

Redefining Health & Wellness

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Featured this episode: Shohreh Davoodi & Michelle Elman

Shohreh Davoodi: Hello, friends! This is episode #84 of the Redefining Health & Wellness podcast and I am really excited to share my conversation with Michelle Elman with all of you. Michelle is the queen of boundaries and she just released a brand new book called *The Joy of Being Selfish*. If you're afraid of boundaries or think they're mean, Michelle explains why you absolutely need boundaries and how to go about setting them. To access the show notes and a full transcript of this episode, head to shohrehdavoodi.com/84. That's shohrehdavoodi.com/84.

Don't forget the podcast will be switching over to its new name and branding very soon. If you're already subscribed to the podcast, then there's nothing you need to do. When the changes go live, everything will roll over automatically. And if you're not subscribed to the show yet, consider this your reminder to go ahead and do so. That way you'll never miss an episode.

[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!

Welcome to the show, Michelle! I really appreciate you being here today, especially because I know there are so many demands on your time. Thank you so much.

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Michelle Elman: Thank you so much for having me on. It's lovely to talk about boundaries.

Shohreh: Yes, I am so excited to talk about boundaries. I can't wait to dive into your brand new book, *The Joy of Being Selfish*. But before we do, why don't you share a little bit about who you are and what led to the creation of your book.

Michelle: So, I am a life coach and I started out online, I guess, with a campaign called *Scarred Not Scared*. And through that journey of sharing my own story of going through 15 surgeries at a young age and having the scars to show for it, I became a somewhat social media person [laughs] and that along with it became being an author, being a speaker, and social media is a large part of where I do my online coaching now. And I really love it 'cause I think life coaching should always be accessible, and not every life coach or personal development person can offer that. And I like that my space is a space where I get to give life coaching advice and there's no limits on accessibility.

Shohreh: And I guess the official word for you would be an influencer, right?
[Laughter]

Michelle: That was a word I was avoiding.

Shohreh: With your many followers! [Laughs]

Michelle: Frankly, the way I see it is it's a word. And influencer, people know what it means. Is it the most accurate description to what the job is? No. Do I necessarily influence people? Well, that's up to the person. [Laughter] If a person doesn't want to be influenced, there's nothing I can do about it. But yes, that's the title that I guess some people would go with.

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Shohreh: I always tell people that we all have influence and so one of the things I hate about the word influencer is there's this implication that you can't have influence in the world unless you have, you know, hundreds of thousands of followers, which just is not true.

Michelle: Yeah, exactly. But also, I think there's so many job titles that absolutely make no sense why they are called those job titles. So I kind of just accept that influencer is one of those words, and actually, if you go back to why it started being called an influencer, was it started from the marketing industry. So marketing industries would call us influencers. So it's not actually the label we gave ourselves or even a label that was created to describe what we actually do. It was in the context of marketing.

Shohreh: Yeah and that makes a lot of sense to me that that's where that term initially came from. But one of the cool things about it is that having that following, like you said, has really opened up a lot of different opportunities for you including that this is your second book. You've actually written a book before this one.

Michelle: Yeah, so my first book was, Am I Ugly? And that was the memoir telling the story of me going through this crash of confidence and body confidence and finding my way out and how I ended up going from an insecure teen who absolutely hated her body to a life coach now helping others and helping others to love their body but also love their life, be confident in their life, and stand up for themselves. And The Joy of Being Selfish, my second book, is a self-help book.

I like to see it as my first book was a book for me as a person and then my second book is a book for me as a professional. Boundaries is my favorite topic to life coach on and personally, it's because it is the thing that changed my own life. And therefore, whenever something changes your

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own life, you want to preach about it to the world and that's essentially how this book got started. Was if someone said to me, and I get asked this question all the time, is like, what's the one piece of advice you would have given to yourself when you were younger. The one lifechanging thing that I learned with my own life coach was boundaries and that's the single most useful tool any person in young adulthood, or even any earlier, needs to actually change their life.

And as much as we can get on board with self-care and self-love, as soon as you get to the point of setting boundaries, people are like, oh wait, hold on, too far. And I'm like, but how do you think you're gonna get self-love and self-care? It's almost like they love the theoretical concept of it, but when it comes to the practicality of the steps you need to take to actually create that change, that's where people stop.

And so I felt like there needed to be a book that tied those two things together. That self-care/self-love, ultimately, unless you're going to be selfish, you cannot create time for that. And it's alright getting on board with self-care and self-love, but if you do everything for everyone else first, you'll have no time left for yourself.

And so it was all these topics that I was talking about online and was really passionate for. And this sounds really arrogant, but I just started getting this phrase in my DMs all the time calling me the "queen of boundaries," from separate people. And I was like, I've never used this term myself, but I was like, wait, maybe there's a theme here. Maybe there is a consistent element to what I'm talking about. And of course, it was, it was boundaries.

But I think I had such a clear idea in my head what boundaries were, but found that there was no one else really educating on it or providing the information, the tools on how to actually set it, the practical stuff. And so I

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went out searching for a book, which I could recommend other people so that they could learn boundaries as well. Because how I learned boundaries was through my own life coach, and my own life coach hasn't written a book. So unless I physically pass her over as a person, I can't pass on the information I know.

And every book I read about boundaries, I would read it and just like, disagree with the whole book. And I was like, no, that's not boundaries! No, now you're talking about diet culture, and now you're talking about God. And I was like, what has God got to do with boundaries, I don't understand. And like, I would get frustrated reading all these books and I was like, there's a quote that's something along the lines of, if you want to read a book and it doesn't exist, then it's your duty to write it. And that's what I've always followed in terms of being an author.

That's the main reason I wrote my first book because I didn't feel like there was a book that talked about childhood illness without the survivor lens and without the inspirational lens. And I felt the same way when it came to this book. And yeah, it was just perfect timing. And I got the book deal on Valentine's Day, and the day before I started writing it we went into lockdown and I wrote the book in lockdown.

