

Redefining Health & Wellness

#25

Featured this episode: Shohreh Davoodi & Neathery Thurmond

Shohreh Davoodi: It's time to embark on episode 25 of the Redefining Health & Wellness podcast. And holy shit, has it really been 25 episodes already? That feels like a lot. When I first started this podcast, I really wasn't sure where it would lead me, and, if I'm being honest, I still have no idea where it's leading me. But, I am enjoying the ride, and I hope that you are too.

Today's guest is Neathery Thurmond, she is a clinical social worker, certified group psychotherapist, board-approved supervisor, and owner of a group private practice here in Austin. Just in time for the holidays and the new year, Neathery and I chatted about stress and traumatic stress, and tools for how to cope, in particular, mindfulness and meditation.

If you're like me and you've never been able to get a mindfulness meditation practice going, stick around to hear what Neathery has to say. To access the show notes and a full transcript of this episode, head to shohrehdavoodi.com/25. That's shohrehdavoodi.com/25.

[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.

I have my friend, Neathery Thurmond here on the podcast today, and I have to say that the first time that Neathery contacted me, it was asking me to get together, specifically over cupcakes. And I was like, who is this person? We need to be best friends! And there's parallels between this and my episode with Lauren Newman, where we got together over pancakes.

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So basically, I guess what I'm saying is that like Austin HAES people know how to eat and socialize. So, hi Neathery thanks for being here.

Neathery Thurmond: Hey, food and friends, my favorite things.

Shohreh: Yes, the best things ever. So, I'm really excited to have you on. We have a very timely topic for the holidays today. But first, let's start by talking a little bit about you and what you do and how you got there.

Neathery: Yeah, so my name is Neathery Thurmond. My pronouns are she/hers. And one of the things I also love about you, just aside from you are so excited about cupcakes -

Shohreh: So excited! [Laughs]

Neathery: You also share; you're so excited [laughs]. People don't know your name, or my name, so I like to say my name is Neathery rhymes with feathery. And I'm a licensed clinical social worker and supervisor, and a certified group psychotherapist. And I am also EMDR trained, and I'm the owner of a group practice, a HAES Informed, Health At Every Size informed group practice in Austin, Texas.

I think from a very young age I knew I wanted to be a helping professional. I am an Enneagram Type 2 [laughs], so I'm a helper through and through. And social work just felt like the most natural fit in terms of my values as a human and also, I just blend right in with the social values of social justice, inherent worth and dignity of every person. And so I went to UT, University of Texas at Austin, social work school and have never left since.

I love Austin very much. And I have always been interested in working with food, body image, and have been in the field of eating disorders since 2009. And along the way I found meditation, which we'll talk more about, I'm sure, throughout the episode. But I definitely infuse my mindfulness practices in basically everything I do, clinically and also my personal life.

Shohreh: Which is perfect because this episode is going to come out literally on Christmas Eve, and not only are the holidays a really stressful time for people, but I honestly think that the start of the new year can be too.

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Because there's a lot of pressure to change, you know, with resolutions and everything else.

It's kind of like the time of the year where you need to become your very best person for the new year, and in this case, for the new decade, because everyone keeps talking about how the decade [laughs] is ending and we have a new one starting.

Plus, there's very specific diet culture pressure too, and dieting, and losing weight, and everything in the new year. So, I want to talk to you about stress in general, and the role that it plays in our lives.

Neathery:

Yes, this episode definitely is timely; Hanukkah also starts just a couple days before Christmas does. So there's lots of festivities, lots of activities, and so many people reflecting about, not just the year, but the decade [laughs]. And doing kind of a self-reflection of what they want in the coming year, coming decade, which is a lot of pressure that we put on ourselves, mixed with work, taking time off, lots of family activities.

We can just be pretty busy. We can define stress, and this is from Hans Selye, I believe I'm saying that maybe incorrectly, a Hungarian endocrinologist from many years back. Defines it as 'a non-specific response of the body to any demand for change. It's neither good, nor bad, and it just simply is something that requires effort from our body.' So, I like to point that out because most of the time when we say 'stress,' we have a negative connotation with it, and that's absolutely true, and we'll talk more about maybe some negative and traumatic stress in the episode.

