It's circulated. This is at the same time that the new canon was being codified. This is around the mid-300s.

In 590, so hundreds of years later, so for people who don't know Mary Magdalene, we probably think of her today most likely as a penitent prostitute if you don't really know her history. She is described in the New Testament as the one from whom Jesus cast seven demons. So He exorcised her. Some people think He was clearing her chakras. Whatever you want to say, she's the most sanctified person in the Bible, theoretically. But that's not how she's been read.

In 590, Pope Gregory I took the eight thoughts, and he turned them in to seven cardinal vices. In the same homily, he assigned them all to Mary Magdalene, the one from whom Jesus had cast seven demons. He turned her into the same woman who anointed Jesus's hair in the Bible. That wasn't Mary Magdalene, but he turned Mary Magdalene into that woman and also turned that woman into a prostitute. This all happened in one –

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FT: He must have hated his mother a lot. Like he really didn't like his mom.

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EL: Yes. So in one blow, they became cardinal vices and were assigned to Mary Magdalene. Mary Magdalene, that's a whole another story. But she's an incredible figure. She was the one – she's the first apostle. It was given to Peter, but she's the one who actually was his best student. She was stripped literally of that honor and turned into a penitent prostitute. Then she was restored only in recent decades. Like in 2016, the pope turned her into the Apostle to the Apostles.

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FT: Oh, my gosh. Only like centuries and centuries later. This book was such an education for me. I mean, I think we always go around talking about or think – we express seven deadly sins, but do we actually know all of them? I didn't know greed was in the mix, and I would love to focus on that the remainder of our call and talk about the revelations that greed and its

association with – let's just start with greed and how women have been sort of interpreting greed versus men.

I will start with a quick story about power, which we often say in the same context with – we talk about in the same context as like greed, wanting too much power, being greedy. When I was in the midst of my financial journey, and I had a little bit of a trip up in my own mind about how much money was enough for me. It was dictated by this idea of greed. I didn't want to be perceived as being too greedy. When I spoke with a money coach about it, she said, “Well, don't you want more power?” I said, “Absolutely not, ew. Who wants power? I'm a good person.”

She said, “Okay, let's just have a quick lesson here. Power, you're interpreting this as the power to take over, this patriarchal power of dominance, which is how we've often been – how that's been introduced to us. But let me cast a different picture of power, which is the power to help, the power to support.” It's not a bad definition, unless you're – it's like the power to control someone, which is what I thought, which is what I thought I was going to be perceived as is someone who's powerful, and therefore all these bad things.

So I got over that, and it was a breakthrough because it allowed me to go for those bigger paydays with more of a desire, with more confidence, and with less fear. I wonder if this captures a little bit of what you discovered as you explored this word, greed, and how it has infiltrated our minds as women.

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EL: Yes, 1,000%. I mean, you just said it. I don't want power. I want to be good, and I'm a good person. I think for a lot of women, not only are we conditioned to believe that money isn't really for us. It's dirty, depraved. To be fair, I think we recognize the cost of runaway power and greed and in the hands of men. That's not something that we necessarily want to emulate and yet – so we I think resist, and there's the pay gap, which we know very well. There's also the wealth gap, which is staggering. That's a real dagger to the heart. It's like 32 cents to a dollar because, as we know, money compounds.

The cost of women shying away from money and seeing it as sort of this scarce resource, rather than something that's endlessly expanding and going up and to the right. What I want to say about the book in general is that what I'm suggesting is balance. Not like let's be greedy, gluttonous, lustful, et cetera. But it is moving out of this instinct to self-restrict, and going towards the middle, and finding our relationship to enoughness, to meeting our needs, to meeting some of our wants, right?

It's not saying let's behave like men have behaved. It is let's – because it's hard, particularly in a culture where we have ecological credit card debt to say like women should just behave like men. No, that is not what I'm saying. Men need to behave more like women. They need to let their feminine come up in the same way that women let their masculine come up, regardless of gender.

But the thing about women and money is what you are alluding to, is that we are really good with it, and we need more of it. We are – I'm sure you know this way better than I do but better investors. We trade less. We're less fueled by testosterone. We're far more generous and philanthropic. We are just by far and away better stewards of money. That reframe that you were talking about has been my reframe as well. Maybe it's a cop-out, but it is I want more money. I'm going to allow myself to own this wanting.

