

Wellness in Color: The Pressures of Perfection

Interview Guest: Aneela Kumar

Interviewer: Maritza Steele

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Aneela: There's a lot of work to be done in this country. I think each one of us individually, if we focus a little bit more on our own minds and how we can be good to one another so that the person next to us, their mind is not getting aggravated just because of what we're saying. And doing I feel like that's a good start.

Intro – Brian: Welcome to Wellness in Color on the Mental Health in Minnesota podcast produced by NAMI Minnesota the National Alliance on Mental Illness. Wellness in Color is a podcast series that explores perspectives on mental health to reshape the cultural language of mental illness. Subscribe to the podcast and listen on the NAMI Minnesota website or wherever you get your podcasts. Your host for this episode is NAMI Minnesota staff member Caroline Ludi. Your co-host is Maritza Steele, a member of the NAMI Minnesota Multicultural Young Adult Advisory Board. And now, here's Caroline.

Caroline: Born and raised in New York to parents from India, Aneela Kumar, 37, shares her story about growing up with anxiety, obsessive compulsive disorder and trichotillomania, an impulse control disorder in which individuals have the compulsive urge to pull their own hair. Currently a mental health advocate, Aneela talks to Wellness in Color about her struggles with identity, race, and religion and how her path recovery began with the words "shy", "weird", and "wrong", but continue with "love" and "awareness". Welcome Aneela.

Aneela: Thank you for having me.

Caroline: These efforts were supported by the National Center for Advancing Translational Sciences of the National Institutes of Health Award Number UL1TR002494. The content is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of the National Institutes of Health. For more Mental Wellness in Color, follow us on the Mental Health in Minnesota podcast on the NAMI Minnesota website at namimn.org. And now let's introduce our guest host Maritza Steele.

Maritza: Hi, thank you for having me today Caroline; welcome Aneela. I wanted to just start out by asking you pretty broadly: what does healthy mean to you?

Aneela: I'm delighted to be here today to share my mental health story. I believe for myself healthy has been a definition in the making. I'm 37 years old as Caroline mentioned but it's only within the last few years that I've really recognized how much the mind in body are connected. And how when one is sick the other is sick and vice versa. And so I'm really trying to understand what is healthy for me and what are the right steps for me to be healthy. But for me healthy is about being in balance with that mind that body and also the spirit and making sure that my soul is fueled as well.

Maritza: Thank you for sharing that. You said that you just recently started to learn about how the mind and the body are in the spirit, from your definition, are connected in what it means to be healthy. Can you elaborate a little bit further? How did you kind of get to this current working definition?

Aneela: Yeah. I mean, I think it really just goes back to—. I guess, I've always been very spiritual person. And so just recognizing in growing up with some of these mental health conditions, which I didn't have the language for what they were. When I was a child, it was "Oh, she's shy." Not "She's anxious." Right. "Oh, she's quiet." Not you know, it just it wasn't the right, people didn't see me for the mental health condition that I had they saw me a shy. They saw me as weak. They saw me as afraid. Not as someone living with an issue in my mind, where I'm yeah, I'm afraid I'm afraid of what's going to happen because of that anxiety that's there not because I can't speak, but I feel like in as I've grown up I've found out how. Basically, how the mind kind of feeds the health of your body. So that disconnect that I had of I feel anxious or I have these OCD intrusive thoughts that are wreaking havoc on my mind also played a role in the health of my body. Like, I remember in college during finals, I would always get sick because it was really really stressed and anxious about the grades and and the work that I was doing and this was in Miami where it's it's warm, it's sunny like there's no reason to get a cold. Or one time, I got a really bad neck pain, like it, manifests, the the stress and the anxiety would manifest within my body. And so trying to reconcile that trying to exercise more. So that my my muscles are strong enough. But also try to exercise my mind so that I can handle the anxiety when I when I see it trying to become more aware of "Oh, I'm having an anxious moment" or "Oh, I'm having an intrusive thought right now." And rather than feeding it trying to subdue it so that it doesn't take that hold and it doesn't feed that negative energy in my body, which then translates to me getting physically sick. Hopefully that makes sense. (Aneela laughs)

Maritza: Yeah. It really does. And so alongside your process of redefining and reshaping what healthy means for yourself has your use of resources or people who you turn to changed or developed a over the course of your mental wellness journey?

