

Redefining Health & Wellness

#24

Featured this episode: Shohreh Davoodi & Ani Mirasol

Shohreh Davoodi: You are listening to Episode number 24 of the Redefining Health & Wellness podcast. Today I'm joined by the wise and witty Ani Mirasol. She's a sex-positive trauma therapist and body liberation activist. This episode is all about politics, but maybe not in the ways you might be initially thinking. We talked about Trump-era anxiety and the effect it's had on family relations, how, for many of us it's impossible to separate out the political from our personhood, how to focus your activism energy to keep from burning out, and more. To access the show notes and a full transcript of this episode, head to shohrehdavoodi.com/24. That's shohrehdavoodi.com/24.

[Music plays]

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.

Today is my lucky day y'all, because I have Ani Mirasol here in my actual house in Austin to record this podcast episode. She is a dear friend of mine and a colleague in the Health At Every Size space, and she is a super badass therapist. So, thank you for being here Ani.

Ani Mirasol: Ah, and thank you for having me.

Shohreh: Of course, so, as I just mentioned, you're a very badass therapist. Why don't you tell us how you became such a thing?

Ani: [Laughs] I love being called 'badass therapist,' I'm going to put that on my business cards!

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Shohreh: Do it [laughter].

Ani: I was actually a therapist long before I ever knew what one was, as a profession. I was born into a family that had a long history of trauma and violence and addiction. And both of my parents had experienced abuse and neglect in their own childhoods, and really as a result, they didn't know how to parent. And so they repeated a lot of patterns of dysfunction in their family. And one of the ways I figured out how to get my needs met was to be able to read people, and further needs, caretake etc.

And so that meant I was really giving my mom and dad advice on dealing with each other. I was counseling friends on the playground in elementary school. And then in middle school I became fascinated with studying dreams, and dream analysis. I didn't know at the time that that was connected to psychology, but I've since learned that dreams hold a lot of information. But I just thought it was cool.

So, by high school I was reading psychology textbooks for fun, because that was the kind of kid I was in high school.

Shohreh: That's adorable! [Laughter]

Ani: But like looking back at it now, I can really see I was just so desperately trying to understand what was going on in my world and my parents' world, why were they doing the things they were trying to do, and really I was just trying to make sense of it. So, that was the early on training.

And then through college I got really into social activism. I was studying sociology, gender studies, and really that all sort of wound together over the years into me becoming the very badass therapist you said I am now. So, what I think is true for lots of us is that the personal is political, which I'll talk more about later. But my personal experience led me to wanting to work with other folks who had similar backgrounds.

So, in my therapy practice now I work with, what I think are lots of badass people. Very strong, independent folks, but who really became that way because of some sort of trauma, either in their past with their family, or living under oppression. And so now my practice is really about trauma

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recovery, living with oppression in your life, and how to take up the space that you're entitled to take up in the world.

So, whatever that looks like. There's a lot of people who get told that they can't take up, or shouldn't take up space because of something. And I think that that's bullshit and my whole life goal is to help everybody take up the space that they deserve.

Shohreh:

I have known that I wanted to have you on the podcast from the beginning, but it was just a matter of finding that perfect topic, because there's so many things that you and I could talk about. When you and I get into a room, we can talk for hours about all kinds of things [laughs]. Part of that is our shared ADHD [laughter].

But I was inspired to have you on because of the Political Stress and Wellness Therapy Group that you have been running. So, maybe can you start by explaining what that is and why you felt called to create it?

Ani:

Oh yes! Yes! Yes! Yes! So, I am generally just super passionate about group therapy and groups in general. I'm a big believer in community care and that really relationships and connections with others is what keeps us healthy and safe and sane and well. And so this group idea came out of several different things, but really two specific things.

The 2016 presidential election and then the 2018 confirmation of Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court. So, following the election of Trump, there was a palpable increase in anxiety and worry and fear and panic. And some of us were going to flee the country, and some of us didn't know what we were going to do. But most of my people in my world belonged to some sort of oppressed group.

So either non-white or queer or femme or trans or disabilities or immigrants, something along that. And I myself am a queer woman, partnered with a person of color, so these were definitely conversations happening in my home. Prior to the election, there were lots of folks coming through with different experiences they had had, around either sexual assaults, or some sort of sexual violence.

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The Me Too movement started by Tarana Burke really brought forth a flood of women's stories. And then Trump's vile comments about groping women, and the 25 plus women who have come forward. All of this was just really creating a lot of momentum. And I remember sitting in my living room watching Dr. Blasey Ford's testimony and being glued to the TV and the news that week.

And what I was hearing, both from Dr Ford and from other people, either on the internets or in real life, was just such a familiar story to me and experience. And I was seeing the stories of my best friends, of my family, college roommates, so many people that I work with, professionally, or personally. And I just remember crying and grieving for all of us who have been there.

For the girls and women who were taught that sexual violence is excused. That boys will be boys, and girls should keep their legs closed, and not get drunk. And all of this, I was grappling with both personally and professionally. And I was getting inundated with sexual assault survivors in my office. People who were saying, "Wow, I never thought that this was assault. I never thought of this as rape, I didn't know."

Some other people who had known, and had labeled it as that, but really there was kind of this uprising of people being like, "Oh, wait, I just kind of felt that that was normal. You mean this might be not normal?" So, kind of setting the stage, all of this was what was really going on in my head. And I just kept thinking, you know what? We need a place where folks can come together and know that they're not alone, and know that this isn't their fault.

