

Redefining Health & Wellness

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Featured this episode: Shohreh Davoodi, Christina Montalvo

Shohreh Davoodi: Why, hello there. Welcome to episode number three of the Redefining Health & Wellness podcast.

Today, I have a curse-word filled interview with Christina Montalvo to share with you. Christina is a body-positive strength and conditioning coach. She owns the only woman-owned, women-focused, body-positive gym in the Chicagoland area, and is best known for her podcast The Confidence Project. We griped about a lot of bullshit in the fitness industry, talked about where coaches who want to get away from diet culture can start and what clients of the fitness industry can do to be informed consumers.

To access the show notes for this episode, Head to shohrehdavoodi.com/3. That's shohrehdavoodi.com/3. Let's do this thing.

[music plays]

Shohreh: Hey y'all. Welcome to the Redefining Health & Wellness podcast. I'm your host, Shohreh Davoodi. I'm a certified intuitive eating counselor and certified personal trainer. I help people improve their relationships with exercise, food and their bodies so they can ditch diet culture for good and do what feels right for them.

Through this podcast, I want to give you the tools to redefine what health and wellness mean to you by exposing myths and misconceptions, delving into all the areas of health that often get ignored, and reminding you that health and wellness are not moral obligations. Are you ready? Let's fuck some shit up.

Christina. It is so nice to have you on my podcast after having been on your amazing podcast recently. Thank you for being here.

Christina Montalvo: Thank you for having me. Can you believe it? This has come full circle. Like, we literally first connected because you were on my podcast.

Shohreh: I know. It's weird that, now, I'm about to become a podcasting human, but here we are, and it's exciting.

Christina: It is exciting. I'm so happy to be here.

Shohreh: Yeah. So today, I want to talk to you about all things fitness industry, and in particular, like, a lot of the bullshit that's been going down in the fitness industry for forever but also recently. But first, why don't you tell me a little bit about your background and kind of how you got into the fitness industry and what you're doing now.

Christina: So, actually, it's a little shameful. Looking back-- And I didn't realize this at the time. Looking back, I 1000 percent got into the fitness industry because of my internalized fat+phobia, you know? I had learned my

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entire life that my body was bad and that I needed to lose weight. And it kind of turned into this unhealthy obsession which I didn't realize at the time because you don't know what you don't know.

I got my bachelor's degree in exercise science, and it kind of just kept growing from there. And this is where it gets fuzzy for me. It's like, "Did it grow from obsession, or did it grow from passion?" Early on in my personal training career, for six months, I worked at a commercial gym, and I think that's when I started seeing the discrepancies in, like, you know, commercialized sales-heavy-- the fitness industry, and I was like, "I can't do this."

And so six months post-graduation, I had just bought my first home. And I called my parents and I was like, "So I quit my job, and I'm going to work out of my garage." And they were like, "You just bought a house." I'm like, "I'm going to figure it out."

Shohreh: That's the perfect time to work out of your garage because you now own your garage.

Christina: Exactly. [laughs] And looking back, I don't know if I would ever make that decision again because, now, I realize the potential severity of that decision, but what I said back then and what I say everyday now is I'm just going to figure it out. And since then, moved out of my single car garage, and I have a 2000 square foot warehouse called Iron Phoenix Strength Club.

And something else I will tell you is that beyond the shadow of a doubt, my personal journey and my professional career in this industry has 1000 percent shifted from this unhealthy, damaging obsession to an unrelenting passion to shed light on the bullshit that so many people don't even know exists.

Shohreh: Yeah. Which is really awesome when kind of-- You mentioned that you got into this for maybe the wrong reasons at the time, but at the same time it's kind of cool because you've been able to shift both professionally and personally as you've kind of healed those parts of yourself, and now you're helping other people with it.

Christina: Yes. And part of me feels, and I'm sure that's my bias, that that's important because I lived it, the other side of it. I lived the obsession, the fear. I've lived all of it, you know? There's not enough time in this podcast episode to summarize the bullshit that I was obsessed with, you know? It was everything. And I lived it. I walked it. I breathed it.

And so I think it's important for the women that I work with now, the people I work with now, because I can speak to that because it was a part of me for so long. And so I think that helps the stance that I'm in now, like you said, both professionally and personally because I knew what it was like, you know? On paper, you're like, "I'm the healthiest person here," but, like, you're not. You're just obsessed, you know?

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Shohreh: Yeah. So what are some things that maybe you used to do as a trainer and a coach that you wouldn't be caught dead doing now?

Christina: Oh my God. [laughs] So embarrassing. My first business card said 'Weight Loss Coach'.

Shohreh: Really?

Christina: Yeah. Yeah. Oh yeah. I don't remember back then doing much with nutrition. I have a minor in Human Nutrition and then all of these certifications. Speaking of which-- And I'm using air-quotes when I say "all of these certifications". I don't think I'd be caught dead retaking any of those certifications because what I know now is that all those nutrition certifications are all rooted in weight loss, all of them, most of them.

I've gotten a few that were more scientific-based. It's, like, the kreb cycle, you know? Like, what happens when your body is digesting a protein or whatever without this, like, "Here's how you eat to lose fat," but by and large, most of the certifications that I had taken were rooted in weight loss.

So I wouldn't be caught dead speaking to intentional weight loss ever again. I used to be a macro coach. I would never fucking do that again.

Shohreh: You went through the whole gamut of the typical, like, trainer things, and I say this as someone who also had a very similar start.

Christina: I would prescribe cardio to my clients.

Shohreh: Oh no.

Christina: Literally, like, 45 minutes on the elliptical. And I look back and I'm like, "Christina, what were you thinking?" I mean, it's, like, for me the best way to describe how I feel about it is have you ever seen the movie-- What is it called? We are the Millers where the guy gets that 'no regrets' tattoo on his chest?

Shohreh: I've seen the image, but I-- [laughs]

Christina: Okay. That's how I feel where I'm like, "No regrets" because it's so bad.

Shohreh: When you say, "What were you thinking?" Like, I know what you were thinking because I was there too, and it's that that is what you're taught when you get into this industry.

