

Conjuring Up Courage

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Featured this episode: Shohreh Davoodi & Dawn Serra

Shohreh Davoodi: You are listening to episode #99 of Conjuring Up Courage. Yes, this is the last ever two-digit episode before the show moves into the land of three-digits. Today's guest is Dawn Serra, a therapeutic sex and relationship coach and pleasure advocate, and we covered so much ground together. We talked pleasure! We talked boundaries! We talked supportive relationships! We talked body trust! And we had a great time doing it.

To access the show notes and a full transcript of this episode, head to shohrehdavoodi.com/99. That's shohrehdavoodi.com/99.

[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.

[Music fades]

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Dawn, thank you so much for joining me today! I have been really looking forward to our conversation.

Dawn Serra: I am so glad to be here, thank you so much for having me. I know this is going to be a fun journey we go on today.

Shohreh: Yes. So in my Follow Your Arrow membership program, we have an entire month devoted to the topic prioritize pleasure. Because as a self-trust coach, I think pleasure is one of the many pathways we can take to come home to ourselves. And in that month's materials, *you* are one of the people I cite as being the inspiration for a lot of my thinking on pleasure and its importance. So I first just want to say that the impact of your work is totally far-reaching!

Dawn: Aw, thank you so much. It's such an important topic and a complicated and nuanced one. I think the more of us that are inviting people into their pleasure, the better for the world.

Shohreh: Yes. So for those who don't know you, can you please share a little bit about who you are, the work you do, and of course, some of your favorite pleasures?

Dawn: [sing-song voice] Ooooh, yes. So [laughs lightly], I am a sex and relationship coach. I have a background as an adult sex educator and I hosted a podcast for about five-and-a-half years called "Sex Gets Real," where I answered lots of questions from listeners and interviewed really rad people in the spheres, like, of bodies, pleasure, identity, sexuality, relationships. And that really led me down a path towards the work that I'm really focused on now, which is helping people, especially people

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who are in marginalized bodies, who are fat, disabled, queer, trans, and also people who are in eating disorder recovery to reconnect with pleasure.

And so a lot of the work that I do is through my online pleasure course, I host an annual conference where we spend a lot of time diving into the intersections of pleasure and trauma. And for me, the work, I try to make it as communal as possible so we can kind of move away from shame and isolation. And for me, pleasure has been absolutely a pathway to increasing capacity around, like, trauma, and deepening my relationship with my own aliveness. And, yeah, I'm hoping to write a book in the near future. And it's just been such rich, rich, rich space to be in.

And some of my favorite pleasures. Well, people who know me know I love play, just like the act of play. So play is very present in my life, my husband and I play board games pretty much every single day. We make up spontaneous games all the time and do things like pillow fights and throwing dryer balls at each other. So play is definitely a huge pleasure for me. I also really, really enjoy cooking and I make all kinds of really, really extremely delicious gourmet ice creams.

Shohreh: Mmm!

Dawn: Yeah, so that's another one. And then time with loved ones, rich conversations, feeling connected, that's definitely an intense source of pleasure and nourishment.

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Shohreh: I love all of those. And also, kudos to you for running your podcast for five years. I'm coming up on two years, and like, people do not realize how much work it is to consistently put out a podcast for long periods of time.

Dawn: Yes. I loved it so much and also, towards the end was just feeling so tired with having to constantly put content out, and I realized it was not pleasurable for me any longer. So I am re-envisioning a podcast that I'd like to launch in the next year or so that's going to be less frequent, but I think more pleasurable and interesting for me to do. And so really trying to ask questions around what feels easy and what feels pleasurable so that I can show up more fully is a really big part of where I am in my work right now, which means breaking up with a lot of things, saying goodbye to a lot of things. And also people in my life feeling disappointed and fans feeling disappointed, but knowing that's all okay, 'cause in the end, it'll mean I can show up more fully for things that, like, really, really matter.

Shohreh: Yes. And it can be so hard to make those decisions. You know, I recently rebranded the podcast, which was really important for me to continue to make the podcast really enjoyable and something I wanted to keep showing up for. And as part of that, I had started a Patreon last year, and I decided to close it down, because I was like the work to keep this Patreon going, it's not fun for me. I was putting in more work than I was getting money out of the project, and so I was like nope, we're just gonna shut it down. I always try to remind myself, you know, sunk cost fallacy, just because it's something you've put a lot of work

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into in the past, like, if it's not currently working for you, you don't have to keep doing it.

Dawn: Yes. Exactly. Absolutely. And I think even one of the things that I talk about a lot with people that I work with is, often we tolerate things because they're not that bad.

Shohreh: Oh my gosh, yes [laughs lightly].

Dawn: Right? And that tolerating often leads to a lot of low-level resentment. We can't quite put our finger on it, but there's something that's kinda making us feel a little snippy or a little under-resourced, or we're just not feeling very generous about something. That's usually a sign that we're just kind of tolerating something that's not actually a good fit anymore.

And those can be really hard to put our fingers on, and I think for me, for a long time, I was kind of doing certain things in my business because I felt a sense of obligation to the people who were getting a lot out of it. But that meant that I was really struggling to create and to show up and to dream big things. And that doesn't serve anyone in the long-run if what I'm putting out is just kind of, like, meh, let me just eek something out.

But I think so often we stick with things because it's been worse than this, or I've seen others and they have it worse. It's okay, it'll get better. And sometimes it does, but I think being able to just notice, like, am I tolerating this and I can see that it's going to become something

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important down the road? Or am I tolerating this and if I didn't have to tolerate this anymore, wonderful things would become available to me?

