

Redefining Health & Wellness

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Featured this episode: Shohreh Davoodi & Sharon Hoefler

Shohreh Davoodi: Hi friends, you are listening to episode 27 of the Redefining Health & Wellness podcast. Today I'm speaking with Sharon Hoefler. Sharon works with college students to create campus communities that value consent and health relationships. We discussed ways to build the culture of care to combat the rape culture we're currently living in, learning to both deal with and dole out rejection, and some necessary tools and skills for better relationships.

To access the show notes and a full transcript of this episode, head to shohrehdavoodi.com/27. That's shohrehdavoodi.com/27. As a disclaimer for this episode, Sharon and I do discuss interpersonal violence, sexual assault, rape culture etc. If any of those topics could be triggering for you, you may want to skip this episode, or at least set up some safety parameters for yourself before listening.

[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.

Sharon, I am so excited to have you on the podcast. The work that you are doing is so important, and I can't wait to dig into it. How are you doing today?

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Sharon Hoefler: I'm doing really well, and I'm excited to be talking to you. Thanks so much for having me.

Shohreh: Yeah, absolutely. Why don't you just start by telling us how you got to do the work that you do?

Sharon: Sure, yeah, so my current work is really sort of the best of both worlds of my two biggest passions professionally, which are working with young people and then also preventing interpersonal violence. So, when I originally started my professional journey, all the work that I had done had been with kids, with teenagers. I really loved doing that and I thought that that's what I wanted to focus my whole career on.

And so the social work program that I was in, the way that they do sort of your final kind of like capstone internship is they give you a bunch of options to choose from of places to intern. And then you pick your top seven. And then they just randomly give you one. So, I did that. My top six were all working with youth, like at communities and schools, and I wrote all of my personal statements about how I wanted to work with kids.

And my very last choice, because I ran out of other options to put on there, was working at a rape crisis center and women's shelter. And I know I was interested in that kind of work but it was not my focus area at the time. And so lo and behold, that's the one that they assigned me.

I don't know [laughs] if it was just happenstance, or if it was someone in the social work program was like, I'm gonna teach this girl that life doesn't always work out the way that you think it's going to [laughter]. But that's where I ended up doing my final internship and it was really a life changing experience. And I developed a passion for working with survivors and preventing rape culture and interpersonal violence through my work there.

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And while I was there I also got to do some hands on prevention work with local middle schools, which was a really great experience, a real challenge. And so passion grew out of that. So after that I got my MSW and then went into interpersonal violence research. So I was doing research and evaluation all about different types of interpersonal violence.

And I should say, when I use the phrase 'interpersonal violence,' because there's a number of different ways that folks can define that, I'm mainly talking about things like sexual violence, dating or domestic violence, stalking, and then also sexual harassment.

Doing that research was really meaningful and wonderful. And through the one-on-one interviews and focus groups that I was doing, I realized that I really missed working directly with people. So then I moved into this sort of prevention work with college students, which really melds my love of working with young people who are so brilliant and passionate about these topics and also the field of interpersonal violence.

Shohreh: Yeah, I especially love that you got your seventh choice [laughter] out of seven, like what are the chances that that would happen to you? But I guess it all worked out in the end, and you weren't miserable while you were doing it, and it kind of led you on this path, so, serendipity. And as you mentioned, so your work is a lot about changing the culture of interpersonal violence, also known as rape culture.

And there are so many things that contribute to this culture, but maybe we could start by talking about some of the main factors that you've seen?

Sharon: Sure. As you said, there's a lot that contributes to rape culture. And I guess a quick definition of rape culture might be helpful. Basically that's everything in a culture or society that works together to minimize experiences of sexual violence or any kind of interpersonal violence to make jokes about, to blame folks for their experiences of interpersonal violence, and in general, to perpetuate interpersonal violence happening

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and being perpetrated, and also stop folks from being able to share their stories and seek out help if they've experienced interpersonal violence.

And I think some of the main things that we know contribute to that culture are misogyny and other forms of marginalization. Of course anyone can experience interpersonal violence, but women and folks from other marginalized communities are really disproportionately impacted by it.

And I think our cultural desire to minimize women's stories and experiences, it can be seen really clearly in the way that we minimize stories about interpersonal violence victimization. I think also more broadly, marginalization means not having power and having your experiences devalued. So, when we see disproportionate power and control in society generally by some groups, that lends itself to creating a culture in which violence against those groups is also tolerated.