Shohreh: [Laughs] So you were actually one of those people who used your lockdown to create a beautiful work of art. I think many of us started in lockdown and were like, we're totally gonna do this, and then things quickly spiraled and that did not happen.

Michelle: Oh, I absolutely hate the fact that I am literally the epitome of a pandemic cliché. Like, how many people were like, I'm going to spend the pandemic writing a book? And I was like, no, you don't understand, I don't have a choice. I submitted this proposal, got the book deal, and in the proposal it

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said, “I will deliver this on the 1st of August.” So there was no choice for me.

I mean, I hated being the cliché of like, everyone was like, I just want to lounge around in my pajamas, and I was like, I do too and I am, but I’m also writing a book at the same time. [Laughs] Yeah, there was a deadline to meet, and to say I delivered the deadline and the next day I went down to the beach in England because lockdown has just lifted. So when I say this is my lockdown book, the book lasted my entire lockdown. Like the day before I was popping champagne with a friend, partying, celebrating this book deal, and the day after that I finished the book, I went on holiday for the first time. Well, I went on holiday within England, but still went on holiday because lockdown had lifted.

Shohreh: I’m sure in some ways writing a book in the container of lockdown, you know, had its special challenges, but I also have to think, you suddenly had all this time, a lot of probably prior commitments or events that you were doing fell away, so hey, if that means you got to really invest in your book in that time, that’s awesome.

Michelle: Well, considering I wrote up to the day of the deadline, I have no clue how I would have written this book if I hadn’t been in a pandemic [laughter]. Like, I have a lot of other aspects to my job that disappeared during the pandemic, and I frankly wouldn’t have had the time to write as good a book as I did.

Of course, there were constraints in terms of the fact my ideal writing situation is I have other jobs in the day and I schedule one or two hours writing time. But everything I do throughout the day inspires me to write and I’ll have moments when I’m in the middle of a meeting and be like, oh, this is a great example of how to set boundaries in a workplace setting,

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and then I'll jot it down in my phone so that when I sit down for that hour or two hours, I already have all the thoughts ready to go. And you couldn't do that in the pandemic, so there was a lot of days of sitting staring at a blank page.

But with every pro there's a con, so I took it as it came. I was kind to myself throughout it, was understanding about the fact that we aren't just working from home, we're working in a pandemic, which is very different. It was an interesting process, but I think overall I enjoyed it because I also locked down for five months alone and this book became my friend. I had no friends [laughter], so I had no human contact, and I genuinely think, because all my jobs had gone, because I was alone, if I hadn't had this book, it was just something really helpful to focus on and not get swept into the like, hysteria that was really present at the beginning of the pandemic.

Shohreh: And importantly, you got the book done. It's finished. By the time this episode comes out, it will be officially released into the world. So, it's amazing.

Michelle: Oh my god, so soon!

Shohreh: I know! it's gonna be in people's hands. I have it in my hands because I'm special [laughs]. I got to read it early. I loved it! And I want to just start with the title, *The Joy of Being Selfish*, because that is attention-grabbing. And for me personally, selfish is a word that was definitely thrown at me as a negative trait growing up, and in particular it was something my mom would say to me a lot as an insult. And your book makes a case for seeing selfish in a different light from what we're used to. So please tell me more about that.

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Michelle:

So, it is that thing of almost reclaiming a word that's always been used against you. And I used to talk a lot about this in regards to the fact that I'm plus size and the word fat was always used against me. And I am a fat person. Lie, I'm not saying that as an insult, I'm saying that as a descriptor. And in the same way, I think we should own the word selfish because it's not an option when it comes to boundaries.

If you are choosing to stay in instead of going out to a friend's party, even though they want you there, and obviously this is in non-pandemic times, you are being more selfish by prioritizing your needs over their need of needing you at the party. Your need for rest is more important. So the definition of "selfish" is to care about your own needs with the disregard of others. And yes, that sounds awful and negative, but you actually have to disregard someone else's need for wanting you at a party, or wanting your company, or not wanting to go to the party alone. You need to disregard all of that if you're gonna choose your need to rest.

And I think a lot of the time we think, oh, well, as long as we take care of everyone else's needs we'll be an important part of their life, and I'm gonna be a good friend, and a good wife, and a good employee. But if you do all of those things, you're burned out.

And the interesting thing is when you talk about boundaries to men, half the time, I was getting a really interesting response where they were just like, well, what's boundaries? And what I realized was they weren't asking what boundaries were because they didn't know how to set them. They were asking what boundaries were because they automatically already did set them. And it's only women who are expected to put themselves at the bottom of their priority list and be a martyr to everyone around them and serve everyone else's needs before their own. And it's at the expense of

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their own needs. And I think it's important to recognize that when you're choosing someone else, there is a cost to that and you are the cost to that. And so, you do need to be more selfish.

So, it's not just about reclaiming the word "selfish" in that when people use that word to insult you, it's really not an insult. It's just a fact that you have to be more selfish to live a life that you are happy with. But also, the flipside of selfish, the best compliment you can give a woman is that she's selfless. And a lot of the time it's seen as an indication of how worthy, or good, or valuable a human is.

But if you look into selfless behavior, a lot of the time what you'll find is someone who is not good, or wholesome, or doing it to be a good person, but more so out of insecurity. That they don't feel like what they offer as a human is enough, and so they give so much in the service of others that what they do almost compensates for what they believe they lack as a person.

And so, I used the example in the book of the mother or the parent who always empties the dishwasher and then explodes one day going, "Why won't anyone help me?" And then the family's sitting around being like, "You never asked." And so, it's this thing of, you do all of these things for other people, but no one actually asked you to, and you're actually doing it for yourself. And that's what I think selfless people have to recognize is that a lot of selfless behavior is actually people pleasing.

Shohreh:

You know, I would say too is not only does this strongly affect women, but also people who are marginalized in general because of all the ways that the world teaches us that we are not as important, right? We're not as worthy as other people, particularly white, cisgender men, for example.

