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# Perspectives

MAGAZINE



The Philosophy behind
## Shades of Reality

In Collaboration with

## What Men Carry

## When Behaviour Is Misread

PLUS
More from Ranath Media Experts

## SHARDIA O'CONNOR
on identity, environment and early formation

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# Perspectives Contents Features


**Shardia O'Connor**
Identity, environment and early formation
06



The Philosophy Behind Shades of Reality
10

When behaviour is misread
14



Rethinking Grief and the Losses We Don't Talk About
18



What if Better Health Isn't About Trying Harder?
22




What Men Carry
28



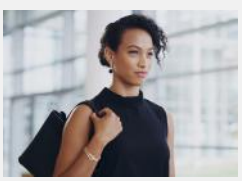
What If the Life We're Searching for Is the One We're Not Present For?
32



Confidence Isn't About Loving What You See
36



What If the Life We're Searching for Is the One We're Not Present For?
40



Some collaborations begin with an idea. Others grow from a shared belief in what matters. For me, Perspectives began with an admiration for Shardia's work and the humanity at its heart.

As someone also from Birmingham, I have long found much to connect with in her outlook. There is something meaningful about sharing roots in a city shaped by so many cultures, communities and experiences. It gives us an appreciation of the different ways people see the world, and of how much we can learn when we take the time to listen.

What I have always admired about Shardia is that she speaks from the heart. Her words carry a sense of purpose, grounded in a desire to make a difference. That is what resonated with me from the beginning, and it remains what I respect most about her work.

At its core is a concern for humanity: a wish to help people, whatever their background, and to contribute to a world in which more of us feel understood, valued and supported. There is generosity in that outlook, alongside a willingness to engage with experiences beyond our own.

That spirit is what makes this collaboration so meaningful to me. Through Perspectives, we have an opportunity to bring different voices together, share experiences and give readers space to consider another point of view. My hope is that these pages encourage curiosity, open conversations and help us recognise the humanity we share.

It is a pleasure to collaborate with Shardia on a publication that reflects those values. I am grateful for the heart and purpose she brings to it, and proud to be part of this beginning.

Thank you for joining us. I hope you find something within these pages that stays with you, sparks a conversation or inspires a small act of kindness.

Sometimes, that is where making a difference begins.

**Rany Athwall**
**Founder**

**Ranath Media**

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# Foreword



I chose to be part of this Perspectives Magazine because alignment matters more to me than visibility.

When something is built with intention and depth, you recognise it immediately. This felt aligned not only in what it represents, but in what it is trying to create space for: real stories, honest reflection, and meaningful dialogue.

My work through Shades of Reality has always been rooted in that same principle. It is not built around performance or surface-level messaging. It is built around understanding, responsibility, and reflection in how we engage with ourselves, each other, and the environments we move through.

My hope is that this publication encourages readers to reflect on their own alignment, in identity, relationships, and the spaces they choose to remain in. Because what we align with shapes what we become part of, and what we become part of shapes everything else.

Shardia O'Connor
Shades of Reality

*Shardia is the founder of Shades of Reality, a platform and consultancy focused on identity, culture, and organisational resilience. Her work bridges lived experience, academic study, and applied psychological insight, drawing from a BA (Hons) in Young People, Families and Communities.*

*She is also an interviewer and writer with a focus on real narratives, human behaviour, and communication. Her work explores how identity is shaped through environment, culture, and personal decision making, with a strong emphasis on alignment, responsibility, and sustainable growth.*

*She has experience across healthcare, education, leadership, and community systems, and continues to develop structured frameworks that support individuals and organisations in building healthier, more resilient cultures.*



# IDENTITY, ENVIRONMENT AND EARLY FORMATION

## Shardia O'Connor

There comes a point where you stop trying to fit into spaces that were never designed to fully understand you, and instead focus on alignment. That shift changes how you think, how you move, and how you build.

For me, identity has never been fixed. It is shaped through experience, environment, inheritance, education, and the decisions you make once you are aware enough to take responsibility for your direction.

Growing up in Birmingham exposed me to a wide range of cultures, perspectives, and lived experiences. It taught me how to observe before I interpret, and how to understand people within context rather than assumption. That ability to read environments has stayed with me across every space I have worked in.

### FAMILY SYSTEMS AND THE "GLASS CHILD" EXPERIENCE

Coming from a large family of six siblings also shaped my early understanding of identity within shared environments. In developmental psychology, there is a concept often referred to as the "glass child," which describes siblings in families where attention may naturally be directed toward children with additional needs or higher levels support. In such environments, some children develop heightened awareness, independence, and observational thinking earlier than expected, as they learn to navigate space within complexity.

That awareness has shaped how I understand people, not from theory alone, but from lived experience combined with reflection.

### MEDIA, PERCEPTION AND COMMUNICATION

Alongside this, I developed an early awareness of media and communication. I became interested in how narratives are shaped, how information is framed, and how meaning shifts depending on tone, context, and delivery. That interest developed into a deeper understanding of how storytelling influences perception and interpretation.

### CREATIVE FOUNDATION: INTERVIEWS, WRITING AND STORYTELLING

My creative foundation was shaped through interviews and writing. I was drawn to conversations that went beyond surface-level answers, particularly those that explored thought, experience, and perspective in real time.

I studied interviews from both the UK and the US, especially those that felt direct and unfiltered. What stood out was not performance, but depth: how people think aloud, reflect, and reveal meaning through dialogue.



Writing developed alongside this. English was one of my strongest academic subjects, not only because of structure, but because it allowed expression. I wrote stories, scripts, and ideas from a young age, often as a way of processing thought and experience.

Reading also played a key role in shaping this foundation. I grew up around newspapers, magazines, and fiction, which gave me both awareness of real-world narratives and imaginative perspective.

## ACADEMIC JOURNEY AND INTELLECTUAL DEVELOPMENT

My academic journey has been shaped directly by these lived experiences. I completed a BA (Hons) in Young People, Families and Communities, which gave me a structured understanding of social systems, behaviour, and how environments shape development.

I have a long-standing interest in the mind, behaviour, and the deeper mechanisms behind human experience. Education, for me, has always been a way of making sense of lived reality rather than separating from it.

## ANCESTRY, ROOTS AND IDENTITY

A part of my understanding of identity also comes through ancestry. My roots trace back to Benin and Togo, carrying a history of structured, disciplined, and resilient women who held leadership within their communities. That lineage resonates with how I approach responsibility, clarity, and presence.

Alongside this, my stepfather played a significant role in shaping my thinking. He taught me to balance logic with emotion, not as opposing forces, but as something that must work together. That balance has stayed with me throughout my personal and professional life.

## COMMUNITY, ALIGNMENT AND PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

Over time, I have learned that while you cannot choose every circumstance you are born into, you can choose how you move forward with what you have experienced. Development is shaped by direction, not explanation.

That understanding has influenced how I see community. For me, community is not defined by proximity or shared background, but by alignment. The people you build with, grow with, and move alongside become your real environment.

