

Redefining Health & Wellness

#35

Featured this episode: Shohreh Davoodi & Ally Ridnour & Tiffany Cunningham

Shohreh Davoodi: This is episode 35 and today the Girl Gang returns to talk about mental health. Girl Gang episodes usually mean lots of laughs, but we decided to show our more serious sides in order to share our personal, often painful experiences with mental health throughout our lives. The three of us got extremely vulnerable and honest in this conversation even though it was scary to do so, because we want to help combat mental health stigma and normalize these important discussions.

There is a trigger warning for this episode for discussion of suicide as well as discussion of some intense symptoms of anxiety, depression, ADHD etc. Please take care of yourself and skip this episode or individual parts of it if you need to. To access the show notes and a full transcript of this episode, head to shohrehdavoodi.com/35. That's shohrehdavoodi.com/35.

[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.

Everyone's favorite Girl Gang is back [laughter]. Say hi to Ally and Tiffany everybody [laughter].

Tiffany Cunningham: Hi to Ally and Tiffany everybody.

Shohreh: Yeah, just imagine, imagine [laughter] your adoring fans saying that across the nation.

Ally Ridnour: Hello my adoring fans.

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Shohreh: Today we are talking about mental health, which is this sort of amorphous thing that is misunderstood as well as stigmatized. And before we dive into that, I do think it's important to state our various privileges because mental health care is certainly, can be terrible for everyone, but it absolutely can be worse for marginalized individuals and multiply marginalized individuals. And I just want to state up front, we will be speaking from our own personal experiences, and we're not speaking for others in this conversation.

But also, I think it's good for our audience to hear in what ways that we do have privilege, so that they know that they cannot necessarily make a direct comparison to our experiences. So, for myself, I'll say that while I don't identify as white, I do benefit from white privilege, proximity to whiteness, except when you see my name on paper, in isolation. I have thin privilege. I am able bodied. Most of my life I've been considered upper middle class. I'm in a straight-passing relationship. I am cisgender and I also think it's important to say here that I have lived in pretty much major metropolitan areas since I went to college, because that definitely affects mental healthcare access as well.

Ally: I think mine are all the same except for that I'm not in any relationship currently, but have been in many straight-passing relationships.

Shohreh: And also, you do identify as white.

Ally: Yes, that's the only difference. I am definitely white.

Tiffany: Yeah.

Shohreh: So white!

Ally: Other than that, cisgender, also upper middle class family, also access to mental health care, all that good stuff [laughs].

Tiffany: Yeah, I would say, yes, the same, identify as white, cisgender. I do not have thin privilege. I'm very much fat and I love it. I'm working on body issues. But definitely was raised in a middle-class background. Would consider myself upper middle class based on my relationship and the benefits I get from my spouse. I am in a straight-passing relationship.

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Shohreh: So, I think, let's first take it back to childhood, in the sense that, like, let's talk about, did you have a sense of what mental health was or mental health disorders in childhood growing up? Like did anyone ever talk to you about it? Did you see any mental healthcare practitioners as a child or teenager? Like just kind of talking about, did we have any experiences with mental health growing up specifically?

Tiffany: I was very distinctly aware that my mother had mental health concerns, and I found out later in life that my father did as well. But my mother was the only one who ever saw a psychiatrist, saw a therapist, and I actually was talking to a friend about this where there was a generational, like assumed ignorance of things like depression, and bipolar, and ADHD. You could just explain them away as sort of like, our family just needs to sleep to get better. We just sleep.

And so, my childhood, I definitely look back and say I did experience depression from probably a very early age and would have benefitted greatly from some attention in that area. But mental health was something that happened to other people, and there was stigma associated with it.

My mom, as someone who did suffer from depression, she suffered from depression for all of my life, definitely informed her self-esteem and her work performance. She experienced post-partum depression, but it wasn't labeled 'post-partum depression.' And it was somebody who experienced clinical depression. And you had to work through it and around it, and it was something that when it came time for her to have an episode, it was hard for everyone to deal with. But I think because of that hardness, people didn't want little Tiffany to suffer from the same thing, so it was kind of like, we just sort of ignored it and hoped it would go away eventually [laughs].

It did not, spoiler alert! [Laughter]

Ally: It doesn't work that way?

Shohreh: What?!

Tiffany: Nooooo! All through high school, like all up until college, like mental health was always explained away by other illnesses. And I think that in the same

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way that women's health is not treated the same as men's health, I would say that women's mental health is not treated the same as men's mental health, and especially in childhood.

Ally:

As a child, like, I knew depression was a thing. I don't know that I knew much beyond that. I think maybe depression was kind of the only thing that I was aware of. And I think only because I had heard my sister talk about it. But I feel like I very much lived in a bubble where I was kind of under the impression, I don't know, maybe my mom made me think this, that it just wasn't something that was ever going to happen to me because my parents had money and I lived in this wealthy suburb, and we were doing well. So depression, that's not something that happens to people that grow up that way.

I experienced a lot of what I now know is anxiety, pretty much my entire life. But I never had the toolbox to talk to anybody about what I was feeling or even to realize that what I was feeling wasn't 'normal,' or that most people don't... that you don't want to feel that way, if that makes sense?

So I would say I had a broad sense of, like, mental health was a thing, but I guess I was always made to understand that it wasn't something that I needed to be concerned about ever. Which I guess we can get into [laughs] how invalidating that feels later.