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Michelle: Well, I think that when it comes to marginalization, the reason why that element comes up as well is because it's still this thing that if you give enough, if you do enough, if you're serving enough within the workplace, or you are compliant enough, all of these things, then you fit into the mold of, because I'm half-Chinese, it's like the model minority. You hear that a lot when it comes from Asians. But as long as I toe the line, I'm good enough to exist? Like no, I'm not buying that.

So that definitely does come up when it comes to marginalization because there is this almost illusion, and I think this has been changing in the last few years, but there was a moment where it was like, well, if you just work twice as hard, you can get to the same place a white person can. Okay, but why did we ever not question that system and how flawed that system is to begin with? Why should we take that onus on ourselves to change who we are and burn ourselves out in order to be equal?

Shohreh: Exactly. And in the introduction you shared this house metaphor to help people frame the idea of boundaries, and I would love if you shared that here too because I think it's a really helpful framing for people who are just starting to get their head around what boundaries are.

Michelle: So the example in the book that I use is that if your house is your life [laughs] and someone walked into your house and stormed through the front door, kicked the front door in, you would never go, "Oh, okay. Well since you're in my house anyway you might as well sit down." Or if someone starts tapping at the window and doesn't stop tapping at the window, then you go, "Oh, well, I might as well let you in otherwise you won't stop tapping."

That's the equivalent to when someone goes, "Oh, can you just do this piece of work for me? Oh, please just do it! Oh, please, I've got too much

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on my plate, can you just do it?” And you finally cave after the fourth time asking. That’s not setting boundaries. And you would never let someone into your house if they just kept knocking on the window. If someone kicked down your door, that’s a violation of a boundary, so you would never let them in after that.

And another example I explain is that like, if someone comes into your house, you also get to dictate the rules. So if someone takes one of your vases and smashes it on the floor, then you would kick them out of your house or at least you would have a few choice words to say. But if you look at the vase as a metaphor for private information, when someone does that in your life, do you set boundaries or do you just go, oh, well, it’s broken anyway, so might as well just leave it? You would never do that. You would look at the harm or the hurt that’s being caused and you would set a boundary.

And so you have to look at it from that point of view. You have to look at it as an invasion of privacy, trust, respect, all of those things. And it’s not just something you can just cave in on. And that’s where the house metaphor comes in because it’s the fact that your four walls of your house are literally your boundaries. It’s the distinction between you and the outside world and you get to decide the rules within your own house, just like you get to decide your own boundaries.

Shohreh: And clearly if people didn’t struggle with boundaries, you wouldn’t have needed to write a whole book about it. So in your experience, what are some of the biggest barriers that keep people from setting and honoring boundaries?

Michelle: So, within the book I highlight like the six main, I think it’s six? Maybe it’s seven.

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Shohreh: It is six. [Laughter]

Michelle: Perfect. It's so helpful that you have the book in front of you! So, the six obstacles that come up. And it's things like the guilt after setting boundaries or the fear of being disliked. All of these things are so common. And I think there's a really nice feeling when you look at these obstacles outlined and kind of go, oh, wait, I'm normal. Because a lot of the time when we have these doubts about our boundary setting, we question ourselves and we don't think about the fact that this is an experience that other people face when setting boundaries too, especially when they're learning to set boundaries.

So just because you don't find boundaries easy to begin with, doesn't mean that you can't end up learning how to set boundaries. I found it so difficult in the beginning. I had to come up against each of these obstacles, face them, find ways around them. And it's why I could write the book because I personally lived through it. And in the book, I do talk about the fact this has been a five-year process, it wasn't overnight, it wasn't uphill.

Because as soon as you get your boundaries in order in one area of your life, like for example, the workplace, your love life is gonna go tits up and then you're gonna have to figure that out. And then you finally sorted your love life out, and then a new colleague comes along and messes up your workplace. [Laughs] So then you have to go back to your workplace and sort that out. And it's a back and forth and just because you don't have boundaries in let's say your love life or your workplace, doesn't mean you don't have boundaries with your family.

And what I find is everyone has one good area, and if you can just take that one good area and take the belief that you needed in order to create that, and for a lot of people that one good area would have been so

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automatic they don't even think to recognize it as a skill. Then you can take what you have naturally as a boundary-setting skill within family boundaries, for example, and apply that to the workplace or your love life. And so, every time those words in your head go, "Oh, I can't set a boundary," you can use that as proof to be like, no, I've done it before, just I did it with my sister instead of doing it with my boyfriend.

And it's things like that which really help when it comes to facing these obstacles and recognizing you're not the only person going through them. And I might be the queen of boundaries now and the person who wrote a book on it, but I was also the person who was an absolute mess and I talk about that in the book as well. That I was a mess and I was the person who you'd compare your life to if you wanted to feel better about your own life.

Shohreh: [Laughs] When I think of people who have weaker boundaries, often for me that's a sign that this is someone who hasn't had a lot of time to really think about who they are and what they want. And you actually list that as some of the barriers. I think you mentioned not knowing what you want, not knowing how you feel or knowing how to process how you feel. And for me as a self-trust coach, I'm like yes, this is exactly it because being able to set boundaries is an exercise in self-trust. It means that you trust and respect yourself enough to choose you over other people.

Michelle: Yeah, 100%. I also think it's a huge element of self-respect that when you do what you say and you say what you do, like, that is a person who respects themselves. My word is my bond and I know that's cliché, but that essentially is boundaries. Because when I say to someone else, "If you do that again I'm going to walk out the room," I walk out the room. I don't just set it as a threat, I don't set it as an ultimatum. I mean it. So when you've set any promise or agreement with yourself, you also have to follow that

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through. But a lot of the time what we find is people will make promises to their friends and families and always hold up that promise and their end of the deal. But when it comes to their own promises, that's where their respect or their trust is lacking.

Shohreh: You're saying you'll walk out the room. I know there are some listeners out there who are going, oh my god, that's so mean, I could never do that. And when I've worked with people who are afraid to set boundaries, they'll often say their fear stems from just being worried they'll lose everyone they care about if they do. What's your thoughts about that?

