

IP0606 Transcript

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From elite women of colour to transgender girls in school sports, certain bodies keep

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being treated as problems that sports need to solve.

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00:00:17,080 --> 00:00:25,600

Behind the language of fairness and biology is a familiar story about race, gender, power,

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00:00:25,600 --> 00:00:33,520

and whose bodies are allowed to belong without explanation.

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00:00:33,520 --> 00:00:41,120

Today's episode isn't really about sport at all. It's about marginalised genders,

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00:00:41,120 --> 00:00:49,280

moral panic and the psychological cost of being endlessly put on trial.

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00:00:49,280 --> 00:00:54,160

I'm Aurora and this is Intersectional Psychology.

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Stick around.

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Aurora Brown and Intersectional Psychology acknowledge the traditional owners and custodians

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of country throughout South Africa and their connections to land, water and community.

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We pay our respects to their elders past and present and extend that respect to all Indigenous

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people listening today.

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Episode 6

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Whose bodies belong in sport?

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There are a few athletes in the world whose bodies have been treated as public property.

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Fewer still whose bodies have been treated as international problems, such as the most

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recent examples of Zambian footballer Barbara Banda and Algerian boxer Imane Khelif.

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But today's episode is mostly about another of them, Mokgadi Caster Semenya.

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The indignities she experienced, for example being forced to undergo testosterone-reducing

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treatments by World Athletics, then known as the International Association of Athletics Federation

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00:02:38,960 --> 00:02:48,880

or the IAAF, revealed broader issues of gender and racial discrimination and representation.

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00:02:51,040 --> 00:02:58,880

Now, before we even begin, I want to say this clearly: This is not just a story about sport

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and it's definitely not a story about hormone levels. It's a story about gender, race, power

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and who gets to decide what counts as quoteunquote "normal". It's a story about how

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Black women's bodies are still policed, sometimes with clipboards, sometimes with lab coats and

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sometimes with deceptively polite legal language. Global media narratives of Semenya's biological

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and gender identity, despite being adopted by some segments of the South African media,

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nevertheless echoes some colonial and paternalistic attitudes that still divide the Global North

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from the Global South. Using Caster Semenya's case as an example, we'll explore the changing

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representation of women's sports as well as representation of LGBTQIA-plus identities.

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So, on your marks, get set and let's go.

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The Single, Shallow Story

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Caster Semenya is, objectively speaking, one of the most successful middle distance runners

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in history. Two Olympic gold medals, multiple World Championship titles, Commonwealth Games

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golds, Continental titles, Diamond League wins. She is also a wife, a mother, an author, a coach,

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an activist, and at one point even a footballer. And yet, if you ask most people what they know

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about Caster Semenya, the answer is rarely about her achievements. Instead, the story collapses into one

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word: testosterone. And once someone is reduced to a single narrative, especially a biological one,

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it becomes very easy to stop seeing them as fully human.

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In Semenya's case, and also Barbara Banda and Imane Khelif's cases, that single story draws on something

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much older and much uglier, the colonial habit of treating African bodies as objects to be

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examined rather than people to be respected. The subtext is rarely subtle – too strong, too fast,

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too quote-unquote “masculine”, too African, and always too much.

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00:06:27,680 --> 00:06:31,680

Institutionalised gender policing

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00:06:32,560 --> 00:06:44,240

Let's talk about the rules. World Athletics introduced regulations requiring

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certain women athletes to medically reduce their natural testosterone levels in order to compete.

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Not “enhance” – “reduce”. The IAAF’s policies mandating testosterone-reducing treatments

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for certain female athletes exemplify institutionalised gender and race discrimination.

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Men, interestingly, are not asked to medically intervene if they have natural advantages,

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whether that’s height, lung capacity, or muscle composition. No one tells Michael Phelps to apologise

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for his wingspan. What’s being regulated here isn’t fairness, it’s quote-unquote “femininity”.

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These policies are deeply Eurocentric. They rely on narrow, Western ideas and norms about what

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women’s bodies are supposed to look like and how they’re supposed to perform.