Like you said, this is what all the certifications are based around. This is, like, when you see fitness industry people online. Like, this is what their talking about. This is what they're doing. So when you get into this, you just think, like, this is the only way. This is the way it's always

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been done, and so I've got to do this too especially if I want to be successful.

So it's no one's fault per se but, like, as you said, you can't know what you don't know, but then when you know it, then it's a matter of what do you do?

Christina: Oh. And when you know it though, for me, I'm like, "You can't unsee it. It's everywhere."

Shohreh: Yeah. It is everywhere. And I think that, especially now because body positivity is getting bigger, intuitive eating, joyful movements. All these concepts are getting more into the mainstream which is really exciting.

But I'm seeing a lot especially in, like, trainer Facebook groups, like, people not quite knowing what to do because it goes against everything they've been taught. They're, like, "I want to help people but also I feel like I'm supposed to do weight loss" and all these other things, and I think there's kind of this crisis that I'm seeing happening over and over again with people in our industry.

Christina: I think crisis is putting it mildly.

[laughs]

Christina: Like, what's worse than a crisis? I'm not sure what the word is but, like, I feel like that's what it is. And you know what too? I have a lot of compassion for those people.

Shohreh: Full-scale panic.

Christina: Just chaos. I have a lot of compassion for some of those trainers that are confused and not sure what to do. I think it becomes problematic when people are-- For example, here's my favorite, and by favorite, I mean most annoying issue. Someone will say, "Intuitive eating is bullshit." I'm like, "Have you read the book or studied any of the work that's being done in that space?" And they're like, "No." I'm like, "Then you don't get an opinion."

So if I am going to toot my own horn a little bit, when I was making that shift, and I don't even know necessarily where this shift came from, but it definitely, like, professionally, but it started with this internal crisis I guess. Here we go again with the word 'crisis' of, like, something's not right. This is detracting from me instead of adding to me. So I started exploring that on a personal level before I started exploring it professionally which I think is very important to do.

And instead of going, "Oh my God. Intuitive eating is silly," I educated myself first. And the problem is that, in these personal training Facebook groups, instead of people acknowledging and saying, "Hmm. That's an interesting perspective. Let me do some reading. Let me do

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some listening. Let me do some of my own homework," if you will and taking that route instead of this, like, "Absolutely not. You're wrong" approach.

And that to me is the most problematic part of it. It's not the ignorance because I do think that, like, people like me exist still to this day where they're selling weight loss, and maybe they haven't come to terms with how problematic it is and how damaging and harmful it can be.

It's the people that are like, "Nope. No way. Like, fat is bad, and you must diet. And what's the point of a personal trainer if your client's not losing weight anyway?" Why don't you pause and stop confirming your confirmation bias? And then we can have a conversation.

Shohreh:

Yeah. I totally agree. I think there's a lot of that happening. And of course, it's because of the cognitive dissonance, right? Like, you're getting this new information. Your brain is like, "No. No. No. That doesn't fit in with our worldview," and so you double down on what you think you already know.

And I think, to a certain extent, everybody starts that way because, like, I know, for example, before I was ever in this industry, like, the first time I heard the term 'thin privilege' I like panicked about it, right, and got, like, really defensive. And I think that's pretty normal when people are telling you things that could shift your worldview.

But, over time as I learned more, followed more accounts, listened to podcasts, whatever, eventually got into this industry, like, I was very, very interested in reading the studies and reading the books and learning from other people and, like, figuring out, like, "Wow. Do I have this wrong?"

Because my ultimate goal is to help people. And I think if you're in this industry for the right reasons that you want to help people to live healthier, more well lives then, like, eventually, hopefully, you're going to be open to listening to information that could help your clients. I mean, that's kind of what I hope. Maybe that's too optimistic, but [laughs] I would hope that that is what people would be.

And I am seeing that with a lot of people, like, people I followed for years who I've seen their messaging starting to change and shift. And I'm like, "Oh. That's really cool because I remember you from when you were, like, straight up in diet culture and now you're not."

Christina:

Yeah. When I see-- Because I've been witnessing a lot of that too. And sometimes it's not so great because-- I just actually on Instagram made my post last night about fake intuitive eating coaches because I'm seeing a lot of that too of, like, 10 ways to lose weight on intuitive eating, and I'm like, "Damn it. Son of a bitch, you know?" I'm like, "Argh."

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And again, that's a perfect example of someone hearing a term, potentially noticing that it's gaining popularity, and then what I called it in my post was, like, 'don't piss in the pool' because you're ruining it for all of us. And you're muddying the waters for the people who are again maybe being exposed to this term 'intuitive eating' and they're like, "Huh." But now you've got these mixed messages. You've got people saying, "Here is how you can lose weight on intuitive eating," and then you've got people saying, "Can we just maybe not talk about weight loss for a little bit while we repair your relationship with food?" And then you've got the people that are like, "You're doing women a disservice by not helping them lose weight," you know? So it's a hot mess everywhere.

Shohreh: Yeah. It's gotten very, like, diluted and convoluted and, you know. I studied with Evelyn Tribole, a certified intuitive eating counselor, so, like, I worked with the person who wrote the Intuitive Eating book which, you know, I highly recommend for anybody who wants to coach intuitive eating because, obviously, she created this concept, so she knows what she's talking about.

But she talks a lot about that, about how, you know, Health At Every Size, and intuitive eating, as they're becoming more popular, of course, people are using them to their advantage, but there are people who literally have probably never read the book or picked up an article about what actual intuitive eating is, and they're just, like, ascribing their own meanings to it.

And, yeah. It hurts those of us who are actually doing the work and who know how helpful it can be when other people just think it's a diet or some other nonsense.

Christina: Yeah. But to your previous point because I realize that I got off-- First of all, Evelyn Tribole is amazing, and her intuitive eating course that I took was-- I would take that again always even just to rehear the same information because she's incredible.

But seeing these shifts, like, the more educated shifts if you will from people that I used to follow similar-- probably-- I'm wondering if we even have some of the same accounts that we're thinking of. They've shifted their entire thing.

