

Redefining Health & Wellness

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Featured this episode: Shohreh Davoodi & Ilya Parker

Shohreh Davoodi: You are listening to episode number 48 of the Redefining Health & Wellness podcast, and today Ilya Parker is bringing the fire. Ilya is a black, transmasculine personal trainer, grassroots organizer, writer, and the owner of Decolonizing Fitness. We talked about toxic fitness culture and how to remove yourself from it and the roles that social justice and politics play in health and wellness. I'd also like to include a trigger warning for this episode for discussion of some dieting behaviors such as calorie counting and discussion of violence against black and trans folk. To access the show notes and a full transcript of this episode, head to shohrehdavoodi.com/48. That's shohrehdavoodi.com/48.

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. And now let's go chat with Ilya.

[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.

Good morning, Ilya! I'm so grateful to have you here on the podcast today.

Ilya Parker:

Thank you so much for having me. I'm excited to be here.

Shohreh:

Absolutely! So, let's just start with learning more about you, how you identify, and then some of your highlights on your journey to what you're known for now.

Ilya:

Okay, well I am a fat, black, non-binary person currently living in the Bible Belt South, and I have always been someone who's liked to shake things up a bit. I just never really fell in line with the status quo. Obviously the ways that I identify, I've received extreme pushback.

So my fitness journey was no different than any other area of my life. I've always grew up in a larger body. I never really wanted to engage in fitness. In fact, found fitness for me just painful because it was something that I already emotionally wasn't into and all of the times where I was, say, forced to engage like in going through school and stuff like that, it just really was an uncomfortable, harmful place for me to be in early on.

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It wasn't until I decided to medically transition from someone assigned female at birth to identifying as a man at that time that I was again sort of pushed or prompted into losing weight in order to get access to testosterone therapy. And so, my "weight loss journey" started with me looking for a personal trainer and deciding to join a gym. And once I did that, as most people experience through that vehicle of entering the fitness industry, it was super, super harmful.

I was exposed to a lot of very toxic cis het men during that time, just interviewing different trainers and me feeling like I was wrong for the way my body showed up. I felt like I was almost begging people to look at me as human, and all the while I need to pay you for you making me feel like shit? [laughs] Like I'm so confused. I'm like, it just doesn't feel right.

But aside from that, I knew also in the trans world, especially in the transmasculine world, like the subculture, fitness is very much infused in our transitional journeys because it's the most easily accessible way for us to modify our bodies to ways that align to like our truth. I started developing a sort of love/hate relationship for fitness, because fitness was almost like a medicine that I needed to feel okay in my body. But it also was a way that I disconnected from my body a lot, because I would cause it great harm in order to achieve a certain aesthetic. And so, I'm still really struggling through those things.

But as I continued to engage in fitness in very toxic ways early on, I realized that I actually could begin to train myself, and then when I gained more confidence in that, I started training my kindred, who are also trans men, trans femme folx. And then I merged my social justice practices with that, and then Decolonizing Fitness emerged.

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And I do like to say a side note, I was already working as a physical therapist assistant before I started my transitional journey, and that gave me a sense of empowerment that I knew a lot more than the average trainer, especially about the musculoskeletal system. So, I decided to really, really move forward in becoming a personal trainer.

And for as long as I can remember, I've been into activism work, probably now at least maybe 16 years. So merging all of those things together is how Decolonizing Fitness was birthed.

Shohreh: And there will definitely be some people who are not sure what you mean when you say “decolonizing fitness,” and you have a fantastic breakdown on your website that I’m gonna link to in the show notes too. But if you wanna take a minute to just explain why you chose that name and what it means to you, that will be perfect.

Ilya: So, for me, to decolonize is just simply breaking free from systems, schools of thoughts, practices, etc. Anything that causes harm or restricts an individual or collective. And so, my version, although this is in the metaphorical sense, and I do actually wanna back up because I wanna honor that I believe in the sovereignty of all African and indigenous folx in the world. And so, the act of decolonizing is a very, very powerful tool that indigenous folx especially have cultivated to literally survive.

So I’m using “decolonizing” in a metaphorical sense—to break free from restrictive structures—and I view mainstream fitness as very restrictive. We know mainstream fitness, anybody who has been on a fitness journey, if you really take the time to maybe really be reflective about your journey, you’ll probably find ways where you felt coerced into fitness. Where you felt guilty, shamed, punished, blamed, etc. etc.