Shohreh: And of course this leads us to the big question, which is, how can we prevent this violence from happening, which I know is a huge part of your work. And maybe we can break this down into, well, however you want to, but we could either break this down as sort of philosophically versus specifically, or what's appropriate at different age groups. I mean, really, whatever feels best for you.

Sharon: Yeah, I think maybe I'll start by trying to break it down into macro level factors versus micro individual level factors. So, when I'm thinking about macro factors, that's what we've been talking about. So the sort of cultural disproportionate access to power and resources, it's gonna take a lot to tackle power differentials in society, but I think that's one of the things we really need to work on.

And you mentioned potentially breaking it down by age groups, like what information is useful at different ages, and I think that's such a huge part of it, as we really need to be starting this conversation with kids. One of

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the most challenging things about this work in Texas is that by the time that I'm working with folks who are in college, they've really had a lifetime of inadequate information about not just what is a healthy relationship, or consent, but about sex in general.

And so it's not just learning new skills, it's really unlearning a lot of things that they've spent their whole childhoods being taught. I was listening to your interview with Erica Smith the other day and just really struck by the ways that purity culture and abstinence-only sex education really contribute to rape culture in our society.

If folks don't even feel like they can name different sex acts, know what they are, have autonomy over their own bodies, that really makes it harder to have conversations about consent and boundaries. And so that should be starting really young. And of course, as you say, there's different information that is appropriate at different ages and different developmental stages.

And I think we're seeing a growing recognition of this too, that, lists online saying make sure that you don't make your kid feel like they have to give their relatives a hug or a kiss at the holidays. Like enforcing consent and bodily autonomy in small ways from the time that our kids are really young, I think is a major thing we can do to shift this culture.

Those are some of the macro level things. I think on the micro level there's skills that folks need to learn in order to understand how to navigate situations around consent and also just healthy relationships, boundary setting more generally. So that's some of the stuff that we work on with students. Which, the students that I work with, I really see this strong recognition of the fact that consent is important, and we need to be taking care of our partners and our friendships, and wanting to have healthy dynamics, but not knowing exactly how to do that, or what that should look like in practice.

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Shohreh: Yeah and as I did in the episode with Erica, I can attest for Texas' terrible sex education in public schools -

Sharon: Yes.

Shohreh: And I will link to that episode in the show notes for those of you who haven't heard it, it's an excellent episode, all about purity culture. But those problems start so early, as you said, because I know that when I was growing up, I very much got the messaging that like I existed for the pleasure of my male classmates, essentially. Which had all kinds of lasting effects on me that I'm still undoing now at almost 30. So, I absolutely agree, the earlier that we start dealing with some of these things in schools, and in families, and all these other places, the better off people are going to be as they're going along.

And we're definitely going to be digging into some of those specific prevention strategies as we're going through, but one thing I wanted to talk to you about is kind of comparing those prevention strategies with the more typical risk-reduction strategies that we're so often told. So, examples of that would be like, never set down your drink. Don't walk at night with your headphones on, and don't go into any dimly lit spaces by yourself.

Sharon: Definitely, yes. So there's a world of difference between risk-reduction strategies, just like you said, and kind of a primary prevention approach, but it's really easy to confuse the two if you haven't heard the difference explained before. So, risk reduction is really those sort of traditional strategies that mostly women have been told to follow in order to keep themselves safe.

There's a couple of things that are problematic about risk reduction strategies. The first being that frequently they make the assumption that someone who is likely to perpetrate violence against you will be a

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stranger. Will be someone that is lurking at a bar, getting ready to prey on people, or who is following people when they go out for a jog.

And we know that that kind of interpersonal violence does happen. Certainly strangers have perpetrated violence against other folks, but really, the vast majority of interpersonal violence is perpetrated by someone that the survivor knows. And frequently is close to or is a current or former intimate partner, or good friend.

So that's one assumption that most risk reduction strategies take that really isn't true. So they don't address the vast majority of cases of interpersonal violence. And then another thing that is really problematic about them is that they put the onus on women or survivors to keep themselves safe, to stop interpersonal violence from being perpetrated against them.

And one thing that we know is that we don't have control over what another person is going to do. So we can't be responsible for other people's actions. So that's what risk reduction strategies do. Also, I'd like to say that they tend to create this kind of culture of fear for women, like make sure you're walking with your keys in between your fingers all the time if you're walking home alone.

