



Tuning Out Negative Body Image

Charlene is advancing in her career as an actor. But contending with narrow industry notions of AAPI body shapes is draining and distracting. Stevon and Juleyka discuss strategies for inventing your own path forward in a creative field. And Stevon offers advice to avoid internalizing negative feedback that has little to do with talent or skill.

Clip: You have to be invested in doing things that are solely for you, that fill you up and make you feel good about being yourself. In these sorts of spaces where there is this comparison, lack of talent might not be the barrier.

Stevon Lewis: What's up everybody? Welcome to How to Talk to [High Achievers] About Anything. I'm Stevon Lewis, a licensed psychotherapist. Today we're talking about managing feelings of rejection in our professional lives, especially when they involve negative messages around our bodies or what we look like. But before we start, I wanted to let you know our show is going on a break as we prepare for our next season. All right, let's welcome Juleyka Lantigua, creator of our show. What's up, Juleyka? Thanks for coming on.

Juleyka Lantigua:

Always good to be here.

Lewis: Let me introduce our guest. Today we have Charlene with us. Charlene is a working actor moving up in an industry that doesn't always feel welcoming to her. As an AAPI woman, she often feels the pressure of needing to fit into very restrictive industry standards. She's struggling to reconcile her healthy body image and what she wants to achieve in this space with the realities of her industry. Let's get into it.

Charlene: I am Charlene Hong White and I am an actor, both on stage and on screen, and I am a musician and also a playwright. I'm the daughter of Taiwanese immigrants and as a working AAPI actor, I am just excited to be here.

Currently living in Chattanooga, Tennessee. I am working towards honing my craft and being able to compete at the highest levels of artistry in this field. And it feels weird to even say the word compete because that's actually something that I've been wrestling with lately in terms of feeling like it is a competition rather than

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feeling like it's an artistic space of creativity, welcoming and open to people from all walks of life.

Charlene: I'm relatively new to the professional acting industry. I started getting involved with a lot of community theater productions, but I was kind of ready to make it a career. I am constantly submitting auditions and submitting headshots and resumes. It's been both exhilarating and also sometimes challenging. I think I felt this in particular because the stereotype of AAPI people, a strict body type, or at least the people that you see in media, like we think of K-dramas or Asian pop, things like that. I am kind of a curvy Asian girl. I do not fit the stereotype of small petite AAPI woman, have never really fit that stereotype. Always been a little chubby. It's always a weird thing to talk about, in part because when it comes to casting. As an actor, we're not privy to a hundred percent of the information. This is why I didn't get the role. That said, though, there are definitely have been situations where I have felt pretty strongly that there have been some body issues that have come into play.

I went up for a role, a commercial. They specifically ask for someone who could speak Mandarin fluently. Usually they'll ask you to usually send a video of where they can see you and they'll also ask you to maybe do a couple reads. I remember working very hard on this script, and it is in Mandarin and I speak Mandarin fluently, but it's still not... My best language is still English.

And then a couple of days later I find out that the person who got the role was someone who I respect very, very much, actually. It's a friend of mine. And this happens all the time because you get to know people in the industry. What was weird about it was that my friend self describes as someone who does not speak Mandarin well. She was so kind enough to show me her recording of her audition tape. I mean, her acting is wonderful, but her Chinese, her Mandarin really leaves something to be desired.

And as I was looking at that, it definitely filled me with a lot of feelings. Was I even in the running? When I'm put into a situation where the person who gets the role over me is, in so many ways, the industry standard for what maybe an AAPI artist should look like, it is really difficult to separate myself out from that situation and say, "Oh yeah, it had nothing to do with my body," because in a lot of ways it feels like it had a lot to do with my body. That's one situation of a few that I've definitely felt this tension within myself, where on one hand I believe so strongly in body positivity, body inclusivity, and also kind of managing the feelings of rejection when sometimes the industry just is the way that it is.

Charlene: There's been various points in my life where I have definitely tried to change myself to fit into a mold that I do not fit in. Not eating, trying to hide the way my body looks through baggy clothing or even in auditions trying to highlight the best parts. It was an extremely emotionally tumultuous point in my life where I was not sleeping or eating regularly in any way, but I was thin and I loved that because that meant that I looked the right way. Even now as I am more confident in who I am and how I look, it is still a battle to be willing to show who I am given the track record of the industry.

Lewis: Charlene, thanks so much for being open and honest with us about your experience. As I listened to Charlene's story, what really stood out to me was the reality of the situation that she's in. Being in a field that doesn't really play up Asian folks and put them prominently, it's really difficult to not always wonder when rejection comes if it's because of race or because of... Look, we'll get into this after a short break. And in those types of industries, it's really, really important for people to find ways to distance themselves from the responses they get.

Lantigua: Yeah, listening to this one, I thought, "Oh, this is going to be a good conversation." Because as a creative coming into an industry that has existed, in this case, for over a hundred years, there is enough written about it, enough people have shared their experiences about it, and so to play devil's advocate, you kind of knew what you were getting into. That would be an easy response and there are a lot of industries like that, but the question then becomes, one, do I take it personally? And then the other question is, well, how do I use what I know to pave my own way? She mentions that she's a script writer, and I'm like, girl, write your own show that you are going to star in. You got this.

Lewis: Yeah, I'm nodding my head feverishly in agreement over here. If you're in a space where people don't accept you, then I'm all for going to create your own space.