People that were known for a paleo-based podcast are now kind of shifting to this body-acceptance, body-positive intuitive eating thing, and it's been-- I'm so excited to see some of these people especially with bigger followings and more impact than I have because I have a really small following. I'm, like, "Yes," you know? It's almost, like, I wish I could call Oprah, someone with massive impact and be, like, "Let's talk about this," and then you can do a Netflix special so that everybody can get in on it.

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Shohreh: Yes. That is the dream. And, you know, what? It's coming. These things are starting to get a lot of press, so Oprah may not be that far outside of the realm of possibility to start talking about intuitive eating.

Christina: We just gotta get her off the Weight Watchers bandwagon. [laughs]

Shohreh: Yeah. We really, really do. [laughs] Do you have any advice for trainers and coaches who are maybe looking to transition from the typical upholding diet culture in their work to starting to embrace weight-inclusivity and Health At Every Size?

Christina: I think reading. So for me, this is what helped is reading the books first. So Health At Every Size by Linda Bacon, Intuitive Eating. I think the-- I don't know if it's hit the press yet, but they just updated-- Do you know if it's their fifth or sixth version?

Shohreh: Of intuitive eating?

Christina: Yeah.

Shohreh: I think the fourth one is coming out, and I don't know if it has actually dropped yet. I currently still own the third, but I'm really looking forward to the fourth.

Christina: Yeah. I have the third too, and that's obviously Evelyn Tribole and Elyse Resch. Those were amazing. Another recent book that I read, and I really enjoy her account too, is The F*ck It Diet by Caroline Dooner. That's really good. So just reading. And for me, I'm a reader too, so that's how I absorb information and enjoy it, but reading those books and gaining those perspectives.

I remember the first time I read Health At Every Size, my mouth was literally wide open the entire time, but I went into it with an open mind of, like, "I don't know anything" versus, "I'm going to read this to argue it" if that makes sense.

I think the intention behind absorbing new information is incredibly important, so I went into it with, like, "Maybe you don't know everything, Christina. Fancy that." And it was mind-blowing. And then it just continued to grow from there.

Another big thing for me that I think-- whether you're a facilitator in this industry or a consumer of it, curating your social media in a very particular way is very important. So early on in my career-- This is actually also very embarrassing. No regrets.

Shohreh: [laughs]

Christina: I followed almost exclusively bikini competitors on Instagram. And it took me probably three years, and I actually had a mentor that told me this. I didn't come to this conclusion on my own. I thought bikini

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competitors were synonymous with personal trainers because at the time, Instagram was newer, and they were selling all their programs right? Like, "Get my booty program. Gets rid of your cellulite. And I'm like, "Oh. I see. If I want to make myself known in this industry, I have to look like that." So much so that I considered breast implants because that's what I was seeing, right? And I was like, "Oh my God." You know, I was obsessing over, like—

And I've never been a physique competitor. I've always been more of, like, competitive CrossFit athlete, competitive powerlifter. And still, I was like, "I have to work on my glute-hamstring tie-in." Because that's what I was exposing myself to. So it felt really normal and very encouraged. And I really truly felt that I needed to look that way in order to be a personal trainer.

And I had a mentor at the time who said, "No. You need to follow--" and he mentioned a couple accounts. To be honest, I don't even remember what accounts they were. And it was the exposure to other body types. So body representation becomes the important topic here. Other sizes and shapes of bodies weren't being represented. I wasn't exposed to that representation.

And just the shift in what I was looking at on social media shifted something inside of me. It's like, "Oh. You can be here too. She is here," right? And so that's an important thing in my business and in my gym is body representation, right? "Oh, her body looks like mine." You know, we don't all look the same. And that's important for both for me as a professional and for consumers as well.

But changing the things that you're absorbing specifically on social media, which is incredibly easy to curate in a great way if you know what to get rid of and what to seek out. That was really, really powerful for me in the beginning.

Shohreh:

Yeah. And I think that's really true for fitness industry folk especially who are maybe trying to make this change is they probably have a lot of assumptions and beliefs about what a personal trainer or a coach should look like. So it's especially important for them to seek out pages of people in this industry who maybe don't look like what they typically think of as being a personal trainer. So people of different body sizes: trans-bodies, people who aren't white and blonde.

Like, there are so many wonderful people in this industry doing amazing work who don't fit that- quote, unquote- mold of, like, what a trainer is- quote, unquote- supposed to look like. And if you don't see it, then it's hard to challenge that within yourself because I've heard so many trainers who say, "Oh. Like, I have all this shame and guilt because I feel, like, I don't look the way I'm supposed to or, like, I'm constantly striving to, like, look a certain way so that people will take me seriously in this industry."

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So you really need to show yourself that, like, you can have a successful business, and you can be respected in this industry even if you don't look like that very small percentage of what people think they're supposed to.

Christina: My God. This is all-- You're bringing-- Like, this conversation is bringing up so many little, like, skeletons in my closet that I haven't thought about in a long time. I, going back to, you know, things that I would no longer do now that I would do before, you know? My biggest thing was, like, "My body is my business card."

Shohreh: I hate that phrase so much.

Christina: And so the story, the narrative that I was telling myself and, like, calling into my existence was that my business was struggling because I didn't look like, X, Y, Z. And it was all these self-limiting beliefs centered around my body and my worth and all these things.

And so it felt really tangible, and it made sense to, like, "Christina. If you want to make money, if you don't want to be broke, you have to have a six pack." And so it validated those disordered and obsessive thoughts because it really did feel like life or death, you know? Like, are we going to pay our mortgage this month? Well, you need to lose weight, right?

So the chaos continued. And I will-- Beyond the shadow of a doubt my business is a hundred times more successful in every sense, not even just monetarily, but the community, the vibes, the all of it. The ease of running my business is a thousand times better and easier and more successful now than when it was before when I literally felt that my body was my business card.

Shohreh: Yeah. And I feel like that's-- Again, like, everyone falls for this bullshit. Like, I fell for this bullshit too. One of the first things I spent significant money on when I started my business was, like, a fitness photoshoot. Like, I literally-- It wasn't just, like, "oh, I'm going to take some branding images for my website" which is what I do now a couple times a year. This was, like, I hired a photographer who specifically did fitness photos.

