

Redefining Health & Wellness

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Featured this episode: Shohreh Davoodi

Shohreh Davoodi: You are listening to episode number 36 of the Redefining Health & Wellness podcast. Today's episode is a short and sweet solo episode before we kick off a very special 12-episode series next week. In this episode I talk about why the scale is a pretty crappy progress-tracking tool when it comes to things like health, wellness, fitness, and nutrition. And I provide some alternatives for you to use instead. To access the show notes and a full transcript of this episode, head to shohrehdavoodi.com/36. That's shohrehdavoodi.com/36.

[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.

It's often the case that in fitness, nutrition, medicine, and more, a person's weight on the scale is held up as the end-all/be-all of whether or not a person is making progress. And look, if the only goal is to lose weight off your body, then the scale is the perfect tool for that. That is literally what the scale measures. But we live in a society where weight is a proxy for other things.

So, while someone may say that what they want is to lose weight, what they may actually be saying is, "I want to be healthier," "I want to have more energy," "I want to eat more vegetables," etc. Further, someone with a weight loss goal might actually have even deeper goals they're not yet aware of, such as wanting to be happy and thinking that weight loss will give them that, or wanting to love themselves and thinking that weight loss will get them that, or wanting to be accepted and thinking that weight loss will give them that.

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And when you get into the nitty-gritty of what people actually want for themselves, you realize that the scale does not have the answers that people think that it does. And just to be clear, I'm not necessarily 100% anti-scale. There are certain contexts where the scale is important, but those contexts are fewer and far between than we're led to believe.

The number on the scale is a measure of how much the force of gravity acts on your body - ooh, science! - and that's about it! That's all it does!

And again, there are certain instances where it truly makes sense to keep track of the ways in which your weight is fluctuating. So, maybe you started seeing a psychiatrist who has put you on new medication, and they're trying to see what kinds of side effects you're having to that medication, whether that means losing weight or gaining weight. Gaining or losing large amounts of weight can be a sign of an eating disorder. It can be a sign of a thyroid issue in your body. It can be a sign of polycystic ovarian syndrome.

But does the average person need to step on the scale daily? No! Does the average person need to step on the scale weekly? No! And yet there are a whole lot of people stepping on the scale, not just weekly or even daily, but multiple times throughout the day, which is a practice I find especially interesting because a wide range of variables affect your weight on the scale, not just day to day, but literally hour to hour throughout the day. So, things like food and water intake, sodium intake, hormones, exercise, going to the bathroom. The number is always in flux.

The reality is that very few people have a neutral relationship with the scale. For most individuals stepping on the scale can be an incredibly painful experience or an incredibly exciting experience depending on which direction the scale is moving. In a fatphobic culture, we allow the scale to define our worth as individuals. But the number on the scale has literally nothing to do with our worth. That number is also not a proxy for our health, our level of fitness, or our relationship with food, even though culturally we act like it is.

And just to be clear, one of the reasons that I'm talking about the scale specifically is because it's something that people often have access to

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within their own homes. But everything that I'm saying also goes for other common progress tracking tools such as BMI, circumference measurements, etc. If it only tracks the size and shape of your body, then it's not a stand-in for health, wellness, fitness, or anything else.

If that is a new idea for you, then check out some of the other episodes of the podcast where we've delved in deeper to the stigmatizing and incorrect assumption that a person's weight is a measure of their health, fitness, or what they eat.

So, you can go check out episode 23, which was Weight-Inclusive Medical Care with Jess Campbell and episode 2, Health At Every Size and Weight Stigma with Ashley M. Seruya, to name a couple. And if you want to go even further into this topic, I highly recommend the books, *Body of Truth* by Harriet Brown and *Body Respect* by Lindo Bacon and Lucy Aphramor.

For purposes of this episode, the main thing that you need to remember is that weight and health are not as intricately linked as you've been told, that BMI is utter bullshit and has more to do with insurance than it does with your health and well-being, and that focusing on weight loss at all costs is often to the detriment of our actual health and wellness.