It really creates a sense that you can never be safe or like take up space in public, and you need to be constantly concerned with managing the image that you're presenting to the world. That's really burdensome. So, with primary prevention, we work to create a culture that will not tolerate interpersonal violence. A culture that's so steeped in consent and good communication and understanding of boundaries and respect and equality, that there is no tolerance for sexual violence or harassment.

In a culture like that, you really are working to prevent perpetration. So, it's not about asking individual people to take individual actions in order to keep themselves safe. It's about systemic change that stops people from

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perpetrating violence in the first place. So that works on a few different levels you can do primary prevention. Really, the biggest macro level of making systems that recognize interpersonal violence and don't tolerate it, so that could be like university level policies, or state and federal law.

And then you work your way down into individual communication. Like what does a relationship look like? What are the norms in my group of friends, at my church, in my school, that create a culture of care rather than a rape culture?

Shohreh: Right, and also get us away from this culture of blame. These are the same strategies that get thrown in survivors' faces when they try to report or prosecute those who have committed violence against them. You know, these are all the stories that we hear in the courtroom of what were you wearing, and like, did you have headphones on, and all this stuff.

Sharon: Mmhmm, and a really big one, were you drinking?

Shohreh: And what college kid isn't drinking [laughter]?

Sharon: That's right!

Shohreh: Well, I'm sure that they have their place. The problem with relying solely on these individual risk reduction strategies is that they don't get to the root of the problem. I like to look at things as root problems and symptoms, and I think risk reduction strategies can maybe help with some of the symptoms. But at the end of the day, it's just putting a Band-Aid over the wound. It's not actually improving it.

Sharon: Exactly.

Shohreh: So, you work with college students, so we need to talk about dating. Because obviously plenty of dating is happening. And I'm not that old, as I mentioned, I'm only almost 30, but I've been with my partner for nearly a

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decade. And dating apps were literally only just starting to pick up steam when we started dating, so I have never been on one! [Laughter]

A lot has changed in that time, so in working with these students, what are some of the things that you're seeing with dating right now that are problematic and that are again, contributing to this culture?

Sharon: Yeah, it's funny. Just like you said, a lot has changed, but also not much has changed at all [laughs]. I think one of the things, kind of a myth that I'm seeing with students right now is that if you are in anything other than a sort of 'traditional,' monogamous relationship, that it's definitely going to be problematic or harmful in some ways. So like, sort of this idea that if you are just hanging out, or just hooking up, or potentially seeing multiple people, whether you want to call that dating around or you identify as poly, that there has to be some sort of coercion or lack of respect that comes with that kind of dating or relationship.

Which is really interesting to me and I think also, sort of based in these old ideas about what dating needs to look like that really aren't serving us anymore in 2019.

Shohreh: Right, this is that purity culture showing up again.

Sharon: Exactly.

Shohreh: And I mean this is still true today right, where like the main love stories and ideas that we see in movies, and TV, and everything, it's always about finding the one monogamous soulmate relationship. So that doesn't surprise me that you're still seeing a lot of that.

Sharon: Yeah, and it's really interesting to sort of posit to students, well, just because you're hooking up with someone, maybe you're never planning on dating them. You can still have a relationship built on mutual respect and one of equality, right? Just like you can have healthy friendships that you aren't monogamous, like you have lots of friends and you can set

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different boundaries and have different expectations and get fulfilling things out of each of those. That can be true no matter what configuration your dating/hookup, etc, relationship is. Yeah, that's one of the interesting things.

Some of the other things that we're seeing, one thing I'll say, we've been really trying to focus on lately is rejection. So, the idea of handling rejection, if you are rejected, but also doing the rejecting, being the person rejecting someone, because both of those can be really hard in different ways.

And they both require a lot of navigating of difficult social skills. But I think in some ways the culture of digital communication is causing folks not to develop those skills as much as maybe they have in the past. I mean, I don't know, I don't have any data on that, but [laughs] that's what it feels like. And so as far as handling rejection, if you're the one being rejected, I think that comes up both thinking about dating generally, but then also about consent to sexual activity, specifically.

Rejection can come up in both of those contexts. As well as, of course, many others, it's not unique to dating or intimate relationships. But one of the things we've been working on is trying to sort of decouple the difficult feelings that can come with rejection, which is totally understandable, and validating and normalizing those feelings, but then decoupling that from reacting out of those feelings, and trying to shift to responding rather than reacting.

So, like when we think about someone being rejected, we know that the feelings that can come up around that can be shame, anger, loneliness, isolation; all of these things can come up. And they can come up in different ways for different people. I think one of the most troubling, I don't know if it's being exacerbated by the internet or it's just easier to see because of the internet, but it's something like, and I don't know who

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originally said this, but it's 'Men are afraid women will laugh at them. Women are afraid men will kill them.'

