

Shelf Healing interview with Dr Radha Modgil. Transcription by Lukas Montgomery

00:00:07

Rebecca Markwick:

Before we start, if you could say your first and last name to make sure I pronounce it right and give your pronouns, that would be great.

00:00:16

Dr Radha Modgil:

Yes, so Radha Modgil and she/her.

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Rebecca:

Hello and welcome to Shelf Healing UCL's bibliotherapy podcast. I'm your host, Rebecca Markwick. Our guest today is Dr Radha Modgil. Dr Radha is a practicing NHS GP broadcaster and campaigner for wellbeing. She is the medical expert for BBC Radio One show *Life Hacks* and is the co-presenter off the *Life Hacks Podcast*. Dr. Radha has appeared across many television channels, including the BBC, ITV and Channel Five. As well is broadcasting across the BBC radio channels. Dr. Radha writes for magazines and has contributed to books supporting young people and parents. She has a particular interest in young people's health and has campaigned for the BBC, Public Health England, Mind, and the British Heart Foundation, Dr. Radha is also now working with the National Association for Social Prescribing.

First question to get us started is nice and easy. Do you feel that reading is therapeutic?

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Dr Radha:

Oh, I love that question. And yes, absolutely. In so many ways, actually, so not only does reading help us kind of take ourselves away from our mind, from our worries. It can transport us into a whole new world, whole new set of characters, whole new set of challenges so that in itself is obviously very beneficial. Because, you know, especially this year, you know, we had lots of uncertainty, lots of anxiety, just to be taken away for a short period of time has been really helpful for our mental health, I think, and our emotional wellbeing, also just so many other layers. So I think, you know, in every story there are parts of yourself that you can see within that story, challenges that you might have been through that you can relate to in terms of that character and how they're feeling. And so, actually, by reading about that character, by reading their story and following their story, I think subconsciously and also sometimes consciously, we can recognize that sense in ourselves, and we can almost work through and start to process some of the challenges or some of the difficulties that we might be having in our lives through that character and through their journey wherever that leads to. I think also when we- when we either read a book or actually also, when we write, you know, we try to write, that again just helps us get all of those thoughts and feelings out on paper, gives us that mental space. But it also is another- it's a sort of stepping stone in that process of understanding ourselves a bit more processing what's happened to us and actually, hopefully moving forwards with steps to kind of come out the other side, or to come to a conclusion, or to move forward with a solution. So, in so many ways, I think reading is just fantastic, and I absolutely love that. I always have.

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Rebecca:

So, what kind of books do you reach for when you want to relax or improve your mental wellbeing?

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Dr Radha:

So I absolutely love books that are totally unrelatable to the real world. So, I really want to be taken away from reality when I read a book. So fancy novel things like *Lord of the Rings*, Philip Pullman's books. I absolutely love the Northern Lights trilogy, for example. Those kind of books really just make me I feel so happy because I'm taken away and something magical, something that I don't- can't really sort of see in real life. And so it really gives me that mental break. But also I love sort of magical books. I love mystery. I don't want to know the facts and figures. I want to just literally be taken into a world where I can use my own imagination, and imagination, actually, is a really interesting thing because we can use our imagination to feel fearful and to worry and to get anxious with always kind of 'what if' thoughts. But actually, we could also use our imagination to create a world, a vision, perhaps an outcome to a situation that is a positive outcome. So I sometimes think, well, you know, why not use our imaginations not just to worry, but also to create a kind of vision, a kind of idea around what might happen or what could come in the future and I think hope is also very much related to imagination, to visions, to solution finding. So as we all know, hope is such an important daily tool, especially this year that we've needed to use. So yeah, anywhere that imagination is, please take me there when I'm reading a book.

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Rebecca:

Are there any works that you returned to over and over again, like comfort food but a book?

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Dr Radha:

So I'm also probably a little bit unusual in that I don't really like reading adults books as in, I actually really like reading, sometimes getting back to these kind of classics that I read when I was little, I was growing up. So, for example, some of those are Roald Dahl's books, which I absolutely loved as a child. So, I love going back sometimes and reading *Boy* or *Danny The Champion of The World* or, you know, *Matilda* or something like that, because I think Roald Dahl is such a great author in so many ways. But I think he's real power for me was about his authenticity, so he treated his readers as, oh that their children and sometimes we treat children so they don't know things. We have to protect them from certain things, and obviously we do two degree but Roald Dahl was really clear in that he, a lot of his characters had had difficult things happening to them in their lives. They had lost parents, for example. They hadn't had the nicest of lives and instead of sugar coating that for children he just told as it was. So I really love his authenticity. I also absolutely love his imagination, his humor, his characters. I just yeah, so I think Roald Dahl, Roald Dahl's books, the ones that I would tend to go back to as well.