But stress can also be really positive as well. Good things can happen, and our nervous system still interprets it as stress.

Shohreh:

Maybe can you give; I guess a positive example of stress. It sounds like regardless of the kind of stress, basically it's kind of, can have the same effect in the body, is that right?

Neathery:

Absolutely, and positive examples of the stress can be just even hanging out with the people you love, having a good time, work promotion, big life events, having cupcakes with Shohreh Davoodi [laughs] -

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Shohreh: Yay!

Neathery: That can be super pleasant and exciting, exactly. And our body still interprets it as a stress, just because it's something that is not, you know, our body does like to stay in a homeostasis, which keeps things pretty even and steady. And any excitement can be considered stress, and also when we talk about negative stress, that's definitely when we experience things that our nervous system will respond as a fight or flight, freeze, fawn, or faint response. And we can get into that a little bit later.

Shohreh: I think too that, at least I feel like we're living in an especially high stress world now, and I think there's a lot of different things that are contributing to that. I mean, certainly in the year 2019, politics are one of those things, and actually the episode that's coming out a week before your episode comes out, is with Ani Mirasol and we're talking all about how the personal is political. So that's definitely an area of stress for people.

I think too with this expectation that we're supposed to be accessible at all times through our phones, and this really high pressure to produce under capitalism, that there's just a lot of stress now. And maybe it's always been that way, obviously I didn't grow up when my parents grew up, but it seems to me, and I'll see what you think, that it may be even more stress now than there used to be that we're under, particularly negative stress.

Neathery: No, I totally agree. Right now it's a super stressful time. I mean at the time of this recording, impeachment trials are about to start and there's so much in the news. There's so much fear, and when we get to talk about traumatic stress, we'll talk about how that shows up in the body. But there is tons of information out there, and this really is the age of information, where we have smart phones and phones with alerts, and news sources all over the place.

There's really just not a place where there's silence, and we just get bombarded with tons of messaging, advertisement, diet culture messages that are already starting. Always there really, but the New Year's resolutioners are already doing their marketing. And so I agree that this is a higher stress time, for sure.

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Then what happens, unfortunately, what our nervous system does, our sympathetic nervous system responds to stress by surging our epinephrine, which is adrenaline and cortisol hormones. These are stress hormones, and too much adrenaline can increase risk of heart attacks and strokes. And too much cortisol can increase our blood sugar and suppresses our immune system.

And these chronic spikes in our stress hormones lead to an increase in blood pressure, heart rate, cortisol, disrupts our immunity, drops our energy, impacts sleep. I mean the health consequences just keep going. So this is a huge issue that we are constantly overstressed.

Shohreh: Yeah, and I also think stress is even higher on people who experience marginalization, particularly multiple marginalizations. And I just feel like that's important to mention because of course we're all experiencing stress, and then that can be heightened even further, depending on how the world treats you.

Neathery: Absolutely. And I would say for folks who have experienced oppression, or continue to experience oppression, I would label that as traumatic stress. People who experience oppression often aren't safe, and their fear is entirely well-grounded. And by virtue of this ongoing oppression, they're often deprived of the opportunity to have closure with any traumatic event. And this compounding effect, so micro-aggressions, or even macro-aggressions, the compounding effect results in traumatic stress symptoms.

Shohreh: I actually had a past therapist, she was at one point, was talking about my trauma, and she called it that, and my reaction was kind of like, whoa, whoa, whoa, I haven't experienced any real trauma. And she was like, 'well, there's big T trauma, and there's little T trauma.' And I found that reframe so helpful because I felt like, oh, I can't put myself into this category of experiencing trauma.

But she explained to me that you know, regardless of if it's, these larger events that we think of as traumatic, so for example like domestic violence, rape, etc., versus smaller traumas, that our bodies often can react in the same way.

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Neathery: Absolutely, and one thing that I hope to get conveyed in this podcast, is for listeners to understand that most people, the majority of people, in fact there's a World Health study that was done in about 2003 that estimates 90% of the world's population would be exposed to a traumatic event over the course of their lives.

Shohreh: Wow!

