

# Conjuring Up Courage #90

Featured this episode: Shohreh Davoodi & James Rose

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**Shohreh Davoodi:** You are listening to episode #90 of Conjuring Up Courage, and today, I am delighted to get to introduce you to James Rose. James is a non-binary actor, HAES informed personal trainer and yoga teacher, and the co-host of the Full Soul Nutrition Podcast.

James and I talk about the lack of inclusion in acting, the infinite number of ways to be non-binary, self-trust in the context of dating and breakups, and tons more that I think you'll enjoy.

To access the show notes and a full transcript of this episode, head to [shohrehdavoodi.com/90](http://shohrehdavoodi.com/90). That's [shohrehdavoodi.com/90](http://shohrehdavoodi.com/90).

[Music plays]

This is Conjuring Up Courage, and I'm your host, Shohreh Davoodi. As a self-trust coach, I help people come home to themselves, so they can be more of who they are, and less haunted by who they think they're supposed to be.

I created this podcast to celebrate what's possible when you commit to being brave. You'll hear from diverse guests who are refusing to let fear and self-doubt stop them from building fulfilling lives and creating a better world for everyone. I'll also teach you my favorite tools, strategies, and mindset shifts so you can do the same. Consider this your invitation to stop living according to "shoulds" and to step into your motherfucking magic instead. Stay open, get curious, and let's grow together.

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James, truly this is a delight to have you on the show. I want you to know that I have a great track record of being able to get a read on future friendship with a person based on like one or two interactions, and I mean it when I say that I felt an instant connection with you, and I've so been looking forward to our conversation today.

**James Rose:** Aww, thank you so much. I felt the exact same way. I think I responded to your initial email and I was like, "You are the first person to have named Pam in an email as like a reason for interest." And I was like, we're going to be friends, like I know it. As opposed to all of the other like, "Hey girly, love your brand! I was thinking about, like, for our skincare line, we were looking for ambassadors." [Laughter]

**Shohreh:** Oh, dear God.

**James:** Like, you really set you apart. [Laughter]

**Shohreh:** I'm so sorry you get emails like that on the reg, because that sounds horrifying [laughter].

**James:** I do. It's really wild. I'm like, oh okay, so you have not looked at a single thing I've ever done. Got it, got it. Weird way to out yourself, but okay. [Laughter]

**Shohreh:** Yeah, sounds like treating you with human decency was a way to set myself apart. And that makes me sad, but also, if it works for us to get to be friends, I'm here for it.

**James:** It's so true though. And like, when you put yourself out there and just like make one personal connection, or like acknowledge something that

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matters to somebody else, even if it is as silly as like a large, pink marsupial [laughs], like it just made me feel taken care of. And I was like, oh, I am going to love this podcast. [Shohreh laughs] I'm going to love this interaction, I'm going to love you. And here we are, so it worked [laughs].

**Shohreh:** We are here, and for those listening who are like, "What the fuck and who the fuck is Pam?" [James laughs] Don't worry, we will talk about Pam later [laughter].

**James:** [Laughter] Yeah exactly, we'll get there I guess.

**Shohreh:** [Laughter] We will. We have to now. We've set it up, very important [laughs]. Alright, well, you are a human of many talents and experiences. I know this.

**James:** Thank you so much. [Laughter]

**Shohreh:** Yes. Well, I would love for you to share anything you feel so inclined to for my listeners who are learning about you for the very first time today.

**James:** It's interesting, I'm starting to like reject defining myself by what I do and more of what I am. And I haven't quite figured out or locked in any of the language around it, but I know that what I really love is life, and I love enjoying all the like, fun, little moments that like, take my breath away, and like, give me butterflies, and make me excited about the next moment to come. And the ways in which I have been able to engage with those most safely, and the ways that like light me up, are through

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acting and through fitness, and now, kind of through Instagram, interestingly enough.

So, I became an actor because I think the human experience is so broad and complicated and exciting, and there's so many stories that have not yet been told. And so, I think one of my purposes, like in this lifetime, is to exhume and to celebrate some of those human experiences. And so that's what I work to do as an actor.

I think that will be a lifetime's worth of work; I don't think I'll ever get there, but it doesn't mean that I don't try. You know, like every performance might get me a little bit closer, and sometimes that's in the form of like, being on film or doing stuff on stage. And it's everything from like tap dancing in an ensemble, and like not being a named person, to being the lead. And I think they're all so important, and like that is what brings me the most joy is telling stories that way.

I think the through line here is actually [that] I'm a storyteller in just many different facets. And the story of my getting into fitness is deeply tied to my recovery from an eating disorder and learning to love myself for who I am and rejecting diet culture. And noticing this huge flaw in the fitness world where we attach our worth to our physical bodies, and where we restrict, and where we put on these moral obligations around food and bodies.

And in my recovery, I learned how toxic some of that was, and decided to become a weight neutral, Health at Every Size personal trainer. And I did thousands of hours of like training to become a yoga teacher, and

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like, trauma-informed yoga, and working with populations that ordinarily don't have access to wellness, and rejecting a lot of the whitewashed wellness. And so, that's what I'm also particularly passionate about is dismantling systems that are oppressive, and learning to make them more accessible.

Then, I just started talking on the internet about sex one day [Shohreh laughs], and now, here we are. [Laughter]

So, you know, just – I guess it's stories, wow. Maybe I am a storyteller of many facets. I don't think I've ever really put it that way until this moment, so I just learned something about myself, real time; that's pretty cool. [Laughter]

**Shohreh:** I love it. I was just thinking when you were saying you're a storyteller of many facets that like, yeah, your TikToks came to mind for me. [James laughs] Because I love TikTok, okay? And there are plenty of people who are not on the TikTok train yet, and that's fine. But I think that one of the things that makes TikTok so cool is what people can put into a 15-second clip, a 30-second clip, a one-minute clip.

**James:** Yes!

**Shohreh:** Like I have learned so much amazing shit from TikTok and found so many cool people. And it is an avenue for storytelling, and for teaching, which I think is amazing. Like people are like, oh, it's just some social media app, and I'm like, it's actually so much more than that.

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**James:** Yeah. I think TikTok especially, it just hit us at the right time. Like I think it really blew up around the pandemic especially, and it couldn't have been a more perfect time for us, you know, because we were, especially in the United States when we were on such a prolonged lockdown, and still are.

[Laughter] You know, we're recording this, [Shohreh laughs] we're almost at the one-year anniversary. And TikTok, I think it's the thing that has singlehandedly saved us.

**Shohreh:** Yes!

**James:** You and I are, you know, laughing because we both got our vaccines yesterday, [laughter] but like, that's also saved us for sure. You know, science.

But definitely like watching people do funny dances, and then like scrolling to the next video and it's an angle of social justice that I had not considered yet because I wasn't exposed to a collection of thoughts in my education, you know. So that is the most exciting thing to me.

And the algorithm is super specific, and exciting, and I love it. I was an anti-TikToker for a long time.

**Shohreh:** Me too.

**James:** Were you?

**Shohreh:** Yeah.

**James:** Ugh. I was anti-social media for a long time.

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**Shohreh:** I thought it was for the kids, you know? I was like, oh, this is for the youngins, I don't know what to do on there. And to be fair, I do feel like one of the oldest people on the app as a 31-year-old, but.

**James:** [Laughter] Yeah, I guess we are definitely a little bit older than the target audience, but at the same time, there's a lot of value in connecting with the younger audience. I think especially as queer people, because like, I was robbed of a generation of people that are queer because there was a mass genocide in the '70s, and '80s, and '90s that took so many people. And those would have been like, our generation's mentors, you know. Those would have been the people that we would have confided in, and looked up to, and had as examples and support systems.

And so I think it's actually really special to see that being offered from our generation to the generation below us. And I read that New York Times article that was like, "The world is as gay as it's ever been!" [Shohreh laughs] And I was like, actually, I think the world has always been this gay, now we just have support and community.

**Shohreh:** And language.

**James:** Yeah, and language. And we have a more vested interest in a common understanding of what might be uncommon for us. And I think that that's the difference now. And I really do think social media is one of the biggest catalysts, because people who may be experiencing isolation or a lack of community for their identity can find it online, and I think that's really special.

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I learn something about my own identities nearly every time I log on and I listen to another non-binary person talk about their experience of gender. And I'm like, "Oh fuck, me too, random person from insert place here. [Shohreh laughs] I had never considered that."

Like one of my best friends just got diagnosed with autism, and she has struggled for years in social situations and just always thought there was something wrong with her. And there's nothing wrong with her, she was just overlooked because she's a "shy girl." I'm putting air quotes around that, I guess you can't see them. [Laughter]

That was what it was chalked up to be, and now she's like, "No, I'm literally a neurodivergent person. [Laughter] Like now I have so much more language and understanding around my identity." And it's just been this wonderful renaissance for her.

And she found out through TikTok by watching other girls that had similar characteristics, qualities, and experiences to her own, listening to them talk about being diagnosed with autism later in life, and asking her therapist about it. And now she's like, "I understand myself."

And I'm like, that is so special. And like, if we didn't have things like TikTok, how would that information have gotten to her? I don't know.

**Shohreh:**

I'm so glad that you mentioned this. One, because ADHD TikTok has been like a total lifeline for me. I'm just constantly learning things about my neurodiversity that I didn't know, and I'm like, oh my God! I do this all the time! Had no idea this was related to ADHD. Like, it's so helpful.

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But two, the queer community has been huge, especially during the pandemic.