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Rebecca:

Yeah, everyone loves a bit of, Roald Dahl

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Dr Radha:

You can't get away from Roald Dahl. And his adult books as well are really brilliant. So *Tales of the Unexpected*, just some fantastic plot twists in those and really, really clever stuff and quite dark stuff as well, because of dark kind of things too stories or short stories, which also I really, really like. So I think those kind of books, but also there are on the other side of it. I do actually really like understanding and kind of growing and learning a bit more about myself. So the other categories of books that I do tend to go back to you are perhaps more self-development type books. So, for example, I absolutely love Eckhart Tolle, who wrote *The Power of Now* and *A New Earth*. I love books by Oprah Winfrey. I love poetry by Maya Angelou. So I love those kind of books that really sort of nourish your soul. They kind of help you remember what's important, the little strategies that are helpful in day to day life. But they are also really inspirational. I love reading about people's lives, their experiences, what life has taught them and there's an amazing collection by Oprah Winfrey, which I think is called *What I Know For Sure* and on each page, she talks about a particular lesson from her life and experience that she went through. And I absolutely love learning from other people how they dealt with challenges and difficulties. So that's on the kind of other end of the spectrum from the imaginative type books.

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Rebecca:

You have a particular interest in wellbeing, particularly in regards to young people. What drew you to this area?

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Dr Radha:

A very good question. So I think when I was- when I was little and growing up in school, I think I was always probably the one to stand up for people who are being bullied or to make sure people were okay. I was quite kind child, I would hope, I think, people have told me. So I think that was always probably in my nature. I think, as I kind of got older I experienced some of my friends, perhaps having difficulties with their mental health or struggles in their lives and I think that also interested me. And then when I started, obviously is a doctor, I see obviously patients having gone through difficult things and challenges, so that also is another element. Then when I went into broadcasting in my media work, I started first of all, with a BBC Three programme and then on Radio One and through that work with young people in the audience, just so many incredible young people in terms of how they got through different, difficult things in their life, or different challenges. But also just the camaraderie of that age group is, well, the amount of support that they want to give each other and just how important it is, you know to me, I'm quite a simplistic person, but to me the foundation of everything really starts with our mental and emotional wellbeing and if we get that as a kind of a solid basis, solid foundation and if we put time and we invest in that for children at school and young people, then actually, yes, life will still be challenging. Challenges will still come, but at least I'll be a better chance of that young person actually being able to manage that, being able to feel like they can ask for help, but they're not

alone. I think that is the foundation of everything. And if we don't get that right, then we can't expect people to thrive and to be part of society and to be part of something, you know, part of that kind of togetherness I suppose. So for me, it all comes down, how we think, how we feel, how we feel about ourselves and how we see our purpose in the world. That really is the starting point for building a society where we are all actually looking after each other and we look after nature as well. We look after everything.

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Rebecca:

It's lovely. It's a really good reason.

00:10:03

Dr Radha:

Well sometimes I think am I being too simplistic here, but I actually don't think I am. I think you know how we think, how we feel dictates our behaviours and our actions. And so we tend to focus on. We look at the problems that are around us in the world and we say what we have to fix that problem and so we start kind of from the outside. But we need to do is kind of come back and retrace that because every problem really that's there comes from the cumulative effect of lots of different people's actions or inaction for a particular reason. So if we could just get that foundation right a lot of those things come from fear come from anxiety, a place of fear, like I'm not enough. I haven't got enough. I need more to make myself feel safe and secure. I need to therefore put other people down, or I want to judge people because I'm fearful, I don't have that self-esteem and confidence don't feel safe. So I think, you know, building on those really basic human needs of feeling listened to, feeling heard, feeling valued, feeling safe, feeling connected, to me if we get those things right, then actually we won't have those kind of secondary consequences that come if we don't get it right

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Rebecca:

In your experience, have you come across the concept of bibliotherapy before and what are your thoughts on that idea of sort of prescribing literature?

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Dr Radha:

So I haven't come across the word bibliotherapy before, but I absolutely love it. I can work out for me from a medical training, you know, in terms of *biblio* meaning book in Latin that obviously it's sort of therapy ways to kind of heal through reading and through literature.

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Rebecca:

That's exactly it.