Aneela: Oh, absolutely. I think for for—. So I also have hair pulling disorder, which is as Caroline mentioned a sub-conscious coping mechanism for stress and anxiety. Whereby I would just pull it my hair because it it provided fleeting moments of relief. But for twenty years, I didn't know what it was. So for twenty years I started pulling in my early teens. And I thought I was really weird and really wrong for doing this behavior. And I didn't know that it was a mental health condition. So for those twenty years, I was in the dark and sort of feeding this cycle of negative self-speak around who I was and because of this thing I was doing to myself. And then in my twenties, I went to Dr. Google, and I Googled, "Why am I pulling out my hair?" And that's when I found out that I wasn't alone and that it was a mental health condition. And it's really only in understanding what the behavior is that you can actually start taking action to take control of it.

Maritza: And from Dr. Google where did you turn to next?

Aneela: Yes. So Dr. Google guided me, to, it's now called the TLC Foundation for Body-Focused Repetitive Behaviors. So that's the umbrella mental health term for hair pulling; it also includes skin picking and nail biting. And so Google lead me to their website, which is BFRB.org. And that's where I read stories about other people and read about the condition. A couple of years later even used their website to find a mental health treatment professional who is well-versed in these disorders to to meet with so the internet's great resource, and then in moving here to Minnesota started getting involved on the in learning more about what NAMI does, but there's tons of resources out there. It's just about having the right Google search. There's also lots of Facebook communities where people share a lot of ideas of how to take control of certain things. I joined also for a really long time. I've had intrusive thoughts about—. About being in a terrorist attack. It's really like I would go to the Mall of America thinking like something's going to happen, and it would feed on itself, and I have two young kids now, and I would be walking through the mall like at Christmas time and everyone shopping, and I'm thinking about my exit strategy or going to save my kids like, and it would just keep coming up over and over all through middle school and high school during the Gulf war that 9/11 brought it back, and it was just my whole life. I don't know why I have such a stronghold of that on me. I think genetics plays a role too because now learning about my familial history. Learning how people a long time ago, 40 [or] 50 years ago during the partition of India they had to deal with some of this stuff. So I really think it's in me in that way. But for OCD intrusive thoughts I found this six-part video series. It's called "The Noise in Your Head." It's on YouTube, and it really helped me identify when I'm having those dream-like sequences of these intrusive thoughts, and it gave me actionable strategies of how to shut those down really quickly by simply acknowledging them and challenging them to scare me more, which interestingly enough the minute I would have that conversation in my head of you know, "Oh something's going to happen here. I'm going to duck into this garbage can to save my kids," I would stop and I would say "Oh come on; you can do better than that" to my mind, and it shut it down. And then I was able to enjoy going shopping. So that website was or those videos those videos were super helpful in in me taking control of those thoughts. For hair pulling disorder that be BFRB.org website, and then mental health treatment was very, very helpful. Another thing that was really helpful for me was actually sharing that secret, sharing that baggage of hiding the hair pulling disorder for so long and even things like talking to you right now of it's it's just all letting—. Like I've actually never really told anyone about those OCD intrusive thoughts. (**Maritza:** Oh wow.) I don't know why that just came out right now, but it feels good to release it and part of the mental health lack of wellness is because your harboring these secrets because you're hiding like it causes even more stress on your body stress on your mind, but, a couple years ago my husband caught me without my eyebrows. So this is the man that I had been dating for years and promised spend my rest of my life with in sickness and health, and I didn't tell him about this disorder. And I turned around one days as we're getting ready in the morning. And my eyebrows were missing I just didn't get my eyelash pencil makeup on time. And he just said, "Where are your eyebrows?" And I said, "You caught me." (**Maritza:** Oh—.) . And I told him. That it was trichotillomania, that it was hair pulling disorder. I told him that it's stress; it's hormones; it's genetics. It's—. I don't even know, I mean it's so much so many things feed this disorder, and then we just set out on a journey to to heal myself and in doing so we're now helping tons of people around the world, (**Maritza:** Yeah.) but the the real the real crux of it is if you can't change what you don't

know. I didn't know that I had OCD intrusive thoughts. I didn't. I thought I was just shy. I didn't know I had anxiety. I didn't know it was hair pulling disorder. But once I knew I could go online, I could talk to people, I could find resources, I could find treatment professionals, and I could take control.

