

Redefining Health & Wellness

#16

Featured this episode: Shohreh Davoodi

Shohreh Davoodi: You are listening to Episode number 16 of the Redefining Health & Wellness podcast. In this solo episode, I am doing a deep dive into big, bad diet culture. I talk about what the heck diet culture is, why it matters, and some steps you can take to leave it behind for good. To access the show notes and a full transcript of this episode, head to shohrehdavoodi.com/16. That's shohrehdavoodi.com/16.

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Hey y'all. Welcome to the Redefining Health & Wellness podcast. I'm your host, Shohreh Davoodi. I'm a certified intuitive eating counselor and a 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.

Shohreh: Well hello there my health and wellness kings, queens, and everything in-betweens. I was not planning to record a solo episode so soon after my most recent one. But sometimes, even when we plan our best, things just don't go the way that we thought that they would. So fuck it. Here we are.

Today, I am going to be talking about one of my favorite topics which is diet culture and wellness culture. And when I say favorite, I don't mean that I like diet and wellness culture, just the opposite actually. But it is one of my favorite topics of conversation because I think it is so important to address.

If you've been listening to the podcast up to this point, you have heard me speak on diet culture and wellness culture before. It often comes up in passing in episodes. And if you follow me anywhere online, I also talk about it quite a bit.

Today, we are going to get into the nitty-gritty of what diet culture is, how it shows up in the world, why it's a problem, and what we can do about it. So I think the best place to start is by defining what exactly diet culture is. I like to define culture as a system of beliefs and values that prioritizes body weight, shape, and size over health and well-being. Diet culture places a moral value on behaviors, products, and goals that are designed to achieve a specific body type.

And diet culture is not just about weight loss and body change, though that is a really big part of it. It's also about which bodies are deemed good and worthy and desirable and lovable. It is about conforming to the status quo that diet culture has set up.

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From the time we are born until the time that we die, diet culture is all around us. It is ubiquitous. It is like the air that we breathe. It influences how we speak and exercise, what we eat and what we wear, and even how we feel about and talk to ourselves. We are literally living and breathing diet culture every day, yet most people don't even know that it exists because it's seen as so normal.

So until you start to do a little bit of digging, it can be hard to even know that it's there or all the different areas that it can affect in our lives. I want to give some examples of how diet culture has shown up in my own life and affected me, but I do want to give a content warning if that sounds like something that might be triggering for you, then I would skip this section. Do whatever feels right for your own peace of mind.

So one of the first things that came up for me was a memory of being in elementary school. I was probably in third or fourth grade. And I was with my close friend Abby, and we were at a community pool. And for some reason, we got talking about our stomachs, and I think I mentioned that, you know, mine stuck out. And she told me that you could suck in your stomach. And this was a revelation to elementary school Shohreh. And she literally taught me how to suck in my stomach to make it appear smaller.

And of course, this is a practice that I continued until probably five or six years ago. And we know now that, doing this, which many women commonly do, suck in their stomachs, actually makes it so that we cannot get a full breath in. So you have all these girls and women walking around literally not breathing properly, not getting full, deep breaths to support their bodies because they're sucking in their stomachs, and they are trying to appear smaller. And I did this for years and years because I was always very insecure about my stomach because, of course, diet culture says that you are supposed to have a flat and a toned belly, and that is not my genetics.

But you know what I didn't need to be worrying about when I was in elementary school? That. I did not need to be worrying about the shape of my stomach and exerting mental and physical energy to suck it in.

Another memory that came up for me was that I was at a baseball game or some similar event with my family. And I think we got food at the event, you know, like hotdogs and candy and stuff like that. And I remember my brothers making fun of me because I liked to eat. And they called me a trash compactor.

And they thought that was a hilarious nickname for me. And I was so embarrassed, and I hated it. And of course, that made them double down on this nickname and they were teasing me. And I think to myself, "What is it about enjoying food that would possess some little boys to make fun of their sister because she liked food?" Right? Like,

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that only comes from a culture that says that it's a bad thing to enjoy food, that you shouldn't eat too much because that makes you gluttonous.

And of course, there have been plenty of other ways that diet culture has affected me over the years. I think of the girl in middle school who asked me in the gym locker room why my stomach looked pregnant.

So again, going back to this idea that our bodies are only supposed to look one way. And by middle school, girls already know what that way is. And they are curious when somebody's body does not conform to that.

