

Redefining Health & Wellness

#78

Featured this episode: Shohreh Davoodi & Ned Buskirk

Shohreh Davoodi: Hello my friends, this is episode #78 of the Redefining Health & Wellness podcast, and it's also the final episode of the weird and wacky rollercoaster of a year that has been 2020. Today, I'm welcoming Ned Buskirk, the founder of the non-profit, You're Going to Die, and I cannot think of a more perfect guest to round out the year with. In this raw episode, we talk about grief, loss, vulnerability, mortality, the need for spaces where we can talk about our feelings, and so much more.

I do want to give a trigger warning because Ned talks about both miscarriage and parent loss in this episode.

To access the show notes and a full transcript of this episode, head to shohrehdavoodi.com/78. That's shohrehdavoodi.com/78.

Thank you for spending your 2020 with me. I know it pushed a lot of us further than we thought we could go. And in the spirit of growth and evolution, keep your eyes peeled for some exciting changes coming to the pod in 2021.

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If you prefer a one-off contribution, you can tip me for my work through the payment links located at the bottom of the show notes for each episode. Lastly, even if you're unable to support the podcast financially, you can always subscribe, rate, review, and share it so that more people can find

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and benefit from the show. However you choose to invest in the podcast, thank you for believing in me and tuning in each week.

[Music plays]

Welcome to the Redefining Health & Wellness podcast. I'm your host and resident rainbow glitter bomb, Shohreh Davoodi. I started this project because I saw how black-and-white messaging about health harms everyone, and I wanted to paint a more honest and vibrant picture. This podcast is a space where we can reimagine health together by confronting limiting misconceptions, delving into aspects of well-being that are often ignored, and prioritizing conversations with marginalized individuals. I encourage you to take what you need and leave behind what you don't. Are you ready for this? Let's fucking go!

Hello, Ned. I am so excited to have you on the podcast today. Considering that we are both going to die, I'm grateful that we're getting to have this conversation while we're here and alive.

Ned Buskirk: Yes! The fact that we're both gonna die, it just makes us fast friends, immediately.

Shohreh: That's right. Exactly.

Ned: We can connect on that.

Shohreh: So true! This episode is actually slated to be released as the final episode of this year because I felt like if there was ever a time to discuss death, and grief, and mortality, it would be one, at the end of 2020, and two, as the calendar is about to turn over.

Ned: Yeah, that sounds right!

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Shohreh: [Laughs] So, to start, how about you tell me more about you and more about your amazing nonprofit, You're Going to Die?

Ned: Yeah, sure. Gosh, there's a lot to say. I guess I'm gonna just try to keep it concise 'cause I feel like I've told you already how much it matters to me to talk about these things. There's just so many ways to go, and emotions to feel, and stories and bits and parts of what we do. But first, thanks for having me. It means a lot to get time like this where I can just be in sort of relishing all the parts and feeling all the ways I do about this work and have someone really intentional about listening to it. Not just you, but your listeners. So I really appreciate it.

Shohreh: Of course.

Ned: Yeah. Well, I guess I'll sort of start with the short version of the story of why you and I are even talking, 'cause it goes all the way back to my first significant loss in 2003. My mom died from cancer the day after Thanksgiving, and she'd battled that cancer for half her life up until that point. So it was definitely a part of our lives and my life growing up. Half my life was dealing with that. And I mean dealing with that, I should just say that she was and really wasn't talking about it a lot. But, you know, it's hard to miss when your mom gets chemo, and radiation, and the symptoms from the medications. So it was a real presence for me and my sister.

And that loss sort of propelled me into a strange window of my twenties down in L.A., working for a toy company, traveling the world selling hula hoops, and really relishing the time to grieve her at 30,000 feet, flying from L.A. to Hong Kong or sitting at a bar in Germany for a toy fair—whatever space I actually got because of that work. And how it allowed me to be alone or in different environments to really grieve and contemplate that

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loss. But also think about how little I care about selling toys internationally at all, 'cause I really didn't.

People say like, "Oh, you worked in toys, how cool, what was that like?" It's like, uh, plastic junk from China that's trashing the planet and getting bossed around by people that you don't respect. But I was young and it made sense during that time of my life to do it, and it allowed me some money to kind of do, not just grieving in the ways I've described, but also do therapy and bereavement groups.

So quick rest of that story is that out of that time, I just knew I didn't want to do that work anymore and I really feel like losing my mom influenced that decision. And I moved from L.A. up to San Francisco and decided to go back to school and I got my masters in English. And while I was studying at San Francisco State, I got involved with the Graduate Literature Association and the students involved with that and started an open mic. And it was a space for people to connect, to share whatever, writing, music, things that they care about, other writers. But definitely a space to connect community, connect the students and the school peeps to outside community.

And the first one was in my apartment in San Francisco, and it was so packed and just trashed the place.

Shohreh: Can you imagine holding a packed event in your apartment right now in this moment [laughs]?

Ned: No way, god. I never did it in that space again. It was like, okay, maybe we should do this in a café. And the next time we did it, it was in a café.

And while it started as that, it moved into this You're Going to Die context. And first probably it was this reminder that space and open mic, letting

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people know, reminding them, you're going to die, take a risk, share what you have, what you've created, what you've written, that song you play alone in your bedroom. Like this is the place for it. It's safe. And we want to hear it before you die.