Shohreh:

I think it's also hard when there's money on the line because, you know, there's that feeling of well, yes, this isn't my favorite thing, but it's paying the bills. And, like, sometimes we do have to make that sacrifice, and like sometimes we reach a point where it's like the trade-off isn't worth it anymore.

Like, I used to do personal training as my main work, and I always [laughs lightly], always hated doing exercise programming, but it made consistent money 'cause people would be like, oh yeah, I just want programming, you know, I don't need this other stuff. And I was like great, no problem. Like, I can write exercise programming, I was taught how to do it, I'm good at it. But I always hated every minute of it.

And in, like, rebranding and changing my business around, like, that's something I've completely eliminated, as I no longer focus on fitness as a main piece of my business. And I still have people reach out, like old clients being like, "Hey, just wondering if maybe you'd do some programming for me?" and it just feels so good to be like, "No. No I cannot. Let me send you to some wonderful people who could, but it's not gonna be me."

Dawn:

Yeah, being able to say "no" is such a crucial skill when we're trying to develop stronger boundaries, which is deeply tied to our pleasure practice. Saying no to things leaves us more room to be able to say yes to things. That doesn't mean that it's easy, but it's definitely an

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important process and practice that a lot of us have to experiment with and find our way towards. You know, it's a process of learning how to take up a me-sized space, you know, where I'm not inflating myself and I'm also not shrinking myself.

And, also I think too, so many of the things that we're tolerating tie to: Do I have enough access to safety and resources to be able to change something about this situation? And that's a really complicated space. Some of us have the privilege and the resources where we can stop doing certain kinds of work, or we can change jobs. And others of us don't have that privilege or that access at this particular moment in time. So often we avoid asking ourselves questions because we're afraid of the answer, and sometimes being able to ask the question, even if the answer is going to hurt, gives us new choices.

So maybe I have to stay in this relationship right now, because if I'm not in the relationship I end up homeless. So if that's true, then what needs to be grieved? What can I change about what's true? Where can I find small moments of pleasure or relief and still dream new things for myself down the road where maybe circumstances are different? I think so much of this work around, like, pleasure and taking up a me-sized space and boundary work, which absolutely ties to courage and hoping new things for ourselves really is about, like, what's true for me? What do I need in order to stay safe? Are these things that I can change now that would allow me to continue to be safe? And if not, then what needs to be grieved? Where can I get support around that? How can I find little moments of rebellion and agency? And there's so much more

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available to us when we can find ways to really be with those tough feelings.

Sometimes we have to avoid, because that's just how we survive right now. So I think avoidance often is kind of framed as this negative, we shouldn't avoid the things that are hard. Sometimes we just need to avoid things because there's so many things going on in our life, that if we were to move in the direction of not avoiding this hard thing, we would just shut down or go past our capacity. And sometimes the avoidance is because we're scared to feel hard things. Maybe we aren't sure where to turn for support. Or maybe it's because we don't really have good rituals for being with the grief that comes up when we ask ourselves hard questions, or the anger that comes up.

And so a lot of the work I do too is around increasing our vocabulary and our capacity for being with our emotions. And the more we're able to say, "Oof, I think I'm avoiding this because I just don't want to feel a sense of mourning right now. Is there something that I can do that would honor my mourning? Or that would honor that sadness, instead of I'm just not going to feel it and I'm going to cut myself off."

Because I think what surprises people so much about pleasure is, I can't tell you how many people that I have worked with, both who are my clients, but also my colleagues and my mentors who talk about the more you deepen into your pleasure practice, the more you deepen into your grief. The more you feel, the more you feel. And when you're cutting yourself off from certain feelings, you're cutting yourself off from all feelings in a certain way.

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And emotional literacy and being more intimate with our vast emotional landscape is a big part of experiencing more joy and satisfaction in our lives. But it does mean, too, grappling with some things that might be really uncomfortable.

Shohreh:

And what I hear you saying is that there's a difference in tolerating when you bring awareness and intentionality to the tolerating that you have to do. That there's really this shift that needs to happen from, I'm just doing the thing because it's a habit or because I feel like I have to, or it's always been this way, and actually consciously thinking about it, getting curious and asking questions and making decisions, or at least understanding why you're staying in the situation that you're staying in.

Dawn:

Right. Something that Prentis Hemphill talks about a lot, who I learn so much from, who is doing beautiful work around embodiment and justice. Prentis often talks about how really, so much of the work that they do is about helping people to experience a sense of agency and choice. And that is really where our personal power comes from, being able to make choices for ourselves and our bodies on our terms.

Now, of course we live in a very complicated world with systems of oppression and all kinds of complicated dynamics, so I think what you said there about, like, intention is really important. Of, am I aware of the conditions that I'm in, whether I can change them or not? Or, am I just kind of following a script? Am I performing? Am I doing things out of a sense of obligation and I haven't really investigated them, even if I can't change certain things at this particular moment?

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A great example is maybe someone that I'm really close to in my life right now is going through something really hard, and being with them or near them is difficult. You know, maybe they're really short-tempered right now, or maybe they're sleeping constantly, or whatever it is that makes it difficult to be with. And when I can acknowledge that and ask myself, do I wanna continue being in a relationship with this person? And can I see what it is that they're going through? They're having a really difficult time, the world is hard to be in.

