

Redefining Health & Wellness

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Featured this episode: Shohreh Davoodi & Lindley Ashline

Shohreh Davoodi: Why hello there. This is episode number 53 of the Redefining Health & Wellness podcast. Today's guest is Lindley Ashline, a photographer and the creator of both Body Liberation Stock and the Body Love Shop. She and I discussed media representation, stock photography, Photoshop manipulation, and more. To access the show notes and a full transcript of this episode, head to shohrehdavoodi.com/53. That's shohrehdavoodi.com/53.

[Music plays]

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

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

Welcome to the podcast, Lindley! I'm so excited that we're finally getting to connect on here.

Lindley Ashline: Thanks, it's great to be here.

Shohreh: Yeah! So you have so many skills and talents and we're gonna talk about a lot of them today, but let's just start by having you tell me more about you and all the cool stuff that you do.

Lindley: Oh, I'm kind of a jack of many trades. I won't say all of them [laughter]. But I either dabble or specialize in a lot of different areas. I'm primarily a

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photographer. I do portrait, and boudoir, and stock photography. I'm also an activist in the area of body acceptance and fat activism. So I do a lot of work talking about that, speaking about that, writing about that. I also do writing, and editing, and consulting. And I run a shop. All these things are sort of tied back in to body acceptance and size acceptance, and then it's sort of the manifestations of that.

Shohreh: I always love seeing all the things that you do 'cause I think it's such a great example of kind of the world of online business ownership. And I know you have your in-person sessions and everything too, but just how you can kind of have your hands in a lot of different things and different income streams is always fun to see people doing that successfully, especially in this space.

Lindley: Yeah, it's a lot of fun. I have a pretty short attention span as a person.

Shohreh: I feel that.

Lindley: So it means that I get to have my fingers in a lot of pies. And some of the things that I'm able to do, it's such a joy to do, because they are things that as a business owner, I would be doing anyway. I would be posting on Instagram anyway. I would be writing blog posts anyway. But because I have a lot of interest in a lot of areas, and because I have this sort of central passion, I'm able to use those things I would be doing anyway and talking about the things that I really am passionate about through those things. As opposed to it just being another chore a business owner gets to do.

Shohreh: Yeah, it's so nice when all of that can actually align, 'cause it's not the easiest thing in the world, and I'm definitely not suggesting that everyone's passions have to be monetized. I think, unfortunately, as a society we're

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starting to move in that direction, and that's not super helpful. Like I have a lot of outside passions that I'm not monetizing, but it does make work so much more enjoyable when you like it.

Lindley: Oh, yeah, absolutely [laughs]. I also do part time corporate work that's writing and editing that's in the tech field—in the software industry—and so it's sort of unrelated that helps pay bills. And that's also a monetized use of my skills, but it's totally different.

Shohreh: Right.

Lindley: It's sort of living in these two different worlds. And then yeah, these side things that I do, hobbies and things, that aren't monetized. And so, it's really cool to be living in sort of all these different worlds.

Shohreh: I'm curious too what some of the, maybe some of the highlights that kind of led you into the body liberation/body acceptance space as well, because of course you had to become really invested in that before building a business around it.

Lindley: Yeah, the short version is that in about 2007 I was on LiveJournal, and I discovered the Fatshionista community.

Shohreh: Oh my god, LiveJournal. That brings me back [laughs].

Lindley: I know, right? I know right. Every time I sort of talk about this background people go, "Oh my gosh, LiveJournal." [laughs] And I was really, really, really active in LiveJournal at the time, because of course this was before Facebook and Twitter were even a thing really.

Shohreh: Do you remember Xanga?

Lindley: No.

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Shohreh: So, when I was, and I'm a little bit younger than you, when I was in, I guess middle school/high school, Xanga was like the big blogging platform at the time. So like LiveJournal existed too, but like Xanga was the thing. And a few years ago when I was—not a few years ago now, it was a while ago—when I was applying for law school, I started googling myself and I found all these old teenage angst blogs. And I was like, “Oh crap, we have to get these off the internet [laughter].”

Lindley: Yeah, I guess I was so involved at LiveJournal I didn't even, it's like the name is only vaguely familiar [laughs]. I was *really* invested in LiveJournal. So LiveJournal had all these communities that are like the equivalent of Facebook groups, and I found this Fatshionista—it's like fashionista but with F-A-T at the start. And there were all these amazing fat women who were living their best lives, and being super stylish and fashionable. And it was the first time in my life I basically had seen positive depictions of fat women, or fat women like being in control of their self-image, and in control of the clothing they wore, and being fashionable.

And I'm not a particularly fashionable person or someone who is particularly interested in fashion. I'm all about comfort. But especially at the time, since I was working full time in an office, I did need to be in control of my presentation. And it was such a revelation to hear these women talking about deliberately finding clothing that they loved and seeing these selfies of them looking amazing. And it sort of opened up this whole world.

And from there I started making friends in that community. This was a little bit before the body positivity movement took off. So, at that time, it was just known as fat acceptance, and body positivity is sort of an offshoot of that. But led me to these fat acceptance bloggers and authors, like Kate Harding and Marianne Kirby who were talking about, to me, just these

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mindblowing things like it's okay to be fat, and fat people are equally worthy, and fat people deserve access to fashion and healthcare. Just blew my mind.

And from there I got really deeply invested in this movement, because the more that I read, these were people who were speaking to me and speaking to my concerns, and it was the first time in my life that I'd ever heard the science behind fat, and weight, and bodies. And once I discovered that the science backed up what these people were saying about my worth, and my value, and my health, it was such a revolution for me.