In high school, I remember asking my parents to get me a personal trainer, to let me try fat burning pills or different diets because I wanted a six-pack more than anything - six pack abs, not a six pack of beer. And I remember crying over getting stretch marks early. I had stretch marks already probably by 14 or 15 and thinking that my thighs were ruined forever because I believed that there was only one way that it was acceptable for bodies to look.

And note that all of this happened before social media and YouTube and Instagram and all these things that kids and teenagers look to now that send them even more diet culture and wellness culture messages about what bodies are supposed to look like and what they should be doing to achieve those bodies.

So one of the ways that I like to describe diet culture is as a stream that is flowing in a single direction. And there are three types of fish in that stream. There are the fish who are actively swimming and going in the same direction as the stream. There are the fish who aren't actively swimming but because the stream is moving in a single direction, they are floating along in it passively. And lastly, there are the fish who are doing the very hard work of swimming upstream against the current trying to move in a different direction.

And when I describe diet culture as a stream that you are either going in the direction of or going against, I really mean it because diet culture shows up in our lives in all kinds of ways from the more obvious to the more sneaky and insidious. People often assume that you have to be dieting to be participating in diet culture. And while that is one of the most obvious ways that you can participate in diet culture, you don't have to be on an actual named diet to be a part of diet culture. Because even when we're not on a named diet like keto or paleo, our actions can still support diet culture's agenda, and we can make choices that are based on the diet mentality. So these are diet culture thoughts that are ingrained in our mind.

So let's play a game of "you might be a willing or unwilling participant in diet culture *if*." You might be participating in diet culture if you are following external food rules, whether as part of a diet or just from what

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you've internalized about how you *should* eat. You might be participating in diet culture if you describe foods as fitting into black and white categories such as good and bad, clean and dirty, healthy and unhealthy.

You might be participating in diet culture if certain ways that you eat make you feel guilt or make you feel shame. You might be participating in diet culture if you judge other people for how they eat or dress or for the size of their body. You might be participating in diet culture if you make assumptions about other people based on their size. You might be participating in diet culture if you think of exercise as punishment or as a way to get permission to eat certain things.

You might be participating in diet culture if you feel like you have to justify what you eat. You might be participating in diet culture if you let the number on the scale or your pants size dictate your mood or your self-worth. You might be participating in diet culture if you are commenting on other people's bodies and complimenting weight loss.

I think it's really important for me to say here that I am angry with the culture, not with the participants in the culture. If you do any of the things I just mentioned or anything else I might mention later in this episode, I'm not upset with you for doing so. I don't blame you. I don't think that it's your fault. We are unfortunately not given a choice about whether or not we grow up with diet culture all around us. It affects every single one of us until we make a conscious choice to step away. And there are so many forces that are trying to keep us on that diet culture path.

Because when you think about it, participating in diet culture is actually a form of social currency. It's a way of getting power in a society that doesn't hand out power very easily. So you're rewarded for staying in that dominant paradigm, for participating in the status quo. So of course, it is not easy to let go of. And it's not my place to tell you that you have to walk away from diet culture because diet culture can be protective, especially for those that hold marginalized identities. My job is just to show you what diet culture doesn't want you to see so that you can make an informed decision for yourself.

And speaking of things that diet culture doesn't want you to see, I think it's really important to note that diet culture is a system of oppression that interacts with other systems of oppression. And I know you might be rolling your eyes and thinking, "How can diet culture possibly be a system of oppression? That seems like a really intense way to describe it." But let me show you.

Think about it. What is it that diet culture heralds above all else? It is young, thin, white bodies with, I would also say, a gender presentation that is seen as, like, normal quote-unquote and mainstream. If that is diet cultures ultimate goal, then marginalized people are going to feel the effects the most and experience the most harm.

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And let me be clear, diet culture harms everybody, but it hits marginalized people the hardest because when diet culture holds up white bodies as the best bodies and the most quote-unquote normal bodies, that is racist. When diet culture says that we should all be trying to look as young as possible, that is ageist. When diet culture holds up healthy and fit bodies as the ideal, that is ableist. When diet culture says that thin bodies are the most worthy bodies and that we should all be striving to have them, that is fatphobic.

And I could go on and on here. I also want to mention classism here because one of the most popular off-shoots of diet culture right now is something called "wellness culture." The diet industry has of course gotten very savvy to the fact that diets are no longer cool, so the new thing is to push quote-unquote wellness, which is actually just diet culture in disguise. So these are things like the diets that say they're not diets because actually they're lifestyle changes. Yeah. No. Fuck that. They're diets.