Shohreh: Yeah, that comes from Gavin de Becker's, *The Gift of Fear*, I believe.

Sharon: Oh yes, thank you. So the way that our culture, and this is again an aspect of rape culture, socializes men frequently, is that they are entitled to sex or affection or attention from women. And that they are also entitled to be the ones who are in control of the way that our romantic and sexual scripts work.

So, when you've been taught that you are entitled to someone's time and attention, a rejection can feel like a huge deal. It's shaking the very core of what you deserve as a person. Again, when we're saying, rejection, it makes sense that it feels bad. That is human, and understandable, and valid. But it doesn't give us the right to react out of a sense of entitlement or to react in a way that makes someone else afraid or takes away their rights or infringes on their boundaries.

And then on the flipside of that, as you mentioned earlier, women frequently are taught, not only do they exist to please the men around them, but that they need to manage their emotions, both to stay safe, but also just because that's what women do. You know, men maybe have a hard time with their emotions and so women need to help them with that.

It's really that emotional labor that is placed on women. Again, yeah, both out of a sense of self-preservation, but also of obligation. In addition to, again, the very natural feelings that it feels bad to tell someone no, sometimes. Sometimes it feels great to tell someone no! [Laughter]

Shohreh: The older I get the better it feels!

Sharon: Exactly! Exactly! But it can feel bad, you don't want to disappoint someone, you don't want to hurt their feelings. Those are nice reactions that are coming out of an empathetic place. But when you couple that

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with the socialization that you need to always be responsible for other people's emotions, it creates a really difficult and scary situation to navigate.

Shohreh: Definitely, and I'm curious how this culture of ghosting in dating plays into rejection.

Sharon: Yeah, I think that's a great question. Ghosting, just in case anyone isn't familiar with the term, is basically just disappearing, from someone's life, from a communication, from a text thread, and not communicating that you are about to disappear or that you want to end communication with that person, but just ghosting. Just not being there anymore. And [laughs], this is sort of a tangent, but it's such a cultural phenomenon, that there's an MTV show about it called Ghosted. I don't know if you're familiar with it?

Shohreh: Is there really? I did not, I didn't know that.

Sharon: Yeah, and I mean there's a whole host of potential issues with that show because it's based on, I think her name is Rachel Lindsay, one of the recent Bachelorette's is one of the hosts. And then there's also a male host, whose name I don't remember. That they basically are contacted by someone they call the 'haunted' [laughs] -

Shohreh: Oh my god!

Sharon: Which is the person who has been ghosted, yeah [laughter], and then they go to track down the ghost.

Shohreh: To find out why they ghosted?

Sharon: To find out why they ghosted and to, it usually concludes with a confrontation between the ghost and the haunted.

Shohreh: What a show. 2019, y'all.

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Sharon: Truly! [Laughter] And so, of course, like that brings up some concerns about stalking behavior and [laughs] like accepting rejection. Yeah, lots of things to unpack there. But all that to say, I think ghosting is really something that seems to be plaguing a lot of people. And it's also something that, just anecdotally, folks who work with students are seeing happen in a professional context too. And like academic ghosting where someone will sign up for a job interview or accept a job and then just never show up or communicate that they're not going to be there.

So, I think that that's related to rejection, and that ghosting frequently comes when someone doesn't feel prepared to reject or have a confrontation with someone. I want to say too that there's sometimes perfectly valid reasons to ghost someone or cut off communication with them. If anyone is ever afraid for their safety, whether that's physical or emotional, it is, of course, your absolute right to stop talking to someone, no matter who that person is.

But in general when that's not the case, it's not really an ideal resolution to any sort of situation. At best, the person who is doing the ghosting might feel good that they just don't have to deal with the situation they didn't want to deal with anymore, but usually, as evidenced by the people who contact MTV to have them track down their exes and ex-friends, it creates a lack of closure.

And again, no one owes each other closure, closure is something you can give yourself, but ghosting takes away opportunities for genuine connection, communication, and boundary setting. And I think that's coming from a place of people feeling that they don't have the skills to do those things in a way that's going to end up okay.

Shohreh: I want to talk about boundary setting because this, along with consent, are two concepts that I really did not hear much about, learn much about, or know how to put into practice until adulthood, which is not ideal.