And so that was kind of how the open mic series was born, which is really the heart of what we do, really where everything began. And it still is. I consider it still a really potent, important, precious, needed space. Even these online versions that we do now during the pandemic. But it grew from there and really started to get me leaning into not just the creative space and the safe place to share, but also this mortal element, this mortality element started to really emerge.

And when I named it, I don't think it even had a name. I don't think it was called You're Going to Die right away. But when it started to get official enough that we were having it every month, I remember talking with a friend who was helping me organize it and we were trying to think of a good name for it, and he asked me why I do it, just to kind of start there. And I remember just immediately replying with, "You're gonna die. You know, we're all gonna die, and this space is because of that."

And in 2011, after I'd been doing it for quite a few years, my mother-in-law died, who I consider a second mom and certainly the most important person in my wife's life and grandma to my son, at that point. And that loss really pushed me over the edge. And not in the bad ways, although there were some of the bad ways, as you can imagine. But it really pushed me and the event into this is what this space is for. It's for being creative, but creatively facing this inevitably, this truth we all share, that we're all going to die. And maybe just by doing that we can inspire our lives and live better, create better, be more connected.

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I guess at a minimum I've always felt that You're Going to Die is a space to remind people that they're not alone.

Shohreh: Yeah, and I love the name because it's just so on the nose. I like the story about how you came to it because you hear that and you're immediately taken by it and you're like, shit! Like, yes, that is true [laughs] and what does that mean for me [laughs].

Ned: Yeah. You can imagine the kinds of conversations, especially in the beginning. Knowing that it needed to be named that and at least just saying, okay, yes. But then having to implement it into conversation. Like say it to people [laughs], invite people to it. So what's this thing? And just avoiding saying the name of it for so long, saying all the other descriptions and caveats and disclaimers before finally saying, "Yeah, and it's called You're Going to Die." But I found over the years that it's its own little vetting process, it's own curator of who is willing and needs it and then ready to lean into it and those people that understandably don't want to.

And even still, there's times after all these years, now being a nonprofit, where you have to create a bank account and submit paperwork to the government [laughter]. You know, we had to say okay, maybe we'll go with the acronym here, YG2D, which we did. But still having it be You're Going to Die and still having the power of that.

And it's true. But it's not a threat, it's just a fact and always as an invitation, like, do you need to, can you do this? And the people that say "yes," you can imagine, to something called You're Going to Die at an open mic, already the event is happening. And the content that's coming into it by those people that can say yes and want to and need to, or at least even are curious, creates really deeply meaningful, and affecting, and moving,

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hilarious, but also cathartic experiences. And the open mic really has done that over all these years.

And now all these other programs, and workshops, and events, like after all these years now, there is that kind of element automatically because it's called that. It has that power, and the risk, and the kind of excitement of it too, you know. It's all those things.

Shohreh: Yeah. There's a lot wrapped up in there. And I like your other description too. I know I've heard you call the organization "a creatively conscious mortality movement," which there's so much in there too. I read that for the first time, and I was like, wow! Like what is this trying to say. And that's one of the things that made me want to dive in more to the website and learn more about what was going on with this organization.

Ned: I know in the email, when we emailed, you talked a little bit about it, but what was your introduction like? How was that? And then why are you saying yes? Obviously I'm totally switching the chairs here right now, [laughter] but I did want to hear that a little bit, like what was it that drew you in. Maybe you've just described it.

Shohreh: See, you're a podcast host too, so you're like, he he he, let me get in there. It's a great question. So, I can't remember who exactly it was who told me about the organization. I was having a conversation with somebody else on the podcast, it was Linda G's episode, and we were talking about, you know, mortality, and how we are going to die, and this is just a fact and people are always trying to outrun this fact. And I don't know if it was her or somebody else as a result of that who ended up just mentioning the organization. And then I was like, wait, I've never heard of this.

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And so, then I think I went to the Instagram, and I was like, ooh, what is this? Like this is so cool and it was very much in alignment with what we were talking about, and then led me to the website, and then I was like, okay, you have to come on the podcast [laughs].

Ned: Cool, I like that. That's awesome.

Shohreh: It was a fun journey, so I'm glad that we are finally making it happen. Especially because I feel like this has been a year filled with grief for so many of us. And something I've noticed is actually a reluctance for people to name it as grief unless it's directly connected to the death of a loved one—you know, a person or a pet. So talk to me about what you've learned about grief through your work and the different circumstances where it can show up.

Ned: Yeah, that's a great thing to consider. The experience, even my friends, but the community that I'm connected to, that they're having now, the depression. You know, like we put that word more easily on the things we're feeling that are really hard, and dark, and heavy, when I would argue that a lot of times it's that we've not had the space enough to grieve enough. And I feel like you're right, that that's a major part of what we are living through right now, in denser ways than usual.

I started a creatively conscious mortality workshop a few weeks ago and really meant for it to be a space for people to gather and creatively write about mortality, or create artwork, and share photography. Knowing that there would be more deep experiences, and sharing, and emotion involved in a workshop like that, but that was really kind of the intention. And during one of the first sessions, we did a little prompt where we had this group of 10 people share their smallest grief and their biggest grief. And kind of with the idea that these are griefs that we're not maybe getting

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to express. Like the smallest grief being the thing that you can't find a place to say it because you don't think you're allowed. Like it's not big enough, you know. Things like literally down to my car, I miss my car that I used for five years, or even like the loss of a pet.

Shohreh: Yeah.

Ned: I think it's often that people don't consider that kind of thing as important or as severe as losing a parent. But that's why we've asked this question. It's saying, what are those things that you feel like your culture is saying you can't say it, you can't speak it.

