



#NairobiNiMimi

"YOU CAN'T BE A GREAT COACH IF YOU HAVEN'T DONE THE WORK YOURSELF. IT'S ONLY WHEN YOU'VE BEEN INTO A DARK CAVE AND FACED YOUR OWN DEMONS THAT YOU CAN REALLY HELP OTHERS."

SHILPA SHAH



As a therapist and life coach living and working in Nairobi, Shilpa Shah, has watched the city change over the last four decades. It is still, she says, one of the best cities in the world.

"I grew up in a compound that had nine tiny apartments. It was like the United Nations. There was a Japanese family in flat no. 2, a Dutch lady in no.6, a family from Ethiopia and I can't remember where else... I just remember it being a very mixed environment. The Japanese would have real live lobsters in a bucket of water in their kitchen. I didn't think anything of it even though my mum's kitchen was vegetarian. I had the kind of carefree childhood that I wish children today could experience. I was so free. I'd spend my holidays or weekends riding my bike in the neighborhood without a care in the world. This was in Upper Hill. It was residential in those days and there was a strong sense of community. I would just go and ride and end up in somebody's house, play with their puppies and the house help would feed me ugali and sukuma. It was a very liberated childhood."

"In my teenage years, oh my goodness, I was a proper rebel, even though I didn't really have strict parents. I remember one day I had an argument with my mum and she locked me in my bedroom from the outside. So, I decided to lock myself in from the inside, then I jumped off my balcony - we were on the first floor - and I hitchhiked into town. I just stuck my thumb out like I'd seen people do on T.V. and some guy in a funky red sports car, wearing cool shades, stopped. He asked me, 'where do you wanna go?' and I told him I wanted to go to town, to my dad's office. So, he drove me there, but as he dropped me off, he blasted me and he shouted 'Now don't you dare ever hitchhike again! It is so dangerous! You're crazy!' I never hitchhiked again. When I finally got home with my father that afternoon my mum hadn't even realized I had left! She must have though I was sulking all day! We all laughed that evening."

"I became an English teacher and taught in Chiang Mai, Thailand for a while. I loved the kids' sense of humor. Every day was different, it's not like my first job as a marketing assistant - that was super boring sitting behind a computer. Thai children are very playful actually and because I taught teenagers I had to make it all as interesting and fun as possible, it forced me to be creative. I wanted to spark their interest, to be accessible for them and not be the kind of strict teacher that I'd had."

Shilpa Shah is back in Nairobi and is now a practicing Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP) coach.

"I came into the therapy space when I myself needed therapy a few years after I'd had a divorce. I had tried many many things. At first it was my doctor who offered me either anti-depressants or to have counselling sessions. I chose the latter. The counsellor told me 'oh you have so many emotions.' I said 'yes, well what do you suggest I can do with them?' The counsellor said 'oh, I don't know! What do you want to do?' It was a frustrating experience which did not help at all. It wasn't until I was introduced to an NLP coach/hypnotherapist through a yoga friend that I started to make some real progress. My coach was amazing. I only had four sessions, and even after the first one I felt so much better immediately. The sessions enabled me to resolve my past and move forward again. I had regained my hope and felt empowered. I haven't looked back since and this is why I chose to learn and eventually teach NLP because it really works well and fast."

"The most challenging clients I've had are the ones that are most attached to their problems. They'll say 'help me change, I want to change' but in actual fact, they don't actually want to change at all. Because their problem is something they want to keep! Or, I get the ones who say 'I want you to help me change my spouse or my boss.' Or 'If my child changes their behavior, I'll be happy.' They don't realize that change has to start with themselves first. So I select the clients I want to work with. I will check first that they are serious about getting results"

Are people ashamed of getting therapy?

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SHILPA SHAH

Are people ashamed of getting therapy?

"It wasn't easy a few years ago. I used to get clients who'd walk through the driveway covering their head and when they got inside, they'd say 'gosh, I hope your neighbors didn't see me'. But it used to be much worse back then, even in my own community. Sometimes Indians wouldn't come to me because I'm Indian. They'd rather go to an African or a European because of the fear that their confidentiality would be compromised. The thing is Nairobi is like a village. They're pockets of little villages all around, and some people do spread gossip, so I understood their fears. But things have changed. Now I have lots of Indian clients, even and especially from my own community and even some relatives abroad seek help from me. They realize that therapy isn't about judging. And that I've also been through my own issues. I believe that you can't be a great coach if you haven't done the work yourself. It's only when you've been into a dark cave and faced your own demons that you can help others. And people trust you to help because you build your reputation and when the coach comes from a place of personal experience its evident. I'd like to let people know that it's very possible to let go of and resolve your problems, if you only dare to go to an expert who can help you."

Shilpa has lived in London, Montpellier, Chiang Mai and Moshi. I ask her what she thinks of Nairobi.

"There is something so special about Nairobi even though I can't put my finger on what exactly it is. I guess the weather and food definitely are great. It's a very cosmopolitan city. But there is also something very optimistic and warm about people who live here. Compared to the West, it's a more relaxed way of living. But as you know, the worst part is the traffic! I've frequently done 31-hour flights and landed in Nairobi still feeling fresh. But then as soon as I would hit the Nairobi traffic, I would feel drained. The way people drive in Nairobi is insane. The big matatu buses and lorries are real bullies. We need to do something about that. We need to have good public transport; and footpaths for people who are walking. When it rains, people who don't have cars just get splashed, and there is mud everywhere. I'm privileged enough to have a car, but I miss being able to walk everywhere like I did when I lived in London. I guess it all goes back to freedom. I tasted it as a child and it is one of the things that I value most in life."

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