And really redirect some of the rage and aggression outwards where it belongs, to perpetrators and systems that repeat this, rather than inwards and being really self-damaging, self-hating, any of that. So, I'm a pretty non-apologetic intersectional feminist, and activist, but even in all of this I didn't know what to do.

So, I did what I thought that I could do at the time, was well, I can start a group. This is what I know how to do, and I can bring together lots of different people who I know are struggling with the current state of affairs.

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And it's been fucking beautiful! I have worked with people through a wide range of ages, from their early 20s to their late 60s, across different generations, raised all across the country. So this isn't an urban, or a suburban, or a rural issue.

People from different political ideologies, religious backgrounds, class privilege, none of that mattered, but people were really struggling. So, once we got into doing this, the group, what I started to see were themes that were emerging out of this, that I think as a therapist aren't always terribly surprising to me because this is what I've spent many years studying. And know this is what's supposed to, when there's assault, this is what it looks like.

But it was just helpful to really see it coming up in a normal kind of regular way, and that folks were having dialogue, and just the themes of self-blame, keeping secrets, feeling the shame and embarrassment, and then just kind of that like lingering emotional pain. You know, there was this 60 plus year old woman who was saying, "This happened 40 years ago, why do I still care today? Why does this matter? Why am I getting reactivated, or re-triggered by this?"

And then there were some other folks in the group also. It was really interesting to just see kind of the overlap, and the overlay of chronic health issues also, that were showing up, particularly this group ended up being all people who had experienced sexual violence in their life. So, it was really interesting, but I'm going to talk a little bit more too, just about health issues.

But in this particular group I was seeing what even kind of similarities in health, like physical body pain, or autoimmune issues, fatigue, things like that. Yeah, that's how I started, and the group was great. And everyone was really relieved to feel not alone, to feel not crazy, to feel like they have a valid experience. And really what I see come out of this all the time is that when folks are able to sit and have compassion for others who share either similar stories, or experiences, or backgrounds with them, that it helps them to gain a practice of self-compassion.

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And gain a way of really looking inwards, and practicing that same sort of love and forgiveness and empathy for themselves too.

Shohreh: Yeah, I love this idea of a group therapy setting, because I can say for myself, after Donald Trump was elected, and even in the election leading up to it, I had all kinds of increased anxiety, and I thankfully had the fortune of being able to see a therapist, who I had been seeing regularly at that time. But, I feel like there is something special about a group dynamic where you can see that you're not alone. You can share with other people.

I mean and again, one-on-one therapy is fantastic, but I think there is this place for group therapy as well where it's just a little bit of a different dynamic. And in fact I think some people probably thrive even more in that environment than they would do in a one-on-one setting.

Ani: Yes, absolutely. I see that a lot. One-on-one, you can sit and you're like, "How do I fill this space." But in a group it's, yeah, it just takes some of the pressure off of you having to do everything. And it really helps us remember and learn how to stay connected in relationships, through difficult things. And that even though there were similarities among these people in the group, obviously they still had lots of differences.

So it really helped to stay connected on the things we could connect about and try to understand the differences, rather than the differences being divisive.

Shohreh: Mhmm. And just being able to learn from each other too, because I host intuitive eating group coaching, and it's such a different dynamic from one-on-one coaching. Because they're able to learn from each other and like members of the group essentially end up helping each other, and teaching each other, and coming up with ideas that I did not have. So, even though I'm facilitating it, which is wonderful, they're teaching me, too. So it ends up just really being a healing experience for everybody involved, I think.

Ani: Oh yes, absolutely.

Shohreh: So, we're going to get a little more into defining political as we go along, but we'll just start with sort of the general sense of what people think politics are, and what's coming up for me is that when this episode comes

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out, we're going to be right in the midst of the holiday season. You know, we're post-Thanksgiving now, which personally I don't even like to call a holiday, and we're heading into Christmas, Hanukkah, etc.

And I think we should talk about the impact on family relationships in the era of Trump and this political climate that we're in. So, you know, as a therapist, what have you been seeing?

Ani: Families, man, families. We've all got 'em, and you didn't get to choose 'em, and you just get the one you were assigned [laughter], so.

Shohreh: Ooh, that's a whole lot of unpacking we could do right there! [Laughter]

Ani: So much of our family relationships already are complex and have their own histories. And it's just been so interesting how different individuals and different families have navigated. There are some families that have different political beliefs that are able to sit and have conversations about it. And then there are some who aren't seeing their families anymore, aren't going to holidays.

There are some who are just like, well, I will go and we won't talk about it, and that's the taboo thing that we'll just avoid. And then there's others that are like, I'm just not going. I'm just not this year. So, it's really different, but I think the biggest thing that I see in families that are disagreeing right now. Right, like families that are on the same side are really digging it right now because we can all sit around the table, and talk about how bad we think the other side is, or how stupid their ideas are.

And it's really divisive and sort of this like tribalist think that's happening. But for those of us, or folks who have families with different beliefs, I think the biggest thing that I just keep talking about with my clients, is cognitive dissonance, and what is that, and what does that mean, and why does that happen?

But cognitive dissonance is just that thing that your thoughts are not lining up with your behavior. So you're saying one thing, doing another. And this is where a mom is telling their queer child, "No, no, I love you and I accept you, and you're beautiful, and perfect just the way you are, and my support for this president or this party doesn't have anything to do with you." And

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for someone who is queer or trans and is sitting there saying, “Well, yeah, I can now be fired, or I can not get housing,” just wanting to bang your head against a wall, and being like, how do you fucking not see that this is impacting me?