Maritza: Yeah. Thank you for that. There is a lot in there. And it was really a fascinating just to hear a bit about your journey through different mental health struggles towards wellness. You talked a lot about awareness and the importance of that, and I wanted to hear if you had any thoughts about how mental health services can be improved for people of color. Awareness is very important factor in whether or not people can seek help or acknowledge what difficulties they're going through and moving forward in their journey towards wellness. And in what ways can awareness be brought to this for people of color?

Aneela: Yeah. I can't speak for all people of color, but I can speak for at least in most Indian homes; in Indian culture there's a huge emphasis on education. There's a huge emphasis on perfection in education. So I think for people of color, and you know, every every group is going to be a little bit different in what it is that sort of the blockage. But I think for Indian-Americans and probably for a lot of other Asian Americans and a lot of homes, really. But again, like, I'm not I can only speak for my experience. That was the blockage for me. I was really good at school. But it was always "Oh, you got an A. Why didn't you get an A+" you know, or, you know, "You got a 99[%], where did that one point go?", and it was and I know my parents meant it from a good place of they want me to do well, they wanted me to succeed, but that pressure I think really feeds itself, and if it's and if you're starting with a child that already is naturally sensitive naturally anxious and then you add that it's like, it's it's like adding hot water to, you know, plastic. It starts to to melt even more kind of. So I think for people of color really, understanding what are the—. The cultural—. I don't know what the word is like the the cultural lines that are weaving through raising a child that could be impacting their mental health.

Maritza: I can definitely relate with that kind of pressure. I think—. I can't, as you can't, speak for all people of color—. I can't speak for all people who have parents who are immigrants, but definitely that pressure to in being the first generation to be in the new country to succeed and keep pushing yourself, I guess sometimes in spite of your mental or physical health.

Caroline: I can sort of interject there a little bit too, Maritza. I identify as a Black woman. (**Maritza:** As do I!) (Caroline and Maritza laugh) But I do as well have a parent who is an immigrant and to that struggle with perfection. Yeah. Trying to succeed especially in education, but just let alone life has also led me to my own struggles, you know, with identifying as someone who does have anxiety and has had to deal with that but didn't know the language to use as well too. So I do thank you for sharing that story because a lot of times a lot of families are struggling with that. And but they don't recognize that, you know, those pressures can also elevate their own, you know, mental health struggles as well too.

Aneela: Yeah. And you both mentioned, you know, as children of immigrants, right? They're they're leaving to give us a better life, which is where the pressure is coming from, which is where that motivation is coming from, and more likely than not they're not talking about what they left behind or what their motivation for leaving is because they wanna forget it most likely

(Aneela laughs), but that does feed how they treat us, how they raise us, right? So we're we're in this sort of—.

Maritza: Like a bubble?

Aneela: Yeah. We're in this sort of bubble of like, we're in America "land of opportunity," and that's what they're coming for. But we don't really understand what they've left behind that's informing how they're they're raising us. And I think if we have that understanding which is why now I'm looking I'm actually talking with family and cousins and uncles and aunts and trying to understand like what was life? What was life like in 1947 in India? And why did my parents choose to move here in 1975? And, you know, try to understand what was their motivation for bringing us here because it all informs, it informs our lives, it informs our trajectory.

Maritza: Yeah. On the family note, since they're here right now, how does family support factor into wellness? Who have you told? What language heavy used to describe your struggles and your journey towards healing?

Aneela: Yeah. Family is paramount for me, so in, when I was in in high school, my father fell sick with cancer. So it was me, my mom, my dad, my sister. And so for four years, we basically just watched him battle the ups and downs of remission, and then it coming back, and then he finally passed away when I was in high school, but we didn't talk about it. Like, we didn't talk about death, we didn't talk about losing him, we didn't talk about it. And yet there was still this bond between us, between my mom and my sister. That you know, we we lost something great. So it brought us together even though we didn't really talk about it so much. But I mean, I couldn't have gotten through that without them. You know, I mean family was very important for hair pulling disorder. Again, I didn't—. I told—. Before I told—. Before I was caught by my husband I told my one best friend who is a studying to be a doctor, and I thought, oh, maybe she will have taken a psychology class or something in might know, you know, some resources, and then I told right around the time of my wedding I told my other best friend because I don't I don't really wear make up that much, but everyone, you know, wedding time make up this, and that pictures yada, yada was like any to do something. So she took me to get eyelash extensions which was helpful, but also really irritating to my eyes and I wanted to pull more. So friends and family trying to talk with them, but, no one talks about death. So that was really hard. I sort of coasted after high school, and you know, in college, I, sort of under the guise of everyone drinks in college in everyone parties in college, I took it to the extreme of did not really know when to stop and kind of used that as my way to get over losing him. Yeah. I wish people would talk about death more. (**Maritza:** Yeah.) I didn't answer your question, sorry. (Aneela laughs)