## SUPPORT SYSTEMS AND CAPACITY

This has also shaped how I understand support systems. Support does not always come from where it is expected. It is shaped by capacity, experience, and exposure. People can only offer what they have access to themselves, and different individuals within a family or environment may naturally connect more easily with different needs.

Understanding this has shifted my perspective away from expectation and towards awareness. It has also reinforced the importance of recognising environments that are able to support development in ways that are aligned with potential, rather than familiarity alone.



## SHADES OF REALITY: ORIGINS IN INTERVIEW CULTURE

This perspective directly influences my work. Shades of Reality began through interviews. Before any structured writing or programmes existed, it started with conversation. I have always been drawn to real dialogue, not performance, but people speaking honestly about their experiences, decisions, and the moments that shaped them.

The interviews I conduct focus on real people and real stories. Journeys that reflect growth, transition, discipline, and change. Hardship is not always defined by extremes. It can exist in quieter forms, environments that do not fully support you, expectations that do not reflect your capacity, or circumstances that require internal resilience to navigate.

## RESILIENCE, OUTCOME AND HUMAN TRAJECTORY

For me, this work is also personal. I grew up in environments where different outcomes were visible and accessible. Many of those around me were navigating complex circumstances, and statistically speaking, multiple directions were possible.

What shaped my path was not the absence of exposure, but the decisions made within it, and the influence of individuals who provided structure, consistency, and direction at key points in my development.

This is why I am equally interested in two types of narratives. Those who have transformed through adversity, and those who have navigated similar environments without being defined by them. Both require different forms of resilience, and both carry insight that is often overlooked.

Shades of Reality was built to hold space for that full spectrum.

The aim of the interviews is not to define people by their lowest point or highest achievement, but to understand the process in between how people interpret their environments, how they make decisions under pressure, and how awareness develops over time.

## ORGANISATIONAL WORK AND CULTURAL SYSTEMS

My professional work through Shades of Reality focuses on identity, culture, and organisational resilience. These are structured frameworks used within education, healthcare, leadership, and community settings.

At the core is the relationship between culture and identity. Culture shapes behaviour, communication, and performance. Identity shapes how individuals position themselves within those environments. When misaligned, systems begin to break down. My focus is on strengthening that alignment, developing resilient teams, and supporting environments that are sustainable rather than reactive

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## COMMUNICATION, TONE AND HUMAN INTERPRETATION

Communication is central to this work. Not only what is said, but how it is said. Tone, behaviour, and delivery shape meaning as much as language itself. Most communication breakdowns are not rooted in intent, but interpretation.

My academic background in psychology strengthens this work by providing a structured understanding of behaviour, cognition, and emotional response. It allows me to connect lived experience with academic frameworks in a practical and applied way.

## CREATIVITY, INTERVIEWS AND LANGUAGE

Alongside this, I have always been drawn to communication in its creative form. My interest in interviews developed early, from watching conversations that revealed more than surface-level answers, to studying dialogue that explored thought and perspective in real time.

That interest naturally extended into writing, which has always been one o  my strongest forms of expression. Reading also shaped this foundation, particularly newspapers, magazines, and fiction, which helped develop both analytical thinking and imagination.

Over time, this developed into a deeper understanding of communication as a tool for interpreting people beyond surface-level narrative. That principle sits within everything I do, including my academic work, writing, and the frameworks I build through Shades of Reality.

## MODERN SYSTEMS AND HUMAN RESPONSIBILITY

I am also aware of the systems we are moving into, including artificial intelligence. As communication becomes increasingly influenced by systems, there is a growing need to remain grounded in context, responsibility, and human experience.

Because people are not systems. They are complex, emotional, and responsive individuals operating within environments that require care, awareness, and accountability on both sides.

## CLOSING REFLECTION: ALIGNMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY

Shades of Reality is built from that understanding. It is not about visibility or performance. It is about depth that leads to accountability, and environments that can sustain growth over time.

Because sustainability is not about intensity, it is about alignment. And alignment is what determines whether anything lasts.



# The Philosophy Behind Shades of Reality

Shades of Reality was created from a simple belief: people deserve to be understood beyond the surface.

We live in a world where people are often reduced to labels, assumptions, titles, past experiences or the version of themselves that is easiest for others to understand. But behind every person is a story, a history, an environment, and a set of experiences that have shaped how they see the world. That is where the conversations begin.

Shades of Reality is a space for real conversations, growth, informed psychology, expression and truth. It is about exploring the layers behind people, challenging the narratives we inherit, questioning what we have been taught, and creating space for deeper understanding.

It is not about creating conversations for performance. It is about creating purposeful conversations. The people I choose to speak with reflect that. Whether they are creatives, professionals, leaders, educators or individuals who have experienced significant change, the common thread is always depth. There has to be something beyond the surface, a lived experience, a lesson, a perspective, or a story that can create understanding.

Because everyone has a reality that exists beyond what we see.

## The Conversations

Conversation has always been a powerful tool for understanding people. Not just what someone has achieved, but what shaped them, what challenged them, what they learned and what they are still becoming. Shades of Reality aims to explore those parts of people that are often overlooked.

Some conversations focus on resilience. Some explore identity, culture, leadership, creativity or transformation. Some challenge the way we view people based on their past or their circumstances.



A person's history is not always the full story.

One example of this is my conversation with Chris Abeso, whose journey reflects change, accountability and transformation. His story highlights the importance of recognising that people are capable of growth, and that lived experience can become a source of education and impact when someone chooses a different direction.

These conversations are not about creating perfect narratives. They are about understanding human beings in their complexity.

## The Work Beyond Conversation

Alongside interviews and storytelling, Shades of Reality explores the relationship between identity, culture and the environments we create.

Through my work with organisations, I focus on the importance of building cultures that support people, strengthen teams and create sustainable environments.

Organisations are made up of people. The culture within those organisations influences how people communicate, how they work together, how they respond to challenges and whether they feel supported. The work is about looking beyond surface-level solutions and understanding the deeper factors that influence behaviour, communication and resilience. Because when people and environments are aligned, growth becomes possible.

## Looking Ahead

The future of Shades of Reality is about continuing to create meaningful conversations and collaborations with people who are willing to think deeply, challenge perspectives and contribute to positive change.

I want to continue connecting with thought leaders, psychologists, creatives, professionals and individuals with lived experience who have something valuable to share.



The goal is not simply to have conversations with visible people. It is to have conversations with people who have something meaningful to contribute. Whether someone is in the public eye or not, their experiences, lessons and perspectives matter.

The future is about building connections with like-minded individuals, organisations and communities who believe in growth, accountability and creating environments where people can thrive.

Shades of Reality is ultimately about understanding people properly.

**Not reducing them to assumptions.**
**Not defining them by one moment.**
**But recognising the depth, complexity and potential within every person.**

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# When Behaviour Is Misread

## How Labels, Culture and Context Shape the Way We Understand People





There is a moment that happens quietly, often before a person has had the opportunity to explain themselves.