I’m your child, you say you love me, but this is really impacting me. Or families with mixed race, either mixed-race partnerships, or multiracial children, and some grandparents, or extended family. Again, kind of the same thing, like no, no, no, I love you, and I’m welcoming you, but those other people [capital T-O-P], are the problem. And just the way in which people, like psychological defense mechanisms, like denial, just come up where folks just somehow like poof, it’s magic gone out of their head, that the person they voted for, the policies they’re supporting impact the loved one sitting right there in front of them.

And because I work so much with trauma, a lot of this is really reactivating and re-traumatizing, especially for folks who have like an emotional abuse, or emotional neglect, or verbal abuse history. Because so much of this is sort of the familiar gaslighting of, “No, your experience isn’t real, you’re crazy. Let me tell you why, here’s what I’m seeing.”

So, all of this stuff, I see coming up in families a lot. And so I’ve been talking about it a ton, because yeah, we just passed Thanksgiving, we’re coming up on the, just all of the December holidays. And one of the things that I also see that’s sort of shifting is, you know, there really used to be this idea that generally we’re all sort of in it for the same things. And we all generally care about the same goals, and we generally want good for people, but that how we go about it is different.

But what I’m seeing now also is just even a questioning of that. Like do you actually want what is best for me? Do you actually care about others, or do you just see for yourself what you’re wanting and how to get there really not worrying about what other people are thinking/feeling/saying. And I see this a lot where particularly how can you support someone who bolsters white supremacy and supports white nationalists, and also say, “But I’m not racist.” These are just all sorts of different themes that I am seeing within families.

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Shohreh: For relationships that have soured, do you have any tips for how people can get through it? I mean assuming that they want to go, and they want to engage? Like you mentioned, some people are just opting to stay home for their self-care, and that's totally fine too. But for people who are trying to get through the holiday dinner table conversations, what can they maybe do?

Ani: Yeah, this comes up so much. So, in my work, after we decide whether or not you're going, then we start talking about, okay, what's that going to look like? And prepping for either comments that might be said, how do you want to address those, do you want to initiate conversations, what are your boundaries and off-limit things? So really I start helping folks conceptualize what is okay for them. If they're going home and going to have these conversations, or know people are going to be bringing them up.

So we're talking a lot about, like what to do, what to say, how to take care of yourself. So, first, I'm a trauma therapist and so a lot of my work is taking that extra step, or really being cautious and helping folks decrease how much they're re-traumatized over the holidays. I always say, "First focus on staying safe and grounded in your own recovery," but that doesn't mean you should or shouldn't speak up.

It just means to know that you have a plan for how you're going to take care of yourself. So, that said, if you're able to safely enough talk about politics with your family, here's what I suggest. First, figure out what is your goal. Like what do you actually want out of this? Are you going in with the idea that you're going to change their mind? Do you want a better understanding? Do you just need to yell and scream at them and unleash some of your rage? Like really, truly thinking, what do you want?

I know in this, that for so many of us the stakes are so high, and literally life and death in many cases. And so it can be really easy and quick to go to that place of, well fuck you, you're stupid and your idea doesn't, can I say fuck you? I don't know if I can say that.

Shohreh: You can say "Fuck you," all that you want. [Laughter]

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Ani: But you know, it's just that it's like when people are saying things in your face and doesn't make sense, there's such an urge to just scream. Or like, "You're stupid, what are you doing? This doesn't make any sense, you're dumb," or put down people. And as gratifying as that might be in the moment, it's usually not terribly effective in keeping relationships or having constructive dialogue.

Shohreh: Fair! [Laughter]

Ani: But you can do it, I will always say that. There's a book out by Beth Silvers and Sarah Stewart, that's called, I Think You're Wrong, (But I'm Listening). And this is a book that's written by two friends. So they say, "Sarah from the left, and Beth from the right." And they are on different sides of the political spectrum, but trying to help us figure out how to have productive and civilized, those are their words, not mine, conversations across party lines.

And one of the things that they talk about is taking off the jersey. So, thinking about, if you've ever been to a tailgating, it's a very clear, the people in green are on that side, and the people in maroon are on this side, and we don't talk, and we don't like each other. And we can go into political conversations, or even issue conversations with our jerseys on, ready to fight.

Sometimes that's really justified because it's just not a question. And there are other times that we might be able to take the jersey off, set it down for a moment, and really just try to have dialogue with someone else. So in that approach, I really think of like trying to find your why, and trying to find their why.

So what's the ideal result that we're all wanting? How are you trying to get there? Why is this higher thinking about it, and really kind of just trying to understand another, rather than convincing them. Most of us, the second someone tries to convince us, we're going to dig in deeper on our point of view and perspective. So I think trying to take an approach of like, I want to have some dialogue with you, can be really helpful.

Saying things like, "I'm really curious to know more about..." or, "I'm wondering how you think about that," or, "I'm wondering how you came to

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believe that.” And I also really believe that the power of story is so important. I grew up in a really small town in the Rust Belt, and I was a very different person, with very different ideas than a lot of folks there.

And there are ways in which I can share pieces of my own life experience, or stories, or values, or beliefs, that might impact the way another person sees or processes a situation. So, I think also, you can get into stats and data, if you want, but anything right now can be called ‘fake news.’ But your own story is your own, and that’s really the one thing that you just have.

And so another thing that might be helpful is to kind of move away from talking about just ‘Trumpism,’ as it is now called, and talking more about specific issues, and how those impact folks you care about. So immigration and the border wall with Mexico. So, instead of attacking the wall as a dumb idea, which I think it is, but I might initiate something with people I care about and ask, “Well, who should get to come to America?” And, “Where should we get to go?” And, “What should that process look like?”

