

Redefining Health & Wellness

#17

Featured this episode: Shohreh Davoodi, Michelle Viña-Baltsas

Shohreh Davoodi: Hello, friends. And happy almost Halloween for those who are excited about spooky times later this week. For episode number 17 of the Redefining Health & Wellness podcast, I have an interview for you with Michelle Viña-Baltsas. Michelle coaches women of all ages and stages of diet recovery to have a less complicated relationship with food and body.

Her client's affectionately call her the Self-Compassion Queen because her coaching is heavily focused on being kinder and less judgmental towards themselves.

In particular, Michelle specializes in helping women through menopause. I learned a whole lot about what to expect in menopause from our conversation and what tools we can use to survive and thrive through the changes. To access the show notes and a full transcript of this episode, head to shohrehdavoodi.com/17. That's shohrehdavoodi.com/17.

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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 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.

Y'all, today, I have the lovely Michelle Viña-Baltsas here to talk to us all about menopause which some of you may be thinking, "Shohreh, you are nowhere near menopause. You're about to turn 30." That being said, I think this is such an important topic for people all across the board no matter your age because, as someone my age, I want to know, like, what can I expect? What is true? Because, of course, we have all these very interesting takes on menopause that we see in media.

And then, for people who are closer to menopause or going through it right now, this can be a really great way for you to learn about what is normal for this time in your life. What can you expect as well? So thank you so much, Michelle, for taking time out of your schedule to be here with me today.

Michelle Viña-Baltsas: Thank you so much, Shohreh. I'm really excited about this. And I agree with you that it will happen to women, and it can happen at any age. So mostly it's older, but it isn't always. So it's great to know and be informed.

Redefining Health & Wellness

#17

Featured this episode: Shohreh Davoodi, Michelle Viña-Baltsas

Shohreh: Absolutely. And I'll say too, like, menopause doesn't only happen to women. Like, people who don't identify as women can experience menopause as well. So there's so many people who this may be really helpful for.

Michelle: Yes. And also, let's not forget partners so that they know what to expect also. So I appreciate you having me to talk about this really important and timely topic.

Shohreh: Why don't we start by you just telling me a bit more about yourself and how you came to do this work?

Michelle: Similar to you, I help coach women who are really struggling with food and enjoying food and living guilt-free and shame-free around food and also struggling with body image and things of that nature.

I came into this work because that was my struggle for the majority of my life. And I really just felt that I was being called to help other people that were in a similar situation. I actually had an undiagnosed eating disorder for several decades.

And of course, when I was struggling with it through the crux of it, it wasn't even diagnosable. Eating disorders aren't what they are now. And we certainly didn't have the research or the awareness, but there was no question that I did. And my whole life was food. My whole life was dieting and, you know, yo-yo dieting and hating my body and all that kind of lovely stuff.

So when I work with people, I really understand. Although I haven't lived their experience, I lived my own. And it was really hard. It was really, really hard to live that way for so long. I wasted a lot of years of my life obsessing about food.

Shohreh: Yeah. And I know that you work with women of all different ages. But it does seem that you've kind of come to specialize in menopause in particular. How did that come about?

Michelle: Exactly right. I definitely work with people of all ages. I mean, I have some teens that I work with, and then I have women in their 70s that I work with, you know, and everything in between. I love working with women in general, but this tends to be an age group like between I would say, like, 40ish, you know, 40/45ish through, like, 65 tends to be most of the women that I'm working with now.

And a lot of times, they seek me out because I'm not 25, you know? They feel like they can identify more with me, and they know that I've seen some of the things that they're either approaching, or I'm not 65, but I'm also not 25. So again, they're looking for someone who has a little bit more of what they are experiencing. And so they feel I can relate to them a little bit more.

Redefining Health & Wellness

#17

Featured this episode: Shohreh Davoodi, Michelle Viña-Baltsas

Shohreh: Yeah. I think that's so important, especially in the field of intuitive eating counselors and Health At Every Size, that we need diversity in a lot of different respects, but age is definitely one of them because there's so many of us who are pretty young in this field which I think is great. And as we are getting older, you know, our audiences will as well. But at this time, we definitely need people who have different experiences than us who've gone through different things. So I'm so glad you're doing this work.

Michelle: Yeah. Thanks. And I think it's important to say we can learn from people of all ages. And that's the one thing I've learned over the years is that there's always something to learn from someone. But in terms of body and, like, the hormonal stuff, people are like, "You get it. You understand this. You're going through it," or, "You've already gone through that piece of it," and I want someone who can be like, "Yeah. I understand what it's like to wake up because I'm sweating." It's like, they want someone who understands that.

