

Q & A with Dr. Sheela Masifi

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Kenith Taukolo

Dr. Sheela Masifi is a psychiatrist based in California. She has just graduated from her residency and has become an attending. Also, she has started her own practice called Nurture Psych.

Kenith: *Hi! So my name is Kenith. I'm going to the Illinois Math and Science Academy in the fall. The reason I became interested in becoming a doctor and the medical field is because I really want to help other people and save their life. I'm also training to be a lifeguard. So how about you?*

Dr. Masifi: *So I think that's really awesome. First of all, I also had some similar thoughts when I was in high school. I actually got into psychology as a field when I was in my junior year of high school. I had an AP English teacher who was a psychologist previously and she got me in my class into reading works of Freud and Jung and applying them to literature and that just got me more into therapy exploring with that would look like I already did enjoy talking to my friends and helping them with their issues and to think of being able to do that as a career was awesome to me. So I pursued ecology as a major in college. I also at the same time. I had some doctors in my family. So I was thinking about helping people through medicine and in the end after several years of introspection.*

I decided to just merge those two interests and become a psychiatrist, and I actually just graduated residency, and I am really happy and really enjoying what I'm doing. So I definitely would encourage you to consider the field.

Kenith: *Fantastic. Congratulations on your residency.*

Dr. Masifi: *Thank you.*

Kenith: *Yeah, so tell me as a resident, what is your typical day like at work?*

Dr. Masifi: *Well as a resident it can look very different from what an attending schedule looks like. The first two years of residency are inpatient. So you're in the hospital you're seeing patients on different psychiatric units with the regular adult unit adolescent or medical and psychiatric combined. You're also required to do some Internal Medicine, emergency medicine, and neurology to kind of fill out some of the*

gaps in knowledge or some of the areas that might be pregnant when you see psychiatric patients to rule out other diseases that might look like Asterixis.

So the first two years are much more rigorous and then the next two years are mainly outpatient. So you're seeing patients in the clinic and that's much more like 8 to 5. With my schedule, you have more of an opportunity to do therapy and to work with some higher-functioning patients and psychiatry is really great too as a specialty because you have a little more time than other other Medical Specialties. So you have more time to pursue what your interests are within Psychiatry and for me that was therapy.

Kenith: That's so cool. So what are you looking forward to most in becoming an attendant?

Dr. Masifi: Well, what I'm looking forward to most actually is being able to set my own schedule and being able to do the variety of things in Psychiatry that I want to do and that includes running my own private practice, which I just started up that's 100% telepsychic called nurture Psychiatry and Psychotherapy on top of that. I want to be able to work with other populations like the county population which is a little more, you know, like Indigent populations. I also like to work in inpatient still kind of part-time seeing some of the most extreme cases and being able to help them is very meaningful to me so variety is definitely one of the perks of being in this field.

Kenith: I think that's really cool. And I really like how you pick and choose. But you know what you want to do I think that's something that a lot of people can aspire to, especially in this day and age where I know some of my friends they feel like the school system is kind of the same thing in and out in and out and they just wanted something different. So I think that's really cool that medicine can set their own standards. To my next question: How would you or how do you try to reduce the stigma around mental illness?

Dr. Masifi: There are a lot of different ways to do it. I also will say that I think it's really great what you guys are doing with mental health. When I was in high school, which was about 15 years ago, nobody really talked about mental illness. I don't think anyone would even think of setting up a group like this. So I think it's wonderful. I think it shows that the stigma has already been reduced a lot over the past, you know, almost two decades. I think that to continue reducing the stigma people just have to be more vocal about their experiences. Sometimes that you know, they do feel more comfortable after they've overcome a challenge to then discuss what they did. So, you know, maybe somebody was struggling with bipolar and then got treatment and now,

you know, they are successful in their work and in school that would be really valuable to discuss what their experience was like in getting over it. And if you're not much of a talker than you could, you know, do some writing or blogging or write articles if you really love talking to big groups and maybe doing some speeches.

Setting up an organization like the one that you guys have there were just so many ways to do outreach and reduce the stigma. Yeah. I definitely think you're right now I think it was loud is not something that we talked about but when we talk about more and that just comes through, you know, telling other people you experienced these stories in people, you know coming out and just be more comfortable with that. I think that's very valuable exactly.