And then from there I had been doing photography—nature photography—for a really long time. So in about 2015, I was in a really miserable office job and said, I'm gonna go do photography full time, what am I going to do? I don't think I can make a living doing nature photography. So I'm gonna go into portraiture. And with portraits, okay, who am I going to photograph? And so for me, it was just such a nature dovetailing of, I'm really invested in the worth, and beauty, and value of fat folx anyway, and at least at the time I couldn't find anybody else who was deliberately photographing and elevating fat bodies. And said, okay, there's my niche. There is where I wanna be. It's an underserved market, and I feel like I am sort of uniquely positioned to serve other fat folx with images.

And from there I started doing the portrait photography, and then I added boudoir, and then I added stock photography, and then I've been running a subscription box for a while. And I'm phasing that out in favor of a regular shop. But all these things sort of came from this central investment—emotional and intellectual investment—in Health At Every Size, the fat acceptance movement, body positivity.

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Shohreh: And it makes sense that this would become such a big part of your work, because seeing those photos on these blogs, on LiveJournal, had such a big impact on you. Because it was something that you didn't grow up seeing, right? And I think it's important to talk about the effect on people to not see themselves represented in media, especially when they're kids growing up in the world.

Lindley: Yeah, and I actually grew up without a TV, effectively. I mean, we had a physical TV in our house, [laughs] but we didn't have cable. And at the time and place where I grew up in a rural area, that meant that you had like PBS.

Shohreh: Oh yeah, we only had PBS for a long time growing up.

Lindley: Like I have seen every episode of Wild America with Marty Stouffer [laughter] that exists. It ran on PBS in the 80s, and I had, my first crush was on Marty Stouffer. You can look him up, he's very—

Shohreh: This is adorable.

Lindley: —he looks like he runs an 80s nature documentary. But other than that one TV show, I just didn't really have access to media.

Shohreh: Mmhmm.

Lindley: I was bullied as a kid, and I was kind of a loner. I didn't really have many friends. And I didn't have access to magazines. This was well before popular access to the internet, so it wasn't like I was on Twitter as a kid. So I lacked formative media influences altogether. I was basically raised by cultural wolves.

So what this has meant for me is that I'm actually not great at speaking to media influences on children, because I just didn't have any. And that

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doesn't mean that I wasn't absorbing diet culture messages, don't get me wrong, because we get those everywhere. I got it at school, you know, I heard my relatives talk about how they hated their bodies. Like, we cannot escape that. You would have to be raised by actual wolves to be able to escape diet culture influences on kids growing up.

But it meant that when I was a teenager and started to get out on my own and started getting exposure to those media messages, it was very shocking. [laughs] Because I hadn't been indoctrinated with that since the time I could sit in front of a TV. So for me, it was easier to reject those things because I wasn't used to them. So for me, my own body image journey has been relatively easy, because I wasn't exposed to those things as much.

So that said, I mean, I was still being exposed to things. I still knew how the bigger people in my life thought about their bodies, and you still grow up with that. So I might have gotten a milder version, but I was still getting it.

And I really don't think I saw a positive depiction of a larger body in the media. I don't know, maybe Roseanne? [laughs] And it's not even that media depictions say in 90s of Roseanne were particularly positive.

Shohreh: Right.

Lindley: But at least she was there. At least she was there on TV. Even that bare minimum of representation, like, sort of stood out for me. So seeing these bodies depicted, even just from a presence standpoint was important.

Shohreh: Yeah, when we think about negative portrayals, particularly of fat bodies in the media, I mean, it's not like this is a thing that isn't happening anymore, right? It's still happening, constantly.

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Lindley: Oh yeah!

Shohreh: Whether it's the stock video footage on the news of heads cut off, or it's just stock photography websites in general, which frankly are like a weird dystopian nightmare place, I hate being on them—except for yours. You have a great stock photography website [laughs]. It's really horrifying and oppressive to see this stuff. I know that's one of the reasons in your work you're really trying to push back against this imagery, because it has such a negative effect.

Lindley: Yeah, even today, and one of the things that I did recently on Instagram was I challenged people to think about how they see fat bodies in the media and how other people around the people in fat bodies react to them. Like say it's a TV show that has one fat character, or relatively fat compared to the rest of the actors on the show. How is that person being treated? Like again, the fact that they're physically present at all is important, but are they there just to be the butt of jokes? Are they there so that everybody can act grossed out by the fact that they exist? You know, what is the reaction to them?

And again, I lack a lot of media exposure. I don't watch a lot of TV as an adult. And so throwing that out to people who are sort of at a normal level of media exposure was really interesting. Because I don't think anybody was able to come up with a fat body that they had seen in the media that had a really truly positive representation. Even the ones that people were able to come up with, they were there as a token, or they were there solely to be the butt of jokes, or they were so that the other characters could reinforce that that body is not normal.

And think about if you don't live in a fat body, or you don't live in a body of color, or in a marginalized type of body, think about what it must be like to

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go through your entire life never seeing a body that looks like yours that is depicted as okay. Bodies like yours are always an aberration. Inevitably, because we know what kind of effect the media has on self-image. Like there have been studies done on this, and we know that the media affects how we see ourselves. And so if all you've ever seen is that bodies like yours, people like you, are wrong, and bad, and just there to be made fun of, think about what it would be like to go through your whole life like that.

And so, a lot of my own work is based in anger about that. Anger is an emotion that I only relatively recently in my life learned to access. I'm Southern. Southern U.S. is where I was born and bred, although I live outside Seattle now. And so, there's an extra layer of sort of cultural expectations that women will be [laughs] sweet, and gentle, and you know, we don't show—

Shohreh: Yep!

Lindley: —we might be passive aggressive mind you [laughs], but we're not gonna be angry.

Shohreh: Passive aggressive is the language of the South, for sure.

Lindley: Oh yes! Yeah, and I'm pretty fluent in that, I'll admit it [laughter].

Shohreh: Yeah you can't not be.

Lindley: Bless your heart [laughs].

Shohreh: So much of that. So much sweet tea [laughs].

Lindley: There are about six different ways to say "bless your heart" and they all mean different things. But just being angry and allowing yourself to feel anger about how people like you have been represented, or not

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represented, and just anger at the way that you're treated, that's a pretty relatively new emotion for me. And I find that more and more that anger drives my work.