Okay, then maybe right now what is a good choice for me and for this relationship that's important to me is things are just gonna be uncomfortable for a little while. So how can I take care of me, knowing that that's true? If this person's just really short-tempered because they're going through, they just lost someone, or they just lost their job, or heck, they're just existing in the world as it is right now [Shohreh laughs lightly]. Where can I be tender with me? And who are other people that I can be with that give me a chance to just kind of, like, breathe and process knowing this is a relationship that's tough right now, but that's still important to me?

There's so much more choice that becomes available when we can enter into curiosity and dialogue with ourselves around those kinds of things. Versus, this person's being really short-tempered and I'm gonna like, lash out in my own life in response. Or I'm gonna feel really shut down. Hopefully if we can turn towards those things, even if it's uncomfortable, we begin to see that there are other options. That there's so much creativity that's available to us in any given moment.

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And something that I'm often inviting people into is sometimes we think that pleasure, and joy, and delight, and connection are in these far-off places. Or when we have achieved a certain level of success, or our body has become something. But in reality, our life is made up of the tiniest moments and when we can begin finding moments of pleasure and nourishment in just those tiny little seconds that make up each day, we can become so much more present in our lives, which increases information and choice.

Also, it helps us to just be more resilient and nourished for the stuff that is hard. 'Cause it's never not going to be hard being human on this planet inside of these complicated systems and cultures we're in. It's hard stuff! It's hard to be in a body. It's hard to be a human. And so when we can really arrive with the scent of our coffee in the morning, just for a few seconds. When we can appreciate that burst of color of those flowers we're walking past. Or that song that comes on the radio that always gives us goosebumps. Even when we're inside of really difficult things, that brings so much richness to our lives.

And so hopefully when we can arrive just for those few moments, we begin to see that the struggles, even amidst the things we can't change, there's beauty, there's possibility, there's dreams, there's a sense of enjoyment, and it may not last for very long, but that's okay. If we have lots and lots and lots of those moments, they actually add up to something pretty extraordinary.

Shohreh:

And I think as a vestige of, like, diet culture and purity culture and these other systems, we so often think of our lives in terms of destinations.

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Dawn: Yes.

Shohreh: So we have this idea of, like, okay, I'm gonna work on my pleasure and I'm just gonna reach a point and my life will be pleasurable. Or my life will be happy. Insert other [laughs lightly] adjective here of what you really want your life to be. And the reality, of course, is that we're humans and life is in flux, not only, like, hour to hour in our days, but year to year, and every other form of time that exists. And so if we get hung up on this idea of arrival where we have to get to this point and maintain it, that is a standard that nobody can possibly live up to.

Even with the example you were giving about being in a relationship with someone who's going through a hard time. Well, if you're in a relationship with anybody for a long period of time, inevitably, both of you will go through hard times. And one person will have to step in for the other and hold more. So I think getting away from some of this fantasy that's built into our culture and our media of, like, you reach a state and you stay there because that's not just reality.

Dawn: Yeah [laughs lightly]. I'm so glad you brought that up because I think for so many of us, the fiction of figuring it all out, or of arriving, is a really seductive fiction. And it makes sense, right? There's a very self-protective mechanism in stories like that because we're tired, we're not sure, we're overwhelmed.

Shohreh: Preach [laughs].

Dawn: Right! Yeah, we wanna get to a place where it's a little bit easier, or where we're not having to work so hard and try so hard. So it makes

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sense that sometimes we really crave those fictions. I think that there can be so much beauty, too, in moving away from a lot of those narratives of the destination, the certainty, the peak experiences. And to begin really exploring what's true now. What might be possible down the road, I think dreaming is something we desperately need. We need to be dreaming new possibilities and new realities. I think science fiction is an extraordinary medium for us to start wondering what could be possible if the world was different.

But can we do that dreaming while also returning to what is true *now*? How am I feeling now? Not how I wish I was feeling, how I think I should be feeling. But what am I feeling now? And the same thing is true with our bodies. I wish that I could do X, Y, Z. I wish that I could fit in a certain size. But what is true about my body now? And how can I care for it and tend to it and honor it and nourish it exactly as it is now? Knowing that's gonna change.

And I think that that's a part of why so much of the work of coming home to ourselves, of developing body trust, which is a big part of my practice, uh, of pleasure work, is tied to grief.

And some of it is letting go of some of those fictions that we were clinging to. And can we dance with uncertainty? Can we turn towards a moment and wonder like, I wonder what's next? What's possible if this is true instead of I don't want this to be true, I'm going to resist that this is true, and I'm going to shame myself that it's true? Which is where a lot of us get into those shame and anxiety spirals of, I shouldn't be feeling this way right now. So many people have it so much worse than

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me. I told myself I wasn't gonna do this again. Here's what's true, so now what can I do? What do I want? Who can I turn to for support? And I think that's really so much more about experiencing our life, rather than wishing our life away. And honoring what is true is deeply validating.

And it's also a way to build trust with self. If I'm constantly abandoning myself in service to these fictions rather than arriving with myself and investigating what is true now, I mean that is a process of either trust or betrayal in a lot of ways.

Shohreh:

And our bodies are so often the center of oppression and trauma in our lives. And because pleasure is something that we feel and experience in our bodies, I think a big piece of pleasure work is building safety back in our bodies. Finding ways to be in them in ways that feel okay and feel safe to us so that we can feel that pleasure.

Dawn:

Yes, absolutely. It's extraordinary that these bodies of ours are both the site of incredible trauma and violence, but also resilience, pleasure and healing. That these bodies of ours are legacies of all who came before us who survived. And that our bodies are a part of something so much bigger than ourselves. You know, we're a part of this enormous web of life that extends even beyond human beings to the trees and the rocks and the planet. I mean, it really is magical when you think about it. And so often, we turn away from our bodies because of all of these external stories.

