

Redefining Health & Wellness

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Featured this episode: Shohreh Davoodi, Kate Browne

Shohreh Davoodi: Hey there, beautiful humans. You're listening to episode number nine of the Redefining Health & Wellness podcast. Today, you'll get to hear from my friend, Dr. Kate Browne, who is a pop culture writer and rhetorician.

Kate is also the Vice President of Communications for The Body Positive Fitness Alliance and the founder of Taking Up Space, a blog about marketing tactics in the health, wellness and fitness industries.

We discuss the difference between body positivity as a political movement versus the "love yourself" brand of body positivity, why shame-based marketing is bad marketing and what you can do instead, Kate's upcoming book about The Golden Girls, and more.

To access the show notes and a full transcript of this episode, head to shohrehdavoodi.com/9. That's shohrehdavoodi.com/9.

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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.

Alright y'all. I'm super excited because, today on the show, I have Dr. Kate Browne. And Kate and I have actually worked together in the past. She has helped me with the rebranding of my business, kind of figuring out my marketing and my message, and she was just a huge help with that and helping me kind of bring my own marketing into alignment with my values.

And we're definitely gonna talk to her about all kinds of stuff related to that today. Kate, thank you so much for being here.

Kate Browne: Thank you for having me.

Shohreh: Yeah. So I think let's first start by you telling us a little bit about yourself and kind of how you got to where you are now and the work you're doing.

Kate: Yeah. Whew. What a winding tale this will be.

[laughter]

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Shohreh: I can't wait.

Kate: So I am a storyteller and a marketing expert kind of person, and I love fitness. And so I bring all of those three things together in the work that I do writing about body image and media. And I started-- My background was originally in theater. I was an actor a little bit, and a stage manager, and then a historian, and I just kind of got further and further away from the stage because of my body image issues.

I didn't have a lot of models for people who are doing what I wanted to do which was be on Saturday Night Live. And when I figured out I couldn't do that, that's when I thought, "Well, now I'll be a stage manager. Well, if I can't be a stage manager, then I'll be a historian. Well, then if I can't be in theater, I'll be in English."

And so my PhD is actually in autobiographical rhetoric, which is basically a fancy way of saying I study the way that people write and talk about themselves.

So that's come up in the most recent work I've done. I have a blog called "Taking Up Space" which is about rhetoric in the health and wellness and fitness industries.

And that's how I got connected into, you know, people like you who are wanting to market in a way that-- I love how you put it, you know, aligns with your values, aligns with who you want to be in the world because we don't have a lot of models for how to bring marketing into the world that isn't just the way it's always been done which is six-pack abs and, you know, fat blasters, and all that. It's like it's one of those infomercials that's like, "There's got to be a better way," and so I'm finding that better way and sharing it with folks.

Shohreh: That's awesome. Yeah. That's a really great way of describing it because I do feel like when I first got into this industry, it very much felt, like, there is only one way to market yourself.

And I have talked about on the podcast before that, like, I went so far as to do, like, a fitness photoshoot that I, like, dieted down for because I felt like I needed to look a certain way to be presentable which is just so far away from the person I am now in the business that I'm running now, but I've seen so many people with those insecurities getting into fitness and wellness of like, "I don't look the part. Nobody is going to want to work with me."

And of course, it doesn't help that there are actual people out in the world who are like, "Oh. I would never work with, like, a trainer or a coach who, like, didn't look like the way I want to look" because, for some reason, that is the benchmark that we have is that, "I'm only going to this person because I want to look a certain way, so they should look the way that I am aspiring to look," which is ridiculous.

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Kate: Yeah. There's this dysfunctional feedback loop. One of the leading gurus of traditional fitness marketing actually says out loud to people, "Your body is your billboard."

Shohreh: Ew.

Kate: Yeah. It's gross. And pressuring trainers with saying, "How can there be so many fat trainers? You have to look a certain way. You are the product you're selling because people are going to look at you and your body, and they want that. So they're going to want to hire you for that."

And so the feedback loop is, "Well, that's what people want to see, so that's what we're going to give them, because that's what they want to see." No. That kind of marketing is what you've always given them. They don't know that there's anything else. So they're not going to ask for anything else.

And I'm glad that that trend is starting to shift. I'm seeing that, and not just in my own-- people who follow me, but in the wider world questioning these ideas of, "Why are all the fitness models that I see advertised in my gym thin, and white, and young, and hard-bodied, and mean?" That's not the experience that I want with fitness. I want more marketing that's reflective of what the actual experience of that would be. And I think the further away we get from that "your body is your billboard" kind of mentality, the more people will feel seen and heard in fitness marketing.

Shohreh: Definitely. And I want to delve into that deeper. But first, I want to go back to what you had kind of mentioned about how-- as you were coming up, one of the things you kind of dreamed for yourself was, you know, to be on the stage or be on SNL, but that wasn't a possibility for you at that time. How does it feel to see people like Aidy Bryant and Leslie Jones and stuff on SNL now, like, people who couldn't have been on SNL at that time?

Kate: I think it's a perspective that's shared by a lot of people who had similar dreams who were coming up as Gen Xers and millennials who are elder millennials right now which is, like, I'm so happy to see that, but it also kind of hurts to know that it is possible now and that I might have missed the boat, or maybe that I wasn't strong enough at the time to face that kind of adversity and to persevere when it counted.

But I'm thrilled. I want more. I want to see all kinds of people in all kinds of media. And Aidy Bryant going out and doing Shrill, and she's in a couple of other movie projects that, you know are-- She's starting a clothing line too I think, you know? So she is a real model for kids growing up now.