I probably started regularly using TikTok at the beginning of the pandemic, so it would have been a year ago, and I started with just a few months of just scrolling, trying to understand the app.

For those who are not on TikTok and they're like, "Oh, like it's not for me," the TikTok algorithm is incredible.

**James:** It will figure you out [laughs].

**Shohreh:** Yeah, but you have to spend some time on the app, like, before it realizes, oh, you don't want the 18-year-olds doing dance videos? No? Okay, let's try these other things.

But it will figure you out. I would say it is the best algorithm of all social media that I have ever seen, in terms of like really being able to help identify you and show you things that you would enjoy. You know, it really figured me out quickly.

And this was a time when I was doing a lot of identity work around my queerness, this was a time when I was going through a divorce, all this stuff. And TikTok was something that was there for me and provided me with queer community that I couldn't have in real life because of the pandemic. You know, everything was online.

**James:** Totally.

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**Shohreh:** And I swear to God, like, those TikToks made me feel less lonely, and made me like be able to figure things out about my identity, and how I wanted to be in the world, and about this community that I was really starting to blossom into, and language that I wouldn't have had.

So I am forever indebted to TikTok, particularly in the pandemic, in a time where I can't just like, go out in Austin and go to a queer meetup. Like this is all I had.

**James:** Yes! I really love that you brought that up, the specificity of the algorithm, because it also means that like, any creator can be fair game, and I like that.

**Shohreh:** Yes.

**James:** You know, like that's kind of the general zeitgeist around TikTok from social media experts is like the algorithm there is fair game. It's actually about the value of your content, not necessarily the number of followers you have. Engagement is not guaranteed.

As opposed to Instagram, like that's where most of my—I don't like to use the word following, I say community. There's a hierarchy there, you know? Because there isn't, as far as I'm concerned.

And so, like my Instagram community is much bigger than my TikTok community, and that also comes with a set of responsibilities. Like I know if I post something on Instagram, X amount of people are going to see it because that's just the way it works. You know? If I post something on TikTok, that's not the case. And I get people on my For

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You page that have all different sizes of followings. And I think that's so important, because then we're not gatekept away from diversities of information. And we can find different perspectives that we may not have ordinarily come in contact with, because any creator is fair game for going viral.

And I think that that is one of the most exciting and terrifying things about it [Shohreh laughs], because there is a flipside of that that's really negative. And absolutely, like, there are people out there and some of my friends are like, "I would love to be on TikTok; it is not safe for me to be on TikTok because no matter what I say, given my identity," it's like they just get maligned for them.

Or if you end up on the wrong side of TikTok, then people just eviscerate you for being something that you cannot change or don't want to change. Then that's just unacceptable. And that's kind of the dark underside of social media.

But I do think that, like from my personal perspective, it has been worth it to navigate some of that discomfort, and hatred, and anger for the benefit of connecting with queer community across the globe, essentially. I mean, there are no limits. That's what's so cool about it.

**Shohreh:**

It's super cool. And you're exactly right that the virality nature of it means that it's awesome, 'cause you can really go viral for anything, and that is so amazing. Just to be able to see anybody, not just people who have like made themselves into influencers, or who are trying to sell

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something, or whatever it may be, being at the top of the content. Instead, it's just like, if your content is good.

Someone like you or me who has been on Instagram, who is maybe used to a certain level of engagement, trolls, whatever it is, we may have a thicker skin and ability to handle that than like someone who's not, right? That they just, like—I don't want to say regular person, that sounds weird [laughs]. But like, someone who has not put themselves out there in that way as part of their work or as part of just what they want to do in the world. And for them to like innocently put up a TikTok that then is literally shown to 2 million people, and all the sudden you have the judgment of those 2 million people. Like, if you were not expecting that, if you're not prepared for that, like, that can be very painful.

So I totally agree, that can be really tough for people.

**James:** Yeah, absolutely.

**Shohreh:** Well, I want to talk about the acting piece, which you've mentioned, because I know this ties into a lot of the kind of changes that you're saying about, you know moving to less toxic fitness, and moving to being HAES-aligned and all of these things.

Obviously, I think most of us know that acting can be quite a toxic environment, particularly from a body image perspective.

**James:** Yeah.

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**Shohreh:** So, I'm curious about, you know, especially you now, about your experiences in acting, both as a person who is anti-diet, which is not most of the acting world, and as a non-binary person, since I imagine that most roles are written for man or woman.

**James:** Oh yeah. I can probably count on one hand the amount of non-binary characters I've ever been able to either read for or play. And out of the handful, I've done one.

We'll go to the diet section first and then we'll get into the gender parts, because I think they're actually related. And yeah, the idea that your body is your currency is pretty accurate within the acting community, and it's a real problem, because then we see how little representation we have of other people. We see how talent is gatekept based off of looks. And we don't get to see the breadth of the human experience represented adequately in our mediums, and it's a shame.

And it's not just a shame, it's truly violent. And I have benefitted from a lot of those privileges, which is what's interesting about like unlearning a lot of it is having to unlearn where I fall on the privilege spectrum. And like recognizing that, oh, even if I'm anti some of these systems, I'm still inherently benefitting from them because I am thin, I'm white, I am what the industry considers conventionally attractive, and I have gotten roles because of what I look like.

And that's complicated because I would rather it be because I'm talented. And like, yes, I may have been talented enough to get into this room, but like there have been plenty of instances, and some of

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them that were absolutely harassment, where I'm like, oh, I was only in here because the choreographer thinks I'm pretty.

That's not acceptable. And neither is it acceptable for my fat friends to get cut at auditions because they're not thin. You know, like none of that is okay.

And I think people would be genuinely and positively surprised at how, if we just completely made a radical shift, and we flipped the narrative around like who gets to tell stories and we started centering fat people, and people of color, and queer people, and disabled people, and put them at the center of stories without their identities being the crux of the narrative, how well people would take to that.

Like if you add up all of the marginalized communities, that's going to outweigh the majority of the people with privilege. Like, we all exist at different intersections. And so, if we were to put people that experience those intersections, and just put them in stories as regular people whilst honoring their marginalizations and honoring their identities, we would actually have a really, really exciting industry.

I think it's pushing that way, but in theater, it's certainly not there, and in film, it's getting better. But we look at the Golden Globes, and we look at The Oscars, and we look at the controversies surrounding some of these white supremacist institutions that have privileged the thin, white, conventionally-attractive person over everyone else.

And you know, the saying "time's up" is not just quippy. I mean, it really is, the time is up. I've talked to a lot of my white friends about like, you

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know, when we go back to the industry, we should be losing jobs. Like we understand that, right? We can't just say Black Lives Matter and then notice that we are in a room full of entirely white people and think that that's okay, you know? [Laughter]

So there's a lot that has to do with the representation, and a lot that has to do in the dance world of how much of your body is currency, and how you're encouraged to change your body and your shape to fit what is considered conventionally attractive. And that just feeds a toxic narrative.

And what's unfortunate is that it tells young people—well, people of all ages—but certainly impressionable young people that don't understand the nuances of oppression and systemic oppression, but it teaches all of us who is and isn't worthy. And that's not fair or right in any way.

And then, also, for the actor perspective, I watched my friends go through horrific experiences with food and with their bodies and have completely undiagnosed disorders that they don't even recognize are problems. And that they don't recognize are things that have been thrust upon them by the industry and that they're being victimized by the very thing that they're trying to conform to.

And it's awful. I've had to start making it a practice of, when I go into an audition, I've gotta put my headphones in, and I can't listen to everybody talking about their diets, and the shakes they're on, and whose class they're gonna take, and what their counter step watch

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thing, whatever you—Fitbit—whatever that's... [Laughter] Because it's horrible. I mean, it's just awful.

And I think it's important to note that if I, someone who experiences a ton of privilege, is noticing that it's awful because of what I experienced, it only gets worse the more we look at other intersections.

So, yeah, that is something that just has to change. That's my biggest qualm with the industry right now, is if we reenter the industry with valuing the same things that we did before, it means that no one listened, and we're doing no one any favors.

**Shohreh:**

Right. And I feel like the industry definitely is like, well, we do this because this is what the people want. And I'm like, well, why do the people want that? It's because it's all you show them. You are perpetuating these things by being like, these are the only people we are going to give opportunities and experiences. When all anybody sees is negative representations of fat people, or negative representations of Black people, for example, in film or on stage, like, that colors how we view those people out in the world, and then that colors how people in auditions are seeing those people as well.

And so it's like, it really has to start with these industries, and deciding no more, right. Like we're not gonna do this anymore, because there's only so much that y'all can do on the acting side. Which isn't to say that there aren't things that can be done. But they are the ones who have the power, and the control, and the money, and they're just being like, no, we're just gonna keep it the way it's always been. And we're just

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gonna only give white and thin people opportunities. It's like, I want better storytelling!

**James:**

Absolutely. We all do. And, you know, we look at like, oh, Black Panther like broke a zillion records, and everyone was like, this stuff makes money. [laughs] You know. Like this is not just a one-off, like, phenomenon. This could be the market if you were smart, and if you cared, and if you listened, you know.

Especially now that like we've had more actors and actresses come out as different genders than what they were assigned at birth. We've got more representation on that scale of gender diversity, and people are more interested in that now.

It'll be interesting to see when I come back, like experiencing the transphobia that I experienced after I came out versus before. You know, 'cause I was always non-binary, but it took me a while to figure out that language, and that wording, and use the right pronouns for myself.