And also because, I'm not in a larger, you know-- It's hard to say what's large, what's medium, whatever. I mean, I'm on the lower end of the plus-size clothing, but I'm not a single digit-sized clothing. And I'm finding more and more people are seeking me because they're like, "Okay. You let your hair grow in. You stopped coloring your hair. You're not wearing single-digit clothes anymore, you know? You're not 25. And that's me. And that's who I want to talk to."

And that's great that there are a few of us, not a lot, but there are a few of us that fit what they're looking for. So I'm glad that they have us because it would be lonely if they didn't.

Shohreh: Yeah. It absolutely would be lonely. I mean, I always tell people like I'm not necessarily the right coach for every person, right? I have people who come to me in a larger body and they're like, "Hey. Could you actually recommend some coaches to me who are also in a larger body?" And I'm like, "Absolutely." Because if you want someone who's had your same life experiences of weight stigma, like, that's not me. Like, I think it's so important for us to admit what we do not know and can't relate to so that people can find, you know, the right coach or practitioner for them in that way.

Michelle: Agreed.

Shohreh: So I think that people around my age like to pretend that menopause doesn't exist and that we will just cross that bridge when we get there.

Michelle: I know I did.

Shohreh: Exactly. So I was thinking, why don't we first talk about some of the, like, basic nuts and bolts of menopause for those who don't know, like

Redefining Health & Wellness

#17

Featured this episode: Shohreh Davoodi, Michelle Viña-Baltsas

what is going to change in my body between now and when I'm entering perimenopause and menopause down the road?

Michelle: Sure. Well, some of the things you know that most people experience-- Of course, everyone's experience is a little bit different, but generally speaking, I would say the first thing that starts to get a little wonky are periods. So if someone is menstruating, they will likely have skipped, or their periods last longer, or they'll go several months. It just gets a little off. Like, no longer is that if you ever had that 28 to 30 day window, that usually kind of goes out the window, so things start to get a little irregular there.

Of course, there are the hot flash situation which, again, not everybody experiences, but some experience with intensity. And it can be where you're literally sweating and, like, dripping wet, no exaggeration, or it's just, like, heat. You just feel hot. And it's not just in your underarms. It's just all over, and redness in the face, like that type of thing.

And the things that people really don't talk about that people weren't talking about when I was going through perimenopause were the sleep problems which are significant. And that all has to do with the hormone fluctuations. And more importantly, for me, what killed me were the mood swings and just the fluctuating moods and how so much of that was linked to my struggles. Which I already had some struggles with depression and anxiety, and how, when I started to approach perimenopause, that ramped up 100 percent. And no one told me that. And I thought I was losing my mind. What is going on here?

And I was seeing people, professional people. And nobody was ever saying, "Hmm. Maybe this is because of blah, blah, blah." And no one told me that. So I was like, "That would have been really nice to know at the time." So I always like to let people know that, similar to PMS, which I used to get so terribly when I was in my cycle that I used to have to take the pill for it because my moods were crazy. So I took the pill to help manage my moods. And that just kind of went right into perimenopause with me.

So, again, no one was ever linking that for me. And that was a big issue. So those were some of the things. Of course, there's weight gain. There's metabolism-- slowing metabolism. Some people have thinning hair. Sometimes there's dry skin. You know? Those are some of the big ones, you know, that people experience. But I would say, like, the sleep problems because, obviously, we need sleep is significant, and the mood swings, and of course the night sweats. Those are the more visible ones, but the internal things are just very difficult to manage and, again, not often spoken about.

Shohreh: Michelle, you're really selling this. I can't wait.

Michelle: I don't like people to suffer, and I especially don't like people to suffer like I did because nobody told me. And I was like, "What is wrong with

Redefining Health & Wellness

#17

Featured this episode: Shohreh Davoodi, Michelle Viña-Baltsas

you people? You need to tell people these things. It's so important." I still think menopause is such a dirty word, you know? And I know when I was in my 30s/20s, whatever, I was like, "That's not gonna happen to me," you know?

And I remember my mother talking about menopause. She grew up in Puerto Rico. And the way she talked about menopause and the way it was talked about on her island was, "That's when women go crazy," literally. And that's what I heard at least 10 times through my life, and I remembered it. It stuck. And my mother was very, very fortunate that she did not have that experience. For her, it was just like one day she had her period, and one day she didn't. She didn't have, like, any of those things that she thought she was going to have. And so she was one of the luckier ones.

But I was raised thinking that when you go into menopause, when you approach that time of your life, you're going to go crazy. And I'm like, "Great. I can't wait. Like, this is really scary." And I think a lot of women have a very similar take on what menopause is. And so I think people are very afraid to talk about it.