Another great example is Weight Watchers rebranding itself to WW and pretending that it's now all about wellness and not about weight loss, but actually, the entire program is structured the same, and you still have to think of all food as points which is super diet culture-y.

But wellness culture tries to say that it's different because it's all about health and longevity. And honestly, it boils down to "if you just do this, this and this, you can outrun death. And definitely don't do this, this and this because if you do, you're pretty much killing yourself."

So it's just more of that same black and white extreme thinking using different language. And one of the places we are seeing this a lot is with the Silicon Valley bros talking about biohacking for efficiency. No. Biohacking is just the bro form of dieting.

There are a lot of things that wellness culture tries to push as being mandatory for good health. So for example, superfoods or organic foods, fancy gym memberships or classes, that freaking weirdo guy who says that we all need to be drinking this certain spring water from a mountain or some bullshit. Those things are expensive. They are inaccessible to low-income people who have much bigger things to worry about like whether or not they can have fruits and vegetables at all, never mind organic ones.

As I mentioned when I was defining diet culture at the beginning of this episode, diet culture isn't actually good for our health, not our real health, anyways. Because, of course, diet culture is spinning the tale that thinness equals healthy, which is not true. One of the areas in which diet culture is particularly harmful is in the prevalence of eating disorders which have the highest mortality rate of any mental illness. And it's estimated that up to 30 million people have an eating disorder in the United States alone. And of course, many known eating disorder

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risk factors such as body image dissatisfaction, weight stigma and a history of dieting are par for the course in diet culture.

If you're hearing about all of this for the very first time, your reaction may be disbelief which makes sense. If you've been investing into a system your entire life, it can be shocking to hear that pretty much everything that system is based on is a farce.

When people hear that BMI is a lie, that size diversity is a thing, that thinness doesn't equal health, and we don't all have to be chasing it, it can feel like the rug has been pulled out from under them. So if you're in that place, and you're feeling a little bit panicky, I see you. I understand. It's going to be okay.

Once people are able to logically get on board with all of these ideas, they often blame themselves for being stupid, for not having been able to see this sooner, for getting sucked in and wasting so much time and energy and money on something that they now perceive as useless.

I totally get it. When I think about all of the time, energy, and money that diet culture has stolen from me, I get pissed off. I think, "Man. I wish I could have seen sooner." But the reality is, again, it's not my fault, and it's not your fault. And the fact that you're waking up to it now is all that matters. So as hard as it is, try to forgive yourself. Forgive yourself for not knowing, for making mistakes in the past because now you know. And you can learn, and you can grow, and you can start to open up space in your life for other things that are so much more important.

I wanna talk about what you can do next once you've been faced with the ugly truth that is diet culture. And again, not everybody is going to decide that they want to walk away from diet culture, and I understand why that might be the case. But for those of you who are interested in moving in a new direction, from going against the current, I am here to support you in that.

So honestly, the first thing I would suggest is to just learn everything you can, especially if this is new to you, learn about diet culture and wellness culture. Educate yourself on Health At Every Size and intuitive eating. Get really clear on what industries do not have your best interest at heart.

Along with all of the learning, you are of course going to have to do a lot of unlearning as well. So this includes things like really thinking about why you are pursuing intentional weight loss and body change and if you're doing so to the detriment of your own health and well-being, if you're doing so in a way that actually does not align with your values and what's important to you, learning how to shift your focus from external to internal and learning how to ask yourself what it is that you really need and want, not what it is that you think you *should* want.

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And a big part of this is going to be what this podcast is all about which is learning to redefine what health and wellness mean to you, making an effort to expand the definition beyond the very narrow definition that we're given culturally.

Honestly, one of the biggest shifts I recommend to people is to work on shifting their language because if you can change what it is you're saying, over time, it's going to change what you're thinking as well. So I'm talking about things like removing moralizing language from your vocabulary. So stop referring to food as "sinful" or "naughty." Stop talking about cheat days that have no place in food. I would also say removing associations between food consumption and exercise. So stop saying things like, "I earned that piece of pizza," or, "I really deserve a donut because I worked so hard."

And especially, we want to remove shaming language around food and bodies. So I would question it when you think in your head that something isn't flattering on somebody else or saying to a friend, "Oh. She shouldn't be wearing that" when you see an outfit that you don't think fits a person's body. Additionally, when it comes to food, telling people what they should and shouldn't be eating. So that means not saying things like, "You should just go ahead and eat this slice of cake. It's not going to hurt you." And, "Definitely don't eat steak. It's bad for your arteries."

