

Redefining Health & Wellness

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Featured this episode: Shohreh Davoodi & Amber Karnes

Shohreh Davoodi: You are listening to episode number 47 of the Redefining Health & Wellness podcast. Today's guest is Amber Karnes, the founder of Body Positive Yoga. Amber trains yoga teachers and studio owners how to create accessible and equitable spaces for wellness and liberation. We chatted about how to move from a logical understanding of Health At Every Size and body positivity to actually embodying it, the importance of creating a culture of consent and inclusion in yoga and fitness classes, and more. To access the show notes and a full transcript of this episode, head to shohrehdavoodi.com/47. That's shohrehdavoodi.com/47.

This episode is part of the Health and Wellness Changemakers series, sponsored by Superfit Hero. The series runs from episode number 37 to episode number 48 if you want to catch them all. The goal of this series is to highlight people making waves in the health and wellness industry and taking it in a new direction. I am so grateful to be collaborating with the body-positive brand, Superfit Hero to introduce you to these changemakers.

Superfit Hero is an inclusive activewear brand with sizes that range from XS to 5XL, and their goal is to provide clothing for ultimate confidence, no matter your size or sport. All of their clothing is also ethically made in Los Angeles, California. To get 15% off your first order, you can use the special series discount code, which is CHANGEMAKER, when you check out at www.superfithero.com.

And stay tuned for the Superfit Hero Wellness Tip of the Week later in this episode.

Now, let's go check in with Amber.

[Music plays]

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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.

Amber, thank you so much for being here and making time to come on the podcast today.

Amber Karnes: Thanks for having me! I'm excited to be here.

Shohreh: Yeah, absolutely. This is gonna be so fun to talk all things about you, and your yoga practice, and your work. But let's just first start with some of your personal journey as far as your relationship with movement and yoga and your own body.

Amber: Sure, definitely. I came to my yoga practice in my early 20s and I just turned 38 last week. And when I found yoga, I found it through the gym that I was working out at. So, I will say that I've always been in a larger body, ever since like my pre-teen years. And for a long time, you know, was on a weight loss journey to change my body.

And so I was working out at this gym at the time, and the trainer there was like, "You should do yoga on your rest day because it doesn't count as exercise, but you still burn a lot of calories." It's like that was my introduction to yoga.

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Shohreh: Like many people! [Laughs]

Amber: Yeah, I was like, well, there's a little more to it, I have come to find out. But at the time I was like, okay, yeah, I'm on this project. I've gotta, like, get it done. So, okay, coach. And so I went to the yoga studio and I was nervous because I didn't think, like, fat people practiced yoga, and I remember being the only bigger person there. But I don't remember much about the class that I was in, that first class.

But it did get my attention leaving the class because I got in my car and started driving home, and I call it my "mean girl soundtrack," like this voice that's in your head—a lot of people, you know, have this—it's like, "you're fat, you're ugly, everyone is mad at you" or second guesses everything you do. And so, like, that voice started back up like 5-10 minutes into the drive, and I noticed that. And I noticed that it had started and then it had stopped, even for just like 10 minutes after class. And that really got my attention, because that voice was always present—like that anxiety, that kind of negative self-talk loop—since I was like 11 or 12 or whatever. Like I had that self-criticism for so long, and I didn't really think that it *could* stop. I thought that was just part of my personality or something.

And that really got my attention. I kept going back to these yoga classes thinking like, "Oh, well, maybe I can figure out how to make this last longer." And I found that the introduction that I had of that trainer saying, "It doesn't count as exercise," really let me approach yoga as something that was different than how I approached exercise as an adult. Because my relationship with movement as a kid was very different than it was as an adult.

Like as a kid, I was a very active kid. I played sports at the YMCA, and was on the swim team, and I would ride my bike to go catch frogs, or, you

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know. Like I was always doing movement things, but they were always just attached to it being fun or it being something that I did as a team sport, like a community thing. I was riding my bike to get somewhere, right? They were never about changing my body or not being good enough, which is kind of like how a lot of us change our relationship to movement as we get older, right?

And so, I think about the way that I approached movement as a kid, where it was something that I was like doing with my body, or doing for my body, or doing because it was fun or pleasurable, versus the way I had come to understand movement as an adult, which was something I was doing to change my size, or my shape, or my weight. Or it was like good people exercise and lazy people don't, right? Like there's these messages that we get about what exercise and movement is for, or we do it to, you know, earn our dinner or whatever, right? There's all these like reasons why we would run on a treadmill or do exercise as an adult.

And so, I noticed this way that I sort of had opened my mind to yoga in a way that was not a judgmental way. That was not a punitive way. That actually was something I was doing with my body that felt good, that helped me with my mental health in a huge way. And yet, it looked a lot like the exercise classes I would do at the gym, and like, that made me very, very curious.

It kind of snuck up on me that I had this positive experience of my physical body. Which as someone who grew up in a fat body, was not something that I had a lot of, as an adult. I had a lot of shame around my body. I had a lot of distrust of my body because I would diet and I would follow the rules, and I still wouldn't be thin.