Neathery: That's either directly experiencing or hearing of a loved one, seeing/witnessing a traumatic event, 90% of the whole world. That was 2003, so I would venture to say it might be even 100% now, but that's just my Neathery research.

Shohreh: Honestly [laughter].

Neathery: And Pat Ogden, who is the founder of sensorimotor therapy, which is a trauma resolution intervention, she says that 'trauma refers to any threatening, overwhelming experiences that we cannot integrate. And after such experiences, we're often left with a diminished sense of security with others, and in the world, and a sense of feeling unsafe inside our own skin.'

And I definitely can relate to your past therapist, where most clients that I have come in the door and they don't know that what they're talking about is actually a trauma, and their body is experiencing it as such. And it can be such a healing process, a very challenging process, to bring that to life, and then work on integrating that back into the body.

Shohreh: Yeah, because obviously this traumatic stress is like a whole new level of stress, and then if you're adding that on top of everyday life stressors, so you can imagine that it could get pretty difficult to function, and to feel like you're getting any kind of peace in your life. And that's really where I think I'd like to pivot to talk about how we can get there, right? What can we do in ourselves to deal with this stress in a healthy way? And I think maybe let's start with talking about those stress responses because I think that at least will tell people the different ways that our bodies sort of naturally want to respond to stress.

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Neathery:

Absolutely, and I think the first way that we can help folks with integrating traumatic stress is that we operate 100% from a trauma-informed model. So, even if you're not a clinical provider or a helping professional, accountants can be trauma-informed as well, [laughs], is basically what I want to say. Everyone can be trauma-informed, and it's this generous and compassionate thing we can give to each other, because we all are carrying trauma that lives in the body.

We can get into the nitty-gritty of the neuroscience, I am a neuro nerd, and I think some of the topics we'll talk about could be entire podcast episodes. So this will be a super basic, watered-down version. But Stephen Porges is the founder of the Polyvagal Theory, which helps us understand what happens to our body when we experience trauma or stress.

There are three parts to our nervous system. There's the ventral vagal, which is the social/engagement system, and this would be what we also consider a window of tolerance. So this is where we're feeling pretty clear-minded. We are able to engage socially with the people around us. We're feeling grounded, generally can breathe a little bit more easily.

And then we have our sympathetic system, which is our fight/flight/freeze response. In this system you'll have feelings of wanting to fight, some aggression, feeling sweaty, easily startled, racing thoughts, feeling anxiety, digestion issues, for sure, trouble sleeping. You'll have a fear of rejection or feeling on edge. You might have anger, irritation, frustration, tense muscles.

Your blood pressure increases and then we get to the dorsal vagal, which is hypo arousal. So you can also imagine this like a ladder. So the bottom of the ladder is the dorsal vagal system, which is hypo arousal. That's our freeze and faint, this is where we find disassociation or feeling numb. Feeling spaced out, depression, shut down, everything kind of goes to sleep.

And then up above that would be the window of tolerance, which is where our social engagement system lives, ventral vagal, where we're able to connect with others and our surroundings, and feel safe, and generally

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content. And then at the top of the ladder is the sympathetic system, which is hypo arousal and that's our fight/flight response.

Shohreh: And where does the fawn fit into that?

Neathery: The fawn would be in the hypo arousal, so that is people pleasing, caregiving tendencies, and a sense of feeling anxious, maybe a fear of rejection, wanting to tend to people as a way to cope with past trauma.

Shohreh: Yeah, and Sam Dylan Finch has an excellent Twitter thread on fawning that I will link to in the show notes. Because I hadn't actually heard of it until I read his thread, and then I was like, oh, this makes so much sense. And it's one of those responses that I think is less understood, or less people know about it, at least.

Neathery: Right, and I think what you just said, that oh, this makes so much sense, that's what I hope, when we come from a trauma-informed place and we can just name these symptoms that happen to most of us, that also provides us regulation. And so I'll get to that in a moment, but I do want to guide y'all through Dan Siegel's hand model of the brain. Some of y'all might have known this before.

And since we're not live, I'm going to do my best to cue y'all to use your hand. You can use whichever hand, and no worries if you are not interested in this part, but if you take your hand and you curl your thumb in to your palm, and then wrap your four fingers on top of your thumb, you create kind of like a fist with your thumb tucked in.

