

Practice Outside the Lines: Episode 12: The Sex Scientist, Dr. Zhana

Today we have Dr. Zhana, a New York City-based sexuality and relationship scientist writer and consultant. You've been helping people build extraordinary lives for 15 years. We're so excited to have you on this podcast.

Thank you, I'm so excited to be here.

So tell me first, you're obviously Eastern European, you note on your website that you're from an Eastern European country, and there are really traditional views there, you said you felt like an outsider there, so tell me more about growing up and how you entered into the field of sexuality.

Sure, I grew up in Macedonia which is a small country in southeast Europe, and it was pretty traditional kind of space that even though not religious it was a socialist country, so an atheist country officially, so there was no religion, soon religious guilt, which is very different I think from kind of the traditional idea of what that is here, it's often tied to religion. But even without religion, you can have more traditional, patriarchal views. But despite that, I was a very sexual kid from a very early age.

How did your parents deal with that? Were they very sexual too, or what were the messages?

No, I think they didn't really pay too much attention to that, I guess.

laughs Okay so you were wild and free.

Well, so when I was younger, they had certainly caught me masturbating, but they didn't make a big deal of that but then when puberty hit, it hit young, my parents were already divorced, I was alienated from my mom, and my dad was kind of doing his own thing, so I was with a serious lack of supervision. Partying and...

you got to explore a lot.

Oh yeah, all sort sorts things, because there were no like idea laws, it was kind of a lawless time as the country was transitioning out of that socialism into some kind of capitalist, democratic world. So yeah, a 13-year-old could go out get drunk, do drugs, have sex with 25-year-olds, and nobody really notices.

That's so fascinating, that the culture and transition phase of this country really played a role in how free you were to explore your sexuality and your identity.

Yeah, it is interesting, I wonder if that would be possible now, now there are much stricter rules around a lot of these things. Although probably not as strict as the US has

Yeah, we're a really puritanical country so...

Yeah, you really are.

We're up against a lot.

Yeah, the religion piece really adds a whole other element to the sex negativity that I didn't experience growing up. Anyway, slut shaming is slut shaming, and I certainly got my share of it. And I think that was part of the reason that sexuality was such a big part of my life. And I could see that it was a big part of everyone's life to some extent and in some way shape or form, and yet, we were so conflicted about it and there was so much repression and so many kind of ambivalent almost schizophrenic attitudes towards this thing, and I knew that had had to be the focus of my career in some way.

Yeah, when and how did you come over to the states?

I moved to the states in 2006 when I started my Ph.D. at Cornell.

Ah okay, so did you get your undergrad over in Macedonia then?

Yep.

Okay, what did you study?

Psychology, I went to study psych.

Ah okay.

Yeah. And at the end of that... I always kind of knew I wanted to have a doctorate, my dad was a Ph.D., he was a professor at the electrical engineering school, and the university in Skopje in Macedonia and I was like I like that life. It gives you a lot of freedom. I always wanted freedom, you know? I'm one of those people who is high on that kind of exploration, sexual novelty, not just sexual, but all kinds of novelty. Like the freedom need is more—

A sensation seeker.

A sensation seeker, yeah, definitely more on that side, professionally personally in every way. So yeah, I wanted that kind of free life, to pick what you're going to study, what you're going to teach, and I was going to do a Ph.D., it had to be in something that was

going to keep my interest for the rest of my life. You know how it is, If you do a Ph.D., you better like that thing.

Yeah, for sure. So, whenever you got your undergrad in psychology, did you know that you wanted to study sexuality? Or was it kind of like you knew you liked psychology and wanted to get a Ph.D. so that was kind of a good field to get it in?

I wanted to understand humans. And I don't know to what extent it was conscious in me that I really wanted to understand humans from this sexuality and relationship perspective. But I knew I wanted to understand why we do the things we do. And then from probably the third or fourth year of college. I was starting to do some sex-related projects, I got involved with the first LGBTQ organization that formed in this newly fledgling democratic country, and I did some research with them, then I wrote a book about sexual orientation. I turned my undergrad thesis into a book that is now used at the university.

Wow. That's so cool. So it sounds like your third and fourth year you started really studying sexuality, and you said okay this is interesting this is fascinating it helps me understand humans, and it sounds like you were afforded the opportunity to get connected with the right people to be able to write this awesome book.

Yeah, I don't know how it awesome it was, I mean I was twenty...

Well, it's still being used in college!

Yeah, it's the only thing written that's written in Macedonia about the psychology of sexual orientation.

So needed.

Yeah, it was cool to be able to do that. I was going to do a Ph.D. anyway right, so as I was writing the book, or right before, I applied to Ph.D. programs in the US. And that's when the serious decision that sexuality specifically, sex and relationships, is going to be my professional focus, that's when that decision kind of got made in terms of a career choice. Because psychology still kind of leaves you some options in terms of which way to go, what you are going to study and what are you going to focus on. Once I started to apply, I was like sex has to be that. Because it is so fascinating, it's the most fascinating thing about humans that I can personally think of.

