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For artists struggling with anxiety, Newton podcaster offers a pathway to help

By **Isabelle Durso** Boston University journalist,
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Allison Sheff does her podcast "Anxiety and the Artist" in her home in Waban with her dog Oscar.
Photo by Brian "Bosco" Sheff

Newton podcast host and director Allison Sheff has launched a new mini-series "Access to Care," during which she speaks with therapists and psychologists in an effort to provide artists with ways to access affordable therapy.

"Therapy is a privilege, and it shouldn't be," Sheff said. "It should be accessible to everybody."

For years, Sheff said, she wanted to start a conversation and reduce the stigma that surrounds anxiety and mental health in the performing arts. So when the pandemic hit, she used her newfound free time to start her podcast "[Anxiety and the Artist](#)," where she explores artists' relationship with anxiety.

"If an actor displays any sort of emotion outside of toeing the line, then people think they're difficult, they're emotional, they overreact," Sheff said. "No, they're having a normal response to a very abnormal situation."

Sheff started out her career as a performer and worked as a child's guardian on Broadway, where she acted as an artistic liaison between professional child actors and management.

"My job was to protect the children, to make sure they were safe and provided for and to make sure their mental wellbeing was in a good place," Sheff said. "I was watching the adult actors get thrown into the same situations, and instead of having any sort of empathy for their situation, it was just like 'Suck it up. Get over it.'"

In the first season of her podcast, which she produces at her home in Waban alongside her husband Brian "Bosco" Sheff, she gives a general overview of anxiety and how it impacts performers by speaking with several established artists in various fields.

Michelle Loucadoux, a former ballet dancer and Broadway performer turned writer and educator based in Los Angeles, spoke with Sheff about audition anxiety in particular.

"I got crazy nervous in auditions," Loucadoux said in an interview. "I would go in and physically be shaking so much that I couldn't hold a piece of paper. It was detrimental to my career."

Loucadoux said she is glad Sheff's podcast is bringing mental health to the forefront of the conversation.

"Twenty years ago, when I was starting out my career in the performing arts," Loucadoux said, "no one really talked about anxiety. I did not have the tools to deal with my anxiety, nor did I even have the vocabulary to understand what it was."

Simon Ward, a psychologist, educator, and actor based in Sydney, Australia, also spoke in Sheff's mini-series about anxiety and his career as a performer.

"Anxiety is everybody's costar," Ward said. "When I started performing professionally, I realized I was feeling all these physical things that I couldn't quite work out. My knees would lock, I would get sweaty, I would get shaky, my mouth would go dry."

However, both Loucadoux and Ward said anxiety also can have positive effects when performing.

"If you don't get butterflies or a little bit nervous about something," Loucadoux said, "then it's probably a hint that you might not care so much about it. [Anxiety] is our body's way of telling us that something important is coming up in the future."

Ward said adrenaline, when dealt with in the right way, makes a performer more alert and enjoyable to watch.

"It's like Roger Federer playing tennis," Ward said. "He does mindfulness exercises so that he's as open as he can be to take in as much as he can and react more quickly."

In the second season of Sheff's podcast, she focuses on eating disorders and unrealistic expectations placed on performers. In her third season, she discusses artists' identities outside their craft.



Brian "Bosco" Sheff produces the music for Allison Sheff's podcast "Anxiety and the Artist" in their home in Waban.
Photo by Allison Sheff.

Sheff said the most recent season of the podcast focuses on how fear of missing out — FOMO — and social media play a role in artists' lives, especially during the pandemic.

"It's this whole artist mind loop that we do where we just get in this repetitive anxiety of 'I'm not good enough, I'm not doing enough, I need to be doing more, I'm never going to work again,'" Sheff said.

Sheff started her mini-series to address the lack of accessibility to care for artists and hopes that it can provide them with alternative, affordable options for therapy.

"Therapy is a really wonderful, useful tool that is unfortunately inaccessible to about 70 percent of the artists I know," Sheff said. "Because of health insurance, cost, or the lack of available therapists that understand the freelance creative lifestyle."

Sheff said she plans on releasing a total of five episodes as part of the "Access to Care" mini-series. She said she is unsure of the future of the podcast but hopes to continue speaking with established artists and therapists and share their stories.

Sheff said she hopes her podcast will let artists know they're not alone, and there are other options for therapy out there.

"It might not be the most traditional path," Sheff said. "But artists very rarely take a traditional path anyway."

Isabelle Durso can be reached at newtonreport@globe.com.