The frustrating part is entering into an industry where aren't the shot caller and the, and I guess metric by which they're judging you is inappropriate for the variety of who we are. And that's really hard to distance yourself from. I have a buddy who's an actor and he said it's one of the more difficult things when you go on three callbacks and then on the fourth when they say, "Nah, we're going to go a different way." Because you know, in that moment, that they didn't choose you. Like it was something about you and not your talent.

Lantigua: Specifically, right.

Lewis: And that's really, really rough to deal with.

Lantigua: Yeah, that was the thing that I was thinking about. I mean, it was really great that she got some insight on that one audition she mentions from her friend who she thinks very highly of, but it gave her something to compare to.

Lewis: Yeah. When you are being judged...let's say judged negatively. When you are being compared to other people, it's hard to not internalize that. And so when we think about entertainment industry as a whole, global kind of umbrella, different pockets of it. I think about maybe with dance and Misty Copeland and how she was told she was too fat, and it's like, well, I don't know if that's necessarily true. She can do all the movements, maybe not so much.

Lantigua: We're thick, okay? People, we are thick.

Lewis: Curves are okay. Curves are okay, and I think Charlene's aware of that. She's like, "I've always kind of been this way. I've always been me. I've accepted it." So I want people like Charlene who hear themselves in her story to kind of be reminded of that. Maybe you not being chosen is not really a dig on you, but, really, a response to the idea that people who are making decisions don't know enough to be able to make a real informed decision about what's appropriate. I'm using your quotes there.

Lantigua: Yeah, the fact that a lot of the folks making these creative decisions are so removed from, what I would call, real life, that they actually don't know what real people look like. They don't know what real authentic interactions are. They don't understand the myriad of multiplicities and ethnicities and body types and gender identities and all of the things that are now the most American expression, actually, so far, historically speaking, obviously, of what is individual expression. And so they're making these decisions not really based on the world that she actually really lives in every day.

Lewis: I'm snapping my fingers over here. I think that's the thing to do. We need to update our understanding or perceptions about the representation of... I think about even in my profession, if you ask somebody to describe maybe their iconic therapist, I doubt you get a bald Black guy with a beard, but here I am. And I think if there's a takeaway I want people to have, it's that. Be okay, show up in these spaces, and be you because you are more representative of what today looks like, whatever community you're from. And also do you, a hundred percent do you.

Lantigua: Yeah, I really want her to go and write her own thing. I think of Issa Rae. Awkward Black girl. She just made her video series because this was her creative outlet, she wrote it, she starred in it, she did it her way. And look at her now, a shot-caller by every definition in Hollywood, and she's just begun. And I just feel like, yes, there

is some measure of, quote, unquote, "paying the dues." You want to understand the system in which you are existing. She exists in a really big ocean, but you can also do something really beautiful in your own coral reef with those gifts that you already have.

And so, without discouraging Charlene, I really want to remind her that she has so many other gifts from which to draw, and I think sometimes it's hard because we crave that external validation for the thing that we love. I crave external validation. Everybody craves external validation. It's totally normal. But I also continue to do things that are fulfilling. I continue to tell the stories that I think matter, even if they don't make money, even if they don't win awards. I'm making them because I believe that there's a place for them in the world, and so I just kind of want to encourage her, the totality of who she is cannot be contained in an audition shot with the resume slapped on the back.

Lewis: You've highlighted a very important juxtaposition, where the external validation is important and it feels good and it helps us recognize that we're on the right track. And also recognizing that you have to be invested in doing things that are solely for you, that fill you up and make you feel good about being yourself. In these sorts of spaces where there is this comparison, lack of talent might not be the barrier, and so when that barrier shows up, we want the Charlene's of the world to push back and create their own lane. It does not mean I'm going to stop, it just means I'm going to pivot.

Lantigua: It's the thing about, am I brave enough to make my own way? I think a lot of it comes down to that. I'm posing that question to all of us. I'm not posing that question just to Charlene, but I think that for many people, that question sits on your chest like a brick.

Lewis: Because it's not only, are you doing this for you and you're breaking the barrier for yourself or pushing past whatever the blockages are, it's also what we hold for the representation or the weight of the community that we come from, kind of serving as a voice or a model for those that will follow.

Lantigua: If Charlene and I were friends, I would say to her, "Find other women like you. Find other people like you at this stage of your career who are going through similar audition experiences, who just understand the craft, and who can give you stories that can nurture you and stories that can also teach you lessons that you don't have to learn yourself. Find a community that can support you and uplift you as you are doing these things that can have some serious psychological impact." Because that's part of what she and a lot of creative people struggle with, that as

much as you love your craft and as good and dedicated as you are, these things take real tolls.

Lewis: And you said find community. It might actually be building. This community you're looking for. You might have to be the catalyst.

Lantigua: Absolutely. Absolutely.

Lewis: Juleyka, thank you for joining me today.

Lantigua: That was fun. Thank you.

Lewis: It makes me really proud when I see high achievers like Charlene achieving on their own terms, by pushing through adversity in a very restrictive industry, showing up consistently as who they are, and by focusing on their craft and the goals they have for themselves.

And that's a wrap. Thank you so much for listening to *How to Talk to [High Achievers] about Anything*. Our show is going on a break as we prepare for our next season. In the meantime, stay in touch on social media. On Twitter and Instagram. We're @TalktoAchievers. Send our producer Virginia an email and we'll get your story on the next season. She's at virginia@lwcstudios.com.

How to Talk to [High Achievers] about Anything is an original production of LWC Studios. Our show is produced by Virginia Lora. Tren Lightburn Mixed this episode. Juleyka Lantigua is the creator and executive producer. I'm Stevon Lewis. Bye, everybody.

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