And even the biggest losses, while we might assume they're so big, of course you're getting to grieve them and of course you're getting to say them out loud, but sometimes grief is so big it feels too big to share with anyone and that there's not a safe space for it. And also that it's too overwhelming, possibly. We don't want to put it on anybody.

And so we have this prompt that was only supposed to be maybe 20 minutes of the workshop where we wrote a little and then shared, and we didn't get to do anything else that whole hour and a half because of what people needed to say about that prompt. How they responded to it, the things they had from a list of grief in their life. And it really got me present again like I had been made present repeatedly since I started doing this work over 10 years ago. That much of what You're Going to Die does and the kind of spaces it creates is for grief more than it is for like, let's engage with mortality, and talk about death and dying, and what about your will, and what about even description of losses. It's like really, really, really more often than anything, a space for people to grieve.

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And that reminder feels more important than ever, to create those spaces and opportunities for people to do that. I feel like that's maybe one of the main commitments I have to showing up through this work and through the nonprofit and the events, to like, remind community that it's okay and that it's safe.

Even if you get on an online open mic and you don't know anybody, that something happens in that open mic. And it might start with me sharing and crying and then maybe making a joke to make you laugh. And that kind of dance between joy and grief, and the safety that starts to get cured or cultivated through that, until someone else says, "Yeah, okay, I'm in." And they share something that opens another door and deepens the night, and someone else hears that and goes through that door and shares something else. And the night just deepens, and deepens, and deepens, and we all have that chance to get it out, and share the grief, and cry, and cry together, and have that medicine of tears happen to us, and laugh 'cause you just have to, once you cry so hard, you know, [laughs] it's like waiting to also happen. And that catharsis.

And then finally just, not the fix, okay, well now that you said what's wrong and why you're grief stricken, here's the answer, go do this or this will fix it. You know, really careful not to end up there. But where we end up is in a reminder that we're not alone, more importantly than anything.

Shohreh:

I ran a challenge back in November that I called Momentum, and it was specifically because I was seeing everyone just feeling so stuck, and sad, and just going through so much. And it wasn't about, you know, let's plan our next 1,000 steps and write a manual. It was literally like, what's one thing we can do to get you moving in the direction you want to go in. And the first day, like the first thing that I had everybody do was literally just like

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take some time, like get into a comfortable space, and write down everything that they were struggling with. And I told them that it doesn't matter how small it is, how big it is, if it feels trivial, or if you feel like it's annoying.

And so many people said that, that they had this, like, their brain poking back at them and being like, should I even write this down? Is this stupid? And it's because we have this experience of comparison, and I think especially I've seen this during the pandemic of, we know that people are going through so much and so we minimize our own pain. And we feel like, well, what I'm going through doesn't matter because other people have it so much worse. And so when you get asked how you are, you're like, oh, I'm struggling, but like you know, all things considered, I'm okay. And we're so quick to push aside our own pain to make space for others. And of course there are times where that needs to happen, but we need our own space too. And not enough people realize that.

Ned:

Yeah, I feel like a huge impact of the kind of culture we live in and have grown into is that we don't have enough ritual space, space to return to regularly, where community gets to be with these parts of life.

Think about, like, right now comes to mind someone who is pregnant who loses a baby. This idea that you keep that from everybody until you know for sure the baby is in a window that's safe enough, then you can tell people. And having people in my life, more now than ever, say, "I wanted you to know that I'm pregnant. I know it's really early, but why would I not tell you? Why would I not tell you that I'm pregnant?" And of course the baby likely will be good and healthy, but also if not, I'm connected enough to my community regularly, not just my little nuclear family which is completely dysfunctional and a mess anyway, but to a bigger tribe of

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people who can show up if that baby died or some loss suddenly came out of nowhere. That we have enough of the reminder, like. this is community. We are here, again, to hold that space.

And then the way that that impacts other contexts. And I think now as I was listening to you of what it was like to lose my mom and drive back down to L.A. and go back to work at that toy company, and how much it was expected of me to hurry up and get to it. It's so boring even to say it, it's like, why am I talking about this? Why am I talking about this thing that we all know? It's like, yeah, I had that too. I had that feeling where I could take three days off because my dad died and then I could go back to work, and once I got there I had to be totally good, and ready to work, and not bursting into tears suddenly in the middle of a conversation about hula hoops or whatever it is, you know?

And this coming from a time, I think, thinking of a few hundred years ago maybe, or different cultures where now there's those spaces regularly, every month or whatever it is, to gather, and weep, and wail, and hold each other. And also to wear black for a whole year and know that your whole being is meant to do that 'cause everybody needs to know it, everybody needs to be faced with that loss of yours and hold that loss with you, and be with the things it brings up for you. 'Cause then if we don't do that enough, then we're sick. We're just ill from holding it in. And who knows where it goes when you do that, you know, all the ailments, not just emotionally and mentally, but physically what happens when we don't get to do that enough and we don't get to weep and cry suddenly on ourselves and on others.

Shohreh:

You bring up such a good point about the expectations that we have for grief, especially in terms of a timeline because I think it's twofold. You have

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the people outside of you who have some preconceived notion of when the grief should be “over” and you should be back to “normal.” And then I think we also put that on ourselves too and feeling like we just want this to be over, we want to get to the other side of this, like why hasn’t this ended yet? Like, we’re never really taught how to sit with our own grief or how to sit with the grief of other people I feel like.