And Dan Siegel likes to call this the brain, where your wrist lies is the brain stem and then what's tucked underneath is your amygdala. And this is your emotion center of the brain. So your thumb would be your amygdala and hippocampus. The four top fingers would be your prefrontal cortex.

So what happens, our prefrontal cortex is what is online last, so usually up until about 26 is when our brain is fully developed, and that is what comes last fully developed. It's our reasoning center, logic center; it helps us make sense of what's happening.

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What happens when we're stressed, our prefrontal cortex is flipped. Our lid is flipped and what happens is we're not able to access our reasoning. We're all purely emotion, and so the amygdala, you can consider it like a smoke detector, and it scans our environment constantly, especially if you've had trauma in the past or are living in oppression. It's constantly scanning for danger. So there is a hypervigilance that comes from those of us who have experienced trauma or continue to experience trauma.

And it's deciding what's relevant to our safety or survival. This is super reptilian. Or mammalian really, it's been around for a very long time, so it also kind of makes us respond before we're consciously aware of it. So that's why when folks are regressed, or there's a trauma symptom, or trauma reaction, we're playing catch-up because our prefrontal cortex takes a while to catch up when we're just purely in amygdala mind.

Shohreh: I had to think that all of that scanning is probably exhausting for our brains to never take a break from that.

Neathery: It is exhausting, absolutely, and our hippocampus is also impacted, and that's our memory center. So, without the prefrontal cortex to absorb the narrative from the hippocampus, it just keeps looping over and over again, which is why those folks who are experiencing more acute trauma symptoms, experience flashbacks, or even feel like they're reliving past trauma.

So it's incredibly important to have an integrated brain, which means all parts of the brain are talking to each other. That way when the amygdala scans something, the prefrontal cortex is live, online, and ready to say, "I see that that red chair over there feels stressful, it's just a red chair." And a trauma response without an integrated brain, you might just act from a fear that that red chair is an unsafe object. This is just for an example. So integration helps us stay regulated and be less reactive to trauma stimuli.

Shohreh: So it sounds like that integration piece is incredibly important in having a healthy, like stress response, and a healthy response to trauma as well. So, let's go ahead and talk about some tools that we can use to improve that integration in our brains.

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Neathery:

There are so many different tools, and I am finding more and more the power of mindfulness, meditation, and somatic therapy. Talk therapy does a great job of helping create structure and the narrative, but also because this is so built into our nervous system, talk therapy only does so much. So, it's spending time today just talking about benefits of mindfulness meditation, I think we can have other episodes that go into more like somatic therapies that we can totally spend hours talking about.

But for meditation, research is showing that long term and consistent meditation increases our resiliency to stress. And it does this by dampening our amygdala, which means making it less reactive, and increases our connection between the amygdala and the prefrontal cortex. So that means that the amygdala is able to talk to the prefrontal cortex more easily.

What is really cool is that the brain is pretty plastic, I think that's something that is pretty widely known now, is that the brain is pretty plastic, that's how change can be made. So that changes in the brain through mindfulness and meditation become more trait-like. Meaning they're more sustainable, and those become our baseline state.

So, not only do we see improvement with lessening the reactivity in our amygdala and the increased connection between our amygdala and prefrontal cortex, but those become the baseline. So that way, over time we're less and less reactive to external stimuli. Meditation also increases compassion, improves quality of relationships, and it decreases the grey matter in the amygdala, and that's what decreases our reactivity to trauma relevant triggers.

Shohreh:

And now I know some of you out there in listener land are rolling your eyes right now because you see meditation and mindfulness as like this very trendy thing, and you're like, I've tried it, it's stupid. I hate it. And I get it, because I am that person! So, I have ADHD, I've talked about this before. I have found it incredibly challenging [laughs] in my life to do meditation for the long term. I've always started it, and then I have stopped it.

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And, we are going to listen to what Neathery has to say anyways, because I think she is going to surprise us with some ways that we can meditate and be mindful that probably aren't the typical ways that you are used to hearing about it. Right, Neathery, throw us a bone! [Laughter]

Neathery: Absolutely. I think more and more mindfulness and meditation is becoming more trendy. There are the images out there that you just sit and with your palms open and you're just clear mind, no thoughts, and that the goal and expectation is that you just clear your mind.