So much of the book is about actually letting our wants come up because they've been denied in this culture of selflessness that's required of women to subjugate all of our wants to other people's needs. But letting them come up in part because I want to be able to give money away. I want to support causes I care about. I want to be generous, and I want to be generous to myself and my family. But it's not about hoarding. It's not about taking, taking, taking, taking. It's about being reciprocal and in flow and moving, letting the energy, the current of money come into my life so that I can move it out.

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FT: I thought it was really interesting when you talked about spending in the chapter and consumerism and how, again, this more – for more women than men probably what drives us to spend is this feeling of like, again, I want to be a good person. I want to support the economy. I

thought that was an interesting relationship. Can you talk a little bit about that? Because that affected you as well as somebody who worked at Lucky Magazine, a shopping magazine, that you loved to spend. When you got to the root of it, you realized that maybe it did go back to some of these ingrained biases.

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EL: Well, that was my form of hoarding. I think a lot of women can relate to this, this compulsion to buy things that we don't need and might not even want, but this like constant accumulation and this really annoying programming of household CEO and women supporting the economy. I became very aware of this after 9/11 when – and I write about this in the book. This is Lynne Twist's insight too, which as she was writing, I was like, "Oh, my God. Yes, that's exactly what happened to me," which is 9/11 happened. There was a tremendous amount of grief and the country coming together and donating blood. Then the calls became and the economy. Like show your patriotism by going to the mall, literally.

This is a refrain now, right? This was the refrain of COVID. It is our responsibility to stoke this economy and keep it going. Otherwise, we'll all suffer and die. So women are extolled to spend. Not extolled to make but to spend and to be the drivers of this economy as household CEOs, an economy the etymology is house. So part of this is resisting this sort of easy – this having it come in and then spending it on a handbag.

I mean, people should do what they want, no judgment. But I had to recognize that in myself and as a woman who worked at Lucky Magazine needed to felt this pressure to be on trend. This is right at the rise of fast fashion, and everything was just insanely cheap. I was making no money, but I was sure spending it like on a lot of stuff. I was measuring sort of my value by the depth of my closet and feeling like I always had something exciting and interesting to wear. It just – there was such a disconnect for me as I think that there was for all of us that this was not ecologically acceptable and that nobody wanted my stuff.

That's the other thing is I was like, "Oh, well. I'll buy stuff, and then I'll donate it, and it will have a second life and third life." I think now, we're like, "Oh, no. This is sitting in barges in the ocean. Nobody wants this. Nobody wants this."

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FT: You talked about your sense of self-worth being a derivative of your possessions. How does our sense of self-worth show up at work? You talk about this relationship between self-worth and value. That can really muck us up as we are trying to earn, be on equal footing with our male colleagues. Why should we disconnect worth from value?

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EL: Yes. I mean, I think that one has a sort of a market rate. The other is ineffable and something – we know this. Time with people we love, letters, memories. These are priceless, right? There's no value to assign to them. Then when we get into a situation at work, it can feel so degrading to say, "This is I'm worth." We conflate the two, and the two need to be kept separate; one being sacred, one just being a function of market forces. We can't internalize that as our essential value.

I think that it allows us to sort of preserve our sense of self without taking what we get paid as a measure, as an internal measure, if that makes sense. Recognizing how totally messed up our culture is where we don't take care of the people who care for us. We don't take care of these most essential functions. We talked about this a lot in COVID, essential workers, essential workers. Yet the essential workers are the ones who have the least amount of external value. That's a perfect way to illustrate the disconnect and how important it is to distinguish them and then fix the latter. We have to as a culture.

Again, I mentioned sort of these qualities of masculine and feminine. It sounds more woo-woo than it is. But I think particularly anyone who's watching the contemporary trans movement is starting to understand this. There are qualities that are feminine. These are nurturance, care, creativity. There are qualities that are masculine; order, structure, truth. It has been our instinct to assign masculine qualities which are balanced. These can get toxic as we know or under express, but to assign those to men and to assign the qualities of the feminine to women.

They don't belong to a gender. We all have all of these energies in us, and they need to be balanced in all of us, regardless of our sexuality and regardless of our stated gender. I think women, people in female bodies and anyone who identifies as female, understands this well that they – I think women are really good at both energies, even though we sort of pretend like we don't have those qualities of the masculine.

Men need to let the qualities of the feminine come up in them desperately. That's what's required, and part of it is caring, nurturing, loving is like an essential part of being human. It is not – and so we devalue the feminine. We devalue all of these functions of care. They have to be both venerated and allowed to express. Then I think in turn, theoretically, let's just hope that it would revalue the way that we monetize or think about what's worth paying for.