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Dr Radha:

So I haven't come across that particular word, but I definitely come across the idea of obviously reading and literature as a as a form of wellbeing, as something which is helpful for people to express their feelings, understand themselves and understand the world a little bit more. And I think- I think it's a great term because, actually, I mean, for some of us, we almost know by common sense and by how we feel that books and reading literature help us and the arts help us. So theatre, cinema, you know, whatever kind of arts we're talking about, really do make us feel good. But obviously there is obviously a section of society as well that needs to have that sort of formalised. Or perhaps could only hear that message if its formalised. If it's presented to him in a certain way. And again, we all take in information differently, we take in messaging differently, so that's really valid. And I think the more the more sort of research, more studies we do around this, the more evidence we grow, the better, because evidence based things always obviously really helpful when we're talking about rolling out policies and activities generally across the health care system when it's really stretched. But I, you know, I think in 2020 the fact that we've had so many things or stopped like live theatre, music, the arts events, book signings, perhaps, or literature festivals, I think because they've been stopped, we really have had it sort of shoved in our faces, very obviously the fact that we really miss those things, and so we're almost sort of being asked to remember just how important they are for all of us, for all of our emotional wellbeing, our mental health and what we actually use them for but perhaps we weren't even aware that we were using them for that purpose, before this happened.

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Rebecca:

In your practice is a GP, do you ever find yourself recommending books to people or sort of just in your day to day life, recommending books to people without really thinking why you're doing it but sort of accidental bibliotherapy prescribing?

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Dr Radha:

That's really interesting. That's a great question. I think we all do that to a degree without realising it, because again we'll be taken by a particular book. And we won't necessarily even stop and reflect why we enjoyed that book we'll just say I really loved that and then we'll kind of put it away and then we might tell one of our friends about it or rave about it. So, yes, I often find myself recommending different books to friends or telling people about something that I loved or a story that I really, really enjoyed. I think sometimes also for some of my friends, I do find myself if they're going through a particular challenge, perhaps recommending a book that I- that is around that theme or that I think might really help them in terms of their worrying about or strategies that might help them. So definitely do that. And I think that's also a great way of connecting people together as well. You know, in a year that's where it's been difficult to connect with people. I think connecting people, which is why people love book clubs, you know, through literature is really helpful. And once you have read the same book as well, I think you and you discuss that you chat about it, whether or not that's in a formal way or an informal way. You do also bond about that. And you know, for example, I'm thinking about really silly, silly kind of game that I play with, you know, my brothers and sisters. Sometimes you, like, traditional over Christmas, where I think it's one of these games where you have to describe you, pick up a card, gives you a name or something. You have to describe it without using the name. They have to get it and myself and my brother particularly. We were the two youngest in our family of four siblings and we shared a lot of common interest in literature and musicals, and opera and theatre and TV as well. So me and my brother, we can actually almost used code language to describe a book, character or reference really quickly because we had that bonding over shared literature or shared reading of stories. Whereas my sisters wouldn't have a clue. It does bond people together for life really sometimes doesn't it.

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Rebecca:

Definitely I love. That's like cheating but not cheating. Just I love it.

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Dr Radha:

And you win the game so it's an extra.

00:16:02

Rebecca:

Exactly. Have you noticed an increase in anxiety, stress and sort of milder forms of depression in recent years?

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Dr Radha:

Yeah. I mean, I think particularly in the younger age group, even before the pandemic there was- I was just using a lot more anxiety amongst that- amongst that age group, but also more generally, I think anxiety whenever I would cover it in broadcasting as a topic, we'd always get such a big response to anxiety. So I think that was already on the rise really before the pandemic, and obviously since that was obviously got a lot worse. So I think we're all being asked this year, sit back and really take notice of our mental health our emotional wellbeing and to think, how am I really today? What's going on for me? And although it's been challenging, I think there has also been an opportunity for us to be a lot more authentic about our answers in that and really ask people, how are you and actually mean it. I think sometimes those words on occasion, we're getting a bit meaningless in that they would be used, perhaps for a campaign for a day, and then it would all be over. This year I think there is an opportunity for us to actually really put meaning behind these words and I'm hoping that we won't forget how important that meaning is, and it will take it forward. But we'll take it forward in a really meaningful way and in a way, with action behind it and real intention behind it as well.

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Rebecca:

Definitely. It's so important. I think whilst this year has been horrible, it has been so good for people to suddenly be kind of almost forced to evaluate that sense of wellbeing and the importance of wellbeing, I guess it's one of those sort of silver lining things.