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[Laughter] These are things that I think we should be teaching children at appropriate levels, and then teenagers, and young adults. So, let's first talk about the role that boundary setting plays in healthy relationships.

Sharon:

Yeah, I will say I share that experience. I [laughs] was never taught about how to set healthy boundaries, or really what consent was growing up. And it's definitely something that I've come to as an adult and through doing this work. I like to say boundaries are a gift. There's a myth that persists that, especially in romantic relationships, love should conquer all challenges, and there shouldn't be any boundaries, or secrets, or anything that's not shared between two people as long as they're in love.

But that's not a healthy or sustainable model of living. And it sets up a situation in which one or both people lose themselves in the other one, and in their relationship. And it makes it really hard to maintain an autonomous identity. It also, and this goes back to socialization, but in general I think women are socialized to not be as comfortable setting boundaries.

And that's not true for everyone, of course, that's a generalization. But not feeling confident to, not just assert your own boundaries, but even to identify your own boundaries. To have a conversation with yourself about what you are comfortable with and what you aren't comfortable with, creates a situation in which it's not possible to have the boundaries that you want, and to create the situation that you want.

This is not just an issue in romantic relationships. A conversation I've been having with coworkers recently is the fact that our culture doesn't celebrate boundaries in almost any situation. Like we don't teach young people when they are getting into their first job, or joining a student organization, or even in friendships, that they can set boundaries. That it's okay to have things that you don't want to do, aren't comfortable doing, or to assert your wants and needs in a situation.

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And that even if there's sort of a hierarchy established, like if you have a boss who is telling you to do something, that you're still allowed to have boundaries, and that that's actually a great thing. And so I think it's no wonder that with these cultural myths about love and with our culture that expects people to just happily agree to whatever anyone in a position of authority tells them to do, it's no wonder that people are having a difficult time identifying their own boundaries and then communicating those boundaries.

I think another aspect of boundary setting is that it can sometimes feel like rejection, even when that's not what it is. So, boundary setting, I think, is frequently a way to create really healthy, strong relationships where both or all people are getting their needs met, because those needs have been communicated. So, for example, if two people are dating and one of them really likes to have some alone time, but they don't feel comfortable communicating that to their partner, and their partner just loves to spend time together all the time.

Maybe wouldn't have their feelings hurt at all to know that the other partner does want some alone time, but doesn't know that, can't intuitively know that, and doesn't have that need for themselves. If that need for alone time, that boundary is never communicated, then you end up with one partner feeling probably smothered, unhappy, like they aren't getting their needs met.

And that creates a situation in which that relationship is, I don't want to say it's no longer healthy, but that aspect of it is not optimal. That doesn't feel good to people, and so it might feel like rejecting someone to say, "I need to spend X nights a week alone hanging out by myself or with my friends." But really that can be a call-in to make your relationship stronger. It's not a rejection, it's, I care about you and I care about our relationship, so I'm going to let you know that this is what I need in order to thrive as one part of the whole that is our relationship.

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Shohreh: Yeah, because there are two parts that are necessary. So one, you have to feel comfortable getting to know yourself and what your wants and needs are, and that's not necessarily something that, again, especially women are taught to even think about what their wants and needs are, whether it's in relationships or friendships. And then two, once you know them, you have to feel comfortable actually communicating them and asking for them, and then we have a problem because that communication bumps up against a lot of societal norms about, again, what a relationship should look like, what a friendship should like.

Because what came up for me when you were talking about that was how a lot of times you see these couples who literally do everything together. Like they don't have their own hobbies, they don't have lives outside of each other, and then it easily leads to the relationship crumbling because they don't have anything else to sustain them, like they are the relationship, essentially.

And so for me, like I've been very careful like in my marriage, like I don't want that. We have our own hobbies, we have our own things, we spend time apart because my first relationship was very much like that, and it was not a healthy relationship. But again, this is what we see in media that love is supposed to be all consuming, and you're supposed to want to spend all of your time together with nobody else. And your husband or your partner has to be your bestest friend in the world and I'm like, not all relationships look like that. [Laughs]

Sharon: That's right, yeah, and just like you said, relationships that do look like that aren't necessarily healthy because who else do those people have as their support system, and where are they finding joy in their lives and in their individual pursuit of hobbies and professional success. Yeah, that model of just two people against the world I don't think has ever been really a successful model for a relationship, but it's certainly what has been presented in the media for a long time.

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Shohreh: Yeah, it's definitely the pop culture model for a good relationship.

Sharon: Yes.

Shohreh: Unfortunately [laughs].