Michelle: Well, I lost everyone I cared about, so... [laughs] But what I realized was that the people I was caring about didn't really care about me. And that's the difference. And when you're surrounded by those people, especially friendships, I'm mainly talking about friendships in this area because I wasn't dating anyone at the time. But I was desperate to cling onto these friendships because when you're in a friendship where you aren't constantly being shown you're appreciated and loved, as you should be in a friendship, then you almost have this justified insecurity, if that makes sense? That you feel insecure in your relationships, so you're trying to do more and more to cling on, when actually you should just take the fact that you're feeling insecure in the friendship as a sign because you're not being reciprocated, or the level of friendship you're offering is not being reciprocated.

And so, I talk about this in the book that I went through a phase which I call the "mass exodus." I lost so many friends in that first year, and now when I look back, I'm like, those weren't friends. They were never friends. They were people who I really wanted to like me, but they weren't friends. They weren't ever there for me. They never once cheered when I was doing

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well and they were never there for me when things went tits up and I needed help. They used my downfalls to make them feel good about themselves for their savior complex. But in terms of actually holding space for me to be a broken human being, as a friendship should, and let you cry and all those things, those people were not supportive in that way.

So what I recognized was a person with bad boundaries, like I was, a person with low self-esteem, like I was, and a person with a lot of trauma she hadn't dealt with, attracts a lot of friendships that are not healthy. And it's painful. It's lonely. It was a really hard phase in my life. But it was a necessary part of the process that I had to go through because I needed to create space for people who I actually deserved to have in my life. And I changed the standard of the kind of friendship I allowed. I changed the standard of how I deserved to be treated and that's ultimately what boundaries are. It's what isn't okay about how you are treated.

And when I look back at that time, all I could feel was like this fear, this loneliness, and also this worry that because I was past university, I kept telling myself that people don't make friends as adults. And even if they did, their old friends come before their new friends. Well, five years later I can tell you that's absolutely not true. I have amazing friends, all of them I made in adulthood because I lost all my friends by setting boundaries. And what I realized was that those friendships should have ended a lot sooner than they did, I just didn't have the courage to stand up for myself. And if the friendship depends on you not having good boundaries, then that's not a friendship you want to keep.

Shohreh:

And I think the underlying fear here is this fear of being alone because a lot of people don't know how to be alone with themselves and how to

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spend time with themselves. You know, yhey kind of try to avoid that at all costs.

Michelle:

Yes, so this is one thing that I kept mentioning in the book because I thought it was a really important part of it. I did not like spending time with myself because I did not like myself, and that's a horrible thing to say. But it's a true thing to say. I was the person with 30 best friends. And as much as that sounds like, oh, how incredible am I, I must be a great person because I've got 30 best friends, the only way you get to having 30 best friends is one, by oversharing, but two, by literally never being capable of being alone. And so I made sure there was a person no matter what, because I never wanted to be by myself.

So of course once I had this like mass exodus—and whilst I say I lost everyone in my life, I didn't lose everyone, I lost at least 10 friends that year but I still had a lot more friends—and in that year I realized the amount of friends I had wasn't sustainable but actually was born out of insecurity because I could not be by myself. And so, when you lose those friends, it forces you to be by yourself and spend time alone. And a lot of the time I was uncomfortable with that because I had never done it before, but also you can't like yourself unless you actually start spending time with yourself.

And so it was like this catch-22 of I didn't like spending time with myself because I didn't like myself, but I didn't like myself so I didn't want to spend time with myself. So I had to break that cycle and start somewhere. So I spent a lot of time alone that year, and now, it raised the standard of who I pick as friends, who I pick as friends, but also who I pick as partners because the fear of being alone doesn't exist. The fear of being single doesn't exist anymore because I lived through it and I loved it. And now I choose alone time.

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I mean, I was just talking about the fact that I was in a pandemic and spent five months alone, and five years ago the one with 30 best friends would not have believed that. And actually, this sounds like the stupidest fear, but my greatest fear in the world was living alone. I've always had insecurity and especially in London, I never wanted to live alone. And the fact that not only do I now live alone [laughs], but spent five months in a pandemic and now it's been what? Almost a year in a pandemic and I barely see people—maybe at the moment I see one person a month—and I'm absolutely fine.

It's because I forced myself to spend time with myself. I found parts of me I liked. And now if someone said, "Why would anyone enjoy spending time with you" I could give you a list of a hundred reasons why someone would want to spend time with me, whereas I couldn't say that even two years ago.

Shohreh:

Right, spending time with yourself really strengthens how you see yourself, how you view the qualities that you have. This kind of goes back to, as well, what you were talking about with the ways that we give ourselves to other people, where we are so willing to give our time to other people, right? We want to go hang out with friends, we want to go out on dates, or to our work, and it's seen as weird for us to give that time to ourselves, right? Like, to take ourselves on dates or be like, I want to spend a night doing this thing I enjoy. And it shouldn't be weird, that should just be a normal part of all of our lives.

Michelle:

You know what, for me, I think that started in childhood. So in my secondary school we had a dining room, like most schools do, and if you were sat by yourself eating lunch, you were considered a loner. But not only that, if you were seen walking to a lesson by yourself, you were

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considered a loner. Which just practically at one point in your day, you are going to be walking from one lesson to another lesson which no other student has that transfer, like, from one class to another, and you will be walking alone. But within the school system, it was like, oh, look at her, she's walking by herself, she has no friends. That's not necessarily true. I might have plenty of friends, I just didn't have a friend who's walking from that one class to another class.

But it creates this insecurity from an early age of, to never be seen alone. And I think it carries into society in general because a lot of the time, if you see someone having dinner by themselves, for example, it almost comes with a like, aw, poor them, they must have no one to have dinner with. Rather than a, they could have chosen that, they might have wanted to experience this restaurant alone, they might have wanted to eat dinner by themselves, they might be wanting to enjoy their own company. But we never assume that. In the same way we never assume someone chooses to be single. That it's always a default that you would end up with if you had no other options.