I also think that people associate it with getting old. And that can be a very frightening discussion for people. So I try to be real about it and educate people about it and help them to see that it's not the end of the world. And the more information you have, the easier it is to manage your symptoms.

Shohreh: I do think this information is so important. As you said, in general, in my life, I feel like the more information I have about things, like, the better that I can sort of be mentally prepared for them and physically prepared for them and other things. And of course, you can never be 100 percent prepared for something like this, but it's so much better to know like, "Here's a range of things that can happen to me going into it," versus getting there and being like, "What is happening to my body?"

Michelle: Exactly.

Shohreh: I want to talk about bellies because, of course in menopause, this is one of the things that we see so much fear around. And it seems it's an incredibly common experience to gain specifically belly weight in menopause to a point where I'm always seeing people peddling, you know, like programs and diets and stuff about like "how to lose the menopause belly" and things like that.

And, obviously, this is also like-- I feel like menopause kind of brings out a lot of that internalized fatphobia in people as their bodies are changing. So I'd love to hear your thoughts on, one, why is this happening, like, practically? And two, how can people get through this time of their life?

Redefining Health & Wellness

#17

Featured this episode: Shohreh Davoodi, Michelle Viña-Baltsas

Michelle: Yeah. Such a great question. I agree. The belly thing, everybody wants to have this flat belly, if possible, six-pack, whatever because that's all we ever see, right? That's diet culture screaming at us that that's the right belly to have. Most people don't have that, but that's what they tell us we're supposed to have.

So why it happens is a couple of different things. Our metabolic rate changes significantly. It declines actually between 15 and 20 percent. And most of the stuff I'm going to talk to you about related to the abdominal area is based on a lot of research that Margo Maine did in her book Pursuing Perfection. That really is, like, the book to read about this particular topic.

So a woman's metabolic rate is gonna decrease. There's nothing we can do about that. That's just something that naturally happens when estrogen decreases. So with that usually comes weight gain. And not everybody gains weight, but on average, they say women gain between 12 to 15 pounds.

Now, most people, honestly, that I know I have gained more than that. I know my clients have. We don't use a scale, but we can kind of, like, feel it. And sometimes, unfortunately, doctors still weigh their patients, which, of course, we know that you don't have to, but some people need to for medication purposes, things like that.

So there is generally some weight gain naturally. Of course, genetics play a huge part in it. So like for instance, my mother always carried more of her weight in her abdominal area, and I do too. So that has a lot to do with where the weight is settling, what your family looks like in terms of their bodies, what their experience is during menopause.

You know, ask them if you're curious, if somebody is willing to share what their experience was like if you have people in your family who are going through it or who have gone through it because that is not exactly the way it's going to happen for you, but you might get some indication.

So that is one thing, but the key thing here is that the fat cells in the abdomen get larger, and they do this so that they can produce the estrogen that the ovaries are no longer producing. So the fat cells start to grow. And that causes the abdomen to expand. But really, what's happening is we need that estrogen because the more that our body is producing in the abdomen, the less severe the menopausal symptoms are gonna be.

So it's once again our bodies doing exactly what they're supposed to do, and we can say thank you. Thank you so much for taking such good care of me and growing my belly in this way. I may not like the way it looks physically, and I may be uncomfortable, but it's doing exactly what it's supposed to do to protect me. And let's not forget, the more estrogen we have, the less likely we are to struggle with

Redefining Health & Wellness

#17

Featured this episode: Shohreh Davoodi, Michelle Viña-Baltsas

osteoporosis and heart disease and all those types of things that come, generally speaking, from the lack of estrogen or that could be exacerbated due to the declining estrogen.

So the expansion is the estrogen production. And by the fat cells growing, they are producing more estrogen which we need. So it's a good thing. I know nobody really wants to hear that, but that's the reality of it.

Shohreh: I'm so glad that you said that though because, one, I didn't know that that's what's happening, and it's just this amazing biological reason of our bodies are trying to, like, protect us and help us. And what it reminds me of, people often gain weight going through puberty as hormones are changing. And again, this is protective, but that is also the time when teenagers will often start dieting, or their parents will start putting them on diets because they're like, "Oh. You're gaining weight," when actually, it's a perfectly normal biological process that's happening. So it's interesting, to me, the parallels between those two very different parts of our lives.

Michelle: And some young women will put more weight in the abdominal area, and again, not all. And that is really to protect the female organs. And again, the body doing what it needs to do. And it's just amazing, when we step aside and let it do what it's designed to do, we can say thank you. You know? When we put the diet culture nonsense off to the side and realize, "Wow. What an amazing, amazing thing the human body is that it knows exactly what to do and what I need, and that may not be, and most likely is not aligned with what we're told it's supposed to look like, but this is what it's doing to protect us, and it's amazing."