Tiffany:

Yeah.

Ally:

As a kid, I guess, and like through high school, definitely into high school, I started to have this sense that, like, something was wrong, but I didn't know at the time what it was or how to talk to anybody. And I never really was super close with my mom. It wasn't something that I talked to her about ever. Like I never grew up with like this relationship where it felt like I could tell my mom what I was going through or what I was feeling.

So I kind of just sat on it through high school and just it kind of became like, as I got older, and like through high school, it just got worse, and worse, and worse. This like feeling of dread and that something was wrong and something was bad, but I didn't know how to deal with it or talk to anybody about it.

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Tiffany: I had an acquaintance, not a friend, but an acquaintance in middle school actually, have an episode in school where they tried to commit suicide. And I remember that like being very jarring, and I don't know, as a 13-year-old kid, it didn't hit quite as hard as now looking back. I don't know if it really like packed the punch because I didn't know about mental health, or if it didn't pack the punch because I wasn't close to that person. So, I was just curious if you guys did have any experiences with anyone in your social groups or outward circles of social groups that did have mental health issues like that?

Ally: Nobody close to me ever attempted suicide. I think I was aware of self-harm. I knew friends that had mental health issues and maybe even like saw therapists, but I think that I understood that to be, you did that if something extremely traumatic happened to you.

Tiffany: Yeah.

Ally: For example, if you had been sexually assaulted or abused as a child. My understanding was like, it was normal, I guess, to have mental health problems or to struggle with your mental health, only if you had been through something like that. So it's really easy for me to say, oh, as a child I definitely felt this, but to put myself back in that moment and remember that, at the time I had no idea what I was feeling, and I didn't know how to verbalize it. I didn't know how to explain to anybody. I didn't even know that it wasn't -

Tiffany: It wasn't normal.

Ally: Yeah, that like nobody else felt like they were gonna die all the fucking time. Do you know what I mean? I can remember, throughout high school and this was in hindsight like a basically, I don't know, like a gradual build of my anxiety because I had zero coping tactics. I was convinced every single day that I woke up - and I remember it getting kind of worse and worse the more I progressed through high school - I was convinced every single day that I was gonna die. Like for no particular reason.

I didn't want to die. Like I was terrified of the idea of dying, but I was just convinced that my heart was going to stop or... I don't know, I was really

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stuck on the idea that I was gonna have a stroke [laughs]. I'm not sure why, well, anxiety is why, that's why.

Shohreh: Yeah, anxiety is why [laughter].

Tiffany: Y'all know the show, Sailor Moon?

Ally: Yes.

Tiffany: Okay, so Sailor Moon was running on the WB, like in the mid-90s, like when I was in 8th grade. And I had such severe anxiety that I would stay up all night, and I would watch Sailor Moon because it came on at like 6:30 in the morning, and then I would get sick. I would get desperately sick. I would feel like nauseous; I'd throw up. And it was like part anxiety, part, like literal, I was making myself sick, so that I didn't have to go to school because I was having this part depression, part ADHD, like avoidance of the things that I didn't want to deal with. [Laughter]

And so I literally watched the entire season of Sailor Moon as it ran, originally, like when it ran on the D cut.

Ally: Oh wow, yeah.

Tiffany: Because I had depression and stayed out of school for six weeks. Almost didn't get to go to high school on time.

Shohreh: Dang!

Ally: Wow.

Tiffany: Fun story. [Laughter]

Ally: Yeah.

Shohreh: Brains are so cool.

Ally: This is like a real life, like processing in real time therapy session -

Tiffany: I know [laughter]. Shohreh, we're sorry, it's your turn [laughter].

Shohreh: So, I was thinking about this today, and I actually texted my mom about it, because I did technically see a therapist when I was in elementary school

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and I remember very little about it. I remember that this therapist worked out of, like an office in their house. And in their living room, which was also a waiting room, they had like a couch filled with teddy bears, which now I'm kind of like, that's really creepy [laughter]. There were probably like 150 teddy bears.

Ally: Oh no.

Shohreh: Yeah, just all staring at you.

Ally: Was it meant to be, like, comforting?

Shohreh: I think so, because I think, I'm pretty sure this was like a child therapist. It was like a child psychologist or something. I'm guessing it was meant to be like enjoyable or fun, but now as an adult, I'm like, ooh, that's kinda creepy.

Ally: That's a horror movie, yeah.

Shohreh: Yeah, pretty much [laughter]. And I barely remember our sessions. I just remember that in one session we played something that she deemed 'feelings checkers.' I think that the checker board itself, or maybe the checkers had like feelings on them, like sadness, anger, whatever. And certain moves in the game would trigger that you had to say, "I feel this feeling when..." and you had to be like, you know, "I feel angry when..." or something.

I think it was just a way to get kids to talk about their feelings that they maybe don't know how to access otherwise, was the point of this game. That is all I remember about it. I cannot remember why I went there. I can't remember how long I went there. And I was texting my mom to see if she could remember, and she said something that, you know, she was like, you were depressed and you were acting out. But then we have a disagreement about why I stopped going because her story doesn't match up with the one in my head.

So, I'm not going to get into it, but [laughs], I technically did see a therapist or child psychologist at some point in elementary school. Because I have ADHD my memory is shit, so I have very little, like actual memory of this.