Ned:

Yeah, you’re right. Yeah, that’s a good point. This idea that we don’t wanna do this, [laughs] we don’t wanna go through this. Like why do I have to, and how long will this go, and how debilitating is it? And just the inclination to numb out and turn it off. You’re right. It’s easy to say, it’s a culture and it’s how we grew up, which we know is true, but also the intensity of loss, how affecting it can be.

And really, I just remember with my mom, the wormhole that you get dragged into where you’re separate from some version of life that you used to be grounded in. I just think of it as being pulled partway into wherever my mom went, not knowing where she went. I won’t profess to know that. But wherever it is, part of me’s there when she’s gone and when she’s died. And so then I’m acting in the world in this completely decentralized, unstable, crazy even, you know, like that level of insanity when you’re looking at the world and you can’t even connect to the facts of directions to get somewhere. You’re that disconnected because of how big the loss can be and change you.

Of course we’d have the inclination to just be over with it and move on, and you’re right. I think that’s part of it, for sure.

Shohreh:

Well, and of course our brains are very adaptable, right? Like we want to seek out things that aren’t painful. I mean, as humans I feel like we will do

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all kinds of things to avoid the pain and reality of a situation [laughter]. I can say I've been there.

Ned:

Yes. I got some good drinking practice in during those few years [laughter] after my mom died. And I'll just say, also, kind of in a way numbing out, but moving stuff too. The open mic, just this connection to that, is there's always talk of where can we do this event. Let's say a venue closed and we're thinking of a new spot for the open mic, and one of those considerations is, oh, that place is great, it's super powerful and focused, but they don't have a bar. They don't serve beer and wine. Early on I felt that it was kind of a required medicine, that's not the right word, lubrication maybe is a better word, to moving the emotion and opening up.

So, I think there's both of that that happened, for me at least, in the years that followed my mom's loss where I think I was for sure numbing out and trying to escape, but also doing drugs and drinking sometimes got me closer to some of that grief, and heartbreak, and healing than just regular life, for sure.

Shohreh:

Yeah, I think there's definitely a balance aspect in there. I mean, who isn't gonna numb out at least some of the time when they're going through extreme pain? The reality is you can't feel it all the time. If you had to feel it all the time, you couldn't function.

Ned:

Totally! I love that!

Shohreh:

And sadly we live in a world where we aren't given that, right. We're only given a little bit of space to not function. With grief I feel like maybe your work will give you a couple of weeks off and some will give you nothing off. And like you said, they'll just be like, alright, well, back to it, gonna need you to do these things. And there's just that feeling that nobody

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knows what you're going through, I think is one of the real powers of your organization because it shows people that actually there are people who are experiencing this as well. And, you know, it's not the exact same thing that you're going through, but you're not the only person who feels like you're walking through a world that doesn't get it.

Ned:

Yeah, I like the way you put it. We couldn't just stay there, right? We couldn't operate in life if we stayed there. I talk about that at the show sometimes. Like I don't understand why we're not weeping and laughing hysterically constantly, [laughter] like why is that not how we're relating to what's going on around us every day? But partly because how the hell would we get through a goddamn day of work or a normal conversation on the street where you have to share the boring-est of details because you run into an acquaintance who asked you about what's going on in your life—"What are you doing now? What's your job?" And we just have to navigate those moments.

And I think there's a balance, you know. I'll unabashedly be one of the people that tries to avoid conversations like that at all costs and sidestep the, "what's your career" conversation whenever I can for the picking up on someone's grief. And being the kind of person I think who's like, listening for it because that's what I'd rather talk about. And that's partly how You're Going to Die came into being is that I needed it. I needed that space for me and my mom and my mother-in-law. I wanted to talk about them, I wanted to talk about how they died. I wanted to tell those stories.

And then, of course, what would happen when you do that? Other people would emerge and listen, 'cause they need you to say it, and then tell you theirs. And finding that need together. Like simply, I feel like the very

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beginning of all this is just because of that need to say it and the need to listen to it.

Shohreh:

And I feel like the core of what you're talking about here is vulnerability. Like when you say why are we not weeping and laughing hysterically, I'm like, because a lot of us really struggle to be vulnerable with one another. And we live in a world that has taught a lot of us that that's not okay. Like I'm specifically thinking of crying, and I'm under the impression that crying is something that you do quite a lot at your events and in life. And I tend to be a crier as well, but I always would hide it. Because I grew up in one of those households where I was taught that crying and showing your emotions is weakness.

So it's taken a long time to get more comfortable with crying in front of other people and not trying to be like, ah, I'm so sorry, this is out of character [laughter] or whatever it might be. And I think that a lot of people have that. Like they just feel uncomfortable when others are crying or getting really vulnerable. And I think that hurts us so deeply.

Ned:

Mmhmm. Yeah, I agree. I hear you, that moment of overwhelm, of expressing emotion and then feeling immediately like you need to apologize. I even heard it put once that handing a tissue to someone, while it seems kind, it's also a like, clean yourself up.

Shohreh:

Oh, that's so true.

Ned:

Here's a tiny towel, wipe that away [laughter]. Can we just keep it neat?

Shohreh:

Dang, I never thought of it that way. That's so true though

Ned:

Yeah, it really struck me, you know. And I still, of course, would hand someone a kleenex, but just thinking about it even, in those terms, and

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feeling that and knowing that it's true we do that. We do apologize and we do want people to stop crying sometimes.