Shohreh: And I think I want to honor too that, obviously, there can be a real sense of discomfort when our bodies change for any reason. I mean, there's so many reasons our bodies change over the course of our lives, but I think if you are used to your body being a certain way, like even outside of internalized fatphobia, which is the real issue, but you can have an actual physical discomfort in-- my clothes don't fit the way they used to or I'm carrying myself in a different way than I used to, so what do you recommend for people trying to come to terms with those kinds of feelings?

Michelle: I get it. It's really hard. You know as well as I that fatphobia is a real thing. And while I don't experience that in my everyday world, I know that hundreds of thousands of people do, and it's horrible. I obviously acknowledge that I get that it's uncomfortable. I've gained weight. And I understand what it's like to grow out of my clothing. So there's that embarrassment piece of it. Then, there's like you said, the physical piece of it. What I recommend to people is that they get comfortable clothing, that they get, especially during this phase, as much natural-fibered clothing as possible so that it breathes because the more polyesters-- they don't breathe, and that's not gonna help, especially when you're having hot flashes and things and night sweats.

Redefining Health & Wellness

#17

Featured this episode: Shohreh Davoodi, Michelle Viña-Baltsas

So definitely finding clothes that are comfortable in whatever that is. If it's an elastic waistband, whatever works for you, but find stuff that's comfortable and being conscious of the finances. It's expensive to buy new clothing. So I go to a lot of thrift shops, you know? And I don't have any embarrassment about that. I love. I have a lot of fun going. I go with my son sometimes. And we go, and I get some great stuff, and it's comfortable, and it's different. You're not going to see it everywhere.

So I would say getting comfortable clothing, finding ways just to make your life easier. Some of my clients complain-- I don't want to use the word "complain", but say they have difficulty putting their shoes on because their belly kind of gets in the way. So, you know, there are things that you can do, you know, put your foot up on a stool, things like that just to be a little bit-- get shoes that don't have ties that are just slip-ons, you know? There are little things that you can do to kind of try to manage some of those challenges that people have, you know? But I would say getting comfortable clothing as often as you can is naturally-fibered is big.

And then of course, doing your homework and really studying up on, like, where a lot of these feelings are coming from that make us feel inadequate if we've gained the weight, and understanding the whole yo-yo dieting and what that's done in terms of set-point, and then adding on top of that the changes that menopause will bring. It's a lot. So getting support with that because it can definitely be a challenge. There's no question about it.

Shohreh: I do want to talk about dieting as well because menopause is a very popular time to start, like, intensely dieting because, again, bodies are changing. And you also mentioned too, there's kind of this fear of aging that's coming too. And so I think whenever we are bombarded with these fears, we're much more likely to want to fix and diet and hold on for dear life. So for you, you coach an intuitive eating approach to food like I do. And I'm sure you have a lot of clients in menopause who have been potentially dieting their entire lives and are probably really feeling that urge to diet as their going through menopause.

So how difficult for them to make the switch out of this diet mentality into trying to learn to eat intuitively.

Michelle: Well, I think it's hard at any age, but I think it's particularly more difficult during this phase of life because you have a lot of chatter from healthcare practitioners especially if someone is gaining weight in their abdominal area. And they're like, "Well, the average weight gain is blah, blah, blah, and you may have exceeded that."

So there's the shame there. And then there's the, "Well, you're more prone to heart disease." Okay, well, what's the alternative? It's not to diet because we know where that's gonna lead people. It's gonna lead

Redefining Health & Wellness

#17

Featured this episode: Shohreh Davoodi, Michelle Viña-Baltsas

them further away from health instead of closer to health because the long-term is not very good.

So how do they manage it? I think it also gets more difficult because, generally speaking, people start to have some health issues as they're getting older. Sometimes there's increased blood pressure, elevated cholesterol, things like that. And that's certainly intensified a little bit more when the estrogen is declining. So those things need to be considered certainly.

So I think that finding that balance of gentle nutrition can be a challenge here because there are certain things that we need, that we may need more of during this time. And also, I'll say the because of the sleep disturbances which are very, very common, a lot of people find themselves gravitating towards more play foods, specifically like the refined sugars because they need the energy. So then they get down on themselves for that.

But again, if they understand what's going on, then sometimes, it helps them to be more compassionate with themselves and say, "Oh. I understand why I'm craving XYZ. It's because I really didn't sleep well, and this sugar is really gonna give me the boost that I need right now." And then just being kinder to themselves and understanding that this is what their body needs right now.