And that doesn't mean that I'm always negative. It doesn't mean that I'm angry with or at my clients, of course. But allowing myself to feel that anger helps drive my passion for my work. And it also allows other people to feel anger about how they've been treated and how they've been represented. And it allows people to be more honest when they work with me about what they're feeling, because the more that I am open and vulnerable about what I'm feeling, the more people are able to come work with me and say, "I'm really angry right now," and then they're gonna flip off the camera. [Laughs]

And that's cool, that's awesome. Because that may be the first time that person has ever felt comfortable expressing anger. And the shot where they're flipping off the camera may not be the one they choose to keep, [laughs] but just the fact that they're doing it in the first place, that's amazing. Because the more we can honestly react to circumstances, the way that our bodies have been treated, the more we can access the ability to also look at those bodies and see those bodies, because if we are closed off about our bodies, if we are blaming our bodies, if we are ashamed of our bodies, it's really hard to look at them. And it's even harder if we're looking at them, or looking at a photo of them, or looking in the mirror to actually *see* what that's there.

And of course, body dysmorphia is a whole specialty in itself. And I am certainly not saying that anyone who has trouble looking at their body has body dysmorphia, at all, because that's an actual thing. But just being able to see the physical contours of the body we live in right now can be really,

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really hard. And it can be hard for everybody. But particularly when every physical body you have ever seen that's like yours has been held up as an object of ridicule, it's really hard to look at a photo of yourself and see what's actually there. Because what we see instead is ridicule, and shame, and bad, and wrong—all these things we've been taught.

So, just getting in front of a camera can be really, really, really challenging. Especially when it's not a camera that you're controlling. If it's not like a selfie. [laughs] Because you have to be able to trust *me* to depict you in a way that is both honest and compassionate, and that comes back to accessing emotions and anger. Because if I'm out there, and I'm willing to be vulnerable and say, "I'm angry about the way you've been treated, and I'm going to hold that as I work with you," you know that I am more likely to be both honest and compassionate in the way I am portraying you than if I were always perky, or always, "Your body is great no matter what."

Because bodies aren't always great. And it's okay to say that too. Some people have chronic illnesses, and some people have disabilities, and some people find that it's great to feel great about your body, but loving your body is not enough to keep you from living in an oppressive world. So letting all those complexities sort of hang out [laughs] is one way that people do end up being able to trust me when they work with me.

Shohreh:

I think it's so unfortunate too that as a society, especially for women, that we view anger as an unproductive emotion and something that we shouldn't feel, that we need to try and get rid of it at all costs, because like you said, it can really be an important emotion, of course, and also it can be channeled. Like it can be used to create change, to create amazing business concepts, like you have created in your own work. Like it can be this really productive, helpful thing to feel—because of course any time we

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choose not to feel our emotions, start burying them, that can lead to all kinds of problems as well—but I just think of how many people have an absolute right to be angry, especially at media portrayal.

Like we can extrapolate this out so far. Like you said, we have this horrible portrayal of fat bodies in the media. I think about growing up the portrayals of black bodies that I saw in the media, whether it was on cop shows or whatever, constantly being portrayed as criminals, drug dealers, all this kind of stuff, and the real effect that has on our society and the racism that is within it. I think about how disabled bodies are depicted—always depicted through this lens of pity, and they’ve overcome it by running a marathon, or whatever crap those messages too.

And that stuff sticks in our brains, and it makes sense why people view others the way they do. I think people feel this sense of like guilt when they’re like, “Oh, I have these certain feelings about different kinds of bodies,” but when you look at the messaging all around us, like, it makes sense. And then once you realize that it’s there, what do you do with it? That’s the important piece. None of us can go back and take all of that messaging away, but what we can do now is figure out what we’re gonna do with it, which is something that you’re doing so beautifully.

Lindley:

Yeah, talking about representation in stock photos, anger has been driving a lot of that too. Because I come from a corporate marketing background, marketing, writing, and editing. And I have needed for many years, in my corporate career, I needed stock photos for blog posts, and presentations, and advertising. And I would go to any of the major stock photo sites, and I would go look for, I don’t know, “construction helmet person outdoors,” [laughter] or whatever. Whatever I needed that day. And inevitably it would be a thin, white person.

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And in my corporate career, it wasn't necessary at the time that I use diverse images, but at the same time, it was really jarring to only have access to the one type of images. And the more that I got invested in size acceptance and inclusivity, the more, even in my corporate career, it bothered me more and more that there was only the one type of photos.

So after I started doing portraiture in 2015, in 2016 or 2017 I saw this big advertising campaign and this article that went around on Facebook, and Instagram, and Twitter about Getty images, which is, of course, a huge, huge, huge stock photography and news photography agency, that they were releasing a line of plus-size stock photos. I got really excited too, because how cool is that? That's amazing, because not only is there increased representation, but it's Getty. They have a huge audience.

Shohreh: Yeah.

Lindley: So what a cool opportunity. And it was a huge thing that went around the body positive communities at the time. And so, like every other body positive activist everywhere, I went to check it out. Because part of the advertising for this was it was going to be diverse and that it was going to be financially accessible, because they were clearly sort of targeting a lot of bloggers and small business folk as well in this campaign.

And I ran over to look at the images, and they were fine. They didn't include anyone who was what we might call "very fat" or "super fat," but, you know, they were fine. But they were only available for editorial use, which in stock photo language means that you can't use them for marketing. Like you can't use them on your Facebook page or your website. It has to be sort of be non-commercial. Like a news agency could use them.

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But then they were also incredibly expensive. They were like \$400 or \$500 for a license that only lasted for a year or two. And I got mad. [laughs] And I said, this is not the way we increase representation. And, oh look, I'm a photographer. I can do something about this.