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And so, I just said, “No more,” at least for me. I don’t want to participate in a culture that is forcing me, or I feel mandated to punish my body in that way. I wanna break free. And especially when I had a glimpse of engaging in intentional movement practices that felt peaceful to me, that brought me pleasure, that helped me realign with my body in ways that felt more supportive, I knew that I could decolonize fitness.

So that’s essentially what it means to me, is breaking free from the restrictive, mainstream fitness and aligning with fitness that is affirming and accessible to all bodies.

Shohreh:

And let’s talk about this very toxic fitness culture that is reflective of colonization, because as much as you and I can for sure see the things that are super toxic, and as much as I think it’s becoming more common for people to realize it, because it is the norm, I think there are still a lot of people participating who just think, “No, this is the way that it should be. Like, this *is* fitness.” And so, I wanna be very specific and active in pointing out, well, what are the things that are so problematic and that you are really working to change in particular?

Ilya:

Yeah, if I could give a quick little history lesson about that, I think Sabrina Strings, *Fearing the Black Body* is a good resource, and also Christy Harrison’s *Anti-Diet* book is wonderful in breaking down the colonial aspects of what bodies are viewed as normative in this culture. And those are, in turn, aligned with the bodies we specifically try to achieve. And those bodies are bodies that are thin, typically, that are able-bodied, that are mostly white or white-passing and have a certain conventional beauty attached to ‘em via European beauty standards.

So when we peel back the layers of the bodies that we all want to achieve, and when we add this component of what it means to be healthy—which is

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also in a normative way of a standard that often bodies aren't able to achieve under their control because of so many determinants that define what our body shape is, how our bodies show up, how they move, it's genetic factors, it's social determinants, it's environmental shit, it's just a lot going on—so when we really peel back those layers and begin to question, well, why do I even want to look a certain way, and why, in the fitness industry specifically, are all of the experts that I go to, why do they all look a certain way or are trying to achieve a certain status? And what does fit even look like?

So that's the hugest piece that I had to really unpack, because once you follow the tentacles of that octopus into the different fitness spaces, you can kind of see how that shows up. And examples are, hey, I'm looking for a trainer, and I have two great trainers in front of me, one's fat, chunky, non-binary. The other is a chiseled, cis-assumed white guy. Both of them are sharing the same information, but I want to go to this chiseled white guy, why is that? Why do I not feel like this chunky trainer will be able to guide me? Why do I feel like I am always compelled to wanna seek weight loss when I talk to trainers? Why is the diet industry infused into fitness? Why does that even have to be a thing?

Why do I feel like even if I do eat, that I feel like I need to punish myself with fitness? Why are all these teas, and body sculptors, and supplements, and this, and that, that make me feel like I have this much control to change my body, but none of the shit works, and I'm constantly paying my money? Why do...when I finish working out with a trainer, that I feel like shit? Because every time I sit and get a rep or I needed this person to modify an exercise for me and they told me that I should just keep studying YouTube videos and looking for the correct form, that I can't

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achieve this particular way to move my body, yet I'm being blamed for how my body shows up.

How come every time I go in the gym I don't have equipment that works for me, or I'm in a wheelchair, I can't access it, or I can't find a gender-neutral bathroom, or even bathrooms that say, hey, all bodies, no matter how you identify, are welcome?

So when you really peel back the layers of that, especially if you're from a place of privilege, you can't see the way that moving in fitness spaces particularly impact you. But as someone who has multiple intersecting marginalized identities, this is the shit that I constantly was faced with. And once you get to a point where you're like, no more, no, this ain't me, this is the world that is refusing to embrace bodies that look like mine, and I have a right to be here and I have a right to engage in fitness, exactly the way I want to.

Shohreh: Okay, I need someone to pass me a basket to throw cash into after that sermon, [laughter] that was fucking awesome. Thank you for that.

Ilya: I hope I answered your question, by the way.

Shohreh: You fucking answered my question, that was incredible. And thank you, because the fact that someone out there is like, "I can't even think of one toxic thing about fitness," and you rattled off like 30 in a minute [laughter]. It just shows that, like, there are so many things out there, and the more privileged you are, the harder it is to see, because you've never had to, because it's never affected you. And that's really important for people to realize. If you're not seeing it, it's not because it doesn't exist. It's because you haven't had to, thanks to privilege.

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Ilya: Exactly. And right now we're in the age of a global pandemic, unfortunately, and it is the same thing. You're in a place of privilege if you've never had to wear a mask. If you have that much room to go out in this world and haven't been exposed to COVID directly that you don't even feel like you need to wear a mask or use any type of personal protective equipment and help ensure the safety of not only you and your loved ones, but anyone that you come into contact with just being out in the general public, that's a place of luxury, comfort, and privilege.