*"A behaviour is noticed. An assumption is formed. A label begins to take shape."*



Someone is described as difficult, disruptive, unmotivated, overly emotional or unable to cope.



But what if what we are seeing is only part of the story?

Throughout my experiences across healthcare, mental health, community settings and different working environments, one thing has become increasingly clear: people are often interpreted before they are understood.

Behaviour is visible.
Context is not always visible.
Yet every behaviour exists within a wider story. It is influenced by experiences, relationships, environment, culture and

the systems people navigate every day. Human beings naturally create categories. We use language to make sense of complexity. In many ways, this is necessary. Labels can provide clarity, recognition and access to support.

For many people with ADHD, autism, anxiety disorders, mood disorders or learning differences, receiving a diagnosis can bring understanding after years of uncertainty. It can provide a framework for better understanding themselves and communicating their needs. The concern is not that labels exist.

The concern is what happens when the label becomes the person. A diagnosis can explain part of someone's experience, but it should never become the entirety of their identity. A person is not simply their challenges. They are not defined by their most difficult moments. They are not reduced to the assumptions others make about them.

Sociologist Howard Becker explored this through labelling theory in his influential work Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance (1963). Becker examined how labels can influence the way individuals are perceived and how society responds to them.

---



*A label is never just a word.*
*It carries expectations.*
*It influences interactions.*

A label is never just a word.
It carries expectations.
It influences interactions.

It can affect how people are treated and, over time, how they begin to view themselves.

The difference between saying, "This child is struggling with behaviour," and "This child is a problem" may seem small, but the impact is significant.

*One encourages curiosity.*
*The other creates a conclusion.*

Psychologist Robert K. Merton (1948) explored a similar idea through the concept of the self-fulfilling prophecy, highlighting how expectations can influence outcomes. The way we see people influences the way we respond to them. The way we respond

can influence the opportunities, relationships and experiences available to them. This is why understanding behaviour requires more than observation.
It requires context.



Psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) highlighted that human development cannot be separated from the environments surrounding individuals. Families, communities, education, relationships, culture and wider society shape people.

*A behaviour does not appear in isolation.*

A young person struggling in school may not simply lack discipline. They may be communicating distress, unmet needs or experiences that have not been recognised. An adult who appears withdrawn may not lack motivation. They may be responding to pressure, uncertainty or circumstances others cannot see.

*Understanding does not remove accountability.*

*It creates a fuller picture.*

This conversation becomes even more important when we consider culture and identity.



The way behaviour is interpreted is not always universal. Communication styles, emotional expression and responses to authority can differ across communities and backgrounds.

This raises an important question:
Are we seeing the behaviour itself, or are we also seeing our own assumptions about what that behaviour means?

The growing conversation around neurodiversity has highlighted this further. While increased awareness of ADHD and autism has finally allowed many people to access recognition and support, it has also raised questions around who gets understood, who gets overlooked and how expectations influence assessment.

The challenge is not simply identifying differences. The challenge is ensuring that people are understood within the full context of their lives because people do not exist as symptoms, categories or statistics.

They exist as individuals.
They have histories.
They have environments.
They have experiences that shape how they move through the world.

At Shades of Reality, this is the type of conversation I believe we need more of. Not conversations built around blame, but conversations built around awareness, responsibility and reflection.

Growth requires honesty.

*'At Shades of Reality, this is the type of conversation I believe we need more of. Not conversations built around blame, but conversations built around awareness, responsibility and reflection.'*

It requires us to ask:
What beliefs have shaped the way we see others?
What behaviours are we willing to unlearn and relearn?

What cultural assumptions influence our understanding?
What are we willing to change to create healthier environments?



*Behind every label is a person. Behind every behaviour is a story.*

I invite leaders, organisations, academics, creatives, industry experts, public figures and individuals with lived experience to be part of these conversations.

Those with influence have an opportunity to shape the discussions that define society.

Because the conversations we avoid often reveal the areas where growth is most needed.

And perhaps the first step towards understanding is being willing to look beyond what is immediately visible.

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## *RETHINKING GRIEF AND THE LOSSES WE DON'T TALK ABOUT*

The loss of someone we love and cherish is one of the deepest losses we can experience, but grief is not reserved for bereavement. Some of life's other losses can be experienced just as deeply. For these other losses, there is no funeral, no sympathy cards and no recognised place in our conversations as there are when a loved one dies.

These are the invisible losses we face in our day-to-day lives, which can arise from any of the losses we experience; losses that are often unseen but can affect every aspect of our lives in ways we rarely imagine until they happen to us.

To fully understand what an invisible loss is and how it affects us, it's important to distinguish between the loss itself and the consequence of the loss. The loss is the event. In the case of a bereavement, this will be the death of someone we love. This is known as the primary loss. This includes living losses such as a divorce or relationship breakdown, an estrangement, a job loss, loss of health due to an illness or accident, or becoming a carer, all of which are examples of primary losses.

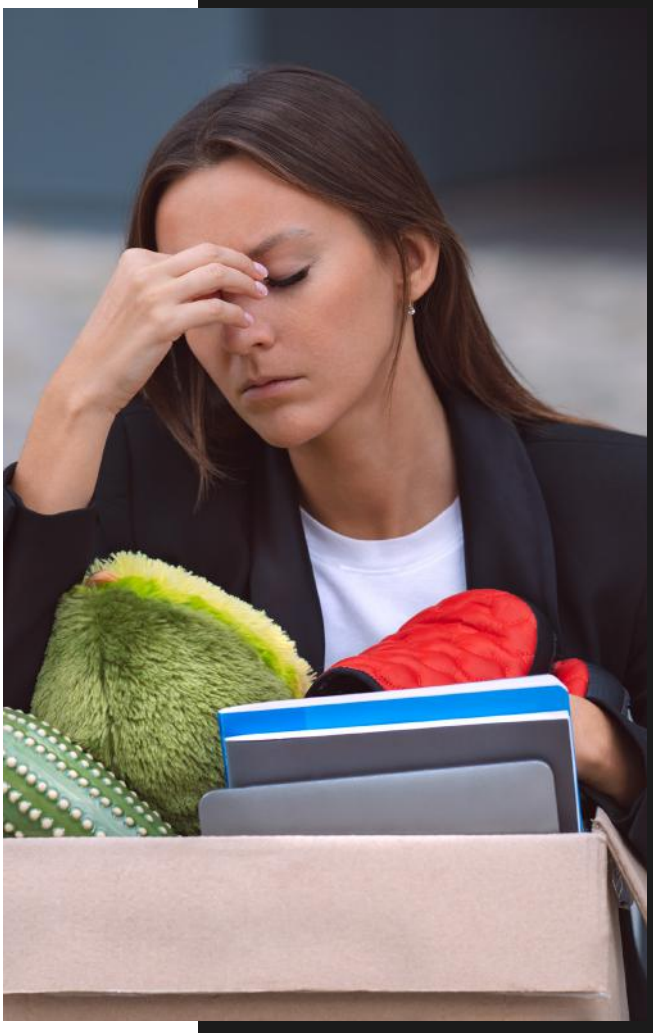
While we tend to focus on the event, it's the consequence of that primary loss that makes the event life-changing.