And I noticed that, as soon as I put my pronouns on my resume, and as soon as I came out to the world, I was not getting callbacks. And the people that were interested in me the year before all the sudden weren't interested in me. And it's not that I got less talented, it's just that I was asking for a kind of respect that they weren't educated on how to offer.

And I remember I was told once that they didn't have room in their show for any they/thems.

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**Shohreh:** What?! [Audibly gasps]

**James:** Oh yeah.

**Shohreh:** Oh my God.

**James:** Yeah, I wanted to spit nails, you know. But instead, I didn't have to, but I chose to do the dutiful, obedient actor thing that we're trained to do of, you know, thank you for your time, and then calmly leave the room. And what I should have done was taken my book and sent it flying through that person's teeth. [Shohreh laughs] But I didn't.

Because like that kind of violence affects all genders. It disproportionately affects trans and non-binary people, but that kind of mentality is so limiting. When we're looking at musicals of any age, any genre, you can absolutely cast gender-diverse people to play anything that they're comfortable playing.

Like when I came out my agents were like, "Oh okay, so are there any kinds of roles, or any characters, or any genders that would give you dysphoria? That you don't want us to send you in for? Are there any restrictions that you want to make around what would feel safe for you as a non-binary person going into the room?" And that is a beautiful question.

And you know, I was so scared to come out to them because they had taken me on as like one of the people that could fit the cute chorus boy type that I was getting a lot of attention for, and it was going well. And I was like, "Not to flip this on its head." [Shohreh laughs] And it was

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like, it's not that I'm no longer interested in being in the top ensemble of *Singing in the Rain*. Like I will absolutely do that, like I would love to. As long as I'm treated with respect in the room, like I will play any gender.

That is my choice. That is not the choice of a lot of other non-binary people who do experience dysphoria playing other characters, and that is absolutely their choice that needs to be respected.

And I said, "No, I want all the roles and all the genders," you know. [Laughter] There's another nuance here that says I'm not going to take away roles from women because women are also a group that does not get to be at the forefront of many stories and should be. And so for me, as a non-binary person to take a role away from a woman, that is a deeper conversation.

But definitely to take roles away from [laughs—to take roles away, even that kind of framing is problematic. To accept a role of like, you know, me playing a cis man, I'll do it. Absolutely. 100%. I love to. I like the challenge of embodying different genders because all different gender experiences have informed my own, and that's like the beauty and the fluidity of gender.

So I hope we get to a place where we no longer have Eddie Redmayne in *The Danish Girl*.

**Shohreh:**

Ugh.

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**James:** And we no longer have like, oh, Laverne Cox is in this film? Great, it's inclusive. Laverne Cox is fucking incredible. Eddie Redmayne can act. Eddie Redmayne shouldn't be playing trans people, and Laverne Cox shouldn't be the only trans woman that's Black that is represented in media [laughs]. You know what I mean?

**Shohreh:** Right.

**James:** Like, we've got a long way to go is my point. And until there's a lot of conversation, especially about queerness. Because queerness is both a gender and a sexuality experience. And I'm somebody who got to be a double agent, [Shohreh laughs] and I'm queer in both directions, right? [Laughter]

And it's important right now, because we have so much violence that's been enacted against trans people and against queer people, in both gender and sexuality, that we get ownership of our stories. And it's not that cis people and straight people aren't talented enough to play gay characters and trans characters. You are. I'm not interested in seeing you do it. You don't inherently understand this. You cannot exhume this experience to the same level. You cannot represent it with the same authenticity as a queer person.

And, because you get lauded for that, it's different than when the trans or non-binary person tells their own story, it starts to shatter the illusion. It starts to make us real. Because if you see us on the red carpet as trans and non-binary, with, you know, all sorts of different middle fingers to gender with our presentation, and then you also see us doing

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that on camera, it makes it more real. Whereas if you just see—I'm using Eddie Redmayne as an example from *The Danish Girl*, and if that's not an accessible like narrative, this is a cis man who played someone transitioning to be a woman.

And the crux of that is like, oh, so Eddie Redmayne played this trans character and was a woman on this film. But like, oh, then you see him on the red carpet and you're like, oh my gosh, it's a man! What an amazing performance! And then for the rest of us, it's like, well that doesn't exit when we leave the stage, just in the way cisness doesn't exit when you leave the stage, or when, you know, the director calls cut. So we need to be offering people who have this experience, to tell our own stories.

**Shohreh:**

Yes. I think too, this brings up something that I've noticed, I know a lot of people in the queer community have noticed, where there's sort of this trendiness right now to queerness. Whether it's TV, or it's movies.

And on the one hand, I'm so excited that I'm getting to see way more queer characters and queer representation than I did growing up. Like I cannot count on one hand the number of queer characters that I had the opportunity to see when I was growing up, to the point where like, I didn't even know I was queer for a long time because I didn't have that representation. And now it's like, oh my god, there's so much beautiful representation. There's also a lot of, I want to say like, hollow representation, where it's like, oh, queerness is in right now. So like, let's just say that this character is queer, and it's like, they don't go

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anywhere with it, or you know that the storyline isn't done with it, and it's really just like, oh yeah, this is cool, we want to have this.

And so that's also weird to see 'cause I'm like, should I feel bad for the critique [laughs] because, like, queerness, I want that to be out there. But like you said, it's like we wanna tell our own stories, and like, we want those stories to matter and be just as important as the stories from non-queer people that are on the screen or on the stage.

**James:**

Absolutely. You've hit the nail on the head with the complication of tokenism versus representation. Because true representation is not a cosmetic fix to a social justice solution that gets funding because it's "diverse." You know, just having the gay best friend is not diversity; having a main character that's bisexual, but it's never handled respectfully, is not representation. That's tokenism. That's doing a disservice to the community because then people who may not have as much experience with queerness see that representation and think that it is a true representation. You know, they think that that is accurate.

And it's really important that not every piece has to be so nuanced that it encompasses every intersection. That's impossible. But it is important to be conscious of like, when you're writing a queer character in, or any other, you know, insert marginalized identity here, it's important to do it respectfully in a way that enhances and builds up the narrative.

Like, of the canon of queerness that we have right now, I would say that the majority of it skews to tokenism, and to caricatures, and to archetypes, as opposed to flawed, interesting, complicated people

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whose perhaps marginalized identity is not the forefront of their entire existence, it is just part of it.

And we see this with cis women get complicated characters. Cis men get complicated characters. Straight men, straight women get complicated characters that are about more than just their gender and sexuality. [Sarcastically] And, interestingly enough, queer people deserve the same thing.

**Shohreh:** [Sarcastically] Hmm.

**James:** One of my favorite experiences was working on a short film that I did for—it was someone’s graduate thesis—it was about two people, both of them are men, that were young, 19, 20, and going through their first college breakup. And I got to tell this story of like going through that heartache, and going through that difficulty, and it just happens that this character was queer. Queerness wasn’t the focus of it.

Now, as you can imagine, this was a graduate film done by a bunch of queer people, and we were like, “We just want to see ourselves as normal!”

**Shohreh:** Yes!

**James:** “So like, let’s create something around it.” And it was wonderful because I just got to walk on set and be a lot of myself. And I got to inspect something from the lens of the humanity, and not from the lens of just the identity. Because I held those identities, I could walk in and

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tell that story. And that's something that's really important to have as well. And we don't get that a lot, and we deserve it.

**Shohreh:** Your mention of queer writers is key because we can tell when the writers' room was just filled with straight people [laughs] writing queer characters.

**James:** Oh yeah [audibly sighs].

**Shohreh:** Like it is so obvious. And this is where they get things wrong, harmful stereotypes are perpetuated. Like one of the—

**James:** Yes!

**Shohreh:** —big, recent ones was, I don't watch Big Mouth, but I know a lot of people who do. And there was this whole controversy where they wrote in a pansexual character, who has like a song about being pansexual, and like the pansexual character essentially is following the like, oh, bisexuality is transphobic line, of like, oh yes, well I'm pansexual and I'm not transphobic.

And I'm like, this is a really popular show, and you've now perpetuated the stereotype that anyone who identifies as bisexual is transphobic, which is not true, has never been true. And if you had spent two seconds on Google, you could have found that out.

**James:** I was just gonna say, if you listened to *anyone*.

**Shohreh:** Yes! Like if you had talked to any bisexuals. [Laughs]

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**James:** Oh my gosh. Like you don't even have to have read Stone Butch Blues to know this. And this is something that like, is exhausting as the trans community to have to constantly talk about. Because it's like, my god, we're centering trans rights within whether bisexual people are represented accurately or not. It's like, actually we need to be talking about the trans people here that get maligned.

And it's like—and I know you're not doing this—but like from the media standpoint, it's so exhausting because it's like, the problem here isn't actually the bi/pan debate; the problem here is how little we know about trans people.

**Shohreh:** Yeah.

**James:** And how little we've been included, like in the representation. Because the bi/pan debate can go on as long as time exists, and like, that is not for me to comment on, as someone who doesn't hold those identities. As a trans person though, like are you attracted to me? Am I attracted to you? Are you gonna respect me? Am I gonna respect you? Cool. That's what matters.

Now, there are other trans and non-binary people who do feel differently, but you're absolutely right. If we look at the history of bisexuality, bi means myself and others.

**Shohreh:** Yes.

**James:** [Laughs] Like, same and also others. Like, more than one. [Laughter]

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**Shohreh:** Yeah, and the reality is that like, no matter what identity you hold, there will be transphobic people because, sadly, that's the world that we live in.