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And so, like diet culture, I think, really did me a disservice in that I think it teaches all of us that we can't usually trust the wisdom that's in our bodies and that we need an expert to tell us how to eat, and how to exercise, and exactly what to do, and how to move, and when to move, and all of that.

And yoga really cracked open that knowledge for me that the body does contain wisdom and that if you can get quiet, and listen to yourself, and start to learn and trust your body, that it could be a totally different relationship with not only the way that I move, and what I use movement for, and how I feel about it, but also with the way that I look, and the type of body that I have, and all of that.

So yeah, it was kind of a really big catalyst for me in that way.

Shohreh: Yeah, and outside of yoga, were there other things that really helped you move away from that messaging that your body was a problem that needed to be solved?

Amber: Yeah, so I came to yoga in my early 20s, started getting serious about my practice, attending classes, and all of that. At the same time that I was kind of getting an education in social justice and feminism, especially intersexual feminism and stuff like that, mostly through the internet, right? Like I'm not formally trained in sort of academic, social justice stuff, but being in the internet with my peers who were writing about feminism, and Health At Every Size, and really, these social justice issues that kind of started to wake me up to how in the world it's presented to us as a binary of, there are people who succeed and there are people who fail. And that's some kind of moral thing. And like, I was learning that actually there are systems that we operate within.

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These two realizations happened at the same time, and as I learned more about social justice movements and equity, I discovered Health At Every Size as a movement. And so, I had been dieting, like, since my pre-teen years. Many, many diets. Lots of losing and gaining weight. A very familiar cycle to many, many people. And always had been in a body that worked pretty good, was healthy otherwise, but was a larger body.

And so, after all these diets, like, I started doing research to find out why am I not able to lose weight? Because I was like, I know how to do the math, I follow exactly the plan, I do what they say, and my weight never does what they say it will. So I started to do some research on my own, and I found this book called Health At Every Size by Dr Lindo Bacon. And it like totally changed my world!

I learned that the diet industry is a \$60 billion a year industry with a 95% failure rate. I learned that it's all but a very small percent of the population can keep weight off for any extended period of time. I learned about the history of the BMI chart and how the tool that we use to measure health and sickness actually doesn't measure any of that. And actually creates discriminatory systems that keep people in higher weights from accessing equitable care.

I started learning all of these things about how our society and our culture is set up to sell us the problem of having a body and that diet culture really promises to solve that problem, right? To solve the problem of being human [laughs] basically.

When I started to get all this education and actually learned that, like my best chance at health was not to try to change the size of my body to fit into some arbitrary chart that doesn't really measure anything useful, right? It was about being able to choose healthy habits and behaviors based in

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scientific evidence, which is what Health At Every Size really is. It's looking at all the evidence we have and saying that healthy habits make healthy bodies in a wide range of sizes.

And so, when I started to learn that it was so freeing. It was so freeing for me to be able to say, "Okay, I'm gonna decide what health means to me. I'm gonna look at these other markers that we have to decide what to do with my body and trust the innate wisdom that my body has to choose movement that feels good and supportive, to choose foods that support my body in an intuitive way that's flexible." And not rely on these extrinsic expectations or some expert to tell me how to eat or how to move, but really to find that balance that I think all the evidence that we have says is our best chance at health.

And so, I think now I have this balance of talking about weight, and diet culture, and how fat people are treated in medical situations, and all of that is important because it's a social justice issue. But also, health is something that's at the forefront of everyone's minds right now in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic. But I think health is actually used in our country in a way that, like beauty standards are used in the same way, health is connected to worth, and worth is connected to productivity in the same kind of way in our capitalist culture.

And I think that learning about Health At Every Size and being able to put it in the framework of not only my personal individual health, but also how this fits into a justice framework really started to connect with the work that I was doing in the yoga world. And really become part of my practice and my work in a connected way. So it really developed in tandem with how yoga was showing up in my life and getting my teacher training and all of

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that and kind of interconnected in a way that really changed everything and now informs all the work that I do.

Shohreh: I talk with a lot of people who are in that sort of research gathering information phase where they're learning about Health At Every Size, they're learning about body liberation, fat positivity, all of these things, and like, they're very logically on board with it, right? Like their brains are like, "Okay, this makes sense. I get it. There's research," whatever. And then it's that moving to the trust part that people struggle with.

The moving from the abstract of like, "Okay, logically this makes sense," to the, "I can trust my body; these things can all be true for me." And I feel people really have a hard time making that leap, and they can spend a long time in that research phase. Like years even.

Amber: Yeah, for sure. That's definitely a milestone that I've seen. I think that the cognitive dissonance that can show up sometimes between yeah, intellectually as a concept, I think body positivity is great. When I see other people, I'm like yes, all bodies are good bodies. But then it doesn't really feel like it applies to me. Like that's what I hear from a lot of people. Is that what you mean?

Shohreh: Yeah, yeah, exactly.