Consider that there are plenty of thin people who do not exercise, don't eat fruits and vegetables, have various ailments and illnesses. In fact, all of the health problems that are associated with a higher body weight are also seen in thin people. Hmm, so interesting. Additionally, there are plenty of people in larger bodies who *do* exercise. Who *do* have a healthy relationship with food. Who have no issues with their health biomarkers to speak of.

So, it's important to realize that health and wellness are much more complex than we've been led to believe, which is one of the reasons this podcast exists in the first place.

Okay, so now that we have that basic understanding down, I wanna say one last thing about the scale before we move on to talking about other progress-tracking possibilities. Do you remember that song from Rent called Seasons of Love? It is the one where they sing how there's 525,600 minutes in a year. It's the one that has that incredible goosebump-inducing

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high note at the end. I know that my musical people out there get it. And yes, this is getting nerdy, but hear me out.

Ultimately what the song concludes is that you cannot possibly measure a year in a life with the number 525,600 minutes, because it doesn't do it justice. So instead the lyrics of the song say that you can measure it in things like daylights and sunsets, laughter, cups of coffee, and of course, the song's ultimate point, that you can measure it in love. And while I don't have a catchy musical number I can bust out here, what I'm trying to say is that when it comes to your health, your well-being, your fitness, it's exactly the same.

If you're trying to measure it by your weight on the scale or your cross section on the BMI chart, then you are missing the point. You're missing the nuance, and the detail, and the stuff that actually matters.

So, what can you track instead if you are interested in improving your health, or your well-being, or your fitness, and you don't want to use the scale because you now realize that the scale is a shitty tool for tracking those things? That's what we're gonna talk about right now.

As I mentioned before, the scale is used in the contexts of general health and medical settings, fitness, nutrition, all of it, which is interesting by itself, right? How can one very simplistic tool, like the scale that only gives you your weight, possibly track our progress across all of those very complex areas? Well, spoiler alert? It can't!

Thankfully though, you're not gonna be left high and dry because there are other ways to track your progress towards goals within those general categories. I use pretty much all of the things we're about to talk about with my own clients as a way of determining if they're making progress towards their goals.

Okay, so outside of the scale, one of the first things that you can track is changes in your ability. At its most basic level, this just means that before you couldn't do something, or you couldn't do it very well, and now you can do that something, or you can do it better than before. And you can apply this to all kinds of things.

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So, maybe when you first start strength training you can't even imagine being able to do a barbell squat, or a pushup, or whatever exercise. But, as you get stronger, you get closer to those goals until you can achieve them, or even exceed them. Maybe you initially wouldn't wear anything but black, baggy clothing, but then when you started working on improving your body image as part of working on mental health, you started allowing yourself to wear colors and other kinds of clothing. It could even be something as simple as initially thinking that you hated all vegetables, but finally finding a few that you like and ways to cook them that are actually pretty tasty.

These are all examples of things that at the outset you didn't have and now you do. And any time we're able to learn something new like this and start applying it in our lives, it's cause for celebration.

In my own life this is something I've seen in particular as an aerialist. I think about how when I first started trapeze almost three years ago, in order to do an ankle hang I had to hold onto ropes wrapped around the bar with all of my might to keep from falling out of the position. And now, an ankle hang is pretty much a resting position for me that I could stay in for minutes on end without a second thought.

Once we learn how to do something, it's so easy to take it for granted. But when we look back at how far we've come, we realize all that went into improving over time.

When we're neck deep in it, it's also hard to remember that progress is rarely linear. It is so common that we take a few steps forward, and then a couple back, and then we take a giant leap forward, and then a nose dive, and then a loop-de-loop, and all this other bullshit to get to where we're trying to go. So, don't forget to look back at where you started, and don't forget all of the different skills and abilities that you've learned over time, no matter how small, because it's those small steps that add up to big progress as you move forward.