**James:** Absolutely. Yes.

**Shohreh:** So to paint with a broad brush and say, well everybody with this identity is transphobic, it's like, no. There are some transphobic people. There are also transphobic pan people. [Laughs]

**James:** And there are transphobic trans people. [Laughs]

**Shohreh:** Yeah. So yeah, exactly. I'm just like why is this the storyline that is happening here?

**James:** Yeah.

**Shohreh:** Like we've literally gone out of our way to put it into a frickin' song. I'm like, this could have been a really exciting moment to be talking about pansexuality on this major show, and instead, it turned into this thing. Like you said, which doesn't help bi people, it doesn't trans people. And I'm like, if this is for the queer community, like why are you doing this? Because it doesn't feel like it's for us.

**James:** 100%. And we can always tell when you didn't have queer writers and when you didn't have queer consultants in the room, and we always know it's because of laziness. Because there's a plethora of queer people that are writers that are exciting. And if you didn't have them in your room, it's because you were lazy and you didn't seek them out.

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I don't understand why you would ever want a room where you're creating something that might be a cultural staple, and you wouldn't want multiple sets of cultural identities represented. Like, why does that sound like a good idea?

**Shohreh:** Yeah, what it comes down to is that it was a choice.

**James:** Totally.

**Shohreh:** Even if you're like, oh, but we just overlooked it, or we didn't, or the budget. I'm like, no, you've made a choice. Because everything that you're doing in that writers' room is like decisions of what you're going to care about and what you're not going to care about.

[Sarcastically] And interestingly, those choices don't happen to people with nonmarginalized identities, how interesting. So that tells me that—

**James:** Yeah.

**Shohreh:** y—you've made the choice that you want to affirm those people, but not everybody else.

**James:** Yeah. Oh, how do we make queerness palatable? No, I'm not interested in it being palatable. I'm interested in all queer people being respected.  
[Laughs]

**Shohreh:** Yes.

**James:** And that just goes back to the earlier idea of who should be losing jobs when, you know, our industry comes back in full swing because parts of it are back, parts of it aren't. Non-queer people should be noticing that

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they lose jobs. And if you're a non-queer person who's noticing that you're like, wow, I am like getting so many jobs, why? Interrogate that. Obviously there are other identities that you can hold [laughter] for sure. The disabled person that's like, "I'm straight, but I'm a wheelchair user." Yes, you need to be in that room, like by all means [Laughs]

**Shohreh:** Yes.

**James:** 100%. And that room needs to accommodate you without your having to ask for it. That's another conversation [laughter].

**Shohreh:** [Laughs] Well, this is a good segue because, whether within acting or even outside of acting, I feel like non-binary identity, while absolutely it is not a new identity—

**James:** Yeah.

**Shohreh:** —there are a lot of cisgender people who are like, this is new to me. And I'm wondering, and I'm not suggesting that you speak for the entire non-binary community because of course you don't, but in your opinion, are there certain things that you feel like cisgender folks could do better to support and affirm the non-binary community?

**James:** Yeah. That's a great question, and it's the hot topic. And it's true, like I don't speak for the whole community, and this is something that's really delicate for a lot of people to talk about. I happen to feel comfortable speaking on it, and there are many trans and non-binary people who don't. And it's important to note that it's never the trans or non-binary person's responsibility to educate other people on their existence.

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There was a viral graphic that I recently like critiqued on my Instagram, which I don't spend a lot of time tearing down other people's content because I don't think that that's helpful. But when something is deeply flawed and going viral, it's important to talk about it. It was someone who uses multiple sets of pronouns, but has never come out as non-binary, so for all intents and purposes, this person is cis.

They were saying, "If you don't understand someone's identity, ask about it." And I immediately pushed back and said, "Gender is such a private experience. If you meet someone who has a different gender identity than something you may understand, that is not an open door for you to interrogate and question. That actually others people and makes them feel less safe."

At the same time, we have to be open to educating each other because otherwise, if someone doesn't speak out about it, then how are we going to learn?

So I want to just name both of those things, and note that like, everyone's got different boundaries with this stuff, and education is a lifelong thing. I could sit here and monologue until the end of time about non-binary gender identity, and neither one of us would ever learn the full crux of it, [laughs] you know. We would never have a complete understanding.

Some main things that I think cis people either don't understand, or get confused about etc., pronoun usage would be the first one. So, pronouns are simply the respectful way to refer to somebody in space.

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Common pronouns that are most often used in English are he, she, and they. And then we have neopronouns, like fae/faer, ze/zen, people using their names as opposed to their pronouns, insert a whole host of other pronouns here.

And oftentimes people get confused because they think that pronoun dictates gender identity, which is not the case. If you see someone's pronouns, the only thing that you know is the respectful words to use to describe them. So, for instance, like Shohreh, your pronouns are she/her, mine are they/them, which means those are the right words to use to describe each other if we're not using our names, right? It does not mean that just because you use she/her that you're a cis woman, and just because I use they/them I'm non-binary, even though, in this case, that's what it happens to be [Shohreh laughs].

A lot of non-binary people do use they/them pronouns. A lot of cis women use she/her pronouns. We could switch and it would still not change our core identities; it would just change the way we would respectfully refer to each other.

And this gets into another thing that I notice is a big pitfall cis people fall into, is trying to conceptualize and understand non-binary gender identities. And it's important to note that there are as many ways to be non-binary as there are non-binary people.

My identity has a lot been informed by the world trying to condition me as a man and never feeling like that fit correctly. And even though like my physical body does not give me dysphoria, being referred to as a

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man does. And yet, I'm not a woman either, even though there are many parts of womanhood that have informed my gender experience. And many things that are feminine that have come into my realm as ways I express myself and ways that I connect with my gender.

But I am neither man nor woman. I would not say that I'm in the middle. I would look at this spectrum as a color wheel, and you could put man on one dot, and woman on another dot, and me on another one, and all the other genders exist on that same color wheel too. And when we say gender is a spectrum, it's important to note that this spectrum is not a continuum of like, one side to the other. It's not like man is on one side, and woman is on the other, and everything else in the middle. That's why I like to use the color wheel because it doesn't have a beginning or an end; it's an infinite menagerie of things.

Oftentimes cis people get really trapped up in trying to understand what someone's gender identity is, but you can't put yourself in somebody's shoes and understand their entire life's worth of experiences.

Gender is informed by our relationships, by media, by our birth assignment, by the way we're conditioned, by our social interactions, by our relationships with family, with peers, with each other, by other people's genders even. There are so many factors that go into this.

And we talk about how gender is fluid because as our experiences change, and grow, and evolve as people, sometimes our identities do too with new experiences and new information.

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So, there's no one experience of gender. And you may never understand somebody else's. There are other people that are non-binary and I don't understand their experience because it's not mine. We have completely different ones. Sometimes even contradictory points. Like contradictory landmarks on our roadmap that like, if I had hit that bump in that road that way, I would have gone in a different direction, and I might not have arrived at the identity that I am. And it's the beauty of it is we can all use even the same or similar labels, and not mean different things, but hold space for it to encompass multiple, even conflicting things.

So I would say that it's more important for cis people to respect trans and non-binary identities. Respect people's pronouns, respect people's gender identities. Treat us as human beings that have more in common with you than different because we do [laughs]. And less important to try to understand someone's gender identity.

Because you won't. Just in the way that I'll never understand yours because I don't have it. I might cerebrally be able to conceptualize it, but I will never understand it fully. That's okay. Give yourself permission not to understand, but to look at ways to respect other people.

**Shohreh:**

Mm. I think that is such an important distinction there because I don't fault people for the fact that like, we as humans love to categorize, right. Like that is built into our brains biologically. It helps us to view the world in a more efficient manner, and so we're always looking for ways to do that.

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And I think this is where we get into a lot of issues 'cause people will be like, well, like how do I know? Or how can I tell if someone is non-binary? And the answer is like, you cannot. It's like, someone needs to tell you that they are non-binary for you to know that, and nobody has to tell you that, right. Like that is not information that you will always necessarily be privileged to have, which is why I ask, why does it matter? If you're going to treat the person respectfully, use the pronouns that they have asked you to use, then does it really matter what their gender identity is, outside of what they want you to know? Like, because—

**James:** Right.

**Shohreh:** —people are asking to like, categorize in their brain, and you've made this great point that like, even if someone tells you they're non-binary, you can't categorize it. Like that's not giving, [James laughs] telling me that there's some universal experience because it doesn't exist.

**James:** And I love that you brought this up because it is such a normal, instinctual thing for us as human beings to want to codify and classify. It's a survival mechanism. This mushroom will be a great thing to eat, this one will make me see God, [Shohreh laughs] and this one will kill me. That's important to know [laughs].

**Shohreh:** This is the best example ever, thank you for going into mushrooms [laughs].

**James:** I'm really glad that I just like randomly pulled that one out [laughs]. I will reference @TheNutritionTea posted a meme about that today, so go

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follow her [laughs] because that's where that came from. That was just ripe in my brain.

**Shohreh:** That's amazing.

**James:** But it's actually pretty illustrative because the reason we codify things is for survival. Then people are like, oh, well then we try to codify gender because we wanna know how to procreate and reproduce. Not everybody is biologically or genetically wired to have that desire. Many people are, but not all of us. And obviously that's not to say that like queer people just like don't want to have kids. Like that's not what I'm saying [laughter] at all.

But I am saying that that is not an excuse to then try to fit someone into a box that they're rejecting, that doesn't serve them. And your survival is not dependent on whether you know somebody else's gender identity. Their survival may be dependent on how you treat them, though, and their survival may be dependent on the space that you create for their safety.