So she worked with, like, a ton of bikini models and stuff like that. And then I hired a coach to get me ready for the photoshoot. So even though I wasn't, like, entering a competition or anything like that, I felt, like, to be respected in this industry I needed to have, like, visible abs and, like, to have, like, those really, like, gritty, raw, like, photos in the gym. And, like, I put myself through hell for, like, months to get these photos taken. Of course these are photos I would never in a billion years use now. [laughs]

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And I look at them, and I remember how miserable I was. And I was so sad. And I was, like-- The whole time I felt like I didn't work hard enough, I didn't look good enough. And, like, I look at the photos now and I'm, like, "Oh my God. You look, like, sickly. Like, that's, like, not a healthy look. Like, I wasn't healthy at the time. Like, I was barely eating, and I was doing, like, a bunch of cardio and, like, all this stuff that I hated to look a certain way for these photos. And what's really stupid about that is I was like, "This is what will get people to work with me because, like, they will think that, like, they can look like this," right?

Christina: [laughs]

Shohreh: Because, like, you're selling a body when you do that. It's like-- I was basically like, "You can have, like, this six pack." This six pack that I didn't really have, and it looked like I had because a tan, you know-- I had, like, a full-body tan, like, lighting Photoshop, like, all this bullshit. And I'm, like, "Shohreh, what the hell is wrong with you? Like what were you thinking at that time?" But, like, that's the industry.

Christina: I know. I felt the same way. I was, like, "Oo. Women need to want to look like me." And if you want to talk about bullshit in the industry, I was thinking about this the other day in the car. I hope I can articulate this, and if not, I hope you can, like, complete my thought coherently. So say at the time I was, like, what? a 22 year old child who felt she was an adult because she owned a home and ran a business.

And I'm thinking, "From a consumer standpoint, they're not asking the right questions" because was I a lot leaner when I was 22 that I am now? Of course. Was I more miserable when I was 22? Of course because I was, you know, weighing and measuring all of my food. I was counting everything in MyFitnessPal. two-a-days, three-a-days. It was, like, team no-days off, like, all those hashtags, right? Like, those ridiculous, like, 'Work harder. Nobody cares', like, 'Sweaty or sorry. You choose'. You know, like, stupid shit.

And I'm thinking consumers should be asking questions to their fitness professionals like, "What's your lifestyle like?" Because I'm thinking now, if someone said, "You can look like me, but this is what it's going to cost you," I would say, "No, thank you."

I see a lot of-- And I actually know some of them. I don't want to say they're friends of mine. They are acquaintances of mine. They live locally. And they have very, very lean physiques. And they have jam-packed gyms and classes and clients. And it's very much so being touted as "You can look like me too. This is what it takes," and I don't think anyone is asking the questions of, like, "Okay, but do I have to weigh my white rice?"

The cost of being lean, the cost of being thin, and not enough people are asking those things. And also, two, I don't know if people are-- I think they're so afraid of not being lean, or they're so afraid of being

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fat, or they're so afraid of gaining weight that they're like, "I don't care if I lose my quality of life, I just want to look different."

Shohreh: That's definitely true for some people. And I've definitely had consultations in the past where I've, like, explained the cost of being lean, and this was back when I did intentional weight loss. And they would say, "Well, like, I think it would be worth it at least to have, like, a six pack for a little while."

Christina: For like a day.

Shohreh: Yeah exactly. And I'm like, "Okay. So you're going to put in all this effort just to, like, I guess, like, feel great about having a six pack for a few days." And you won't feel great. You'll still feel like shit.

And then, like, I guess you'll just stop, and you'll go back to what you were doing before? Like, it's just amazing, like, the mental loops that people will go through to get this thing that they think that they want because they've been told they're supposed to want it their whole lives. I mean, I can't blame anybody for wanting these things.

And the other thing too is the coach is, like-- It's not even just explaining the cost of being lean because, for example, like, I am a small human. That is my genetics.

My sister and my mom are exactly the same way. Like, I have a ton of clients who straight-up could never look like me. It doesn't matter how hard they worked because we have wildly different body types, and there is this amazing magical thing called size diversity where people are different shapes and sizes naturally. And not everyone can be the same shape and size which is a wonderful, beautiful thing, but somehow everyone is told that they're supposed to be my body size, which is ridiculous.

And you have coaches who play into that. And they're just like, "Anybody can be thin. Like, anybody can be a size two." And it's just, like-- That's bullshit. That's not true, and you're selling a lie.

Christina: Or my favorite that's like, "Tell your inner skinny--" What is it? It's on Pinterest which makes me hate Pinterest.

Shohreh: Oh no.

Christina: It's like your inner skinny chick wants to come out. Like, liberate your inner thin chick. And I'm, like, what's the f-- what the-- What?

Shohreh: Yeah. And I think that you made a really good point too about-- Going back to you saying clients don't necessarily know what to ask of coaches. And this brings up for me, like, how can you be an informed consumer of the fitness industry? Like, what should people be looking for, and maybe how can they advocate for themselves with coaches

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who are super diet-culture-y, who are super, like, into weight-loss stuff. Like, you know, maybe the client has specifically said I'm not interested in it, but the coach keeps trying to push it. Like, if you're the client, like, how can you have the power in this situation to come out getting what you want?

Christina: Yeah. So I think first things first, I think that a lot of people don't even know how to define diet culture. For example, I'm going to use a situation that happened recently. A member of my gym was saying that one of her friends signed up for a gym that's just like mine. And I was like, "Really? In the Chicagoland area? There's another gym like this?" And she's like, "Yeah." And I'm not going to say the name of the gym but very empowering name to the gym.

And she's, like, "And they have kettlebells there and just all this stuff." I'm like, "That's amazing." Not even two weeks later, my client comes back to me and she goes, "Never mind. They're running a weight loss challenge on Facebook," and I am like, "Ding. Ding. Ding. I knew it. I knew it. I knew it." Unfortunately. And I was thrilled at first. I was like, "Maybe I was wrong. Maybe I'm not the only body positive strength and conditioning gym in the Chicagoland area." Wrong. Well, I was right. But that's sad. I was sad. And no. They did run a weight loss challenge. They used it to get new members, whatever they used it for. It doesn't matter.