Shohreh: Yeah, that's so true. I do think this pandemic is bringing up a lot of this stuff in new ways and really showing what some people's beliefs are on different things, for better or for worse, for that matter. So, when we're thinking about this toxic fitness culture, right? Normally I'm very anti-detox, but when it comes to detoxing from toxic fitness culture, I am all about it. [Laughs] So, maybe we can talk about on both the client side, like how someone who is a consumer of fitness can start to detox from that, as well as on the fitness professional side, what they can be doing to try to start walking away from this.

Ilya: So, I think on the client side, the first thing is, if you're engaging in fitness practices now, take time to really assess, are you getting your needs met? Whether it's with the fitness space you're utilizing, the trainers that you're working with, any type of fitness services that you're getting at this moment. Do you feel genuinely supported in your body? That's the very first thing you can do.

And that's a difficult, difficult kind of place to sit within yourself because you wanna feel like the people around you in fitness are really there to support you, but a lot of times, especially with big box gyms, and this is not a knock on big box gyms, but the main thing, we know, the bottom line is,

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you know these corporations are trying to make money and stakeholders also are trying to make money. They don't give a fuck about you. You just another body.

So you have to peel back that part of you taking responsibility, and it's your fault, and it's just because you just can't seem to get the plan right or this or that. Remove that blame, guilt, and shame, and really assess what that looks like in your life.

Also, too, I think for me in particular as a client, I really had to also do a lot of internal emotional work around the way movement literally triggered things in my body. And certain people, and how they talk to me around movement triggered things, or particular personal trainers, or even other gymgoers that just felt the need to critique my form because I was fat or just whatever it was. And so that was another place that I kind of had to, to really do a little bit of emotional work, whether that means that you need to seek therapy services to support you through that or maybe even go on some affirming social media pages and find groups and places that maybe can support you. And this is a good opportunity during this global pandemic to start kind of feeling around on online spaces and seeing if you can maybe come across that.

And then also just really unpacking that, I can't say this enough, that it is not your fault the way your body shows up. Although I don't talk about dieting, of course—I'm anti-diet, HAES-informed, I don't talk about weight loss and all that shit—but I know the diet industry is directly linked to the fitness industry. So you might have to even look at your relationship with food. And again, you may need to speak with someone and see if that more than likely does have a direct impact with how your journey with fitness is kind of unfolding.

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And then, like I sort of mentioned earlier, this is the last piece I'll share about the client side, is really reaching out to, I used to say body-positive folx, but fuck that. The body-positive industry has really been co-opted. And I'm not saying there's not a lot of body-positive coaches out there that are doing great work, but I just don't like to use that as a general bucket to put affirming trainers in.

I will say that Superfit Hero has a body-positive fitness finder, and they have awesome folx on there. That's a good resource to utilize to see if you might even have someone who is affirming and supportive in your area. And then just really check out a lot of cool Instagram pages that are out and just learn a little bit of ways they can support you. Don't use that as an end-all, be-all, 'cause you might need specific therapeutic services, and you know, there's a lot of misinformation out there. But those are good tools to kind of get you re-shifting the paradigm a little bit and moving in a more inclusive and affirming space.

Shohreh:

Yeah, and I actually wanna go back to what you said a little bit earlier on the consumer side too, where you were saying how you felt like you were paying people to make you feel like shit. And I think that is such a common experience in fitness, one, because people don't know that there are other options out there, right? So I'm glad that you mentioned the body-positive fitness finder and that there's tons of wonderful, HAES-informed, fat-positive trainers and coaches on Instagram that you can find too, because there are other people out there, right? You don't have to work with someone who makes you feel like shit, that doesn't have to be the end-all, be-all fitness experience.

And also, I think what I've noticed too, because I've had clients who have worked with those kinds of trainers, either before me, or even after me if

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they've moved or something like that, and people feel like they can't leave. Like it's almost what you were saying about people thinking that their bodies are at fault. It's like they internalize it as, "I'm the reason I'm being treated this way, because I'm not measuring up. Either my body isn't measuring up from the way it looks, or even though these things this person is asking me to do hurt and are hard that I have to just push through it because that's what you're supposed to do in fitness, and I need to rise up to this." And it just makes me so sad that that's the dominant viewpoint in fitness, because exercise can be a wonderful, enjoyable, restorative thing. And it isn't when you're working with people like that, who make you feel like crap and again, you're paying them a lot of money to do that, which is a double hit.