What exactly have we lost by that event occurring? Take the example of divorce or the breakdown of a long-term relationship. We don't just lose a spouse; we lose the future we imagined with our partner and our hopes and dreams and plans we made with them.

We may lose our sense of self and our identity, security, financial and otherwise, confidence and self-esteem, our sense of worth and everything that comes with a change of status, especially if we have to move home and uproot ourselves and start over, losing the way of life we once knew. We may lose mutual friendships and contact with extended family.

We may also lose our health in the aftermath of the event. These are known as secondary losses and often invisible to the outside world. But they change us, and the impact is indelible. It is often these secondary losses – not the original event itself – that people struggle with most, because they quietly reshape almost every aspect of daily life.

One partner leaving a marriage may be the event, but the loss may have been felt years before in a relationship that has turned sour or where the parties have drifted apart, and both partners are actually grieving the loss of the love and connection they once knew.



Similarly, when it comes to estrangement, the act of a child leaving, ceasing contact and cutting all ties with a parent is the event, but the pain and grief arising from that fractured relationship may have been felt by both parties prior to the estrangement taking place and well before the decision of the child to leave.

For the parent left behind, the knowledge that their child doesn't wish for them to be a part of their life can be an unbearable loss compounded by feelings of shame, guilt, regret and even hopelessness.

In the context of job loss, the event might be the redundancy, but it's the consequences of losing that job that cause the grief. Loss of income will bring up feelings of financial insecurity and uncertainty.

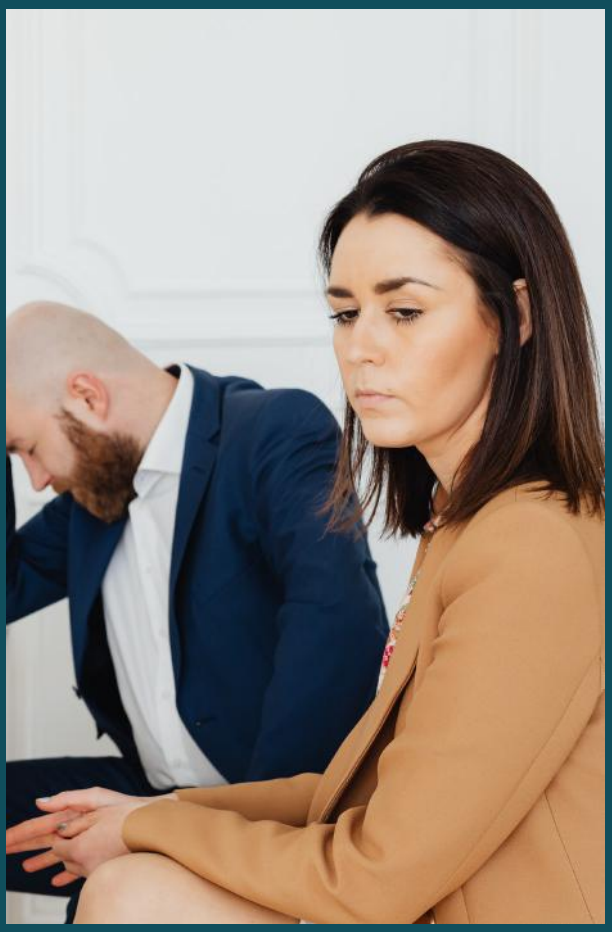
Anxiety about how to survive if there are no funds to pay for food, bills, and to keep a roof over our heads. Worry about spiralling into debt, losing our home and ending up homeless. This may sound overly dramatic, but our primal instinct is all about security and our insecurity is driven by the fear of losing it.

And again, loss of identity will come into the equation, the "what do you do as a living?" scenario, loss of confidence and self-esteem, loss of the relationship with co-workers and loss of prospects/promotional opportunities.

And where someone remains in a job but has been overlooked for promotion, that loss of career progression may also cause loss of confidence and self-esteem. Where employees feel that they do not have promotional opportunities and loss of prospects, they soon become demotivated.

Loss of mental or physical health and the loss of vitality or independence, ageing and the feeling of loss of youth, including menopause, mobility issues and mental capacity, are losses we invariably grieve for silently; losing a way of life, peace of mind and creating insecurity and uncertainty about the future. Becoming a carer may create losses from making sacrifices when it comes to life choices in order to support another, leading to a loss of identity and purpose when that role of carer comes to an end.

**“In the context of job loss, the event might be the redundancy, but it’s the consequences of losing that job that cause the grief. Loss of income will bring up feelings of financial insecurity and uncertainty. “**



Empty nesting syndrome after children have left home, or an identity crisis after career loss or retirement, where we grieve for the loss of the person we believed ourselves to be. All these are life transitions and the grief is real.

One of the most significant invisible losses is infertility. For someone who wants to be a parent, infertility represents the loss of the opportunity to have a child. An “inability” to become pregnant feels like failure. It’s devastating not to fall pregnant either naturally or after several rounds of IVF, or to fall pregnant but to miscarry or lose a child at full term. The feelings of loss are overwhelming, and we grieve for the child we never had.

By becoming more aware of hidden loss, we broaden our understanding of the grief that flows from it. We also broaden our capacity for compassion for those suffering loss. This is because we're able to recognise why someone is grieving and how it impacts them.

Once we acknowledge the loss, that people need to grieve for it, and allow space for that to happen, healing can begin. Not because the loss disappears, but because recognising the loss and witnessing it is a fundamental part of the healing process.





Amanda Whitehead

## WHAT IF BETTER HEALTH ISN'T ABOUT TRYING HARDER?

Have you ever found yourself asking that question?Perhaps you've promised yourself that this week will be different. You'll eat better, drink more water, exercise regularly, get to bed earlier and finally put yourself somewhere near the top of your own priority list. Then life happens. Work gets busy. Family need you. The to-do list grows. You grab what's convenient, push through another day and tell yourself you'll start again on Monday.

For years, I thought the answer was simply to try harder. If I found the right diet, the perfect morning routine or the latest health trend, surely I'd feel healthier. But I didn't. Instead, I became exhausted.

Looking back now, I realise I wasn't lacking motivation or discipline. I was directing all my energy towards changing my body, without ever taking the time to understand it.

My own health journey has included Irritable Bowel Syndrome, an underactive thyroid and years of living in and out of burnout. At the time, I viewed each symptom as a separate problem to solve.

On the 23rd September 2023, I woke up and decided I couldn't keep living like this. Now I see something very different. My body wasn't failing me. It was trying to protect me. It was asking me to slow down. To pay attention. To care for myself in a way I never had before.

The problem wasn't that my body had stopped communicating.
It was that I'd forgotten how to listen. I don't think I'm alone.

Every week I meet people who are trying incredibly hard to feel better. They're balancing careers, families, relationships and endless responsibilities. They aren't lazy, and they don't lack willpower. In fact, they're often doing everything they can.