And I-- even though that dream took a little detour for me, I love knowing that kids, girls, you know, girl types, will be able to see

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someone like them and say, "I could do that too." And Aidy Bryant still is kind of, like, "small fat," white, kind of hetero presenting kind of person. So that's one model.

Leslie Jones is quite another. And I think she speaks-- She spoke directly at one point on SNL about age and how she came into acting. And she's been doing comedy for over 20 years but getting her big break in her fifties, that it's kind of never too late.

Overall, I'm very happy. And I only have to put those two lessons together and know that it's not too late for me to be on SNL.

Shohreh: Exactly. Well, and, like, let's not short yourself here. You recently also returned to the stage. So I want you to talk about that and what you're doing.

Kate: Yes. Yeah. That's a fun story. Yeah. I joined a band last year after many years, probably almost a decade of telling people at parties. That was the first thing I would tell you if I met you at a party is how much I want to be in a band. And not just any band, but a band that covers 60s soft pop AM radio hits.

Shohreh: A very specific desire.

Kate: So specific. And I was at a party for a friend. It was a going away party. And one of her co-workers was there. And I am of course telling her about this dream. And she said, "Well, I'm in a band. Do you want to come to rehearsal?" "Sure. Yeah." And I went to rehearsal. And I've been singing with the band ever since.

They were gigging out right away. So I think I had gone to two or three practices with them. And they said, "We got a gig next month. So meet us there, you know," wherever it was, "at four o' clock." "Okay."

So if there's anything in the world about faith and just knowing it's going to happen and riding with it when it does, that is one heck of a story, a testament to that.

Shohreh: I also adore that you're, like, the youngest person in this band by far which makes sense for the genre that you are choosing to sing.

[laughter]

Kate: I know songs that they don't, sometimes.

Shohreh: [laughs]

Kate: I think if I had joined a band as a younger person, I might have done a lot more work for free. But now, they're just, "Yeah, we play music, this is what we charge. Do you want us to play or not?"

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And it's also a unique-- If you think about all the bands in the world that you might know, a very small percentage of them are three or more women together with no men. That's such a rarity. Who is out there that we can look to and say, "We're a band like whomever", and there aren't a ton. It feels really great to have music be a part of my life in that kind of way. So yeah. I'm all over the place doing all kinds of stuff.

Shohreh: Yeah. You really are. You have tons of different interests. And I know I had seen a post that you had put on your Taking Up Space blog about how you had seen, like, you know, this ad for Weight Watchers, and it really pissed you off because they basically were suggesting that, through Weight Watchers, like, so-and-so, like, found their voice to be able to, like, sing and get on stage again and that you were as that, "Well, you don't need a Weight Watchers to be someone worthy of being on the stage."

Kate: Yeah. I saw that ad while I was on stage doing my first gig. So if you've not had this sort of experience of being on stage, it's sort of a double consciousness in a not-so-political way.

But, you know, you're focused on the audience. You're focused on your band. And then, we were at this bar, and I see this Jennifer Hudson ad on TV. And it actually said, "Kate" was the name of the character. "Kate found her voice." And I was in the middle of singing a song. And it took everything I had to stay focused on my singing and not just throw something at the TV because I was on Weight Watchers when I was 10 years old. And Weight Watchers has been in the news recently for its app.

And last year, they did something else about, you know, giving free programming to teens. So it's really never gone away but kind of coming up in the consciousness. And I was, from 10 until 25, maybe even up until I was 30, really being wrapped up in not just the weight loss or dieting world, but the Weight Watchers world.

My mom was my leader at some point in my teens. And, you know, I have many women in my family with different weight loss stories through Weight Watchers. And that is the most insidious part of Weight Watchers marketing to me is the way that it wants dieting to substitute actual bonding, especially between women and family members.

So this idea of dieting giving you your voice, it's very Ursula-Little Mermaid thing, right?

Shohreh: Right.

Kate: Like, you get your voice, but what am I going to take from you? I'm going to take this connection. I'm going to take this belonging so that you are always trying to be a perfect version.

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And I think especially for kids, you know-- All kids want to do is make the grown-ups around them happy. And if a grown-up comes to you and says, "We're going to do this thing. You're going to do this thing." "Okay, sure. What is it?" And then you do it. And then it sets you up for this lifetime of always wanting to make those grown-ups happy again.

And I think it's damaged a lot of people. And that's what I think body positivity, and inclusive health and wellness, and just even body neutrality can do for all of us is start repairing some of that damage that's been going on for two, three, four, five generations.

Shohreh: Definitely. And I think that is a good point to maybe talk a little bit about body positivity as a movement kind of versus the watered-down version of "love yourself" body positivity as I think I've heard you refer to it. And you've written about before how you actually think the viewpoint of the "love yourself" body positivity isn't necessarily without merit even though it's not going far enough.

But I do think so many people are conflating, like, positive body image with body positivity as a movement. And that would be worth talking about here.

Kate: Yeah. I think the important thing to remember about my definition of body positivity and the reason that I continue to advocate for it when so many people have abandoned it to this larger "love yourself" kind of wellness is that, to me, positive isn't always happy. Positive means presence.

So if you think of that clinical where you test positive for strep throat or something, that means that virus or infection is present in your body. So if you think about positivity as presence, that-- I mean, that body positivity is about inclusion of people. I think it's a right and responsibility to make choices about your health and wellness, and about your body for that matter, but also making that possible for as many other people as you can.

And depending on a lot of different factors that may or may not be available to you in a big way, but a small way would be to not engage in diet talk, you know, at your work, or at a break room, or with friends and family. Simply walking away from those conversations is sending a kind of message that you are inclusive and want possibilities for people wherever you go.