Amber: There's this point of understanding it logically, but then not really owning it emotionally, if that makes sense? And so, I think sometimes what can happen is, it's easiest for us to sort of recognize injustice or recognize when something is not fair when it's outside of ourselves. But that sometimes, like, we do their job for them. That stuff is not just like you read a diet book and then your whole composition and orientation to the world

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was changed. Like, we get conditioned with this stuff every day from the day that we're born.

Like, through every ad the beauty standards are reinforced. Through every bit of messaging around the morality of food, for every bit of positive reinforcement we get when we lose weight, no matter how we lost that weight. All these things in our culture where every single day the ideals of fatphobia, and diet culture, and the hierarchy of beauty, and the hierarchy of health, and the hierarchy of how able your body is, like all of that stuff seeps into us, right?

And so, we can read something, intellectually say, like, "Yes, this argument makes sense," but it doesn't undo all that conditioning that's very deep in our nervous system. And so, I think for me, and for a lot of the people I know that have made some progress on this journey of self-acceptance, body liberation, the good news is that it's totally possible and worth it, and the bad news is, it's not one and done. It's kind of like recovering from an eating disorder or an addiction. Like you're always in recovery, you're never recovered.

And I think the way that diet culture operates, especially in America, we can't just read one book or one blog post or follow one body-positive activist on Instagram and call it a day. Like, it's something that we constantly have to be in inquiry with ourselves about.

And so I find it really helpful to do writing and journaling. There's a lot of good courses and things out there that have journaling prompts about this type of stuff where you can really start to investigate what are the biases that you hold about bodies? What is the conditioning those unconscious thoughts, that set of rules, that code that's like buried in all of us? We all have a different one. Based on the family we grew up in. Based on our

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churches, and schools, and coaches, and teachers, and who the people were that surrounded us. But we can each start to investigate that within ourselves and say, why do I believe that thing about that type of person? Like who taught me that? Is that true? Do I know it to be true? And really start to investigate what are these implicit biases and unconscious thoughts that you hold about bodies, and health, and worth, and weight, and all of that.

And I think that that kind of self-inquiry and the work around, “Am I just trying to understand this on an intellectual basis or am I able to put it into practice,” which I think practice really involves that process of self-reflection. And so it takes time. I think it takes time to get our brains to catch up to the new thought pathways, right, that we’re trying to cultivate with a new way of thinking and a new way of being with our bodies in the world.

And so, I think community can really help with that sometimes. I know that when I first started learning about body liberation and fat acceptance, I recognized people that were like me, right, like at the start of my journey I really hated my body. I didn’t have very good self-image. I was still dieting. And then I think I could recognize people that were sort of my heroes, right, the people that were writing about body liberation that I was learning from. And I had this idea that they were somehow fundamentally different from me. I was like, “Oh, they’ve made it. They don’t have any negative thoughts about their body. It must come easy to them.”

Because I think the messy sort of middle part, you can relate to the before, you can see the after, but you have no idea how to get there. And I think sometimes it really helps to have other people that you can share those

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stories with, and commiserate with, and say, “Hey, this came up, how do you deal with that?”

And so I think that community really can be the answer to help get through some of those pieces where we don’t have a handbook for it, you know? It’s like, we can understand it, but we really have to live it and practice it before we can own it.

Shohreh:

Yes, and I think there’s this tendency to try to take the structure and thinking of diet culture and then apply it to HAES, body liberation, like this paradigm as well. And the problem is that in this other world there is no “after” like there is in the world of diets and diet culture, right? Diet culture is like, “Hey, you eat these foods, you do this exercise, you lose the weight, then ta-da! You’re happy, you’re healthy, whatever, and you’re gonna be that way forever.” And that’s a fantasy to begin with, but because that’s so pushed into our brains, it’s really easy to then take that and be like, “Okay, so if I adopt HAES and body liberation, I’m never gonna have a problem with my body again. Everything is gonna be fine and wonderful.” And it’s like, that’s not the reality of life.

We don’t have this rigid black-and-white thinking. It’s messy. Every person, even the people furthest along in their journey have crappy body image days. What they also have are the tools to deal with those and to know that it’s not forever. And I think that’s kind of where that difference is really important.

Amber:

For sure. Something that occurred to me when you were saying that is that diet culture, I think, really does a good job of enforcing the way that dominant culture, capitalism, and patriarchy, and all of those things, like use binary thinking, right? And hierarchy to sort of trick us into thinking, you’re either happy and successful 100% of the time, or you’ve failed. And I

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think diet culture promises that you'll get here, and then you'll be done with the work, and it will be easy. And that's just not how life is.

It would be creepy if everybody was like ecstatic 100% of the time. Like we have those positive moments in life because we have the negative, you know, it's just like part of that human experience.

Shohreh: Yeah, absolutely, this is why positive vibes only is bullshit [laughter].

Amber: Right! Exactly, exactly.

Shohreh: So, I want to shift to talking about yoga, and specifically, looking at how yoga can be a beautiful, restorative, incredible practice, as you know—you've built your business around that—and at least in the western world, it can also be exclusive. It can be culturally appropriative. It can feed into narrow standards of fitness and beauty. So how do you square all of that with your own teaching and practice?