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And when those ideas meet Black women from the Global South, the result is often suspicion

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rather than celebration. Such policies perpetuate systemic bias against athletes from the

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Global South, like sinister echoes of the colonial practices of measuring and categorising African

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00:08:20,640 --> 00:08:29,840

bodies. The science, too, is shakier than it's often presented. Testosterone alone does not

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determine athletic performance. The notion of defining a quote-unquote "normal" testosterone level

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is inherently flawed given the biological and hormonal diversity among athletes.

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Bodies are complex. Biology is messy. Sport has never been fair in the way we pretend it is.

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What is clear, though, is that women's bodies, especially gender non-compliant women's bodies,

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are treated as problems to be solved or specimens on which to experiment.

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The decision to regulate testosterone levels is a clear case of eugenics, which brings us to ethics.

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Human rights, not just sports.

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Julian Savulescu, a professor of law and biomedical ethics at the universities of

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Oxford and Melbourne, highlighted ten ethical flaws in the Caster Semenya decision.

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They concluded that this ruling violated principles of fairness, autonomy and justice.

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The Court of Arbitration for Sport later acknowledged something crucial in Semenya's case –

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that the regulations are discriminatory and that they violate her right to privacy.

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And yet she still isn't allowed to compete. So yes, there was technically a legal victory,

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but it's the kind of victory that comes with an asterisk.

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Semenya's case matters not only because of what it says about sport, but because of what it says

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about whose rights are negotiable. And media representations amplify the scrutiny,

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often sensationalising Semenya's identity and reinforcing exclusionary narratives.

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These portrayals not only perpetuate stigma, but also underscore the urgent need to challenge

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systemic discrimination. Her fight has been supported by the South African government

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and international human rights organisations, precisely because it exposes a larger truth –

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that systems claiming neutrality often reproduce inequality, very efficiently.

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Historical Echoes:

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Sarah Baartman

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South African feminist scholar Pumla Dineo Gqola draws a chilling parallel between

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Caster Semenya and Sarah Baartman. Baartman's body was displayed, dissected and pathologised in Europe

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in the 19th century, measured against white femininity and found "obscene". Baartman was objectified

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and dehumanised based on the ways her sexualised physical appearance differed from idealised

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white femininity. But she hadn't been the one sexualising herself. The choice to uncover and

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put her body on display to draw attention to specific body parts by exposing them on parade,

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that was made by the European men who had colonised and enslaved her and her family.

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Semenya's body might not be exhibited in a museum, but it is scrutinised,

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regulated and disciplined by overwhelmingly white institutions. There's an important difference,

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though – Baartman was marked as too “feminine”. Semenya is marked as not “feminine” enough.

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This comparison underscores how cishetero-patriarchal and racialised frameworks

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continue to marginalise individuals who defy normative Western gender expectations.

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Different centuries, same logic. This is what racialised gender policing looks like when it

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00:13:41,200 --> 00:13:56,000

updates its language but keeps its assumptions. Women's sport and media silence

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Even without Semenyá's case, women's sport is still marginalised.

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In 2023, only about 15% of sports media coverage focused on women's sports,

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despite women competing in nearly all Olympic disciplines.

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Yes, the coverage has improved. Representation had nearly tripled in the preceding five years,

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but improvement doesn't erase history. It just makes the gaps more visible and underscores the

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need for continued advocacy. Initiatives like the International Olympic Committee's updated

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portrayal guidelines aim to address these disparities in the media, yet systemic issues

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persist. When women athletes are covered, those who don't conform to traditional femininity

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00:15:06,720 --> 00:15:16,880

face additional scrutiny, and Semenya sits right at that fault line. South African media have at

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00:15:16,880 --> 00:15:24,880

times challenged the international narrative, exposing its political and racial undertones.

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But media also reproduce inferential homophobia – the quiet suggestion that her gender, her sexuality

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00:15:37,680 --> 00:15:42,880

and her body are all part of the same quote-unquote “problem”.

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That further marginalised her within the sports community and thereby separated her from potential

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allies, such as other sportswomen or athletes. This media portrayal not only affects public

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perception, but also impacts the opportunities and support available to all female athletes.

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Because once again, it is women – and only women – who are subjected to gender testing.

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00:16:17,760 --> 00:16:22,160

Patriarchy, if nothing else, is consistent.