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Dr Radha:

Yeah, it's hard, isn't it? To look for silver linings and some days it's even harder to look for those and again, that's okay. That's kind of, you know, that's normal. We can't and we shouldn't be expected to be positive all day, every day, and especially not this year. But I think if we can step back and not be

unrealistic, but be realistic and say this has been absolutely dreadful year. This has been really hard because of this, this and this. But then to step back and say okay, it has been hard, but what have I learned? What could I take from this? What can I take into the future about what I want now and who, who I'm becoming on what I actually understand about myself and I think you know, if we had to go through this, which obviously all of us have had to, can we try to find some kind of gold in that something that will be a life lesson for us that will stay with us. Because for me, that's the only way of actually reframing it. It's a bit like if you have to do a, you know, really difficult exercise class or something, you know, really, just to kind of put your all into it. So you get then any kind of benefit you can out of that. And I think although it sounds like a strange analogy, if we can try to find some lessons that we've learned that would be useful in the future but also have been useful in shaping who we are now because we're all very different people from when we- who we were in January, we often think we're a static person and it's hard to see how we've changed. But this year it's actually probably one of the easiest to stop, step back and say wow, you know, how have I changed in this year and, however coped how I managed and to be proud of that because we don't often stop and say, well done to ourselves. We just kind of carry on and carry on and I think it's also really important to stop and say to yourself, you know, well done me for getting through all of this tough stuff because it has not been easy.

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Rebecca:

Definitely, I coach professionally, horse riders. I make such a huge deal about celebrate the small things. Every goal that you achieve celebrate it because horse people are so bad they achieve something and they instantly want to do better. Next. It was good, but I haven't done this yet. No, no, no, no, no, no, no. Celebrate the win. You know, even if the win was just you got on your horse and it didn't shuffle about while you were trying to get on, which is the most annoying thing ever celebrate it. It's progress.

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Dr Radha:

Absolutely. And I think this year, you know, honestly, there's some days for all of us myself included. It's just saying well done for just getting out of bed and have a shower and getting up getting dressed. And, you know, starting work, you know, is a really important thing. To say well done for. You know, when I when I sort of say, you know what have you learnt about yourself? I'm not talking about grand things I'm not talking about go learn a language or go and this and go and that or whatever is, I'm literally talking about have you learned that actually, you're really resilient- you're more resilient than you thought. Have you learned that actually, you've got some great friends around you? Have you learned that you know, if you're feeling a bit low, have you learned how to comfort yourself? Or have you learned how to ask for help from someone else? They're really- they're really simple small things that they are really powerful if we can recognise them. And we can really say to ourselves, okay, I won't always get it right in the future but I do know now that when I'm feeling a bit anxious, I could go for a walk and I feel a bit better. Or if I'm feeling a bit sad, I can allow myself to cry, not push it down, and I can feel a bit better. These are all really basic things, but they actually allow us to trust ourselves more and hopefully, this year, given some time, we might look back and think you know what? I learned a lot about myself that year and it may have, it very well diverted us down a completely different direction to the one that we were just kind of automatically going on.

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Rebecca:

Yeah. Do you think that reading therapeutically may help with those sort of ideas around, self-soothing and sort of reading for solace and just to improve your mood and your wellbeing?

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Dr Radha Modgil:

Definitely. Because again, you know, we're all, myself included were all obsessed with phones and technology and screens and swiping and looking at our phones. And, you know, lots of times when I used to commute on the train into London for work, I would take my book and it would be in my, in my handbag and but would I read it now I'd be on my phone, so I'm definitely not one to preach anybody, but I think this, yeah, this is really helpful this year in terms of you know, we haven't- we've been on screens so much, and I'm grateful for screens because otherwise we wouldn't be able to connect. But we have wanted to get away from screens as well and so actually, like you say, books are that place where we can get away from a screen that's used for work. We can get away from technology, we can read at our own pace. You know, our brains are not designed to be dealing with so much information all the time constantly multitasking you know information overload. We can choose the pace we read at. We can choose the types of books we want to read, where we want to be taken to. If we're- what kind of mood we're in as to what kind of book we might want to want what I want to pick up, for example, so just how music is a great tool. So, for example, if we're feeling a bit angry or frustrated we can listen to really fast music. And while we're running, for example. If we're sad, we can listen to a tune that's going to make help us cry. Or perhaps feel happier. Same with books, we can pick up a book or something to read. That is the thing we need in that moment and so reading really is a daily tool. And also it's a sign, you know, I think before the pandemic maybe even now as well, reading sometimes was a sort of, a sign of luxury, luxury of time and luxury of or you're reading a book or wow, you know, you can't be that busy, but actually, why do we, why do we make ourselves so busy that we cannot pick up a book and have we got so kind of have we got completely lost around actually, how we're spending our time and our choices around what we do with our times as well.