And so I think the very first place to start, like step zero, is for consumers to even be informed on what diet culture is, what it looks like, what it sounds like. And I'd like for you to weigh in on that, but I think the easiest way is just, like, intentional weight loss, before and after photos, anything that is centered around the size and shape or measurements of your body. Thoughts on that?

Shohreh: Yeah. That's a good definition. It's essentially anything that is putting bodies in a hierarchy where thin is, like, the goal of what you're trying to get to. Like, it's basically you're trying to achieve fitness at the expense of actual health and well-being...would be diet culture.

And I'll link to-- I actually have an article that I wrote for Girls Gone Strong about what diet culture is and how to ditch it. So I'll make sure to put that in the show notes if you're someone who's literally never heard this term, and you want some examples of kind of what this looks like in real life. I'll give you that, but what you described is probably the best way to describe what that is which is just, like, an obsession with thinness which we have as a culture and basically practices and mindsets around that with that as the sole goal.

Christina: Yeah, right. So I think that's-- And I love that you'll link to that article below in the show notes. I think that's really helpful for people if they need to read that. But in terms of if you've already hired someone or if you're considering hiring someone and you already feel and you know

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that you don't want it to be centered around diet culture, you have to advocate for yourself.

Like, you have to do it at the gym, in your doctor's office, in your physical therapy office. You likely have to do it when you're at work, around your girlfriends, maybe even around your family members: your mom or your sister.

But in terms of a consumer, I honestly don't even know how to answer that damn question to be honest with you because I've never been put in that position. I've been in the opposite position where women will come to me and say, "Listen. I'm getting married in six months. Will you help me fit into my wedding dress?" And I say, "No. And here's why."

And of course, there's a lot more dialogue behind the scenes that we go into unpacking that, but ultimately, we end up not working together when someone seeks me out to intentionally change the size and shape of their body. I tell them that that's not what we do here. You're likely coming to the wrong spot.

And so then they go out and likely find someone who's going to help them facilitate that, and for me, that's against my ethical code at this point for all the reasons that we've already spoken about.

I don't even know if you have a trainer or coach that's selling intentional weight loss, and you have the conversation of, "I don't want this to be my focus anymore." It is your coach's job to honor that because it is your body. But that also makes me sound incredibly hypocritical because then someone could say, "Well, Christina. It's my body, and I want to lose weight," so this becomes an interesting conversation.

Shohreh:

Well. I guess the difference that I see here is that you tell people up front that's not in alignment with your values to work on intentional weight loss, and you give them reasons why, and then they can choose whether or not they want to work with you. I mean, I guess someone could argue that not working with the client on intentional weight loss is against their values. Like, I guess if they're, like, really fatphobic, and they think that the client will be- quote, unquote- unhealthy unless they lose weight. Like, that might be a reason why you might say, "Sorry. I can't help you with any other goals that you have."

But I feel like the vast majority of coaches that I know typically don't only do weight loss in the sense that their clients usually have other goals as well. And hopefully, you're a good enough coach that, like, if someone's like, "Hey. I don't want to do weight loss, like, you know how to program not specifically for that. I mean, hopefully. I hope that you've learned that information.

So, like, I do see a difference in it. Like, if a client-- Because you're telling a client upfront, like, "Hey." That weight loss is not the thing that

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you're going to do." You know? If it comes up later in conversation with the client, then that's something where you can remind them, like, "Hey. This is not my philosophy, you know? Here are some other people you can go to or whatever."

And really, another coach can do that too. So if it is a coach who truly only wants to do weight loss, and a client tells them, "Hey. I don't want to do this anymore," then maybe at that point, they need to refer out, you know? Maybe they need to say, "I'm not the right person for you anymore. Let me find you another coach who can help you with your other goals."

But if they're going to keep the client, then yes, I think they absolutely need to honor that client's request. And I've worked with someone in the past who came to me because she had hired a coach who she was stuck in a contract with, who she told him that she was not interested in weight loss. And he would not honor it. And so she asked me, "How can I advocate for myself?" And so I just kind of helped her to have some talking points with him about, like, what's important to her and why and that, you know, what he was doing was triggering. And, like, ultimately, she had to go to his manager.

Christina: I, like, knew that that's how it was going to end. Like, of course.

Shohreh: Yeah. He couldn't get it. So, you know, and this was at a commercial gym. And so she told the manager. And, like, she ended up getting moved to a different trainer, and it ended up being okay. What he did was unacceptable. The fact that she felt she had to hire me to be able to advocate for herself with another coach who was ignoring her, like, that should never happen.

Christina: Gosh. I don't know. I just-- Shohreh. Oh my God. Okay. I have so many thoughts. Okay. First of all, I mean, how many times a day do you see on these personal trainer Facebook groups that we're in where people are like, "Oh my God. I don't know what to do. My client's not losing weight. She's eating 1200 calories a day. She's doing two-a-days, and I just, like-- I don't know how to help her." And I'm like, "Stop focusing on the weight loss." Like, what is happening?

So many trainers are out there that don't even understand that what they're doing is harmful. And part of me-- So going back to things that I'm embarrassed of now, I really did feel that I was doing my clients a disservice if they weren't losing one to two pounds a week. Right? And so I would freak out. I was like, "Oh my God. I can't do my job. I can't do my job. I can't do my job. And one of the most empowering things of shifting away from this intentional weight loss is do you know how many other cool things you get to celebrate with your clients when you're not obsessed with the size and shape of your body?"

Shohreh: So many.

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Christina: Like, oh my gosh. It's amazing. However, going back to coaches and trainers respecting client's boundaries and their comfort, not only is that a language conversation, not only is that a goal conversation, but it's also, like, some clients in commercial gyms or in various settings don't like to do hip thrusts or hip bridges. It's uncomfortable for them. It is your job to respect that boundary and that comfort for your client. It is so much more important for me for my client to feel safe and supported and comfortable than it is for them to grow their glutes. Do you know what I mean?

Shohreh: Yeah. Absolutely.