Sharon: Exactly.

Shohreh: And I want to explicitly talk about consent as well, because I think that I'm very excited that consent is becoming a more common conversation. That it's becoming a more common conversation on college campuses, especially. Like I think we may be at a point where younger generations have a better understanding of consent than older generations. And so we see a lot of nonsense in the media about how, oh, well consent is just this like sexual wet blanket and we can't do anything anymore. And obviously that's bullshit, that's not true. So maybe you could define for me how you like to think of consent and why it matters?

Sharon: Sure, I would be happy to. I think just broadly, consent is an enthusiastic agreement. It's when everyone involved in any particular sexual, intimate, romantic interaction wants to be there, is excited about it, has the option to say no. So, consent can't exist if no is not also a possible answer, or if someone worries that their no won't be respected, or there's any kind of element of coercion, or guilt, or shame associated with saying that no.

And consent is vitally important, not only to make sure that violence isn't being perpetrated - of course everyone has a fundamental right to their own bodily autonomy and any violation of consent is sexual violence - but consent is also a great way to communicate, to figure out what you're excited about. What you're interested in, what your partner or partners are interested in, what sounds fun.

Honest conversations about consent can really open the door for honest, open conversations about sex in general and intimacy in general.

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Shohreh: Which, again, with purity culture, we don't really [laughter] have many opportunities for such conversations, so more things to learn as an adult that oh, talking about sex doesn't have to be this horribly awkward, embarrassing thing. And ultimately the goal is for both people, or if there are more than two people involved, to have the most pleasure possible. That's a good thing. I totally agree with you, consent can lead to all of this wonderful happiness and pleasure in a sexual relationship. And yet we act like oh, it's going to stop the action and ruin everything.

Sharon: That's right, yeah. Another thing I want to say about consent is that it has to be ongoing. So I think some of the still pervasive myths about consent are that consent to one thing is necessarily implying consent to another. So for example, if someone consents to go to your room with you, that is not consent to any kind of sexual activity. And consent, similarly, to one sex act, is not consent to another. Consent to kissing isn't consent to oral sex, which isn't consent to anal sex. Consent has to be ongoing and everyone has to consent to every individual act.

Now saying it that way might make it sound like it's playing into those conservative ideas about, oh, you know, consent is after someone kisses, they have to stop and sign a contract saying they agree to a blowjob [laughs] anything like that, and that's of course not true. There are a lot of ways to communicate, both verbally and non-verbally that you're excited about something, or interested about something and consent to an interaction moving in that direction.

Shohreh: And also, I'll say it too, that just because someone consented to an act once, doesn't mean that you automatically have consent to do that thing again another time.

Sharon: Right, that's so important, thank you for saying that. And also, just because you might be in a relationship with someone, doesn't mean that you have their automatic or assumed consent. No matter what your

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relationship is with someone, you have to make sure that everyone is consenting and excited every time.

Shohreh:

And for me this all comes back to, again, communication and communication skills. And I think this is something that is sorely lacking in education and that I have only learned through personal therapy essentially, and couples therapy, and how to communicate with other people, how to communicate with people I'm in sexual relationships with. Because that's such a huge piece of boundaries, and consent, and all these other pieces, but people aren't getting this information.

And I assume that that's a big part of the work that you do on your college campus, is teaching how to communicate.

Sharon:

Yes, definitely. One of our favorite activities to do with groups of students is to have them practice writing down all the ways they can think of to ask for consent to sexual activity on sticky notes, and then put them all up on the wall, and then we read them out loud. It's always really fun, it gets people giggling, and confused, and they've never had, not that I'm much of an authority figure, but they've never had an authority figure ask them to feel comfortable having a conversation about consent, or even mentioning sexual activity in any sort of classroom type setting before.

And it's just a good way also to show that there's a lot of different ways to start a conversation about consent, and it doesn't need to follow a rigid script. It's not like you have to know the exact right words to say. But like you said, it's just, it's about being present in the moment, and communicating, and understanding that if a partner says yes, but they seem tense, or upset, or conflicted, that you need to stop and check in.

Yeah, so it really is a lot about those check-in skills, those communication skills, and just getting over that initial hurdle of talking about sex at all. Because I think even in the context of having sex, for a lot of young

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people it's more intimidating to talk about sex, even in the middle of having it.