Kenith: *The coronavirus kind of now shifted people's minds that you never really after you know, the middle of March everything hadn't stopped. I think that's made a lot of people re-evaluate, you know who they are and we know what they're doing. So I just wanted to know, like especially in working in the medical field, you know, how you're like a specialty is impacted by the coronavirus in how you talk to patients now if it's hard to connect with them. Is it harder to talk about things with them?*

Dr. Masifi: *UC Irvine which is where I went to residency. We use zoom and now in my private practice, I also use zoom and doxy. We use a lot of different platforms. I would say that the hardest part of connecting is usually a technical difficulty, which it's back to get better every one of them internet providers and these companies that come out with these platforms. So I think that will get better in the future. I do think that having video of this does take away a little bit from the personal connection that you have with somebody when they show up in your office because you're not as able to see minute-to-minute or even second to second changes in body language, which is more than half of communication. If you ask some people I also find it easier to focus in some ways when they're on my screen and there aren't too many external distractions. It's just me. I'm in the moment looking at their face on video. And as long as there aren't too many technical issues. I actually do find myself even more in the moment sometimes so it's kind of a mixed bag but it's something, I also think Telehealth is very convenient for the providers and the patients and it's something that a lot of us enjoy. So I do think it's a wave of the future at the same time. I think if we're able to come out of isolation eventually and go back to something for some sessions and some people prefer that, we should definitely encourage that as well.*

Kenith: *Yeah, that's very true. So, you know when you talk to these patients, I mean in general, how the coronavirus affected them and like the well-being of them.*

Dr. Masifi: So that really depends on the patient's personality is I've seen and also their diagnosis so, you know, the most common sense thing I can think of is if you're an extrovert, you're probably suffering a lot more right now than an introvert just because of you know, the lack of social interaction and their ways to get around it. But, you know having a zoom sessions isn't really the same as seeing people in person also people with social anxiety and agoraphobia are doing a lot better than they were before which was very interesting to see but, you know some things that are affecting everyone negatively are, you know, like I could name consequences of the isolation, you know, losing jobs or even being forced to spend more time with their families when you know having some distance and some time apart was often healthy for them. So now they're just everybody as I said before coming up with new ways to adapt to this situation, If they're if they're really suffering and obviously I recommend seeing a therapist or psychiatrist and even reaching out to support groups. I think there are a lot of support groups out there that are online now and it's fairly easy to find them. They're out there.

You know, I know this is one of your next questions, but having a sense of community and people who can support you who also understand your situation is really important in you know, either combating depression and anxiety or you don't even preventing it from happening.

Kenith: You and your patients have adapted to the situation. I know you answered this a little bit but what would you tell someone who is struggling with mental health?

Dr. Masifi: First of all, you're not alone. I'm sure that they know that because it's been in the news so much and you know. I want to reach out to their support network and if they don't have a support network to try to find one online again, some people that can understand what they're going through and the specific situations are going through but it'll be impacted the most, you know, financially or socially or with their family. There's a support group for everyone out there on top of that. I would encourage them to remember the things that they've been through before the challenges. They've been through before and how they've overcome them and to draw under you know, their internal resources like their strength to get through this time. There's just a lot of different options that they can they can kind of drawn to get through this. I would also like I said before would encourage them to reach out to a therapist or psychiatrist, whatever they feel comfortable with.

And to remember that this is going to pass like all other obstacles in life. This time will also pass and and they will adapt you know, things will get back to normal. Establishing a new normal for themselves and one thing that we always tell her patients now is to establish a routine. The anxiety comes from a sense that we don't

have control over what's going on around us. So at least have control over the basic things in our lives can be a really a powerful thing.

Kenith: *Yeah. I think that's true especially with you know, a lot of people know that they really think that this is out of control to just focus on themselves.*

Community is more powerful than each individual and I think that's really important, thank you. I wanted to thank you so much for spending the time talking to me. This has been a really special experience for me and for me, hopefully put this on a podcast and I wanted to also congratulate you on starting your own practice.

Dr. Masifi: *Well, thank you so much, Thank you for having me on and best of luck to you by.*