Maritza: No, I think that we did, you know, touch on that a bit. Thank you for sharing about your loss. It sounds really challenging and not having a language for death, in addition to mental health. I think at the time, it probably added a lot more pressure on top of pressure on top of just challenges.

Aneela: Yeah. I think it really comes down to pressure. It's all about the pressure around you, the pressure you put on yourself. And if you're not taking care of yourself you can't handle all that pressure.

Caroline: So now when you talk about that word pressure. What other words would you have used to describe your own mental health condition while you were growing up? You said before you kind of touched on "shy" and "weird". And you've interjected a lot with "pressure." But how do you describe your mental health journey now?

Aneela: Now? Now, it's more about "focus", "awareness", "wellness." Now, it's it's because I understand it now. I think it's also I didn't understand it back then like it felt like just like a tornado in my mind, the whole time. But now it's calm, right. And even now like when the wind starts picking up, in my mind, I have the strategies to subdue it. So it's it's more about staying aware. And and to me that means like, you know, the voice in your head, if you will, like not actually paying attention to what it saying rather than just letting it talk like, "Oh, you're an idiot because you forgot to do, blah, blah, blah." No, I'm not an idiot because I forgot to do, because I forgot to set the dishwasher last night like the world's not going to end. Right. Like really being aware of that voice because that voice is really powerful. And if you're telling yourself the wrong things, it's gonna feed your decision making it's gonna feed the way your body feels it's gonna feed feed your spirit, it's gonna feed a how you treat other people, and it's just going to domino. So if you can really pay attention to that voice, then you can control it, and you can tell it to shut up when it needs to shut up, and you can tell it, you know, to behave and to be good to you. And then it feeds everything else.

Maritza: So we might have touched on this a little bit before. And it's fine to repeated again, I wanted to ask what you think might be the single most thing that has helped you on your journey to wellness.

Aneela: Well. There's not. I think the single if I have to choose one thing than it would be the very first thing, which is acknowledging. Acknowledging that there's something wrong and being ready. So okay, two. (Aneela and Maritza laugh) Acknowledging that something's wrong and being ready to say, "Okay, I want to fix it. I want to fix it for myself; I wanna fix it for my how my kids; I wanna fix it for, you know, other people in in the community." Okay, so three things. Acknowledging. (All laugh) Acknowledging what's wrong, wanting to fix it, but also having a good reason as to why you wanna fix it that motivation because it's going to go up and ups and downs, and you know. Like in college. There was there was a time when I was drinking a whole lot in then I took a break from life. And I went and I traveled, and I went to visit a friend, and she was drinking a whole lot. But I told myself "No for these ten days, I'm gonna actually try to have fun without having alcohol" and and I had pressure from her pressure from other people around me. But my "why" was because I wanted to see if I could do this. I wanted to challenge myself. You have to have a why as to why you want it to get better while you wanna make change because otherwise when it's going to get tough you're just going to give up, but if you have that motivation, it will keep you going.

Maritza: Yeah. And for that trip just setting that boundary for yourself, a healthy boundary in you know, your circumstances. You had your why and so setting that boundary against, you know, the pressures of life the pressure of you know, other people's perceptions also. In this way, fed into your journey for mental wellness in that moment. So, what are your wellness goals?