And if I want to move to another country, what is fair for them to ask of me to do? What is that expectation? Really kind of just trying to have broader conversations. We can all get really narrow in our convictions, and I think of it as kind of trying to broader that umbrella of what we’re looking at, as a way of moving out of the, I’m right, you’re wrong individual nature of it, and moving more into a broader macro kind of look.

And you get to disengage at any point. And if it becomes personal, or attacking, and you need to leave, or step away, please do so. It is not helpful for you to sacrifice yourself for someone else. And then, have a self-care plan after, if you’re gonna do this stuff. Audre Lorde, I love her quote, ‘Caring for myself is not self-indulgent, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.’ And I really, really fundamentally, in my bones and being, believe that.

You must care for yourself. So, if you’re gonna go into your family and visiting, even just if they’re stressful in general, but especially if you’re gonna try talking about these things, have a ‘phone a friend,’ like have a group, have someone on call that will be able to take your call. Or let your

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group chat know. Like yo, it's about to go down [laughs], I might need some support. Like have some people, step outside, take a walk, go for a drive.

Like anything that you need to do, and also, please don't try to have these conversations after everyone has had bottles of wine or whiskey or whatever you have at your family meals [laughs] because that just never helps anyone.

Shohreh: Yeah, and you kind of mentioned this at the beginning, but I'll just say as well. Like you obviously don't owe anybody these sort of calmer conversations or whatever. Like if your family abuses you, or gaslights you, or whatever, it's not like we're saying you have to have these kinds of conversations with them. These are just some options if this is a way that you'd like to engage with them.

Ani: Yes, I'm so glad you said that. I feel so passionate about that. I think oppressed folks already, like bear the responsibility of advocating for themselves, and I respect that the closer the relationship, the more difficult it is. The closer it is, if it's someone you really love and care about, you may not have the spoons. You may not be able to fight that fight with that person, but you can fight the fight with somebody else's parent, because that's not the same relationship.

Shohreh: Right, there's some instances where it just may not feel safe to have these kinds of conversations, or where you might just say, "Fuck it, it's not worth it," to you, to put in that kind of effort. I mean I do think if you want to have these kinds of conversations and educate people, like you really need to care about them, right? And some relationships, it's just not worth it.

Ani: This is a long game, right. Like you're not going to have one conversation at Thanksgiving around the table with your racist uncle, and then it's going to be magically done. So, again, if you're wanting to blow up relationships, or you don't care about the relationships, it's really easy to go into the like, fuck you all, I hate you, I'm never coming here! But if these are people that, those relationships are important and dear to you, think of this as a long game.

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Like we're going to be having lots of conversations and I'm just having, this is just a groundwork, and we're gonna keep building. And I think that can also help, for me, that can help me not get so worked up that I'm like, ah! This is the one conversation I have to change how you feel about everything! It's like, let's be real, that's just not gonna happen, so we're just going to have a conversation, and then we'll have another one next time we see each other.

Shohreh: I like that a lot. I think one of the issues, not only with these kinds of holiday conversations, but in other areas in our lives, is people try to put up these boundaries of like, oh, let's not bring politics into this, right? And this idea that we can somehow separate the political from everything else that's going on in our personal and professional lives, because for instance, when I'm doing stuff for my business, you know, I often talk about social justice and political stuff.

And there's definitely people who will just immediately unfollow me or who give the feedback of like, what does this have to do with fitness, or whatever. And don't think that these things can kind of mesh together. So, what do you think? Is everything political? Is it not? [Laughter]

Ani: Yes. You know, I'm so tired of this like old adage, I don't know when this began or why, but this whole thing of, you don't talk politics, money, or religion. I'm like, these things impact every area of our life, and we're just supposed to magically not talk about them.

Shohreh: You've got to bury them really deep, and then deal with them as an adult with your therapist. That's what you're supposed to do!

Ani: Which I appreciate the job security. However [laughs], I think we can also, maybe, I don't know, figure out a different way of doing it. But to me it just always feels like, hey, don't talk about your values or your passions or what matters to you in the world. And that goes back to me being like, I'm just not shrinking, to people. Like I'm just not. I'm just done with it. I did it too long, and I'm not.

So, you're going to know what I think about politics, and money, and religion, and sex, and all sorts of things I'm not supposed to talk about. So, for me personally, I cannot separate the two. I think my, just very existence

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is political, as for lots of people; you're just existing, without you doing or saying anything, just your very body and presence in a public space. When I put on a bikini, as a morbidly obese, fat woman, that's a political act, because the government has an all-out war on my body, and people who have bodies that look like mine.

And when I can say, "Fuck you, I'm going to wear my bikini anyway, because it's 150 degrees in Texas, and I'm hot, and I'm swimming," -

Shohreh:

Real talk.

Ani:

It's miserable in the summer. But like that in and of itself is political. And by doing that, by saying, "I refuse to cower to your societal expectations," or your demands, or your policies, you also make yourself a target for people's thoughts, feelings, opinions, fists, violence, all of that. To tell someone that their existence is not political, or that they should separate the two, to me means that I should somehow just be a head that walks around on a non-existent body.

Like one of those, like a riding horse, like that's what I feel like. You're not a being, you're just a head, and here it is. So, I think that's true for lots of folks, if your body is black or brown, or your gender is ambiguous, or you're trans, or you're a very flamboyant femme male, you use a wheelchair, any of that, just taking up space in public.