So this is exactly the kind of thing you were talking about with the reaction leading to an action. Because I'm like, I'm having to...developing my photography skills anyway. I am doing photo sessions for my portfolio anyway, for my portraiture, going out and working with people, mostly not trained models, and working with people who are these diverse types of people that need to be represented anyway. Let's change how we do this a little bit and do these as stock photos. And that was how the stock photos got started.

Shohreh:

Yeah, and I'm so glad that they did, and I think since that time, you were not the only one, I think, who was angered by that and realized that representation was missing. Because I know there's definitely been some other sets of photos representing, for instance, like trans and non-binary individuals, disabled folx, since then as well, that have come out. Which is, again, super exciting for me as someone who blogs and uses a lot of stock photography to have some options too. Because some of these are free, which is nice.

Of course, I wanna pay people for their work as well, that's really important. But it's also nice, especially if you're a new business starting out, you know, you can't afford to pay, even like \$16 is cheap in the land of stock photography, like you said, Getty's selling these images for hundreds of dollars for like a year-long license [laughs]. But if you're just starting out from nothing as a business owner, and you're trying to create an inclusive business and you want a wide variety of photos and you just

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don't have a lot to spend, like before there was nothing out there. You were not gonna find anything that wasn't thin people, and so you saw a lot of people just using objects on their websites and things like that, in lieu of actual people. So it's nice that now we at least have some other options out there and I hope this obviously continues to grow to the point where maybe eventually we're gonna have like a big inclusive stock photo website with all kinds of different options.

'Cause as I've said to you before we were recording, it's like you go on a stock photo website right now, and I swear to god, it's just like Hitler youth everywhere. It's just like thin, really white, blonde people. I mean, it's really creepy. And then, I'm sure you've noticed this too, the keywords that are used on photos are nonsensical. Like you look for things that you think would be there, and you see the keyword they put on it, it's like sexy person doing this. I'm like, it's a person eating, like what, what is this?

Lindley:

[Laughs] Yeah, both pricing and keywording are really complex. Because like on the pricing end, I get it so much. I am also a dirt poor small business person who is just trying to make the dream work. And so, I also occasionally will use free stock photos from elsewhere. And I try to mark when I do that so that it's clear that it's not my photography, you know, 'cause as a photographer, I don't wanna confuse people. But it's really important to have at least a minimal set of diverse stock photos out in the world so that people who just cannot pay have that to take advantage of. Because poverty is a marginalization too.

And I had to really debate when I worked out my own pricing, like, how am I gonna do this? How am I gonna make these accessible while also eating myself? You know, eating is great! Having a roof is great. But also, I

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compensate my models too, because they are almost always in some kind of marginalized population themselves.

So, what I do for my models is before the session they get to choose whether they want an hourly rate or whether they would rather have images from the session. And that way the people who really need to be compensated for their time, or who would rather be compensated for their time, they are totally free to have that hourly wage. And it also gives them the ability to make sure that they're not being taken advantage of, or feeling like they should do it for free just because they should represent. And it also gives people the dignity of, you are worthy of being paid for your work. You know, you are worthy of showing up and your time being valued. But for people who would rather have the images, of course, they can choose that.

So, I'm basically forced to charge for what I'm doing because I need to eat, I need to pay my models.

Shohreh: Of course!

Lindley: And since I launched the photos, I think it was in 2017 that I launched the stock photos, so in the four years that those have been available, I've made just about enough money to make up for the money that I've paid models. And it does continue to grow. This will continue to grow and hopefully some day will actually help pay my mortgage [laughter]. But that is why I charge what I charge. That said, I'm so glad that the free resources exist because those need to exist too.

And I do, right now—I won't guarantee that this will stay, that this promise will be around forever—but right now, for folks who sign up for my newsletter, I do actually send out free stock photos every month. And I

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don't make a big deal of it because I'm not sure how long I'm gonna continue doing it, but as of this taping, my newsletter subscribers do get free stock photos every month, which is, again, it's one of the ways I kind of try to balance that.

But there are free libraries that exist out there, and I'm so glad that they do because that way something is accessible for everyone. And the folk who are able to support what I'm doing and to compensate for that labor can do so, but then the folk who just can't have an option too.

And then the keywording is such a funny thing too. And this is another thing that I really had to sort of confront when I built the stock photo site. Because the keywords that people actually use to find photos aren't necessarily the most social-justice informed phrases that we might prefer people use for things.

Shohreh: Yep!

Lindley: And I mean, I'm not gonna use anything that I think is actually hurtful, or offensive, or really out of date. But again, some of the words that people actually use to search by, usually they're not offensive, but they're not necessarily up to date either.

Shohreh: Right.

Lindley: But you also have to use them, because on a practical level, that's how people find your work. But also, I think as stock photographers, a lot of the advice that we see out there advises us to tag things in a certain way, which is how you end up finding that sexy person [laughs], sexy person eating food, and why you find 85,000 photos of thin, white women laughing alone with salad.

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Shohreh: God, they're so depressing [laughter].

Lindley: You wanna shoot what sells

Shohreh: Yeah.

Lindley: I mean if you're actually trying to make a living or part of a living off of this, then you want to photograph what sells. And so, doing the things that are reaction to that, again, seeing things, being annoyed about them and taking some kind of action to counter them, it does mean that you are also accepting the ramifications of that from a business standpoint. Because if I wanted to make money photographing stock photos, I would probably be out there doing exactly what all the other stock photographers are doing and photographing thin, white women with salad.

So, I had to take a real leap of faith that the market was there for stock photos that are actually inclusive and that there are enough people out there who are willing to support that work. I firmly believe that that's true. And as more of those people find me, you know, it continues to support the work that I'm doing. But yeah, sometimes you do find really random keywords [laughs].