So, of course, learning the difference in people's genders, and maybe even learning their gender identity is incredibly important. There is a time and place for that. Like focus on using the right words, focus on using language that makes an inclusive space, focus on collecting and examining as many narratives of different genders as you possibly can because that will just open your brain up even more.

And oftentimes, the more people learn about gender, the more they start to challenge their own. And I think that's really, really exciting.

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Because the entire construct of gender is made up. It is fucked up, it's stupid, it's colonizer, it's bullshit. And sometimes, in order to have an experience in this world, we have to codify ourselves by things that we don't want to.

And the entire construct of gender is something that is rooted in colonization, and if we go back hundreds and thousands of years, we know that there are more than two genders that have existed in civilization as long as civilization has existed. And it's important to note that that's no different now, it's just that we have more language surrounding it, and we have more connection—we're back to social media—so then we can understand how many different kinds of people there are out there and how many different experiences.

And so, it is certainly important to learn the different identities, but that is not the core thing you need to know about someone in order to respect them.

**Shohreh:** And for those who are interested in an accessible way to learn more about the history of gender, someone who is posting about this really well is Alok Vaid-Menon.

**James:** Yeah!

**Shohreh:** They have some incredible posts where they do book reports about different books that have gone into this, and they really break it down in a way that is accessible, that is easy to understand. And I have learned so much from their page about the history of gender that I had no idea about before.

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And so, you're right, the more that I learn about it, the more I'm like, wow, like, this does make me think about gender and identity, and like what does it mean to be a woman? What does it even mean to be a man? And I think a lot of us haven't done that work because we just take it for granted. We're just like, oh, yeah—

**James:** Totally.

**Shohreh:** —this is what I am, this is what I was told that I am.

**James:** They are, they are a fabulous resource. I'm glad that you brought them up. And I would also counter that with, not only do we need to look at like the history of it, and then also look at what's present, so like adding to what you said.

Following hashtags like, #thisiswhatnonbinarylookslike, or #genderfluidpride, or #oneofthem, or something like that will offer you media images of people that look like all sorts of different things and have all sorts of different experiences that do hold similar identities. And noticing how diverse the gender experience currently is is just as important as holding space for the history.

So I would say do both. Like learn where it came from, and then also learn how it's currently being represented. And the more that you fill your feed and the more you fill your brain with a diversity of perspectives, the easier it becomes to hold space for something because it's more at the forefront of your mind.

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And I think a lot of cis people get really confused on like, how do I make sure I don't do anything wrong? Newsflash, you're going to do something wrong. [Shohreh laughs] I do things that are wrong and I hold these identities. It's not about getting it right all the time; it's about making the effort, holding yourself accountable when you do make the mistake, and also moving forward with new information and new knowledge to continue making a safer space.

Like the idea of a safe space is this ethereal, like, unattainable utopia of social justice. It does not exist. It is something we strive to create. I would argue, and I do argue, that you can work towards that utopia in an individualized setting, and you can absolutely parse out what is necessary to make that individual setting as safe as possible, and you can achieve that. But the like, utopian like global safe space doesn't exist. It is a community-based process and set of work.

**Shohreh:** Yes, that is such a good point. Mmm should we talk about your exes?  
[Laughs]

**James:** [Laughs] Sure. Absolutely. What do you wanna know?

**Shohreh:** Alright, before everyone jumps down my throat, [James laughs] I need to inform them that literally in the bio that you gave me [laughs] you said that you talk about your exes on Instagram. [James laughs] So, this is a fair game conversation, everybody.

**James:** [Laughs] That's hysterical. Oh my gosh.

**Shohreh:** I am not being a jerk, but we need to talk about your exes [laughs].

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**James:** [Laughs] The last person I dated was like, "Are you going to write about me?" I was like, "Well, if you give me a reason to, I will." [Shohreh laughs] I was like, "I'm never gonna like Taylor Swift mention you by name." Once like someone likened me to Taylor Swift, and I was like, I have complicated feelings about this.

Because like, don't tell anyone, except your—like everyone listening to this podcast, [Shohreh laughs] but like, one of my most embarrassing qualities is that I know every lyric to every Taylor Swift song ever. And I've also been like critical of, you know, some of the things that she's done. And also celebrate her evolution, and like, you know, what she's trying to do.

**Shohreh:** Yeah.

**James:** It's a complicated, nuanced thing that I have—enjoyed isn't the right word, but that I've learned a lot from watching. And I was like, I don't know that I really want this likening in any way. [Laughs] I don't know that I want to be in comparison here. But like, she did once say in an interview—they were like, "When are you gonna stop writing songs about men that like say mean things about them?" And she was like, "When men stop doing mean things to me." [Laughs]

**Shohreh:** Yep.

**James:** Like what?!

**Shohreh:** Yep.

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**James:**

So I was like, well yeah, I'm never gonna mention someone by name and be like, "Can you believe so and so said this to me?!" Like that doesn't get me anywhere. But writing about past relationships is certainly a therapeutic exercise that I have employed for a long time. And I find liberation in sharing those stories, and it helps me like, package them up, and put them away, and move on from it.

And as somebody who like, for better or for worse, loves incredibly deeply, and when I commit to someone, like I'm there. Like, I love you, and I'm going to love you as much as I possibly can. And if this doesn't work out, that is heartbreaking. Regardless of who ended it, you know whatever the deal is, like, I put so much of myself into this.

And that's not a bad thing, you know. We look at that as like, oh, you don't have enough self-esteem. It's like, no, no, no. I love myself enough to know that this relationship could be enriching and enhancing, and I'm going to put as much of myself into it as I can safely. And when that doesn't work out, there is a grievance. Like it takes me a long time to get over people. Which is not because I don't have coping skills, or because I'm weak or improperly attached, but because I really love with my full heart. And so it takes a long time to get that back sometimes.

And there's a room in our narrative of like, this third wave of feminism that's like, fuck men, which I get. And I think that there's an important place for that. We've also gotta hold space for like, yeah, and sometimes there's more to it than that. It's like, okay, fuck men, but also, like, we didn't get a choice that we love them. [Laughs] Like, that's

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not really something that we got to choose, and there's a healing beyond just a middle finger for me.

**Shohreh:** I read a critique about the kind of like "fuck men, men are trash," statements recently that kind of helped me to see it in a new light. Because I'm definitely someone who has said that. Not like, publicly, but you know, in the group chat or something like that [laughs].

**James:** [Laughter] Right.

**Shohreh:** And this critique was essentially saying that like, it's not really fuck men, it's fuck toxic masculinity, and it's fuck the systems that created these men. Which is not to say that there isn't individual responsibility because of course there is. But when we say things like fuck men, right, like it takes away the agency of men to like be better and do better.

And I was like, oh, that's actually a very illuminating point for me on this.

**James:** Absolutely.

**Shohreh:** Like, I don't want to be in the business of just writing people off because I do believe that people can grow, and evolve, and change.

**James:** Absolutely. I wholeheartedly agree, and I've talked about this with other friends because I am somebody who never goes back to an ex. It's like once that's done, that's done. That means I have given it everything that I could have, it is not going to work, your time is done.

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And a lot of other people that I know will give multiple chances, and I give like multiple chances in relationships. I'm a good communicator. I really value communication, and an open discourse, and like, you know, vulnerability in problem solving, and it being us versus the problem, instead of me versus my partner, or vice versa.

And sometimes I've noticed that like the growing and the evolving has run its course in the relationship—

**Shohreh:** Yes.

**James:** —and in order for this person to grow and evolve, I have to like either let them go, or I have to leave in order to continue growing and evolving. And one of the things I feel we need to push up against more as a society is the idea that longevity is a measure of success for relationships.

**Shohreh:** Preach!

**James:** Yeah. Some of my most impactful relationships were shorter ones. And like, you know, people look at the divorce rate as like a moral failing somehow. And it's like, actually, no. That's not a failing. That's just the reality of like how A, perhaps humans were not meant to be monogamous. Not perhaps, [laughs] we know that not all humans were meant to be monogamous.

And also, how people do change, and things do run their course, and that is not failure, that is growth. And if we started looking at that as a

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positive thing, like your paths are allowed to converge and fork, and it doesn't make you any better or worse for that.

I know you started publicly talking about your divorce for the first time, which is so important. And I don't know if you want to spend any time on the podcast speaking about that, but what an important thing to speak on because so often we look at that as like the, almost pun intended, scarlet letter of dating. When really, it's just another experience that has a nuanced meaning that does not make you or the other person a failure, it just means that you learned something.

**Shohreh:** Oh my gosh, yes. And that's why it was so important to me to talk about it. I mean, it took me six months to have enough healing and have enough space to be like, alright, I'm kind of ready to broach this in public. But I cannot even tell you like how many comments and messages I got from people who were like, "I wish that I had something to read like this when I was getting divorced."

**James:** Yeah.

**Shohreh:** Or, "I'm going through this too, and like seeing that you are also going through this has made me feel less alone." Because it's a very lonely experience in a society that says like divorce is one of the biggest personal failings that you can have as an individual.

And my former partner and I talked a lot in the early days when we had decided to get divorced about how longevity isn't the most important thing in a relationship. And like we know people who have been together for like 40, 50 years or whatever, whose relationships like are

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not healthy. And they've just stayed because they didn't know how to leave, or it was easier, or whatever reasons there may be.

And for us, you know we were together for ten years, I would much rather our relationship have the end point at ten years, as painful as that has been, and still have that like connection, and the beauty, and like have had a really great relationship, than to just keep hanging on because it's easier, for another ten years, or however many years. And then have to look back and be like, well, I outgrew this, and I stayed anyways.