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And beyond that, kind of similar to Ally where I was like, I knew that depression was a thing and especially a teenager, I had very intensive mood swings and my mom would ask me, you know, “Are you depressed? Are you suicidal?”

And again, now knowing that I have ADHD, which was undiagnosed at the time, it’s a great explanation for the combination of like hormones and that disorder, and why my mood swings were so intensive and dramatic, like even compared to the average teenager. So I really only knew, like same thing, that depression was a bad thing and that, you know, depressed people are basically sad all the time. And that really depressed people might commit suicide. That was the extent of what I knew about mental health.

Tiff, in answer to your question, I definitely had friends who self-harmed and there was, this is gonna sound weird, there was a point in time where I’m gonna say, ‘I tried it,’ but it was very much like a, I think it was more of like an exploration kind of thing than like actually wanting to harm myself. So I never did anything that truly hurt myself, though I do have a random scar on my wrist from again, this weird experimentation.

And then my best friend in high school was suicidal/threatened suicide as a way to get the attention that she desperately needed at the time. And obviously I don’t know what her mental health state was, I can’t speak to that. I was a teenager. But at the time it just seemed like she really needed help and that was her way of trying to get that or trying to get a boyfriend or somebody who broke up with her to notice her.

There was definitely that happening in my life. So I was seeing this happen with somebody else, and it was really scary for me because it was my best friend. And it was also confusing because I was like, are you actually suicidal, are you not suicidal? I was usually the person that she would call or try to get her help. So that was definitely really scary to kind of see that up close with somebody in my life. But that was pretty much it for me when it came to mental health.

Like certainly nobody ever talked about mental health in the way that they talk about physical health. Nobody ever said this is something that can be

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like improved, that you can do things to have better mental health. Like I said, I only really knew about depression and suicide.

It's like I knew about ADHD because I had two siblings who were diagnosed as children, so I knew that was thing. But I didn't really know much about it because no one suspected that I had it. And I honestly don't think I even knew that that necessarily had to do with mental health. Like I think I probably saw it as like an illness or like a disorder. I didn't necessarily know that it was a brain thing or anything like that, the way that I understand it now. So, yeah, I would say that was pretty much my experiences growing up.

So, let's move onto what happened in the next phase of life then. So, looking at adulthood, once you were in college, once you were out of college, what kinds of experiences did you have with mental health there? Is this when you were able to start accessing things like practitioners, start having actual diagnoses or able to get medication? How did it progress for you?

Tiffany: I'll start with saying, I'm 38 and I was only diagnosed with depression two and a half years ago, and I was diagnosed with being ADHD a year ago. From the time I went to college to the time I was actually diagnosed with any mental health issues, it was a wild ride! [Laughter]

Shohreh: I bet that it was!

Tiffany: There was a lot of, what I would probably call some cries for help and some definite like health issues that were, in retrospect, caused by mental health issues versus actual health issues.

So, first thing that happened was I dropped out of college, which I now know was a major depressive episode. I literally like, I had that dread feeling every day for an entire semester, and then, I went to college in Santa Fe, New Mexico, so my mom was driving me to college. And I looked at her like, we were outside of, probably San Angelo, and I looked at her and I was like, "Mom, I don't want to go back to college," and I started crying. And it was just like tears everywhere.

And I cried all the way from San Angelo up until Santa Fe [laughs].

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Shohreh: Baby!

Tiffany: I know, it was really bad. I know now this is how my body processes emotion. That probably should have been clue one.

There was a second one that I had when I broke up with one of my boyfriends, and I did the same thing that I did with Sailor Moon where I was like out of work for two weeks, making myself sick. I had a couple of episodes where I was convinced I was gonna either have a heart attack or, I had like heart palpitations [laughs]. I went to see so many doctors, and none of them could figure out what was wrong with me. Anxiety. Like Ally said, it's kind of how it goes [laughter]. It's like no one could figure it out. It's like you don't have heart palpitations, you don't have a heart attack.

A couple of things happened later on. When I got married, right before I got married actually, I had a pretty serious health incident. And one of the reasons that my husband and I got married was because he had very good health insurance. Which, speaking of privilege, I feel like I have an enormous amount of privilege in this case, because our policy is one of the most comprehensive and affordable because he works for a tech company.

It's just one of the things that I think, I'm thankful for -

Shohreh: But also, you had to get married to access it, so what does say that about our healthcare system? [laughter]

Ally: Yeah.

Tiffany: Yeah, but anyways, so I started actually seeing a GP regularly, which was something I had not done for probably 10 years. And I have the same GP as my mother, which is a good thing. Because in this case, as we started to develop a patient/doctor relationship, he noticed similarities between myself and my mother. And there was one day where he asked me a question, and I just started crying. And he's like, "Has anyone ever tested you for depression?"

And I was like, nooooo! So yeah, he gave me a tablet and took some questions and comes back and he's like, "Tiffany, you are *so* depressed."

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[Laughter] I think he was nearly in tears himself. I think he felt so bad. I love my GP, shout out to my GP.

But yeah, that was two and a half years ago. And the things that I did in between being in college and when I got diagnosed is... I had things that were like addiction, and self-harm, and eating disorders, and depression, and anxiety, and all of these things that were bundled up into “you’re fat and you’re poor, and you’re going to die.”

[Laughs] That’s what it was, it was like, this is just what you’re going, your life is now. This is what everyone experiences when they’re fat and they’re poor. It’s like, you’re gonna die.

