

# Redefining Health & Wellness

## #33

Featured this episode: Shohreh Davoodi

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**Shohreh Davoodi:** You are listening to episode number 33 of the Redefining Health & Wellness podcast. This episode has been lovingly made for the exercise haters out in the world. Is it possible for you to change your relationship with exercise from sworn enemies to frenemies, or maybe even friends? It definitely is for some people. But what if that never happens for you? Can you find a way to do it anyway, assuming that you want to? I think so, and in this episode I give you some of my favorite tools for making exercise suck less. You can find the show notes and a full transcript of this episode, at [shohrehdavoodi.com/33](http://shohrehdavoodi.com/33). That's [shohrehdavoodi.com/33](http://shohrehdavoodi.com/33).

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Hey y'all, welcome to the Redefining Health & Wellness podcast. I'm your host, Shohreh Davoodi. I'm a certified intuitive eating counselor, and a certified personal trainer. I help people improve their relationships with exercise, food, and their bodies, so they can ditch diet culture for good, and do what feels right for them.

Through this podcast I want to give you the tools to redefine what health and wellness mean to you, by exposing myths and misconceptions, delving into all the areas of health that often get ignored, and reminding you that health and wellness are not moral obligations. Are you ready? Let's fuck some shit up.

Before I get into today's topic, I do want to say that this episode was inspired by a recent post on Instagram from Linda Whillikers. Her handle is @littlewingedpotatoes and she is also the person behind the blog, Fluffy Kitten Party. So, she wrote a post about a month ago about her experiences as someone who doesn't get a lot of joy out of exercise and who feels like the term 'joyful movement' is a pretty high bar.

And that actually reminded me of an Instagram post that I wrote last year specifically for people who don't get much joy out of exercise. And that's how I ended up here recording this episode where I'm going to dig into that topic a lot deeper.

So, just wanted to give credit where credit is due and I will link to Linda's post in the show notes, my post in the show notes, as well as her blog, because it's awesome.

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Okay, so today's episode is all about what your options are if you think that you hate exercise, or whatever you want to call it, movement, joyful movement, flopping your arms and legs around, I don't care. Us Health At Every Size and intuitive eating folk like to talk a big game about joyful movement and as I've mentioned many times before, I both love and hate this terminology because it's kind of a misnomer.

If you want a more in-depth discussion about what joyful movement is and isn't, refer back to episode number 28, with Karen Preene, all about HAES friendly fitness. I'm not going to rehash that here. However, one of the big differences we talk about between joyful movement and the way that people typically relate to exercise is the importance of finding exercise that you like.

So, where does that leave people who don't like exercise at all, because just like everything else in life, people have different exercise personalities. So, some people think about exercise as being this bringer of sunshine and rainbows into their lives, and the birds are singing, and it feels good, and it brings them mental clarity. And they really have this innate drive to exercise. They crave it like food or water.

Some people are more in the middle. They go through phases of enjoying exercise to phases of not really wanting to do it. If they have the right structures in place, they're able to do it consistently, but if they don't, it's a little bit harder to get going. But generally, they don't hate exercise; they just don't love it and breathe it.

Then there are the people who are the topic of today's episode, which is people who downright hate exercise. Who have probably hated it as long as they can remember and nothing that they've ever tried has made it more enjoyable. If that sounds like you, or even if you're in the 'meh' category about exercise, this episode should be helpful for you because we're going to talk about some of the reasons why you might hate exercise and what you can potentially do about it.

And then if you ultimately decide that no, you're just someone who inherently hates exercise and that's never going to change, I'm still going

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to try to give you some ways to make it suck less, if you want it to be a part of your life.

Quick and important disclaimer, before we get into all that, which is: you do not have to exercise. I want to throw out this disclaimer and make this abundantly clear, because you don't.

You don't have to exercise. And yes, there is an angry, screaming mob out in the world that will try to tell you that you do have to exercise, and that if you don't, you're a shitty person who doesn't care about their loved ones or their health, blah-blah, blah-blah-blah.