So that's what's really important to me about body positivity. And the reason that the "love yourself" kind, you know-- that perspective is the first step is because when you acknowledge your own capacity to love and be loved and respect yourself, then that makes it possible for you to give that to others.

I don't think it's that kind of Ru Paul-- It's not like you can't love others until you love yourself. It's not that. It's more of a recognition of, like,

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"Yes. I am worthy of love and respect. Therefore, everyone else is, too." So that, to me, also means that body positivity is more than just body size or aesthetics which I think is another hallmark of the "love yourself" wellness that really focuses on "I love how I look."

It's more about that intersectionality of there are different ways to live in a body that deserve to take up space just as much as I do. So whether that's gender/sexuality identity, race and ethnicity, ability. I mean, that's physical, mental, emotional ability, all of those things factor into it. And it's a much more political stance. And I don't mean political like governments politics but more your values-based politics that really opens up a lot of possibilities.

But if you need to start with yourself, that's perfectly fine. It's just go a little further. If body positivity and the ability to love and accept yourself has done you any kind of good, it's worth thinking about how you can share that with others.

Shohreh: Definitely. You specialize in storytelling and marketing in fitness and wellness which is an area I think is really starting to embrace body positivity a little bit more. So can you start by talking about some of the issues you see with this shame-based, mainstream marketing in these industries?

Kate: Yeah. Absolutely. So the shame-based marketing that's so prevalent in fitness culture, honestly, I think it's bad marketing. I think that it excludes more people than it includes, but the reason that that works so well is it does promote this exclusivity of, "Are you in or out? Are you part of us? Are you one of us or not?"

And the way you prove you are one of us is when you look like the people that are promoting the products. Because there are many studies, all kinds of studies from universities, from fitness organizations, that show that people, generally, will subscribe to some kind of wellness program, so any of these "going to change my life sorts of things."

New gym membership, new diets, anything like that, even therapy. They'll stick with it pretty hardcore for the first six to 12 weeks, and then there's a pretty dramatic drop off until years one and two where they're not doing that anymore.

So even though it costs more to acquire a new client, we've developed this culture where people need to start over. They need to restart. They need to come back to the fold as it were. So that shame-based marketing keeps everybody coming back.

If we had marketing that said, "Fitness is really fun, and you should want to do it because we're the most fun in town," that's not gonna start that cycle. You'd have to spend more time and attention on retention rather than getting these new clients.

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And again, that dysfunctional cycle of if everybody else is doing it one way, you don't want to set yourself apart to be another way. I've had conversations with lots of people when I asked, you know-- I'll see a brand that will say something like, "Our fitness products is for everybody."

And I say, "Hey. That's great. I'm so glad that you want to be a part of this. Why am I only seeing one kind of model in your fitness advertising?" And they say, "Well. It's not about the body type. It's just..." And then, it sort of devolves into, like, nothing. There's no-- They don't have an answer for that.

But the answer is it's kind of like school lunch tables. Remember? Where there's the jocks and the nerds and all these people, right? Fitness are the jocks, and then body-positive people are the nerds. And it's cool for a jock to come over and befriend one of the nerds to show how cool they are. But when it comes to taking them to prom or dating or, you know, like, a serious friendship, no. no. no. We don't want any part of that. Why? Not because the nerds are going to think we're uncool but because our jock friends are going to think we're uncool.

And it's...fitness brands aren't going to stick their necks out to say, "We are for everybody, even the freaks, and the weirdos, and the old and broken people, right? They're not going to say that. They have to maintain this ideal of fitness, and it's only for the exclusive club.

So that's one of the problems. I guess that's two. One is that shame-based marketing is a bad marketing tactic. And two, there's always going to be this divide unless and until one of the big varsity jocks comes over and sits at the nerd table and doesn't care what the cool kids think. And I haven't seen that happen yet.

Shohreh: No. And I think it's really hard for those of us who are, you know, solo entrepreneurs or small brands who-- we are using these other marketing tactics. And we're moving away from using shame, but it's a risk to do so just financially and in the industry because it's still not the accepted way to do things.

And it can be really hard out there to basically not sell weight loss, to not sell a singular body type.

Kate: Yeah. Like you said, we're all growing up with it. We're all surrounded by it. And fitness professionals are no exception. You get this idea that this is how it's supposed to be. So you're fighting your own battles of self-worth and body image while also trying to bring in people and change their hearts and minds toward a new way, not just of working out, but of being.

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What I love to see in non-traditional fitness marketing, I saw a gym just recently, a simple little poster, I love it. Just a little poster. It had a couple rocks on it with painted on smiley faces, and they were doing some sort of exercise thing. And the copy on the ad said "Fitness rocks." That's beautiful.

Shohreh: A good old-fashioned pun.

Kate: [laughs] It's got a good pun. It didn't show any actual people in it, so I didn't have to be like, "Oh. Is that me or not?" It was smiley. It had a positive message. Everything about it. And it was just a simple idea. And I hope it resonated with people.

If you see marketing like that in your place of fitness or that your trainer or wellness coach is doing that you like, tell them. Especially if it's these more big-box kind of places. The more you tell them that you like what they're doing, the more of it they will make because they have this idea that we have to do this a certain way. That's what people want. They won't know unless you tell them.

Shohreh: I'm actually curious about your opinion on-- A lot of business coaches nowadays, kind of recognizing this shift in the industry kind of are taking this line of, "Well, just use, like, your body and, like, the weight loss lines and all that stuff to get people in the door. And then, once they're in, you can kind of hit them with, like, the mindset stuff and the body positivity and all of that." So people are trying to walk this line of both.

Kate: Okay. I don't know who's giving that advice, but that is the most cowardly thing I have ever heard in my life.

Shohreh: Oh snap.