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Queer visibility and resistance

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Caster Semenya is openly gay, and her marriage to Violet Raseboya is not incidental. It's

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quietly radical. In a context where her womanhood is constantly questioned, it would have

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00:16:56,640 --> 00:17:04,640

been easy for her to try to quote-unquote “prove” her femaleness by conforming to all other gender

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expectations – for example by dating men. She didn't. Instead, she made her family visible.

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She confronted the archaic Eurocentric scrutiny. She dared her critics to expose their personal

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biases. This matters, because queer representation in South African media still often perpetuates

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00:17:32,240 --> 00:17:43,120

stereotypes and stigmatisation. As Bradley wrote in 2023, the media often reduces queer stories

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to the extremes of “crying, dying or marching for Pride”.

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Semenya defies those caricatures. Her visibility disrupts the lie that femininity, heterosexuality

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00:18:01,040 --> 00:18:10,160

and womanhood are naturally aligned. And that disruption is precisely why it is threatening.

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Representation as power

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Stuart Hall reminds us that representation doesn't just reflect reality, it produces and creates

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it. Meaning is made through discourse, through repetition, through what's framed as "normal"

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and what's framed as "exceptional". And when what's being repeated was an imitation or distortion to

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start with, it erodes the truth. Media portrayals of Semenya as an quote-unquote "abnormal" athlete

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don't just misrepresent her, they police the boundaries of gender itself.

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Her body becomes a battleground where race, gender, sexuality and power collide. And what her case

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ultimately exposes is this: Sport doesn't just measure performance, it enforces social norms.

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00:19:40,640 --> 00:19:55,520

Caster Semenya's story is not about biology, it's about belonging. It asks a question that sport

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and society still largely ignores – “How do we make space for everyone to be included with equity?”

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And until that question is answered differently, Semenya's resistance – simply by existing as she is –

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remains profoundly political.

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If you're still with me, the conversation doesn't end here. In the bonus segment,

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I zoom in on what's happening right now. Including a landmark U.S. Supreme Court case

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on transgender girls in school sports. And what it reveals about how law, science and

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fear get woven together. Because once you start looking closely, it becomes a lot harder to

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00:21:06,080 --> 00:21:23,520

believe this was ever just about fairness. That's over at [Patreon.com/IntersectionalPsychology](https://patreon.com/IntersectionalPsychology).

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When we follow stories like Caster Semenya's all the way through, we start to see a pattern.

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Recognition without redistribution is never enough. In the final episode of this series,

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we'll turn to economic empowerment. Because justice doesn't only live in discourse,

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law or identity. It lives in material conditions. In who has access, who has options and who gets

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00:22:07,040 --> 00:22:16,640

to live with dignity rather than precarity. That's next time in this series on Intersectional Psychology.

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00:22:18,240 --> 00:22:25,200

Until then, remember everyone has the right to live with their optimal mental health.

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00:22:40,240 --> 00:22:45,440

Psychology in your preferred app. It really helps other people find the podcast.

149

00:22:48,160 --> 00:22:55,200

This episode of Intersectional Psychology was researched, written, recorded and edited by me,

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Aurora Brown. For a transcript of this episode, please see the link in the show notes on your

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podcast app or go to IntersectionalPsychology.com. You can also check the website or the show notes

152

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for a full list of references for this episode. A video of this episode with closed

153

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captions is available on [YouTube.com/@IntersectionalPsychology](https://www.youtube.com/@IntersectionalPsychology).

154

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156

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You can also chat with me on BlueSky at [intersectpsych.bsky.social](https://bsky.app/profile/intersectpsych.bsky.social) and Instagram,

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Facebook or TikTok at [@IntersectionalPsychology](https://www.instagram.com/IntersectionalPsychology), but mostly BlueSky.

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Aurora Brown and Intersectional Psychology are committed to the Cite Black Women praxis.

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All episodes of Intersectional Psychology

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mental health advice, diagnosis or treatment. I, Aurora Brown, am not able to answer specific

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questions about individual situations. Always seek the advice of your health provider with any

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questions you may have regarding a mental health condition. Never disregard professional medical

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advice or delay in seeking it because of something you have heard or seen on this podcast.

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If you think you need immediate assistance, please call your local emergency number or any mental

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health crisis hotline. Everyone deserves good mental health.