Like literally everything else in your life, *you* get to decide if you want to exercise. You do. Nobody else. Not your partner, not your mom, not the asshole stranger on the street or online. Because exercise is not a morally superior activity to anything else. It's the moral equivalent of reading a book, driving a car, or say, watching paint dry.

Now, while exercise has absolutely nothing to do with whether or not you are a good person, like every other choice you'll ever make in your life, the choice to exercise or not does come with its own set of consequences. And when I say 'consequences,' I'm not meaning that like a parent scolding a child for doing something bad. I mean it in the universal way that everything we do in life affects everything else we do in our lives. And I'm going to return to this concept a little bit later, so let's just put a pin in it for now.

Bottom line here is that I want to make clear up front that in recording this episode, I'm not trying to say that you have to exercise, or that you should feel bad if you can't or just don't want to. I'm specifically talking to people in this episode who *would* like to have a more regular exercise routine, but don't know how to do that.

Which leads us to an important question which is, if you're convinced that you hate exercise, is it possible to stop hating exercise? And I would say yes, for some people, not for everyone. If you have an interest in becoming the kind of person who exercises regularly, then it's definitely worth giving a few things a try to see what's really going on and where this hatred is coming from.

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I'm going to give a few examples of reasons why people hate exercise, and I do just want to throw a trigger warning out there, because I'm going to be talking a bit about trauma and eating disorders. So if that would be triggering or harmful for you, then you may want to skip this next section.

I, of course, cannot claim to know and understand every single reason why a person might struggle with their relationship with exercise and feel like they hate exercise. That being said, I have worked with a lot of clients on their relationship with exercise and helping them improve it. So I've definitely seen a lot of the more common reasons why people feel that way, and those are the ones that I'm gonna cover here.

So first is trauma. Associating trauma with exercise for a variety of different possible reasons. For a lot of people it may have to do with being made fun of or struggling in gym class as a child. Perhaps being forced to do those embarrassing presidential fitness tests. Maybe their parents made them exercise as a method of weight control, or they've been forcing themselves to exercise as a way of beating their bodies into submission as an adult.

Another example of a traumatic exercise experience might be somebody who has a past history of an eating disorder, like anorexia or orthorexia. If you're someone who used to use exercise as an eating disorder behavior, it can be very difficult to separate out those eating disorder thoughts and feelings from your actual experiences and interests in exercise.

It's not that you can't exercise if you have a trauma history that relates to moving your body, but it is going to feel more difficult. A common reaction to trauma in the body is disassociating, which leads you to feel kind of like a floating head where your mind and your body aren't that connected. So I do a lot of work with my clients on helping them to reconnect into their body, start to feel those signals again, and listen to what actually feels good, bad, or neutral, because otherwise it's challenging to tell what your body even wants and needs.

Depending on what your traumatic experiences were, how much work you've already done to unpack them, if any at all, what other things that connects to in your life, you may need to work on this with a therapist or

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other professional to really get to the bottom of why you feel the way you do about exercise and try to heal that.

And just to be clear, you are not required to do that, that is something that you can make a choice for, for yourself, but chances are, whatever it is that's leading you to hate exercise is affecting other parts of your life too.

Another common reason that people hate exercise is because exercise is painful for them. Pain during exercise is a much broader topic than I can fully cover in this episode, but I'm going to at least skim the surface. There are, of course, many different reasons that exercising might be causing you pain.

Perhaps you have a lingering injury from a previous car accident, or something that you never got checked out when you used to be an athlete when you were younger, and now these things have gotten worse and are causing you a lot of pain, particularly when you move in certain ways.

So that may be a barrier to exercise until you're able to go see a physical therapist, or an orthopedist, or a chiropractor, or whoever you need to see to help diagnose and deal with that pain that's lingering.

Additionally, different types of bodies experience different types of exercise in unique ways. So it's possible that you are doing things that are causing pain, that you do not have to do, or that there are alternative options for you to do instead.

Then there are the kinds of pain that are caused by not having the right equipment. So for example, if you have really large boobs and you don't have a good quality sports bra, it's going to be really painful if you're jumping around or running. If you have a larger belly and you haven't been able to find pants that don't roll down, that could be really uncomfortable if you're trying to do a yoga class.