And they can honor that if they are able to without all that emotional guilt that oftentimes comes with it for a lot of people because of course the fear there is, "All I do is eat sugar, and I'm gonna gain more weight," and all of that.

So always going back to the educational piece of it, going back to the compassion piece of it because if that's one thing I have needed to learn that's absolutely essential for me to get through this is self-compassion. Because without that, there's just no way that I would have survived.

Shohreh: Definitely.

Michelle: So cultivating a self-compassion practice, you know, educating people. And I think that those are the two major components, and understanding also like where your body is in terms of your metabolic health, you know?

And if you do struggle with blood pressure, you know, and if you're medicated or not medicated, you know, looking more at that, working in those cases with a dietitian to get a specific, of course, HAES-aligned or intuitive eating-aligned dietitian to help you map out what foods are best for you to be eating at the time in your life and possibly working with a coach to help you to get around some of the resistance you may

Redefining Health & Wellness

#17

Featured this episode: Shohreh Davoodi, Michelle Viña-Baltsas

be having to doing those types of things because it may remind you too much of being on a diet.

So there's a lot of emotional components here, but certainly, keeping in mind gentle nutrition but also paying attention to what your metabolic needs are during this time are very, very important.

Shohreh: And for those of you who don't know, gently nutrition is the last principle of the 10 of intuitive eating. And it is the last principle because it can be the most difficult to implement in that, if you're not in the right place of mind, it's very easy to take this nutritious, nourishing eating to a place of dieting and taking it too far.

And I can see where that would definitely be the case as well in menopause where that line is getting really blurred between, "Okay. What am I eating because it makes me feel my best," versus, "What feels like dieting or like I'm actually making these choices because I'm trying to change my body."

Michelle: Definitely. And I think that's such an important point that you just made is, "Am I doing this to change my body?" Instead of, "Am I choosing to eat this food because it makes me feel nourished? Because every time I eat it, I feel great after? I don't have any gastro issues afterwards. It just makes me feel good," as opposed to eating something and being like, "Yeah. I don't really love this food, but it has the least amount of calories. So I'm just gonna go for it."

And there's constantly that we have to be checking in with our intentions. And I think that's very easy to lose sight of. But when we are in an intuitive eating world, we need to be thinking about those things. And especially when we're in the intuitive eating world and in peri or actual menopause or even post, that constant fear of the weight gain, like at any other stage, is there. It's just there. So we need to be real about it.

Shohreh: Yeah. That's something that I talk to all of my clients about is this "why" behind our actions because, especially when it comes to exercising and eating certain foods, again, there's this line. And it's blurry. And it can be hard to tell. And I'm always like, just really listen to yourself and get to that "why" because if you're making the choices from a place of self-care versus a place of self-control, then it's not a dieting choice.

But if you're making the choice because you're secretly hoping that maybe you're going to get smaller if you make that choice, or any other of the wellness myth bullshit. Then that is not intuitive eating, right, at that point. That's not joyful movement at that point. So it really is so important to be keeping an eye on, "What am I hoping for with this choice?"

Michelle: Right. Right. And I think it's important for people to understand that we're all human. We're all exposed to diet culture 24/7 because, as we

Redefining Health & Wellness

#17

Featured this episode: Shohreh Davoodi, Michelle Viña-Baltsas

know, it's relentless. And as Christy Harrison says, we're all swimming in it, you know. And it's the truth.

And so we need to-- when we sort of get off track a little bit, it's completely natural. We can easily, like, get back on track, reading an article that is through an intuitive eating, HAES lens to recenter ourselves because it's very easy, especially when our bodies are changing, to get really easily swept away in that bullshit.

So we always have to be nourishing ourselves with this work because it's hard. It's very hard out there, and the exposure is massive. So for people that are sometimes "falling off the wagon", know that that's completely natural in terms of our thoughts, but we can get right back on again by, again, re-nourishing ourselves. And I think that that's really important.

Shohreh: Yeah. And I think it's also important too to remember, and this is something you and I both talk about that you don't necessarily have to love your body or love every part of your body to still respect your body and trust it and go through this intuitive eating process. And I'll let you speak to that because you've had some great posts about this recently. I think people get confused because they're like, "Okay. I know I'm not supposed to hate my body, so let's go to the opposite end. I'm supposed to love myself."

Michelle: Yeah. And that word is so big. Love is a big, big word. So where I start out generally is, "Let's just neutralize. Let's just start there." And looking at bodies and just saying, "There are bodies of all different shapes and sizes. There are supposed to be bodies of all shapes and sizes."