Kate: I did not know you were going to ask me this question, so you're getting some unfiltered opinion about that. I heard similar things from different kinds of business coaches, the advice where you sell them what they want, you give them what they need kind of thing. And the way that I've heard that is more like they tell you they want to make more sales, but what they really need to do is change the way they think about sales, right?

So to me, that's a more linear shift. I could see how that might be applicable. But to offer weight loss, which is a thing you know people want-- I don't know how familiar your listeners are with the customer journey and the different places people have to be in their mindset to buy.

So the first one, like the most basic, is they don't know you. They don't know they have a problem. They're not looking for a solution. They're just totally unaware of the entire thing that you do, right? And then, it gets progressively closer to you being the solution to their-- they know

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they have a problem. They know what the solution is. They know you are the person to help them with this problem, right? So you can think of anything you've ever purchased that maybe was a big-ticket item, you probably went through the same kind of process.

So they're basically saying, your clients are at the problem-aware. They have a problem with their bodies. They are solution-aware. The problem with my body image is weight loss. And then you are skipping all the steps that say, "I have the weight loss that you want and need."

So you basically tricked them into a sales process and a purchase. And then you're going to give them something totally different, which is a weight-neutral or body positive fitness experience? To advise someone to do that is basically saying your credibility is garbage, so you should just not have that be one of your values because you are now willing to bait and switch people to buy from you.

Shohreh: I guess part of the problem too is that some people in this industry are of the belief that you can be body positive as well as sell intentional weight loss. I disagree with that. I believe that you do as well. But so for them, they're not necessarily seeing it as a bait and switch. They're like, "Oh. Well, I'm giving them weight loss, but, like, I'm also teaching them not to hate their body at the same time."

Kate: To sell someone weight loss is supporting your own belief that weight loss will solve their problem. I don't know that you can be an ethical, values-based, body positive fitness professional, and with integrity, say to a client, "I believe that weight loss can solve your problem" no matter what problem that is, whether that's, "I am unhappy with my body image." "I have knee pain." "I want to live a longer life." "I want to do anything else besides lose weight."

I do think it's common for people to think that, when they work out or when they approach fitness that weight loss is going to be the thing that solves their problem. I also believe it's possible to help someone see that weight loss is not the solution to whatever problem they have, or-- I think this is even more to the point of what I believe because I don't think that "Oh. No one should lose any weight ever for any reason." That is not my take on this. But we have taken the story of weight loss and made it into its own mythology that it's going to solve everybody's problems, and it's not.

Maybe somebody comes in and says, "I want to lose weight. I want to lose 50 pounds because I have knee pain." Well, what if losing 10 pounds will cure your knee pain? Is that enough? Most of the time, they will say no because that's not actually what they're there for. They are there for this total life transformation which is what we've been sold in fitness marketing especially the before and after weight-loss success stories.

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So if you're selling someone weight loss, and then you're going to teach them how to love themselves, you're accepting a client on the basis of this mythology and not what is actually the best solution for them. And that's what I think is really unethical and a bad business practice.

Shohreh:

I agree. I will clarify for my audience because not everyone is as deep in this as you and I are which is that the general stance in, like, Health At Every Size and body positivity is that the thing that we are not selling is *intentional* weight loss, so going in with the goal of manipulating different factors in order so that the goal is that someone will lose weight.

However, sometimes, when people change different things in their lives, they happen to lose weight as a result of that even if that is not the goal. So I as a coach and trainer, and most people in this industry, that's not something that we're demonizing or that we have a problem with because your body is just going to react however it's going to react if you change the way you're eating, or you change the way you're moving, or your sleep, or your stress, or whatever.

Some people, that means they lose weight. Some people stay the same. Some people gain weight. It really just depends on where your body wants to be. And that is different from promising somebody, "I'm going to manipulate these different factors in your life so that you lose weight regardless of if the things we're manipulating are actually healthy for you and your life as you are right now."

I just want to clarify that because I think some people think that we are against anybody ever losing a pound which is not nuanced enough for what we're saying.

Kate:

Yes. Thank you for that clarification. I think that is a really important point, especially if you are just starting to get into body positivity or you're coming into the wellness space.

My gateway into this was I was in graduate school, and I was studying autobiography, specifically weight loss before and after success stories. And I wanted to know if there was another way to tell the story of our bodies. And I found through that work and that research the concept of fat acceptance or fat liberation, which is a political movement that comes out of the 1960s just like the civil rights movement, first-wave feminism, that is all around the same time, that is questioning why we continue to allow body size stigma, fat stigma, in our world.

And when I found that movement, it was such a paradigm shift for me that I just bought into it completely. Like, I called myself a fat activist. If I heard anybody dieting, I would fight with them. Now, I'm not proud to admit this, but I think it's important to in this clarification.

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Like, I was mean to some people, especially online where I would see a coach who said they were body positive-- or this was before body positive was a word, but they would say, "I want you to love yourself no matter what. I'm so proud of my 50-pound weight loss." And I'd be like, "You're a fraud." I don't know if I actually said that, but, "You are deceiving people. And weight loss isn't the answer." And I just got so mean about it.

And even in my personal life where I would hear somebody was joining Weight Watchers or was doing some kind of diet. And I would go off about the research about how, you know, "95 percent of diets fail, so I don't know why you're trying that." I'm not proud of this, right?

So through my own learning, and through my definition of body positivity, I've come to a place that I feel really solid and secure about which is I'm not here to police anybody's actions of what they want to do with their bodies, the choices they want to make about their bodies.

What I want to do is question the story we tell about that experience because, right now, the story we tell is, "Fat people are before, and thin people are after. Weight loss is virtuous. Weight loss is healthy." That's the story that we're are telling. Whether or not that's true for you in your experience is a totally different issue.