Shohreh: It's such a leap of faith to go for it and say, alright, well I know that there's one way to do this to make money. I mean, it's the same thing in my line of work with fitness and nutrition, right? The way to make money is to sell weight loss. Those are the people who are making the big bucks in this industry, and also, that doesn't align with my values. And so there's that tension between, I wanna be a business owner, and I'm not doing the thing that makes the money more easily. I'm not doing the easy sell. And, you know, I think a lot of people in this space certainly feel that pressure, but also at the end of the day, even if our bank accounts might be a little

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bit smaller, we get to feel empowered by the work that we're doing, and we know that we're like truly helping people and making a difference. And I think for most of us, that's what keeps us going, even when it gets hard.

Lindley:

Yeah, and I always wanna talk about where my business is at and the money that I'm making or not making,, and the privileges that I hold here, because it's really easy to look at somebody who is reasonably okay with their marketing skills online, and the more slick their marketing is, the more we automatically think this person has it together, this person is making a living, this person is doing it right. This person has more clients than they can handle, clearly, because of their marketing. That's just how we are as humans. The better the marketing, the more we assume that they're doing the thing full time and making a living from it.

And especially with internet businesses, a lot of the time that's not true. And so I try to be very honest about that. So that's why I say, here's what the business is doing. I occasionally am able to pay myself off the business. Mostly I invest that money back into the business right now. And I'm able to do that, because I hold a tremendous amount of financial privilege right now. My husband is supporting us, and we are able to have a roof over our head, and food to eat, and Netflix to watch [laughs], and an internet connection. Eventually the business will grow to a point where it is a living, but I have that time and that space to do this work. And the privilege to go on the internet and be publicly angry under my real name and the ability to do this activism work, *because* I am being supported.

And so, I always point that out when I talk about my business so that I don't give the false impression that Lindley is some kind of magical activist who immediately is making a living from what she's doing and is super

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financially successful in a way that makes other people feel inadequate. You know, just try to keep it realistic.

Shohreh:

Thank you for saying that. And that's a conversation that I've had on the podcast before too, because I am in the same boat of privilege with that in that the only reason that I was able to start my business is because my partner has a very secure job, same thing, that can pay our mortgage. 'Cause let me tell you, I do not make enough money from my business to pay our mortgage and our other bills. And similar to you, for the first, almost three years of my business, I put everything back into the business. I did not pay myself anything. I've only just recently started paying myself a little bit, which was an exciting change in how things work.

But you're right, I've definitely had people say to me and I'm sure they've said to you as well, like, "Wow, it seems like you're so successful, and you have all this, and you have everything put together." I always just kind of giggle, because I'm like, no. No, no, no. [laughter] That's not how it works.

Lindley:

And you know, I also don't want to be pessimistic—"You'll never succeed trying to have a business that's socially-justice aware." I don't think that's true at all. And I believe that the stage that I'm in as of this recording is just part of building a business. But this is where I'm at.

Shohreh:

Yes!

Lindley:

It's not that I will always be where I am at at this moment, I just want to be realistic about that. And the thing too is that I have the privilege to be super out about what I'm doing. I am okay if people google me and find my activism work. Most of the companies that I do part-time work for don't give a crap what I'm doing on the side [laughs]. I'm not in danger of being discriminated against, or arrested, or who knows what else from my work

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like other more marginalized people might be, like say, maybe a Black Lives Matter activist might be in a significantly higher amount of risk territory than I would be for my work.

And so, I always want to keep that in mind too. I'm not putting my life in danger to do this, but I'm able to do it really loudly, and really proudly, and to be very radical in my work because I have that safety net. In a way where if I were doing this same work, trying to survive financially on my own, I'd be making a lot more compromises. I'll be honest. I might be elevating smaller bodies a lot more than I currently do. I might be keeping my activist side a lot more quiet, so as not to scare off potential clients. And I see a lot of these compromises being made in real time, particularly on the Health At Every Size side and the body-positive side. Like how do you balance, when you don't have the kind of privileges that I do? It's on you whether you eat or not that day. How do you balance your ethics with your business?

And it's a huge topic, I'm sure we could talk for an hour just about that. But I try not to get super judgy about folx who make different choices than I might about how they market their business. I mean, if somebody is actively being harmful in their business, I'm probably gonna be that annoying person on Instagram like, "Have you thought about maybe not hurting people?" But you know, when someone is...like right now I have a writing client who has asked me to write some things about Health At Every Size, but we've downplayed the more radical aspects of that just a little bit, so that we can pull in people who have never heard of it before. Because if you were steeped in diet culture and then you see a piece that's talking about, oh I don't know, the more social justice-informed aspects of Health At Every Size like the war on obesity is nonsense, you might not even be at a point where you're able to listen to that.

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But if we pull you in more gently with something like, oh, you know, “you can be healthy at the size you’re at now, we’ll show you how,” that might be a more gentle introduction. And so, you kind of have to meet people where they’re at, and you kind of have to meet your business where it’s at too [laughs].

So, the more that you’re able to move towards justice, that’s awesome. But when you need to eat, sometimes you kind of have to pull it back some, and that’s okay too.

Shohreh:

Those are all excellent points that talk about privilege in a lot of these different things and the hard choices that people have to make when a job is on the line, or when they need to make money to live. I mean, it just really goes back to this idea that like everything is not super black and white. Like, I know we really, as humans, we wanna make it very black and white. There’s like a lot of grey. This also reminds me too of an episode I did with Dr. Kate Brown where we talked about body positivity, right, and what value it has. And she was talking about how, you know, the rainbow bopo land actually does have value because for most people [laughs] it’s a stepping stone to get to the more radical. To find their way to fat liberation, body liberation, and this more radicalized space.

And I’ve talked with so many guests who said the same thing. They said, you know, if I hadn’t had a mid-point, I may never have gotten here. And that’s why I try not to write off you know, these parts of the movement that have kind of spun off from their more radical roots, because I do think that they can be valuable. Like you were saying with HAES, like sometimes to get people to buy in, they need to buy into the parts that are easier for their heads to wrap around first.