Shoes are another big one. People will often show up to strength training with me wearing running shoes and those can actually be really dangerous and cause pain and other injuries. There are specific kinds of shoes for different kinds of exercise.

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One of the most frustrating things for people is that sometimes, not always, chronic pain can be greatly improved through exercising, particularly strength training. I've had a lot of clients who have come to me in the past with back pain, from all different things, former car accidents, I have someone who has scoliosis, ankle pain from an injury. And strengthening their muscles and their joints in those areas has helped improve, and in most cases, eliminate their pain, which is a bit counterintuitive because we often think, oh, I need to get this pain taken care of before I can start exercising.

And in some cases, it's actually that the exercising is what would help improve your pain. And if you're curious which one you are, again, you definitely want to consult with a doctor or a physical therapist, who can assess your body and help you figure that out.

Lastly, one of the biggest reasons that people think they hate exercise is because they haven't devoted enough time to figuring out what kinds of exercise they actually like. I ran on a treadmill for years, *years*, because I thought it would give me the body that I wanted and that's what I saw other people doing. But I absolutely hated it.

Nowadays I run, maybe once or twice a year, and it's almost always when it's a really beautiful day and I just get this feeling that it's something that I want to do. Besides that, pretty much never run.

Way too many of us are doing exercise that we think we're supposed to do instead of exercise that we would actually be interested in doing.

And just for a little exercise primer, there are two main categories of exercise. Those are aerobic exercise, which is also known as cardio, and then there is strength training, which is also known as resistance training. And some workouts do combine the two together. Aerobic exercise would be things like walking, running, swimming, biking, dancing, anything that is getting your heart rate up. And then strength training, people most often think of as lifting weights, which is true, but it can actually be anything where you're using some kind of resistance to ultimately strengthen your muscles.

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So free weights, yes, as well as machines, resistance bands, medicine balls, whatever. As well as some things that might surprise you, like yoga or karate, where you're using your own body as the resistance.

As far as an example of something that is both, I would definitely say aerials, which is something that I do. So, most of the time I would say that trapeze is more resistance training, because I'm using my body and sometimes the bar as the resistance, and that's building up my strength.

However, when I'm working on a routine, and I'm moving from pose to pose one after another for a consistent period of time, like three and a half to four minutes, then it can very easily become aerobic exercise because my heart rate is getting up there and I'm getting sweaty. Both kinds of exercise have wonderful benefits, are awesome for you. So it's really about what feels good to you, and again, what benefits you're trying to achieve, which we'll talk about a little bit more as we're going forward.

But if you haven't done much exploration, I definitely recommend you do so before writing off exercise entirely, especially nowadays there are so many different weird, and fun, and silly exercise options that are out there and available to you. A lot of different gyms have an entire schedule of classes that go with your membership. You can use ClassPass, which most cities have now, where you sign up and you can try classes at all different kinds of studios. You can stream a lot of different exercise services online. I will link to my favorite size friendly one, which is called Joyn.

I can tell you that I certainly never would have known that I really enjoy hanging upside down from a trapeze bar until I had the opportunity to try it. And the only reason I thought to try it was because a former acquaintance of mine was posting a bunch of videos of her doing lyra. Lyra is the aerial hoop. And I was convinced that I was going to love the lyra and that was going to be my apparatus, and then it turned out that trapeze is what had my heart.

So try some cardio, try some strength training, try whatever sounds fun and floats your boat. Or if there was anything you liked to do as a child that maybe you want to try again now as an adult, that's always an option too.

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Okay, so, what if you have unpacked your trauma, and/or dealt with your sources of pain and/or tried a bunch of different things,, and exercise still fucking sucks! Well, my friend, not to worry, that is what the rest of this episode is about.

Let's return to what I was saying before about how the choice of whether or not you exercise comes with consequences either way. My favorite way to explain this concept is to use the analogy of brushing your teeth. Benefits of brushing our teeth have been widely studied. We have tons of evidence to support that brushing our teeth helps prevent things like tooth decay, cavities, gum disease, bad breath, and all kinds of other things that are associated with those.