Ilya: Yes, absolutely, absolutely! And that's the difficult part. And it's easy for trainers to blame their clients when their fucked up bullshit weight loss advice doesn't work, 'cause we know it ain't gonna work. But it's easy just to say, "Hey you know what, you ain't worked hard enough, that's why it didn't work, that's why you—"

Shohreh: Or you're lying to me. I hate when the trainers are like, "Oh, I think my client's lying to me 'cause they're not losing weight." I'm like, oh my god.

Ilya: Right, oh, that's a big one. I used to hear that all the time. And I'm literally, I hate to—trigger warning—but I hate to talk about calorie counting, but I had a personal trainer one time, and a matter of fact, they actually live in Austin, Texas, they have a super big platform, and they had me down to [bleep] calories a day.

Shohreh: Oh my god!

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Ilya:

They were doing like macro coaching and fitness coaching all in this big package, and they still were blaming me for why I wasn't losing weight. And I was following their program to the nine.

But I did wanna answer the second part of your question, how can coaches began to create a more affirming environment for folx. And I just really, again, reflective questions: think about, are you actively divesting from diet and toxic fitness culture daily? Not "Okay, yeah, I took a couple of workshops, I know a little bit of LGBT terminology, and I do know what HAES stands for. I know what that acronym means." No! That's constant work (laughs). Constant! You know, "Yeah, I checked out an Instagram live video. I sat through a whole 30 minutes of someone telling me how to love fat bodies. I got it."

Do you provide anti-oppressive fitness offerings? And that's where the decolonizing piece comes in with me, even down to, do you know what sacred indigenous land and what tribes are on the land that you rest on? Because we know this land has been colonized, and it was named before us. There was inhabitants before us.

So those things, and you know, also coming from an anti-racist lens, are you aware of that? Are you aware of how not only your privilege, but your access to power, and the way that you're able to utilize resources, what are you doing to plug that back into your local communities? So that's a huge piece.

Are you weight-inclusive and size-inclusive? But do you understand what fat liberation looks like? Are you even aware of the fat liberation movement?

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And also, are you trauma-sensitive? For me, as someone who has a lot of trauma, who's worked through a lot of trauma on my own, finally getting into therapy, I necessarily don't have trauma-informed training, per se—I do wanna get it eventually—but I think for those trainers who have multiple marginalized identities, you know what trauma feels like. And even if you haven't experienced a lot of trauma, if you know that you genuinely are coming from a place of compassion, like, you really can start working on what being trauma-sensitive looks like and how that can show up with your clients day-to-day.

And now, in the age of the global pandemic, again, is your online presence digitally accessible? Are your services in general accessible to a variety of bodies? And, not saying that you have to be able to rattle off all the accessibility needs, but you should be asking your clients and checking in daily, like “Hey, what do your access needs look like?”

Do you offer compassionate forms of movement? That's a big one that I had to learn even for myself. When I first started training, I very much had this bootcamp mentality. I very much was a stickler on form, because I thought that's what I needed to do to prove myself as a valid trainer. And then I realized, especially when I started getting more of a belly, like, oh shit, they just literally can't perform this movement 'cause their belly's in the way. Ain't no amount of form checking in the world that they can do, or they may be so disconnected from their body that they literally cannot feel the particular muscles of this movement. So maybe we need to scale it back and do other things to help them fall into their bodies.

Do you use gender-neutral language and images? Do you even know what the term “gender-neutral” means? Do you provide a range of offerings at

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various price points, including free, especially now? Are you consistently just checking in with your staff to see if they are informed in those ways?

And the last thing I'll say, and this is a *huge* one, do you engage in fitness training within your scope of practice? I am so sick of trainers—and you're actually an intuitive eating coach as well as a personal trainer, right? So hats off to you. So thank you for that. But I'm so sick of coaches who talk more about dieting than they do fucking training and don't even know about training. I've had so many trainers where they spent so much time breaking down what's a good food, what's a bad food, this type of fat versus that type of fat, and then when I would be like, "Hey, I actually can't do this movement, can you give me another modifier?," "No, I don't know of one."

Like you should have the basics of what your practice is. You should be constantly pouring into your practice. And if you have a client that has a need, you need to stop and say, "Hey, wait a minute, this is beyond my scope. I might have things that work for my body, but I can't give advice." Because you don't know if someone has eating disorders, you don't know what someone's relationship with movement is, you don't know what trauma you're triggering, or anything like that.

