

Diverse Mental Health

Interview with Maiten Panella



DMH

I Maiten thank you for joining me, it's a pleasure to speak with you today

MP

I Thank you so much for having me!

DMH

I Your work as a psychologist and psychotherapist involves a strong ability to understand and connect with people. Can you share a bit about why connection is important and what most attracted you to this profession?

MP

I Connection is the foundation of ... everything! The way you connect with other people, objects, ideas, literally, everything around you and in you, creates your world and determines how you move in it. Gestalt therapy calls it "contact", and it is the pillar of my practice. Without this "contact", there is no alliance, and without alliance, there is no therapy, no coaching, no interaction possible...nothing!

I decided to become a psychologist when I was 12 years old. I wanted to understand why people behaved the way they did and desperately help them out, be able to "free them" from their

miseria If you want.

When I grew up, I took a slight detour from my first calling and went to study Law for one year. But then, a car accident put me and my casted leg in bed for several months, and I had the time to reflect on my life and what I really wanted to do. So, I dropped Law and embraced Psychology. I was 19, and I had at the time the same clarity about this calling, that I have now, at 53.

DMH

I Your life experience and work has taken you to three continents and I'm very envious of the fact, that you speak three languages fluently Spanish, Italian, English. You also possess a good knowledge of French and Portuguese. Throughout your work with different cultures, what have you found out about the way people view mental health and what are some of the defining factors, which lead to mental health problems or lower levels of poor mental health?

MP

| You know? My love for languages is based on my passion for cultures and my respect, curiosity, and many times admiration for the different and diverse. Learning other languages opens the door to different worlds, their approach to life, and mental health. Every culture is different, but if I have to make a general and sort of superficial distinction, the first thing that comes to my mind is the difference between Western and Eastern cultures in terms of concepts: life and death, family, roles, purpose in life, collectiveness vs individualism, etc.

In relation to mental health, one of the main problems I see around are the barriers imposed by society, in all cultures. The types of barriers might be different, but their meaning and purpose are the same. Of course, I'm talking about the barriers that divide and isolate, the ones that decide who is in and who is excluded. Still, I'm also talking about the ones that contribute to creating a "false self" in order to be accepted and considered. This false self is the origin of lots of suffering and takes a significant toll on the health

DMH

of those who, for the sake to "belong", decided to masquerade who they really are.

| You obviously possess a powerful curiosity about the world and the people in it. I'm curious about who or what experience has had the biggest influence on the person you are today

MP

| It is difficult for me to say there are so many. If I have to choose one, is the relationship I developed with the practice of yoga and meditation, which began when I was in my

early 20's and definitely consolidated during my trip to Asia, almost 10 years later.



“ It changed my polarised, binary vision of the world (black or white, 1 or 0) for a deeper understanding of the nuances and a genuine welcome to the notion of “union” ”

DMH

I As a Business Psychologist, you love work with leaders in gaining clarity and focus on recognising opportunities, reconnecting with their true purpose and motivation. Are their differences in working with Male and female leaders?

MP

I Yes, but it also depends on the country they come from and work in and their ages. People in their late 40s have a different approach to leadership than people in their late 20s. There is a movement, from a fixed model based on hierarchies to a more dynamic version that welcomes more voices. But there is still a lot to do.

Female leaders had to fight tough and for decades to “gain” the right to lead and be respected. Many of them, particularly the ones with the more powerful voices, are still profoundly criticised or penalised based on their

views, the words they use, their behaviours and even the clothes they chose to wear (!)

DMH

I Throughout the world the Covid -19 Pandemic has had a drastic impact in many aspects of our lives, testing our human resilience and perseverance. Moving forward what do you think we can learn from the challenges we have faced?

MP

I Hopefully, a lot. From the perspective of the planet and the respect and care, we owe to each sentient being, the importance of taking care of our families and communities in a more conscious and sustained way.