Christina: That trainer that you're referencing, like, he has, like, respect and a lack of, like, respecting of boundary issue, and it likely doesn't just stop at, like, the intentional weight loss, I'm sure. I'm sure there are other things that clients are, like, "Oh. That doesn't feel good in my knee or whatever." And that's your client's way whether it's physical, emotional, mental, spiritual, whatever. They're letting you know that something doesn't necessarily feel right. And it's your job to help them navigate that. That's what a coach does.

Shohreh: Yeah. I think if you are looking at everything in a black-and-white way, like, you're not coaching, but that is a lot of the fitness industry. Like, there's so many people in this industry who are, like, "There's only one right way to do it. There's only one right way to squat," whatever, whatever. And despite all the evidence to the contrary, like really experienced coaches being like, "Well, no. Actually, this, like, looks different ways on people's bodies, and there's no, like, one right exercise that everybody has to do and all this stuff.

Like, there are people out there actively trying to dispel this dogma, but you're always going to have coaches who-- They just cannot see it in that way, and they're seeing it in a very black-and-white way. And ultimately it ends up hurting their clients because they get hurt or they feel like they're not heard, or they just have, like, a bad experience.

And, like, again, if you're not in this industry to help your clients live better lives then, like, what the fuck are you doing here? It's not like we get paid a ton of money. Like, why are you here?

Christina: I know, right? I know. I'm curious to hear, what were some of the talking points that you had mentioned to that client to bring up with that trainer?

Shohreh: So in speaking with that client, I basically asked her, you know, what was it that she did want to work on, and how did it make her feel when he was not choosing to work on what she actually wanted, you know. And she was really frustrated. She felt really triggered because she had experienced a lot of, like, guilt and shame for her weight over the course of her life. She was really trying to get out of this kind of diet culture thing. The reason she hired this guy was because she just

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wanted the accountability to make sure that she was moving, like, once a week.

You know, like, she was someone who had always had a bad relationship with exercise, and she was really trying to change that and get into more of a habit with it, you know? Her reasons for being in the gym, perfectly valid, wonderful reasons that just so happened to have nothing to do with changing her body, and this guy, like, just didn't care because he looked at her body and was like, "Nope. This is a body that needs to be smaller" and would kind of program around it.

So I just suggested to her to, you know, remind him, like, "Here is what I want. Here's what I actually want. Here is why I don't want weight loss. Here is how I feel when you talk to me about weight loss and these other things." And, you know, just make it really clear. Like, "Do you understand? Like, do you have any questions about this?"

And again, like, he was useless because even after having that conversation and him claiming to understand, like, nothing changed because he wasn't really hearing her, which was unfortunate. And it was pretty much what I kinda anticipated would happen though because anyone who didn't listen to her the first time is probably not going to listen to her, you know, the next go-around either, but thankfully, she eventually got out of that situation and was actually able to get out of the contract too, so it worked out.

Christina: Oh, good. That's good for her. And I think, again, that's just a symptom of a bigger problem where it's like, "No. You're wrong. Your body is wrong. The only answer is to make it smaller." That's really the issue. I mean, doctors do it all the damn time.

Shohreh: Yes. Yes, they do which is a whole other conversation.

Christina: Yes.

Shohreh: So I feel, like, we've talked a lot about, like, what the fitness industry is doing poorly. So I feel like we can have a positive note here where we can talk about some of the things that are going well which is one thing that I love about you is actually that you don't take new clients at your gym or run any promotions in the month of January. Can you talk about why you do that?

Christina: Yes. So even when I was, I think there was one or maybe two January's. So this might have be, like, 2013/2014. I would, you know, run these promos or whatever. I don't want to say, like, a problem with those clients, but it just never really went well.

And then that was more from, like, a business standpoint. And so, you know, I vowed to myself that I would never kind of go that route again. And then once my business expanded, I had a short stint with the business coach. And she's like, "Okay. Well, January is coming, and

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you can run a weight loss challenge and get these people in the door. People are going to be knocking your door down." And I was like, "Ding. Ding. Ding. No. Absolutely not."

Because, by and large, and this is what I didn't realize in 2013, and I definitely realize now, those people are using exercise as a means to an end to-- you know, they're succumbing to the New Year's resolution pressures of, like, "New year. New me." And, you know, I used to do that too. I mean I would write up, like, a dissertation to myself every December 31st about how little I was going to weigh. "This will be the year I'll have a thigh gap and all this stuff." I did that for years. Since 2014, I've never taken a new client in the month of January, and it wasn't until 2018 that I actually ended up with a full-blown waitlist.

So as my business expanded into a more public place with a lot more visibility, a lot more clients, a lot more capacity for scaling and working with multiple people at once throughout the day, so dozens and dozens by the time the day ends, lo and behold. I fucking knew it. January. Email. Email. Email. Inquiry. Inquiry. Inquiry. And I told every single one of them, you know, "This is the January policy forever here at Iron Phoenix Strength Club. I will reach out to you in February. If you are still interested, then you can circle back."

And I think one of them of the, like, 15/16 emails that I got actually followed up after January ended.

It's important for me. It's like the biggest middle finger that you can do to the industry, right? Is it a middle finger to my bank account also? Yes. But I will stand on my integrity before I ever stand on a stack of bills. Like, put that on my headstone. My integrity is so much more important than that. I never want to draw people in based on fear, right? Like, I'm afraid that this year will it be the year that I lose all my weight. No.

Shohreh: Which is a common tactic in our industry, let's note.

Christina: Oh. It's a very lucrative tactic also. So it's amazing. And the best freaking part is that my clients, my current members, thank me every single time because they think they see the integrity and, like, the community and the vibe that that upholds. Like, this is a safe space where we're not obsessed over our bodies. This is a safe space where you're allowed to come as you are no matter what that means or looks like or feels that day or what it sounds like that day or whatever. It helps me keep those women safe that are currently with me.

And again, it's this big middle finger to the industry of, like, "Okay. Every other gym on the planet is going to run a promo for January, and we're going to be over here doing our thing, and when you're ready for empowerment, and when you're ready for the awesome shit that we've got going on here, we can talk February 1st."

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So that's my favorite thing. It's probably the dumbest business move ever, but it's in so much alignment for me.