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And honestly, some of us are heavily punished for being in our bodies the way that they are, whether those bodies are fat, or visibly queer and trans, or disabled, poor, all kinds of things, bodies of color. You know, so some of us are in bodies that when we step out into the world, we are just punished simply for existing. And it's a complicated thing to be in a body that is experiencing harm and oppression just for moving through the world. And it's also a body that can shiver at a touch. A body that can feel a yummy temperature of a just right shower or a bath. That can feel sunshine on its skin. A body that can allow you to taste and to smell and to see things that delight you. So it's this both and space of as the hurt is happening, as it feels complex, there's also all of this goodness happening.

And sometimes, especially if we're in a body that experiences chronic pain or chronic illness, that is a really tough place to be, where I'm literally in pain *and* this food tastes really good, or I really enjoyed holding that person's hand. And I wish for more of us to have more tools for being able to be with ourselves and what's true. And to be really witnessed and seen inside of that truth. I think that that's an extraordinary place of meeting someone in their humanity.

Shohreh:

Just to give a very literal example of holding both of these things in our bodies in terms of pleasure and pain, I had to start going to see a pelvic floor physical therapist this year because out of nowhere, I started experiencing pain with arousal. And so a thing that has otherwise been a pleasurable experience, and still is, now also involves pain.

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And it's a mind-fuck [laughs lightly] when you have all of these various things happening in your body at the same time, whether it's because there's something physical going on, something chronic, past trauma. So I want to hold space for that. Yeah, it's weird, and it's hard and trying to figure that out and to heal from it is really challenging. But our bodies really, truly are capable of both, of all, of holding so many different things at the same time. And I think we often don't give them enough credit for that.

Dawn:

Yeah, we so often spend so much time trying to shrink our bodies, to mold our bodies, to force our bodies to meet these external ideals. And it makes sense why we do that. We see that people who have bodies of a certain shape, size, age, race, they often have more access to support and resources. Whereas people in other kinds of bodies, that are kind of other end of the, you know, hierarchy, we often see are rejected and don't have access to care and respect and dignity. So it makes sense that we often are seeking belonging by trying to deny our body and what it needs in service to not being left behind or abandoned. Which is why there's so much grief work [laughs lightly], you know, inside of reconnecting with ourselves and our bodies.

But it's true that these bodies of ours are extraordinary. One of the things that I used to talk about a lot on my podcast when it came to, like, sex and communicating with a partner, is no one will ever know what it's like to be inside of your body. The flavors you taste when you taste chocolate are totally unique to you. Now, we might use similar things to describe them, but no one will ever know what chocolate

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tastes like exactly the way that you experience it. Nobody knows what it's like when someone puts their hand on your back and gives it a soft rub. Nobody knows what it's like when your hair is being washed at the salon, or any of those sensations; they're totally unique to you.

And when we kind of hand our power over to so many of these external ideals and stories, these are stories that have no idea what it's like to have lived life in your body, to have moved through your story the way you moved through it. It's important for us to be able to really get to know ourselves, to be able to share our experience, to ask for more of what feels good and less of what doesn't. Because nobody knows what it's like to be us and to feel what we feel in these bodies of ours, as complicated as they can be.

And there's tremendous power in more of us really being able to turn towards our bodies with compassion and curiosity and wonder. You know, what is it like for me when I taste these things? Or when I take a bite of a crisp apple? And to really explore that from a central perspective because no one will ever know. You're the only one. So what an extraordinary place to get to experiment, and to share, and to marvel at what is possible.

I think that can be a really beautiful kind of journey to go on when we start to realize that, like, my experience of my body is duplicated nowhere else in the universe. And that means it's up to me to get to know this landscape and all that it's capable of, and to be with it as it changes. It's a big ask, but what an exciting one.

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Shohreh: And I also think in talking about the uniqueness of our experiences, it's important that we remind ourselves that there is not a hierarchy of pleasures. Whatever you like and you enjoy, like, that's yours, and that's great and it's wonderful. And there's obviously this horrible idea of guilty pleasures [Dawn laughs lightly] that we have in our society of oh, there are some things that aren't seen as "cool" or "in" right now, or they're "basic" and so you're not supposed to like them. I mean, there are entire friendships based off of, like, hate bonding of stuff that other people like, you know?

Dawn: Yeah.

Shohreh: And the older I get, the less that I am here for that and the more I wanna call out that kind of behavior. Because I think it's so important that we let people like what they wanna like. You don't have to like the same things. You have your own unique needs. No one likes being made fun of for the things they enjoy in their life. Like, it's okay for us all to be different, and it makes me sad that, like, that is a piece of the pleasure puzzle, of people feeling, like, guilt over what it is that they like or that they need to keep it a secret. Or, you know, people who maybe they used to do something they really loved and they got made fun of for it, and so now they just don't do it anymore.

Dawn: Yeah. It's really heartbreaking that so many of us have been shamed for a lot of the things that bring us joy and delight and that give our lives a sense of satisfaction. And yes, one, we're kind of trained away from focusing on our pleasure. Part of that is inside of capitalism, we're taught that we need to be a certain level of productive in order to earn

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rest and pleasure. And there's also, you know, a lot around class tied to that, that only certain people with certain wealth are allowed access to luxury, and the rest of us need to keep churning and struggling before we are deserving of that.