And I will also say, at the same time, I believe in human agency, and that I believe others have the right to live as they see fit. And I know some people, who I love deeply, who actively avoid politics, or they don't vote, or they roll their eyes when I'm on my new rant about whatever thing I think is important - all of it. All of it is important.

And while I disagree, I can also respect their right, because I don't know, that just goes fundamentally to my whole belief that we get to choose what we do, even if I disagree. But that was my kind of personal tangent about it. But for me professionally, starting out as a baby therapist, I had a lot of mentors, and coaches, and people tell me, "You really don't want to make yourself that political on your website. You really shouldn't say that on your website. You really shouldn't do this on your website."

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And it took me an obnoxious amount of time to create a website, because I was trying to not be me, in order to not offend anyone. And once I stopped that, now I have a beautiful website that I love and I'm proud of, that's really authentic. Authentically represents me, and authentically speaks to the folks that I want to work with.

I just don't think you can untangle the two, and especially in mental health. So much of what gets labeled or diagnosed as mental 'illness' – illness in air quotes – is actually a completely normal, totally reasonable, valid response to a fucked-up situation. So, to a family that's not safe, an environment that's not safe, a body that's not safe.

Shohreh:

When you were saying that, I was thinking how not only is that shitty business advice because there's something to say for niching down, and speaking to your audience so that the right people can find you, you know, instead of just being like, I can help anybody. Because one, that's not true, you can't, there are very specific people who are going to benefit most from you.

But then also this idea that therapists and health professionals, and whatever, are not supposed to share anything about themselves, is I think, really rooted in white supremacy and other issues. Because I think your clients deserve to know what they're getting with you, and if you are a safe space for them, and if you understand and can help them unpack their background and how that affects their lives, I think that's just a silly idea to just be like, "Nope, you can't say anything about what you believe and your politics" because that's going to really screw some people over, and you'll be a horrible fit for them.

Ani:

Yes, for those of you who are not in the office while we're recording, which is everyone, I was just nodding, [laughter] very vigorously. Yeah, all of that I totally agree with, and it comes, you know, psychology has such a root in white men, and really comes out of how white men thought that relationships and therapy should go and look. And I feel like there's a divide in our field too, of sort of old school/new school.

And this older school idea of you're a blank slate and you're just neutral, and you don't have any reactions that allows the person to just project

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whatever they want. That doesn't work for me. And I know a lot of people who that doesn't work with and I work in a much more relational way, and the things that you said. I think it's really important that you know if we have some similar values, or if I do or don't support your actual existence in life, or whether I actively am working against your rights.

I think that you're absolutely entitled to know that. And as I have more accurately and honestly reflected myself, exactly what you said. I have people that I get to work with now who are so cool, who I would love to be friends with, and I'm not friends with because I have good boundaries. But they're just fucking cool people, and I am so able to meet them and work with them, in a very different way, and at a deeper level, than I could with other folks who have situations that I'm... I mean part of it is just, I also have a lived personal life experience, and when that matches up with someone else's sort of experience, it's, I don't know, it's just kind of magic

Shohreh:

So, I'm with you, that we can't really separate out politics in this like neat line from our everyday lives, and our professional lives. And I think one of the areas where I especially see this show up, and of course is what this podcast is all about, is in the health and well-being of so many of the people that I know and that I'm working with. Because the reality is that all of this political stuff can have a serious effect on a person's health and wellbeing, not only from chronic stress perspective, but also thinking about things like intergenerational trauma, which lasts between generations.

Ani:

Yes! The impact on health and wellness is endless! Seriously! From the micro to the macro, the food that we eat, the ways that we get around, the work we do, the education we receive, are all interconnected. Large scale issues like climate change, and natural disasters, and how we clean up after natural disasters affect the very air that we breathe.

If we're breathing in toxins that impacts our lungs and can contribute to allergies, or asthma, or if you live in Austin, you're just going to have allergies, because that's how it is here!

Shohreh:

Water, that made me think of water and Flint.

Ani:

Yes, exactly! The food that we access, like if you are in a food desert and the nearest grocery store is miles and miles and miles, you're going to

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have limited access to different types of foods. You might have different quality. Cost is going to be different, all of that is going to matter to your individual health and wellness. I'm going to talk about generational trauma, but I think kind of leading into that, I think the biggest impact around politics and health and wellbeing, is really related to stress.

Particularly the traumatic stress, either living as a member of a marginalized or oppressed group, or someone who the government is trying to actively erase or kill. And just the cumulative impact of living in under chronic stress. So, our bodies are resilient as fuck. They're meant to bounce back from a lot, and we do. We do bounce back from a lot.

But chronic stress without reprieve is taxing. It's an extra overload. It keeps the body in a heightened state of alarm, constantly scanning for threats. It's like you're a bear in a cave, but you can't hibernate, and so you never get to rest because you're looking out for what's the newest threat. And this contributes to all sorts of connections with health, like adrenal fatigue, unexplained aches and pains, digestion, regulating temperature, hormones, sleep, all of that plays into this. Not only your physical body health and wellness, but just the quality of life.

If you're constantly on edge and irritable, or keyed up, or you're constantly exhausted and drained and have no energy, all of that I think of as being related to health and wellness. And then I love that you brought up intergenerational trauma. There's so much being talked about, and written about, and studied about the impact of intergenerational trauma on us, as individuals, but also as a collective. So, we all have trauma wired into our DNA. Some studies are saying we carry up to 16 generations of DNA, that's a lot.