Another way to track your progress outside of the scale is tracking changes in your level of pain or your health conditions over time. In the same way that it's stigmatizing and inappropriate for doctors to use the

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patient's weight as their sole basis for prescribing weight loss and restrictive diets, the scale is not a good indicator of the state of our own pain and health conditions.

And thankfully, some of these things are really easy to track. For example, you can track your cholesterol levels before and after making dietary changes. You can track your blood pressure before and after starting a new exercise regimen. So it's not difficult to see how things are going and if improvements are being made.

Then there are the more subjective things such as the level of aches and pains that you experience. Many of my past clients noticed that their overall aches and pains improved from starting a regular exercise practice. And, of course, the only way they could notice this is just from their own experiences. So if normally by the end of the day you'd have a horrible backache and over time you start to realize, hey, most days, or all days you're not getting that backache anymore, then that pain has improved from the things that you've been doing.

In either of these cases, scale weight is not going to give the person the information that they need. And also, all of these changes are important and awesome outside of anything to do with weight. If a person with high blood pressure is able to lower their blood pressure without losing a single pound, then why are we looking at the scale? If someone who had joint pain was able to minimize or make that pain go away through physical therapy or strengthening their muscles with a trainer, then why are we looking at the scale?

It is perfectly possible to improve your health and your well-being without ever losing a pound. The confusion comes up because sometimes people do lose weight concurrently with improving their health. And weight often mistakenly gets heralded as the *reason* that people feel better or have health improvements. But much of the time losing weight is simply a side effect, and it's just the underlying behaviors that were responsible for the improvement.

So don't assume that weight loss is the key to improving your pain or your health conditions, because as we've talked about on the podcast before,

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weight loss is not a behavior. So what you need to focus on is the behaviors that are associated with improving pain in different situations and improving those health conditions. And there are many non-weight related ways to do that, because again, thin people also experience pain, and experience all kinds of health conditions. So how are doctors treating them? How are physical therapists treating them? What are they doing to improve their conditions? And those are the things that you want to look at.

Okay, so moving onto another area where you can track your progress, and that is tracking changes in your energy and your stress levels. More energy and less stress are hallmarks of health and wellness. Improving in these two areas is often associated with eating IN nourishing ways for our bodies and regularly exercising, which is awesome. Losing weight, of course, is not going to magically improve those things. And thankfully, your stress levels and your energy levels are things that you can track for yourself to see how they're improving over time.

The way that I do this with my own clients is very simple. I use a different kind of scale and that being the kind of scale that goes from 1-10. And when a client signs up for coaching, I have them fill out a lengthy initial questionnaire and that questionnaire has many of these 1-10 scales throughout it. And this helps me know the client's baseline starting point for different metrics that I've deemed important, including energy levels and stress levels.

Then, as the coaching relationship develops and we work together, I have them fill out check-ins where they continue to rank themselves on these 1-10 scales so I can see how things are changing over time. Not only is it great for me to be able to see how they're improving, or not improving so that I know if we need to make adjustments or change our focus, but it's great for clients to be able to see their own progress this way, especially for things like energy and stress, which may feel harder to quantify.

And honestly, you can use a 1-10 scale for pretty much anything that you find difficult to quantify. Like I said, in my initial questionnaire I use it for all kinds of different things that I'm interested in tracking. So if there are things that you're interested in tracking for yourself, such as maybe your

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moods or other symptoms that you experience, you can use that kind of scale over time.

So don't neglect changes to energy levels and stress levels - very important to track because they can really help you to see overall how you're feeling, and they can have such a big impact on your day.

So the next non-scale thing that you can use to track your progress is tracking changes in your thought patterns and your mindset over time. As I've talked about before on the podcast with a number of guests, the mind is intricately connected to the body. And negative self-talk is one of the hallmarks of diet and wellness culture, and other things too, such as depression, anxiety, and ADHD. So keeping an eye on how your thought patterns and your overall mindset are changing over time is well worth doing.