Yet despite all that effort, they still feel tired, overwhelmed, anxious or disconnected from themselves. So, what if better health isn't about trying harder? What if it's about understanding ourselves better?

One of the greatest lessons I've learned is that awareness always comes before change. We don't know what we don't know. Until we begin to understand our own unique body and mind, it's incredibly difficult to give ourselves what we truly need.

Somewhere along the way, many of us stopped trusting ourselves.We became so used to looking outside ourselves for answers that we forgot our own bodies hold an incredible amount of wisdom. We search online, listen to podcasts, read books and follow advice from experts.

Yet how often do we simply stop and ask ourselves:
How do I actually feel?
Not what I think I should feel.
Not what everyone else expects me to feel.
But what am I genuinely feeling in my body?
Because we spend so much time living in our heads that we've forgotten how to live in our bodies.
We analyse.
We overthink.
We compare.
We criticise ourselves.
Meanwhile, our body keeps speaking through sensations.
A clenched jaw.
Tight shoulders.
An unsettled stomach.
Shallow breathing.
Poor sleep.
Exhaustion.

These aren't always inconveniences to ignore. Often, they're invitations to become curious. Rather than asking, "What's wrong with me?", perhaps we could begin asking, "What is my body trying to tell me?"

That single question changes the conversation completely. As I became more aware of my body, I also became more aware of my thoughts. I realised many of the beliefs shaping my life weren't really mine.

Somewhere along the way I'd learned that being busy meant being productive. That resting was lazy. That putting everyone else's needs before my own made me a better person. That pushing through was something to be admired. I never questioned those beliefs. I simply lived by them. Maybe you've experienced something similar.




**“One of the greatest lessons I've learned is that awareness always comes before change.**

**We don't know what we don't know.**
**Until we begin to understand our own unique body and mind, it's incredibly difficult to give ourselves what we truly need.”**

Many of the stories we carry have been shaped by childhood, past experiences, society or difficult seasons in our lives. Over time, they become so familiar that we mistake them for facts. But awareness creates choice.

Once we notice those stories, we no longer have to let them define who we become. For me, this is where real health begins. Not with another diet. Not with another quick fix. But with a healthier relationship with ourselves.

Health isn't simply about the food we eat. It's also about what we consume mentally, emotionally and spiritually every single day.
The conversations we have.
The people we spend time with.
The content we watch.
The thoughts we repeatedly think.

The boundaries we keep. The rest we allow ourselves. The environments we choose. Everything either nourishes us or depletes us. We are one whole being.

Science continues to show us that the brain and gut are constantly communicating. When we live under prolonged stress, it doesn't just affect how we think. It influences digestion, sleep, energy, hormones, mood and our ability to recover. Our body doesn't separate these systems, so perhaps we shouldn't either.

To me, spiritual wellbeing isn't necessarily about religion. It's about reconnecting with yourself. Learning to trust yourself again. Living in alignment with your values. Creating enough space to hear your own inner voice above the noise of



everyone else's expectations. Because I don't believe most people need fixing. I believe they need reconnecting.



The beautiful thing is that this doesn't require dramatic change. It's usually the smallest actions that create the biggest transformation. A nourishing meal. A walk outside. A few slow breaths. An earlier night. A glass of water. A moment of stillness.

Saying no without guilt. None of these seems life-changing on their own. Yet together they create a powerful compound effect. They build trust. Trust becomes confidence. Confidence creates consistency.



Consistency becomes a lifestyle. And that lifestyle becomes better health. Do I still slip back into old patterns? Of course. I'm human. The difference today is that I notice sooner. I pause. I listen. I choose again. Not from guilt or criticism, but from compassion.

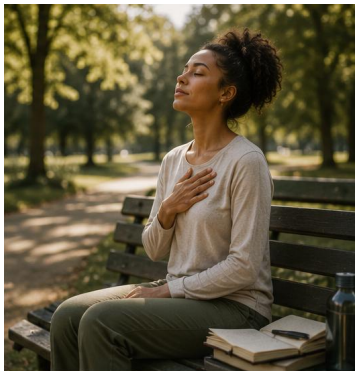
I've learned that this journey was never about becoming perfect. It was about coming back to myself, one small choice at a time.

So, what if better health isn't about trying harder? Perhaps it asks us to do something much braver. To slow down. To listen. To become curious instead of critical. To question the beliefs that no longer serve us. To stop fighting our bodies and start understanding them. Because perhaps better health isn't about becoming a different person.



Perhaps it's about remembering who you were before the world taught you who you thought you had to be. Coming home to yourself.

And from that place, choosing—one small step at a time—to nourish every part of who you are. Because lasting health isn't built through perfection. It's built through awareness.



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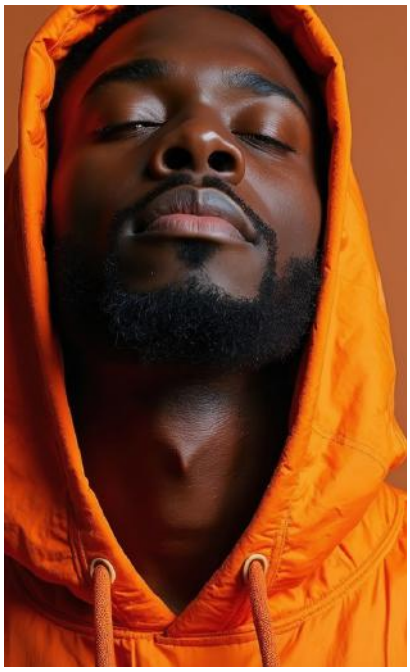


# OUR PUBLICATIONS

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# What Men Carry

Growing up in inner-city Birmingham, conversations around men's mental health weren't really conversations. It was something you understood without it being said. A lot of it started at home.

You didn't really see men being encouraged to talk about how they felt. If anything, you learned early that certain things were better left alone. You deal with it, you move on, you don't sit in it too long. That wasn't always said directly, but it was clear, and over time, that becomes normal.

For many men from diaspora backgrounds in Britain, that silence isn't accidental. It's cultural and, in many cases, generational. It's shaped by migration, by survival, and by environments where emotional expression wasn't prioritised because other things came first.

So instead of being processed, things get carried.





You see it in behaviour more than conversation. The way someone reacts, the way they shut down, the way they avoid certain topics entirely. It's not always intentional; it's often learned. That's part of what makes conversations around therapy and counselling more complex in these communities. It's not just about access. It's about perception.

Across the UK, men are already less likely to access mental health support, making up a significantly smaller proportion of referrals to talking therapies. When you look at ethnic minority communities, that gap becomes more noticeable, with lower engagement and later access to support. In many cases, help isn't sought early. It comes later, often when things have escalated.