Aneela: Yeah. So, 2019 started the new year, everyone talks about resolutions, in you know, "I'm gonna make change. I'm gonna read, I'm gonna exercise, and I'm going to do this. I'm gonna eat healthy, blah, blah, blah." Yeah. I have all of those goals. (All laugh) But I'm trying to take it, you know, I'm trying to make them more specific. So, I'm really starting with one thing and trying to make it ingrained into my life before I start with the next thing, and for me that's water intake. So, you see this giant bottle of water right here. (**Maritza:** I do.) This is my second one today. (**Maritza:** Oh wow!) (Caroline laughs) So just—. I'm trying to to—. My goals for the year and for my life, and it's gonna take time so it's not that I'm doing all of these right now. But I want to drink more water, which I'm work—. That's the thing that I'm working on now, which is I'm carrying this bottle of water with me every day, and I'm going to fill it three times a day, and I'm going to drink it, and my other one that I'm going to start working on after I feel that I've won at water is sleep which is to go to sleep by 10:30 at night and to wake up by six thirty in the morning because I feel like I'm losing a lot of time on social media late at night. And it's while the internet has been a huge phenomenal resource in connecting meet up other people suffering from some of these conditions and to resources, it's also a huge time suck and it feeds some of that mental anxiety so trying to shut that off. And then after that, I'm gonna work on eating better. You see, all I want is a hamburger right now, but I'm gonna eat spinach instead, that kind of thing, but again after I get water and sleep taking care of. But the beauty is whatever noticed is just in starting this journey with water is it's it's already impacting, you know, what else I'm putting in my body. It's it's already. "Well, if I'm going to be doing good to my body with water, why would I put that burger and my body too? Let me let me get the salad instead" kind of thing. So, it's it's already kind of domino-affecting. But I don't wanna focus on it. I want it to make it like the very very thing that I'm going to focus on. And then I'm hoping all of that will feed my body, my mind, my spirit, so that I can be better parent, and that's my motivation.

Maritza: So, I hear you on all of your current goals for 2019, and I am definitely rooting for you on that. The next thing that I wanted to ask about is how you feel your cultural or racial identity kind of intermixes with your work in the mental health space.

Aneela: Yeah. Well, it's a really ha—. I don't know if I really thought about that. So, I guess to answer that question. I'll just talk briefly about what I do in mental health aside from just advocacy. And so as a hair puller, you know, my husband caught me a few years ago. I shared that secret with him about how I just don't realize when it's happening. And then one day we were sitting on the couch watching TV, and I was just pulling away, and he just gently grabbed my hand. And I said, "Oh no. You do not tell me when I'm doing this behavior." It's just very very, you know, when someone tells you no, you just wanna do that thing even more. But I did turn to him and say "I wish had something that notified me. I wish I had something that could make me aware of this behavior. I just wish it wasn't you doing that for me." So, we set out to build a smart bracelet that helps people with the condition. So, the bracelet gets trained. It's called HabitAware, and you train it for your specific behavior and it sends a vibration whenever you're doing the behavior as that gentle reminder, so that now these behaviors are choice. Now you can practice replacement strategies that you may be working on with the treatment professional or you can try and, you know, take control with deep breathing or going for a walk or whatever it is to help you shift the energy. So that's the work that we do. And we're helping thousands of people around the world with this.

So now to answer your question about how culture and race impacts what we're doing. It's a really great question. I've never really seen myself as an Indian-American woman bringing tech product in the mental health space. Like I've never really thought about that construct. But I would have to say that I think part of the way that I was brought up. In culture in our environment of, you know, one thing I can say is my husband, and I we work together, and in our culture in my Indian culture, we come from a line of entrepreneurs like we're we're called Sindhis and it actually means business like businesswomen, business, or business people rather. So, from from that kind of perspective culturally, I guess, I always knew that I was going to be a business owner. Even growing up I would play office instead of house and school. So it sorta just made sense that yeah, I'm gonna run a company one day, culturally. Also, both of our families, both of our parents. We each have one parent that's in the medical field and the other parents supported and worked in the office while also having their own full-time job. So we saw both. Both my husband and I saw parents working together, and that was life, that was culture, that was how we grew up. So it also extends into how we work together. In terms of how it infuses with how I connect with other people, I don't really I don't really know if it does to be honest, and I know it's kind of a bad answer but I've always just kind of seen me as sharing my story and just trying to connect with people on a human level versus like, a "you're black, you're white, you're green, you're pink," right? Like, so I haven't really thought about how, I mean, maybe there must be some subtle things that I'm doing that are affecting how we work together or how we're we've brought this to market or how we're helping people on a, you know, in our email communications and things like that. But they're probably so subtle that even I have yet to become aware of them. So now, I will take that back with me and start thinking about that more.