And that's a really hard decision to make. And no slight against anybody who finds themselves in that place because it is really hard to leave, and there's so much societal pressure around—whether it's marriage or just a long-term relationship. And it does take so much courage to be able to say, "I know that I have reached the furthest point that I can grow in this relationship. And if I do not leave it, I will no longer grow as a person."

And that is the point that I reached in my relationship, where it was nothing about my partner. We are still friends. Like we still care and love each other deeply. But I was like, this relationship is no longer a container for the growth that I wanna have. And I just kept telling myself, I was like, this is really hard, but I get one life. And if I don't do this, I will regret it. And that was a big driving factor.

**James:**

That's such an important perspective because sometimes we look at how trapped we are in a situation and we forget that like, [sighs], this is

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temporary. Everything can be temporary. Everything is temporary. Just to get super, I guess, esoteric and philosophical about it, like, it is. And the pain that we experience in relationships where we find ourselves wilting is also temporary.

**Shohreh:** I'm glad that you mentioned that because the reality is, I was choosing between two different kinds of pain. I could either have the pain of separation, which was horrible, and is still happening. I'm still very much grieving this relationship. Again, this was ten years of my life. And, if I had stayed, then I would have the pain of not being able to step into my true self and the person that I want to be going forward. And I chose the pain of separation so that I could become that person because that's what was important to me.

There are rarely options where you don't experience pain. The human experience is that we will have pain, and that's what makes the love and the other things beautiful because we have this contrast with pain.

And so I think sometimes we have to remind ourselves when we're afraid of something, often we're choosing between types of pain or choosing our hard. And the question becomes: which is the one that you want?

**James:** Absolutely. And I don't know about you, but I find uncertainty to sometimes be painful.

**Shohreh:** Yes.

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**James:** Like walking away from something where I know what the ground rules are, I know the person, I know the situation, I know this person's flaws, I know my flaws. I have a lot of givens, I have a lot of solid things here. And I also know that it's not working for me, and I'm like, well, I don't really know who I am without this person. That's usually the problem. [Shohreh laughs] Or, I know who I am, this person isn't helping it, and I don't quite know what it looks like to be my own person in the next step.

For me, when I have looked at relationships ending, I've always valued my independence in relationships. And so it's not that I don't know who I am without the person, but I don't know what that next step looks like. I don't know what that next phase is. Like, I don't really know what it means to grow in the new direction without them, I just know I've gotta do it.

**Shohreh:** Yeah.

**James:** And that, to me, is really painful because it's like, I can't explain that to a partner. I can write for the rest of my life, and I won't be able to fully explain why I have to go on to a new thing because this somehow isn't serving me, and I just know it in my soul, and it's not something I can always say through words.

And being on the receiving end of that sucks. Because, I mean, it's the normal thing for us to look at that and go, oh, I failed. It's my fault. I didn't show up enough for this person. Like and feel guilt and shame about those things, when the reality is like, you may have enriched that

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person's life exponentially to the point where they can take this next step. And part of that is letting them go, and part of that has absolutely nothing to do with you, and everything to do with them.

**Shohreh:**

It's exactly that. Yes, and I've said this to my former partner, that I wouldn't be the person I am who could take this step, if not for the relationship that we had. If not for the support and affirmation that I received from him for all of these years.

And that sucks, right? It's bittersweet 'cause there's this feeling on the other end of like, you feel almost like a stepping stone, I think. You've had this growth, and they're like, but I'm not the one who gets to benefit from it? And so I see that side of it, and I see how painful it is.

Like the reality is that any breakup, both ends of it are painful in just different ways. And everyone has to try and navigate that in their own ways. It's so difficult.

But yeah, I think it is really hard, on the part of my former spouse, of the idea of like, it hurts to think that someone has outgrown you in a way, even if it's the best thing. Even if you know you want this person to be happy and you want them to go on, that's just a painful reality for anybody to have to deal with.

And I know, for me, as I was weighing, you know, do I stay, do I leave, one of the biggest things for me is, I don't wanna hurt this person who I love so much. And this is another reason to stay 'cause there's like the comfort and there's the love. And it's like very different than like where the relationship is like dead or something, and you hate each other. It's

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like, no. It is so hard to walk away from a person that like you love and cherish, but like you know that you have to.

And for anyone out there who may be struggling with that, or feeling that, like, it's hard. It's complex]. And like, I feel you. It's so tricky.

**James:**

It is really tricky. And what I've found too through writing about this, and I wonder if my perspective on this will change as I get older, I don't know that you ever really get over your exes. I don't think that you do. At least personally, I am not. And I also don't think that it's a hindrance in my growth or my ability to hold space for another relationship moving forward, should I choose to.

Since I've started dating, this is the longest I've ever been single, which is an important milestone for me. And also like I look at the men that I've dated, and like, you know, my first ex I'm friends with now, which is a wonderful experience, and it has taken us a long time to get there. I mean, we've been broken up longer than we were together. We were together for a couple of years. And so now we can actually be friends with each other, which is wonderful. And then my other exes, one of them is dating a guy that I introduced him to. The other one I haven't spoken to in years, I don't know how he is. And then the other one's getting married.

All of those things are so completely different when you watch somebody else's life take a different path away from what it was with you, there's always something guttural that it brings up for me. It's almost always tied to pain in some way.

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The reason I say that I don't think we ever get over these people is it's like we carry them with us. Like I can never un-date those people.

**Shohreh:** Yeah.

**James:** I can never un-love those people. It's like I feel like I'm carrying rocks in my pockets, you know. Especially like right after a breakup, it's like, oh god, I have these just stones that I am holding as I'm crossing like, ugh, I don't know, a river and trying to swim.

And what I've found is like, writing about it and talking about it, in a way that respects their privacy because I do think that's an important like caveat to this is like, yeah, I write about my exes, but I also protect their identities because it's not actually about them. [Laughs] And I feel like writing about it and sorting through it, it's like I grind down the stones almost, to where the sand kind of shaves off and I can leave it behind. To where now they're just like little pebbles that are much more manageable to carry.

And it's like they're always going to be part of me. And that's just the only way that I have found I can manage that. And I don't think that's a negative thing. When someone's like, "Oh I'm totally over him." I'm like, "No, you just learned how to manage what your relationship is and was and hold space for the reality and the truth of what it is now." And I absolutely think that our feelings for people change and like I'm certainly not in love with any of my other exes, but I do hold space for like how I did feel for them at one point and how I did love them.

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And kind of shaking hands with that almost feels liberating to me, because it's like oh yeah, God I look back at the pictures of so and so and I together and I just, it makes me cry because I was so happy. And I'm not gonna feel that happiness again, it's gonna be different the next time if I feel it again.

And now I'm in my mid-twenties, so it's like I'm being both pulled in the direction of like complete independence, I don't need anyone, [Shohreh laughs] and like, I just wanna hold someone at night. So now I have Pam. That helps.

**Shohreh:** We did promise that we would come back to Pam.

**James:** Oh, that's right, we did! [Laughs]

**Shohreh:** So I feel like let's tell the people about Pam.

**James:** Yeah. [Laughs] It's actually a solid segue from my exes because one guy that I dated, the one I haven't talked to in a long time, and I had only been dating for a couple of months and Valentine's Day came about.

And he was like, come over to my apartment. So I did, and I walk into this apartment and the entire studio, you know, space in Brooklyn is covered in rose petals, and they were real. And there's like a big heart on the bed made out of rose petals, and in the middle of his like dresser, vanity, table thing, was this giant, pink koala holding a card. And the card had a key to this apartment. And he was like, "This place can be yours too, and like, I want you to feel comfortable like coming in and out."

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And I was like, [singsong] "I'm not ready for this." [Laughs] [Shohreh laughs] I was like, "Thank you!" And stuffed animals are totally the way to my heart, like I have a full farm. My other ex actually named it the farm and I just kind of kept that. And I was like yeah, I have a whole like farm of my soft friends.

Pam is the largest one, she's a pink koala. And her head is bigger than mine, and she has a red heart on her foot because she's a Valentine's Day koala. Her name is Pam. I don't really remember how that came about, but I initially named her something else, and then I learned that she was trans and was definitely deadnamed, so I had to fix that.

[Laughs] [Shohreh laughs]

And uhh, she's huge, so like—I mean, she's like the size of, I don't know, like a four-year-old kid. I'm holding her like as I'm doing this, like examining. "Pam, how big are you?"

**Shohreh:** I will put that post in the show notes, [James laughs] where you're holding Pam, and you have the pictures from you walking in and finding Pam. So don't worry everybody, you're gonna get to see Pam.

**James:** Oh yeah, for Pam's birthday I did post like a carousel of Pam photos.

**Shohreh:** You did!

**James:** I think she's an icon. She thinks she's an icon, for sure.

**Shohreh:** The crossed arms photo is my fucking favorite [laughs].

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**James:** [Laughs] Yeah, she has her own personality. And like, I really think it's important to be in touch with our inner child. Like I sit and play with my stuffed animals. I am 25 years old, and I play with my stuffed animals, and that is not the weirdest thing about me. I actually think it's like something really cool, and I wish more people did it. And all my exes know the whole farm, like they've all met them, they've all like had to bring them places and whatnot. Not like regular outings, but like, you're going on tour? Take this one with you [laughs], like, as a piece of me. Like, you know, to be sweet.