Shohreh: Right, it's like the Buddhist monk mentality.

Neathery: Right, that's actually not the case and I really feel like I'm on this campaign to make meditation cool [laughs].

Shohreh: Yay!

Neathery: Make meditation accessible, and make meditation trauma-sensitive. I also want to just put a caveat in there that meditation, mindfulness, you can adapt it to your needs. You don't just need to sit, and just breathe, and be there. That can actually be really triggering to many of us, and it can be really overwhelming if there's traumatic material that is living in our body, that we haven't fully processed, or had any therapies around it.

So, because of that, it's not just sitting and just clearing your mind. You can actually focus on other things in the room that you're in. You can even do walking meditation, walking mindfulness. And that's just walking a trail or walking in your neighborhood, walking your dog or your cat, whatever you're into. And just even saying, "Breathing in, breathing out, breathing in, breathing out."

What mindfulness can help us do is to learn how to regulate our attention, which means if our mind's attention is like a flashlight, and correct me if I'm wrong, from your experience, that your flashlight might feel like it's kind of bouncing around.

Shohreh: Mine is like a strobe light Neathery [laughter].

Neathery: EDM, is EDM playing in the background?

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Shohreh: Pretty much, yep [laughter].

Neathery: Yes, and so it's not judging that, right, that's your brain, and it's a lovely brain, to just be with the strobe light and maybe over time, the more you're like, oh, my mind is over there, now my mind is over here. It might be able to feel more regulated and contained. I don't think it's ever going to slow down because that's your brain, and there's nothing wrong with it.

What can also help is having a dual awareness, dual attention. So that while you're focusing maybe on breathing in and out, or your puppies paws on the payment, that's a fun one to watch, or their little butts wagging.

Shohreh: Yeah, so cute!

Neathery: Yeah, I know, they're so cute. You can also be connected to your body and have some body awareness. What does it feel like to put your feet on the ground as you're walking, or sitting? Or your body makes contact with a chair, or a couch, or the floor, or meditation cushion? What's the sensation like in your body? And also meditation can help with emotion regulation. You can notice what emotions are arising. Dan Siegel has a famous saying of 'Name it to tame it.'

And so just using our left brain by naming sensations that arise, helps regulate the intensity of that emotion. It's incredibly powerful, just to name what's rising. Like before we got on our interview together, or phone call, I got a little nervous, which is so interesting because I love talking to you and I love talking in general. But there's something a little nerve-wracking about, oh, this is gonna be aired [laughs], at some point.

And so before we were going to have our call, I was sitting doing some deep breaths and going, I'm noticing right now I'm feeling anxious and in my belly it feels like a tight, tight churning, and like a bowling ball is in there. And so just being able to name that and breathe, and noticing my exhale, when we're able to really focus on the exhale and have it even be audible, like a big sigh, that signals to your body that you are safe, and that you're okay. And then you're able to regulate a little bit more.

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Shohreh: Because a big piece of meditation mindfulness really is bringing ourselves into that present moment, right? Because we spend so much of our time thinking, like future facing and then thinking about the past, so it's kind of a way of bringing us back to where we are right now, wherever that may be.

Neathery: And a really great definition by Jon Kabat-Zinn, 'Mindfulness is paying attention in a particular way, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgmentally.' I think that just defines everything about mindfulness and meditation so beautifully, that there isn't much expectation aside from paying attention. And it could be to feeling your feet on the ground. It could be to coloring, you could be coloring.

You can make anything a mindful experience. Focusing on the present moment, so what is it like to be paying attention to that object or that task, and non-judgmentally. That's where we often get tripped up, is being non-judgmental with ourselves. I love tying in meditation and self-compassion work because that means we're able to just be who we are, wherever we are, without judging it as good or bad.

Shohreh: Yeah, I think that non-judgmental piece is so important, and it's the part that so many people struggle with. Because you can even be judgmental of the fact that you're not meditating correctly, right? You tell yourself, oh, I'm not supposed to... When I notice the thought I'm supposed to let it go, but then you notice you're having a lot of thoughts, and then you're getting down on yourself. You're like, oh brain, why are you thinking so much, and that's not particularly helpful either.