Shohreh: That's overwhelming [laughter].

Ani: That's a lot of people up in you, that you don't know about or understand. I've worked with folks who were like, I have all these PTSD symptoms, but I don't have a trauma. There's all sorts of things we could unpack there about repressed memories and things like that. But it's also true that this trauma changes genes, and genes then get passed on. So what you're inheriting, both on an individual level, but also on a collective level is like,

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our world history of immigration, and colonization, and wars, and genocides, and it doesn't matter if you're only in the U.S., or anywhere in the world.

Like all of our world histories involve this. And so this gets passed down consciously and unconsciously. So, for example, I can use my family a little bit, and my experience. So, after years of abuse, let's say a woman now has her own family. We could maybe call this woman my mother, or anyone's mother. But, this particular mother has never really been able to release herself or be freed from the torture that she experienced.

So, she's still carrying psychological and emotional wounds that went unaddressed. And then as a result, goes on to then repeat many of the same behaviors from her abuse, leading, kind of carrying that on, both in a genetic, biological way, but then also in a learned social environment way by kind of re-enacting some of the same things.

So those dysfunctional ways of coping continue on for generations and generations, and stop and think about your family. We tend to see things like sexual abuse that will stem way back in generations, until someone in the family tree decides to end the secret. Often if one person comes forward, then lots of others come forward. And intergenerational trauma often leads to like rigid thinking, repetition of patterns that you-obviously are poor, why would you repeat them, but that you do anyway.

Also, lots of like substance abuse is connected to trauma histories or intergenerational trauma, because you're trying to cope. You're just trying to cope with all the feelings that you have.

Shohreh:

If this is an area that you have interest in learning more about, I highly recommend the book, *The Body Keeps the Score*, which is by Bessel van der Kolk [laughter]. Yes, try to say that properly! I will obviously link to it in the show notes, so that you can go check that out. It's a pretty hefty book, but super useful if you're trying to understand some of these topics, and how past trauma in generations before yours are maybe affecting you and your health and wellbeing right now.

And I also think it's a really great book for health and wellness professionals who are taught incorrectly that people are directly

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responsible for their health and well-being in these different circumstances. And we know that that's just not true, as Ani has mentioned, there's so many immediate circumstances that are outside of people's control. All of these social determinants of health, and then there are things that are really outside of your control that literally came from generations before you, that have nothing to do with you, that are now settled into your body. So it's a really fascinating area of science that I think fills in some gaps.

Ani: Yes, and another book also that I think is really great is called, *Waking the Tiger*, by Peter Levine. Similar, kind of talking about how trauma gets frozen and stored in the body, and the ways that we can move through that, I think that would be another one to include too.

Shohreh: Perfect, I'll include that one. With things being especially political right now, and of course we have another presidential election coming up in, oh my god, it's less than a year, that's horrifying! [Laughs] Sorry, I'm having terrible flashbacks right now. I think that there are just so many problems that in our faces all the time. There are these real life consequences that we're seeing to our loved ones, and just all the shit going on in the government here.

And I think it can just be so overwhelming for people. So, I have two questions, I think. One, knowing that there are so many important causes in areas that work needs to be done in, like how do we decide where the hell we should focus our energy? And then two, how can we deal with this feeling, like we're just never doing enough? Because I think so many people, we try to do so much, and then it can lead to burnout, which means you're not doing anything, so that's not very helpful either.

Ani: Mhmm, yes. This is so interesting. I've reflected some on this and how it's changed for me personally over the years, at different points. You know, we're all in a different stage of development in our own activism or awareness. And wherever you are, right now, is exactly right, it's the exact, perfect, right spot for you. And wherever you go will lead you to the next place that you're supposed to be.

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When I first started, I think my answer would have been, we must focus on everything all the time, forever [laughs] because there's so much shit to do, and we'll never get it done. And then I burned out, over and over and over again. And with age comes some grace, and maturity -

Shohreh: Maybe a little wisdom.

Ani: A little wisdom, that's what they say. And so I think the way that I answer this now is different. So, kind of twofold. One is that there's no wrong way to be involved. That thinking of what do you care about the most. Pick one or two key issues or causes that you are willing to commit to, for right now. For whatever that means for you, the next 90 days, the next six months, the next year. What is important and matters to you the most is going to change over the course of your life, just depending on different circumstances. But right now, what are you most passionate about?

What is calling to you? What is the mission or the statement that you wish you could scream from the top of the mountains and get everyone to believe? And I think that those are good places to get involved. Or those are good areas to get involved if it, again, if it is doable for you. So if you have violence in your history and you want to work against violence, that could be really good, and you could do that, and there are some times where folks are like, I just can't do that, it's too close.

So respect that as well. There is someone out there who can do the work that you can't. When you have causes, or you kind of figure out more, this is what I'm aligned in, see who is already doing this work, and support them. We do not need new non-profits every time someone has a new idea. And so I think, gosh, I feel like saying that, that's not a discouragement from starting your non-profit. Start a non-profit if you want to start a non-profit.

But I just think that there's so often this like, oh, I care about this, I must start something for this. I will do this in a silo. And there are so many of us out there who care and are already doing work, or are involved, or can get you connected. So just talk to other people, get involved in your community. And if you can't do that, you don't have the mental abilities,

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the physical abilities, you're raising kids, you've got other things, if you can support financially.

If you don't have time but you have money, oh believe me, we all need some money in these causes. We need scholarships for folks to participate in programs. We need funding for things. So if you are a person who has more money than time and can give that, awesome! If you're a person who doesn't have a lot of money, but you can give time, awesome! If you can only do something once a month for two hours, awesome!