And I think we have to flip our mentality on that altogether because I do choose evenings on my own when I've had other options. And I've never regretted it because I value time with myself. But if you don't value your time at all, like whether that's your time in terms of how much you're being paid within work or your time within work in terms of how much they're taking advantage of your time, then you won't value your time in terms of you spending alone time either.

Shohreh:

Yeah, and I can say now at 31, I fucking love alone time. I love spending time with myself. There are so many cool things that I can do in my time with myself and I will be way happier doing those than saying yes to going

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out or doing something with someone else that I didn't want to go to in the first place. And boundaries is what has given me that. Thank you, boundaries!

Michelle: I mean, what's funny is that I just spent a month over the holiday period with my family, and after a month I was like, I need to be alone. And my mom was like, you've just spent five months alone, like how much more alone time do you need? [Laughs] And I was like, I actually think the five months of alone time made me want more alone time [laughter]. It worked in the opposite way. But I've definitely tested my limits of aloneness this year and I didn't hate it.

Shohreh: Yeah, I think a lot of people had to test their limits of alone time this year and for a lot of people this past year was maybe some of the first instances they had of getting to spend time with themselves like that. So hopefully some people started to see the benefit of that because like I said, I freakin' love it.

Michelle: Well, I think it forced a lot of stillness and it forced us all to reflect and pause. And I think alone time is great for that. Like, a lot of the time I enjoy just being alone simply because I'd get to evaluate my day and think about how everything went and how I would have done it differently and what I'm grateful for throughout the day. And you need that time alone to just think about that stuff sometimes.

Shohreh: Right, it gives you opportunity for self-reflection.

Michelle: Yeah.

Shohreh: Alright, so for people who are listening who are like, okay Michelle, I agree with you that it sounds like boundaries are a good thing, but I have no idea how to go about setting them, what advice would you give to them?

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Michelle:

So, within the book I start with the easiest boundaries, and the easiest boundary is no. Start staying no when you mean no and yes when you mean yes. Don't say yes when you mean no and don't say no when you mean yes. And it sounds simple, but it really is that simple.

When it comes to getting your hair cut and someone goes, "Do you like your haircut," if you don't like your haircut, say no. Tell them what they need to change—don't just walk out of the store unhappy. If you're in a restaurant and your food is cold and the waiter comes over saying, "Are you enjoying your food," say no if you're not enjoying your food.

It's things like that. And it sounds minute and it sounds so, almost unconnected to the rest of the boundaries in your life, but if you can't set boundaries with a stranger, then how are you going to set boundaries for anyone you actually know, especially within British culture and it's like very British to never say no to, that you don't enjoy the food to a waiter or it's embarrassing and all of those things. But that's where you start.

And whatever boundary you find easiest to set, start there. It doesn't need to be the hardest boundary first. For some people it's setting boundaries with a stranger first is the easiest, and with some people it's setting boundaries with the person you trust the most or you care the most about. So let's say it's your best friend. Then set the boundary with your best friend. Maybe it's saying no to your best friend for the first time and that can be a really hard thing in itself.

I actually tell the story of me setting boundaries with my best friend for the first time, and that was one of the scariest things I ever had to do. I had to sit down with myself and be like, this is the person I trust most in the world. This is the person if I was in hospital, I would call first, before even my parents (because I would freak my parents out). So I would call my best

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friend. And if I can't have a hard conversation with her, how true is our friendship really? And so I had the hard conversation and of course it was absolutely fine because she wouldn't be my best friend if there wasn't a reason for it. But it can be really daunting.

So whoever you find it easiest to set a boundary with first, it's about practice. Start somewhere. And when you first start boundaries, it's going to be messy. And I think this illusion that it's going to be eloquent and perfect the first time, it's not. Even for me, and not to be arrogant, but I'm told I'm quite eloquent with setting boundaries now. [Laughs] I'd hope so because I wrote the book on it! [Laughter] But I wasn't when I first started.

When I first started, I remember literally sitting in my life coach's office almost learning a new language. Like, I was there with my phone asking her to compile the words because I can't even remember what I was saying no to, but I didn't know how to actually phrase it. So we had the whole conversation, I was like, okay fine, I need to set the boundary, but how do I actually say it? And she was like, well, you just tell them. And I was like, no, you're going to have to put it in writing. And so, we sat there and compiled my text.

And this didn't just happen once. This happened frequently! And it's why throughout the book I give actual text examples because it's almost like I didn't have the vocabulary for it, and it's stupid because it's English. Like I knew the words, I just didn't know which order to put them in. And whenever I tried to set boundaries I almost pendulum between being too lax and being like, "I'm really sorry, I hope this is okay," or being too over the top and like, almost being confrontational and starting a fight before the fight had even happened.

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So, I needed to find this balance and my life coach definitely helped me to do that, and that's why throughout the book I put all these text examples is because it's important to have a varied vocabulary, a lexicon in different ways to set boundaries, in different styles. And of course, they're all within my language because it's in my voice after all, but hopefully with the various examples it does give you a better idea of what you can actually say in the moment.

And it's simple phrases like, "This doesn't work for me," but that's one I use all the time, it's one I like. You might not like that one, but then there are other ones which, "I'm gonna walk out the room," is one I use a lot. [Laughs] Which I understand other people think is a big deal, but I just don't. Even if I don't want to say I'm walking out the room, I will excuse myself from a conversation and say I'm going to the toilet or something like that. But I don't see why I should have to stay part of a conversation where I'm either being insulted, or being treated badly, or it's about something that I've set a boundary around. So if I didn't want to have a conversation about plastic surgery, then I shouldn't have to keep enduring it simply because you want to continue talking about it, but I've already told you stop.

Shohreh:

And for people who are really struggling with the tone, I actually found your life coach's five C's in the book to be super helpful if you're just starting to wrap your head around boundaries and you're like, how do I actually say this without coming off as an asshole? And I'll just say what they were. So the five C's are calm, compassionate, clear, concise, and consistent.