Neathery: Right, I have so many friends that I'm like, "Hey, do you want to come do meditation with me?" They're like, "No, I'm not good at it." I'm like, what does that mean? No one is good or bad at meditation, we just are. What I love about mindfulness is that it helps us build on our observing self, versus our experiencing self. Observing self is a part of us inside that can observe everything that we're doing live time, and have a little more space from it. It slows everything down and hopefully our reactions slow down. So we come from a place of responding versus reacting.

Shohreh: I know that you did a 200 hour meditation training, is that right?

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Neathery: I did, yes.

Shohreh: I'm curious kind of what your experience was from the beginning of that to where you ended up at the end of it, like if you noticed any differences, I guess in yourself in general, but also in your meditation mindfulness practice, going through that more long-term rigid experience?

Neathery: Yeah, I think that's a beautiful question. So, I have been a yoga practitioner, meditation practitioner for many years. And it's taken some time to have that non-judgmental piece, because I did start thinking, okay, this will help me just not think anymore, and that's not really the point. So when I decided to do 200 hour meditation teacher training, because I wanted to use more meditation in my work and offer such a useful tool, I chose to enroll, it was a six month long course.

I chose to enroll January of 2019, and it ran from January to June or July. And then in February my brother actually died by suicide, and so my whole world changed, definitely. So I started the meditation teacher program with my brother on earth, and then I ended it without him. And I got a front row seat to my grief, and I still have a front row seat to my grief.

Why I find it so powerful is I was able to hold myself in a loving, compassionate way, and really feel, truly feel, without trying to push it away, and I actually found that the most healing experience ever, for myself. And this is just for me; it might not work for others. And that's why I wanted to come and talk about the power of meditation and mindfulness, because we can take traumatic events, and this was a trauma, and I still kind of feel it in my body.

And transform it in a way where it doesn't feel like we're drowning from the stimuli or the event and we're instead able to flow with it, in a way where it feels like we are grounded.

Shohreh: I think that's an important point too, is that the goal here isn't to not feel anything anymore. If anything, it's to learn to sit with an experience, our feelings as they come, and to let them come, and to then let them go as well.

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Neathery: Yes, to not cling to them or push them away, not to avoid them, it's to just sit with them. And Tiffany Roe, I think you follow Tiffany Roe as well?

Shohreh: I do, I love Tiffany.

Neathery: Yes, she's awesome. She has a saying out there called 'Feel, deal, heal,' and that's so true. That's what mindfulness can provide us, is the opportunity to truly feel and heal, and not judge what's happening, and not feel so overwhelmed by these emotions that can feel so big in the moment, because if our lid is flipped again, if our prefrontal cortex is not online, they do feel really overwhelming. But if we're able to have a connection where our prefrontal cortex is able to say, "Oh, you're feeling sad," and that makes sense because this horrible thing happened.

Or you're feeling really anxious because you have double booked yourself and you're about to take PTO, and XYZ. So being able to just name, oh, it makes sense that you feel that way. Our body automatically starts to relax.

Shohreh: For someone who either has never tried meditation mindfulness before, maybe someone like me who has kind of tried it, but never really gone the distance with it, do you have any recommendations for just how to get started?

Neathery: I love, there's this app and I swear, I don't get any kickbacks from it [laughs], I just love promoting this app. It's called Insight Timer, and we can probably link that in the show notes.

Shohreh: Yes!

Neathery: It's free, I mean there's some courses on there that you can pay for, but the majority of the meditations are free. And so you can even type in something that you're wanting to maybe explore, so there's self-acceptance or relationship, anxiety, sleep, I use their sleep meditations a lot, they're great. And so you can start by having a guided meditation. You can either start by also reading books about it, or just dive right into the Insight Timer app and just put on a meditation.

They have some that range from like four minutes all the way to like an hour, and just start with having someone guide you. And of course I want

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to again make the disclaimer that if you do have more acute trauma symptoms, or if things start to come up as you're starting to delve into more meditation, it's okay to pause, and seek out the support of loved ones, or a therapist, or some kind of resource that will help integrate a little bit more before you dive in a little deeper.