I grew up in a family that the only emotion that was mostly expressed was depression, which was represented by disconnect, mostly, and anger. And I don't mean to oversimplify. If my mom was alive and my dad ever listened to this podcast, which he won't [laughs] because he can't deal with it, you know, I would want them to know there's more to it than that. Especially my mom.

Like of course, growing up, what she did as a single mom, having my dad be the kind of dad he was, how she had to and felt like she needed to not talk about the cancer and just hope that it was getting taken care of and leave the rest inside between her and God. I understand it and I get that that's how she survived her life and in ways that she was taught.

But my response to that depression, her depression that she admitted, having from, I guess, when I was maybe three years old on, she told me that last year that I moved home with her that she was depressed since then. And my dad kind of checking out, maybe all along, but definitely eventually physically by the time I was five or so, only appearing here and there. But often just with anger and anger between them and the words that come from that and the abuse that comes from that context. My reaction was to throw tantrums.

And so, I think I had this early way of getting attention, and my survival technique was getting the tears out. I think I got the practice in, in my resistance, to easily express myself in that way. And all these years later, even still when I get off an interview recording session like this or maybe after an open mic and I think back to how much I cried, there's a little shame that pops up.

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And it's not stopped me, but it's there, whatever voice that was. Whose voice is that? I don't know. But it doesn't stop me from letting it go. And I know, like I described to you, my tears are an invitation to people, you know, with the open mic it's like hey, look at this 6'3" man [laughter], just huge physical presence, fully weeping in front of 100 people talking about his mom on her deathbed. It's an invitation. And for me it's a reminder that we're close to truth when there's tears. And more now than ever, that it's a medicine that we need, that I need to cry on myself and that you need to witness.

Shohreh: It's such a gift that you were able to have that and now can bring it to the work that you're doing because of course we know that boys, in particular, when they're growing up are really taught that they're not supposed to show emotions, boys don't cry. All of that is still so prevalent. And so, I'm sure when there are men in the audience at your events and then they see you crying, that that is probably one, making them uncomfortable, but two, you know, hopefully opening up something in them to be like, okay, this is something I'm maybe not used to, and how does it feel.

Ned: Yeah, that's good. I would say the demographic that is most drawn, unsurprisingly, to the shows and the workshops, especially the events, are women. And certainly, men show up and are involved with some of what we offer, but it is a thing to notice. Especially, I lead a men's workshop with cancer patients, and it's a completely different vibe and emotional energy. I'm still bursting into tears after all these years learning the tears help, but also, like a tantrum, that level of crying centers myself.

And so it's a couple of things I'll say, that whatever that is, how my dad was, how I experienced these guys and often men in these vulnerable spaces where it's supposed to be safe and where we're allowed to open,

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but still seeing maybe some mechanics at work for them keeping them from sharing, or when they share, seeing them push, push, at the edges and share, like they maybe don't in any other part of their life.

But going back to that time, really thinking back to what it took for me to access my ability to express myself in that way and really getting, I think in a way that relates to what You're Going to Die is asking of people, is what are the hard parts? What are the hard things? What is the heartbreak? Where are you suffering? Where are you alone? And out of that, like I, as a little boy, decades later, am able to maybe arrive at is that these parts of us that are hurting, and these places that are unsafe, and these things we're going through that are breaking us absolutely, can definitely create meaning eventually and create even parts of who we are in the world that other people need.

And I know from listening to your podcast that you get it and from your work in the world, and I'm sure the people that are drawn to listening to a podcast like yours get it already, but that reminder feels so important, just to me personally. These things, these vices, these patterns for survival that don't actually serve me anymore, save me now, also in balance and in healthy relationship. I mean, like, when I'm in healthy relationship with this part of me that needs to burst into tears, it is doing good work for me and for others, and that we have the capacity to get to those things out of total suffering and hardship.

Shohreh:

I talk a lot about how we are in relationship with ourselves. And not a lot of people think about the relationship that they have with themselves as a relationship, but I think it's so important to look at it that way. I mean, and I'm someone, what I literally do is self-trust coaching, and trust being the foundation of healthy relationships, like we need that with ourselves too.

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And I think an area that people are often missing in this is the, You're Going to Die part. A lot of people don't want to look that squarely in the face because it can be very terrifying. Again, we don't really talk a lot about death as a culture. That's something we try to sweep under the rug. And a place in particular that I've seen this come up in my work is sort of in the diet and wellness culture aspect of things. Where industries have really capitalized on this idea of let's convince people that if they just pay for a juice cleanse, and hire the trainer, and eat the chicken and broccoli, they're gonna live forever, right? They're gonna live so long, they're gonna be so healthy, never mind how miserable you are while you're doing that.

And I'd love to hear your thoughts on the ways that we get wrapped up in beating death through health or anything else. Because I know that sometimes we're not really consciously aware that that's what we're doing, but I think that's a driver. And like I said, oftentimes what it leads to is that people are miserable while they are here living in hopes of living longer.

Ned:

Yeah. I love that you bring that up. There's a lot to what you just shared that I want to speak to.

First of all, this idea of, what'd you say? Trust in yourself, like befriending yourself, being your own best friend, knowing how to take care of yourself, I especially love that idea and feel very strong about it today. A couple of the workshops I've done this week with cancer patients and our creatively conscious mortality workshop that we started I told you about, there this was this inclination after I had one of my own little meditations after yoga, in the morning. I had this experience sitting quietly, like I was effectively holding myself in that meditation. So, all the parts that are hurt and broken, or upset and crazy, were resting in me.