Get involved in a way that works for you, that is sustainable, so that's my kind of preventative on the burnout, is like, do something that you care about and is sustainable for you and is doable, so that you're not adding more just taxing stress to what you're doing already.

The newer thing that I'm really getting interested in, and passionate about, is something called Pleasure Activism. Adrienne Maree Brown put this book out called Pleasure Activism, and she's a strategist. I want to say out of Detroit, I believe, but I see her as a badass community organizer really. But this book, Pleasure Activism, is all about trying to figure out ways of making justice and liberation the most pleasurable experience we can have.

Which I was like, that doesn't go, like I do activism when I'm angry [laughs] or like I have to be outraged, and I really loved what she was talking about, is that pleasure often gets lost under the weight of oppression. And that it is liberating, and it is liberatory to reclaim pleasure for yourself. And that's something that I've been thinking about a whole lot more recently, is how we can stop equating suffering as the story of how we do justice, or how we do justice work. And I feel like it's just what we do, and what we know.

We know struggle, and there kind of is that feeling that you have to be suffering all the time. That you can't go out and enjoy something, or you can't laugh, or you can't have fun because people are dying. And I mean that's true, people are dying, it's not fun, and this is not a long term survival strategy to keep yourself stuck, weighted, stressed. I really love her book. I think that it's great. She also talks some more about Audre Lorde and saying that we settle for suffering because of the oppression.

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That oppression actually makes us believe pleasure is not something we have access to, or isn't something that we deserve or can claim. And that really when we do the work of reclaiming our full selves, like whole, liberated, free selves, is through reclaiming and reconnecting to pleasure and joy. So I think that's some radical shit. I don't fully know how to embody quite it yet, but I really like that idea that I can figure out how to make this pleasurable.

Shohreh:

I love that! I think that dovetails so nicely with the work that I do against diet culture with my clients. Because diet culture is literally this whole idea that like, what you eat needs to be devoid of pleasure. The way you exercise needs to be devoid of pleasure, and so a lot of the work that I do is helping people bring enjoyment back to what they're eating, and how they're moving their bodies, which is amazing. It's what I love about my work.

And it's really deep in these puritanical roots of our culture that like we are not supposed to enjoy and have pleasure in anything. I mean you see this in sex, of course, like you said, that's a taboo topic, we're not supposed to talk about it, oh no! And that extends into food, and makes sense that it extends into activism, these other areas of our lives. It's like, you know, we're here to work and make money, and like that's all that matters. And like, that sucks. And that's also not honoring the people who have lost their lives in a lot of these struggles for the rest of us to live under suffering and to not find any joy. Like I don't see that as a way of really honoring lives that are lost either.

Ani:

Yes, I love that connection, and thinking about food as pleasure can be such a radical shift of looking at food. Food not as enemy, but food as fun, or enjoyment, and sex, like queer sex, sex as a fat person, sex as a person with a disability, like girl, go get your pleasure on. Like we're gonna have lots of time to fight the world's problems, but you also need to stop and enjoy the life that you're living now, or else we're just continuing, like it's just a shitty cycle. I want to get off it.

I think of how free we were to experience pleasure and joy as children. The ways in which we moved our bodies, like weren't rigid. You know, we did weird shit, like bear crawls and crab walks [laughter] -

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Shohreh: The floor is lava!

Ani: [Laughter] Yes, like how much fun was that? You know, and we just lose touch with that, like I don't know, it gets beat out somewhere, that being an adult means struggling and working the 9 to 5, and always being tired. Professions, gosh, I'm sure you can relate to this, in your former law career, but there's a point of pride almost that you're overworking. Or like, "Well, I put in 80 hours this week." Okay, first off, super guilty of it, used to be that person, totally was like, well, I don't understand why you're tired because I'm tired because I did all this.

But now I'm just like, yeah, sorry you worked 80 hours man, like that doesn't sound fun, I hope you enjoyed it, you know? Like I want to do other things besides work all the time. I love my work, but I also love my dog, and I love being outside, and I love... Like there's just more. I love dance, like I just love other things. So, find pleasure.

Shohreh: Yeah, I think it's telling, and I'm guilty of this, that you know, we use the word 'adulthood' typically to mean like negative things, like paying bills or working or whatever else [laughter] and I'm like, that's kind of sad, now that I think about it in this context of that, this idea that oh, when you're an adult, like everything sucks. I'm like, 'cause does it have to? And so I think that book is kind of a good in-way into maybe finding some ways where it's like, maybe it doesn't have to and maybe we can go out of our way to try and find joy and pleasure in our lives.

Ani: Yes and the joy and pleasure, gosh, I love the puritanical piece because that really was so systematically removed from so many of us. Systematically, that you will not have fun, that we will put children in camps, that we will take children out of homes, that we will...in families where there was early childhood abuse, your childhood gets cut off, you know, you don't get to have more time to just be fun and silly.

And so, so much of the work that I do, like you're saying connecting to joy, I'm also working a lot with like connecting to your inner child, because often that child had that initial curiosity and joy and wonder at some point, had to get cut off, to respond to other things that are happening in the environment. Whether it's in your family or at school or the world, and so

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just reconnecting with this part of us that at one point was really free, and connected to their body, and knew when they were hungry, knew when they needed to pee.