I am never going to tell anyone at this stage in my life or ever again that your desire to lose weight is bad. Your desire to change your body is bad. And I just look at it as any kind of other experience. I would like, at some point, the experience of climbing a mountain. I've never done that before. Can I do it? I don't know. Sure. Maybe. Why not? But I don't want anybody coming and telling me I can't try, you know? "Well, 95% of people have never climbed this mountain. Like, what makes you think you can do it?" Like, I don't know. Let me just see and find out.

I think it's the same thing. It's not for me. Weight loss and intentional dieting, that's not for me. But it's also not for me to tell you that you can't do that. And I think that when people are coming into this space, they're going to hear a lot of that, like, "All dieting is bad. All people who diet hate themselves," you know? That kind of rhetoric that is really harmful, especially for people who are kind of just getting on their feet about this whole perspective.

And I can't imagine what it must have been like for someone who trusted me enough to tell me what their plans are with their health and wellness and for me to just steamroll them with all of this negativity.

So I am an advocate. That's why I said in the beginning if you want to create a change, one of the most powerful ways is to just not engage in that conversation. You don't have to be combative. You don't have to defend your position. You don't have to bring out a dissertation's worth of research to demonstrate your values in that way.

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Shohreh: That's something I have counseled a lot of people on too because, as people are getting into intuitive eating, HAES, all of this, a lot of times, they want to evangelize it a little bit. And, you know, they're like, "Oh. How can I talk to, like, my friends and my co-workers about this?" And I'm always like, "Well, have they asked you for your advice or your opinion about this?" And if they haven't, then it's not really your place to be like, "This is amazing. Here is all my information. Your dieting is terrible."

Like, instead, I usually suggest just live it. Like, be the person who doesn't call food good or bad, or be the person where, when they're being down on their body, that you tell them, like, you're not going to tolerate that kind of talk from them. Be the person who walks away, like you said, when the diet talk is going on or changes the subject. Live that so that when they are ready, they know that you are a safe person that they can talk to you about that if they ever are ready. And for a lot of people, it just takes a lot of time, you know?

Even five years ago, if you had told me about all these concepts that I'm living and working in now, I would have been like, "That's bullshit." I was so steeped in, like, this fitness/wellness industry, thin privilege, that I couldn't see that at that time. But by surrounding myself with some really wonderful people, being open to learning, I have completely shifted. So it can happen, but trying to force somebody to get there is never going to be the way that it happens.

Kate: Yeah. It's really hard to be in those conversation sometimes, especially if I'm around moms and daughters, and I'll hear a mom say something like, "Oh. I'm going to eat all these cookies. I just can't control myself today." And, like, I hear this and I'm just, like, on fire because this is the sort of thing I want to stop doing.

And my approach to this is, like you said, to live it and to show that I am a safe person. And a lot of it, sometimes it's just as simple as I'm a safe person to eat around. I was hosting a lunch club here in Central Illinois. I called it the Relish Lunch Club. And it was just a place where we would all get together, and you know that in this room, for this hour we're not going to talk about diets. If we're going to talk about food, it's, "Hey, I bought too much of this. If you want some, you can take it," or, "This is really good. I'm so glad I got this for lunch." Like, that is the extent of the food talk at The Relish Lunch Club.

So if I'm with moms and daughters or moms and kids, I will be the one. I'll be very loud about it, but I'll just say something like, "Okay. I brought the salad. Take as much or as little as you want," and that's it. That's all I say.

And it's those little gestures that, to me, help reinforce the idea that there's no good food. There's no bad food. "Eyes on your own plate" is the thing I tell my kid all the time. We don't need to be commenting about other people's food. It doesn't matter what they eat. It doesn't

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matter what they say to you about what you eat. Just eyes on your own plate.

Shohreh: Yes. And I think too, like, it doesn't mean you can never comment or say anything. Like, sometimes it's invited. Like, this instance came up for me where I was in one of my trapeze classes. And we had just finished, like, a really tough class. And someone in my class was like, "I'm going to go to Sonic, and I'm going to get some fries because I earned those fries." And I just looked at her, and I said, "You don't have to earn fries. You can just eat them because you want them." And she was like, "Yeah. You know what? You're right."

And, like, that was it. That was the end of the conversation. But, like, that one little switch for people can be enough for their brains to be like, "Oh. I wonder why I said it that way," you know?

Kate: Yeah. It's such a habit. It's a pattern. It's the way we talked about things. And I think that's it's easy, especially among women type who have been kind of trained in this social way, you know? How many times you haven't seen somebody in a while, and they're like, "Oh. You look amazing. What have you been doing?" Or, "Have you lost weight?" And that's a compliment.

And, you know, if we start examining our language patterns, what are the actual words that we're using when we talk about these things and how we interact with each other, it opens up a lot of possibility for a friendship and connection.

And yeah, talking about food is great. It's one of the primary ways we connect and care for each other is to share food. So why shouldn't we talk about it? But let's talk about it in ways that foster that relationship and that pleasure and enjoyment instead of disconnect.

Shohreh: Agreed. So if I'm a fitness or wellness business owner listening to this podcast, and I know that before and afters are persuasive, I know that shame-based marketing works, what are some other ways that I can tell the story of what I do and that I can tell the story of my clients without using that?

Kate: Wonderful question. Let's break down what a before and after success story is and looks like. So before and after success stories happen all over the place, not just in weight loss, but thinking about Marie Kondo or any of those-- Property Brother or-- I don't know. I don't watch those shows too much anymore, but you know the ones where they're like,-

Shohreh: That is a show. [laughs]

Kate: [laughs]- "This was your old, gross house. Now, this is your cool new house," right? All of those are before-and-after transformations. And the one thing that they have in common is that, in order for the drama of that story to work, you have-- A story needs three things. It needs a

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hero, it needs something the hero wants, and then someone or something that keeps the hero from what they want.