Sure. So, whenever you chose sex to be the focus, did you have any role models that you looked up to, or did you know anybody else doing it, and so you're like okay yeah this is a legitimate field that you could actually go into and study?

I suppose it was different back then as I was a student in Macedonia. We didn't have...things were not as available on the internet at the time, so we're talking about 2004 or so, and our libraries didn't have access to a lot of the articles. To any articles, any journal articles, really...there was not access to recent science. We only had these kind of outdated textbooks, honestly, from local professors on these different topics but you didn't get access to any of the new science so what I did a lot of when I was writing the book actually was writing to the authors of the different scientific papers. And saying, I'm this poor student from Macedonia we don't have access to your articles through our libraries, would you send them to me? And then they would. And I would read them, and it became clear to me that oh, this is a thing. I can actually study this. There were a couple of people, like James Cantor, one of the first articles I think I've ever read was written by James, and I was like oh wow, this is so interesting and fascinating, so I looked him and kind of read some of the other stuff that he had written. Lisa Diamond was another one, so Lisa Diamond actually inspired me partially to go and work with a professor that I ended up working with for my Ph.D. at Cornell, Ritch- Savin Williams, who was kind of one of the big names in sexual orientation research, and the fluidity of sexual orientation, which Lisa Diamond took up as her line of inquiry, so yeah, those I guess were my role models at the time.

Those are amazing role models, I mean they're pretty, well known in the field today, so I feel like you were able to get the right research in your hands, and you were resourceful enough to connect with him and develop that relationship is cool too. Whenever you decided to become a sex scientist, was that something you had heard about or, how did you decide on that title or that career?

I don't know, that's a good question, I'm not sure if I heard about that while I was still in Macedonia, but probably. I think once I started reading articles then you could see the journal sex research, and the archives, some of the names and language used in those articles that alludes to sex research being a thing, so that's probably when I became aware.

So you got your Ph.D. in development psychology from Cornell University, pretty impressive. You studied how different aspects of sexuality are linked to health and well-being. Was that your thesis? How did you decide on that piece of it?

That was my thesis, yes. One thing that might be interesting to your listeners in terms of sex research is that most places do not have a sex research department, a sexuality, sexology or sexual psychology department. That's not a thing. I would really love to have university departments for sexual psychologists like you have cognitive psych, social psych, and personality psych. All of these different types of psychs except sexual psych, like why can't we have sexual psych? But we don't, so you kind of have to find a professor if you're going to do a Ph.D. in this area that is in developmental, social, community, or health or some other type of psychology that does sex research, and then do your research there.

So that's how you chose Cornell?

Yeah, that's how I ended up at Cornell. Yeah, I just looked at well I knew I wanted to be close to New York, I always wanted to live in New York, and so I only looked at places on the east coast. My process for selecting schools to apply to was to go through the top schools in the world, go through their ranking list, and then all of the schools on the east coast, I looked up at their psychology departments and the faculty that was teaching there and looked through their interests and wherever they were whether they were in developmental, or psych, or personality or health or community I didn't care what their home, if you will, was in the department, as long as their research interests sounded interesting to me and in line with what I wanted to do, which I thought I wanted to do mostly sexual orientation research when I came to Cornell with Williams but I probably would have gone in some other direction if I had worked with someone else who had different interests, so I kind of looked broadly and that's what came my way.

I think that's so smart I think that a lot of people get lost and stuck in that process of how to choose a university and how to choose those professors that are researching and studying sexuality and I think that it's really smart and helpful to hear your process in terms of how you narrowed it down, how you chose the university, how you narrowed in on a topic too in terms of what you were going to study. Were there other people at Cornell that were kind of doing the same thing and studying sexuality along with you?

Not really. Rich had another grad student and then took on another two after I arrived, but he was pretty much the only professor at the professor level, there was another professor doing a lot of attachment theory research, Sydney Hazan, she's actually one of the top scholars who invented attachment theories. But that was more on the attachment side of things, and for some people, those two made sense to combine, another co-grad student with me, she worked with both Rich and Sydney but I was not really interested in attachment at the time. I now regret it I really should have been interested in attachment, but I was mad at attachment theory for not liking casual sex.

Yeah, I mean you see that even now, where there is a lot of attachment specialists out there that pathologize non-monogamy and casual sex, so I can understand your reluctance and frustration very early on. I think there is some very good work going in terms of how to integrate and incorporate the alternative and non-traditional lifestyles and attach them to attachment theory. Like the new book Polysecure, I think that's really helpful. I think early on and even from just a couple of years ago it was very pathologized and for someone who is studying casual sex and consensual non-monogamy it is frustrating to see that.