**Shohreh:** Aww.

**James:** Not like we're going to the grocery store, we have to bring my stuffed animals. I'm not at that level yet. [Laughter]

**Shohreh:** We'd still love you if you were.

**James:** Thank you. Yeah. There are just boundaries I set. I don't want them to get dirty [laughs].

**Shohreh:** I mean that is an important aspect of having stuffed animals. I get it.

**James:** I think it's important to like just have an outlet where we are creative and we play in a nonjudgmental space, so that's like my menagerie of soft friends.

And I didn't want to get rid of Pam. I've gotten rid of like many stuffed animals in my life, and like washed them and donated them to children's hospitals and various other like organizations and whatnot. And I was like, I don't want to get rid of Pam because I really love her, and I just

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couldn't do that. And when we broke up, he was like, "Pam is yours," and it was really like you know who gets custody of the child. It was sad. [Laughs] And I obviously got custody of Pam—.

**Shohreh:** Phew!

**James:** —because he was like, "Pam was always yours." And so I started taking her on acting contracts that I was going on as like you know my stuffed animal that I just kept with me in my bed. And I started re-marking experiences with her, because I didn't want her to be so tied to my ex. Like I wanted her to be her own person [laughs]. Now she is a guest on my Instagram frequently [laughs]. [Shohreh laughs]

And it reminds me, I wrote about this I think, like how re-marking your experience with emotional objects is actually like, in a way, re-parenting ourselves, and in a way, reclaiming our own narratives.

And like, every time I look at Pam, I just kind of chuckle because I'm like, oh yeah, that's my large, pink marsupial, as opposed to thinking of him. Because I don't anymore when I think of Pam. She's her own person now [laughs]. As silly as that sounds, I think it's liberating. It is for me.

**Shohreh:** I don't think it sounds silly at all because another area of this for me, for instance, is music. I'm deeply in that right now where there are some songs that I'm still not quite ready to listen to, and when they come up on shuffle I'm like, nope, we're not gonna do that. But that won't be forever. As more time passes, and I have more space, like, those songs

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are gonna eventually become mine again, and I'm gonna find new meaning for those songs instead of just casting them out.

I think this kind of is in line with what you were saying about like, you know, you don't just like get over your exes 'cause I agree, I find that really sad. This idea that like a person who shared a big part of your life, that you're just like, ope, I'm over it. Like done and gone. Or like people who throw away everything from an ex, and they're like, I'll never listen to this album again. Like that makes me sad because those things are things that made me happy, and like they can continue to make me happy in new ways with or without the person who was originally a part of it.

**James:**

Absolutely. It's important to re-mark those experiences for us so they don't impair our ability to live a full life. After one of my breakups, like I had a really tough year. 2018 was rough. And after a breakup, I decided I needed to like, really regain my own understanding of myself; I felt out of touch with me.

And I decided that, before I dated again, I would take myself on 100 dates, and I called the project "100 Happy Dates." Which was sort of an homage to the 100 Happy Days like archaic Instagram challenge. And I was like, I need to start dating myself again as opposed to trying to replace this man with another man.

And I took myself to the places that I used to go to with my exes, you know, whether they were theaters, or restaurants, or places in the park and whatnot. And my rules were that I had to do it alone, and that I had

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to put my phone away. And if I wanted to do something, I could journal about it, but I had to like actually be present in the experience and reflect.

And I did finish the hundred, and I don't actually know if I ever posted all hundred on Instagram because then I met someone, and I started dating him, and obviously we're not together anymore, but it was the right time.

And I remember re-marking some of those places, and it was painful to like sit there in the restaurant where I'd like had my first date with so and so, and like sit at that table, and sit there alone.

And also, I didn't initially feel this, but the more I started doing it, the more powerful I felt. Because it wasn't scary to be a single, alone person. I didn't become as lonely, it just became a choice.

And I think that that's a really important part of like getting over people and re-marking them is like, I wanna be able to go to my freakin' favorite pizza place in New York without thinking of kissing so and so. And it takes a while, but I'm back there now. [Laughs] You know, like I can go to that pizza place and I certainly don't think of him.

It does take some time, but I do think it's really worth it to re-mark those experiences. And it's a way we take our power back. How long are we going to let the thorns of a relationship be the things that bleed us? And at what point are we going to take our own metaphorical shears to them and start clipping the thorns away?

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**Shohreh:** Yes. I love this idea. I love that you took yourself on all these dates. I'm very much looking forward to dating, and I'm also looking forward to dating myself. I need this pandemic to like wrap itself up.

**James:** Oh yeah.

**Shohreh:** Something I'm looking forward to because this will be the first time I've been single in a decade, is spending time with me.

**James:** Ah! Yeah!

**Shohreh:** And taking myself out, and like, what is this like? And like you said, it's the layers of like, who am I and what is here? And it's like, I feel like I do have a good sense of that, and I know there's still so much more to learn outside of relationships. So now is the time!

**James:** Absolutely. I am so happy and excited for you that you're excited to get back to dating. It doesn't terrify me, but I'm like, I can't wait to not date [laughs].

**Shohreh:** [Laughter] Yes. Well it's been so long since I've gotten to date, to be fair. Like I have yet to do queer dating.

**James:** Oh really?

**Shohreh:** So this is like driving a lot of my excitement because when my ex-spouse and I got together, I thought I was straight.

**James:** Oh!

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- Shohreh:** So I have only discovered my queerness in relationship. So this will be my first opportunity to actually like go out there and enjoy that. So this is why I'm super excited.
- James:** I am so excited for you! I hope that that ends up being just an affirming experience where you get to really learn about yourself. Oh, I'm so excited to like hear once things reopen and like, hear the three-month update you know, and then the six-month update.
- Shohreh:** Yeah!
- James:** Like, I'm excited for that for you. And conversely, I'm in the opposite place, which is I think also important to like note how differently this manifests for people. Where I could probably not name you a time where I wasn't like interested in someone once I started dating. There was definitely a long time where I was so academically driven that I was like, relationships? That will not help my GPA [laughter]. Don't be that person either [laughs].
- Now I'm like, I cannot imagine finding somebody that I like enough to sacrifice enough of what I love doing to be with them. I cannot imagine it. I'm open to it if it happens, but I'm like, I can't get people on a dating app to gender me correctly. Like how on Earth am I gonna find somebody who I feel like will nourish a relationship with me, you know?
- Shohreh:** Yeah.
- James:** It's also my first time on any dating apps. This is mortifying, but I'm on The League. [Laughs]

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- Shohreh:** Wait, I haven't heard of this one.
- James:** [Laughs] It's so elitist. Don't do it. [Shohreh laughs] It's the one where you have to apply, and like everyone went to an Ivy League school, and like everyone's the vice president of a bank.
- Shohreh:** Oh wait, I do remember this one.
- James:** Yeah, oh, for sure. Because not that I need to justify my choices, but I've had a Grindr forever because I've hooked up with most of New York City [Shohreh laughs]. Oh yeah, we could do a whole other podcast on like my whorish endeavors. Maybe I'll start that [laughs].
- Shohreh:** Well this is what I'm excited for, see, I get to be a slut now. And I'm like, yes please. Thank you very much.
- James:** Oh, yes. I mean, it's such a liberating experience. Some of my relationships were open so I still got to be a ho then, and I loved it. Actually, wait, I just learned that ho is AAVE, and I didn't know this before like two days ago.
- Shohreh:** Oh, I didn't know that either!
- James:** Yeah. I'll edit that out of my vocabulary but like let's keep that in because it's an important thing for people to know.
- So like, I spent a lot of time being a slut and enjoying it. And for some reason, I'm like, I don't even know if I want to do that again. That opinion will, I'm sure, change [laughter].

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So I only had a Grindr, and I always met people organically because like, I just need to feel something with you in person and like be interested in you that way. Like I just—I don't know that online dating is for me.

And so I joined The League because I thought it would be funny, like to see if I would get in. I'm like, I'm an actor, like they're not gonna let me in [Shohreh laughs]. You know, like I'm like a leftist, like what? No way. [Laughs]

And so they did. 'Cause it's a whole application process, and you have to like be approved [imitates gagging].

**Shohreh:** Oh my gosh.

**James:** And it only gives you three matches a day, so you can't like go nuts on it. You can't like excessively swipe on people. Like, my friends are like, "Well I ran out of prospects in the island of Manhattan because I swiped too much. And I'm like, "How did you manage that?"

**Shohreh:** [Laughs] Oh my gosh.

**James:** Where this one doesn't let you do it, and algorithmically, it's supposed to be curated to like, when you get a match with somebody, it's supposed to be somebody you would actually have a genuine connection with. So you don't get very many because obviously you both have to match each other, but you only get so many a day. So it prioritizes the people that it thinks you're going to be the most compatible with.

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And, if we weren't in a pandemic, I actually think that some of these connections might have blossomed into something. But because I'm not even in New York right now, I'm like, "Yeah, I'm down in North Carolina. [Shohreh laughs] How are you doing?" [Laughs] So they're all like, "Yeah, like let me know when you get back, cutie." And I'm like, "Yeah, thanks, okay, whatever." [Laughter]

And I do actually think that that's kind of an interesting idea, but nonetheless. And then I see this—I could go into a whole diatribe on this, and I'll keep it brief, but all the gays that are on Grindr are also on the other apps. So every time I'm like, I know you're on the other ones, so like, I know you're not just looking for a hookup, Josh. [Laughter] But.

**Shohreh:** Oh my gosh. Yeah, I've never been on a dating app before in my life because, again, with my partner for ten years. So they were not really a thing yet at the time. Like I think OkCupid existed, but it was just a website. [laughs] Like you had to go on a desktop to use it.