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So often in this space, like, that can be spoke about critically, because I think there certainly are some people who, what are they called, like the “splinter assers” is the phrase that people [laughs] like to use, people who are like in between the two.

Lindley: Right [laughter], the fence sitters.

Shohreh: Yeah, the fence sitters. Yes. My term was the more offensive version [laughter]. But I've heard both. But yeah, so there's a lot of conversation about that. And I think yes, there is reality to that too. People who are using the language inappropriately, right, using the language of HAES, intuitive eating to sell weight loss or something else that isn't in alignment, that's a problem. And I think there is certainly more room for nuance all around about different people's situations. So this is actually an important conversation to have, so thank you for mentioning that.

Lindley: Well, and we see that in photography too, in the sense that a lot of photographers who have not changed their practices or the types of bodies that they are willing to work with and they're still very much based in the “thin bodies are best” Photoshopping world of photography, are using body positivity language now because it's starting to sell. It's starting to pull people in. And there's a real difference between using body-positive language on your site and actually walking the talk.

So as far as a gateway for people to get in the door, there are also a lot of photographers who are doing, yeah, sort of the rainbow bopo work now too where they're sort of a cross-over area. And I'm not counting the photographers who were just using the language and not doing any of the work in that. That's pretty toxic. As a photographer you can't say, “All bodies are wonderful, all bodies are beautiful, but I'm gonna Photoshop away all your fat rolls.” [Laughs] I mean you can say that, and people do

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say that, but that is toxic. Because you can't say, "Your body is great except we're gonna completely erase it and make a new body." Like that's not okay.

But there are a lot of body-positive photographers who are serving that gateway space now, and that is fantastic. They've sort of been very gentle about the language and still using a lot of the minimizing traditional posing and things, but they're just on the edge of body positivity. And that's a great place because if the only way that you're able to really look at it is through a photographer who is still gonna kind of pose you to minimize you, and use posing tricks, and lighting tricks, and things to minimize you a little bit, but isn't full-on like Photoshopping you? If that's what you need to be able to see your own body, cool.

I'm at the point where most of the people who come to work with me, they're ready to see it full-on. I mean, yes, of course I'm posing people. I'm guiding you through. I'm posing you, we're using the techniques that make the photo beautiful without minimizing your body. And so I'm always giving full guidance to people and I'm gonna have you lay here, I'm gonna have you put your arm here, and you know, we're gonna have you tilt your head this way. But I don't Photoshop at all. I will not remove parts of bodies [laughs]. I'll do very light skin smoothing for things like corporate headshots where your appearance is affecting your career. And I'll remove acne. And like when people get nervous, their ears turn bright red [laughs] or their chest will turn bright red. It's totally normal, it happens to almost everybody, and I'll tone that down so that it's not super distracting.

But beyond that, I don't change bodies. And so, the people that come to work with me are mostly ready for that. They're at a point where they're ready to see the full monty. And I make it very clear through all my web

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presence and through my materials that I give clients before their session that that's what you're getting. Because I can't think of anything more sort of humiliating and hurtful than for somebody to come through this process thinking they're gonna get Photoshopped, and then not be. Because that would be so hurtful if you weren't at a place where you were ready to see your body as it exists. So I'm very clear in what people can expect from me.

And so the people who come to me tend to be further along in their body image journey, but just like in the Instagram world where there's this whole spectrum from diet culture on up through HAES and fat positivity, we're starting to see that spectrum in photographers now too. And that's fantastic, because it means that wherever you're at, you can have an avenue to see your body.

Shohreh:

Definitely. And I do think there's a larger conversation there too, 'cause I've definitely been hearing a lot, particularly on Instagram, of kind of this back and forth argument about Photoshop, and filtering of images, and all of these things. And this is another area where I think there's nuance, because on the one hand, right, we're talking about creative expression, which photography, selfies, all of that is a part of creative expression. Being able to filter, to change things, and have this lens, I think can be a really beautiful, creative thing. But as you mentioned, on the other side of that is if you are Photoshopping bodies to the point where, you know, you're taking everyone's rolls, cellulite, all these natural things out of it and your whole website is just an unrealistic portrayal of bodies, then that's another part of the conversation.

And so you get into this idea of like, well, is it a person's right to have that portrayal of themselves or to do that kind of photography? Can that be

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creative expression? Is that an argument, you know. And again, this is another area where there's a lot of nuance. But as a photographer and photo editor, I'd love to hear your thoughts.

Lindley:

On one level, it's very complex, and a lot of it is about meeting people where they are. But on another level, I think it's actually really simple. Because when we think about creative expression, and we think about art, and we think about changing what we're seeing in the service of art, the overriding thing is that when we see bodies changed in the service of art, it's always *towards* the ideal and never away from it.

Because we have a beauty ideal. I mean, there's no question about that. It changes with time, you know, every decade it changes a little bit. But in general, it is thin, white, able-bodied, blonde. And for men there's a different standard. But you know what it is. You can see it in your head. I don't have to explain it.

Why does the art always drive towards that one ideal? Why do we never see people Photoshopping bodies to look bigger? Outside of a fetish context, which that is a thing that happens. There are Instagram accounts where—and it's uniformly cisgender men—are photographing almost uniformly cisgender women to look fatter because it's a fetish thing. I don't really want to go into that 'cause it's gross. [laughter]

Shohreh:

Yikes!

Lindley:

But it does happen. Other than that, we never see bodies made larger in the service of art. We never see bodies taken further from the ideal in service of art. So I would question, when you're changing bodies in service of art or as an artistic endeavor, why are you always changing them towards the body ideal?

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Shohreh: Yeah, I think that's an important question.

Lindley: I mean you're allowed to do that. I'm not like the art police. I'm not gonna come around and scowl at you [laughs]. I mean, I might, but I won't comment so you won't know [laughs]. But you get to do whatever you want in your own artwork. You get to take selfies and filter the crap out of 'em if you want. Like that's fine. As long as you're looking at yourself, I hope that one day you get to a point where you're ready to see yourself as you actually exist in that moment. And if you never get to that point, that's cool too. You do you. I'm not the body police.