So it’s like, it really was, it was like I had to get married to get the help I needed. I had to have a major health scare to have people pay attention to my health at all. I don’t know, my experiences with mental health so far, in being diagnosed, like it’s been literally a life-saver. It’s also made me have to confront a lot of, I don’t know, resentment and anger towards a lot of things because they definitely fucked me up [laughs].

Which I say laughing because if you don’t laugh, what are you gonna do but cry?

Shohreh: Both at the same sometimes?

Tiffany: Yeah, that’s true. I do that a lot with therapy. I cry and I laugh.

Ally: Oh my god, me too, like if I start crying, I have to like joke about it and like laugh.

Tiffany: I know, yeah.

Ally: Like I’m always in the midst of like sobbing, I’ll be like at my therapist, like I’m thriving right now [laughter]. Girl, it’s okay to just cry and I’m like, you don’t understand, it’s not [laughter].

Tiffany: Feelings, no [laughter].

Shohreh: Well, and I do think this is a good point to just note as well, in the same way that none of us were taught sort of generally about mental health or how to deal with it, I think it is also very common in families not to talk

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about feelings and like, how to deal with them, and how to feel them, and heal, and all these different things. Like I definitely grew up in a household that was very much like, we don't talk about our feelings, and we don't cry, and we don't do all this shit. And of course, now, later as an adult, I'm having to unpack the ways it affects my relationships and my life. And it has long-lasting effects.

Tiffany: Mmhmm. Yeah, same. Had some really fun conversations with our couple's therapist that have had to deal with that. And it's like, I don't want to talk about this right now, can we do, can we talk about other things? [Laughter]

Shohreh: Can we do *anything* else but talk about our feelings!

Ally: Literally anything else.

I would say summer after graduating high school into my first couple of years of college, that was like the worst time in my mental health. I struggled to eat because I was just so anxious about everything. I would eat two bites of food and feel like I was gonna throw up. I lost an immense amount of weight which, I don't know, also can tie into my body image issues.

But I was scarily thin, I lost my period, I thought I was gonna die every single day. And I still didn't know how to talk to anybody about it. So it was this very isolating, didn't quite know that what was happening to me wasn't normal and okay. And I basically was just like, desperately treading water, trying to keep my head above, without knowing what I could do.

And then sophomore year of college I woke up one morning, and I was having a panic attack. In hindsight I had experienced a couple episodes that were probably like, baby panic attacks, I guess you could say. At the time didn't know what they were, basically just was like, my heart's racing, this is weird.

But this was my first full -blown, I was like shaking and my heart was racing. And I had a roommate at the time, so luckily she was a close friend and I trusted her. So I woke her up and was like, I don't know what's happening to me. We thought I was having a heart attack, which I now know is like extremely common with panic attacks. If you don't know what

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they feel like, it's to think that you're having a heart attack. So, I went to UT, the University of Texas and I think most public schools have this, where you can call some health hotline and talk to a triage nurse basically.

So I did that, and the woman on the phone was like, it sounds like you're having a panic attack, it doesn't sound like you're having a heart attack, you'd probably know by now. And I was like, oh, okay, cool. And as part of UT's protocol, I had to go to their health center and they did some sort of, I can't recall, but it was some sort of like test on my heart where they made sure that I did in fact have a panic attack and not a heart attack.

And then, I don't remember if it was recommended or if it was required, but I started seeing a UT-sanctioned therapist. The therapist was helpful in the sense that I had literally never talked to anybody about my anxiety before, and so this was my first experience coming to understand it. In hindsight, I didn't really click with him. I didn't gain a lot from that experience, other than that I understood that I had anxiety.

I then went back to my childhood GP because I was 18 or 19, so still going to a pediatrician because I'm not a good adult, never have been [laughter]. So, went to my pediatrician as a 19 year old and was like, hey, so when I was in college I had this panic attack, I'm seeing a therapist now. And she, without question, and without prompting, wrote me a prescription for Xanax, which I didn't ask for, and was like, I don't know what to do with this. I don't know how to take it. Suddenly I just had Xanax.

Tiffany:

Wow.

Ally:

I never took the Xanax because honestly, I was afraid of it. I didn't know what it would feel like and I didn't, I don't know. My doctor didn't explain what the purpose of it was, so I was like, oh, I don't wanna take this. It's gonna make me feel weird or, I don't know, do something to me. I was like 19.

And so from then until I was mid-20s, I understood that I had anxiety, really didn't understand much about it. But at that point in my life, didn't struggle much with it.

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And then in my early 20s started dating somebody, and by the time was in my mid-20s, realized I was unhappy in this relationship. In hindsight, I can see that it was abuse happening. In the moment, I just knew that something didn't feel good. Which led to a period where, for probably six months to a year, I felt highly anxious all the time, to the point where I was disassociating constantly.

Again, didn't know how to talk to anybody about it. Didn't know how to cope with it. Eventually got to a point in the relationship where I was able to leave, thankfully, very grateful for that. Like floundered for a year and a half. And then finally, I went to therapy [laughter].

Shohreh: Round of applause!

Tiffany: Yay!

Shohreh: Woooo!

Ally: Finally I did it; I finally got my shit together. Found a therapist. Things have really been looking up since then, you guys. [Laughs] I've been able to contextualize and put words to a lot of my previous experiences that at the time felt just like isolating and terrifying. And I felt very lonely, and now I'm able to be like, "oh, this is what I was feeling, and that's what I was feeling."