Michelle:

Yeah. And I think it's a really good summary because god, I was not good at calm in the beginning. [Laughs] I think there's an illusion when you're

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first setting boundaries that they're done out of anger and to realize that whenever you set a boundary it's about you, it's not them. So they don't need to be a bad person, they don't need to have been rude, even though sometimes they are, but it doesn't have to be the case that they were insulting, or rude, or any of those things because your boundary is about you.

And one of the metaphors I use in the book is you don't build a fence because you hate your neighbor. And you might hate your neighbor, but that's not the reason you build a fence. You build a fence as a property line—as a boundary between your property and theirs. And that's exactly what a boundary is. A boundary is the difference between you and me and where our distinctions end and where our distinction lies. And especially within things like romantic relationships, that line can get blurred so easily. Or between a parent and a child, that line gets blurred as well. And so knowing where one person ends and another begins is also really important.

Shohreh: You were talking about the power of using the word “no” and something else you mentioned in the book which I thought was really interesting was not justifying your use of the word “no.” So tell me about the result of not doing that because I'm not gonna lie, is it not something I had thought of before. I think I often justify my no's.

Michelle: I think sometimes it's phrased as, you need to give a reason in order to be polite. But if you've ever been on the receiving end of someone else setting a boundary saying they can't come to your party, a lot of the time you don't care for the reason. You just need to know whether they're coming or not. But when we're on the other side, we almost put too much weight on what someone thinks about us.

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And so, we over justify or even justify in itself, where we go, “Oh, I can’t come because I’ve got work and then I have to go to this thing.” No one cares what your schedule is. No one cares. And if they do, then they can ask. But a lot of the time they won’t ask. And it’s this thing of not wanting to offend and therefore providing a reason. But if you have to provide a reason and therefore you have to have a busy schedule in order to say no, then that’s not setting boundaries. That’s letting your schedule dictate what your calendar is.

Rather than, let’s say your evening was free, you just didn’t want to go. So what, you have to say yes simply because you’ve got a space in your calendar? Because you don’t have a reason to say no? What if your reason is you simply want to sit on the sofa and watch Grey’s Anatomy, which is my reason a lot of the time. [Laughter] That’s a good enough reason!

So it’s this justifying of no that I thought was a really crucial point. And I use the example in the book where I inadvertently gave a reason and then had to withdraw it and cancel and it was all really awkward. And I included it because as I said before, it’s going to be messy and it’s going to be awkward. But once you start picking up on it, you’ll notice how many times you actually naturally give a reason without someone asking for it. And even when someone asks for it, they don’t necessarily deserve a reason. Your no is your no. And now when friends go, “Oh please come to this party,” blah-blah-blah, I’ll go, “No, I said no.” And they’ll be like, “But why?” And I said, “Because I said no.” And then if they push it a third time, then now all I need to do is, “Boundaries. Stop.” [Laughter]

But seriously, I would have actually set the boundary. But obviously now that I’ve written a book on it, all my friends know about boundaries way too much [laughs], they don’t push it anymore. It’s so strange becoming known

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for boundaries because people don't really test my boundaries anymore, which is so strange that I spent five years learning how to set boundaries and now I just don't because I wrote this book.

Shohreh:

You know, the thing about it is that when you get really good at boundaries in your own life, you have so much respect for other people who have strong boundaries. Like, I'm actually thinking of a recent example in my own life where I had reached out to someone to come on the podcast. It was someone we had kind of talked about doing it before. And she wrote me back this really beautiful email saying no. And in this case, we had a relationship, so she gave me the reason of, you know what, podcasting is just not really my form that I really like to speak in. So she's like, if I ever change my mind, I'll definitely let you know, but right now it's not for me. And I literally wrote her back and I was like, thank you so much for beautifully stating your boundaries. Like, that was amazing.

Michelle:

Oh, 100%. I also find even now when people set their boundaries and it's inconvenient for me, I'm secretly really happy for them [laughs] even if it's inconvenient for me. For example, like at Christmas when everyone was writing their signing-off emails and I'm going to be out of the office from this time to this time, the editor for the book was like, I'm going to be out of the office from whatever date it was 'til the 11th of January, if there are any emergencies, here's my number. And I just replied with, "There will be no emergencies. Good boundaries!" [Laughter]

Like, there is nothing urgent. The book is coming out on the 4th of Feb, whatever can happen will happen after the 11th of January. Everything that comes before that, it's very easy to get swept away with the illusion that it's important and urgent, and we do this in all of our careers, no matter

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what the industry is. But frankly, unless you're doing brain surgery, it's not important nor urgent. And so, you don't need it right now.

So even if I did have a question about my book, which I didn't because I have my own boundaries, but if I did on the 8th of January and she was coming back 11th of January, was it really worth disturbing someone else's rest? But it's only because I value my own rest that I valued hers too. And so that's where you recognize that as soon as you start getting good at boundaries, not only do people test your boundaries less because I almost think you walk around with this energy of don't mess with me or don't fuck with me—

Shohreh: Yes!

Michelle: I don't know, it's the only way I can explain it because no one really tries to test my boundaries that much anymore. So, I was like, I don't know what it is. And I do think you walk around with a different energy that people just know not to fuck with me because [laughs] they're not gonna get very far and I'm not even gonna get upset by it because I'm just gonna set my boundaries and then move on with my life. And you can sit there being annoyed about it, but I'm not going to be affected by it. But also, you start respecting other people's a lot more and you stop taking other people's boundaries personally, because that's another thing that happens as well.

Shohreh: Yeah, and it's okay if someone's boundaries annoy you, or inconvenience you, or whatever. Like, the idea with boundaries isn't that, oh, someone sets them and you're just like, yay, this is great, so happy. Like, sometimes people set a boundary and it's not great for you, and that's because the boundary was for them and not for you. And so getting to a point where you can still respect that, even if it's not the choice that you like or that you would have made, like, that's the whole point.