So in a before-and-after success story, the hero is the house, or the person, or the closet, or the food truck, or whatever. The thing they want is to be whole. And the thing or person keeping them from it is themselves. So it's this fight for your life kind of thing.

So when you have the conflicts being between self, that's a plot point they call self-versus-self, that means you have to prove that you are a villain that you can vanquish. So the before is negative, whatever that means to you. For before and after weight-loss success stories it's that you were fat, miserable, gross, sad, lonely, any adjective you want to put on it. And then the after you is healthy and beautiful, light, bright and accepted, and fully alive.

So the most impactful way to do that is to take a picture of a person and show them in a pair of large pants. That tells a before-and-after success story immediately. The second level to that is to show two side by side pictures. The left is bad before. The right is good and after.

And I see this sometimes where people want to try and flip the script on the before-and-after story where they will put-- Maybe it's a story of eating disorder recovery or weight gain through strength training. So they'll put the- quote, unquote- after picture in the before spot on the left side, and they'll put the "who I was before picture" on the right side.

But that doesn't do enough. The story is so ingrained in our brains. All you have to do is show two pictures side by side to get that before and after. So the best way to kind of short circuit the story and start writing new stories is more of a collective.

So show me a collage of pictures of your journey. What was it like for you during this whole time? Show me lots of different people working out in your facility at different seasons, different times of day. Give me more of a longitudinal. Show the during process of it.

And then when you're writing about it, a lot of people start chronologically. They'll say, "Well, back in 2009, I weighed X amount and had this high blood pressure. And I was sad and miserable." Now, the text is doing the job of setting up that before person as bad.

So again, play with the chronology. Tell me a really hard-- And the thing about before-and-after success stories, especially when it comes to health and wellness, is that I think the stories are so much more compelling when you get away from the results.

So I have kind of a before-and-after, what could be a before-and-after success story, with my running. You know? Before, I was not a runner. Now, I am a runner. Great. That story is boring. But I could tell you

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some really great stories about-- On my run the other day, I noticed there was a turtle on this side of the street.

[laughter]

Kate: I live in Central Illinois. We don't have a lot of wildlife out here, so to see the turtle was, like, a big deal. But it made me think about the fact that I've been running for five years now. And if I had not kept up those habits, I might not have seen that turtle.

Shohreh: My husband's favorite animal is the turtle, so I'm laughing because he also would have been really excited about that turtle.

Kate: [laughs] And I've seen it. And again, I go enough now that I know that, around 10 AM, that turtle is going to be there. If I go out at two, no turtle. So tell the story of someone being consistent or, you know, having a difficult time and then coming back. I don't think we celebrate consistency enough.

I mean, when you've done it, when you've done something for a long time, it gets to be a little boring on your end, but I mean think about it, of having to do that over and over and over. I mean, I don't know. I'm just impressed with people who can do things pretty consistently.

So celebrate other kinds of successes and milestones, you know? Sometimes, I'll see people, you know-- it's your third year working out in the gym. That's awesome. I mean, yeah. Especially if it's, like, a five AM class or something. Like, wow. That really works for you. You've really been going at it. I think that's great.

So what's a more compelling way to tell the stories of your success, the success of your clients, the possible successes of people who might be drawn into your practice? What can you promise people that you know is within your values and you know is the result they're going to get that has nothing to do with how they look, physically? And that can be hard to think about.

And the other thing you want to do, you know-- all these business courses and advice is to establish yourself as an authority. And that's where that "your body is your business model" thing comes from. But what's another way you can establish authority? You can promise someone that, "Every time you come into my practice space, you're going to be heard and respected, and we're going to try and have a good time." Sign me up. How do I get into that? Like, that's what I want for my life.

And maybe your potential client didn't know that's what they wanted. Maybe they came to you with this idea of losing weight, but instead you promised them respect and to be a part of your community. "Oh, well now all of a sudden. Yeah. That's the thing that I wanted. I wanted a sense of community and belonging, and here it is." That's the way to

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establish yourself as an authority that some of the people can know, like, and trust.

Because again, if you're going to meet a trainer for six to 12 weeks, how well are you really going to get to know them? What kind of connection can you build during that time? It's probably not a lot. So that's a very long answer to a pretty simple question, but yeah. No before-and-after success stories, and speak from your values. Speak from your heart.

Shohreh: I appreciate your long answer because I do think it's worth delving deeper into. And, you know, I always think to myself when I see kind of these fit pros online who are just-- Their entire Instagram is, you know, photos of them half naked where I'm like, "Yes. Okay. So I see that you have abs, and you have, like, a round booty or whatever. But what does that tell me about you as a coach?"

It tells me nothing about what my experience is going to be like working with you." And so if that's all I can see on your page, and I know nothing about you and your values and how you're going to take care of me as a client and all these other things, like, it's kind of useless information.

And, like, again, it does work because of the culture that we're living in, but I have heard a lot of stories from people who basically got sucked in by that image, and then got something totally different than what they were expecting from that coach because they, as the consumer, didn't realize, like, "Oh. Actually, I need to ask some different questions here and not just assume that because they look a certain way, they can give me what I'm looking for."

Kate: Yes. That's an excellent word that I think both fit pros and consumers of fitness culture can lean on, that experience, because I bet, if I were a potential client of yours, and I asked, you know, "What is it like working with you? What experience am I going to have?" You're going to have an answer.