Maritza: And I think that it's quite interesting. I don't think that it's a bad answer. (Aneela laughs) It is your honest answer and for question like that and how complicated it can be. I feel like simply saying, you know, "I don't know" which in your case if you don't know, and that's honest, (**Aneela:** Yeah.) then yeah, I accept that. And I find it. I do find it interesting. It is a part of your story. (**Aneela:** Yeah.) And that's what we're asking about today. (Maritza laughs)

Aneela: No no no, yeah. I think it's interesting though, because I think it's also something we don't talk about. We don't really talk about what are the cultural threads that are impacting why certain communities, do, you know, go certain rounds for careers, and this and that and and how we use our race or culture to communicate or to, you know what I mean. Like it's very it's so deeply woven that we don't see it kind of so it's a really interesting question that would probably take some time to unravel. I'd be interested to hear what other people how other people answer this question as you continue to do the podcast because it's a really interesting—. I think it can inform a lot of change. Yeah. I think it can. Again, it all comes back to awareness. If we understand why then we can fix a lot of things. So I think it's a really important question.

Caroline: So saying maybe come back in another year or two and see part two of this? (All laugh)

Maritza: And you know, I really do just love your statement about awareness. I did ask that question about what the single most thing that helped you throughout your journey was because I knew it would purposefully be very difficult to answer and just hearing very outright that awareness piece for me. It kind of comes full circle, the thread kind of follows through with the

device that you created to you know, help other people in their journey just to have that awareness bit. (**Aneela:** Yeah.) About their behavior and thinking about how their behavior might be affecting how they're feeling (**Aneela:** Yeah.) or how how they're feeling affects their behavior and their motions. And you know that whole interaction.

Aneela: That's exactly right. And if you're not aware, then you can't make those analyses, right? Like, you can't take those pauses. And say, "Oh, I'm pulling" or "Oh, I'm having anxious thoughts because of what's really going on because I'm bored, because I'm tired, because I have a test tomorrow that I haven't started studying for" because you know, whatever it is or "because my parent just died" like it's you without understanding without being aware of what's happening to your body, and your mind, you can't—. And then understanding why it's happening, the trigger that urge that's causing it, you can't take control. It's it's the why is going to inform how you take control. "I'm anxious because I'm at the mall, and I think something bad is going to happen. And I need to protect myself and my children." Why do I feel that way? I still have no idea. But at least if I'm aware of it, then I can challenge those thoughts, and I can subdue them, and I can try to over time be less afraid of that happening. And now with the whys start to just diminish or "I'm pulling right now." Well why? "Oh it's late at night and I'm working and I'm exhausted. And it's three in the morning, and oh, yeah. I have my sleep goal that I missed let me shut down my computer. Let me stop pulling out my hair. Let me go to sleep and it all just feeds itself. Like if you can take care of yourself in these little worries of water and sleep and shutting the phone off like just imagine. How the, you know, like, the the wind tunnel in your mind will just quiet slowly, start to quiet. That's not to say for every mental health condition 'cause there's definitely levels of severity. I'm not saying that that's like "the treatment." But I think these little things can help you get to a place where then you can start saying "Okay, now, let me go to a professional." "Now, let me try this; let me try that." And it's all about experimenting to kind of find what works for you the mental health treatment. I would say it was just phenomenal to just have someone to talk to who didn't judge and didn't say, "Oh, at least it's not cancer." Or didn't say, "Oh, come on your life is so amazing. Like, why are you complaining? My cousin over here has this and that and a lawsuit, and like be grateful for what you have" like to have someone who just sits and listens without judgment and can guide you through your thought process. Like, I don't understand why that's not in the same way that, you know, a general practitioner that you see is covered by mental health—by healthcare every year like that annual checkup like that should be covered at least two year should be covered. And that's something that as I grow as a person, I understand more of what NAMI does what all these other organizations do in public policy, that's my goal is to try to start figuring out how do we get health insurance companies to start getting on board with that and start supporting people in that way. Because they'll save money in the long run. But—. I won't continue my sentence there.

Caroline: Thank you for sharing that. We at NAMI are definitely, you know, advocates not only, of course, mental health. But also to for policies that improve the lives of people that live with mental health, you know, and their families.