And that leads to all kinds of policing of self and of others. And often, people who are policing other peoples' pleasure, other peoples' experiences are doing so because they either don't know what they want or because they're terrified of being rejected and shamed. And so they are trying to get ahead of the rejection and the shame by shaming and rejecting others.

And I think part of that is growing up and trying to figure out who we are, but I think later in life, too, to see someone in an experience of pleasure or delight and to judge it, or to shame someone for it, is really more about you and the fact that you're feeling uncomfortable. You don't know what to do with that. You feel like you can't be in your pleasure in the same way, and because that feels really upsetting to you, you're reacting to it.

And wouldn't it just be so extraordinary if more of us were supporting each other in the things that feel good? I mean, what a life-enriching set of relationships it is when the people in our life genuinely, totally want us to orient towards pleasure in our lives. They celebrate our yes to more ice cream, to that second serving of lasagna, to slowing down and smelling those flowers and petting that cat for a little while longer. And to be able to do that in return and to see the people that we love and

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care about savoring something. And to say yes from a place of genuine want rather than a sense of obligation.

I mean, I don't know about you, but I have both been this person and experienced this person, where you really don't wanna do something, but all your friends convince you to do it and you begrudgingly say yes. And the whole time you're there, you're miserable. And when you are at a party or you're at an event and there's that person who is the sad sack and they're bitching about everything and you can tell they are having a miserable time and they don't want to be there, it impacts everybody. Like, nobody is having fun now. Or the fun we're having has kind of got a little asterisk on it because so-and-so over there is going to say something snarky in the next second.

Versus if we were to encourage the people in our lives to take up that space and to say *no*—so many of us are so terrified of people saying no to us because we take it as a personal rejection instead of that person is taking care of themselves, and now we can actually have something really interesting happen, where you've said no, I don't want to go to the thing. And if my response to that is, "Thank you so much for taking care of yourself. I hope whatever you do instead is super fun. Let's connect afterwards and find out what it is that you did and I'll tell you how my thing went." And then I go and I have a great time because everybody who is there wants to be there. That's a totally different experience for everyone.

Like, we still get to connect afterwards, instead of pressuring someone into something that they didn't really want to do. And I feel kind of

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guilty about it. Or I feel a little bit bitter that I had to do so much emotional labor to convince the person and they're not having a good time anyway. I mean, it becomes really complicated really quickly when we're doing all of kind of, like, coercive, manipulative stuff with the people in our relationships, and that we're friends with, and our families.

So I want for more of us to be in relationships with people who celebrate our pleasure, and for whom we can celebrate their pleasure. And sometimes that means being on the receiving end of some no's so that there's more space for some of those yes's. And it also means allowing people to say yes to the things that they want, even if we really don't get it. I don't need to understand why you like this thing; all I need to know is that you like this thing and I care about you, so yay you for having this thing you like! It doesn't make sense to me but what matters is you like it, and this relationship is something that I'm invested in.

So that's the only story that I need to really understand. Maybe down the road I'll learn more, but I think so often we get hung up on the why, when instead if we kind of come back to, does this person I care about really enjoy this thing? Does it make them happy? Then that's the why.

Shohreh:

And it invites us to get to know the people in our lives better, to get curious about them, and learn things about them that we might not otherwise know if we had bullied them [light laughter] into doing certain things or going to certain things that they clearly don't want to do.

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Dawn: Yeah.

Shohreh: Like, it's an opportunity be like, oh, well, I would like to spend some time with you, you know? What might be a fun thing that we could do together that you would enjoy? Right? Like, there's so many ways to handle this that aren't like, [whining] please, please, please, please, do it for me!

Dawn: Yeah. I mean, I love how you bring in the creativity that becomes possible. I think that that's something that when we're terrified of rejection gets missed. You know, when I'm so scared of you saying no because it feels like a personal rejection of me, Dawn, rather than a rejection of just this particular invitation, uh, for the billion reasons why maybe you might not be up for it, it really shuts down the opportunity for us to get creative and to co-create and to dream together.

Versus what you offered, which is if you say, "I'm *really* not up for a party tonight," if I really want to go to the party and you really don't, okay, well then we can kind of talk about how that looks. But if you really don't want to go to the party and I'm not super invested in it, I'm more interested in the time with you, then what does feel good? What could we do? You know, is there something that would feel more fun? Maybe instead of the party, we do a picnic. Or maybe it's, like, Netflix and ice cream night. Or maybe you don't even wanna put clothes on and we're just gonna, like, talk on the phone for a while. There's so many different things that we can then start finding our way towards that feels good for both of us, but that requires us to be honest and

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vulnerable and to have some skills around communication, which most of us are notoriously terrible at.

And so it takes practice, you know, and being able to have people in our lives who we're able to practice these skills with is super important. 'Cause we absolutely do not practice those skills, for the most part, when we're younger in school and with our families. So for a lot of us, we're learning some pretty basic communication skills, some pretty basic skills around like resilience and boundaries much later in life. And that's a tough time to be learning, but also *most* of us are kind of learning at that point. So I love how you're bringing in that opportunity for creativity and collaboration.

You know, I certainly want more of *my* relationships to be based around dreaming together, co-creating together, kind of checking in with like, well, what's true today? And does this plan that we made before still feel good? You know, so many of my friends will say, "Hey, next Friday, let's do a movie night!" and then Friday night rolls around, and if one, or many of us, have had a totally shitty day, I love that we're able to check in like, "Does a movie still feel good? Or would something else feel good?" And then we kind of figure out what makes the most sense, including saying, "I'm not up for tonight."