Shohreh: That app sounds like a really cool thing because I do agree, I think especially when you're starting out, it's kind of this like, what do I do with my brain. So having like a voice that isn't your own to focus on, I feel like is a really powerful way to get started with some guidance.

Neathery: Absolutely. My meditation practice, it's super varied. So there are times where I want to just sit in silence and have a more contemplative experience where I'm just focusing on my in and out breath or maybe what feelings are arising. But I also love guided meditation, also chanting. There's songs that are more meditative that you can be listening to. So it's not just sitting and doing nothing in silence. It can be whatever feels mindful or meditative to you.

Shohreh: Yeah, I could see how like you could have meditative dance, or really any way of expressing yourself that feels good to you, could be mindful and meditative if you think about it in the right way.

So, outside of meditation and mindfulness, there are of course some other tools that people can use to deal with their stress. And I think a big one of those, and one that most of us aren't getting enough of is probably gonna be rest.

Neathery: Yes, rest is huge! There's a joke I like to say right now, is that I'm so busy and overstressed that I can't read the book Burnout! [Laughter]

Shohreh: Ha! By the Nagoski sisters, yep.

Neathery: Yes, I've no time to read that book and I'm hoping to when I take a couple of weeks off later this month. But rest is crucial, and that's something that I've learned over this year, for sure. Is that rest is necessary. It's definitely a patriarchal capitalistic expectation that we just produce, produce, produce. It kind of disgusts me to be honest. It disgusts me that that's the focus, because it doesn't take into account different abilities. It doesn't take into

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account what our nervous system actually needs, and that's not to be going, going, going all the time.

Shohreh: Right, and rest can, of course, mean sleep, but it can also mean just taking a step back from working all the time. In my line of work you have people who are like over-exercising and things like that too, where they're just not listening to their bodies and not realizing that their bodies are crying out for them to just stop and take a break and find some form of relaxation, and restfulness.

Neathery: Absolutely. And rest can also mean laughing with friends [laughs] and that is something that is really important for our nervous system, in healing from trauma, or stress, is our social engagement. And so when we're feeling overwhelmed, the best thing that we can do is get social. And it might mean just reaching out to someone in the room next to you, or texting someone, calling them, just making sure that you feel connected to another human who is a loving, comfortable person in your life. That can help you feel more regulated.

Shohreh: I think pleasure has also been a really big theme of this podcast, without me really expecting it to be. It just has kind of come out in all these conversations and I want to point out that rest can also be pleasurable. Like if you are finding pleasure, and joy, and happiness, like that is a form of resting as well, which is a beautiful thing, I think.

Neathery: Pleasure heals, period. There's so much we can say about that, but pleasure does heal and whatever form you find pleasure in, please allow yourself that opportunity, and it can be scary. And overworking and overproducing is a symptom of trauma, for sure. So it can be scary to just start to pull back a little bit more. And finding out what is pleasurable to you, you may not even know.

Shohreh: I do just want to say that of course meditation, mindfulness, rest, these are all fantastic tools. Neathery has mentioned many ways that these can benefit you, and please do not feel like you're obligated to embark on these things, or use these tools. If you feel like in your life this is not accessible to you right now or you don't have time, or maybe you have some other tools, like that's great.

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That's awesome, this is not intended to be a shaming thing where it's like, oh, if you're not meditating, you're an idiot. Like nope, nope, nope, like that. Again, going with non-judgmental here, just want to give some options for how to deal with your stress, not add stress on by making you feel like, oh, I'm a bad person because I'm not meditating.

Neathery:

I'm shaking my head, yes, yes, yes! Mindfulness and meditation, one of the key things is non-judgment and if it means right now it's not a fit for your life, or there's so many barriers preventing you, or anyone from maybe even being able to listen to this podcast in the first place, there is no judgment. This is not an obligation; it has nothing to say about someone's morality. And we have to understand social context of trauma and how trauma is political.

We live inside these social and economic structures that are designed to respect and increase safety and opportunity for some groups, and then systematically disregard, oppress, harm others. And so maybe starting off meditation on your own, if you're feeling like unsteady, maybe that's not a great idea, and that's okay.