Yeah, it was really was and at the time it was funny because I haven't thought about that time in awhile, but I came to Cornell thinking I was going to primarily study sexual orientation and I did study that, I did publish a number of papers on some fluidity stuff, on the mostly straight, not the completely straight or fully bi people, but then I also had

this other interest in casual sex. Mostly because I loved casual sex myself. I was having a lot of it and loving it and I was seeing a lot of other people around me do it, and some loved it more than other people and some struggled with it to different extents and different ways so then I was really fascinated with this distinction between long term loving relationship sex and the other more casual variant so I ended up studying that, but I felt like I read a couple of those baseline attachment papers and was like “oh really? Damn.” I think there was one that compared casual sex to a meal you would get out of a trashcan.

Ohhhh ouch.

I was so hurt by that.

Yeah, oh man. I think it's something that is not very understood. It's only until recently that hookup culture was populized and it was talked about it more and it gained a little bit more acceptance, but I think especially in academia, which is kind of why I asked how did it go at Cornell studying sexuality right because especially in academia it's something that's pathologized and shamed, and your colleagues kind of think less of you, and so it's a hard field to be in sometimes.

It's true. I was only there as a grad student and as a grad student if your professor is supportive of you then the other professors don't have much to say. I did keep getting my yearly reviews saying that said I needed to broaden my interests, you're not going to get anywhere, but they were kind of nice they were like we're looking out for you, we're looking out after your interests, you're really narrowing down your options in terms of finding the kind of job that we prepare most of our students for. The Cornell Ph.D. path is that you become a tenured track professor at a prestigious research-based university, and progress up those ranks, and you need big grants in order to do that kind of research and work, or your work will need to be fundable by the national science foundation, or the national institute of health, and it's sort of a path that exists. I was like I hear you all, but I really don't want to study those other things that you're telling me to study. I just wanted to study this and they were like okay. You're hurting yourself but okay. And I was like you're probably right, but...You know I was always driven by you have to do what you love. I spend so much time doing the work that I do that I need to love it. I was not driven by making a lot of money ever. Now living in capitalism, you know, socialism was a little different. You didn't have to make a lot of money to be comfortable. In New York City, you kind of have to make a lot of money to be comfortable. If you make a medium amount of money, you're not comfortable, you're hustling, you're always hustling. Whereas in socialism, at least the one I lived through, it was a little more forgiving on that part. But I was never driven by making tons of money. My primary decisions around career was that something that I love? Is that something that I can contribute to the world in some way shape or form? I always wanted to contribute to the world to kind of leave some sort of legacy however small in whatever way. I was also very much driven by that sense of freedom, that I wanted to have control over what I do and

how I do it and where I do it from and kind of not necessarily be tied down to any particular place, I never wanted children. I didn't really have to plan for a lot of stability. As humans, we both need stability and freedom. Some people need more of one thing, and we sometimes want one more than the other depending on our life stages, but I was just always not needing more stability but needing more freedom, and this meant more freedom and rebelliousness. I did like being a bit of a rebel.

So, whenever you know they laid out this path for you, of like okay you're getting your Ph.D. at Cornell, here is the trajectory and academia in terms of how to work and where to work and getting tenured, how did it sit with you? Did you want to follow the footsteps of your father?

I thought that was going to be my path certainly coming into Cornell and probably for the first 4 or 5 years I kept thinking that and then I was like I will find a place to do a post doc or get a professor position, I was going to all of the sex research conferences where I would meet other people doing that, and I had relationships with professors, and I was confident that I wasn't going to be left jobless if I wanted that kind of job. I'm not saying it would have been easy or immediate or get exactly what I wanted, but. I was confident that I was a good enough scholar that I would be able to find the next step of that career and. I actually did. I got a post doc in NYC, in fact, of all places, right after I was done with my PhD. It was to do research that I would've loved to do on drugs and sex in the sex party community in NYC that was funded by the National Institute of Drug Abuse, and I said no to it the day before it was supposed to begin because I got a book deal because in the 6 months prior to that I had kind of also decided to see what I could create out there in the non-academic world. I had 6 months after I had gotten my PhD until this post doc started. That's when I came down to NYC and started teaching at NYU. The first class they had me teach as an adjunct there was a class that wasn't my own, it was like a lab social and personality psych research methods class. They wanted to test me out to see if students would like me, and for the following semester they gave me a human sexuality class to create, basically. But during those six months, I started writing for popular media, I started writing for psychology today. A few of my studies had started to come out in the media. Okay, can I back track a little?

Absolutely.