Some things you can ask yourself are: Are you spending less mental space thinking about food and how much you hate your body? Are you meeting negative thoughts with more positive and neutral ones more than you were before? Have you lessened your black-and-white thinking, and are you more able to remind yourself about the nuance in different situations? Chances are if these things in your life are improving, that it's having far-reaching effects into the rest of your life as well.

Not only does mental health matter, but mental health doesn't live in a vacuum. Our mental health affects our physical health. It affects our social health. It affects our sexual health. Pretty much, it affects all areas of our health and everything is interconnected. So when our mindset improves, when our thought patterns improve, our life as a whole is improved. Not all trackable changes are physical ones.

Which leads us to our final progress-tracking tool, which is that you can track changes in how well you're able to listen to your body and respond to its needs. Something I work on with pretty much all of my clients is learning to listen to the signals from their body that they have been ignoring since diet and wellness culture, caregivers, or even traumatic experiences told them their bodies couldn't be trusted.

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And different people need to work on different areas of this. So for someone it might mean an ability to hear and respond to hunger and fullness signals. For somebody else it might mean knowing when you can go hard at the gym and when you actually need to rest. And for another person it might mean knowing when it's time to self-soothe versus when self-soothing isn't going to cut it and real self-care needs to be a part of the picture. Or for someone else it might mean knowing when certain foods aren't making them feel great and when it's been a little too long since they've had a piece of fruit.

And frankly, for some people it's all of the above, and then some, because it is so common to be disconnected from our bodies and what they need. And learning to listen to them can often feel like learning a brand new language.

Is it doable? Absolutely! But at first it can feel really weird and really awkward, and you're definitely gonna want to quit. But just like learning any language for the first time or brushing up on our skills for a language that we used to know, it's a process. It's going to take time and patience, and it's not always gonna feel easy. But once you're able to communicate better, it will be totally worth it.

And you'll know that you're improving when you start to get it right more often than you do right now. And that doesn't mean that you're going to get it right every single time. Pretty much none of us do, even those of us who are very fluent in the language of our bodies. But, you're gonna see the difference that it makes when you start to meet your body's needs most of the time versus ignoring or accidentally misinterpreting its needs. Being able to do that is one of the true secrets to having improved health and wellbeing in your life.

So, notice when you mess it up, because if you get it wrong and you give your body the thing that it doesn't need, your body is gonna let you know. And that is data that you can collect so that the next time you're more likely to get it right. When eating a dairy-filled, heavy meal right before yoga makes you feel like you wanna puke in the yoga class, chances are you're gonna file that away in your brain so that you don't make the same mistake next time. When you go so hard at the gym with the barbell

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deadlifts that you feel like you can't walk for a week, chances are you're gonna make note of that so that next time you don't overdo it and strain your muscles so hard.

But in order to make note of these things, you have to be aware that there is a connection between them, which means you have to be in tune with what's going on with your body and how the things that you do with your body affect the rest of your life. And that's something that I often have to help clients with, making that connection, because again, it isn't easy if you're not familiar with it.

All the things that I mentioned in this episode are things that aren't top of mind for people when they're thinking about how to track their progress towards their health, wellness, fitness, and nutrition goals. I know that. But, I promise you, if you stop tracking your weight on the scale and you start focusing on even one of these things instead, you're gonna see a marked difference in how you feel about yourself and in your ability to assess the direction that your health and wellness is going.

Again, your weight by itself is not a measure of your health and your well-being. And on your journey to redefine what health and wellness mean to you, you have to decide what aspects of health and wellness actually matter to you right now. And then you can break those down into trackable elements if you want to see how you're improving over time.

Will it always look like a simple number that goes up or down and tells you how to feel and how to respond? No. It will very rarely look like that. But again, health is complex, and it requires more complex progress-tracking than what the scale can give you.

[Music plays]

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

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