And, you know, I have a mantra, "All bodies are good bodies." They all serve a purpose. We all serve a purpose. And none of that has anything to do with our shape or size. So, like, once I'm in that space, and once I can help people to kind of get in that space, it kind of takes a lot of that charge out of, "Yeah. But they're this, and they're that." It's like, we all have a purpose.

And that's I just think very important to understand. And our bodies are going to change throughout our lives. We can kick and scream all we want, they're going to change. So I think it's doing our best to embrace that to the best of our ability. And some days, it will be easier than others.

So I think neutralizing is important. And then, if you can get past that, maybe just like it. Some people never get to love. They just don't. But I think if you like, or at least you're able to neutralize or respect, I think you can not love your body and still respect and give it what it needs as often as you can.

So giving it the foods that it seems to be gravitating towards, stopping eating when you're full most of the time, moving in a way that makes

Redefining Health & Wellness

#17

Featured this episode: Shohreh Davoodi, Michelle Viña-Baltsas

you feel good. When all of those things that people do when they try to honor themselves. And to me, it's a relationship, and relationships require effort.

So if you're starting out really hating your body, know that you're not gonna go from hating your body to loving your body in two or three days or ever, again. So I just think that really, if it happens, that's so great.

But I think if we can move and be a little more realistic and go into that neutral and then going into like which, to me, includes the respect and just do our best to honor it as often as we can, I think we're doing great because then we're taking care of ourselves. Because then, we are meeting our needs as often as we can. And that, to me, is a good thing.

Shohreh: Yeah. I agree with that. And one of the things that I've noticed that's a problem with the idea again of loving your bodies, which, some people can do this way more easily than others for a lot of different reasons is that, so often, I've found that the love is conditioned, right? Maybe we can get to a point where we love our bodies the way they are right now.

But the minute something changes, you know, we get a new wrinkle or more cellulite or we gain a few pounds, it's like, "Ah. I can't love this body. I loved the body that it was before." And I'm like, "Well, that's love." Right? When you are conditioning it on your body staying the same which it's not going to do, that's not a true, real love for the body.

Michelle: Right. Yeah. Agreed. Yeah. It needn't be conditional. And I don't like the word "should" because I think I'm so prone to say it-- many people are so prone to say it. And I think that, a lot of times, there's guilt, you know, or shame beneath that. So I think the more we go inward, which is what this whole thing of body trust is all about really is learning to listen more to our bodies.

The more we understand that our purpose is not our bodies and what they look like, I think the easier it gets, not easy, easier, you know, I think we can move towards more peace with our bodies, with our food, basically with everything in our lives. If we just-- we're going inwards to see what our needs are.

And then, when we get to that place of, "I feel my body needs this, but I'm afraid I'm going to gain weight," then we can navigate through that, you know, and understand where those messages are coming from. They're not coming from a place of love. They're coming from diet culture. So understanding the source of those things and then untangling all of that stuff, which is a lot to untangle. But again, the more we become aware that it's not our bodies that are the problem, it's the culture that's the problem, I think we can find more peace there.

Redefining Health & Wellness

#17

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Shohreh: I want to go back to something you said earlier too about how one of the things that makes menopause so scary is this idea that we're getting older and mortality, but I think for women in particular, it's because we feel like we get written off by society as we get older. And I think for some people, like, menopause is like this being welcomed into an era of invisibility. Have you noticed that as well?

Michelle: I have not fully yet noticed it because I'm 53, and, you know, some people have already experienced that. And you know what, maybe I have, but didn't really notice it, or maybe it's been there, and I haven't really noticed it. I've noticed that people still see me, but I've heard people younger than me saying that they feel invisible.

So I really just think it depends on everybody's experience. But I agree with you that a lot of women in particular say that they feel like they've become invisible. It's not cute. I would imagine that it doesn't feel great. So I thought that kicks up a lot of other stuff.

Like you said, mortality. I mean, that word, it still sends a shiver down my spine because a lot of times, when people go through menopause, and again, it doesn't have to be at a particular age because some people do experience this earlier in life. But, like, for me, as an example and several of my clients, their kids are also going off. So they're also dealing with empty nests.

And then, sometimes, people are dealing with ailing parents. So there's that whole storm of significant life changes happening simultaneously. And it can be a real challenge. When my son went off to college in September, I was suddenly looking at, like, "Hmm. What's my purpose now?"

I have one child. It was an absolute blessing to have him. I still have him. But my life has changed dramatically, you know? So that on top of everything else, it's like, this is a whole new phase of my life, and I'm literally needing to redefine my life and what I feel like my purpose is. And this has been going on for years, but a lot of people struggle with this.