I realized that I missed a critical step in that journey. 6 months before I got my Ph.D., as I was finishing up that research project that was my three paper PhD. So, my Ph thesis, which was actually three academic papers that were published in the academic literature with a little intro and a little outro and beginning and end that tied all three of them together. But I could not publish these three papers in succession which were the topic of casual sex and mental health, because that's what I ended up being really interested in because I was so unhappy with this very pathologizing black or white view of casual sex. And I was like, this can't be bad for everyone. Maybe it's bad for some people as you all say, but it can't be bad for everyone. Because look at me, this is working so well for me.

So, I have to find what are some of those factors that distinguish people that suffer when they have casual sex and people who benefit from it.

I'm so glad you mentioned that because you're very open about your personal experiences not only in your media and on your website but also in person. I find it so refreshing, you say that you crave lots of casual sex and that you've had sex with people older than you and that you've had group sex and every possible variation and you're curious about kink and it sounds like you use those personal experiences to your advantage in terms of what you would study and the curiosity that came from it.

Yeah, I just thought that all of those experiences were fascinating, and I certainly brought a lot of that into my research. I had not spoken so much so much about it in terms of my public presence, and the kinds of stuff I shared. It's been an interesting journey, Heather....I didn't talk much about my personal experiences until up until recently. I tried to stay close to the science. I mean a little bit, it was a long process of becoming more and more comfortable with that.

Well, I can imagine it's probably looked down upon in academia too, it's not like you were very encouraged to be very open about it all and so I can understand that transition in getting more comfortable and confident in your own experiences.

Right, I think it makes total sense, if you're trying to connect with not academic audiences, but with different kinds of audiences that I'm connecting to now, with consulting clients and with people taking my consensual nonmonogamy course, or the people who are coming to my uncensored sex talks who I'm literally in conversation with all the time. It helps to incorporate your own personal perspective, which you're really not encouraged to do in any kind of academic writing or speaking. You're not even supposed to share that information with the people during cocktail hour during conferences.

It depends on what conference you go to.

True. There are pods, maybe you share that information with a few people you trust, but you don't publicly put it out. And that was one of the aspects of my life that it did feel like a double life, maybe...but I don't know.

So obviously you've accomplished so much in terms of the research you've done, creating the casual sex project, doing a Ted Talk, out of those couple of things that were pretty big, what was the most challenging?

I didn't quite finish the story and I promise the answer to that question will be at the end of this story. 6 months before I finished my PhD one of these papers on casual sex on promiscuity and non-monogamy got out in the media for the first time and that's when I realized there was so much interest in the topics I study academically amongst the

people out there in the world that are not in the ivory tower. And that's when I decided I wanted to speak to those people, and I didn't necessarily know how, through which means, was it writing, was it podcasting, was it Youtubing, all of those many different ways and tools that exist for us to do that. I was pulled in that direction, and when I sat there and compared the traditional tenured track path with this opportunity to adjunct teach at NYU and do this other medley of activities, that mean educating the public, or doing consultations, or speaking or writing, or other ways to connect with the general public and not the academic public and it's been 6 years now, or so, 6 or 7 with me doing that in other ways. So this entire time I've been teaching as an adjunct professor at NYU one or two classes per semester, and the rest of my time I've been doing a lot of different things. You mentioned the casual sex project which was the reason I said no to my post-doc opportunity, and the reason I got a book deal was that I had created this casual sex project after writing for a few media, like Playboy and Psych Today. I created the casual sex project which was this repository of stories that people shared from their hookup experiences. It was kind of structured in a way that a study on that might be structured. I pulled obviously a lot from my experience having done all that research on casual sex and that project really blew up. The media found it, it was all kind of connected, I was doing the research on it, I had created this project on it, so the media wrote about it all over the world. We had a huge influx of people coming to the site, submitting stories, and engaging with it for many years. We kept it going for many years. I did not manage to monetize that, though, speaking of career.

Making it in NYC.

Yeah, I was trying different things...I'm not much of an entrepreneur, my primary skill is in teaching and understanding and analyzing and doing science and not so much in how to be a successful entrepreneur and. I never figured out a way to monetize it. It was a project I learned a lot from and am applying some of the stuff I learned into what I'm doing right now with the uncensored talks. I'm like oh yeah, I know that thanks to the casual sex project. That's one of those things that..who knows...maybe we will revive it. It's still up there people can read stories, but they can't submit. I don't know, maybe one day we'll revive it.

So you said there was a book deal that came out of it, was it kind of a collection of the stories?

We talked about different ideas, I was going to write a book about how to have healthy casual sex, like what the science says about what healthy casual sex looks like and give people practical advice on that and of course it was going to be populated with stories from the project, but we were not on the same page. I tried to write that book for 2 ½ years, back and forth and back and forth, we got book doctors to help with the writing and that didn't work out...we went through so many different iterations. We were on so on different pages with the publisher that eventually I walked away from it.

That's such a hard experience I'm sure to have gone through in terms of getting the book deal, putting all of those years of work into writing, and time and investment into it and to ultimately decide to we weren't on the same page and decide it wasn't the best project for you.