But when we uniformly, again, outside of that sort of fetishy context, are always driving towards this one ideal, is that really the full range of our artistic expression? We can do better than that as a culture. Again, you individually, if you're seeing yourself in a way that works for you, cool. You do it. But culturally, keep that in mind as you look at art. Why is art always driving towards this one specific ideal?

It's the exact same way that, I'll be honest, I haven't watched Project Runway, but my understanding is that every time [laughter] they have to design something for somebody's mom or that they have a plus-sized model to work with, there's all this moaning and groaning because oh no, we have to work with a body with curves!

Shohreh: Oh yeah, they're total assholes about it!

Lindley: Why are you such a poor artist that you can only work with one kind of body?

Shohreh: Oh shit!

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Lindley:

Like what kind of artist does that make you? You're a crap artist [laughter]. You know? Bigger bodies are this amazing artistic resource in themselves. The contours are totally different. How they move and how they position are totally different. And when I was learning posing, because when I started doing portrait photography I didn't know how to work with bodies, I didn't know how to work with people. And so I had to train. And when I did that training, the only training available, for the most part, was very, very, very thin bodies. So I had to learn that and then adapt it.

Because all bodies, every single body on the planet can be posed in many, many different ways. But just the same as in yoga, like if you ask me to sit on like the top of a brick wall with my knees up to my chest, I can't do that because my belly gets in the way. And if I ask somebody whose belly gets in the way to do that, well, we're gonna have to modify it. It's totally fine. And if you're a photographer or if you're an artist who can't modify, what kind of artist are you?

And again, you see this anger coming out, this irritation. And I'm letting myself do that these days because we have this entire culture that says there's only one artistic ideal and everything should drive towards it. I mean, what a failure of imagination.

Shohreh:

I love what you just said—"failure of imagination." That's so true. That's actually a wonderful way to put a cap on that, and it echoes a conversation that I had with Melissa Fabello on the podcast where we talked about the politics of attraction and this idea that people have convinced themselves, oh, I'm only attracted to this, like, that's my "type." And we talked about how, yes, there can be things you're attracted to, like hairstyles or height, things like that, but when our attraction falls into standards of beauty that we have as society, and we don't dig deep into that and ask ourselves,

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well why? Where does this come from? That that's where we're having this failure of imagination.

Because we have been socialized in this very narrow viewpoint, so we see this in relationships, we see it in photography, we see it in everything. And I always think for me that's a red flag of like, now it's time to ask some questions. Where does this come from? What can I do about it? And I think that's true of photography too. and I think you just said that really beautifully.

Lindley: Yeah. It's okay to be in this paradigm that you started in. That's okay. But like, do you need to stay in there? Do you need to stay in this one little beauty box or can we maybe look at breaking out of that a little bit.?

Shohreh: Yeah, and expand your whole damn life doing it, because how much better is it for everyone? Like, I mean it's just a positive people! It's scary, but it's a positive!

Lindley: When I'm talking to photographers too, the question then becomes, well, how do I get larger bodies into my portfolio? How do I work with larger bodies? Because if you don't have any, people don't know that you're safe to work with, so how do you get there? Or people who want larger clients.

And the answer is to ask around until you find somebody who is willing to work with you and somebody who is willing to give you real talk if you fail [laughs]. If you make them feel unsafe, or uncomfortable, or whatever. And then you work with that one person, and then you show your results. And then you find another person to work with.

That was how I had to start. When I started doing portrait photography I knew I wanted to work with fat people, but fat people didn't know me. I mean, I knew some personally [laughter], but professionally nobody knew

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me. Like I had to prove myself. And I went on Craigslist, and I looked for plus-size models, and I took the people who responded. These were almost uniformly people who weren't trained models, which is great because trained models move differently and they know how their bodies look, and my clients don't. And you just work with that one person. Then you publish those photos. And then you look for another person. And then after you've worked with four or five people who are willing to trust you far enough to work with you, then you have examples that you've worked with larger people.

And the reason I'm bringing this up is it works for photography, but it also works for other purposes, other professions. Because I know some of the folks listening to this are HAES professionals or other professionals who want to be able to expand. You have to prove that you're safe to work with, and then people will seek you out.

Shohreh:

Yeah, that's a great point. That's a conversation I've had with a lot of HAES professionals where they're saying, "I'm missing X kind of client, and I'm not sure why that is." And then these are the kinds of conversations we have to have. Well, why aren't you attracting queer people? Why aren't you attracting people of color? What's missing? Have you worked with them? Are you safe? And these are big questions. You know, people try to ask this in like a bite-sized question hoping for just like an answer. And I'm like, it's not as simple as like here's the answer to fix it. Like, a lot of work has to go into that.

Lindley:

Yeah, get those photos on your site that prove that you're even willing to be associated with fat people. Say you're a HAES therapist. I know a lot of HAES therapists, so they tend to be the folks that I think about when I think about HAES marketing. If I looked at your entire website and I see no

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evidence whatsoever that you are body positive or fat positive, or there's no people on your site at all, nonetheless fat people, I have no way of knowing, even if you have said that you follow Health At Every Size principles, I have no way of knowing whether you mean it. [laughs]

So if I go to your competitor's website and they're using a range of bodies on their website, and maybe they even have a testimonial from somebody who was willing to go on the record and say, "I'm plus-size, and I felt safe with this person." I mean, I'm gonna go to that person and work with them.

Shohreh: Yeah, that's such a good point, and those are all different little pieces of your business, right, because then you have the clientele, that clientele had to have felt safe enough that they're willing to leave a testimonial, maybe with a photo to show, hey, like this person is a good person to work with, the different bodies, all of that.