Like knew all of those things, and so I, yeah, I do a lot of that, like connecting to that inner child. And then also connecting to ancestors living or dead, that remembering somewhere in our lineage, someone else was like us, and that if you come from a family that doesn't represent you, or doesn't think like you, just also remembering that you are not, you did not just come magical out of like, you're not a poof. You didn't come out of magical fairy dust.

That there is a line and a lineage of folks who somewhere also thought like you, believed like you, practiced like you. And trying, if you are a spiritual person, this can be a way of cultivating some of those ancestral lineages, to try to find some strength and source from that, as you're continuing on, in whatever journeys you're doing.

Shohreh:

Yeah, and I'll say that Layla Saad has a great podcast called, The Good Ancestor podcast, that actually talks a lot about that with different guests and kind of connecting with that ancestry. So, I highly recommend that one as well, if you're interested in that area. And I'll quickly go back too, to what you were saying about choosing areas that are important to you and your activism. And I think, especially now, you know, this podcast is going to come out right before we finish up 2019, going into 2020, so that it can be a great kind of end of year exercise for somebody to say, okay, what do I want my 2020 to look like?

Which areas are going to be really important to me in this next year, and then knowing that of course, not only can you change them throughout the year, but you can always reassess them at the end of 2020 and say, okay, do I want to keep up with these areas of activism? Do I feel like I'm lacking in certain areas, have other things become important to me? Because like for instance for me, 2020 is going to be a very politically active year for me.

And you know, I want to support whatever Democratic nominee that we end up with, in whatever way works in my time. But that's not something I

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would necessarily do in 2021, for example. So like these things can change, and how you can spend your time can change based on what's going on at different times around you.

Ani: Absolutely.

Shohreh: So we've come to our final question of the podcast which is our usual, how do you define health and wellness for yourself at this moment in your life?

Ani: I love this question. I love hearing everyone's answers that you've, when you have different people on the show. It's always nice to hear what we're all thinking about. And you know, I tried to think of a way of kind of succinctly saying lots of the things that I already said. But for me, the health and wellness at this particular moment, specifically, is really around self-love and my own sort of liberation. So, I, like most living humans, struggle with the impact of some of these policies and ways of talking.

And have had to do a lot of work with loving my own body, and loving my own self, and overcoming my own trauma history. And so right now, health and wellness for me is about doing less, which is, I mean it feels like might kind of go against the whole podcast that we just had, of like getting active [laughs], but for me, it is that, kind of comes out of that pick one or two things. That health and wellness for me right now means that I need to get a little narrower in the things that I want to do, in terms of creating change.

Because I'm at a point that I'm realizing, I have not had a whole lot of pleasure in my life. That I did not have a lot of access to pleasure growing up, and as an adult, have really been in that whole like work-work-work, we need money and we need this, we need this, hustle, hustle. And I'm just getting to a point now of being like, you know what? I love my work, and I want other things too.

And so for me health and wellness is like tapping into more time in nature, that's sort of my spirituality. Like tapping into relationships and connections that are really nurturing, and spending time that is unscheduled. Just having down time, and being able, kind of reconnecting with my inner child a little bit. Of like, well okay, here we are, and we're sitting and we're bored and what do you want to do? Well, here's the to-do list I could do, oh, but like what do you actually want to do?

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And so I'm really trying to work a lot, my health and wellness right now is really about want. Allowing myself to want, allowing myself to meet those wants. Allowing myself to learn about other people's wants. Like I'm just real excited in that right now, kind of the abundance sort of theme of, we all work so fucking hard together, but like what also, what is the magic and beauty that we do together also.

And that's where I'm really focused right now in my own health and wellness.

Shohreh: I like what you said about kind of pulling it back because something I see a lot with my clients is this all or nothing mentality. Where they try to just go gung-ho all into everything and then they end up with nothing because you can't. You cannot do everything. Even though we talk about so many different areas of health on this podcast, which I love, you can't look at all of them equally, at the same time, every moment of your life.

And that's why I ask people, you know, how do you define health and wellness for yourself right now, because certain areas of health and wellness are going to be more important to you in this moment, than maybe they will be tomorrow, or next week, or next year, and that's okay. We just don't have the capacity to do all the things, all the time.

Awesome. Well, thanks for being here Ani. You mentioned your beautiful website earlier and I want people to be able to find it. So tell us about your website and anywhere else that people can find you online if they want to catch up with you.

Ani: Yes, my name is Ani Mirasol, so I'm going to spell it because [laughs] it's not always easy. So, my website is www.animirasol.com, so animarisol.com. I am on Facebook under Ani Mirasol as well, and I'm on Instagram @intersectional.therapist, where I am not quite yet super active, because I haven't figured out how to use it. And I am feeling my age! But, I am there and there are some things [laughter].

Shohreh: Fantastic, and as per usual, all of those will be in the show notes, so you can easily access them if you'd like to. And then you are still looking for people for your Politics and Wellness Group that you're going to be running for 2020, right?

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Ani: Yes, yes, yes, we'll be starting, the date is out of my mind right now, but it is the Tuesday after MLK in January.

Shohreh: So late January.

Ani: Yeah, I want to say it's the 21st or something like that, but this will be an in-person group in Austin, Texas. I don't have online programming yet, but I am trying to figure that out, because I would like to expand. But for now, in-person, you can get the information on my website, any of the places, email me, or call me if you're interested or just want to talk, to learn more about it. Or if you want to sign-up, I would love to have you.

Shohreh: Fantastic. So yeah, if you're interested in being a part of that group, if you like the ideas we were talking about earlier, just reach out to Ani and she can give you more details about what that would entail.

[Music plays]

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.

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