Yup. I gave up my post-doc or that, right, I gave up that whole career. That was kind of the fork in the road for me—was I going to take this book deal or am I going to take this post doc? And I knew I couldn't do both at the same time, because I was also going to teach my first Human sexuality class at NYU that following semester and so I knew I couldn't do all. But I knew that was the decision, even if the book failed. But the people at the post doc were like if the book fails in a year or two and you want to come back to us, please come back, we'll take you. But I kind of knew if I stepped into this more public world, I wasn't going to come back to full blown academia. I would still like to do research and teach, I love teaching, I absolutely love teaching. I loved research; I am trying right now to get to a place where this a lot of passive income. There's enough passive income coming my way so there is enough time to write academic papers.

*break

In some of the stuff I've been looking at, you started a podcast in 2017, which is really cool it's like the science of sex podcast for a couple of years. What are some lessons learned from starting that podcast and what made you take a break from it and focus on other things?

The Science of Sex podcast, another one of my brain children. Yeah so I started that in 2017, as. I said this has been an interesting long exploration of the methods and the tools and the ways and the themes and the topics that I want to engage with and the means of doing that with other audiences. And Science of Sex Podcast was another one of those experiments if you will, that Joe and I did for 2 years. I had a co-host who was kind of this like I don't know, I'm just this guy from jersey and I don't much about sex or anything but I wanna learn and I'll ask some dumb questions but I'm a good guy. And he really was, that's exactly who he was. I think we made a great team together, and we had this interesting stereotype of gender differences. I'm this super non-monogamous person he was this super monogamous person in the same relationship for 20 years, so I think I really enjoyed doing that podcast. What we did was interviewed sex researchers about their latest research or their bigger body of research on a particular topic. I loved it, a lot of people loved it. A lot of people who are now part of my story of new, project, are people who came through the science of sex podcast and I think we put out some great stuff for people who want to delve into the science of some of these things, I think any of those episodes anyone can find on iTunes, are really good content. What I learned from that and the reason again we decided to put it on pause is that it's a very niche market and we did not find a way to make it big enough for it to sustain itself.

What I'm hearing from that is, is being able to make money off of it, right? All the side hustles in terms of how we monetize some of these projects and some of these experiments that you're doing in order to make some money off of it and sustain yourself living in NYC. What have you found to be helpful and what hasn't worked?

As far as podcasts are concerned my kind of lesson to people would be either have other means to support yourself and do it as your volunteer project that you don't have to make money off of, or already have a big audience that you know will be listening to that podcast so that you can monetize it or be ready to work for it. Maybe have a few months you can commit to it voluntarily. So you will be working towards all the work that needs to go into it to really make it successful.

I'm kind of of the school of thought that you can plant the seeds and later you hope they grow and sounds like from the science of sex podcast you had a lot of people to come out of that are kind of part of your uncensored talk project now so that maybe that helped. I think a lot of times if you have this overarching goal like this is the podcast, it's free work, right, you're going to invest a lot of time and energy into it but you're building an audience and hopefully building followers and the question is how do you give those followers what they need and obviously that's for a cost, right? If you're forming something and creating something that they're asking for and that they need but I think that having kind of that plan at the beginning is really really hard but it sounds like it kinda has worked out somewhat in terms of your sex talks and kind of taking some of that audience and figuring out what they need, what are they craving, and how can you develop a program or community that serves them?

Yeah, exactly. I love that way of thinking about things, and you know I may not have been able to see it at the time as it was...

Well that was years ago I think that's hard, I think we're just learning now how to like monetize all that stuff.

Right, right. But it is all coming together and what I'm learning now is that all of those projects which—it was interesting when you were like come to talk to us about your career and I'm like you're going to hear about a lot of things that I started and they didn't go as ...

I think there is a lot of powerful lessons in all that.

Mhm. Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. And then I knew, I was kind of giving myself a few years, I didn't know how many years I was giving myself after my PhD but there was kind of a loose plan in my mind. I wish I had a stricter plan, that's another lesson I'd give my younger self if. I could talk to her if there was a magical universe.

So giving kind of a structured plan in terms of the structure of how you set up these different projects and obviously how you can monetize them later on how you can give people what they're asking for, is that kind of what you're saying?

And also more of a timeline, like, how much time am I giving myself after my PhD? So when I said yes to that book deal, and said no to the post doc, I should have given myself 3 or 5 years, by this date, you have to have experimented learned all of the lessons, and then take what works the best. Because I was trying to experiment the variables, and me being the scientist, the variables there were, do I like doing it? On a long-term basis? Can I see myself putting this much time and energy because any big project is going to take time and energy, can I sustain that for long periods of time and enjoy my life? Does it connect to people? Do people actually want that thing that I so much enjoy doing? And then does it make money? Is there a mechanism that gets enough people paying enough money to be able to sustain the comfortable life that I would like to have. Which is not unreasonably high, which is a comfortable life in NYC. So I should have had a more concrete plan for how I'm going to vary these variables, I should've taken a more experimental approach and then how long this experiment was going to last. This way, I let it go on for a little longer than I would've liked. I also think those last couple of years of the experiment was kind of the time for me to learn all of the lessons I could take and synthesize them into what it is that I need to be doing to get to that next level.