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FT: I was thinking about that expression we often throw around. Money doesn't buy happiness. Forget the fact that scientists have disproved this. But I wonder, whoever said that first clearly had a lot of money, didn't know what it was like to live paycheck-to-paycheck, didn't know what it was like to be living below poverty levels, and probably, therefore, a man. So can we also maybe say that this is a patriarchal expression that money doesn't buy happiness because it does ultimately keep people and particularly marginalized communities, women, feeling satisfactory about the fact that they don't make more?

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EL: Yes. It's really – like the research on this is so important because, as you said, there is a certain standard of living which I wish we lived in a culture that would establish a universal basic income and get people to this baseline. There's a standard and you need more money if you have children, obviously, where anything less and you suffer greatly. We know this, right? People suffer. It's like 65,000 for an – obviously, this is entirely dependent on where you live in the country or 95,000.

Then I think the research suggests that after a certain point, an escalation of wealth does nothing for you. I think this becomes like the massive note and culture, right? We know this.

Being really rich doesn't make you happy. A lot of really, really rich people are really unhappy. That's very different than saying, "Oh, the virtuosity that we then ascribe to poverty or living paycheck-to-paycheck." That scarcity mindset which is very real like reduces – I mean, it just ruins your life when you're scrambling. There's no joy. There's no space. There's no room in that style of living. It is incredibly traumatic.

So, yes, having a billion dollars isn't going to make you happier than having two million dollars or whatever it is theoretically. Or it doesn't insulate you from life. But getting people to a point where they can provide and meet their needs, I think we're in a different ball game in terms of happiness, for sure. We have a cruel society that has no social net, only corporate welfare. But, no, we don't care at all about people's basic needs. It's really inhumane.

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FT: So, Elise, you started earlier talking about Mary Magdalene and how it took until 2016 for her to be properly recognized by the pope. What's your read on how long it's going to take for us to release ourselves from these sins as a guidebook, sort of the model for living a "good life" and being a good person?

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EL: Yes. So as mentioned, I think that there's the two parts, the psychology and the systems. I think that the systems will evolve and fall as soon as we address the psychology of it. A big part of that is supporting each other, women supporting other women as we start to break this down and establish a new status quo.

That means the chapter on envy is all about this, which is an argument that our undiagnosed envy because we're so not used to identifying what we want. When we see another woman stepping into her wanting or behaving in a way that we would never allow ourselves to behave, our immediate instinct is to swat her down and police her. This is why in the social science literature, you see women being as hard, if not harder, on other women than men are hard on women.

A big part of this is just identifying that in ourselves. I think if we can do that and start to support each other as we knock down this programming and tell a different story, it could be fast. This is why. Women have been outperforming men in school for a century. I don't really know any lazy women, to be honest. Most of the women that I know are incredibly hard-working in the home and outside of it. I think our work ethic is unparalleled. I also – I feel like women are an oppressed part of the culture. I'm sure many women don't feel oppressed. But we live in a patriarchy, so it's present. I think we have a much better insight into what needs to change in order to rebalance culture. I don't see a lot of women causing a lot of harm. There are some, certainly. But it's primarily men.

I think as soon as we can address the psychological burden of this and put it down and get behind each other, change is fast. Watch out. I say like women are – we are like boxers training at high altitude. I think if we can get behind each other and behind ourselves, watch out.

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FT: Well, watch out and watch out for your book. It's going to help definitely along that journey and more than help. I mean, this book, I want to read it again too. Because, first of all, Elise, you're a writer's writer. Your writing is so beautiful, so sharp.

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EL: Thank you.

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FT: You talk about your own life. You really take us there. It's deeply researched. It's just a combination of so many important things you want in a book. Not only that, the message is so, so critical and what we need to hear right now. So thank you for taking the time to write this. I know I can only imagine the journey. I hope you're celebrating because this is a celebratory book. It's a moment.

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EL: Thank you. I so appreciate it, and I can't wait for yours. Because as mentioned, fear, that's what I didn't address. So your book is a companion piece.

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FT: Well, I'm honored. Thank you so much.

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EL: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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FT: Thank you so much to Elise Loehnen for joining us. Her book, again, is called *On Our Best Behavior*. I'll see you back here on Wednesday. In the meantime, I hope your day is So Money.

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