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And it struck me as this moment of befriending myself that I feel more now than ever before. Something that maybe is a no-brainer for others, but being the kind of person who obviously lives outside of myself through my emotion and tries to exist in the world by expressing myself fully so others can have me be outside of myself—that sounded totally crazy what I just said, but I think it's accurate [laughter]—that I need to put a little effort more maybe than some others to come back here and remember that I am my best friend, that I know myself better than anyone, when it all comes down to it.

And so where that connects to the mortality conversation is that deathbed moment. Not that we will all have it. Or maybe we will. Maybe we think about deathbed as *the bed* where you die slowly. And we don't know what time would be like if our head got cut off suddenly [laughter] in some crazy horrific accident.

Shohreh: I do think about it, but [laughter]—

Ned: Yeah, totally! But maybe time works in those moments in the same way, you know. It slows, and we're present, and our spirit is alive and our energy is alive enough to be in the dissolving and disappearing as much in a moment where we've been beheaded [laughter]. I don't even know why I went with the beheading, but—

Shohreh: I love it. It's perfect!

Ned: —that seems very striking. Yeah, it's so striking and sudden. But that compared to the deathbed, no matter where and when and how, maybe there will be an opportunity to really ask ourselves, will you accept this best friendship? You know, like here I am, like I'm here with you still, like as everything falls away.

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And once during an open mic this woman shared a piece about dying and she described it like a raft where we're all on the raft. I'm on the raft, and you're on the raft, and my friends and family are on the raft, and acquaintances are on the raft, and people I work with are on the raft. And slowly I have to push people overboard. The circles get smaller, and smaller, and smaller until it's just me.

And how are we befriending ourselves in this life? And then, befriending death is our chance to do that. This notion that we will be at that moment eventually. And so then just with us, in taking care of just us, and departing with just us, however that goes. And so then my wild journey through all of that back to answering your question in full, is that we then, from that healthy engagement and that befriending, consider chicken and broccoli, and supplements, and exercise as just yet another way of befriending ourselves. Not a, if I do this I'll never die, but, I don't want to leave, and I want to be as healthy as I can be while I'm here.

And so then do those things, and by being that healthy, you take care of your good friend, yourself, and so are better at dealing with the eventuality that you are not escaping, which is your inevitable demise, at least on this plain or in this body.

Shohreh: I think that goes hand in hand with what much of the work that this podcast has been, which is about redefining what health and wellness are. Because what I see so often is that people will take on this very narrow definition of what health is, where they're like, it has to look like this, it's very black and white. And again, what happens is that they're not considering all aspects of health, right? Like it's very physical health focused where it's like, I am just going to do all these things, and maybe it's taking a huge toll on my emotional and mental health. Maybe it's taking

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a huge toll on my social health because I'm making myself eat in such a restrictive way that I don't even want to go out and see my friends 'cause I'm worried about what the food will be like there.

Like those kinds of things, where it's like, that's not befriending yourself. That's pushing yourself away because you're doing what other people are putting an expectation on you instead of figuring out what is the thing that I need. Like how do I define feeling well and feeling healthy for myself outside of these other definitions.

Ned:

Right, and even to trust the part that says, screw this, I do wanna get drunk. Or screw this, I do wanna watch Gilmore Girls for 10 hours straight [laughs]. Listen, I've never watched Gilmore Girls, but it's always been this, like, good version of what I think of as the, I'm just gonna let myself have this thing and like numb out on this ride for a marathon of episodes. We all have whatever show that is. Mine right now is Evil, which I recommend. This isn't a plug. I don't own [laughter] any rights to the show, but I'm watching it on Netflix. But I think about how I let myself have it, you know, and in a way there's some balance happening.

It's okay. I don't have to spend every night writing in my moleskine about my emotional relationship with reality, and the things I need, and how I need to heal, and what I need to eat better, and what my next yoga practice is. But that sometimes too we can just remember, just let go. Like practice letting go too into whatever that is. And if it really is not helping and making you ill, then you need to pay attention.

And so you trust the compulsions and pay attention to the ways you can be healthy, but also trust the moments where you just want to let it out the window. Because ultimately, we're all gonna die and eventually be completely forgotten in thousands of years, maybe thousands and

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thousands, maybe only a hundred. But to not exhaust ourselves on the overthinking too much, you know. That we find this healthy balance, fluid flow.

And by the way, I absolutely have not accomplished this. [Laughter] As much as You're Going to Die is born out of all these things I've shared, it's also borne out of huge anxieties and fear that I have, and resistance I have, you know. It's like talking about vices, making something good in the world, or making us show up in the world in powerful ways. That's part of why You're Going to Die exists because there's part of me that's terrified of dying.

To finish making my point, this idea that we try to practice, maybe more than anything, the kind of letting go and the healthy version of it, so that we do remember one night what we need to do is go over to our friend's house and have whatever they're cooking because it's more important that we get that time with them than we bring a Tupperware full of the food that we need to eat every day. Like my mom eating beets and cottage cheese for a month straight, repeatedly throughout my life because it was the diet she thought she had to be on. And now what is beets and cottage cheese diet to my mom and her being dead, you know? These ways we get so lost in the options. But it's also part of being human, you know? It's overwhelming.

Shohreh:

It is. Well, and I think you've really spoken well to intentionality, right? Like I always talk to clients about how I care less about the ultimate decision that you make most of the time and more about how you got there. Because so often we're on autopilot. We're doing things very subconsciously; it's become a habit. And we're like, I feel crappy, I don't really know why, I

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don't want to investigate any further. And it's really just about being able to pause long enough to make the intentional choice.