Yeah, and I think that you know, typically with people that make any kind of money, and definitely with people that make a lot of kind of money in this field they offer something that people are wanting, that there is a problem for. We really need to learn this; we need to understand this. I think there are so many of your projects that have powerful lessons and information that you've researched that people would want to know it's just a matter of finding that right community and finding those right people that are willing to pay for that knowledge.

Right. And I think that I did! I think that I found them. I found the format, I found the people...I'm still figuring out the exact business model, but there is a business model and ways to grow and expand.

So tell us a little bit about that. What did you find and what is it all about?

What is it all about? Well who knows, maybe 5 years from now we have this interview and I'm like ugh, I wish I knew the things I now know.

Well, I think that's the whole goal of this podcast. All of the things we wished we knew 5-10 years ago, how can we help people that are maybe underprivileged or in positions where they're not able to take the time or energy or resources or money to actually learn all of this stuff.

Absolutely, yeah I just hope that what I'm telling people now is not actually going to lead to me being bankrupt being in 5 years.

Sure.

I think this is the way and this is going to work for me and for a lot of other people and there are signs that it is already working, and that is online courses. That is the passive income, not that you don't have to do anything in order for that passive income to keep coming, but once you've created that online course, then there is money coming your way from any advertising and promotion that you've set in motion a lot of it that can be done by other people and automatically right? You don't have to deliver your content every time it's being consumed and that scales the market tremendously, so one of my projects that just launched is Open Smarter, which is a course on open relationships and especially on how, well it's not just actually on open relationships it's more broadly on our relationship personality. The way our personality kind of informs and guides some of the decisions that we make around sex and relationships.

I think that's so smart. It's so smart to frame it that way. There's a video on your website that describes a little bit more of that. I think it's so smart to frame it in terms of personality and it's not about finding the right relationship but finding the right relationship structure and these different core components that go into it. You say that it's attachment anxiety and avoidance, emotional stability, cognitive flexibility, assertiveness, empathy, jealousy, social stigma resilience, sexual risk tolerance, pleasure capacity, and infatuation susceptibility and. I think that when we frame it in that way it helps people understand it really is our personality that goes into not only the relationship but the type of relationship we're having. So this Open Smarter course just seems so smart.

Good, I'm so glad it sounds smart to you, because you know these things. Of course, psychologists are aware of how important personality is. But, a lot of other people are not, or they don't even think in personality terms, they've heard it's something like introversion or extraversion maybe.

Which is like the same thing, it's your temperament and how you interact with the world and your partner and anxiety producing activities.

Absolutely, yeah. And then there are all of these other personality traits, some of which are actually facets of the Big Five, some of which are adjacent to them in some way. They all have an effect on how we go about sex and relationships and how we are and that doesn't mean we're stuck there forever. We all know personality, we have a baseline, but there is also some leeway around that baseline and there are things that we can all do to move the needle up or down on that spectrum but where we are on that spectrum determines a lot, in what we want, how we want it, when we want it, what kinds of partners we want to be with or not be with, and what kinds of skills we have to deal with the different things coming our way. All of that is important, especially when you try to open up a relationship or go into this world of open relationships where there are not that many rules, and we don't have role models, and we don't know what we're doing, it's new, it's uncharted territory. With monogamy, at least you have a path even if it's not a

perfect match for your personality, and for many people it's not. That's one of the points in that course, that for a lot of people complete lifelong monogamy is hard to stick to.

And it's very rare.

Yeah, exactly and it's very rare because it doesn't match most people's needs and desires. It does match some people, absolutely.

Yeah absolutely. When we're talking about lifelong monogamy, we're talking about one person for the rest of your life and not serial monogamy where you have a couple of people throughout your entire life.

Exactly, I think a lot of people think 'I'm monogamous' but what they're doing is changing relationships every 3-4 years. No that's not monogamy, you are non-monogamous, you just worked out a different schedule for that non-monogamy. There are some people for whom lifelong monogamy works and I want those people to be monogamous and to feel good about being monogamous, I don't want anyone to be prude-shaming them.

That's such a critical piece. I love that you said that because I feel like in a lot of open poly communities there is a lot of that same or prude shaming. In terms of like, 'you're monogamous, that's the lesser...you're not as evolved' or whatever and I think that's bullshit!