Now, the actual experience of brushing your teeth is pretty boring. It's kind of annoying; it's something you don't necessarily want to be doing. Some people hate it, some people don't care that much. And it can be especially painful for people who have sensitive gums or teeth. For most people when you're tired, at the end of a long day or rushing out the door in the morning, brushing your teeth is the last thing you want to do.

And you're either the kind of person who does it, or you're the kind of person who doesn't do it, or maybe you could go either way. Whichever option you choose, you're doing it knowing what the consequences of that choice could potentially be. If you never brush your teeth or don't brush your teeth regularly enough for what your teeth need, then you're running the risk of having all of those dental issues that I just mentioned.

The dentist might get mad at you when you go into see him and of course dental appointments, and work, and potential other issues could get really expensive down the line. So in deciding not to brush your teeth, you're essentially doing a risk assessment of time, money, energy invested now versus time, money, and energy potentially invested later.

So if you choose to do the boring, annoying teeth brushing now, if you choose to spend money on floss, and a decent toothbrush, and toothpaste, and all that kind of stuff, it's because you're banking on the fact that if you do that, you are going to spend less time, money, and

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energy down the road. Hopefully have less pain, discomfort, and medical issues, and have better oral hygiene over time.

And if you opt out of brushing your teeth in the present, it's because you have done the mental calculation and decided that you'd rather save the time, money, and energy now, and take the risk of what might happen down the road with your oral hygiene and your health.

And let me also clarify that in this analogy, I'm assuming that you as an individual actually have both of these choices. Someone who doesn't have the money to take care of their teeth, or somebody who didn't have the education about why that's important, is not what I'm talking about here.

Now that the toothbrushing example is hopefully seared into your brain, let's replace brushing your teeth with exercise. We have an astounding amount of science that shows the wide-ranging physical and mental health benefits of exercise of all different kinds. In fact, I have a blog post where I list a bunch of those benefits, and I will link that in the show notes because there are some that you may not have heard of before.

We know that exercise makes a lot of people feel better in real time, from endorphins and stress release, experiencing less muscle aches and pain. And we also know that in the long term, when you exercise consistently, it is great for your heart, and your brain, and your muscles, it's great for improving depression and anxiety, and so many other things.

So as I said before, whether or not you choose to exercise has consequences. If you do exercise, then you can potentially get the many benefits that exercise has to offer. But, it's in exchange for doing something you don't necessarily like, that takes time out of your schedule, where you could be doing something else that you enjoy more. It may feel hard, it may make you sweaty, or whatever other reason you don't want to do it.

On the flipside of that, just like with brushing your teeth, if you choose not to exercise now, whether it's because it's uncomfortable, you just don't like it, there are other things that you want to prioritize, or you hate that it makes you sweaty, then not only will you not get to the potential benefits of exercise, there are also plenty of potential pitfalls later in life such as

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having weak bones, which makes it more likely that you'll have osteoporosis or that it will be easier for you to break a hip. You might need a wheelchair or a walker or another assistive device sooner.

There are real risks and that's something that we have to take into account when we make the choice of whether or not we want to exercise. And again, I don't care what you choose, it's totally up to you and what feels right for your life. I just want you to be informed about the consequences either way.

So, with that backdrop, if you ultimately decide that you want to find a way to exercise and move your body more in your life, even though you hate it, let's talk about specifics for making it suck less. We're going to start with mindset, and don't yell at me. I know what you're thinking. You're thinking, goddammit Shohreh, I just told you that I hate exercise, it's not in my fucking head, don't be talking to me about mindset.

Yes, I hear you! And, if you go into an exercise session and all you can think about is how shitty it's going to be, and how much sweat you're going to be drenched in, and how much you freaking hate it, then I swear to god, it is going to feel shittier, and harder, and more frustrating than if you had gone into that exercise session with a more neutral or a more positive mindset.

Because even if you feel like a giant floating head and you don't feel that connected to your body, our bodies and our minds are intrinsically linked. It's super cool, and it's also super annoying. So, a good example of this is that there have been studies that show that if you are strength training, for example, let's say you're doing a bench press that works your chest, if you actually think about your chest muscles working while you're doing the exercise, they will activate more than if you don't think about them working.