So to me, an affirming trainer looks like someone who is developing a list of resources of great folk that they can refer their clients to. So their clients can continue to be in a place of support along their fitness journey.

Shohreh:

Especially that last point is really important because I agree with you, I constantly see trainers who are working outside of their scope of practice. And obviously I appreciate that they want to help their clients, but the reality is, if you're not the best person to help your clients, and if, in fact,

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you might cause harm, then that's the point where referring out is the appropriate thing to do.

And, I mean, even for me, I'm a certified intuitive eating counselor, I have nutrition training, but I'm not a dietitian. I constantly refer people who could be clients to dietitians, because they're coming to me and they're saying, "Hey, I have these medical conditions, and I need help with food." Well, I can't legally help you with that. I can't give you medical nutrition therapy, so I'm going to send you out to one of the many amazing HAES-informed dietitians that I have on my referral list.

But not everyone takes that point of view, and instead, are often being like, "Sure, I'll take you on." And it's like, you're not equipped to deal with that and you could cause harm. So just not a good idea.

Ilya:

Yes, and I love that you do that 'cause it's a collective way that we're cultivating healing. And again, once we unpack that, the fitness industry, like I imagine about those tentacles, everything's so infused. We can't be the end-all for our clients, and so it's good that you're doing that. And through this re-shifting of fitness, we're encouraging folx to like, refer 'em to your comrades, to your colleagues, so we can get all of the things that we need as clients.

I'm also open to feedback from my clients. I am not the end-all, be-all. I'm not the all-knowing expert.

Shohreh:

Preach!

Ilya:

You are the expert of your body. Period. I don't give a damn how many trainings, and accolades, and certificates, and all this other shit I got. That means nothing to me, 'cause I ain't in your body.

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Shohreh: Yeah, if you're a trainer and you're not consistently learning from your clients, then that is something to look at really closely.

Ilya: Yes.

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.

Jenna Jozefowski: Hi, my name is Jenna Jozefowski, and I'm a coach in the Chicago area and online. And my wellness tip is in regard to goal setting and making sure that you reevaluate your goals often and ask if they're something that's really coming from within you or if there's something that you've been told that you should do.

So, for example, if you've set a goal for yourself of trying to work out in the morning, but you're actually not a morning person and you have a horrible time waking up in the morning and you're tired, instead of trying to force yourself to do that thing, reevaluate and ask yourself if another time of day might work better for you.

Or, for example, if you've set a goal of eating more vegetables, but you feel like you have to cook them all from scratch and that's just not working for your life, then give yourself permission to be a little bit more flexible with the way you choose to serve and prepare those things.

So, that's my best tip. Reevaluate your goals often, and make sure that they're coming from something that's aligned with you, and your values, and what you know you can do.

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

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don't forget to use the series code CHANGEMAKER for 15% off your first purchase. And now, let's get back to the show.

And the other thing I'll go back to too with this is you were kind of mentioning form, right, and how as your body has changed you've realized that different things look different or feel different in different bodies. And as much as we're talking about trainers and things that they can do, I also want to acknowledge, of course, the systems that are at play that are training the trainers, right?

Trainer education sucks. It is very specific to a narrow body type. It assumes that pretty much everybody wants to lose weight and that should be a goal. A lot of trainer education pretty much encourages that trainers go outside of their scope of practice and give nutrition advice and all these different things. And there isn't a lot of great education out there that is HAES-informed in the fitness space.

And I'm not saying that there isn't any, because there definitely is some wonderful programs that have come out, especially over the last few years. But like, thinking of form, for instance, like every textbook I ever looked at showed a thin, muscular body demonstrating the exercises, right? And so it makes sense that a trainer coming out of that is gonna just think, "Well, it needs to look the same in all bodies, and it should feel the same in all bodies," and have that tendency to blame the client.

And, of course, once you learn more information and know better, that's when it's important to do better instead of doubling down on that. But I'm just thinking about all the ways in which, when I first got my certifications, it fed into that culture. And so it can be really hard to claw your way out of that.

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Ilya: Yes, that is so true. That was the same thing that I realized, and then naming it and getting a lot of pushback because these are bodies of work that we are just so linked to and feel like we cannot change or disrupt, even when they are just not suitable, or hella outdated, or just suck for the people that we are directly working with day-to-day.

Shohreh: Yeah, exactly. And in talking about that, both on the client side and the consumer side, of course, you and I both mentioned a lot of things related to social justice. And I think one of the things I've found most frustrating as someone working in fitness, and nutrition, and all these things, is how when I actively bring social justice to the forefront of my work, there are people who hate that and are like very vocally against it and essentially think that politics has no place in fitness, or health, or wellness.