So, obviously still deal with anxiety, but in a much, much, much healthier way, where I can talk to somebody about it. And also, it affects me much less than it used to because I talk to somebody about it now. So when I'm feeling it, it does not spiral the way that it used to.

Tiffany: Clearly, when I first met you, you were probably at that period of time in your life?

Ally: Yes.

Tiffany: And I did not know this. I did not notice. It did not even occur to me. I think looking back, I would say you had excellent coping mechanisms. Like I've always said, Ally, you are always really super badass, and I was just like... you were probably suffering a lot. And I think that, for better or for worse, you were very good at living life through it.

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- Ally:** Yeah.
- Tiffany:** So, I think you've gotta give yourself some credit there.
- Ally:** Thank you. When we met, I think I was probably in the thick of spiraling. And yeah, that's not to say like over, you know, the, however long, decade that I was like coping with this anxiety and not doing anything about it, like I had periods where I felt really good, and I'd be like, oh, I had one panic attack, but since then my anxiety has never flared up since then. I have a personality type where you might not necessarily think that anxiety is something that I deal with. I joke around a lot, and I try to make light of things, and I'm very, like, outgoing.
- Tiffany:** Technically, you and I are similar but different in that we both very much dislike conflict. And conflict can be, like, we both put other people's security, and safety, and health above our own, sometimes to our detriment. But one of the ways that we do that is we want to be the person that makes everybody happy.
- Ally:** Yes.
- Tiffany:** And that can mean being outgoing, and exuberant, and laughing, or it can be the person who says yes all the time - that's me! [Laughter]
- Ally:** Yeah, for sure. I think I definitely have some of that, I don't know, class clown personality of like, "I don't feel good, but maybe if I can make everybody else feel good, then I'll feel good too?"
- Shohreh:** I think it's also worth saying that coping mechanisms can be both constructive and destructive-
- Ally:** Yes.
- Shohreh:** -in different ways, In different situations. So in some parts of your life it may ultimately be like healthy and helping you, and in other parts of your life it may be hurting you.
- Ally:** Yeah, for sure, I think I've definitely developed a healthier balance of when to joke and laugh about things, and when to actually sit and talk through something, and be vulnerable, and let myself cry. Which is not something I

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was comfortable with three/four years ago that now I'm like, okay, I can do that.

And so when I do turn around and be like, "Hi guys, let's laugh about how sad I am," [laughter] it's in a healthier way. Because it's like either I've processed what I need to process, or I know that I'm not quite ready to process it. I have a much better toolbox now for... I'm not like just frantically flailing, grasping at anything I can to try not drown. I'm like okay, let me assess the situation and see which of these tools is going to help me best.

Tiffany: The toolbox thing is so true. One of the things I've been thinking about lately is that, how talking to people who have been in therapy or currently going through therapy is so much different than people who have never worked on themselves in their life.

Ally: I think that the whole idea of the toolbox is something that I learned from you, Shohreh.

Shohreh: Mhmm.

Ally: I don't know, I think I picked it up from your socials or something. And I was like, that is a really good metaphor for my mental health. I have this box, and I'm gonna put different tools in it, and sometimes I need a screwdriver, and sometimes I need another tool that, I don't know tools.

Tiffany: Like a hammer.

Ally: Hammer is a tool [laughter].

Tiffany: Hammer is a tool! Hammer you can smash things with!

Ally: That's me! I'm the hammer!

Tiffany: Sometimes you need a flamethrower. I'm a flamethrower girl [laughter]. Burn it down!

Shohreh: Well see, and this goes to the point that, one, you can have a toolbox of all kinds of things, but one, you need to know when to use certain ones and when not to. And sometimes you might choose incorrectly or like you just didn't do the most ideal one and you chose a different one, and all these

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other things. I love that analogy, and I use it all the time in coaching too because that's what I help people do in my coaching, is give them tools that they can use at a point in time when we're no longer working together. And just give them more options because most people have some tools.

And the problem isn't necessarily those tools, it's if those are the only tools that they have. And this is the problem with all coping mechanisms when you don't have a variety of them, is that they don't fit in all situations. And so if you're forced to use them, they can become really harmful. And you see that, Ally, with your anxiety, Tiffany, with your depression, me with my ADHD, and the ways in which, yes, we had coping mechanisms that helped us to be mostly functioning-ish humans, and also they hurt us a lot because we hadn't learned other ways to deal with our issues.

Tiffany: And the other thing that I think is really important to know is having tools, and using a tool, and being an expert with that tool are three totally different things. Because one of the things I've been talking to my therapist about, my friends about, is like, how, practicing using the tools makes a big difference, because if you never use them, and then you try to use them, you're just gonna be clumsy about it.

Ally: Yeah.

Tiffany: Nobody comes out of the gate a master plumber. In the same way, mental health toolboxes, you know, you're gonna fuck up sometimes. You're gonna flail and you're gonna eventually get better and practice, and it's that whole like, woo-hoo, practice makes progress kind of thing. But yeah, if you don't ever use your tools, or you just let them sit there, you'll never get any better.

Ally: I'm like currently picturing my anxiety as like me just running around with a hammer screaming, so. [Laughter] That might be like my favorite image of what anxiety feels like to me, which is, I don't know, somebody's asked me to hang shelves, and all I have is a hammer, and everything's on fire, and I'm screaming, and I'm just smashing things.