That pattern points to something deeper than availability. It reflects trust, understanding and cultural alignment. Because for a lot of people, therapy isn't something that was ever normalised. It can feel unfamiliar, sometimes misunderstood, and in some cases, actively discouraged. There's also the question of perception. In certain communities, seeking help can be seen as weakness, or something that doesn't align with how masculinity has been defined. That tension shapes how mental health is experienced, and whether support is even considered.

Research in the UK has consistently shown that Black men are more likely to experience severe mental health outcomes, including higher rates of diagnosis for conditions such as psychosis, as well as higher rates of detention under the Mental Health Act. At the same time, they are less likely to receive early or preventative support.

So engagement often happens later, and under pressure.

**That disconnect matters.**

Because it challenges the idea that people simply don't want help; in many cases, it's not that straightforward. It's about how help is understood, how it's been presented, and whether it feels relevant to lived experience.

There's also the role of visibility. When Stormzy speaks openly about vulnerability, or challenges narrow ideas of masculinity, it creates space. Not necessarily solutions, but a shift in what's seen as acceptable.

> **"When you put that into context, a lot of what we see starts to make sense. If you're not shown how to process something, you find other ways to deal with it."**

In his talks and writing, Akala often breaks down how environment and historical context shape behaviour. When applied to mental health, it becomes easier to understand why certain patterns exist within diaspora communities.

And in his work on trauma, Gabor Maté highlights how people adapt to their environments in ways that help them cope, even if those adaptations don't always serve them later in life.





When you put that into context, a lot of what we see starts to make sense. If you're not shown how to process something, you find other ways to deal with it. If you're not given the language for how you feel, you communicate it differently. Over time, that becomes normal, and because it's normal, it doesn't get questioned.

That's why a lot of these conversations still feel underdeveloped. It's not that there's no awareness; it's that the depth isn't always there. There's still a gap between recognising that something exists and actually understanding it.

From the outside, it can be easy to simplify things. To label behaviour without looking at where it comes from. But when you've seen it up close, you know it's rarely that straightforward.

Most of the time, what's visible is only part of the picture.

There's a lot that sits underneath, things that haven't been processed, conversations that never happened, experiences that were absorbed and carried forward. Because it's not always spoken about directly, it continues in the same way. It's not necessarily about changing everything overnight. It's more about recognising what's already there. For a lot of men within Britain's diaspora communities, it's not just about opening up.....

It's about unlearning.
Unlearning what strength is supposed to look like.
Unlearning what should be kept private.

Unlearning the idea that everything has to be carried alone.

That process doesn't happen quickly.

But it starts with recognising that the silence isn't random. It's been learned.

**Reference note:** This article draws on publicly available UK mental health data, including NHS Talking Therapies statistics, research on mental health inequalities, and published interviews, talks and writings from Stormzy, Akala and Gabor Maté.

RANATH MEDIA

## *WHAT IF THE LIFE WE'RE SEARCHING FOR IS THE ONE WE'RE NOT PRESENT FOR?*



*Darlene*

I used to dye my hair endlessly. Chasing every colour under the sun. I started in my teens and continued into my thirties. It was partly a way to explore my identity, partly a bold statement, and also the pure enjoyment of having colourful hair. Some colours were carefully chosen, while others were the result of mixing colours that clashed more than complemented.

Despite my best efforts, I kept searching for a colour that matched my style, my mood, my voice. Nothing ever truly felt quite right. My hair became my canvas, transitioning through one colour after another.

It had been so long since I had started with this process that I lost sight of where I began. Eventually, I got tired of it all. I wanted to give my hair a rest, and I thought it was time I let it be instead of always chasing and manipulating this elusive vibrancy. I even joked about cutting it all off one day and starting all over again, fresh.

In the coming months, I allowed all of the colour to grow out, what I refer to as my "letting go" stage. I was patient. I observed a gradual fading. As one can imagine, this didn't happen overnight. I watched the fiery red turn to pink, then a gentle shift to yellow. The blue turned to green. Do you know where this is leading?

Over the coming months, as my roots quietly emerged, I discovered exactly what I had been searching for. A colour that matched my warmth, my personality. A colour that didn't scream for attention; instead, it invited me in and welcomed connection. That rich chestnut brown colour did not come from a box; it was here all along.

Here's a thought: What if everything we are searching for is already here, right in front of us?

You may be thinking that's a strange story to share. I believe that there is a valuable life lesson amongst the gloves and hair dye.  I think life is like that sometimes. We get tangled in the web of wanting to be different, ruminating, dwelling on the past, anticipating the future, or holding on to things we no longer need and that don't serve us.

We lose precious hours to mindless scrolling, always trying to keep up, comparing. The negativity swirling around us traps us in a cycle of fear, leaving us spinning in place.

We are constantly surrounded by people, tasks, devices, and external noise that pull us away from what's right in front of us. We get lost in the weeds of it all. Our attention is pulled in so many directions that we miss out on our own lives.

You are not alone if you find yourself in this loop. It's easy to do given all the noise around us.

Here's a thought: what if everything we are searching for is already here, right in front of us? Maybe we are simply moving too quickly to notice.



As you read this, what else is competing for your attention? What are you thinking, worried or stressed about? All of those thoughts, rumination, and nostalgia can become overwhelming. I've been there. I've been caught in the cascade of moving so fast from one thing to the other, to do more, that I lose my sense of direction. Many of my clients express similar challenges. "How can I keep up with a world that is asking so much of me?" and "I feel like I'm missing something in my life."

What may we be missing?
**Presence. Noticing. Awareness.**

Notice without judgment, without chasing an outcome. It is not about doing more, but about being more present and truly seeing what is here.

**You notice.**

You awaken to a greater understanding of yourself and of others.

Even a brief break can help you shift those patterns and return to the present, refocusing on what truly matters.

Let's slow things down. Our breath, our thoughts and our actions. Moving with intention.

Let's take a mindful pause. One way that I use and share with my clients is by anchoring to our breath. It doesn't have to be long. I call these my micro moments of awareness. One intentional breath can shift the inner dialogue.

I welcome you to try it now. Take one conscious, intentional breath. That's right. Here and now. Go ahead, no one will know. Take a breath through the nose and out through the mouth. Allow yourself a moment to be present. Give a good sigh at the end if it feels right.

Allow for a few seconds to slow things down and be present with what's here...now.

Can you pause for a moment to appreciate your own existence? Your breath moves without much thought, and your body carries you through the world, holding you in every moment. Holding and being held.



**"Let's slow things down. Our breath, our thoughts and our actions. Moving with intention."**

What did you notice?

Reflecting back on the story I shared,  I see how I was constantly seeking something better, not appreciating what was already present for me. I learned a valuable lesson in stepping back, being patient, and allowing life to unfold before reacting.

Shifting the way we see things, the speed at which we move through the day isn't going to change overnight. These habits and patterns were built over time. It is completely normal to have days when you slip back into old patterns or find yourself drawn away from being present. When this happens, offer yourself kindness rather than criticism.

The takeaway here is moving through the day with intention: appreciating, noticing, and trusting that what we are seeking and searching for may already be present. It doesn't always happen the first time around. We may need to explore one more time before we finally arrive.  You need a moment, a breath and an openness to see it.