Lastly and honestly, this could be an entirely separate episode, being mindful of complimenting people on weight loss. So this is when we say things like, "Wow. You look so amazing. Have you lost weight?" Or, "You look good. What's your secret?" Because when we do that, we are putting bodies in a hierarchy. We are falling right into diet culture's plan because we are saying, even if it's not what we intended, that "I noticed that your body is smaller, and it looks good." And the implication is that, when your body was bigger, it did not look as good and was not deserving of the attention that I am giving you right now.

And of course, these compliments can ignore all the other reasons that a person's body may have gotten smaller from depression to cancer or other sickness. When we always act like a shrinking body is a positive and good and healthy thing, that ignores a lot of nuance in the world.

All this to say that your language does matter. It not only affects you, but it affects the people around you. And it pulls people into diet culture who do not necessarily want to be there.

Let's also address a really common myth about being anti-diet or anti-diet culture which is that anybody who is does not care about their health. And that's just bullshit. It is a completely unfounded assumption that people who are ditching diet culture have stopped eating anything resembling nutritious foods, are no longer exercising, that they're resigning themselves to a sedentary life.

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Now, what can sometimes happen when people are initially trying to leave behind diet culture is that, in order to heal from it, they need to give up everything that they have previously associated with diet culture. So this can be certain foods that they have viewed as diet foods. This can be exercise of certain kinds or all exercise, whatever it may be.

Sometimes, the healthiest thing a person can do is to stop worrying about any health pursuits in order to heal their mental health and their emotional health and to come back home to themselves. But look, that is not a forever thing. All of those people eventually, when enough time and healing have happened, are able to return to health-promoting behaviors that they find nourishing.

But one big thing has changed, and that is their why for participating in those behaviors. Because when you're no longer inside of the diet culture paradigm, you don't have to eat carrots that maybe you hate because you want to get a six-pack and you think you are supposed to. Instead, maybe you're going to eat roasted broccoli because you like the taste, and you also know that it's important for you to have greens because they make you feel really good. You no longer have to run mile after sweaty mile on the treadmill in an effort to control the shape of your body. Instead, you can ask yourself, "Hmm. What kind of movement would feel really good and really nourishing to me today?" And you can do that instead. When we leave diet culture, we are able to make our health decisions from a place of self-care instead of from a place of self-control. It's with a look towards our internal self instead of our external self.

Giving up diet culture can be a truly beautiful and life-giving thing, but it won't be without its challenges and pitfalls. I wish I could say that all of this was easy and that the learning and unlearning process was going to go perfectly smoothly and everything would go in this nice linear line on an upward trajectory to making you your happiest and healthiest self. Unfortunately, that's just not usually how it works. People spend a lot of time in and out and in and out of diet culture as they are trying to make their transition.

You don't have to do this alone though. Two things that could help would be community as well as working with a coach or some other kind of professional. Ditching diet culture when everyone you know is still in it can be really lonely and really heartbreaking. So it helps so much if you have some community to talk to about all of these kinds of things. It's possible you might have some in-person communities where you are, but there are definitely online communities, including my own. I have a free Facebook group called Redefining Health & Wellness that I will link to in the show notes which is all about making a safe space to ditch diet culture, talk about all of these struggles, and you are more than welcome to join us in there.

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There are lots of other wonderful groups out there as well including a huge Health At Every Size group that you can join which I will link to too. The more you can surround yourself with like-minded individuals who are going through the same thing, the better you're going to feel about this transition.

Additionally, some people really benefit from working with a Health At Every Size informed coach or therapist or registered dietitian depending on what you're looking to get help with. I will link to my own services in the show notes. As y'all know, I am a weight-inclusive wellness coach, and I help people to heal their relationships with exercise, food, and their bodies.

So I'm a certified intuitive eating counselor and a certified personal trainer. I work with people online, and I work with people here in Austin Texas to really improve on those areas. So if you're not sure where to start, or if you get started and you get stuck, you don't have to stay in that place. There are many people and resources available to help you work through it and feel better on the other side.

In conclusion, diet culture is a punk ass book jockey out there ruining lives, but you do not have to participate any longer if you don't want to. You can come to the dark side where we say a big "fuck you" to diet culture.

[music plays]

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 will really help other people who might benefit from the podcast to find it more easily.

I also love chatting with listeners. So feel free to screenshot from your podcast player, post on social media, and tag me.

And if you're looking for more information on what I'm all about and how to work with me, head on over to shohrehdavoodi.com. Hope to see you for the next episode.