And like you said, if the intentional choice is that you're gonna sit on the couch all day and watch my show, Parks and Recreation, for hours at a time, then that's fine. But what you don't want is to find that after 12 hours and be like, how did I get here? Right? And again, I am not perfect at this. Perfection is not the goal. These things happen.

But the more intentional we can be about being like, what do I need right now, and if that is the thing, instead of trying to be like, oh well, that's a healthy thing or it's an unhealthy thing, or it's a good thing or it's a bad thing, and just saying, this is the thing that I need right now. It's probably not going to be the thing that I need every day. That's what makes all the difference because that's how you're listening to yourself. Again, that's that befriending and actually taking into account what you need versus just being like, I do this thing because someone else told me to, or because I've always done it, which so many of us tend to get into those trends and have a hard time getting out of them.

Ned:

Mmm. Yeah, easing up on ourselves. I think you're right. You put good words to that. This kind of way we can be with ourselves that maybe our parents or other influences in our life weren't so good at doing in learning to kind of give ourselves a break and forgive ourselves. 'Cause then what better way to deal with the stuff that might really come up then, which is maybe guilt or shame. These driving forces, these experiences we have of ourselves in life, that the easing up would allow us to make room for all of that too.

The end of watching 10 hours of Gilmore Girls, I maybe could be ready to be with the repercussions of my choice, and open, and just down to learn

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from it. And know that I'll never maybe do that 10-hour stretch again, whatever it is, but that we're just in an easy relationship with paying attention and being curious about ourselves and how we're in the world.

Shohreh: Ooh, you're speaking my language right now! [Laughter]

Ned: I have to talk the caveat. The caveat is like you said, and I said already, it's like, I'm not doing this really well. I'm trying. I'm figuring out how to do it more. But I know it's something I wanna be, you know?

Shohreh: Yes. I talk about all this stuff with clients all the time. Like I cannot tell you how many times a week I talk about curiosity and openness. It's so important to have and just moving away from that rigidity and being a little bit more flexible, I think, can make such a big difference for people.

Ned: Yeah, me too.

Shohreh: So considering everything that you've learned through your own experiences and the work you've been doing with You're Not Going To Die, I'd love to hear if you have some advice for people in terms of how they can create meaning and impact while they are here and alive.

Ned: First of all, I just want to check you on what you just said, which is amazing. You called it, "You're Not Going To Die," which is like my favorite [laughter], it's my favourite moment of the podcast so far.

Shohreh: Okay, hilariously, you know why my brain wrote it that way, is because that's a book by Dr. Greger, the vegan guy, and back when I was super vegan, I read it and I was like all up in this philosophy.

Ned: Wow. That's what it's called?

Shohreh: It's called How Not To Die. Even worse because it says that it's a manual.

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Ned: Here's the way not to die [laughter].

Shohreh: It's bad! It's bad!

Ned: That's so powerful. Anyway, I mean it, the book or not, just the way we're inclined towards there. Even when I say, like people get them to try to remember what it's called, I think there's these unconscious things that are happening where we're like, I really don't want to know it. I don't want to say it! [Laughter] I love that. Please leave that in the podcast. Okay.

Shohreh: I will leave it for you. I meant to say, You're Going to Die, and now everyone knows.

Ned: Yes, yes. My first response to that question is to be really overcome with emotion. I don't have the answers. I don't have many answers at all. But I know in my experience doing this for the last 10 years is this reminder that I get and hope others get, that you're not alone and there's a place to go. And I'm not saying that it's me, or an open mic, or a workshop, but that there's a place to go where you can bring what you have to give. And someone needs it.

And I think it's important to remember that it's not a book that gets published, necessarily, or that movie that gets released, or that project that gets so dialed, and that social media account that gets lit up and has 20,000 followers. It doesn't necessarily mean any of that. It could end up there, but it's not about that. It's about knowing you have an experience that matters, and you have a heart and words to put to that, and someone needs you to say it. Like someone absolutely needs to hear you say it.

And when I sit in these open mics and I sit in these workshops and someone gets on stage who's written a really good song and played it at 40,000 open mics leading up to it, it's great. Thank goodness for them and

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that song. But what has mattered to me over the years more than any other thing that could happen in these contexts is someone who gets up and says, “I’ve never said this before, but I want to say it here.” And they speak their loss, and they speak their heartbreak, and they speak their joy, and they speak from their heart. And they might cry or make everyone laugh, whatever it is, but that they’re doing that act, that medicine. That’s impact.

And everything else will unfold as it needs to as long as you trust that. And especially your compulsions. And that’s this caveat I’ve said over the years. You’ve just gotta trust your compulsions. You have to pay attention to the thing that you’re not letting go of, that your consciousness is not letting go of, that some part of your mind, and being, and heart isn’t letting go of, but that you trust that it keeps coming up. Take that action, that ask, that invitation.

And I feel like You’re Going to Die, for me, being here with you and having this powerful, special hour to talk about something I love with all my being, to someone who listens and can take it, I only get this because somewhere way back, out of the loss of my mom, I just knew I needed to give it away, and say it out loud, and put words to it, and have it be witnessed. And so then I’m here. I don’t know how this happened, but it started there [laughs]. That’s all.

Shohreh:

I think you had more to say there than you realized. I think that was actually a very beautiful answer and so much wonderful information in there for people to really marinate on.