That's not personal. That's not because they don't wanna see me.

That's because they had a really hard day, or their allergies are kicking their butt, or whatever it is. We get to come back together at another point. And I just wish for more of us to have those kinds of supportive, collaborative connections.

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Shohreh: Yes. I think in my late twenties and 'til now in my early thirties, so many of my friendships have transformed into that kind of relationship, and it truly is illuminating. Because when you give other people permission to show up that way, you're also getting permission to show up that way and honor each other's needs and not have these sky-high expectations that every person in your life needs to be able to do every single thing with you. Obviously of course in romantic relationships, a lot of people tend to hold this idea of, like, my partner needs to be my everything, we have to do all the things together.

Dawn: Oof [heavy sigh], yeah.

Shohreh: And there's a whole separate topic that we could get into, but it's okay if the people in your lives [laughs lightly] don't do every single thing with you. And they're not you. They're not a carbon copy of you, so it makes sense that you're gonna have different things that you enjoy or wanna do.

I have friends who if I'm like, "I wanna go have some pool time and drinks," I know to call them. I have other friends that I know that they *hate* doing that. They don't wanna be out in the sun. They don't really care for water. So that's not the person that I'm gonna go to for pool time. But maybe that's my friend who loves board games.

So as you get to know your friends better and their preferences and, like, what feels good to them and what doesn't, it allows you to not put so much on each person, and instead honor where they are at.

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Dawn: Yeah. And one of the things that comes up time and again whenever I run my pleasure course—it's a five-week course, and in the fifth week we talk about bringing our pleasure practice that we've been doing for the past four weeks into our lives. You know, we spend four weeks really kind of turning within and getting to know our bodies, getting really curious about our experiences. But we don't exist in vacuums. So the ways that we move through our life is in relationship with others. And so in that fifth week, we start exploring boundary work and the relationships in our lives.

And often, what people start being afraid of, either because it's true or because they're not sure and they're worried that it's true, is if I start really prioritizing my own pleasure, can the people in my life meet me there? And the answer is sometimes they can't. Now, they may be able to down the road, and they may not, that'll be something you'll have to assess. But some people put their dreams and their joy on hold because they're so worried that the people around them are gonna judge them for it. And I think that's a really, really important place of investigation.

If as I'm adopting my pleasure practice, I'm afraid that my friends are going to shame me, ridicule me, make fun of me, then that's an opportunity to really ask: are these the kinds of friendships that I want in my life? If me moving in the direction of my joy means that I get made fun of and I have to shrink, is this really a friendship, or is this more about performing in ways that keep these people in my life? And there are some people who are going to feel threatened by you moving in the direction of your yes.

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And it's for the reasons we've already talked about, right? Like, a great one is sometimes people who are starting to renegotiate their relationship with food, where they're, you know, breaking up with diet culture, they aren't restricting anymore, they're really trying to take a more intuitive approach to food. There's a very good reason for a lot of the fear when it comes to eating in front of certain family members. And we know why, right? Like, if I'm saying yes to dessert but maybe my mom, who's a lifelong dieter, absolutely does not feel like she's worthy as a human being to say yes to dessert, seeing me say yes is gonna bring up all her stuff. And then often, the people in our lives, when that stuff comes up, don't know how to deal with those feelings and so they project them onto us.

And so often when we are starting to find our yes's and our no's, we want to start honoring our boundaries, our hungers, our desires, we're gonna start bumping up against people who have not done similar work, and so it's touching on their own shame, their own fear of rejection, their own worry about their body changing. And that is absolutely a place where having community, having support, can really help us while we're kind of trying to renegotiate these new dynamics in our relationships.

Some people just need some time. Like, oof, I'm worried you're gonna leave me. I don't know what's going on. This isn't how we used to connect. But over time, you know, as some of those fears ease, they'll start kinda like okay, I really care about this person, and this is just

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gonna be different for us. You know, they honor you when you say, "Hey, can we not talk about diets anymore?" and they listen.

And there's gonna be other people for whom they are not ready for that kind of truth and they're not gonna be able to meet you inside of that. And so then you have another one of those places of choice, right? Do I want us to get in this relationship? Has this relationship run its course? Do I just need additional support for this particular area of my life?

But so many people don't really get to know themselves and don't really get to know what it is that they want, what it is that they like, because they're so afraid of the people in their lives making fun of them. And shaming them. And judging them. And I think that that's a really, really important point of inquiry: is this how I want to live my life? Like, will I feel good 20 years from now if I didn't move in the direction of taking care of me and learning to honor this body because I was afraid my friends were gonna make fun of me?

Or, do I hope that 20 years down the road, my life is full of friends and loved ones and community who celebrate me and all that I have done to get to know this body? To deepen into my sense of power and pleasure. To do the work that matters to me.

My guess is that most people want, 20 years down the road, to have that richness. Where they can be themselves and be celebrated for it. But often, that means that now, in this life, some of the relationships we're in might need to be renegotiated.

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Shohreh: And fear and courage go hand in hand, right? It's not that you're going to reach a point where it's necessarily not scary [laughs lightly] to renegotiate relationships or to start setting boundaries. Like, the fear is going to be there. It's a matter of learning to hold that fear and do it anyway because that's what you want for your life, and you wanna honor yourself instead of elevating what other people want. Or, what really, you're guessing they want, over what you want.