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Rebecca:

Very true. And there's always poems, you know, if you don't have much time, you still want to read. you could go for a poem.

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Dr Radha:

Yes, you know, I love poems, actually, and I love. I also love listening to poetry, listening to people reading poetry. I mean, that's why I actually mentioned my Maya Angelou because I love her poetry and there is a beautiful poem that she did, which is, I think it's supposed to be for children. But I read it all the time as an adult, because a lot of things that are good for children are good for us as adults, too. On that is, *Life Doesn't Frighten Me*, which is an absolutely beautiful poem and, I think, in times of anxiety or worry, you know, just reading that poem, reading her words and, you know there's some clips of her actually reading her poetry out with lots of other verses which are just so beautiful. Actually for Halloween this year I also remembered a poem that I used to I think I learned in school, which was I think, was it Walter de la Mare? I think it was one of his spooky spooky poems. And I listened to that being read on a clip on YouTube and it was just so evocative. And I thought, wow, I actually really love. I didn't like poetry much of school because I think it was probably it was taught, but I'm really starting to actually open my mind now to poetry and really started to enjoy it.

00:25:38

Rebecca:

Lovely. Final question. If you could recommend any book to someone to improve their mental wellbeing or just make their mood a little bit better, what would it be?

00:25:53

Dr Radha:

Mm. Oh, wow. Am I allowed two? Very different types. So one in terms of perhaps a book that gives you a nice idea about sort of mindfulness, present moment is very much *The Power of Now* by Eckhart Tolle because that when I read that book when I was in my early twenties, I think that kind of really changed my life in terms of how I experience things. So, I think that for me would just be a great sort of book to read for tools and understanding. And I think- I think actually, the other book that I would recommend is a bit of a long one. But I would actually recommend *Lord of the Rings* for lots of reasons in that there are so many characters in that book. They're all going through very different things or going through different challenges and lots of themes in that book, which are the characters really go through pretty much a lot of the themes of life challenges that we all go through in different ways. So I think that in that book you will find a character you can resonate with and relate to for whatever you're going through in life. But also, I think *Lord of the Rings* is all about, you know, good over evil, light over darkness, the journey, the difficulty, the challenge is the obstacles, the not knowing, the not understanding, but knowing intuitively that something needs to be done and the very last scene, you know, when Frodo and Sam are going to drop the ring and you know that whole thing that Sam says to Frodo you know, about you know, I'll carry you. Let me carry the burden or something like that I can't remember exact words.

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Rebecca:

I cannot carry it for you, but I can carry you.

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Dr Radha:

Oh yes. Even you saying that makes me want to cry. So that's me. It's also a story of connection, friendship, hope, perseverance, determination and sometimes also, you know, people who wouldn't necessarily think of as the true hero being actually, the steadfast and the person that really takes the burden holds it all together. So I think it's just such a beautiful book, and it's peppered with beautiful bits of imagination and different worlds. So I think *Lord of the Rings*, definitely for me.

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Rebecca:

Worth it just for the Tom Bombadil moments. If anyone hasn't read it but has seen the films, you won't know who Tom Bombadil is. But oh my goodness for a character who is just so full of life and positivity. Yeah, top notch.

00:28:41

Dr Radha:

Absolutely. But you know, I think, I think, *Lord of the Rings* from is it is really is like a story of sort of perseverance and in life- life is always going to be challenging. We can't control what happens outside of ourselves. The only thing we can control is ourselves. How we look after ourselves, how we think, how we feel, how we then act. And I think, the main lesson in life, I think, that we're all learning this year, but even more so is that yeah, we just we just kind of carry on. We just keep going, keep carrying on things will get better on I think that hope that message of hope in that message of persevering is really important.

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Rebecca:

Fantastic. It's- that is such an important message as well. I'm going to put all of the authors and the books that you've mentioned into the show notes. So our listeners can find them, give them a read, just research them and enjoy them. Thank you so much for coming on and agreeing to be part of the Shelf Healing experience.

00:29:47

Dr Radha:

It's been so lovely. I actually love it. Honestly, made me really think about the books that I read and why. And I think it's absolutely brilliant. So thank you so much for having me has been so lovely.

00:29:58

Rebecca:

Oh, how lovely. Thank you. What a lovely interview to start 2021 with. I hope you enjoyed it. I'll be back next week with another Shelf Healing interview.

Thanks to Nicholas Patrick for our music and to Lukas Montgomery for all of our transcripts. Don't forget to check us out on Twitter @Shelf_Healing