Shohreh: Oh yeah.

Kate: And I know. And part of that comes out through your branding. And I wasn't involved in the visuals of your branding, but I knew right away, this is somebody that I can have a lot of fun with. This is a fun practice. This is a fun experience, and that's great.

If you are interviewing or going to a gym or something like that during that interview process, and you ask, "What's the experience here?" And they can't speak to anything beyond, "You're going to get a really great workout." I don't know. Have been thinking about this at all? And that is what I would encourage from both sides. What kind of experience do I want to have with my fitness? And what kind of experience do I want to offer my clients?

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Shohreh: Definitely. And I think, too-- I want to throw out there for those of you who are personal brands, and, you know, you're not necessarily working as a big box gym, so you have a little more control over your branding and your marketing. Like, I did some work with Kelly Diels as well when I was working with you. And she is really big in the feminist marketing space. And she has done a lot of work around, like, imagery and, like, how you can change it and not fit into this typical mold of what we see.

I mean, if you go to the homepage of my website, I am literally yielding a lollipop as a weapon in, like, a rainbow gown. Like, I'm sending a lot of messages in this single image that are very different from what you're going to find on most, like, fitness and wellness websites. And I'm doing it on purpose because I want someone to go to my website and be like, "Okay. I really want to know what she's about. Like, this is very different from what I'm used to seeing."

And, like, you guys can do that too. You don't have to do, like, the crossed-arm, fit pro, like, Jillian Michaels image on your website that everybody has. Like, get creative with it. Figure out, like, what message are you trying to send. Who are you? And you can put that into your branding and your marketing. And it's really fun.

Kate: Yeah. And if you are a serious person, and that is the kind of experience-- I mean, it's really doing your clients a service if you are up front about the kind of person you are. Like, if I were a super serious kind of fit person, I would not want to go somewhere where I feel like I'm required to have fun to be a part of this community.

Shohreh: Right. Exactly.

Kate: Yeah. And if you are like really fun-- but I've worked with some folks who-- their personalities are super fun, but the fitness side of them, they take very seriously. And it's like, "Okay. Do you want to call in the people who want to have fun, or do you want to call in the people who are here for a super tough workout because they have goals, and they want to experience both having fun and being serious?"

And because they think they have to shut off a part of them-- like, "Oh. If I want to call in the super-serious fitness people, I can't be fun." Like, no. Speak to the people who are both. I know there's a fear of, "If I'm too specific in who I want to work with, then I'm going to lose all of these clients," but some of the best advice I ever got was, if you're thinking about your branding as talking to a room full of people, it's not just the people who are right next to you who are hearing your message. There are gonna be people coming from other rooms to hear what you have to say.

But you can't, like, run to every room and try to say, "Hey. Come in. Let's see what's in here. Hey, come in and see what I have. Hey, come

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and see what I have." They will come to you if you are loud enough in who you are and what you do and just be secure in that. Stay where you are and send a message.

Shohreh: Exactly. I definitely think it's about authenticity for sure. And if we're going to talk about authenticity, I feel like we cannot end this conversation without talking about the fact that you are currently writing a book on The Golden Girls.

Kate: [laughs] Woo.

Shohreh: So please tell me more about that.

Kate: Yeah. My book about The Golden Girls. We're talking about the TV show The Golden Girls, you know.

Shohreh: For those who don't know about the show. [laughs]

Kate: For those who are unaware. Yeah. When I was in grad school, I came across Wayne State University press, and they have a book series called TV Milestones. And I was looking through their back catalogue, and I said, "Hey--" because I just wanted to buy it. I said, "Hey. Do you have one on The Golden Girls?" And they said, "No." And I said, "Well, then I would like to write that book."

[laughter]

Kate: So that was in 2014. This is another one of those, like, just believe it will happen, and it will happen kind of stories. So in 2014, I sent in my book proposal, and they were like, "Great. We love this. We want you to do this book."

About two months later, they got back to me and said, "Actually, you don't have your PhD yet. We cannot offer a contract to anyone without a PhD in hand." I was disappointed, but undeterred. I just knew this was going to happen, right?

So I would sit down to write my dissertation. And every time I felt frustrated, or I didn't know if I wanted to continue in higher ed, or anything, I would just think about that book and like, "I'm going to write that book. So if I'm going to do that, then I need to get this PhD, and I'm going to do it."

So I did. In 2017, the week after I defended my dissertation, which is in- - graduation is not the end of getting your Ph.D; defending your dissertation is. So the week after that, I sent in my revised proposal. They accepted. Here we are. The book is being published May 4th, 2020.

Shohreh: Oh my God.

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Kate: It is a wonderful date for a lot of different reasons. My son's birthday is in early May, so it's, like, a lot of genesis happening in early May. But also, 2020 is the 35th anniversary of The Golden Girls premiere. So if I had published earlier, I wouldn't have hit that milestone. It would have been in an off-year. But now, I get to celebrate the 35th anniversary of the premiere with my book.

And I'm putting it out there, I would really love to be on Ellen during pride month talking about how The Golden Girls was and was not, like, a watershed TV show for LGBTQ rights in the U.S. So anybody out there, make that happen. That would be great.

[laughter]

Shohreh: We'll see what we can do for ya.

Kate: Yeah. But one of the things that I really love about writing this book is that it deals so much with body image. So, if you talk to anybody about The Golden Girls, they probably know that it's about four older women living in Miami. And they're kind of like fun and feisty living their best lives out there, right? And in a lot of ways, that is true.

But it's also about the representation of age on television. We had not, and have yet still, to have another TV show where four older women are shown living together as roommates.