And earlier this year, I had Michelle Elman on the podcast to talk about her book on boundaries, "The Joy of Being Selfish." And she talked about the fact that when she started setting boundaries, she lost a ton of friends because those friendships were based around the fact that she had no boundaries. And so all of the sudden, when those people couldn't walk all over her anymore, they didn't really want to be part of the friendship. And, you know, she's like, that was really hard, but ultimately I'm so much better off because those weren't real friendships. They were one-sided and I just couldn't see it because I didn't have good boundaries.

So sometimes when you do this, you really learn things about other people that you couldn't see before, and you may realize, wow, I actually don't want this person in my life. Like, I was afraid of them not being there, and now I'm actually glad that they're not here. So there's so many different ways it can go.

Dawn: Absolutely. One of the things that I have done, but also that I see a lot of my clients do too—and it makes so much sense why. But often, when we kind of realize, holy crap, there's this thing about my relationship

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with this person, whether it's a friend or it's a romantic sexual relationship, whatever it is. But you kinda are like, holy crap, this thing totally isn't working. I've been avoiding this one thing, and often the discomfort, or the pain of that realization makes us dive into the hardest thing, right, the most painful thing with this person. And then we're both struggling to breathe.

It's kinda like, I just realized I've never actually enjoyed the sex that we have. We've been together for eight years, and I just realized, I don't really like it. And so often, inside of that discomfort, we're like, I'm just gonna go tell them. And then we, like, blow things up. When we don't have a strong foundation of skill, moving directly into that hardest thing is pretty self-destructive. It's also uncomfortable to know that and to not take immediate action.

But, when it's a relationship that really matters to us, often we have to kind of take ten steps back, right? So maybe instead of going to them and saying, "I just realized that I have absolutely not enjoyed the sex that we've been having for the last eight years," that's a pretty catastrophic thing to say to someone. Now you can absolutely do that. I think it depends on you and your relationship and your life. But if it's a relationship that we really want to maintain, we just need things to be different, sometimes it's important to ask ourselves, what's the culture of our relationship? Like, do we often talk about our personal experiences? Do we get really vulnerable? Have we navigated really tough things before? And if the answer is no, then maybe we need to

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kind of back way out and start building some skills and building a foundation first of sharing around things that aren't so tender.

Can we talk about things that are kind of adjacent to it and start getting comfortable with that, and getting to know each other, and being a little bit more honest about some other aspects of our life to find new points of connection and to really enrich the relationship? So that when we finally do enter into that conversation, it doesn't feel like I've just thrown a grenade. Instead, it might feel scary, it might feel uncomfortable, but we're confident in the skills that we've built together. And I think that means being uncomfortable for a while, because skill-building takes time.

So that's also something that often I'll invite people into, of what skills can you start cultivating now? What kind of a culture can you start cultivating now in the relationships you're in so that when—not if, when tough things come up, scary things need to be shared, you feel like you can meet each other inside of that, rather than we're just kinda cruising along, things are easy until they're not, and now we don't know what to do. We don't know how to be with each other inside of hard things. We haven't navigated multiple conflicts before. And so everything just kind of falls apart and we either pretend like it never happened, or it totally disintegrates trust in the relationship.

And so I think some relationships we just need to move away from: this is absolutely not serving me, it's toxic and I see that. Other relationships matter to us a lot but we also haven't been doing the things that we could that make it so that we can share really openly and communicate

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around vulnerable topics. So what can we start doing *now* in a way that feels playful and hopeful and curious so that down the road, we're more skilled in those areas? And all of that ties back to boundary work, to pleasure, to body trust, to honoring what's true for ourselves. It's such a rich dynamic. It plays with so many entry points.

But I do want to encourage people that are listening, that for the relationships that matter to you, really take stock of the culture of that relationship. And what can you be doing differently? And what do you wish the people that you're in relationship with were doing differently? And then how do you set yourselves up for success to be able to start doing those things, rather than just like, well, this is gonna be uncomfortable, so I'm just walking away.

Shohreh: Thank you for talking about that, because it's such a common experience, especially if your self-trust has not really been there, if you have commonly ignored feelings that you've had. Or, things that are coming up and you've pushed them down and you've pushed them down, where it does feel like it's erupting from inside of you [laughter].

Dawn: Yes.

Shohreh: When you reach that point where you're like [exasperated voice], "If I don't talk about this, I will scream!" You know? [Dawn laughs lightly]. So there is this tendency to be like [angrily], I need to sit this person down right now and—like, we're going to have it out." And *rarely*, rarely, does that go well. And it is, it's uncomfortable, 'cause, like, you feel like, you're like, I need to get this out!

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And I'll also say there are so many places you can process that that aren't necessarily with that person. So it's not that you have to keep it inside, you know, you can bring this to journaling, to therapy, to so many other places so that you feel like you can get that out and start to really understand what's going on there without, like you said, throwing the grenade [Dawn laughs lightly] and blowing up everything that you've built over the course of this time.

Dawn: Yeah.

Shohreh: 'Cause maybe you haven't liked your sex life for eight years but maybe you really love your partnership. So do you wanna just throw it away because now this has come out? Probably not.

Dawn: Yeah, I'm so glad you mentioned that. There's other places that we can go to process, to grapple, to grieve, to celebrate, to try and understand more deeply, so that when we do approach the person, right, that it's about, we've had some time with it. And it's also important for us to remember that when we've been thinking about something for a really long time and we bring it to someone, they haven't been thinking about it for a really long time, often.

Shohreh: Yes, oh my gosh [laughs lightly].