Amber: Most of my teaching now I teach other teachers, so I'm a teacher trainer. I just did my first 200-hour teacher training where I'm making new teachers that haven't been teachers before. But I do a lot of continuing ed, and I talk about this stuff a lot. I'm working with teachers around things like body image, and yoga, and social justice.

And I think that one of my strengths is really as a marginalized person, somebody that's in a bigger body, which is definitely marginalized in a yoga space for sure, I think I have kind of an insider's view, a little bit, on how this model of how we do yoga in the west is like not designed around marginalized folks. It's designed around the people who have the most privilege, which is a system driven by commerce. It's not surprising to anyone.

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But I think that what we see show up in a lot of these spaces where you're seeing the things you mentioned, like cultural appropriation, and spiritual bypass, and really leaving people on the margins, not, for example, designing our 200-hour teacher training to teach our new teachers how to work with folks with disabilities, or older folks, or folks in larger bodies. That's still something that's pretty rare in the yoga world, to find trainings that do that.

And so for me, it's really important to take this notion of equality and of interconnectedness, which I think is at the core of the yoga practice and the yoga teachings right? It teaches us that we're not our thoughts, we're not our possessions, we're not all the labels, and titles, and all of that. We are human beings sharing this experience and this inner radiance. And I think yoga is really about recognizing that in ourselves.

And I refer to that most of the time as our humanity. Yoga is about being able to quiet our minds so that we can remember the truth of who we are. And that we can remember that we are these radiant human beings, having this experience, and being in relationship to one another. And I think yoga really allows us to see each other, and to be in community in a way that really honors really what it's about to be a human being, to be a spiritual being in this human body.

And so, for me, yoga is not just about the asana, the postures, the movement part of it. It is really about a lived practice that honors the uniqueness of each individual. And that's really a justice and a community-oriented practice. And so my work, when I work with teachers and when I teach teachers how to build community and how to especially build equitable community where there are people that are centered in this practice now, right? And I would say in the model of studio yoga in

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America, which is like most of my experience [laughs] in how the industry shows up here, thin, white women with money, I would say, are centered at the practice. And disabled folx, people of color, queer and trans folx, folx in larger bodies, older folx, tend to be left at the margins and sort of be an afterthought or a specialty is kind of how the yoga training schools mostly teach it.

And so, my practice and my teaching and the way that I build community is really about asking about who is not in the room and why. And noticing those barriers that seem invisible to the people who the set-up was designed for here in America, they might not see those as barriers, where marginalized folx see very real barriers to being able to practice.

And so, it's really important to me to work with folks who facilitate these spaces, right, studio owners, people that own meditation, movement, community spaces, to be able to see those barriers and to recognize them and hopefully to design an experience from the beginning that takes those into considerations. That knows that accessibility isn't just about having a wheelchair ramp in your building, but it's about financial accessibility, and where is the public transportation? Do you have childcare options, and how are you presenting yourself as a studio or as a community? Like, does it seem exclusive and not accessible? Are people going to have to pay a lot of money to participate in this experience? Or can you make some decisions to be able to allow folx to come into the space and feel like they belong regardless of how much money they have or what their physical ability is.

And so that's the space that I'm really honored to occupy and to work with teachers around, and it's just super important to me that when we talk about yoga, especially as white folks facilitating a spiritual practice that

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most of us go through teacher training in America, we don't have a direct connection. We don't have a direct lineage to the indigenous holders of this practice. And so I think it's really important for all of us to stay in inquiry with how we're honoring the roots of what is a lived practice and not just an hour of stretching exercise class together on the mat, which is how it's bought and sold a lot, I think, in America.

So for me I really am passionate about making it more justice-oriented and community-oriented and honoring the way that these practices can give us the tools to be resilient and to show up in relationship to one another in a way that's different from dominant culture. In a way that really honors our individual humanity.

Shohreh: Yeah, and let's talk about some of the specific ways that people can do that. And not just yoga teachers, but I would say fitness instructors, coaches as a whole can benefit from this conversation. And maybe let's first start by talking about what it means to teach from a trauma-informed perspective and to create a culture of consent when you're teaching.

Amber: Totally, yeah. That is one that's a very big deal to me, and I don't ever lead a teachers' workshop without talking about consent, especially if we're talking to movement educators, yoga, Pilates, dance, any kind of group fitness.

I think that there's sort of been a culture of, like, it's expected that if you come to a yoga class, the teacher might put their hands on you at any moment, right? That's sort of, like, if you walk into any class in America, you should sort of expect it might happen. And so that's problematic for lots of reasons. We just shouldn't really be touching people without their consent, at all, ever. I feel like this is an interesting time because all of a

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sudden more people are aware of consent around touch than they ever have before maybe.

Shohreh: Thank goodness for that!

Amber: Right? [Laughs] Maybe that's a lasting effect that could be really interesting to observe. But like, anyway, back to adjustments and assists in yoga. I think that it's really important as fitness instructors that we have a culture of consent and we build a culture of consent into our classes. So, it's not an afterthought, it's not something that's awkward, it's not something that's unclear. It's something that's really part of the rituals of how you establish your classroom space.