“ Resilience is a factor engraved in our DNA. Our ability to adapt and move forward is a definition of our species. ”

The pandemic has been challenging (and still is) and has left consequences at all levels, from the economy to health. But I'm convinced that our mental resources are plenty, even if they seem to abandon us sometimes. We just need to find the right path, maybe with professional help, to be right back on track.

DMH

| The We Too & Black Lives Matter Movements have brought long standing abuse, inequity and injustice to the open like never before. This has led to people speaking out and calls for change. How do you think leaders and businesses can best respond?

MP

| It is clear that we NEED a new lifestyle. And I say lifestyle because the change we need has to be made in all the spheres of the society and not just in the business area. If we don't understand once and for all that, in order to grow and develop, we need each other and our differences, we are doomed. Some of the new generation leaders are becoming champions of change, fearless pursuing the ones that can be seen IN ACT and not just in words.

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A change where inclusion, respect and integration are daily realities and not just trendy words for LinkedIn posts.

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DMH

| We are beginning to recognise how women, black, brown and people from diverse backgrounds, be that their sexual orientation, religion, physical ability, age, class, neurodiversity face adverse societal factors, which are detrimental to their mental health & well-being. These are factors such as racism, sexism, prejudice discrimination, inequity and more. Why do think it is important for people and businesses to understand and address the impact of these issues on mental health?

MP

| If we don't do it, if we don't open our eyes, we are literally doomed. The only possible way for our societies to grow is to welcome life as it is, as it has always been, in all its variety and diversity, honouring the differences and understanding their particularities and also, their contributions

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The toll we have paid till now in terms of losses (of people and minds) is one that we cannot afford.

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Our future literally depends on our openness and willingness to embrace the diverse not only because it is fair but also because it is beneficial. Our permanence and growth depend on it.

DMH

| What is a major mistake or regret in your life, how has this impacted you and what do you think you have learned from this?

MP

| Well, to tell you the truth, I don't have major regrets. Of course, I have made mistakes! Or what we could call "not always the best choices". But the motivation behind all of those acts has always been genuine. Each time I did what I thought was the best, even if I was wrong. But at that moment, little did I know.



DMH

| What three works, be those films, books, podcasts, talks, theatre pieces have had the most profound impact on your view of the world and how does this impact your work?

MP

| This is quite difficult, to tell you the truth, mainly because I'm an avid consumer of art in all its forms, so I have passed my entire life among books, plays, movies and music.

But, trying to be somehow specific, I have to mention first *The Ballad of Narayama*, a film by Shohei Imamura based on an adaptation of the book *Narayama bushikō* by Shichiro Fukazawa. The movie won the Palma D'Or at Cannes. It is a poignant story about a practice that consists of the abandonment of older people to die, being carried up to a mountain by the oldest son.

Another piece that made a massive impact on me is *Never Let Me Go*, a dystopian novel by British author Kazuo Ishiguro, about human cloning and organ donors. There is also a film based on the book by director Mark Romanek.

And I have to add any of the books, articles or essays by Sigmund Freud. They were my first

contact with Psychoanalysis and the possibility of understanding people beyond the surface, and also, the first.

How these notions are moulded based not only on our DNA but on the culture we grow up, and the importance -as a mental health professional- to be open and willing to investigate, understand and welcome all points of view, including those who demand a considerable effort of comprehension from our side.

DMH

I You are passionate about Diverse Mental Health and the importance of developing a way forward for a more equitable, inclusive and supportive mental health culture for everyone. What is one major benefit, that this can bring for society?

MP

I Clearly, its permanence and evolution. No organism, no structure can grow and evolve if it denies some of its crucial constitutive parts. The only path to survival (as raw as it sounds) is to be open to mental health support, inclusivity and equity.

Maitén Panella is a Psychologist and Psychotherapist, with 25+ years of multicultural experience and further studies in Gestalt, Emotional Intelligence, Positive Psychology and Cognitivism

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