There's no way to do meditation right or wrong, and if you don't do meditation, that's not right or wrong either. I think there is a sense out there that ooh, I meditated, oh, heavily meditated, you know, the shirts out there that culturally appropriate meditation. And that just feels so connected to wellness culture, diet culture and, as we know, we hate [laughs] diet culture, and it just co-opts every useful thing out there.

So, these are words from ASDAH, the Association for Size Diversity and Health, about HAES, that HAES is not a moral imperative. Health is not a moral imperative or obligation, neither is meditation. You get to choose what you want to do and that is the most important experience of healing from trauma, is choice. And I think it is important to note, and this is a quote from Bell Hooks, that 'being oppressed means the absence of choices.'

And so it is impossible to ignore the systems of oppression that make living hard for those most marginalized. And there's a book out there called Trauma-Sensitive Mindfulness that I just want to link as a resource,

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that talks about how to take meditation to communities. And so, for those who maybe have privileges, multiple privileges, that can go and provide meditation services at low cost or no cost, that are trauma-informed, I really encourage folks to do that.

Shohreh: Right, because again, even as we are giving these tools, which are things that an individual can use, we are definitely not ignoring the fact that a lot of this stress is coming from systemic problems and issues that are gonna need changing, for people to make real progress in a lot of these areas. Because it's definitely not the case that we want the individual to feel like, oh, they're responsible for fixing the issues that the system is causing in them, because it's not our responsibility to do that.

What needs to happen is that the systems change, but in lieu of that happening, or along with our work to make changes with the system, there are also tools that you can use to help yourself along the way too, and that's kind of the goal here with this episode.

Neathery: You said that beautifully, I couldn't agree more.

Shohreh: So Neathery, how do you define health and wellness for yourself at this moment in your life?

Neathery: Well, we mentioned briefly earlier in the podcast that rest is crucial for health and well-being, and I have learned this year that it couldn't be more true. So after I lost my brother, my body just had such visceral responses that I could not keep up with my regular to-do list, my socializing schedule, my exercise, whatever I wanted to do, so I took so much rest time. I took tons of restorative yoga classes. I really was gentle with my body. I took time off, and I really tried to connect with, I scaled back in my social engagements, but I connected more with my partner, my dog, nature, and really just scaled back.

And that, I think, is the biggest lesson for myself, as someone who has experienced trauma, and is a people pleaser and Type 2, that I really was tending to myself. And scaling back didn't mean I was a bad person. My fear was that I would lose out on friendships or business opportunities, and that has not been the case. Everyone still loves me, perhaps even more

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that I had taken care of myself, and I'm able to be more present with the people I love.

And I'm able to talk to you about it now, and I'm really grateful for that. And rest is so important, and I encourage everyone to be a little more gentle with themselves.

Shohreh: Mmm yes, especially again, heading into a new year, a new decade.

Neathery: A new decade, 2020.

Shohreh: 2020! So if we're going to change anything about ourselves, why not let it be pulling back a little bit, getting a little bit more rest, taking the best care of ourselves that we can. Awesome, thank you so much for being here Neathery, if people want to find you, where can they go?

Neathery: Thanks so much for having me, I'm so grateful to have this conversation. And I will continue to have these conversations on my Instagram. Part of the resting, actually I've taken a little break from posting for the past month and a half, or so. So I might be gearing up to come back online, but until then, you can find me @neatherythurmond and we can probably link that in the show notes. And that's the best place to stay tuned. I also have a newsletter. You can go to my website to find out more, but I definitely will be having more meditation offerings in 2020.

And I'm going to figure out how to make these more accessible, i.e. free, for folks to connect virtually, and really just trying to make this something that is not, that you don't have to just go sit on a rock and clear your mind, you can be mindful at any moment of the day. And I want to just be there to support folks. You can find me on Instagram, and I'm totally happy to connect via email. If people have questions or want to know about resources in their town, I'm definitely a resource, just please reach out.

Shohreh: Wonderful. I will link all of that in the show notes so people can easily find you. And like she said, if you are interested in maybe doing some more meditation work in 2020, sounds like there will be some offerings available coming down the road.

[Music plays]

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