Tiffany: This is fine.

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Shohreh, I feel like we haven't given you enough attention.

Shohreh:

I guess I will talk about my adult mental health experiences.

So, when I went to college, I still wasn't really thinking much about mental health. And again, it's one of those situations where I can look back on my college experience, and I can see, oh wow, I had some really low lows and great highs and there was a lot of swinging between the two. And I always felt like I felt feelings very strongly, which is a weird thing to say.

But I just felt like I was this overly emotional person, or just like I struggled in my romantic relationship that I had throughout college and in friendships. And again, now I know why, but at the time I just thought that was normal or that's what other people went through or just didn't really have a sense of it.

And then I took like a year and a half off before going to law school. And my second year of law school I pretty much had a complete mental break where I was so overwhelmed with anxiety that I was not functioning very well. I was crying all the time, I was burned out and stressed, I was panicking. And my relationship with Jason, who by then I was dating, was going downhill because I was in this really bad place.

And so I decided to go see the school's therapist in that our law school, the healthcare that was associated with the school allowed you 10 free visits with a school-appointed therapist. And the weird thing is there was a floor in our building that up until that point I hadn't realized I had never been on. And they literally hid the mental health practitioners on that floor.

Tiffany:

Oh my god.

Shohreh:

So, it was really weird. You'd go on this empty floor, nobody is there, and you go back to this office that I've never heard of or seen before, and there's this person. And I was like, this is like a horrible metaphor for what's about to happen [laughter]. So I saw this woman for, I don't know, maybe four sessions or something like that. And she basically chalked it up to anxiety and was like, it just seems like you're really anxious about school.

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And I didn't get to choose her. She didn't really know much about me or my life. And so we never really had a connection. And I basically just like buried my feelings and plowed forward, because what else could I do? Like I was in law school and I had to get through it. And so I just didn't really deal with it.

Post law school, when I was a lawyer, I briefly saw a therapist when I was transitioning to start my own business because I just felt like my mental health was deteriorating because I hated my job.

And then after I started this business, I started seeing a new therapist who was the first person to suggest to me that I might have ADHD. And I actually kind of brought it up to her because I was noticing these symptoms and I thought that I might have it. And I had asked my parents about it, and my parents were like, "Eh, we don't really think that you have it. Like your siblings had all of these strong symptoms and you never had them, so you probably don't have it."

But the more I thought about it, the more I looked at these online tests and then talked to my therapist about it, I was like, "oh shit, I actually think I have ADHD and maybe it's more mild than my siblings, but I think that this is what I have." And my therapist agreed with me and she was like, "I thought it might be anxiety, but now that you've brought it up to me, I can see that this probably is ADHD."

And I just presented differently than a lot of other people. One, because of being a girl, because girls in childhood tend to present with ADHD very differently from how boys do. And then also, I was very skilled with my coping mechanisms to mask my ADHD. I didn't know that's what I was doing, but I had spent my entire life up to that point basically trying to be more neurotypical. And taking my cues from other people and being like, "okay, I have this shortcoming that I recognize and I need to fix it."

So for example, people with ADHD are known for being extremely disorganized. I am organized to a T and that's because I learned as a child that the only way to not have to deal with the shame of being disorganized, was to be overly obsessively organized. And I always saw that as a strength and I was like, oh, I'm so organized, this is amazing. But

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in reality it was a coping mechanism because I had this fault that I saw that I, this was my way of dealing with it.

So, for me, getting that ADHD diagnosis was huge because it gave me a framework to understand my entire life up to that point. It gave me a framework to understand what happened my second year of law school in the sense that because I didn't know I had ADHD and I wasn't receiving treatment for it, my symptoms spiraled out of control because I was in such an intensive and high pressure environment, which is really common that that would cause a lot of issues with ADHD.

And all of these things in my life, the highs and the lows. and being super sensitive to rejection, and always procrastinating. All these things suddenly made sense. So for me it was really helpful to have that diagnosis because I was able to learn a lot more about myself. I was able to learn why I'm prone to depression and anxiety. But then figuring out how to treat it became kind of the battle of my last three years, now.

And at this point I am finally seeing a psychiatrist. I am finally getting medication. I have a great therapist, so I feel like I'm in a much better place now than I was previously. But it took a long time to get there. It took a lot of difficulty, and trying to find practitioners, and healthcare issues to get there as well. So it certainly was not easy.

And that's actually what I want to shift to talking about too, is because we've all had these mental health things that we've had to deal with, and even though we are a fairly privileged bunch, I think we've all had some access issues. Like Tiff, you already mentioned, literally having to get married to get the healthcare that you needed.

Tiffany:

Oh yeah.

Shohreh:

And you know, for me, one of the biggest things was finding a psychiatrist. It took eight months, I think, to see my first psychiatrist, and she just, luck of the draw, turned out to be terrible and ultimately closed her practice a few months later. And I had such a bad experience that it took me another six months to even start looking again. And then it took me six more months to find the psychiatrist that I have now, who thankfully takes my

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insurance and is reliable. But it was such a process. I was miserable, I was depressed about it.

And even though I have a psychiatrist now and she does take my insurance, I still have to pay a \$60 co-pay for every 20-minute follow-up appointment that I go to. I still have to pay for the medication. And my healthcare does not cover therapy, so I pay out of pocket, over \$100, for every time I go see my therapist. So, those expenses add up, and thankfully I am able to afford that and prioritize that because of Jason's job, certainly not because of my job, but it's still even very expensive for us. And so I don't know how other people manage it.