So using that same logic here, if you are convinced that your exercise session is going to be the worst experience in the world, it's probably going to feel a lot closer to the worst experience in the world than if you thought about it a little bit differently.

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I know it might sound silly, but visualization is a well-researched technique that you can use to help have a better mindset going into things like your workouts. So, a lot of people use this, think about people before giving speeches or athletes before games, and the way this tool works is that you simply visualize in detail how you want it to go.

So for exercise, maybe you think about having a gentle warm-up, and feeling your heart rate start to rise and your body start to get a little warmer. You can visualize the details of exactly what you're going to do, whether that's lifting weights or dancing, and how you're going to feel during that experience. And then you can visualize what you're going to do at the end and where you're gonna go after.

And that can just get your mind into the right place to be prepared for what's going to happen next. And as you might imagine, this is probably going to have a more calming effect on your body and mind than muttering to yourself, "Fuck this fucking workout, I don't fucking want to go."

Another thing that you can focus on is your why for being there in the first place. And the more specific you can get with this, the better. So instead of saying, "Oh, I want to have more energy from exercise," you can say, "I want to have more energy so that I can do blank" Get through my work day more easily, keep up with my children, whatever it may be.

And I do want to point out here that external goals like weight loss or aesthetic changes to your body may seem like a good why to have, but actually studies have shown that they're not very motivating in the long run. And as you all know, I don't coach intentional weight loss and if you want to know more about that, I will link in the show notes to a previous podcast episode I did entirely on that topic. But that being said, if that's something that you personally are working towards, you should know that it's a myth that exercise can more easily help you to lose weight. Most studies actually show that exercise isn't that great for weight loss.

If future health benefits or life experiences still don't seem tangible enough for you, then I would recommend having a why that is a specific goal. So, maybe you want to train for something very specific, such as a 5K at

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Disneyland, or a big vacation hike with your partner or family. Or maybe a Pull For Pride deadlift competition to raise money for LGBTQ+ youth. Specific goals lend themselves to specific training and for a lot of people a fun thing at the end can be really great motivation.

Okay, so once you have your specific whys lined up, so you have something that you can focus on whenever you're going to exercise, another piece of mindset that's important is remembering that discomfort is highest at the beginning, both physically and mentally. Our brains really hate being beginners at anything. It feels awkward, it's annoying, it's uncomfortable, and we really want to quit. But we know that if we stick it out, eventually we will build up our tolerance, and things will feel a lot easier.

That's why I would also suggest not doing too much too soon when it comes to exercise, whether you're beginning to exercise regularly for the very first time or if you've been away from it for a while and you're coming back to it. There's a reason why programs such as the Couch to 5K program don't have you jump directly from the couch into the 5K. Because if you did, you'd probably get injured at worst, and really pissed off and quit at best.

So, be patient. Give your body and mind time to adjust to something new, and chances are it won't feel as hard as time goes on if you stick with it. If you continue to quit and take long breaks away from it before coming back and trying again, that's when it remains difficult every single time.

We've covered a lot of great mindset pieces. So now let's talk about some non-mindset things you can do to help exercise suck less. One really simple thing that I found has helped so many of my clients is simply expanding their definition of what exercise even is. Because our cultural belief is that it's not exercise and it doesn't count unless you're super sweaty, you're sore, you're exhausted, you're red faced etc.

So many people have told me various arbitrary lengths of time that it has to be for it to count, or heart rates that you have to hit for it to count. And honestly, all of that is bullshit! All of those parameters definitely encompass *a* type of exercise, but there are many, many more to choose

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from. So, taking a walk is exercise. Household chores, doing yard work, washing your car, anything that's physically strenuous can be exercise.

Making time to stand up more throughout the day, taking little walks while you're working or a stretch break, all of those ways of moving your body help you to be less sedentary. It's okay to start with these little things if 'exercise' feels scary.

The other thing is that every little bit of exercise counts. So, even if you're only exercising for 10 minutes a day, three days a week, that's still going to give you so many more benefits than if you don't exercise at all, or if, what a lot of people do, you exercise for an hour five days a week for two weeks and then you quit for six months.