I felt it, I've been in communities where I'm like no, monogamy is an option it's part of the spectrum. Just like we are part of the spectrum, just on the other end of the spectrum, and that's what I try to teach people in this course. It's all a spectrum, figure out where you are on the spectrum, and the non-monogamy spectrum is one of those, figure out where you are, and then build a relationship, a relationship type and find a person who wants that same type of relationship that is going to be a good fit for who you are, what you want, and how you want to go about it. That will eliminate a lot of pain and suffering that you would otherwise go through if you picked the wrong types of relationships and the wrong people to have those wrong types of relationships with.

So you mentioned that I caught you at this different time in your life where you're a lot more open in who you are and a lot more expressive in terms of the type of sex that you like and how out and open you are and I know that you recently when on a sabbatical. Was that part of this journey to becoming who you are now? Tell me a little more about this piece.

Yeah, I did go on a year off of life, I took a sabbatical that was supposed to be 6 months, but it ended up being around 9 months-to a year. I was slowly coming back during those last 3 months. I felt like I needed to process all of the stuff that I learned from this experimental period I had given myself after Cornell, even though as I said it was a little longer than I would've wanted it to be, but I was ready. I think I needed to take time off in order to process all of this information. And that my life, the way it was normally, it was

just too busy. There was not enough time literally, for me to lay down and think, or journal, or do yoga, or meditate, or do some more of those introverted...I've been an extra extra extravert my entire life and I've lived so much in constant communication and travel and speaking and doing things and also personal life and lovers and friends and birthday parties and festivals and lots of fun. And lots of lots of fun. But with having lots of that kind of social fun makes it impossible to sit and think and process and really take stock be more reflective. So I needed to carve out some time for me to do that. So that was what the sabbatical was, time to reflect on my personal life, and time also to reflect on my professional life and how I can put all of these things together. That was also the time I set out time to work on the course, because I knew that going into it an online course was sort of my next step, that I had to do, and I had been working on non-monogamy for so long that I had so much in my brain that needed to come out about that topic that it was a no brainer that that was the course I was going to make. I knew there was a lot of interest about that in my community. A lot of people in this community had come to me about things I had done in the past. I knew that list of people, a lot of them at least were interested in open relationships. I wanted to create something for them. As I was getting close to being done with creating the product, as we were finalizing some of the final touches and getting to launch it, I also wanted to create something else, this is obviously an online course, but I wanted to reengage with the community I had and create something that was more interactive where we could really get into some things and I also really benefit other people's views and opinions. Whether they're similar to mine, because then that validates my experience, or if they're different from mine, then I'm like Oh, why? Tell me more about yourself so I can understand how or why you might feel or think or do the way that you do. I wanted to create a space where we could have that. So I created this uncensored talks with Dr. Zhana which is Zoom based online group conversation between myself and anyone who comes into that room from anywhere in the world, and we have global audience of people, where we get to talk, it's a moderated conversation that I facilitate about a specific topic. We've talked about casual sex, open relationships, sex work, consent, about threesomes, we're going to talk about jealousy next time and anal sex, no we're going to talk about libido and sex drive first, and then jealousy and then anal sex. We're probably going to talk about celibacy at some point because part of my experimental year off my sabbatical consisted of different forms and stages of celibacy, intentional. OF course, people experience unintentional celibacy, so I want to get everyone in the room. That's the kind of thing I want to create, if we're talking about celibacy, I want in the room people who chose to do it and people who are forced into living without wanting to do it and I want to be able to hear each other from all of those different perspectives and create a respectful space for people to be able to have these conversations and even disagree with each other. I feel like there is not enough disagreement allowed in a lot public spaces when it comes to sexuality and relationships.

Very hard to do.

So I would like to create space for respectful disagreement.

Does it cost to be in this community?

It is pay what you can for coming to any of the events. It's a \$27 suggested donation but literally people can come in for as little as \$1, it's whatever people can afford. And then we're working on a membership model, we're rolling that out shortly, so that they can come become a member and get a lot of perks with that, they can get recording of the events, so people don't even have to be there in person, they can listen to the recording afterwards. A lot of people just buy the recordings as is, the chat notes, and other notes we're building a forum for the community, and kind of a social network we can all be a part of as uncensored community, and there will be other kind of perks for the membership but that's one of the ways people can be a part of it.

That's so cool and I love that there are different levels and you're still serving the community for people who maybe can't afford it but still want to be a part of these conversations, but you also have a higher level for more intense and more in-depth conversations. I know we started this off talking about being a hustler in this capitalistic society and having to have all of these different projects to sustain you in NYC. What are the best projects that you've found to be able to do that?

Well, I'm pretty sure Uncensored is going to be that because there's a podcast component coming out, and there will be other things coming out from that. There's a lot of potential for growth and spread, we're working on it. We have an amazing group of people that all came together.

Oh awesome, so it's not just you, there's a couple of people it sounds like.