So, you know, when we post about Black Lives Matter, people unfollow. When we post about trans lives matter, people unfollow. As if somehow, we can put the parts of our life into these neat little boxes that don't spill over into each other.

And so, I'd love if you could speak to your own experiences with that, especially as a person who experiences multiple marginalizations and the fact that, of course you can't separate those out from your health, and wellness, and fitness.

Ilya: Yeah, you can't. Thank you, that's such a good question. Everything is political. It's just no way around that. And then, aside from that, the current political movement that we're living in, with 45 and what we're seeing, we're literally seeing dehumanization at play, you know, on perpetual loop right now. And so, if you have the luxury of not being viewed as de-human in this society, like you're not linked to any type of forms of oppression, then number one, fuck you (laughs).

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And then number two, you know what, we're coming for you.

That's really all I can say with that piece, because it's also a conscious shift, I think, that's disrupting the status quo. Because you have a world filled with more people that have marginalizations than you do with people who are living in privileged bodies and privileged states. The people who are living in the privileged bodies and the privileged states just have access to a lot of the resources and the power.

But we're coming for you. I'm not trying to come off like some militant mob mentality, but everything is shifting because we're tired. We're tired of dying. We're literally either dying at the hands of the state, with gun violence, and dying in institutions, and prisons, detention centers. Trans folx especially are being murdered very brutally, trans women, by people.

And we actually have laws in place called the LGBT Panic Defense laws that justify people killing us just because we're trans. That's literally in a lot of states right now. You can justify killing—and I can be more explicit than that—you can justify killing another human being. Even with some of the legislation, the morality legislation, that really is forcing a particular population, i.e. trans folx and LGB folx, from being able to participate in parts of society with bathroom legislation, with the ways that we can't participate in sports, and all of these different things. Being denied access to healthcare.

All of this shit is political, because you have a government, you have systems that are literally denying people to the point that they're dying. And then when you add the slow, insidious way, the slow forms of genocide that are killing people, that is wrapped up in the fitness culture too. Because the way I was working out as a trans person who felt such a sense of urgency to change my body, to look a certain way so I could fit in

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the status quo, I'm killing myself in fitness having to deal with a lot of issues now where it's even hard for me to get out the bed in the morning because of the way all of this social justice shit is at play.

That's why social justice is so important. If I didn't have social justice, I would not be able to survive. I had to participate in that. I had to be a part of Black Lives Matter. Why wouldn't I? I'm black. I need it. Why wouldn't I participate in organizations and collectives that support the rights of trans people? I need it. That support the right of folx who have disabilities and folx who are in larger bodies. I need that shit. If no one was saying that shit, I wouldn't be here. No one would even think of us.

And we're part of the essential workers right now during this global pandemic. They want us to get their fucking lattes, and be masked up, and make sure they're safe, while they're sitting comfortably on the other side of the counter twiddling their damn thumbs. That's all part of social justice.

The rent strikes right now, a lot of the mutual aid that is happening right now. A lot of the ways that even personal trainers are making their services at least more financially accessible, that are making them accessible, because they have no choice, online. When many people in disability communities have been stressing people to make more of their services online. Nobody wanted to do it. Now we're forced to do it. That's social justice.

You're forced to participate in it right now. You ain't got no choice. So any time that someone asks me, because somebody actually did ask me that and I was like, "Well you're engaging in activism stuff right now, every time you choose to put a Zoom video up and you put closed captions on it, that's social justice."

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Shohreh: And I think a lot of this comes down to, as well, the need for people to expand their definition of what fitness is. Of what health and wellness are right? A lot of the topics of this podcast. Because when we see it as this very narrow thing, just physical health, just weight loss, whatever, then you miss all of this bigger picture, and these nuances. And I think this was really brought home for a lot of fitness folx recently too with Ahmaud Arbery, because they were like, holy shit, this is a person just out on a run. I go out on a run every day; I've never had to think about that. Social justice *does* have a place in fitness, and we fucking need that.

Ilya: Yeah, we absolutely do. Social justice is the only way to continue to bring a voice to people who typically don't have much say in a lot of institutions and industries but are the most impacted. And that's why I often talk about, as far as creating affirming spaces, being mindful of the elitism that is in fitness. Because oftentimes folx will be like, "Well I don't wanna engage in social justice or be affirming because I have a very specific clientele. They all look just like me. They all have money," i.e. CrossFit. Often a lot of CrossFit spaces are just that, and they're cool with that. And hey, more power to you.