So there's still a lot of room for that kind of representation. And the thing I was really excited to talk to you about, and I did not get to write about in the book-- I just didn't have room for it because this is the first academic book on The Golden Girls, so I had to do more of an overview than, like, diving really deeply into anyone topic.

Shohreh: [laughs]

Kate: Is the idea of how much they diet. They are on diets constantly. They are constantly making fat jokes. I think in the second or-- I think it might even be the first episode, they pull out a scale because one of the characters says, "Well, I weigh exactly as much as I did on my wedding day." And they actually moo at her when the thing flips around.

So there is a deep, deep culture of dieting in The Golden Girls. But there is one episode in particular called The Rites of Spring which you watched, yes?

Shohreh: I did, yes. I watched it just for you.

Kate: It's a fake flashback episode. The Golden Girls love to do this. They would go back in time, and they would show you different parts of their lives, but-- A regular flashback episode is from-- They reuse scenes that they've already shot, and they just put them together.

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But most of the time they were creating these sketches, basically, that had never been shown in any other episode. So Rites of Spring in season four is all the times they've gone on diets for different occasions. And 99 percent of the time, it's because somebody is going on a date or-- the whole episode of Rites of Spring is they're going on the twins cruise, you know? And, like, they remember all these times they were dieting. Oh man, that episode.

Shohreh: Yeah. And that episode too. I mean, some parts of it were really cringy. Like, that mooring part is actually in that episode.

Kate: Oh, it's that one. Yeah. Okay.

Shohreh: Yeah. It's one of the flashbacks. And I was like, "Oh my God. Like, this is terrible." And yeah. It's a lot of them, like, making, like, fat jokes at each other. And again, this is, like, the 80s and also, like, sitcoms have never shied away from making a ton of fat jokes. So this is nothing outside of the realm. But, like, now, like, just seeing that and, like, being like, "Oh. This does not age well anymore." It's, like, tough to watch.

Kate: Yeah. It's kind of good. I mean, that means that some kind of change is happening, but it's hard. It's one of those all our faves are problematic, right? So I love The Golden Girls. It still makes me laugh. And I've written about it, but I do cringe at those jokes and those episodes.

And they have even the jokes about gender and femininity and all of that are very cringy. And it's hard to be in love with a certain kind of media that lets you down in such a specific way. And for shows that aired 35 years ago, didn't even know they were letting you down. Like, that wasn't a part of the cultural conversation at that point.

What I hope is that we can take a look at media that we've loved in the past or what's coming up and what we're seeing now and really thinking more about what message is it sending about body image and body positivity, and how do my values align or differ from this message?

Shohreh: I agree. Because I think, especially now with the dissemination of language, is things are moving so much quicker. We're adjusting so much faster. So I think shows, even from four or five years ago now, you can watch, and there are jokes that you're like, "Oh. That's really cringy. That's not gonna hold up now."

So it's not even just, like-- Obviously, the Golden Girls is 30 years old, but even stuff as recent as, like, five/10 years ago, you can watch and be like, "Wow. We've actually come a long way with language and as a culture that we wouldn't maybe these jokes now," or at least if you did, like, people would have something to say about it, which I always find is really interesting. It's interesting to see how we're developing as a culture for sure.

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Kate: Yeah. The more stories we can tell about things-- I think Kelly Diels talks about this, too, being a culture maker. If you have an opportunity to tell your story in a unconventional way, you are changing the culture. And not that anybody is obligated to tell their own story or make that part of any kind of branding that you do, but however you disrupt that narrative is a culture-changing moment.

Shohreh: Agreed. And I will give you one last chance to tell a story about yourself as well before we wrap up here which is I always ask my guests, how do you define health and wellness for yourself at this moment in your life?

Kate: Oh. Health and wellness for me at this moment is really getting in touch with the emotional part of wellness. I think, for a long time, and this isn't uncommon, but health and wellness was about the body and maybe mental health which sometimes gets wrapped up in that.

But I have been noticing my energy levels and how my wellness is impacted by and impacts different energy. And I don't mean that in a, like, metaphysical way but just when do I work best? When do I feel really happy and excited about things, and how can I use that as part of my overall wellness? And it's something I've never really thought about before.

And it's just a part of my own journey and healing and the next, you know, evolution of my life. I'm really excited to get in that even though it's terrifying because I typically avoid emotion as much as possible. [laughs]

Shohreh: I understand.

Kate: The ways that I've challenged myself before with fitness and different kinds of activities, I'm doing that same thing in my emotional life. Like, why did I think this was unavailable to me? Why did I think this was scary? What can I achieve if I attend to this emotional side of my life? So that's what's up for me right now.

Shohreh: I love that. You're actually one of the first guests who has mentioned emotional health as being an important aspect of kind of health and wellness. And I believe that it is, too. So it's cool to see how you're kind of working on that in yourself.

And in general, thank you so much for being here. You're such a multi-faceted person. I feel there's a million things I could talk to you about at any given moment.

Kate: And I could talk about them all. [laughs]

Shohreh: Exactly. It's so much fun. So how can people find you and work with you?

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Kate: You can find me on Instagram or Twitter - @drkatebrowne. And I'm sure you will have this all in the show notes.

Shohreh: Yes, I will.

Kate: So yeah. Connect with me there. I'm redoing my website right now. That's very exciting. So Instagram and Twitter are the best ways to get a hold of me right now. Taking Up Space is a blog on Facebook, so you can also speak to me there as well.

Shohreh: Awesome. Thanks so much, Kate. This was really fun. I'm excited to release this episode to the masses so they can learn all kinds of good stuff.

Kate: Fantastic.

Shohreh: And that's our show for today. I appreciate you listening to and supporting the Redefining Health & Wellness podcast.

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Hope to see you for the next episode.