Shohreh: Absolutely, and I think going back to what we were talking about before, different age appropriate things. I think it's important to mention too that there are foundational skills that can happen at a young age, and families, before someone is ever at the point of being sexual or talking about sex. And this goes back to what you mentioned about not having little kids have to kiss their relatives, or hug their relatives when they're uncomfortable. And teaching them that their bodies are their own, and they can tell people that, you know, they don't want to be touched. They don't want to be hugged.

Sharon: Yes, definitely and you know, another aspect of that is teaching kids the correct words for their body parts, including parts of their anatomy that are considered sexual. That's another really important thing and something that we see even in college is, particularly folks who haven't had access to adequate sex education as they've been growing up, that they're not necessarily even able to name different sex acts or know what they entail, which, of course, makes it impossible to consent to those things, or to communicate about them.

Shohreh: Right, if you're in college and you're still calling your vulva a flower, then chances are you don't have the education and information that you need to have these kinds of healthy sexual relationships that we're discussing.

Sharon: Right. I think one of the biggest conversations that's happening, not just on campuses, but sort of in the national news cycle, is conversation about alcohol or other substances and consent, or alcohol and sex. And I think you sort of see, or I've sort of seen these two sort of opposite ends of the spectrum approaches to the topic, which are, on the one side, and I think this tends to come from the people you mentioned before, who think that

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consent is just, like you said, just a wet blanket and we should stop talking about it.

And then those people saying that, well, people can say no matter how much alcohol they've had, it's not a big deal. This is... alcohol-facilitated sexual assault isn't really sexual assault. And of course we know that that's not true, and that's an incredibly damaging myth, and that alcohol is the most common substance used in facilitating sexual assault. And that if someone is incapacitated, meaning they're intoxicated to the point that they can't think straight, or they're slurring their words, or they're stumbling, or especially if they're passed out or not conscious, then they're not consenting to sex. So that's one end of the spectrum.

And then on the other end of the spectrum, I think some folks who really out of maybe an overabundance of caution and out of a desire to protect people say that if you've had any alcohol at all, then you can't consent. And I understand where that approach is coming from, and I'm not sure that that is really a nuanced enough look at this issue. Knowing that there are many adults I know in my life who have had a glass of wine at dinner and then enjoyed an evening of sex with their partner.

Shohreh: Right.

Sharon: And that was not for them anything that they considered to be coercive or an experience of violence. And so, I think that both of these extremes are not really getting at the heart of the issue and that students have a lot of questions that are coming up for them about how to take care of each other. I think another myth that I see in the media is this idea that every male student especially, but every student on a college campus is just terrified of Title IX and of being accused.

And I don't see that in the students that I work with, but I do see a genuine desire to not perpetrate harm and to build loving, caring relationships. And so as part of that desire comes questions about how to

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do that, and especially when substances might be involved. And one of the biggest takeaways for me that I share with students is that it might be difficult to pinpoint an exact line at which someone can or cannot consent. The most important things are that if you're ever unsure, you stop. That you focus on taking care of that person.

If someone is potentially not able to consent, then they probably need a glass of water and maybe to get some sleep. And so see if you can help them with those things. And to really de-emphasize the pursuit of sex kind of at all costs, which I think our society really throws at us. Is the idea that we should always be looking for sex if we can possibly get it, but that in a situation in which someone is maybe incapacitated and not doing so well because they've been drinking and having fun, partying, first priority should be taking care of your friend.

See if they're okay. And then also a question that I like to pose to folks is maybe this person consents, but it's important to check in about why you want to have sex with someone who is intoxicated. Why is that important to you right now, and what potential harm might that be causing?

Shohreh: Absolutely. I think there's so much nuance, there's so many questions to be asked here and this is a heavier episode. We've talked about a lot of things that make for not-so-healthy relationships. We've talked about interpersonal violence. So I want to bring this back around to a more positive note, and also talk about what does make a healthy relationship? What are some of the cornerstones of that, especially for young people who are getting into some of their first relationships? Maybe some things that they can kind of anchor themselves in to have a healthy relationship?

Sharon: Yeah, I'd love to talk about that. First of all I'll say that I'm not sure if I've explicitly said this yet during this podcast, but abusive relationships, unhealthy relationships are really built on one person having power and control over another. So, when we think about what makes a healthy

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relationship, it's that it's grounded in equality and a sense of shared ownership and respect for each other.

And so I think those are the most important things to look for in a healthy relationship. I'm not sure if folks have seen there's something called a power and control wheel, which shows different tactics for gaining power and control by an abusive partner. It includes things like financial control, like potentially using children, if a couple shares children, to control or coerce another person, so that's a power and control wheel.