If this article sparked your curiosity, I invite you to visit **www.talkbreathelive.com** to continue the conversation.






## *CONFIDENCE ISN'T ABOUT LOVING WHAT YOU SEE, IT'S ABOUT CHANGING HOW YOU SEE YOURSELF*

" The most powerful transformation isn't changing your body - its changing the way you see it."

We've been taught to believe confidence is visible. That it's a look.. sculpted, filtered, camera - ready.

Fix the body, and the confidence follows. That's the message, dressed up a hundred different ways.
But it doesn't work like that.

Let's be honest, how many of us wake up, catch our reflection, and start the inventory before we've even had coffee?

"My stomach looks big in this. I'm getting old. Too fat, too thin. Look at these wrinkles."

We stand in front of the mirror and pick ourselves apart... the scars, the shape, and so called flaws often without even clocking that were doing it.

Underneath it is a quiet belief most of us never chose... that we'll be worthy of love and respect only once we look a certain way.

But what if the problem was never the body; only what we were taught to see when we looked at it?

**What confidence is actually made of**
Confidence isn't a body type, or a certain appearance. It's not something you build by changing what people see on you. It's the relationship, the one between you and the voice that talks to you when your alone with your reflection.

You can lose weight, exercise, change your appearance and still feel like you're not "good enough". You can buy the clothes, receive the compliments, and finally see the "after" photo you once hoped for; yet still feel disconnected from the person looking back at you.



That doesn't mean the transformation failed. It may simply mean you were trying to change the wrong thing.

Because the mirror was never really judging your body. It was reflecting the voice you had been listening to for years; the one telling you that you needed to look different before you could feel worthy, confident or enough.

**Where comparison quietly wins**

A lot of that self-attack doesn't even start with us. It starts with comparison. We scroll past someone else's life, someone else's transformation, and without even realising it, we begin measuring ourselves against it, not against who we were last year, or how far we've come, but against a stranger whose life has been carefully curated, edited and filtered before it ever reached us.

Underneath the comparison sits an expectation we often never chose for ourselves, that we should look a certain way by a certain age, that our bodies should behave and age and recover a certain way, that worth should be visible enough for other people to confirm it. We inherit these expectations from family, culture, years of magazine covers and a feed that never stops, and we hold ourselves to them.

But you were never in competition with anyone else's reflection. Comparison only works if you accept someone else's mirror as more accurate than your own - and it never is. Next time you catch yourself comparing, ask: whose expectation is this, mine, or one I never agreed to?

Usually it's the second, and you're allowed to put it down.

Here's what we get wrong about people who seem to walk into any room like they own it: they're not confident because nothing bothers them. They're confident because whatever bothers them doesn't get the final say.

They still have the thought... did that come out right? do I look okay? Everyone does. The difference is they don't stop and put themselves on trial over it. The thought passes through, and they keep walking. So confidence isn't fearlessness. It's the absence of self-attack, and what's left once you stop treating every flaw as evidence against you, and stop building a case and calling it "being realistic".

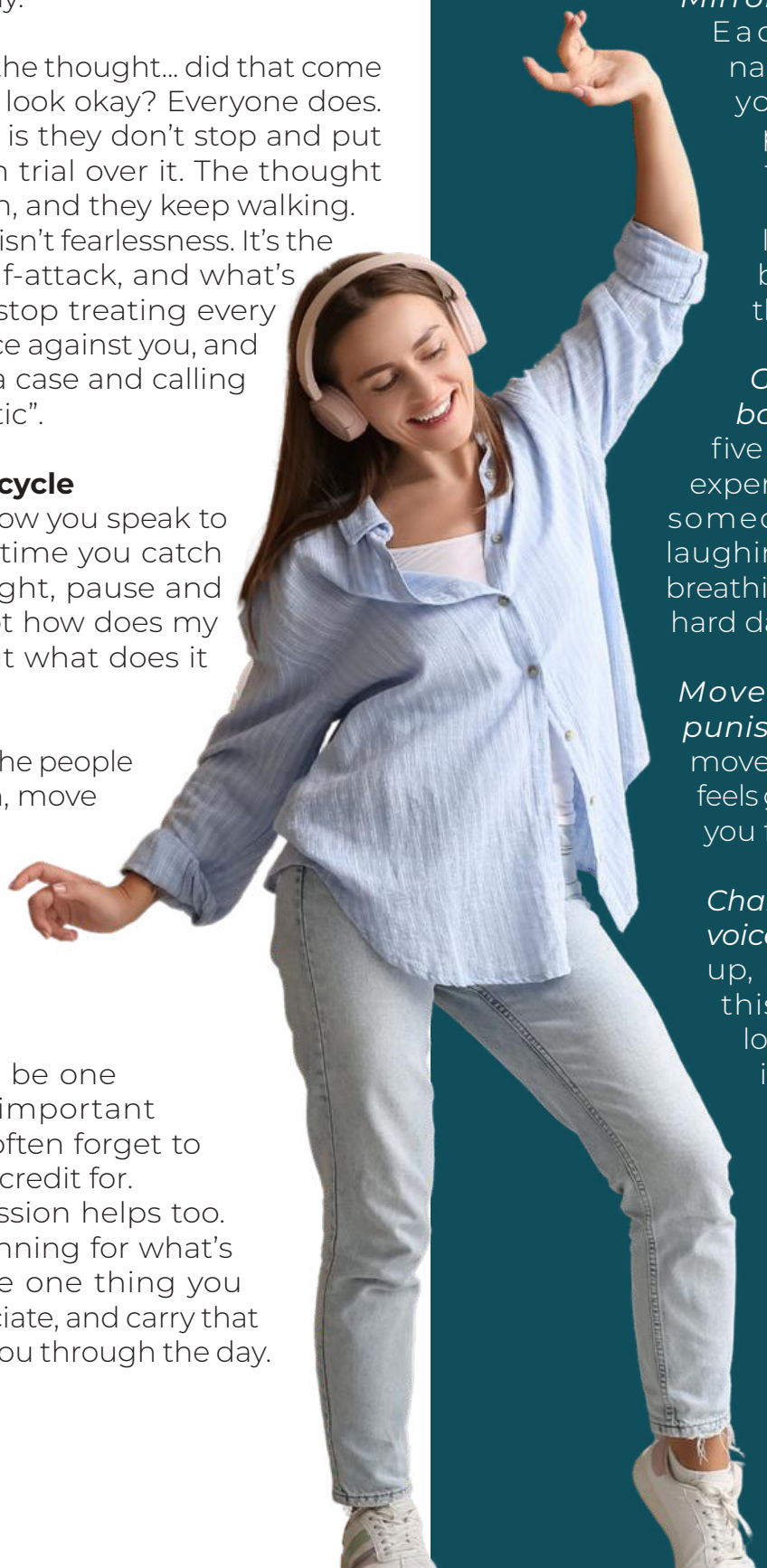
**Breaking the cycle**

It starts with how you speak to yourself. Next time you catch a critical thought, pause and re frame it. Not how does my body look? but what does it do for me?