Tiffany:

I don't either. I'm in kind of a similar situation where finding my providers has been a little easier because the people in my life, now that talking about mental health is a thing, the people in my life have talked about their providers, and so they've recommended some. Like I said, I see my mom's GP. I see my husband's psychiatrist. I found my therapist on my own, totally independently, and I love them so much. And between mental health and physical health issues, I take like seven medications a day. So it can really add up.

And so yeah, I don't understand how people can do it, and I can definitely see how, I know, I have plenty of friends who do not have the same privileges. That do really struggle with getting medications, finding doctors, just getting access to healthcare. And the things that we've talked about today, the feeling like you're gonna die, the feeling of anxiety, and panic attacks, and depression, and just non-functioning, I see this happening to them. And seeing it is hard because you can't do anything to help, other than talk to them about what your experiences are. And you want to be able to have them have the same access, but it just almost feels like it's unattainable for them.

But I would say, it is easier as an adult to find these things. And it's easier now than it was 25-30 years ago. Because I think even though access to practitioners can be very difficult, I think that because the conversations are starting with friends and family, there is more talk about it. Whether it's in online communities... there are fucking apps now for therapist [laughs]. This is a thing that happens now. You can talk to a therapist on an app.

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I know that a lot of the times where things that I will have concerns about will come up in conversation, or in articles, or on some kid's meme on Tumblr. And it's like, "oh shit, it me." [Laughter] I've had so many of those places have happened where it's like, that happened with me and ADHD, it's happened with the anxiety. It happened with me and certain relationships in my life recently. I think that alone has helped a ton. And so one of the things I've always been trying to do, and I haven't done lately, but it's like, I have tried to always be really open about my mental health journey with friends, and family, and co-workers.

Because, not just the stigma, but also, I don't know who is out there that might benefit from talking about it. Like just me saying, "Hey, I'm having a really bad anxiety day, this is how I feel, I'm not going to come to work today because I'm sitting in a bathtub crying." These are the things that you learn as you talk about these things. If I hadn't have had that experience, I wouldn't have known that my boss suffers from PTSD, and I wouldn't have probably talked to you guys about mental health and stuff like that.

So, while access to practitioners is still really terrible, I think that the conversations that are being had nowadays, at least in the communities that I'm in, and I think maybe you guys are in, that those conversations are happening now, and it's helping.

Ally:

Going back to access, I am extremely fortunate that I have health insurance through my job. My boss pays for 100% of my health insurance and so, and that covers mental health for me. So my co-pay for each therapy session that I go to is \$30, and I know that even for some people that amount is prohibitively expensive. For me, it's not, so I'm super lucky that I can do that. I had a really hard time finding a therapist that would, number one, fit my schedule, was taking on new clients, took my insurance, specialized in the things that I needed to talk to somebody about.

And that combination of things can be extremely difficult to find. I called a lot of therapists before I finally found one that could do all of those things for me. And then I got extremely lucky that the first therapist that I started seeing in adulthood, I clicked very well with and I felt comfortable,

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because that also doesn't happen a lot. I have a lot of friends that started their therapy journey and did not click with the first person. And that can be disheartening and can set you back, or at least like slow down your journey.

I mean I can't speak for everybody, but I did have one therapist that I didn't click with, and it felt like something was wrong with me, that I was like, this therapy isn't really working. So anyway, all that to say, I feel extremely fortunate, and I think it's very rare that the first therapist that I did start seeing, as an adult, worked super well for me, and I love her, and I am like thriving with her basically.

And that said, I have all the privilege in the world, and it still took me a year to find a therapist that I could go to, and I could afford, and would see me.

Shohreh: Yeah, and again, we're not trying to be discouraging in mentioning that, just that this is the reality that a lot of people experience. And it's not uncommon to see one, or two, or three therapists before you find one that you really click with. And yes, it is so freaking frustrating when it happens and when you have to like essentially fire a therapist and start the search again. It absolutely -

Tiffany: Yeah.

Shohreh: I've been there. I've done it multiple times. But also, if you really want to find somebody and like you prioritize that and just keep looking, hopefully you'll eventually get in touch with the right person. Like Tiff said, hopefully you have some friends or family in your life who you can talk to to maybe get some recommendations from. There's a lot of different directories and things that are coming out online to make it easier to find and search by things like, "oh, I need a sliding scale because I can't afford this thing, I don't have healthcare" or whatever a person might need.

Tiffany: Like if you want to get your shit together, the first step is just saying, "hey, I need to start looking," and sometimes that's a big step, in and of itself. I know that was a hard one for me, just saying, "hey, I need to get my shit together" took 30-something years [laughs].

Ally: Everyone is on their own journey, however long it takes you [laughs].