Maritza: You didn't want to continue your sentence, but I actually wanted to open it up, the conversation, to ask you if there's anything else that you wanted to share or you really burning to express, right now.

Aneela: Oh, I think that you probably felt that burning desire just now (**Maritza:** I do, I do!) Yeah. I, you know, I personally believe mental health is paramount to physical health, and we need to start taking better care of ourselves. Not just ourselves, but our communities like how we treat other people in our communities like I mean, even just knowing the names of your neighbors like little things to make you feel like you're part of something and you belong to something. And all of that just will trickle to you feeling to again fueling your soul, fueling your mind, fueling your body. And then maybe we won't even need to worry about our health care system in this country because we will have our own healthcare. We will have our own ways of taking care of each other and taking care of ourselves. Yeah, I don't know. I just—. There's a there's a lot of work to be done in this country and I have no clue where to start but I think each one of us individually, if we focus a little bit more on our own minds and how we can be good to one another so that the person next to us, their mind is not getting aggravated just because of what we're saying and doing, I feel like that's a good start.

Maritza: Thank you for that. I am so glad that I asked you to share, you know, your burning passion, and I truly respect, and I'm so grateful for the work that you are trying to put forth and the efforts that you're making. And hopefully, we can continue to just do little things here and there to help to build each other up and to build ourselves up.

Aneela: That's exactly it. Let's figure out ways to build each other up; I love that.

Maritza: So on [previously] speaking about the device [you created] and the awareness that it gives, I wanted to ask more about how people can get connected with your company or the device.

Aneela: Yeah. Thank you so much for asking. I do appreciate that. 'cause our goal is to really help people become aware of essentially where they their hands are so that then they can kind of do the work of understanding why hair pulling, skin picking, nail biting, why they're engaging in these behaviors. And then like I said before the why will inform the how to take control. So you can find us on our website, which is habitaware.com. And you can find us on all the social medias and I'm happy to chat with anyone who just wants to talk about their disorder. Who may just be having that "A-ha" moment right now. I was there, you know, ten years ago. So yeah, happy to talk with anyone. There's tons of strategies out there to help you get better.

Maritza: Thank you for that and can you just speak briefly about the design of the device?

Aneela: Sure. Yeah, we, so the bracelet. If you look on our website, it looks very much just like an activity tracker. And we we did design this purposefully because you know, I hid it for 20 years. We want to make sure that it's on your terms when you share about your behavior. So we designed it to be discreet and to blend in, but the beauty is that we're seeing more and more people, you know, just as we're talking about mental health today. More and more people talking about mental health more and more people talking about specifically hair pulling disorder, skin picking, nail biting, and you know, sometimes just leveraging the bracelet as a way to to say to a friend. "Oh, you know, it's it's because I have this disorder, and it's helping me take control of it." And just it's been really exciting when people come back to us and say, "Oh, I told a friend. They thought it was cool." You know, like the reaction like we're so afraid of what

other people think sometimes and and that's why we hold it back. And that's why we hide it but sometimes I think we have to recognize that everyone's afraid of what of everyone else is thinking about them, like even when I'm sitting in a meeting, and I'm pulling my hair, and I'm thinking, "Oh are they looking at me? Are they seeing me?" The reality is they're also sitting there thinking, "Is my hair okay? Is my, you know, my notes, right?" like whatever like everyone's so in their own minds. So hopefully, this helps you build awareness of where your hands are so you can take control you can hopefully then have enough confidence in yourself to start sharing your own story and releasing the baggage because like I said that baggage just feeds itself, and that's our goal. Our goal is really to help people learn to love themselves. Caroline noticed that I end all of my emails with love strength awareness. Love yourself. Be strong enough to go after what you want, and to be aware enough of what's happening around you so that you can make the right choices.

Maritza: Thank you so much for sharing.

Caroline: And I agree with that too. It is so important that, you know, we as you said before bring each other up by as while we recognize that everybody is dealing with, you know, their own internal strife, so it's appreciated. Yeah. You shared your story. Thanks, Aneela.

Aneela: Thank you.

Outro – Brian: For additional resources related to this episode please check the podcast show notes and visit NAMI Minnesota online at namimn.org. You've been listening to Wellness in Color on the Mental Health in Minnesota podcast produced by NAMI Minnesota.