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Michelle: 100%. Sometimes someone setting their boundaries will make you feel shit and will make you feel guilty because it could be because you violated their boundaries and you just didn't know. And so, it wasn't bad intentions or it wasn't an intent to cause harm in any way, but you didn't know their boundary. And so, you can't respect a boundary that you didn't know existed. And so, sometimes when someone is like, "Hey, you crossed my boundary," you might feel guilty, but that's okay. You can just go, "I'll now respect it from now on, thank you so much for letting me know," and then you can deal with your own feelings.

Whereas if you have bad boundaries, that's when you put your feelings about their boundary on that person rather than accepting how I feel about your boundary is my stuff, I have to go sort that. But the response to you is, "Thank you for letting me know." That's all you need to know about this process and my separate process about my own stuff and my own feelings, and the feelings of rejection or the feelings of abandonment it just brought up are my history and my wound, but it has nothing to do with you and your boundary.

Shohreh: Yes, and, you know, that bad bitch kind of energy that you mentioned, like, for me, I'm thinking about the fact that boundaries are really teaching other people how to treat you and how you will accept being treated. And so, once you've done that enough with enough people, they've gotten used to it, you've eliminated some people who couldn't get used to it, then it's like, of course people aren't gonna fuck with you anymore because you've actually curated your life in such a way that you don't even have people around who would try that.

Michelle: Exactly! The boundaries get rid of the wrong people in your life, but keep the right people. So whenever I was talking about the mass exodus and all

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the friends I got rid of, I truly believe boundaries cannot get rid of the wrong person because you setting boundaries should not end a friendship. And if it does, that friendship should not have existed.

Shohreh: Yeah, I agree with you on that one. Any time that I've set a boundary that has ended a friendship, I was able to look back afterwards and see, oh, there were actually some red flags there along the way, and maybe if both of us had set better boundaries on the front end, then we would be in a better place. But, you know, the reality is that a lot of us were not taught how to set boundaries when we were growing up. I did not learn how to truly intentionally set boundaries until my late twenties.

Michelle: No, exactly, and I'm the same. And this is why we have the issue that we have now and the reason why I wrote the book. Because none of us were taught that. And I think it stems from, and I talk about this in the book, that it stems from the fact that we have this illusion that children have a different set of rules to adults, and so we never make that shift. Because at what point should you listen, shut up, stay silent, and just accept what you're told, and at what point do you challenge it? We never got taught that. We have these set of rules in school—shut up, stay silent. and do what you're told—and then you're suddenly meant to be an adult who stands up for yourself.

But actually, you can teach boundaries so much younger than a lot of people think. And I use the example of a ten-year-old child in my book of one of my friends who taught her daughter how to set boundaries.

Because I do think you can start boundaries from an early age. And if you set those boundaries early on, then they're second nature to you. So you might not know the word "boundaries," but you'll know how to set them and you'll be vocal in how you set them because it's just your second

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nature. It's how you've always been taught to stand up for yourself and what you deserve.

Shohreh:

And teaching kids boundaries I feel like requires you to respect the autonomy of those kids, and I think especially in older generations, that was not as much the case where it was more of this dynamic of like, the parent is the ultimate authority, you do what they say, no questions asked. Kind of like what you were saying what we have in schools as well. And so, if you don't see that autonomy in your child, then why would you teach them boundaries?

Michelle:

That's so interesting. You just made me think of something that happened last week. I was hanging out with a friend and her child, and it's so silly, but the child was trying to get a carpet from another room and he didn't want to go. And I was like, why don't you want to go? He was like, because I'm scared because the other friend who was there keeps tickling me. And I was like, well go up to them and say, "Do not tickle me." And I like pointed my finger. And because he was two years old, three years old, he went up to her and went, "Do not tickle me," and then walked past and got his carpet. [Laughs]

And when he got back, his mom was like, why did you just teach him that? And I was like, because he should know how to stand up for himself and if someone is touching you in a way that you shouldn't be touched, then you should tell them, "Do not tickle me." And it was really cute because he was three years old, but literally copied me like word for word with the finger pointing as well. But then the mom went, "We don't talk to people like that, we don't point our fingers at people." And like, of course, I was joking. You shouldn't point your finger at people. But it was funny how I told him how to set boundaries, he managed to get his carpet, the person didn't tickle

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him because he told her not to, and then the mom almost undid it and was like, “You don’t talk to people like that.”

And I was like, but what was rude about what he just said? Like, to me, that wasn’t rude. Okay, maybe he shouldn’t have pointed his finger, but that’s boundary setting. And frankly, if someone was touching me in a way that I didn’t like as an adult, I would turn around and say, “Do not touch me like that.” And it’s the same thing. So if you can teach it to a three-year-old, you can teach it to a ten-year-old, and that’s part of their nature. But it was just quite interesting to me that I taught him this, he learned it very quickly, and then his mother untaught it.

Shohreh:

Yes, that is always a really frustrating thing. Kids are just like great little sponges, but depending on what the environment is that they’re in will determine what exactly they are soaking up. That’s why I feel like the more of us who can be examples around other people, like even if you don’t have kids, because I don’t have kids, I’m not planning to have kids, but when I’m around other people’s kids, I want to be able to be that example of boundaries and other things because they will learn that. And you don’t know if they’re getting it at home, so you can definitely help them set them in that right trajectory so they’re able to set boundaries later in life.

Michelle:

Yeah. I just think it was also interesting in terms of, like, it almost showed the mother’s discomfort around boundaries that was mirrored in her child. And I think that’s where a lot of people get an interest in learning how to set boundaries once they have children because they want the boundaries for their child but aren’t at the place where they want the boundaries for themselves because they still don’t believe they deserve to set boundaries.

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Shohreh: It's funny how much of this comes back to the idea of politeness isn't it? 'Cause I feel like that thread runs through so much of this. Like, all the things I was taught growing up in order to be polite, were actually ways of making myself smaller and putting other people before myself. And fuck that.