But it's still a way that, again, if we're coming from a place of compassion, if we're recognizing the conscious shift in this world, you're either gonna have to get with it, or you're gonna get ran over 'cause it's happening. What really boggles me is people can recognize when language expands, technology expands, all of these different areas expand, we keep up, but when it comes to the humanity of a population, we just cannot wrap our mind around that.

And that's why colonialism is so fucking real to this day, because we have been so inundated, through our generations, no matter how you identify.

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All of our ancestry impacts how we show up now, and we are so routinely moved to continue to live up to this colonialist bullshit that we can't even see that hey, all I gotta do is respect this person, that's it. That's really all they're asking. I don't care what name, what identity you put to it, it's just a basic human respect. That's it. It don't even have to be complicated.

Shohreh: What you were saying about ancestry too, reminds me of the episode that I did with the creator of Inclusive Therapists, which I will link to in the show notes, but she was talking about how white people put the onus on people of color to know their ancestry without bothering to look into their own ancestry, the good, and the bad, the historical. And that is such a common line of thought from white people. They're like, "Oh, well, I wasn't a slave owner, right, so it doesn't matter."

Ilya: Yeah.

Shohreh: "That was the past," like you're dragging us into the past. And it's like, well, no, the past informs the present and it informs the future. And the more you can learn about your own lineage, yes, even as a white person, like the more informed you can be coming into the present day. Like, that onus does not belong just on people of color, it belongs to everybody.

Ilya: Absolutely and then when you're on the higher rungs, like the hierarchy, you don't have to look down, but those of us from the lower rungs, we always have to be mindful of the people above us 'cause they stomp on us. And when I talk about social justice, anything I talk about, I do talk about the historical impact, and when we're talking about the U.S., the United States in particular, you can't deny the way this country was built.

This country was built on the backs of African and Indigenous people. There's no way around that. And the people who directly enslaved my

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ancestors and Indigenous folx's ancestors were more than likely of European descent. There's just no way around that. And I don't care if your particular family lineage you trace and they had no slaves, more than likely they benefited from slave labor, and they still do. And if you trace your generational wealth, more than likely that came from some type of way that your family either exploited, murdered, stole from African and Indigenous folx. There is just no way around that.

We want to highlight this rugged individualism and this Western-centric view of, well, this is just me, how I take care of my family, I'm just doing what I need to do, I'm a good white person, I don't really get into that politics stuff. I'll be politically correct, and I'll do this, but I'm just good, I'm polite. No! This is how you still have access to a lot of the wealth and resources, because if you trace back your ancestry, it came from that. It came from slave labor, there's no way around that shit.

Shohreh: Ooh, what you're saying about wealth and resources is so true and really hits home for me, because before I did what I do now, I used to be a wealth planning attorney.

Ilya: Oh shit, wow.

Shohreh: Yeah, my job was literally to help the 1% stay the 1%. Like that is what I did. Using *legal* methods of keeping wealth in the family.

Ilya: Wow!

Shohreh: There's all kinds of fancy tax ways to do that. It's very complex. I'm not gonna get into it. But let me tell you, hiring an attorney, like I used to be, was very, very expensive. So that's just another barrier. Who has access to not only just the wealth, but then access to keep the wealth? That is such a good point that hasn't quite been made on this podcast before that, like, if

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you trace your wealth back, ultimately it came on the backs of Black and Brown folk. It did. For anybody who is white, white-passing. So that's something that's really important to think about when you try to tell yourself, like, "Oh, I earned this," right? Like "I worked so hard." It doesn't mean that you didn't work hard, it just means that you had access that other people did not.

Ilya:

Yes, yes, and that doesn't take away from the work you do now. We're trying to move this forward, and we're trying to make sure everyone has access, because you know, that's the difficult piece. Like a lot of folk too who are like fitness trainers and they're like, I just don't quite get why I should have to offer sliding scale 'cause I feel people are gonna take advantage of it. I don't think it's even gonna get into the hands of the people who truly need it. And it's just like, you have to remind yourself, am I limiting someone from accessing this service simply because they don't have the financial means that's not even the fault of them?

It's not my fault that I am in an oppressive institution that doesn't allow me to access resources enough to pay an exorbitant amount of money of fitness service, and that also doesn't mean that in turn I don't deserve it. Because we still deserve it, even if we don't have access.