And so, there are lots of ways to obtain consent around touch, but I think that it's important to talk about a model of consent, and I always encourage my teachers to use kind of a three-pronged approach. Consent has to be enthusiastic, right? It's not an absence of no, right, it's a clear yes. It has to be ongoing, like there needs to be a way to check in, like throughout the experience when you're with the students to get that affirmative enthusiastic yes, right?

As opposed to, I'll give an example, like in yoga classes a lot of times the teacher will come to the front of the room and say, "If you don't want me to give you adjustments, raise your hand." Right, which at the beginning of a class maybe you opt in or out, but maybe throughout you decide to change your mind, right? We need that ongoing way to check in.

And then consent needs to be informed. So, you need to know what you're saying yes to. And so if you stand at the front of the class and say, "I may come around and offer assists," and the people in the class don't know that that means you might put your hands on them, we need to say,

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“I may come around and give hands-on adjustment to help you find more alignment.” You have to describe what you’re going to do.

So being really clear, I think is important. I think having a way to get consent, a lot of people are using consent cards, like a little coaster or something that has “yes” on one side, “no” on the other. That way you explain it, every student gets one, everybody knows what they’re for and you have a very clear “yes” or “no.” But asking every time works too, right?

I just think it’s very important to be able to establish a really clear policy and protocol, be consistent with it. It might seem like a lot of overkill. It might seem like, ugh, we’ve got to have all these rules, but I think that that sets up an environment of safety that you can then experience freedom within those constraints.

And I think for people who have experienced trauma, especially, in order to feel safe in the body, this is what trauma-informed teaching is all about, and I actually think is one of the things that’s at the core of the yoga practice, they go hand in hand, which is this concept of agency. And agency, as I like to think about it is knowing what’s going on inside your own body, in your life, and feeling like you have some say in that.

So with relation to yoga, learning to down regulate our nervous system through breath, through movement, through meditation, through all of these tools that we learn, self-study, then we start to be able to create that feeling of safety in the body. We understand what the sensations mean, all of that. But it’s hard to ever even get there and get quiet enough to start to detect sensations if you can’t relax your nervous system.

And so, things like establishing this culture of consent really allow folks to be able to start to build some trust. To start to be able to turn off that sort

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of alertness that comes from a heightened nervous system, whether that's just through chronic stress or through experiencing trauma. Once we have that safety and that trust, then we can start to experience the benefits of being able to down regulate our nervous systems, and experience that peace, and really go deeper into the practice.

And it's hard to do, we've talked, I think, a lot lately, or at least I've heard a lot lately Maslow's hierarchy of needs mentioned. A lot of us are in the sort of, we're at the bottom of the pyramid. We need our needs for physical and psychological safety to be met. And so, if you don't feel physically safe, it's hard to move into those higher areas of growth, and transformation, self-actualization that we know the yoga practice can give to us.

And so I think it's so important to look at that at the foundation of your teaching and understand trauma-informed teaching and a culture of consent so that you can help your students to learn to trust their own bodies as a safe and powerful place to be, because that's where that personal growth starts from.

Shohreh: Yes, and thank you so much for discussing some of the trauma aspects as well, because I think we do a real disservice to the concept of consent by only talking about it in relation to sex, such that people often get confused when you mention consent in other contexts. And I think it's really important to understand that consent is a global concept that applies to many situations, not just sexual ones.

Amber: Right, definitely.

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Shohreh: Welcome to our Superfit Hero Wellness Tip of the Week featuring trainers and coaches from Superfit Hero's Body Positive Fitness Finder. Let's listen to what wisdom is being shared with us today.

Geoff Starling: Hi there. Geoff Starling here with your Superfit Hero Wellness Tip of the Week. I'm an exercise physiologist and personal trainer, operating out of Calgary, Canada through my company Every Body STRONGER. We specialize in creating pathways to better health for people living in bodies of all sizes, ages, and abilities through physical activity and functional strength training.

Over the course of our lives we tend to build up a steady catalog of things we tell ourselves we suck at, or we truly do suck at. But we stick to them because we feel we *should* be good at them, or we really, really want to be. Diets are a big example!

The truth is, different bodies are built for different things. Some are great at running long distances, some at short and some, well, not running at all. The cool thing is there are so many ways to move our bodies that we're all built to be good at at least one of them.

Some ways are more demanding, like rowing, soccer, volleyball, while others are more gentle, like yoga, square dancing or stand-up paddle boarding. Some are strength-based, like weight lifting, bowling, or archery, while others are more agility-based, like gymnastics, swimming, or obstacle-course racing. You might simply be good at walking your dog or taking a stroll with a friend.

Whatever you and your body gravitate towards, celebrate the crap out of it by doing it as often as you can. Your body will celebrate you for it in return.

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Shohreh:

I hope you enjoyed this week's wellness tip. You can find out more information about the dozens of amazing trainers and coaches included in Superfit Hero's Body Positive Fitness Finder at www.superfithero.com. And don't forget to use the series code CHANGEMAKER for 15% off your first purchase. And now, let's get back to the show.