Michelle: Well, I couldn't get over the fact that, I do a Monday Q&A on my Instagram every week, and every time someone asks me about boundaries, there was one week in particular where I noticed it, where there were 10 questions on boundaries and every single one was worded in exactly the same way where they said, how do I set boundaries with my partner, like, politely, or without being rude? And it was those two words kept coming up. And I was like, it's not that you can't do it politely and it's not that you can't do it without being rude, it's that why is that your focus? Because if that's your main focus, you are not going to set the boundary accurately.

Because the whole thing of being rude is how it's perceived, right? You can't control that. You could be the most polite person in the world and the person could still turn around and be like, "You're being rude." In the same way that mother thought I was being rude by saying, "Do not tickle me," I don't think that's particularly rude, and I think if I said that to a guy in a bar at the age of 27, "Do not touch my arm like that," I don't think that's rude. I think that's me standing up for my own body that needs protection. And so, the mother thought it was rude, I didn't think it was rude. I think it's setting boundaries.

So if you're relying on someone else's perception, then you're going to lose. You need to decide what you want and let the other person have that perception of your boundary. Whether that's calling you rude, calling you impolite, calling you selfish, let them have their reaction. In the book I say,

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“Their response is not your responsibility.” But you have to actually completely remove their response as your focus to set the boundary accurately.

Shohreh: Yes, the fact that likeability is always a losing battle is all the more reason to choose yourself and put your own needs first because you could run around and try to please all these other people, and no matter how well you think you’re doing that, it’s not gonna be enough for everybody and you’re just gonna lose yourself in the process.

Michelle: Oh, 100%. And there is no doubt about it, when you start setting boundaries you will become a more unlikeable person. I am not a particularly likeable person. I like to think I’m a lovable person, but I’m not a particularly likable person. [Laughs]

Shohreh: Yeah, maybe we just toss out this idea of needing to be likeable anyways. Like, why is that the pinnacle, again, especially for women, of ooh, we need to be liked. It’s like, why? Why do we need to be liked? We do not need to be pleasant. We do not need to have a smile on our faces all the damn time.

Michelle: You know what’s so funny? I wrote a caption on this a couple of weeks ago where I said, “I’m a difficult person to be friends with. I’m a difficult person to be in a relationship with. I’m also a difficult person to work with.” And I don’t think there are many people who I work with, in relationship, all of that stuff, would dispute that. But I’m so bored of being an easy person to be in a relationship with, an easy person to work with, because every time I did that, it was at the expense of myself. Like, a person who is really easy to be friends with means a person that you never invest in the friendship.

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And so, yes, I have standards for my friends, and I have high standards for my friends and if you don't live up to that, I'm not gonna cut you out, I'll call you out on it. But I want to be called out on it as well. And as I talk about in the book, I have friends who call me out on my shit all the time. If I'm not behaving in a way that they think is living up to what I'm capable of, they'll be like, "Come on, we're better than this, stop bitching about that person, you're better than this." And I want friends like that in my life because once you start setting boundaries and you build that self-esteem and you build your identity, you want to live up to that standard. You know what you're capable of and you want to actually reach that.

And so, it stops being important whether you're likeable or not. And likeability is actually a competition in how many people like you and not who likes you, and that's the difference.

Shohreh: Mm. Yeah, that's so true. And I think this idea of easiness is really a dishonesty because if you have relationships, you know, where you never fight or disagree, you don't have difficult conversations, you just say yes to each other all the time, like that's just a dishonest relationship because those relationships don't exist. So, you're again, not choosing yourself, you're putting this relationship or the harmony in the relationship over you, and those aren't great relationships to be in and they're not going to make you better.

Michelle: You know what always makes me laugh? Is on these dating apps where guys put like, "I'm looking for an easygoing, drama-free girl."

Shohreh: Bleh.

Michelle: That means you want a woman with no needs, but you're gonna call me needy the moment I ask for anything. And so, I am going to ask for

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something because if we're in a relationship I want my needs met. So every time I see these dating profiles which say, "easygoing" or "carefree" or "spontaneous," all I hear is, okay, so you're not going to make plans and when you turn up randomly, I'm meant to be spontaneous and just accept it. I'm meant to be drama-free, so any time I have an issue I'm meant to not vocalize it. And easygoing means I'm not meant to ever have needs.

And so, if that's the person you want, fine, go for it. Click, swipe right on the person who wants an easygoing person. I'm not easygoing. I'm not a person easy to be in a relationship with. But you know what? I fully believe it's worthwhile being in a relationship with me and that, as much as I'm not easy to be in a relationship with and I might be difficult to be in a relationship with, what I bring to the table is worth it.

Shohreh: Ooh, with the mic drop there! Love it! [Laughs] So many great nuggets in this conversation. If there's one final thought that you could leave listeners with about boundaries, what would you want that to be?

Michelle: The main thing I would say is like, you need to believe that you deserve to set boundaries, which means you deserve to dictate what's in your life, who's in your life, and what your limits are. And to start standing up for that. And it's 2021, it's time to, new fresh start. I love a fresh start in the New Year. Yes, it's an arbitrary date, but I love the fact that it brings a new energy. And if you start making the changes now, it takes a while, but you will start seeing the shifts in how people react to you almost immediately.

Shohreh: And y'all, you are worth it! You are absolutely worth setting these boundaries and they will totally improve your life.

Michelle: Yeah.

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Shohreh: Well, thank you so much for being here, Michelle. How can people find you and get their hands on *The Joy of Being Selfish*?

Michelle: I am @scarrednotscared on Instagram, TikTok, Twitter—I think those are the main platforms. You can get *The Joy of Being Selfish* at any bookstore, I think, but all bookstores are closed, so online it is. If you're in America, the Book Depository is the place to get it. And I have a podcast called *In All Honesty* and that's about it.

Shohreh: Awesome, I will put all of that in the show notes so it is very easy for people to find. I think that people are hopefully gonna feel inspired to really dig into boundary setting this year after hearing this conversation. So thank you so much for making the time.

Michelle: Wonderful, it's so lovely talking to you.

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 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.