Shohreh: Yeah. I mean it makes this statement about what you believe, like, right off the bat. So I think it's actually a genius business move without intending to be in the sense that, like, you're getting your ideal client, right? For all of us, especially when we do very niche work, like you and I do, like, all the time that we spend talking with people who are not our ideal client ultimately ends up wasted because they're not a great fit. We aren't going to get to work with them.

So anything we can do that gets us the right kind of people who are going to resonate with our work is ideal. And I think having this policy, even though you're not getting business that you could get in January, what does happen is it sets the tone for other people who are watching your business and ultimately probably gets you clients later in the year from people who respect that you do that.

Christina: Yeah. That's a good perspective. I like that perspective.

[laughs]

Shohreh: Just a little mindset shift to you.

Christina: Yeah. Yeah. I, like, it.

Shohreh: Awesome. Well. I have to ask because I know this has been, like, the fitness industry rant session here. Is there anything else that, like, has just really been driving you nuts lately in fitness?

Christina: What drives me crazy about the fitness industry is, like, the hypocrisy, right? And this goes back to something that you've mentioned it on your Instagram which I think is so powerful is, like, you get to eat and not just you, Shohreh, but anyone with thin or fit privileged. Like, we get to eat whatever we want out in the world, and no one's going to say anything to us because our bodies afford us the privilege to eat without a lot of judgment if any judgment at all, you know? There's just a lot of hypocrisy happening all the time.

Shohreh: Yeah. There is. There's definitely a lot of hypocrisy in this industry. I was talking to someone the other day about how it's really hard to be in an industry that's like this, but also, like, to leave the industry would mean that there's no chance to change it, right? Like, by staying, by trying to do something different, I think it can be really powerful even though it's fucking hard because you get a lot of pushback, a lot of people yelling at you for studies all the time who just, like-- I personally-- I know that you've been doing this for a long time, and you found a lot of success, but, you know, for me being newer in the industry and newer in this particular space in it, like, success, I think it's harder to come by than if you're selling weight loss.

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And so, like, there's a lot of sacrifice that goes into doing this work, but also you have the potential to help so many people who otherwise are not being served by this industry. And I find that really powerful, and that's what makes this worth it to me.

Christina: 1000 percent. I'm not sure if I've ever had this conversation. Oh, no. I've definitely had this conversation with you where I'm like, "I could sell out and be making bank, like, tomorrow." Like I really, really could.

But again, I look at these women that I work with, and, you know, they're, like, little lives. I say 'little lives', but I'm like, "You're not just a person. You're not just a weight loss project, but you have a whole life that you live when you step outside of these walls." I have goosebumps as I'm saying this. Goosebumps are, like, my version of crying. I'm not a crier, but I get goosebumps.

Shohreh: I love that. That's cute.

Christina: Yeah. I guess goosebumps. They go out into the world and they're like, "I was able to load my cart from Menards with no help," or, "I was able to do the monkey bars with my grandson for the first time ever. I've never done the monkey bars before." "I cleaned out my entire garage with or without the help of my husband." Whatever. "My car broke down and I was able to push my car off to the side of the road." Just these acts of strength and independence and capability that was never true for me or my clients when we were just selling weight loss. If I could pay my bills with those stories, I'm the richest woman in the world every day. And I truly, truly mean it.

And so it is hard. The work that we do is incredibly exhausting. There are days where I'm like, "So do I just ram my head through the brick wall or no?" Like what do I do, you know? And then when you root yourself in these lives-- Like you said, leaving the industry would mean a hole in this type of community, you know? I would truly be doing these women a disservice, all of them: my online clients, my in-person clients. Where would they go? Where would they go? It will never feel the same like it does here. I'm not the only person in the world facilitating this stuff.

They could move to Texas and get this same empowerment and encouragement as you give your clients, but I'm thinking about, you know, within the Chicagoland area, I'm like "We are you going to go?" And that's what keeps me hanging on because it sure as shit ain't the paycheck. I'm gonna tell you that much right now. It's not the paycheck.

[laughs]

Christina: But it's these transformations that are so much more impactful than the scale going down, you know?

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Shohreh: Yeah. I really do. I think that it's-- Like I said, from the very beginning, it's a sort of being the thread of this conversation, like, if you're not in this industry to help people, like, what are you doing here? And the helping people, if that's what you're doing, is what keeps you here and keeps you going even when the work is really tough and even when you're swimming against the current of the industry as a whole.

Christina: Yes. Really quick, do we have time? I want to hear what you're most frustrated with right now.

Shohreh: Oh. What am I most frustrated with right now? I think I'm just really frustrated with Facebook groups in general. I've told you this.

Like, I'm really close to just logging in and going on, like, an unfollowing spree of all these Facebook groups where I just realized, like, how much time I've been spending because, like, you know, they pop up in notifications or whatever. And I, like, read through these posts and then I, like, read through the comments and I'm like, "Why am I wasting my time especially when so much of it is bullshit?" Like I don't know if it's just because, like, it reads like a novel or what, but, like, something about it is, like, a little bit irresistible.

Oh, and, you know, what? Anytime one of your friends, like, comments on something that pops up in your notifications too. So, like, if you comment on a thread in a Facebook group we're both in, it tells me that. And I'm like, "Oh. I wonder what Christina had to say."

Christina: [laughs]

Shohreh: But then I end up having to read, like, this horrible bullshit post. And then you're, like, arguing with them which as you should be. And I'm just like, "Argh".

Christina: That happened to me just this morning. It literally said, "Shohreh commented on whatever," and so I clicked it. I scrolled to the original post. I hit 'view more comments'. 'View more comments'. 'View more comments'. And then, actually, I had to hop on this interview with you, so I got out of this rabbit hole because it is like you go down this rabbit hole of chaos.

And I was having a conversation with a mutual friend of ours actually, and she asked, "Do you think I should be commenting on more Facebook groups?" And I said, "It's a compulsion of mine, and I need to stop. I don't even like that I do that." But I'm like, "Well, if no one's going to chime in about this, then I guess I will."