So it's just a critical time in someone's life, just like having children if people choose to have that is a major transition in their lives. But these are big, big transitional times in people's lives where they really need support because find like-minded people, find groups, find whatever you need to find where you can actually be with people that get it, because if not, it can be extremely isolating.

Shohreh: Yeah. And it makes sense to me that, during such a time of change, like, if you are feeling invisible, that that's like especially painful, right,

Redefining Health & Wellness

#17

Featured this episode: Shohreh Davoodi, Michelle Viña-Baltsas

because there's all this stuff going on. And you just want to be seen as yourself.

And part of me wonders too how much of that invisibility comes from a bit of internalized misogyny, you know, where it's actually feeling invisible to whom, right? And it's like, probably, if it's to-- in most cases, if it's to men, you know, if you're a heterosexual individual. And it's like, "Okay. Then, the question is, do we need to unpack where does our value come from, right?" Is it our value in relation to men finding us attractive, definitely it is not, but that is something that a lot of us have internalized.

So if you were used to getting that kind of sexual romantic attention, and you're not getting it anymore, I think that can just bring up a whole lot of stuff. And again, there's so much other change going on. It's just a tough time, you know?

Michelle: Yeah. That's a really good point because yeah, not attracted to who? Not seen by whom? That's an excellent, excellent point. And I think a lot of those things come up too when we talk about fatphobia. That there's a lot of concern, "Who's ever going to want to date me? Who's ever going to this? Who's ever going to that?" And again, it's looking so much at the outsides.

Shohreh: Yes. Exactly. It all comes back to that.

Michelle: It all comes back to that. It's like, what are we looking for? You know? How are we connecting to people? And are we just going by first looks, or are we going a little bit beneath the surface?

And I know, as I've been getting older, like, my circles of inclusion are getting bigger and bigger. And I love it. And I seek it. Like, I want to learn more and more about people that are different than me because I find it so interesting.

So I think it's an opportunity, I really do, for us to look beneath the surface. And I think that's really-- If we all did that, I think we'd be in a very different position.

Shohreh: Yeah. At any age. I mean, that's something that's really important to me as well. And yeah. Hopefully, people can start doing that at any time, realizing that, wow, the more people that you know from different walks of life and different experiences, especially marginalized individuals, you can learn so much about the world and, like, what's not working and other people's cultures, which is so beautiful.

Michelle: Mhmm. And see our privilege because there's so much of it, you know? There's so much of it. And I, daily, am shown that. And I'm like, "Thank you. There, I see it again," you know? And now, I'm like, catching myself. I'm like, "Wow. I'm gettin' good at this."

Redefining Health & Wellness

#17

Featured this episode: Shohreh Davoodi, Michelle Viña-Baltsas

But again, I am very thankful for it because I know that it makes me more sensitive to others, and I know that it—and more compassionate. And it ups my self-compassion game because I can easily get down on myself and say, "Oh. That wasn't very, you know, whatever." And I'm like, "You're like everyone else. You're learning, and you're aware," you know? So you are very, you know, hypersensitive to this stuff because you're really paying attention.

So this is life.

Shohreh: Yeah. And I want to, as we're coming towards the end here, talk about as well the positives because, obviously, of course there are some things that are viewed as maybe negative or scary in going into menopause or later in life, but would you say that there are things at your current age that are actually better than when you were younger?

Michelle: Yeah. I would say that I'm more in my body now. I'm really paying more attention to what I actually need, and that feels really good. I definitely didn't do that in my younger years. I felt very disconnected, which, you know, probably that was because of my eating disorder, but also because I didn't really want to be connected. I was kind of running all over the place and doing a lot of people pleasing. So I'm really reducing that. I definitely still have work to do in that area, but it's improving.

So I would say that I am more apt to ask myself what I need in the moment and then honor it as often as I can, so that's definitely better. Similar to what I said before, like, really seeing the beauty in all people and really seeking out people that are not necessarily in my community but really just to widen my circles of being inclusive because I used to be in a marginalized group when I was younger, and I know how difficult it can be.

And certainly, doing the work that we do, a lot of the people that we see and hear about are certainly marginalized for their size. So just being a more sensitive human being. So I have always been sensitive, but I think it's definitely increased, and that feels good. That feels really good because I find that people that are different are coming to me because I believe that they feel that my heart is open to that. And that feels good too.

Also, I've found yoga. I'm more in my body, like I said before. I'm more tolerant of a lot of different things with other people and within myself. I'm much easier on myself now than I used to be which feels good too. And that's something that I really had to learn, but it's been worth it. It's been worth it. And that's an ongoing progress, but one that I'm extremely grateful to be going through.