So, I want to talk about language as well, because certainly there are big changes that could be made in that department that would be helpful, but I also think there are small shifts in the ways that yoga instructors, fitness instructors in general speak, that can have a big impact as well.

Amber:

For sure. Yeah, language is something that I spend a ton of time talking with teachers about because I think, especially for group fitness instructors, yoga teachers, meditation teachers, our language, like our words are one of our most powerful tools. And so, we really can set, I think, a lot of community norms, and I don't think that teachers often think this way, like, when they're writing their sequences or their cues, thinking about their cues, like, "Oh, this is going to build community or make people feel more lonely."

We don't really think that way, but the way that we talk can really set up expectations about what type of class is this? Like, is this an environment where everybody has permission to be themselves and to go at their own pace, or is this like a hard-driving, competitive, you're here to strive and to earn something, and we're gonna praise people that are working the hardest, right? Those are two very different types of environments to be in, even though they both might be a yoga class. So, I think our language as teachers can establish a lot of norms around what type of classroom environment is this. What type of community is this.

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And one of the things that I would say is most impactful, if you can make one small shift to the way that you teach, is to take hierarchy out of the language as much as you can. So I think there's a way of talking about, I'll just take yoga poses for instance, as, "This a beginner pose, this is an intermediate pose, this is an advanced pose," that has implied hierarchy. Or, "This is the full expression of the yoga pose, and this is a modification."

That sets up expectation that the "full expression of the pose," which I'm putting in air quotes, you can't see [laughs], this is one of the phrases I think you should remove from your language if you're a yoga teacher. "The full expression of the pose" implies that there is one correct way to do a pose, that it's the full, best expression of that, it's the real yoga, and then everything else is a modification.

When we're teaching, especially in a culture that is used to hierarchy, that couldn't function without hierarchy, we have to be really clear about what this practice is all about. And in yoga, it's not about nailing the most advanced pose, whatever that even means, it's about having an experience with your body and getting to know yourself better.

So, I think that one way that I see poses being taught a lot in yoga, or in any fitness class is really where it's taught from, here's the most advanced version. Right, like, here's the top, fanciest version. So in yoga class, maybe it's a pose where you take the bind or something, and then if you can't take the bind, just lift your arm up. And if you can't lift your arm up, put your hand on your waist. And if you can't do that, go home because you're a loser who can't do yoga. That's what our brains hear, right?

Shohreh:

Yeah.

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Amber:

So rather than saying, “If you can’t do this, modify it,” which makes people feel othered, which makes people feel like “Oh, well I didn’t achieve this,” right, and people start to get discouraged, especially if they’re a beginner, in a fitness environment. So rather than doing that, where we say, here’s the best and then if you can’t-can’t-can’t, build from the foundation up. Teach the pose, or the posture, or the practice, or the move, whatever it is that you’re teaching, from the most foundational aspect.

So in yoga I think about, what’s our spine doing, what’s our pelvis doing, what’s the foundations that are connected to the earth, whether it’s your feet or your hands, or your knees, or whatever, right? Get that set up. Let’s get the core of the pose really stable and strong. Then I can think about fancy stuff like lifting your foot, or taking the bind, or balancing, or whatever. It’s really about building from the ground up. So everybody does that first most accessible version of the pose, and then we start to add on. Then we start to add variations, or challenges, or ways that folks can work within that.

And so, I think that can make a huge difference in the way that your students experience a class, especially if you have a mixed-levels class where you might have beginners coming in and practicing with people who have more experience. That oftentimes those beginners might leave discouraged, right, if they can’t do any of the poses successfully. They might be thinking, like, “Unless I can do all of the most advanced versions, I didn’t take a yoga class today.” And then they leave and they say, “My body is not for yoga. I’m too big. I’m too old, I’m too whatever.”

When you can have a class full of people who all leave having participated in everything in their own, and who have a feeling of success that they want to come back and they want to try again. And I think it can make a

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really big difference just to flip the way that we introduce things sometimes. Like let everybody have a successful experience, and then meet your students where you are, but don't leave them there. Give them some things to challenge and to try.

Shohreh: Right, and of course, accessible language benefits everyone because just because you can do all the advanced poses, doesn't mean you want to do them that day. It doesn't mean you're feeling up for it or however your body is feeling that day. So just by changing that language, it's like giving everybody permission to do what feels right for their body that day as well.

Amber: Totally, and I think especially if it's important to you as a trainer or a yoga teacher to help your students to learn to trust their bodies or to trust their bodies again if they've been dieting or anything like that for a long time, I think it's really important to give that permission, right?

My friend Dianne Bondy likes to say, "Verbalize to normalize," which I think is like a really helpful catch phrase to think about. We don't often talk about bodies in a frank way of like, "Bodies change from day to day, and throughout the seasons of our lives," and as any yoga practitioner or meditator can tell you, from minute to minute. The experience of being in a body changes so often that of course you might have to change your practice, or your, whatever you're training for, to suit your body from day-to-day. Especially now as our energy is zapped and pulled to other things that need our attention more urgently, we have to be able to be flexible.