It really is a compulsion, and I think I do need to start unfollowing a lot of those things because they in a silent and sneaky way, I think are triggering for me. In a different way than it would have been triggering maybe seven years ago. I don't know if triggering is the right word. I

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just get overwhelmed and sad. I'm like, "Oh wow. There's so much work to still be done." I can't believe we're still having this conversation, but yes I agree with you. The Facebook group thing is very frustrating.

Shohreh: It is. And like you just said, I'm conflicted because part of me is like, "Well, someone has to speak up for these things." And then another part of me is like, "Well, this is just exhausting and horrible and, like, nobody's listening to me anyways." Or like, the people who are liking it are people who already believe what I believe, then there are people who are arguing or people who don't want to hear it anyways.

So it's like this fine line between like, "Okay. It's important to me to do this work and put it out into the world," and also, "I need to protect my time and my energy so I can actually help people" because parts of me is like, "Okay. Well, how often does arguing with people on the internet actually tangibly help people?" Not as often as, like, working with my clients or working to get more clients."

So, like, from that perspective, I think that's really what it comes down to for me. It's like, I'm an entrepreneur. I work for myself. I have very limited time, and I don't need to be spending it, like, fuming at people on Facebook.

Christina: Oh my God. I think you just-- I'm just-- As soon as we hop off this call, I'm just going to go on an unfollow spree. [laughs]

Shohreh: All right. Let's do it. We're both holding each other accountable.

Christina: I love it. I love it.

[laughs]

Shohreh: Awesome. Well. Thank you so much for being on here today. I want to wrap up with one final question that I ask at the end of every show which is, how do you define health and wellness for yourself at this moment in your life?

Christina: Oh my goodness. Health and wellness for me right now looks like trying to play more, have fun, and rest, which, if 22 year old Christina heard me saying this, she would have a mental breakdown. Rest and play. And it's something that never occurred to me as being part of a healthy, well life. And I know that's probably not a very popular answer, but I'm very much so--

So I just started going to therapy. And day one a couple months ago in May, my therapist, within 10 minutes of my first session takes out her notebook and she's like, "You're a workaholic," and then she writes down "workaholic." And I was like, "Shit. It's that's obvious?" Like, I've been there for ten fucking minutes.

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So it's looks like finding more joy, having more fun, taking an hour away from work or maybe not going to the gym so that I can play with my dogs which, for me, it's part of bringing back more than balance in my life both, you know, with my potential, like, very rigid exercise schedule that I used to follow for so long and moving away from that.

Can I move in ways that are less regimented and more joyful and fun? Do I have to move more at all today? Like, do I have to do that? Do I have to work until midnight? Can't I just go to sleep? Can I watch something ridiculous on TV just because? And allowing myself that permission to just be sometimes, just literally exist instead of having to produce something. That's what health and wellness looks like to me right now.

Shohreh: That was beautiful and amazing.

Christina: Oh. Thank you.

Shohreh: I think that rest and play are key parts of health and wellness.

Christina: Okay. I was going to say, is that a valid answer, Shohreh? [laughs]

Shohreh: Absolutely. What you're talking about is literally what this podcast is all about, right? which is that health and wellness looks different on everybody. And it often looks very different from what we think it's supposed to look like.

And so I think your answer just, like, beautifully encapsulated that, that, you know, rest and play are these areas that so often go ignored, especially if you are a workaholic perfectionist type, and I'm raising my hand because that is me as well.

And those are things that I really tried to prioritize in my life too as well as not giving myself grief about prioritizing those things because that's part of the battle is not just doing it but, like, not mentally beating yourself up because you're doing it.

Christina: Yes. Oh, boy. That I know to be true, so yes. I very much so-- I'm, like, intentionally choosing to sometimes do nothing and then not being like, "Who do you think you are to take a nap on a Tuesday?" Like, "You know what? I'm allowed to do that if I need to. And it's self-care." And it's awesome. It's been an interesting experience, navigating rest and play as part of health and wellness. It's awesome.

Shohreh: Amazing. Well, thank you again for being here. This has been such a fun conversation. As always, I could talk to you for hours, and we do talk for hours when were not on a podcast.

[laughs]

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Shohreh: So thankfully the world doesn't have to hear all of that. But tell me, how can people find you?

Christina: I am most active on Instagram, christina_montalvo. And I also have a podcast, The Confidence Project podcast which, again, is how you and I originally connected, but it's full of a ton of F-bombs. So that's just my little--

Shohreh: Welcome to [unintelligible 00:53:32]

[laughs]

Christina: That's my little disclaimer on The Confidence Project podcast I guess. Not for the faint of heart, I'll say.

Christina: Yeah. I was on my Instagram stories recently, and I put up a poll on who was going to be mad with my constant cursing on this podcast. And there were a handful of people who admitted that it was going to rub them the wrong way. And I was like, "Cool. Thank you for telling me. And also, I will still be seeing "fuck" a lot. I hope that's cool with you, and if it's not, then I guess this isn't the podcast for you."

Christina: Not for you. Exactly. I remember when I was setting up. I was like, "Can I curse on this?" Or whenever we were having the podcast cursing conversation. So I've been on a podcast before where they're like, "We don't curse." I'm like, "Why didn't you fucking tell me that before I hit record?"

Shohreh: [laughs]

Christina: I would not have agreed to be on here. Yeah. So funny. Thank you so much for having me on. I am so excited for you, so excited for this podcast, your entire show as a whole and to be interviewed as a guest is such an honor. I'm happy to be sharing this space with you.

Shohreh: Yes. Thank you. This has been wonderful. I'm sure we'll be back for more shenanigans.

Christina: I hope so.

Shohreh: And peace out. Is that still a thing people say? Peace out? I don't know. That feels awkward.

Christina: Peace out, girl scout.

[laughs]

Shohreh: And we will end with that. Bye.

Christina: [laughs]

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[outro music]

Shohreh:

And that's our show for today. I appreciate you listening to and supporting the Redefining Health & Wellness podcast. If you enjoyed this episode, it would mean so much to me if you would subscribe and leave a review with your podcast provider of choice. It would really help other people who might benefit from the podcast to find it more easily.

And if you're looking for more information on intuitive eating, joyful movement or body respect, or you want to learn how to work with me, head on over to shohrehdavoodi.com. Hope to see you for the next episode.