Shohreh: And with the tolerance that you mentioned, what that makes me think of is, for me, every year that I've gotten older, and again, I'm 29 about to turn 30. So I'm not particularly old, but I feel like every year, I have

Redefining Health & Wellness

#17

Featured this episode: Shohreh Davoodi, Michelle Viña-Baltsas

been able to get more in touch with my authentic self and who I am and who I want to be. And I can just see that continuing to grow every year as I'm getting older.

And I just think that's one of the beautiful things about age is, like, being able to not give a fuck so much about what other people think about you and what you think you're supposed to be and instead being who you know that you are.

Michelle: Agreed. And just being like, "Do I want to spend my life trying to please everybody, or do I want to just try to please myself as often as I can?" You know? And what's going to make me happy and kind of putting that bullshit aside of what everybody else wants and going more with what do I want? And giving yourself permission to ask, "What do I want?"

Then, going the next step and actually doing it. Giving yourself what you actually want. Like, giving yourself permission to do that is very hard for a lot of people. So I think that that's something else for me that has come a little more easily. Saying, "I don't want that. I want this," and giving it to myself with full allowance. It's nice.

Shohreh: Mhmm. Yeah. And I think the earlier we can all learn that, the much happier we will be for the course of our years.

Michelle: Agreed.

Shohreh: So I always wrap up by asking the question how do you define health and wellness for yourself at this moment in your life?

Michelle: Kindness comes to mind in all areas of my life, just that self-compassion piece. I always come back to that. Asking myself what my needs are because I feel that ripples into almost everything. Bearing in mind, "What are my needs for my metabolic health? What are my needs for myself emotionally? What are my needs for myself physically?" And then, from there, seeing what I can, you know, work with my schedule and my family and everything else, you know, without stressing myself out, you know? So always going back to what my needs are and then balancing them.

And then my other favorite is often saying, for the most part, just being more gentle with myself, you know, in every way. So that's how I'm redefining wellness. My wellness right now is really centered around kindness, just being really nice to myself, you know? And it's just to reduce my stress as much as possible, my stress and anxiety.

Shohreh: I absolutely love that you mentioned kindness because I think so many people in their heads do not make that connection, right, between kindness and health and wellness, but it's such an important piece. And also what you said about being realistic about what you can do with your life. That's a conversation I have to have with so many clients

Redefining Health & Wellness

#17

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because they're like, "I should be doing this, this, this, and this." I'm like, "Those things don't fit into your life. You can't do all of those things. So, like, what do you actually want to do and prioritize?" Like, that's all that matters. So I love that.

Michelle: Yeah. That critical voice needs to really be quiet. And when it's really loud is when I have to sit down and be like, "What is going on here? What is really going on here?" And zooming out, when I'm, like, so hyper-focused on something, and I feel the anxiety, like, rising in my body, I have to really zoom out and be like, "Okay. Let's look here at the bigger picture. Where can I be kinder? What can I do within, you know, the time that I have? What's gonna meet my needs?"

And it's not a 15-minute conversation with myself. It's short, but it's like I'm getting better at, "Okay. Well, this can go. That can go. This is gonna help me here." And just being a little bit more mindful of that I think makes a huge difference.

Shohreh: I think it's really important what you said about, when you're getting especially critical, that's the sign. That's the sign that we have to zoom out and figure out what's going on as opposed to-- I think that's where people want to double down and continue to be critical. It's like, "No."

Michelle: That control. Control. Control. Control. It's like, "Oh. No. No. No. No." That's exactly what we're not able to do, but that's what we try to do, but it doesn't work.

Shohreh: Yeah. Well, thank you so much for being here Michelle. This was great. How can people find you?

Michelle: My business is my name. So they can look me up - michellevinabaltsas.com. And I know you'll have everything in the show notes. I have a Facebook page, a Facebook group that I hang out in. It's called the No-Diet Sisterhood, and it's a safe place for people to go if they don't want to be continually bombarded with diet culture nonsense.

And I'm also on Instagram @michellevinabaltsas_coach. And I have a nice handout that I put together just to sort of put on paper, some of the big questions that people ask that about menopause and, like, a little self-care chart and some really good book references. So I will have that also. And they'll be able to find that on my website.

Shohreh: Awesome. I will definitely link to all of those things, especially that handout sounds really great. I'm sure that will be a fantastic resource. So thank you again for being here. This is going to help so many people just to learn a lot about what they can expect, and honestly, just how to be kinder and more compassionate towards themselves which I think we could all use in our lives.

Michelle: Yes.

Redefining Health & Wellness

#17

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[music plays]

Shohreh:

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