And that's another piece. It's like, well, you know this bootstrap mentality is always, that onus a lot of oppressed folk often have to carry too, of well you know, *this* black person, you know, *this* Asian person, *this* Latinx person, they made it out. They pulled themselves out, even when they came from a single-parent home, but they still chose to do X and Y and Z and get out.

The system is designed to allow for a few marginalized folk to make it through. I like to use the, I guess it'll be a metaphor or an analogy of like,

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you think about the dam, like a big dam that prohibits a lot of water from getting through. I mean that's the purpose of it. But that structure has holes, so some of the water will spill through. But you still have this dam, this big structure in place that is not gonna allow for all of that water to pour through, because then it would be evenly distributed. It's no way capitalism could ever, ever function. Jeff Bezos wouldn't even be a thing. How can someone about to be positioned as a fucking trillionaire and you can't tell me how they're not exploiting people in that process to be able to get to that place. There's no way in hell that could even happen.

You wouldn't even have wealth if other people weren't exploited. And usually the people that are exploited are what we're seeing now, in the pandemic, as essential employees that are paid the least to put their backs on the front lines the most to keep you safe and make sure you get access to the shit you want just 'cause you wanna go out and spend your money on some bullshit more than likely. But they have to put their lives on the line, and they can't say no because they don't have enough money to stay their ass at home. But then you also blame them for being out and continuing to spread the virus, because they have to get out on a bus. They have to get out and be around people on a train. They have to get out day in and day out to make sure you enjoy the comforts of your life.

Shohreh:

Yes, and to be clear, we have barely, like, just gone into the tip of the iceberg of why social justice matters, and we have been talking for just under an hour. And so, if you're listening to this and you still think you're gonna come away from this conversation thinking that like, "eh, social justice doesn't really matter to me," or fitness, or health, or wellness, or any of these things, like come have a conversation with me. We need to chat. Because we have covered so much ground in, again, just under an hour, and we are barely scratching the surface of what is there. And it's hard for

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me to fathom, being able to walk away from listening to this and still thinking like, “Eh, social justice just doesn’t matter to this,” ‘cause it’s so important.

Ilya: Thank you.

Shohreh: Alright, well we have come to our final question of the podcast, which is, how do you define and health and wellness for yourself at this moment in your life?

Ilya: Hmm, that’s a good question. I used to blame myself, and I still kinda deal with this here and there, for the way my health shows up, even with the information that I know that things are beyond my control. But I find myself, as of lately, really hurting in my body and feeling like my health is taking somewhat of a decline in some areas. And so, I’m really trying to make peace with however my body shows up in the moment, it’s meant to show up that way, and it’s okay. And bodies that are not viewed as healthy, we don’t owe health to people, and we’re still just as valid as bodies that are viewed healthy. So that’s just a day-to-day struggle that I’m really working through.

But I’m thankful to be in the body that I’m in. And wellness is just part of that conversation as well. Wellness looks like me being at peace with my current health conditions. Wellness looks like me really recognizing the union between my mind and my body ‘cause I tend to be a very heady person, just look at this conversation. I talk a lot of shit that kind of separates me from my body in a lot of ways. And so wellness looks like me merging my body, my mind, my spirit, all of those things together, and trying to be reminding myself that I’m deserving of love and support, from me, as well as from the universe. And just beginning to, even if I don’t love my body day-to-day, learning to accept it, and be okay in the moment.

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- Shohreh:** Mmm, and the pursuit of that merging, I think, is one of the most underrated parts of wellness, right?
- Ilya:** Yeah.
- Shohreh:** Because so many people have that disconnect, and it's hard to bring mind, body, and spirit together. We live in a world that teaches us to separate those things, but it really helps the more we can connect them, even if not all the time, but when we want to just feel really embodied and to be more in touch with our authentic selves. So I love that that's a big piece of it for you.
- Ilya:** Thank you.
- Shohreh:** Well thank you so much for being here, Ilya. This conversation was fan-fucking-tastic.
- Ilya:** Oh my goodness, yes.
- Shohreh:** How can people find you and work with you if they would like to?
- Ilya:** So, the best place to find me is on Instagram—I've put that out before my website—@Decolonizing_Fitness. And then my website is www.decolonizingfitness.com. And you can also check out my Patreon, just simply go on Patreon and search for “Decolonizing Fitness” and my page will pop up, and check me out.
- Shohreh:** Perfect. I will put all of those in the show notes as well so people can easily access them, and I so appreciate you making time for this. This is a great conversation.
- Ilya:** Thank you. It was a great conversation. Thank you so much.

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Shohreh:

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

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