And I think that that's one of the ways that this conditioning of binary thinking can do such a disservice to us, is it tells us, like, "Nope, if my output is this, then it should be this every day." Whereas when we talk about bodies and we talk about the fact that they change, we set up that environment of permission for you to show up as you are, with an

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imperfect [laughs], messed up, broken body, or however you think about it, right? That we all are having these types of experiences and it's okay to show up the way that you are and not wait until some magical day when you have a "perfect body," whatever that means, to be able to do this practice. That sets up an environment where everybody can show up as they are.

Shohreh: Yes, exactly and that's so important. And the work you're doing in general is so important; I'm so excited that you're training so many new people to go out into the world with this kind of information. For students and consumers who don't have teachers like this, are there ideas that you might have for them for how they can empower themselves in those spaces?

Amber: Yeah, so specifically speaking to students or practitioners of yoga, not from the teacher lens, I would say, number one, set yourself up for success, and do a little bit of research before you go. So if you're trying to find a class or a studio that will work for you, whether that's for yoga class or any other type of fitness class, go on the website, read class descriptions, find a class that seems like it's the appropriate level for whatever your ability is, and then I would call, or email and talk to the teachers.

I would say that marginalized folx entering fitness spaces all have different concerns. People in larger bodies are gonna have different concerns from older folx, from people of color, from queer and trans folx. So I would just say within the subset of people in larger bodies, we have different concerns. So I may be more concerned about, am I gonna be in a class where the teacher is talking about, like, your bikini body and blasting fat. That would make me walk out of a class, so I'm gonna want to find out

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about that. Somebody else in a larger body might be concerned about, can I be in this class without having to get up and down off the floor.

So I think it's really important to hone in on what is keeping you from going to this class or this fitness environment, and those are the things that I would ask about, when you call. And the answers that you get can give you a lot of information, right? Read the reviews on different review sites, like Yelp. Really take time to research and try to set yourself up for success.

And then I think that once you find a class that you want to try, know that the teacher still might not be for you, even though you've tried it. Nothing is wrong with you. We each resonate with different teachers. You might have to take a little while to find one that works for you.

And I would say that it always helps me to feel like I know a little bit before I show up. So if I had never done yoga before, I might go on, like now, [laughs], if I was like, oh, I heard of this new thing called yoga, I would probably go online. I would probably try some classes, or watch some videos. And so I think it would be awesome if you are someone in a larger body to find a bigger-bodied teacher online to practice with. Or if you're disabled, find a disabled teacher to practice with. Watch what they do. Practice. Feel it in your body. And then go to a class, and see how it goes.

I think it's easier once you've experienced it, to then recognize, "Hmm, what are the tools that I'm missing?" So for instance, in yoga, sun salutations are something that are really ubiquitous, like you find them in almost any class. But I think are actually really unattainable for a lot of people, or are really difficult and have to be modified or put variations in them for lots of different bodies and lots of different reasons. So, I think it's great if you're in a larger body, like figure out how to modify the sun

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salutation for your body. And there's lots of videos from people online, if you don't have a teacher that can work with you, people like me, people like, I can give a bunch of names [laughs] for bigger-bodied yoga teachers, to be able to work with your own body so you can have the tools to really take your practice and take the responsibility for your practice into your own hands rather than relying on the teacher to know all the tools to be able to work with you.

Because while they should, the fact is, most of them don't. And there's people out there like me and my colleagues that are working hard to change the industries that we're in to make sure that when somebody goes out to teach human beings that they know how to work with people in diverse bodies and with different abilities. But until that's widespread, that's why I want to teach those tools of how to work with your body, how to move stuff out of the way, how to make more space for yourself in poses so that you can do that on your own, no matter if the teacher knows how to work with you or not.

So, just to sum up, I think one of the things that I tell my students sometimes is that part of our practice as marginalized folk entering spaces that were not designed or created for us, is that like mental practice beforehand where you reassure yourself that you have inherent worth and value as a human being. Sometimes it's hard to go into fitness spaces that were not designed for us. And that when you encounter those little microaggressions, and those comments, or those things that make you discouraged and make you want to leave, remember that it's not you. That the system wasn't designed for you. But that there are people working to make it better, but that you still have that personal power that comes from your practice. And that's not something that anybody can take away from you, even if there's a class that isn't maybe the best fit.

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You can always try again next time with another teacher, or with yourself, or online. And please don't get discouraged. There is a better fit out there for you and your body is not the thing that's gonna hold you back. You just have to connect with the right teacher sometimes.

Shohreh: I think that's some great advice, and I will take some of those names from you, and I can put 'em in the show notes so that anybody listening, if you want to be able to see people in different bodies practicing yoga outside of the mainstream of what you're used to, that way you have some names of who you can go check out and accounts that you can follow so you can start seeing what this looks like, like Amber is suggesting.

Amber: Yeah, perfect, I'll send you some great folx to check out.