**James:** Oh yes, OkCupid. Oh, people still use that.

**Shohreh:** So that's gonna be interesting. Yeah, people definitely still use OkCupid, and now they've turned into an app. But I've heard so many stories from friends about dating apps and all these things. And I'm the same way, like, I've had two long-term partners in my life and I met both of them organically. And so I don't know how I'm gonna feel about this whole dating digital thing.

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But, this is part of the exploration; this is part of like the getting to know and what do I want. So I'm like I've gotta at least try it and see what happens, and maybe I'll hate it or maybe I'll be like, ooh, this is kind of fun.

**James:**

I will say that I have met – and this is, not controversial, but I don't know that this is particularly common, and I think it's the way in which you use the apps. I've made some wonderful friends and great connections from Grindr, which is a notoriously seedy hookup app. And I've met friends that like started out as like people I hooked up with that, now, I have great relationships with and are friends. Other people that like were friends with benefits types of situations that like are either still friends, or like they ran their course in an amiable way.

And I really do think that, if you hone your communication skills, not you personally but like you in general [Shohreh laughs]. Hone your communication skills and are really specific about what you're looking for, in terms of the kind of interactions. Not like, he must be 6'4," a ginger, have gone to Dartmouth, and doesn't have a picture of a fish. Like not that. But like, oh, I'm looking for like a genuine connection.

And like so instead of starting out with like, "Hey, how are you?" I start out with, "What was the highlight of your week?" Or, "What's the thing you're most looking forward to coming up?" And like I want to know what you get excited about. Like I don't ask people what they do for work; I'm like what are you passionate about?

**Shohreh:**

Yes!

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**James:** If work didn't exist, what would you be doing? I am way more interested in that because people's answers give you way more information about them than, "What do you do for work?" "Oh, I'm the vice president of this bank." [Shohreh laughs] [Laughter] No shade to vice presidents.

**Shohreh:** Yes, no shade to vice presidents.

**James:** Have I met one worth my time? No, and [laughs] I also think that hearing that, "Oh, like I'm really interested in collecting blah, blah, blah." Or like, "Oh, I love to travel; here are my favorite countries." Then I can have a conversation with you.

**Shohreh:** Yes.

**James:** I can't have a conversation with you about accounting.

**Shohreh:** [Laughs] Unless it's the TikTok version of accounting, and then maybe you could.

**James:** Oh my gosh, yes. Have you seen all of those TikToks that are like, "When somebody asks me what I do, I say I'm an accountant, and then nobody asks me anymore questions."

**Shohreh:** But my favorite ones are people who are actually accountants, who are like, "I have that I'm an accountant on my dating profile, and I didn't know that it meant something else on TikTok. And now I get all of these really interesting DMs from people [laughs] [James laughs] about me being an accountant." They're like, "I'm really an accountant. [James laughs] I really look at spreadsheets all day." [Laughter]

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- James:** [Laughs] Incredible. Oh, that's so good.
- Shohreh:** [Sighs] Oh my gosh.
- James:** TikTok is a gold mine. TikTok is a dating app.
- Shohreh:** It is. We have gone full circle...
- James:** It literally is.
- Shohreh:** ...on TikTok now [laughs].
- James:** [Laughter] We really have. I'm telling you though, I have never told TikTok what I am; it will show me hot guys in my area. Because I'm in Charlotte, North Carolina right now, ooh! [Laughs] And with my grandparents, as a caretaker, who I love; I love my grandparents. My grandfather has Alzheimer's so I'm here helping out with that, which is its own just emotional heavy weight.
- And yet – so obviously I don't have a social life. We're in a pandemic. I FaceTime my friends, I don't see anyone; I have not sucked a dick in what feels like years. [Shohreh laughs] [Laughter]
- Shohreh:** Tragic.
- James:** [Laughs] Yeah. TikTok is like – it will be like some cute Charlottean guy who's like, "Just like looking for a boyfriend, blah, blah, blah." And I'm like, [Shohreh laughs] No! I don't need to see this!" [Laughs] [Shohreh laughs] My friends are like, "Yeah, you don't need to see this. Because he'll be like, "I'm just going to like stay for like two more weeks." [Laughs]

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- Shohreh:** Oh my gosh. Ahhh.
- James:** Ah. But TikTok is a dating app. I don't use it that way, but other people do.
- Shohreh:** But it can be used that way.
- James:** It can be [laughs].
- Shohreh:** Alright. This is delightful. I could talk to you for like the next four hours, so...
- James:** [01:18:25 - crosstalk] really good.
- Shohreh:** ...note to self. I want to wrap up by just mentioning that you do a very special something called "Monday Motivation."
- James:** [Laughs] I do.
- Shohreh:** You do, and it's a delight. And the people love it.
- And I'm wondering if you can find it within yourself to leave everyone listening to the podcast with a little motivation to get them through the rest of their week.
- James:** Oh. Well, thank you for the compliment, first off.
- Monday Motivations are something I have been doing longer than I've ever had a following. Because I taught a 7AM barre class at Midtown on Mondays with like the most fantastic group of women, mostly over the age of 50. And they would just tell me the most inspiring stories. And it would just give me zest for life.

## Conjuring Up Courage #90

Featured this episode: Shohreh Davoodi & James Rose

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And I was like, [audibly gasps], I've got to share this with you know my 1,000 friends on Instagram [laughs] [Shohreh laughs]. And, now, here we are like three, four years later and I'm like, "Hey everyone, like Monday Motivation!"

So the thing I have been thinking about recently, and maybe you can take this into your week, is that, oftentimes, we really don't have to change much about ourselves; we just have to invest in becoming a more centered version of who we already are. And there is so much about you that is incredible, and good, and wonderful. And you're doing so many more things that are right than are wrong.

And so, instead of nitpicking and focusing on all of the things that we want to change, realign with your values, and like check in with what you actually want to be doing. Like what actually serves you as a person? And where can you deepen your understanding of yourself? Deepen your commitment to what you do value, and step into more of who you are.

Because that is the right thing to do. It's not changing these little bits about yourself that you know society says like, oh, trim this, and like shave this part of your personality off. No. Become more yourself; you've got incredible power; step into it.

**Shohreh:**

You could not have done a better motivation for Conjuring Up Courage, and for me, as a self-trust coach. [James laughs] Y'all James know what they are talking about, okay? That was a delight. Thank you for that. Thank you for being here.

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**James:** Oh, thank you for having me.

**Shohreh:** Of course! How can people find you if they want to do that, and is there anything my listeners can do to support you at this time?

**James:** Oh, that's so sweet, thank you. I'm on two social medias now, I'm on TikTok and Instagram.

**Shohreh:** Woo!

**James:** They're the only two places I exist on the internet. So those are the ways to get in touch with me. Both of them are @JamesIsSmiling, all one word.

And if you want to support me, I do a series called Fund Fridays every Friday where I just repost the calls for mutual aid that I see within my community, or within – either people I know, or people will email them to me and say, "Will you post this on your Instagram?"

And if we're actively looking at dismantling oppressive structures, people with privilege have to engage in mutual aid and redistributing our wealth.

So if you want to support me, instead of like shouting me out on Instagram, donate to those mutual aid pages, or share them with your community, because we have to take care of each other.

So actually, today's Friday, spoiler alert! So I'm going to be doing that like after this podcast; I have a whole bunch that I have to share.

**Shohreh:** Yay!

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**James:** So that's what I would recommend. You don't need to use me as a source because like I am not the source for mutual aid. There are tons of pages, like look at one in your local community, find a mutual aid organization, find a sex worker outreach project, find a harm reduction center, you know a place that is actively engaging in getting money to people who need it. Not just charity work. Not just donating to organizations, but to GoFundMes, Venmo requests, calls for aid. Do that.

**Shohreh:** Perfect. And if people want to hang with you, I believe you also teach some pay what you can classes via Zoom, correct?

**James:** I do, yeah! So one of my best friends and I run Full Soul Nutrition, which is – it's her registered dietician private practice, and also where we run group fitness classes where we focus on accessibility.

People in eating disorder recovery are our main audience, but everybody is welcome. Where we use body neutral language, and we work to give as many options for all sorts of different ability levels, feelings, you name it. And I teach that one on Wednesdays at noon. And there may be more stuff added, and we like to do events as well.

So it's in my bio, so if you search @JamesIsSmiling and you look at the Full.Soul.Nutrition link, that's where that is.

So yeah! If you want to come hang out with me on the Zooms, [Shohreh laughs] you can do that too.

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**Shohreh:** Yay! Alright, well I will link to all of that in the show notes, so it is very easy to people to find.

Thank you for spending this time with me. It was so much fun, and I am sure that you will be back on the podcast before we know it.

**James:** [Laughs] Oh, thank you so much, I would love to! And shoutout to your incredible community; you've cultivated something so special, and I am honored to be a part of it.

And I think everything that you're doing is courageous, and it is uplifting, and it's special, and you are such a necessary voice in this world. And I'm honored to share a little bit of mine with what you're already creating, that's already so special.

**Shohreh:** Thank you so much. I feel the exact same way about you. Happiness.

[Music plays]

And that's our show for today. If you're enjoying Conjuring Up Courage, don't forget to subscribe through your podcast provider of choice so you never miss an episode.

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Finally, you can sign up for my email newsletter, "The Sunday Share," and get more details about how to work with me by going to [ShohrehDavoodi.com](http://ShohrehDavoodi.com).

Thank you so much for listening, and I hope you'll join me for the next episode.