I bring that up because there's also an equality wheel, which for every aspect in the power and control wheel, shows what a healthy relationship would look like for that same aspect. So, I can send one of those over, I think it would be an awesome thing to include in the show notes.

Shohreh: Absolutely.

Sharon: But it's really this great look at what, especially for a young person, what do you want to see in your relationship, and what do you deserve to have out of a relationship. I think one of the most important things is open communication. And I think also a willingness to work on yourself, like for each individual person in that relationship. To take accountability, to do better, so not just to apologize and say, alright, move on, or certainly not to minimize your partner's concerns, but to say, "I hear you, thank you for sharing that with me." And then take the steps that you need to, in order to move forward and grow and be a better partner. I think that's really important.

We've already said respect, but I think that's really one of the most important things, is a shared sense of respect. And that doesn't mean that you necessarily have to agree on all things. I mean certainly no two people agree on all things, so that's not something you should look for.

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But a respect for each other's ideas and decisions, as we've been talking about, respect for each other's boundaries, and not a grudging respect, but a true, honest, I love so much that you shared with me that this is what you need, and even if it's hard for me, I'm going to figure out how we can make this work together. Yeah, I think those are some of the most exciting things to see in a new relationship that really show you're building a solid foundation.

I'd also say, like we talked about earlier, having outside interests, still being able to feel like you can be yourself and pursue things that you're excited about outside of the context of your relationship, and that your partner supports you in those things, and is excited about them for you.

Shohreh: Yeah, I love that especially because that's been a really important piece in my own relationships to continue to feel authentically me, and like I'm not getting subsumed by the coupledness. Awesome.

Well this has been a great conversation. We've covered so much and there's a million other things that we could have covered. As I mentioned to you before we started recording, it was hard for me to outline this interview because there's just so much here that we could talk about.

But I think there's lots of great nuggets of information here that people are going to find really helpful. So, for our final wrap-up question, please tell me how you define health and wellness for yourself at this moment in your life?

Sharon: I love this question! I'm going to answer this question in two different parts because one of the ways that I've been working on defining health and wellness for myself is really in a communal sense of health and wellness. So, what is the strength of my relationships and my community? For all of us, how can we shift, like how are the systems around us working to support our health and wellness, and how are they not? What opportunities are there for joy, and connection, and a sense of belonging,

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and safety? So that's really one of the ways I've been trying to think about health and wellness.

And then I also want to say that I'm someone with a lot of anxiety and with that comes perfectionism. And those are things that I've dealt with my whole life, but I've been really trying to work on self-compassion. And so one of the ways I've been thinking about health and wellness is how kind am I being to myself right now and to those around me? And also, am I embracing opportunities to let myself rest, and sleep, and just enjoy being a person and not here to produce, but just to let myself be. So that's how I've been thinking about it.

Shohreh: I think kindness is such a key component of well-being too, because we can just be really mean to ourselves. [Laughter]

Sharon: Yes, I'm meaner to myself than anyone else is mean to me [laughs].

Shohreh: Yeah, that's something I work on with my clients a lot, is about kind of dealing with that inner mean girl bully in their brains, and realizing like, do you ever talk to your pet that way? Would you ever talk to a child that way? And they're always like, oh my god, no, I would never do that. I'm like, exactly! Exactly! [Laughter]

Sharon: Oh, that's such a good question. Like something I've heard is, would you talk to a friend that way, but thinking about talking to my dog that way makes me want to cry.

Shohreh: Right?

Sharon: That's really good [laughter].

Shohreh: Yeah, yeah, that's what I'm saying; it really helps put that in perspective for people, so I love that. Well, thank you so much for being here, Sharon, this is a great conversation. I know you don't have much going on as far

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as social media presence, but if someone wanted to reach out to you, what would be the best way for them to do that?

Sharon: Yeah, definitely. My personal Instagram is @sharon.hoefler, pretty simple. It's mainly pictures of my dog, but you are welcome to contact me there if you have any questions or want to connect about anything that we've talked about today.

Shohreh: Perfect. I will make sure that all of that's included in the show notes so people can find it.

Sharon: Thank you so much. I've so appreciated the chance to talk to you today.

[Music plays]

Shohreh: And that's our show for today. I appreciate you listening to and supporting the Redefining Health & Wellness podcast. If you enjoyed this episode, it would mean so much to me if you would subscribe and leave a review with your podcast provider of choice. It will really help other people who might benefit from the podcast to find it more easily.

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