Dawn: And they deserve time. They get to have time for big feelings and for being surprised and having no idea what that means and for their shame to come up. And so often, it's kinda like, I've been thinking about this for weeks or months, and I bring it to you and I want an answer *now*. I want you to be calm about this. I want you to just get it.

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But it took us a long time to get there. We raged and cried and all the things and talked to five friends and brought it to therapy, you know, three sessions in a row.

So there's an opportunity for grace when we bring things to people and to say like, "If you need some time, if this is something that we maybe need to talk about multiple times, if you want to go away and think about it," and to really, genuinely give someone time, not like, "Hey, have you thought about it? Have you thought about it? Have you done that thing you said you were going to do?" Right, because then we're uncomfortable with the waiting.

But sometimes people need time to know what they're thinking and feeling about a thing, especially when it feels new or like a surprise. And that's another point, right, that can be uncomfortable. And so it makes us kind of take action, rather than just being with the uncertainty for a little while.

Shohreh: Yes, I have been there and done that and it doesn't go well.

Dawn: [Laughs] Same.

Shohreh: So good warning. Alright, well, we have covered so much ground. To wrap up, for those who are listening who are feeling maybe a bit disconnected from their pleasure, or like it's not something they've really been prioritizing in their lives, do you have any suggestions for them on how maybe they could start to explore this?

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Dawn: Absolutely. So one of my favorite things that I recommend to people who are kind of like, what does that even mean to me? What do I like? What does pleasure feel like? I don't know.

Shohreh: Which is a lot of people, for the record.

Dawn: Which is a lot of people. A lot of us think we know what we like, but then really discover we actually don't know, or we don't really like the things we thought we liked, which is really scary to realize. So for me, a really great starting place that is super simple, and it's really about those micro-moments, is starting with our senses. So when we begin to investigate intentionally, like what are all of the sounds that I really enjoy? As I move through my day today, I'm just going to notice sounds and see what were some of my favorites. Maybe tomorrow, it's gonna be flavors. You know, what are the flavors that I like in food? What are the textures that I like in food? And to just really arrive with our senses, from sight and sound to sensation and flavor and smell, and it sounds really simple.

But I can tell you after hundreds of people have been through my pleasure course, that consistently it's the week we spend on the senses that are the most profound for them, and begin to change their understanding of their own pleasure and body. So what feels like a yes when it comes to smells? What feels like a yes when it comes to touch? What feels like a yes when it comes to the things you're looking at? And where can you start bringing some more of those things that you enjoy into your life in big and small ways? Maybe it's a slightly different path

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that you take when you're walking to the store. Or maybe it's different music you play when you're in the car.

But when you start tuning into your senses and really cultivating, "That's where my yes is. That's how my yes feels in my body. Oh, maybe I can bring more smells of lavender into my house. Or put a piece of art next to my desk that I really like, where I can see it every day." That starts to connect us with our bodies in a pretty potent way that's pretty simple. And also starts to give us some evidence that one, we do experience pleasure, and two, this is what it feels like. And also, this is what it feels like when I don't really care for something or when it's kind of neutral.

Those are fantastic sources of information so that when we then start growing and trying other things, we now know this is what a no feels like for me, and I think that's what I'm feeling right now. So starting with an investigation and an awareness of your senses is a really, really powerful but simple, free thing that we can do in our daily lives that'll lead us towards knowing more about ourselves and our pleasure.

Shohreh: I love that, and I also think it's great for people who are still needing to get practice being in their bodies.

Dawn: Yes.

Shohreh: Because especially when I'm thinking of things like smells or sounds, like these are time-bound things where it's like you're coming into your body to smell something or to feel something, and then like, you can leave, right?

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- Dawn:** Yep.
- Shohreh:** You don't have to stay there. And so it's really accessible for a lot of people.
- Dawn:** Yeah, it's pretty scary for people when it's like, just masturbate! [Shohreh laughs] Or just, you know, take that big trip. Like a lot of us aren't ready for that. A lot of us would be just further dissociated by that. So what's the smallest, smallest thing that we can do for just a few seconds? And the more we do that, the more we increase our capacity for presence and for noticing, and then that really becomes the foundation of so many beautiful things.
- Shohreh:** I love that. Thank you so much for being here, Dawn. This has been a wonderful conversation. How can people find you, and how can my listeners best support you at this time?
- Dawn:** Thank you for asking. Well, you can find me at dawnserra.com. I'm Dawn Serra on pretty much all of the social medias everywhere. And the work that I'm really focusing on right now is my five-week pleasure course. It is phenomenal, I love it. It's so fun, it's juicy, it's deep. I have alumni who have gone through it like four times at this point—
- Shohreh:** [Laughs] I love that.
- Dawn:** 'Cause they just keep getting more every time. So if you're interested, I actually have a new cohort that's starting in a couple of weeks and I'm running it about four or five times a year, so

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dawnserra.com/pleasurecourse if you wanna check that out. I would love to see you there.

Shohreh: Perfect. I will make sure all of that is linked in the show notes so everyone can find it. Y'all go follow Dawn, she's always posting really wonderful insights about pleasure and all of the great things we talked about today. And you're not gonna wanna miss them.

Dawn: Thank you so much for having me.

Shohreh: Of course!

[Music plays]

Shohreh: 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. Additionally, if you haven't left a rating and review in the Apple Podcasts app yet, you can do so from any Apple device to help more people find and benefit from the show. I also love hearing from listeners, so feel free to take a screenshot from your podcast player, post on social media, and tag me. My username is @ShohrehDavoodi on all platforms. 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. Thank you so much for listening, and I hope you'll join me for the next episode.

[Music fades]