It lets you hug the people you love, laugh, move freely and feel the warmth of the sun on your skin. That is not nothing.

In fact, it may be one of the most important things we so often forget to give ourselves credit for.

Mirror compassion helps too. Instead of scanning for what's wrong, choose one thing you actually appreciate, and carry that thought with you through the day.



Shifting your focus from appearance to experience. Move your body in ways that feel good...walk, stretch, dance in your kitchen, breathe deeply and notice you're still here. None of that requires looking a certain way first.

**Practices to come back to:**

*Mirror appreciation.* Each morning, name three things you appreciate... physical or functional. Perhaps strong legs, kind eyes or a body that got you through yesterday.

*Gratitude for your body.* Write down five things it lets you experience... hugging someone you love, laughing until it hurts, breathing deeply after a hard day.

*Move for joy, not punishment.* Choose movement because it feels good, not because you feel forced into it.

*Challenge the critical voice.* When it shows up, ask: would I say this to someone I love? If not, replace it with something you would.

*The confidence pose.* Stand tall, feet grounded, shoulders back, chest open, head up. Hold it for a

minute while you breathe slowly. Strong, open posture genuinely shifts how you feel. Sometimes confidence doesn't start in the mind - it starts in the body, and works its way up.

Freedom isn't found in changing your body. It's found in accepting the one you're in - right now, not the future version you're waiting to become.

Many of us grew up internalising the idea that our value was tied to appearance. Letting go of that takes practice. But the process begins each time you notice yourself criticising your reflection and choose kindness instead.



Loving your body is never about perfection. It's about appreciation, acceptance, and recognising that finally that the confidence you've been chasing was never something to see. It was something to feel, built quietly, on the inside, one kinder thought at a time.

My teaching memoir, **Beyond the Mirror,** explores my story of health, body confidence and self-acceptance — and how true freedom begins when we change our relationship with ourselves. Because when that relationship changes, our confidence, self-acceptance and, ultimately, our lives can change too.

https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/B0HF6D2YTZ





Taneka Johnson

## *WHAT IF THE LIFE WE'RE SEARCHING FOR IS THE ONE WE'RE NOT PRESENT FOR?*

There is a question I have found myself returning to more often lately:

How much of the life we are living did we actually choose? At first, the answer seems obvious. We choose where we work. We choose our relationships. We choose what we pursue, what we believe, what we tolerate, and what we call success. Or at least, we think we do.

But underneath many of our decisions exists an invisible collection of beliefs, expectations, experiences, and learned behaviors that began forming long before we had the awareness to question them.
We were taught what success looks like.
We learned what was considered responsible.
We observed how people around us handled money, conflict, love, ambition, rest, failure, and uncertainty.
We discovered which parts of ourselves received approval and which ones created discomfort. And somewhere along the way, these lessons stopped feeling like things we had learned. They simply began feeling like who we were.

### The Invisible Operating System

Conditioning is not inherently negative. In many ways, it is necessary.

Human beings learn through observation, repetition, experience, and reinforcement. Conditioning helps us understand how to function in families, workplaces, relationships, communities, and society.

The problem begins when we stop recognizing the difference between what we have learned and what we have chosen. Consider how often we use phrases like:

"That's just how I am."
"I've always been this way."
"That's what you're supposed to do."
"I don't really have a choice."



Sometimes those statements are true. But sometimes they are evidence of an internal operating system we have never examined. Perhaps you learned that responsible adults choose stability over curiosity.

Maybe you were taught that being successful means constantly producing.

Perhaps being agreeable kept you safe, so you became someone who avoids conflict. Maybe you learned that changing your mind means you failed. Or perhaps you became exceptionally good at achieving things you eventually realized you never wanted. That is the fascinating thing about conditioning: It can become so familiar that we mistake it for identity.

## When Choice Isn't Really Choice

Having options does not automatically mean we are choosing freely. A person can technically choose between several possibilities while still making the decision from fear, expectation, obligation, or an outdated belief about themselves.

We can choose the career everyone expected us to pursue.
Choose the relationship that looks appropriate.
Choose the version of success our environment taught us to admire.
Choose to remain somewhere because leaving would require becoming someone we have never been before.

And then one day, we may look at a life that appears perfectly reasonable from the outside and quietly wonder: Why doesn't this feel like mine anymore? That question should not always be treated as a crisis. Sometimes it is evidence of consciousness.

## The Plateau May Be Trying to Tell You Something

We tend to view plateaus negatively. When progress slows, motivation changes, or something that once worked stops working, our immediate instinct is often to push harder. But I have become increasingly interested in another possibility.

> What if some plateaus are invitations to examine the beliefs that created our current lives?

There are moments when an old identity simply cannot carry us where we are trying to go next. The habits that once protected us may eventually restrict us.

The definition of success that motivated us at 25 may feel completely different at 45. The career we once prayed for may become the environment we eventually outgrow.

The version of ourselves built around survival may struggle to understand a life that now requires expansion. The plateau, then, is not necessarily evidence that something has gone wrong. Sometimes it is where our conditioning becomes visible.



## The Courage to Question Yourself

Real change does not always begin with a dramatic decision.

Sometimes it begins with a question. Why do I believe this? And then another: Do I still believe it? Those are very different questions.

One investigates origin. The other requires choice. We can appreciate what our families taught us without carrying every belief forward. We can acknowledge what an experience taught us while recognizing that the lesson no longer applies.

We can honor an earlier version of ourselves without allowing that version to make every future decision.

That is where a different kind of pivot begins. Not necessarily changing your career, ending a relationship, moving across the country, or reinventing your entire life.

Sometimes the most significant pivot happens internally when:

*"I have to" becomes "Do I choose to?"*
*"That's who I am" becomes "Is that who I still want to be?"*
*And "This is how life works" becomes "Who taught me that?"*

**"We can honor an earlier version of ourselves without allowing that version to make every future decision."**

## Conscious Living Requires Choice

I don't believe the goal is to become completely free from conditioning. That would be nearly impossible. We are shaped by our families, cultures, communities, relationships, successes, disappointments, environments, and experiences. They are part of our stories. The opportunity is not to erase those influences. It is to become conscious enough to decide which ones deserve to continue shaping us.

That is the difference between living reactively and living intentionally. And perhaps one of the greatest expressions of personal freedom is not having unlimited choices.

It is developing enough self-awareness to recognize what is doing the choosing.

*So instead of asking only: What do I want next?*
*Consider asking:*
*Why do I want it?*
*Whose definition of success am I pursuing?*
*What have I been afraid to question?*
*Which parts of my identity have I consciously chosen—and which have I simply continued?*

And perhaps the most revealing question of all:

*If I were no longer required to remain loyal to the person I learned to be, who would I choose to become?*

Maybe conscious living begins there.
Not with rejecting everything that shaped us. But with finally recognizing that we are allowed to participate in shaping who we become next.




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