Shohreh: Awesome. Well, for our final question, I would like to know how to you define health and wellness for yourself at this moment in your life.

Amber: Yeah, so at this moment in my life is April 21st, 2020, so we are heading up the peak, I think, of the COVID-19 pandemic in America. So health for me in this moment in time is a little bit different than if you had asked me this question six months ago [laughs].

Shohreh: I bet!

Amber: I think for me right now, a lot of what I'm thinking about with regards to health and well-being is mental health. The pandemic has changed a lot about my life and my job. My job, which I created myself, the perfect way, exactly how I wanted to do it. It was going really well, and now most of what I do is not possible because I can't travel and I can't gather.

And so, there's a lot to grieve, right? There's a lot to grieve that I can't see my family or go anywhere. Everybody is dealing with their own version of

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that, right? And so I have found that my emotions are all over the place. And I'll have some days where I feel great and really productive with my work and I'm able to sit and Zoom calls all day and still be nice to my partner when he comes home [laughter]. There are other days where my temper is very short, and I cry at the drop of a hat and all that. So I've noticed that I need to allow myself a bit more room, and a little bit more space, and a lot more self-compassion than I'm used to [laughs].

And so, for me, I can tell whether I'm healthy or not, day-to-day, based on how is my mental state? How am I talking to myself when I make a mistake, or when I drop the ball and forget an appointment, or when I have to cancel something that I said I was going to do because I just don't have the capacity that day that I normally do.? And so on the days where I try to set up myself for success, and I will really write a list, like, get dressed, brush your teeth, take your meds [laughs], I really give myself an extra bunch of support and try to remind myself when I don't make a deadline, or when I make a mistake or something like that, that I need to have compassion with myself. Those are the days when I'm like, oh yeah, I feel really good.

So that to me is like the litmus test where, I don't know, six months from now or six months ago it would have been something very different. But I think rather than did I eat the perfect nutritional balance for me or did I get my steps in, or whatever metrics might have normally been looked at, I find I'm focusing a lot more with mental health and with trying to just put some structure in place that, like, I've got a lot of frozen burritos in my fridge right now [laughter]. 'Cause it's like, I'm not on my game like I normally am because of, we're all in a global crisis and we're all experiencing trauma, for very different reasons.

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And so for me, that's at the forefront right now because I have to be mentally healthy to continue to do this work. And to not only do whatever normal work I had before, but to pivot my business, and support other people's business, and support all my teacher trainees, and all of that. For me, that's really the crux of where I'm looking right now at my health.

Shohreh:

Yeah. I mean, I think this pandemic has really brought to the forefront the reason why I ask this question in a very deliberate and specific way, right, of putting on "at this moment in your life." That was not a thoughtless choice, because it really does change, and I think people don't tend to think of it that way. And this kind of comes full circle to what we were talking about at the beginning, how there's really no destination here, right? It's a constantly changing thing, whether it's our bodies, or how we think of our health or our mental health, or whatever, and all we can do is adapt in the moment of what we have.

Amber:

Yeah, and I will bring a quote now that has been helping me since I heard it a couple of years ago, but it's been really present in the teacher training that I led, which was October through March. One of our guest faculty, Michelle Cassandra Johnson is a Dismantling Racism trainer and a yoga teacher, and she came and did a two-day workshop with us on privilege, and power, and oppression, and race, and stuff like that. And one of the community agreements that we had during that workshop is "expect and accept non-closure."

So this is something that culture does not teach us to do, right? We talked about this binary black-and-white thinking, this, like, final destination. And this really, I think, has set the tone, like for our teacher training in a way that was very useful, just as like in yoga we talk about being able to hold opposing truths, and duality, and all that stuff. But we didn't get to have a

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graduation because of this pandemic. We didn't get to have our last module together. And so the whole thing is non-closure.

But I think it's a really beautiful metaphor, just for life, and especially for life right now where so much feels unfinished, so much is uncertain, and we don't really know what our jobs are gonna be, or what our industries will look like, or what travel will look like. This could change so much.

And so I think holding onto that, and sometimes it's easier for me, I think mentally, to know that non-closure is sort of part of my job as a human being. And that when life happens that way it doesn't mean something has gone wrong, it just means that is the constant changing nature of life. So if that phrase is helpful to anybody else, I want to offer it, because I know I've kind of clung to it a little bit [laughs] the last few weeks.

Shohreh: I think we can all use that phrase right now in this major time of uncertainty. So, thank you so much for being here Amber, this was awesome. How can people find you and work with you?

Amber: Yeah, so you can go to my website, bodypositiveyoga.com, and all my social media is linked to there. But feel free to search me on any of the social media networks, Amber Karnes, or Body Positive Yoga, you'll probably find me. And yeah, all my classes, courses and events, if we ever get to have them again [laughs] are on my website.

Shohreh: Awesome. I will post all of that to the show notes so everyone can go find you, and hopefully in the meantime people can enjoy you virtually until they can see you again in person.

Amber: Well thank you so much, I've really enjoyed chatting with you.

Shohreh: Of course.

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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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