Oh yeah, it's been going on for two months now but 4 weeks in I said I need help to get this baby off the ground. People just flocked, I had 40 job applications from people to all sorts of things.

That's amazing.

I'm pretty confident that this will grow into something big. Otherwise, what's helped sustain is work with Lelo. I've worked as their residence sexpert from quite some time. That's one of the things, one of the experiments of like how do I work with brands, because that's one of the ways that we all have to make money in this profession, and I learned that I didn't love doing banners, posting, product reviews, that kind of stuff, posting on my social media about brands, I'm not saying I'm never going to do it again, that would be very silly of me to say but. I knew that it didn't feel as aligned for me to do a lot of that. I was very fortunate to be able to work out a deal with Lelo that involves me educating on their part. So talking to media when media has questions about sexuality and relationships, doing Instagram Q and A's, writing the Q and A'S for their blog, so

really being this role as an educator and expert that works on the behalf of this company as opposed to—

Just an influencer.

Yeah an influencer I guess.

So you're actually providing content and education and there's value in that and I think that's great versus just being an influencer.

I mean that's what works for me. That's why I'm telling people this. You find what works for you, this was all done through trial and error and this is how it makes sense to me and feels most aligned. Because again, that alignment is everything to me. I will have less money in life if I can be more aligned.

That makes sense.

And other people feel differently right? For some people the money is more pressing than perfect alignment.

And it depends on where you are in your hierarchy of needs right? Your Maslow hierarchy of needs in terms of needing money just for basic survival, I mean whenever you're in that stage some of that stuff is really important, anything you can do to really help you live.

What advice do you have to young sexuality professionals?

Fail fast. I'm sure a lot of people had said that in many different professions, but I would say this in this one as well especially if you're going to take more of the entrepreneurial route. If you're going to take more of the academic route, don't fail. Then do not fail, please. Do your absolute best, publish the best papers you can. Do not get distracted. If you're going to go the academic route, don't get distracted with a million different papers that you want to write. You may want to write them, but you cannot write all of them. So pick a few that you're going to write over the course of your grad school career that are going to get you a job. Listen to your advisors when they tell you what those things are. Take their advice into consideration.

Sure. That's great advice and makes a lot of sense especially depending on the route you take and what career path you're aiming for. Fail fast.

IF you're taking more of the entrepreneurial route, try things like podcasts, youtuber, and influencer, then fail fast. I think those three variables are important variables. Do you like doing it long term? Does it resonate with people? Can you make money? Think about those three things and then find the thing that is going to do that for you.

My favorite kind of motto that I follow is “jump and build the parachute on the way down.”

Yep, I like that too.

That’s kind of entrepreneurship, you just have to start, you just have to jump and figure it out as you go, and that’s kind of along the same lines as “fail fast.”

It doesn’t have to be perfect. Take a risk. That’s kind of how uncensored was created and started. I had an idea, I had no idea to what extent it was going to resonate, I thought it might, but I was like can I do this myself? Yeah I can. I just need one tech person to help me with the zoom. I found a friend to do it, and. I was like let’s see how it goes. Threw it up there to my audience and 100 people bought tickets to the first one.

That’s amazing, that’s so cool.

And from that point on, I was smart enough to get their feedback and this and that, and they were like this doesn’t exist anywhere. We want more. Give us more. And I was like oh, okay! I think I can give you more of this because this is amazing. I love doing it, you clearly love being a part of it, so let’s turn this into the thing that hopefully feeds all of us. Feeds us both materially and emotionally, our souls.

Absolutely feed our souls.

Well, we are so excited to have you teach with Sexual Health Alliance this month of February 2021. At the end of this month, you’re going to be teaching a workshop to anyone who wants to join us at the Sexual Health Alliance, there’s a lot of our certification students that are getting certified in sex education, therapy, counseling or coaching but anyone else can join if they want to listen and learn and hangout with a bunch of sex nerds so we can’t wait to have you on for that confer4encfe. Where else can people find you?

I’m very excited for this one I used to talk about casual sex so much in my professional life and I haven’t after my sabbatical, so I think is going to be my first big casual sex workshop.

Debut?

Yeah, debut. Re-debut.

Yeah, I love it.

I’m really excited about it, so thank you for providing that opportunity for me. People can find me on my website on drzhana.com and they can get to the Open Smarter course that way it’s drzhana.com/open-smarter and the uncensored talks are also going to be on my website where they can buy a ticket or become a member, and I really hope to see some

of you. And please, give me feedback! If you ever come to an Uncensored and you ever take the Open Smarter course, I want your feedback. Tell me how it was so we can make it better.

Yeah, absolutely. Thanks so much for hanging out and talking with us. Like I said, we're really excited to have you teach with us and I can't wait to see where you go with all of these fun projects.

Thanks Heather!