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- Tiffany:** The journey never stops.
- Ally:** Yeah. Yeah.
- Tiffany:** There is no destination.
- Shohreh:** The destination is death! [Laughter]
- Ally:** Oh.
- Shohreh:** Ceasing to exist. Weeeee!
- Tiffany:** Weeeee!
- Ally:** I kind of want that on a shirt [laughter]. A cool skeleton that has sunglasses on and is like, "My destination is death."
- Tiffany:** I love it. Can I do that?
- Ally:** I'd wear it. Yeah, I'd wear it.
- Shohreh:** I also just wanna honor, I think it's important to honor that for some people there are very real and challenging barriers to finding a therapist, to going to therapy, to whatever it may be, and that it is not your only option to improve your mental health. Thankfully we're living in a time where there is access to books through libraries. There are amazing mental health podcasts out there. There are awesome mental health practitioners on Instagram who are putting out content that is very helpful and that you can apply to your life.
- So yes, it is awesome if you can go see a therapist, psychiatrist, whatever, but also, I don't want to discount that you do have other options if that's just not realistic for you at this point in your life. And that doesn't mean that you can't do anything to take your mental health into your own hands. Like there are other places that you can look to do some self-therapy and some self-help for yourself too.
- Tiffany:** This is one of those ways that the internet changed the world, because we do have this access to a whole global perspective on mental health. You can find the people who are like you. And I think that finding that community, it changed my life, I will say that. It didn't just make me realize

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that the things that I was feeling were normal. It made me realize that some of the things that were happening around me were not. And I think that in and of itself was one of the greatest gifts and lessons I've ever learned.

Shohreh:

I would say for me the way that I want to wrap this up and kind of my parting thoughts on mental health are that one of the things that I have noticed with people in my life is this idea that you only need to go to therapy, whether that's individual therapy or couples therapy, if you have major problems, or if you're 'broken.' And certainly you can go to therapy for those reasons, but also there are a lot of wonderful reasons to go to therapy that don't necessarily mean that you have to be on the verge of total breakdown in your life.

I have absolutely gone to therapy for those reasons in the past, and there's definitely a stigma about who can and should go to therapy, and I think that it can benefit so many people who don't necessarily have a diagnosed issue, like anxiety, or depression, or ADHD. Or whose marriage isn't falling apart, necessarily, but they just want to be able to bring someone else into their relationship, work on communication, work on whatever.

As we were talking about earlier, one of the things that therapy can do for you is can give you more tools in your toolbox, and that's from a general mental health perspective, and it's just from like being a human perspective. So, in that sense, anybody can benefit.

And then the last thing that I'll say too is that the stigma around medication kept me from getting medication for a lot longer than I am happy to say at this point in time. Because I convinced myself that I had to try every possible alternative first, before taking medication, because I felt like I should be able to handle my mental health on my own. And I honestly think I had internalized that I was weak if it turned out that I needed medication and what if I came to depend on it or something like that.

When in reality, I could have gotten my poor neurodiverse brain the goddamn help that it needed, like years earlier, if that stigma hadn't been around, and if I hadn't convinced myself that this was true.

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Which is not to say that you shouldn't try alternatives. I think it's totally fine. I do think that oftentimes medication is overprescribed, and it's often a first line choice when it could be a second, third, or fourth line choice. But this was coming from me. It wasn't coming from somebody else. And so I'm glad that now I have the medication that I need, and that it is helping me and that has been a whole journey. And I wish that someone had said to me sooner that, "hey, it's okay if you want or need medication, and that doesn't make you a weak or bad person, and it doesn't mean your brain is fucked up. It just means that your brain is a little bit different."

Ally:

What I want to say is if you're somebody that feels like you have all the privilege in the world or you have nothing 'super bad' has happened to you, you don't have some like big trauma in your past and yet you still don't feel good, you have the right to feel that way, if that makes sense.

I think for a long time I felt like I didn't deserve to have anxiety because I didn't have some big reason to have it. And so it kept me, like you were saying Shohreh, this stigma of like, I shouldn't have anxiety because there's no reason for me to have it, kept me from seeking help for a very long time. And I'm glad that I finally did seek help and things have been a lot better for me. But I also was like, just really floundering for quite a long time because I just kept saying to myself, and my partner at the time kept saying, there was just no reason for me to feel as bad as I did.

So if that's something that other people out there are feeling, you're not wrong or bad for having mental health problems. And even if you don't think that you 'deserve' to have them [laughs], even if you don't think that there's a reason for you to have them and you don't have it bad enough to have these problems, you still deserve to seek help if you don't feel like something is right, is what I'm trying to say.

Everybody deserves to seek that help, even if you don't think that you should be depressed or you should be anxious.

Shohreh:

And I just wanna say too, obviously y'all have heard a lot from the Girl Gang now. In the episodes that we've done, I mean, we share a lot with you. And also that in some ways it's a lot easier to come on here and talk about bisexuality, joke about anal sex, than it is to talk about mental health

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and be vulnerable with strangers about our experiences. And I just want to honor that it's not easy to do this, and the reason that we are choosing to do this and to share these intimate parts of our lives, is because we are well aware of the stigma around mental health. And we know that if there's a chance that this could help somebody, then it's worth pushing through our own discomfort to talk about this.

Tiffany:

Oh yeah. The way that representation matters has really been highlighted for me, is like when I see people who are in larger bodies doing anything, it says to me, okay, then this is something I can do. And so, if you can see somebody in a larger body talking about mental health, then awesome. If you can see somebody in a queer body talking about mental health, awesome. That representation, that conversation is so important.

[Music plays]

Shohreh:

And we, all three of us in the Girl Gang are rooting for you in your own mental health journey.

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.

I also love chatting with listeners, so feel free to screenshot from your podcast player, post on social media, and tag me. And if you're looking for more information on what I'm all about and how to work with me, head on over to shohrehdavoodi.com. I hope to see you for the next episode.