So this goes back to not doing too much too soon. There's no reason to take on more than you can handle. If you've gone your entire life without exercising consistently, then starting out with 10 minutes a day for a couple of days a week could be perfect for you.

My personal favorite way to make exercise suck less is to make it a social part of your life. If y'all remember Ally from the Girl Gang, and how could you forget, really? She and I have been working out together on Monday nights, pretty consistently, for over a year now.

This came about simply because one day we were sitting around talking about how we wished we were strength training more often, and we decided it would be a great idea to have a day where we did that together, so we could hold each other accountable. And it's funny, because when I first started out, I scheduled these in my calendar as 'accountability workouts' and I decided I don't like that language, and I changed them to 'friendship workouts,' which I like a lot better.

We don't always want to work out on Mondays. Most of the time we do it anyways because our resistance to working out isn't that specific. Eh, we're maybe a little bit tired, we just don't feel like it, but once we get moving, we're fine. However, when there's an actual reason not to do it, like someone didn't sleep at all the night before, or we're feeling sick or down, then we both support each other in the choice not to work out.

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But just the act of mutually having this scheduled on our calendar means that most weeks we get in at least one strength training workout, which is better than what we were doing before we started doing this. It's the same reason that people hire personal trainers, because if you have someone waiting for you, and especially if you're paying them, you're a lot more likely to show up.

So even if the exercise itself isn't that fun, you still get to socialize with one of your friends, catch up with them and see what's going on with them. And in the case of Ally and I, we often have dance breaks and dance parties during our workouts, which I love. And this is something you could do with a friend. It's something that you could do with a romantic partner. And it's also something that you can do by finding a community where you can make friends that you really enjoy.

So for me, my aerial studio fills that role because I have made so many friends through my classes and through that community at large, which makes it always a really fun time when I get to go there. I know other people who have joined kickball leagues, or soccer teams, so that they have a community as well.

For our next stop on the reducing exercise hatred train, I would love to suggest that distractions are a beautiful thing, and they can help the entire exercise experience be more enjoyable and go by much faster. People always think they have to exercise in silence, but you really don't. You can listen to your favorite music. You can listen to podcasts or audio books. You can even watch TV and exercise while you're doing that.

Distraction is a wonderful way to get through the discomfort of the experience of exercising. And I do want to note that this only works up to a point because if you get too distracted and you're out of touch with what your body is doing, it's obviously going to be more easy to injure yourself, which we do not want. So whatever you're doing, just make sure that you can safely multitask.

But one of the reasons this technique works so well is because you're connecting exercise to something that you like. So even if you don't like exercise, if exercise becomes the time that you watch a TV show that you

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love, or you listen to an audiobook that you're really invested in, then you will look forward to exercise much more.

One of my past clients used to start out every workout with a Beyoncé dance party warm-up. And that was something that she had so much fun doing, and got her warm and excited for what was to come, and it became something that she could look forward to. So don't hesitate to find ways to associate pleasure with exercise in your life. This could even mean something that you always do before you exercise, or after you exercise, so that it makes it a more enjoyable overall experience.

Hopefully I've given you a couple of new things to think about when it comes to making exercise something that you can do sustainably for the long term, even if you don't like it that much. The truth is, we all do things we don't like that much if we believe they will benefit us, whether that's brushing our teeth, as we've already talked about, threading our eyebrows, argh, but worth it, getting flu shots, or agreeing to go clothes shopping with our mothers.

Cost-benefit analysis is kind of what life is made up of. And exercise is no different. So I wish you well in deciding if exercise is worth it for you to embark on. I personally think it is invaluable. But again, that's for me to decide for my life, and you get to make the choices for yours, and I will respect whatever they are.

If you've decided that you do want to improve your relationship with exercise and that you'd like some help getting started, that's something that I specialize in. So you can reach out to me through my website, by going to [shohrehdavoodi.com/contact](http://shohrehdavoodi.com/contact). That's [shohrehdavoodi.com/contact](http://shohrehdavoodi.com/contact).

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