And I think this can go the other way too, because you have the people who co-opt that stuff and you see diversity on their website, but then actually working with them, they are harmful. No matter what, there's a bit of a risk, any time, I think if you're a marginalized person, particularly working with someone who does not share the same marginalizations as you do, that they are not going to be exactly what you're looking for. Which is why I never fault anybody who wants to work with someone who looks like them. If someone in a fat body is like, "Hey, you're great, but you know what, I'm really looking to work with a fat provider," I'm like, awesome. Let me give you some recommendations.

Because everybody needs different things, and I don't think people should take it personally if they're not the right fit, you know?

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Lindley: Oh yeah, absolutely. I had a client, or a potential client contact me a while back who was part of the LGBT community, I don't wanna be too specific, and they were looking for a particular style of photography. And that was something that I was able to do, but because I had representation on my website of LGBT folx, but I had not been clear enough that I personally am a straight cisgender woman, they weren't sure whether I was part of that community. And they checked, which was absolutely fine, and then they were basically like, no, well, okay, I'd really rather prefer to work with somebody who is LGBT themselves. And I was able to refer them out to someone that I knew was in that community and did the same style of photography, so I knew they would have a good experience and get what they were looking for.

And that was fine, because that's what they needed to feel safe. And yeah, there's always a risk that just because somebody, like, puts on a good show on their website and their social media, they might still be terrible in person. [laughter] But also, at least if they're willing to be representative and inclusive in their marketing and when they're public present, at least I feel like I have a lot better chance of finding somebody who's really amazing that I can work with.

Shohreh: Yeah, that is so true, and this is a plug for having great referral networks, right? I love that there's so many different people who I can refer to. I'm sure you've built up relationships with so many different people that you can refer to. Like I'm very much of the mindset of the more diversity that we have in the field of professionals, the better for everybody, because then each person is gonna be more likely to find the right fit for them.

Lindley: Yeah.

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

Lindley: This is such an interesting question, because you're not letting me generalize about it, which I kind of appreciate [laughter]. Because normally with this sort of question I can talk about, oh well, health looks different for every person at every moment in time, yadda yadda yadda. But personally, I have a chronic illness. I have a muscular issue in my arms. We haven't quite isolated what's going on yet. But it means that I live with arm pain. It limits my time with my camera sometimes. It limits my time on the computer. And it looks a little bit different every day for me.

So I am always adjusting to that and what that looks like for my life at that moment. So when I think about health from a personal standpoint, that's always the first thing that comes up for me, is what are my arms gonna let me do today? Am I gonna be able to do yoga that involves any weight bearing anything today or do I need to do chair yoga?

And I have been living with this issue for so long that for me it's just, it's kind of background noise. I'm always having to take it into account, but it's also not something that I spend a lot time angsty about. It's, here are my limitations today. [laughs] And it's also the sort of thing where I have immediate feedback in the sense that if I push my arms too far, well, they hurt [laughs]. And I have to stop doing whatever I'm doing because it hurts too much to continue.

So for me that's what health looks like most of the time, is balancing that, the needs of that part of my body, with my need to get stuff done. And as we're recording this too, we're in the middle of a pandemic. And anxiety, which is reflected in the body, has become sort of additional factor in that,

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I'll be honest, if I read too much news right now, if I spend too much time on news sites, my arms will just spontaneously start hurting [laughs].

So they're a pretty good barometer as to, you've done a little too much looking at the news today, maybe you should back off. So as I become ever more in tune with my body and as I continue to progress and considering my body to be a partner, it's really interesting to watch sometimes that immediate feedback. So that's kind of what health looks like for me right now, is balancing the needs of the body with my everyday life.

Shohreh:

Yeah, I like what you mentioned too about kind of how it's different for you with having a chronic condition, because for anyone who doesn't have one, they may not have thought about how your day-to-day truly is different. I mean I think that health and wellness changes for everybody all the time, but I think for those who don't have chronic conditions, it can be more of like a week-to-week or month-to-month kind of change. But for those who do have chronic conditions, it's often like a minute-to-minute adjustment in the day that you have to think about.

Lindley:

Yeah and it's a really good exercise at staying, I'm not thrilled about this phrase because I think it's kind of cliché, but staying in tune with your body. Because it is perfectly possible for me to ignore those cues and to power through. And then if I do that, if I'm hyperfocused on something and I'm gonna go do the thing, or if I'm doing a photo session that is much longer than is wise, as occasionally I'll do when I'm photographing stock photos [laughs]—like we're having fun, we wanna keep going it, I've gathered a bunch of people in this room and we're doing a thing and it's fun, and we don't wanna stop—and then later I'll wonder why I'm, you know, I have a migraine and my arms won't stop hurting. Well, it's because

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I pushed myself too far. So in a way having this chronic issue is, I mean I'm not gonna say it's a gift, it's really annoying, but it is also this constant reminder that I have to listen to what's going on.

Shohreh: Yeah, that makes sense. Well, thank you so much for being here Lindley, this was a fantastic conversation. How can people find you, work with you, get on your awesome newsletter?

Lindley: Well, everything I do has a central website at www.bodyliberationphotos.com. www.bodyliberationphotography.com will also get you there. And from there you can explore the stock photos, and my client photography, and the shop that I run, and all these different things. You can always find me on Instagram @bodyliberationwithlindley. I'm on Facebook at Body Liberation with Lindley Ashline, and on Twitter, @lindleyashline.

And I am sending out free stock photos every month right now and sending out this really amazing newsletter once a week that is absolutely full of Health At Every Size resources. It contains a thoughtful piece from me every week. And you can find that on the website if you go to "More" at the top of the website and go to "Body Liberation Guide." That's where you can find that.

Shohreh: And I am on Lindley's newsletter list, and I love it. It's a great thing to have in your inbox, so I do personally recommend it. Well, thanks again and I hope you have a wonderful rest of your day, I'm so glad you came on the show.

Lindley: Thanks, you too.

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

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