Ned:

Thanks, I hope so.

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Shohreh:

I think especially, and I'm not trying to paint loss with a silver lining brush or anything like that, but I do think that some really beautiful things often are born out of loss because it really rips us open in ways that nothing else in life does. Again, it comes back to that befriending right? It kind of forces us to get to know ourselves. And, again, we may try to really avoid it, we may try to numb it out, maybe we don't want to know it, but if we're able to sit with it, and feel it, and see it, I think there is a knowing there that is hard to come by otherwise. And sometimes that can really make something beautiful.

And like you said, maybe it's not like, a book, or a podcast, or these things that we hold up as being incredible accomplishments or anything like that, but maybe it's just a conversation you have with somebody else and for all you know that conversation changes their life and they remember it forever. I think we have so many moments like that, that we don't know, because we didn't experience it, right? I know we've all had moments that had an impact on us, that maybe that person doesn't even remember it happening, but it changed something in us. And we're often that for other people too.

Ned:

Yeah, the exchange, you're right. That's the transformation, or it can be. The, let me give this to you, let me put it down, can you hold it with me? And then can you even give it back to me? And that there's something that occurs in that. And it's part of the befriending that we keep coming back to. At least I think it is.

When I sit in a workshop like I did this morning with these 14 cancer patients and offer prompts and facilitate the space and do my "job," more than anything that's happening, more than any of that, is this exchange that's changing us. And not just connecting us to each other and

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reminding us that we're not alone, but befriending us to ourselves. And that the container does that, even though, like you said, even as simple as a conversation, that it can be that kind of sacred occurrence that we need more of in life.

Shohreh: Yeah. We're making meaning and impact in more ways than we know, all the time. And I think the more we can keep that in the forefront, that can really help us with remembering that we matter, which can be difficult to remember. People will be like, I'm not Oprah, so what [laughs] even is the point.

Ned: Yes.

Shohreh: And it's like, you don't need to be Oprah.

Ned: No!

Shohreh: You are impacting the world around you every single day. You have a lot of power in that way.

Ned: Absolutely. There's something I said at one open mic way back that I just loved that it fell out of my mouth. And it got caught on video, so I got to relive it and people have got to watch it and share it in the way that it mattered, which was what you just described. It's like, listen, 40,000 years from now you and I are the same as Beyoncé. It's like, that's it. So what is mattering? If we're both the same as Oprah in 40,000 years, then let's completely shift what mattering means. And especially needed that, I think, sentiment in our culture and these times where it's so much about success and measuring success. So I really feel that. I love that you put it that way.

Shohreh: Mmm. I love that. Well, thank you so much, Ned I'm actually delighted that this is gonna be the final conversation of 2020 for the podcast because I

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feel like it's just such a good fit and so many wonderful things for people to think about as they are going into a new year. How can people find you and support the incredible work that your organization is doing?

Ned:

Thank you for letting me be a part of this and especially this last episode. It's been really, really nice and special to talk with you. Like, the ways it could just matter just between you and I feels so important and like a gift for me. And then it's just icing on the cake that other people get to listen to it.

Yeah, you can check out the website, www.yg2d.com, and find out about our events that we do every month. We do an online open mic right now, so that amazingly is connected to people all over the world in a way that we hadn't been before the pandemic. So those extra surprises and gifts that come from strange times. And we do that on the third Thursday of every month. It's free to register, so if money is an issue, just don't worry about it. Just join.

But all the events like that and programming, our hospice program, our prison program, all the things we do, our Etsy page, our social media, you can get through that website. But the easier way, or easiest/easier, as easy way [laughter]—I don't know what I'm saying now, can I just finish?—is to go to Google and enter, "You're Going to Die." Not, "You're Not Going To Die," enter, "You're Going to Die."

Shohreh:

Yeah, don't fuck it up like I did!

Ned:

Although I hear there's a great book on health out there if you wanted to search for that. But if you just enter, "You're Going to Die," in Google, it'll bring up all of our links and pages. And I would just recommend not going

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further into that search. If you go deeper into the page it gets kind of intense, as you can imagine.

Shohreh: Oh yeah.

Ned: That's an easy way to connect up too. And I'm Ned! I'm Ned Buskirk, and I will be your friend, if you find me on Facebook, whatever. Like social media is a weird, wacky thing, but I feel committed to having it be a way that I can remind people I'm here, you know? I'm out here, I'll be your friend. 'Cause I feel like we need those reminders.

Shohreh: Oh yeah. Well, I'll make it really easy for everyone to find that stuff so they don't have to go down any weird rabbit holes [laughter].

Ned: Cool.

Shohreh: Everything will be in the show notes, so don't worry. Y'all have an Instagram too, I've got a lot of folx who are on Instagram, so you can check that out as well. And thank you again for sharing this space with me. It was a really lovely time.

Ned: Yeah, thank you, it was.

Shohreh: And that's our show for today! If this podcast has taught you anything or helped you in any way, I hope you'll consider supporting me in my effort to keep it going. You can join my Patreon community and receive members-only perks by going to shohrehdavoodi.com/Patreon, or you can tip me for my work through the payment links located at the bottom of the show notes for each episode. I would also encourage you to subscribe and submit a rating and review through your podcast provider of choice. I love hearing from listeners, so feel free to screenshot from your podcast player, post on social media, and tag me. Finally, if you're looking for more

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information on what I'm all about and how to work with me directly, head over to shohrehdavoodi.com. Hope to see you for the next episode.