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MAGAZINE

Anousheh Ansari, a woman with curly brown hair, is smiling and wearing a black leather jacket. She is standing in a museum or gallery, with various model rockets and spacecraft on display. The background shows a large window with a view of a city and a blue sky. The text 'DEFYING GRAVITY' is overlaid in large, white, outlined letters.

DEFYING GRAVITY

Space Ambassador for Humanity,
XPRIZE CEO, and self-funded space traveler

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WOMEN
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WHAT'S IN A **NAME?**

Written by **Leah Morrison**

Mental health advocate Khaliya doesn't care if her passion isn't popular—because she knows it's one worth having.

PHOTO BY GULNARA NIAZ



Occasionally, you come across someone with such a stellar reputation amongst their peers, colleagues, and fans that they no longer need to be referred to as anything other than their first name. Take for example, Rihanna, Madonna, or Beyoncé.

Though more common amongst celebrities, single-name recognition can go beyond the world of entertainment. The field of mental health care, for example, boasts its own single-named champion: Khaliya.

Once known as the Princess Khaliya, while married to the heir apparent of a princely dynasty within Shiite Islam, she currently promotes radical, cutting-edge treatments for the plague of mental illness we see today. Khaliya's life journey has propelled her from her origins in New York, where she studied International Affairs and Public Health, to her life in Europe as a representative for the largest private development agency in the world, to becoming a victim of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after a violent assault, to her current work as a passionate advocate for expanded access to mental health care around the world.

"I believe mental health is a human right," she says. "We have not funded enough research or paid enough attention to this area. I've made it my mission to change that. We need to treat mental illness with the respect it deserves, considering its impact on people and the amount of unneeded suffering that it causes."

Khaliya splits her time between London, Majorca, and Venice Beach. Living part of the time in the United States, she is aware of the epidemic of mental illness taking a toll on people's lives and futures. According to the National Institute of Mental Health—a

division of the National Institutes of Health—almost one in five Americans live with a mental illness, and about one in 25 adults in the country experience mental illness that critically affects at least one major life activity.

As a mental health advocate, a health specialist, and a humanitarian, Khaliya has become a recognized leader in her field, campaigning for expanded access to mental health care as well as cutting-edge treatments. Working with institutions like the United Nations and the World Economic Forum, she has also become known as a passionate advocate for treating certain forms of mental illness with psychedelic compounds.

Khaliya became involved in mental health because of her own experience with PTSD. She found a lot of the treatments she was receiving weren't effective—in some cases, they seemed to be more harmful than the actual PTSD (and additional depression) itself.

"I went on a quest to try to find better solutions," she says. "I was able to come across some new ways of looking at mental health and I became aware of the fact that—in my opinion—50 years ago we kind of took a wrong turn when it comes to mental health. We went into a model of treating mental health issues that was very mechanistic, that looked at things like SSRIs for

treatment, looking at one sole system, when in fact humans are much more complicated than that and often that solution does not work.”

Five years ago, in a move that many found startling, Khaliya began to promote the use of psychedelics as treatment. She discovered the beneficial effects it has on people with PTSD and depression and decided to run with it.

As the youngest member of the World Economic Forum’s Expert Advisory on the Future of Health and Healthcare, she wrote the first case study for the organization on the use of MDMA as a treatment for PTSD. She also wrote the first positive *New York Times* op-ed on the use of psychedelics for mental health; an op-ed in *Wired* on the same topic; and has spoken at more than 50 venues—including the UN General Assembly—about mental health care.

The importance of addressing people about the topic in places where mental health, despite being a political issue, is not being taken seriously is something Khaliya keeps in mind when deciding where and to whom she wants to speak. She points out that the issue has reached pandemic proportions of sufferers, beyond those with depression where one in five people are affected. She also speaks about the increased rates of suicide among youth, the rise of mass shootings, and the increase of violent behavior at large.

“Better mental health solutions is a place where we can find a way not just to address current suffering but to

really have an impact on the social issues that arise from that kind of suffering,” she says, looking a little sad as she reels off facts. “My motto is always, none of us can be happy and safe until all of us are happy and safe. There is this kind of contingent aspect to [mental health] that makes it so we are all impacted when people are unhappy, we are all impacted when people are suicidal, and we are all impacted when people are unhappy enough that they’re willing to take that unhappiness out on others, such as we are seeing now with the rise of mass shootings in the U.S. and elsewhere.”

So, how do we turn this problem that’s becoming more obvious into a set of solutions?

Enter Falkora, the organization established by Khaliya and her husband, the futurist and regeneration architect Thomas Ermacora, to expand the definition of mental illness and explore technologies to create new approaches and innovation in its field. So far, the nonprofit has vetted and supported bright ideas and new talent that focuses on ground-breaking solutions for brain health, and catapulted mental health issues to the top of the political agenda on both national and international stages. Today, the organization is expanding its scope of work to become a members society. In the near future, the Falkora Society will bring leaders in various disciplines together to develop roadmaps for societal transformation, combining areas as diverse as consciousness development and global affairs.

Falkora is helping change the perception of mental health from a stigmatized topic to something that is talked about as openly as everything else. Khaliya thinks we as a society are reaching that point, but that we won’t truly get there until there are solutions that work.

“When something like depression is seen almost like HIV, where you get it and you can never get rid of it and it sticks with you for life, it will be stigmatized,” she explains. “But once we have solutions, similarly to



PROFILE
KHALIYA



PHOTO BY CHRIS COURTNEY

HIV where once we found solutions the stigma really fell to the wayside, I think with mental health we will too. But the treatments we have now don't work. My job on the this earth, I feel, is to help find those treatments so I can help find the people that need it and get it to them. When people change and get better, so do the societies around them as a whole."

Khaliya became an advocate not just to increase funding for mental illness and discover treatment solutions, but to act on her passion of looking at the disruption of the mental health field, something finally she has done with her encouragement of the use of psychedelics as a treatment. But it hasn't been an easy path. When she started campaigning for mental health years ago, it wasn't a popular topic—she faced a lot of criticism and blunt requests not to discuss mental illness because of the discomfort it caused people. She was told to perhaps talk about motivation instead.

"I was like, 'No,'" she states simply. "The conversation that needed to be had was mental illness, and I believed, and still believe this in my core."

When Khaliya won the National Monuments Foundation's Middelthon-Candler Peace Prize alongside First Lady Rosalynn Carter—a longtime mental health advocate—it was validation for what she has been working toward for years.

"It was a watershed moment in terms of seeing somebody that believed in what they did, who just kept doing it no matter what, and finding the fact that I stuck to my guns and kept doing what I thought was right, despite the fact that it wasn't popular..." she pauses, as if still taking in the meaningful achievement. "Time has changed the equation,

and now it's popular because it has to be, because it's become too obvious to people: If everybody knows somebody who's depressed, if everybody knows somebody who's had some sort of suicide in the family or some illness that has made them change as a person, it changes opinion."

Stick to your guns is a simple phrase Khaliya says she will tell anyone she mentors. "Do what you care about, do what you feel is right, and put all of your passion into it. Know that even if people don't care about it now, they will one day because you matter and what you do with your life matters—the more you connect with your purpose, the more you connect with the 'what' that makes you tick—whatever it is that connects you to a greater community or a greater cause. This is what will lift not just you up, but everyone around you. So don't ever give up on what you believe in: fight for it and keep fighting and remember that it is the striving itself that we can find our joy, our meaning, and ultimately our place in the larger scheme of things."

To emphasize the point, she quotes Martin Luther King: "If you can't fly then run, if you can't run then walk, if you can't walk then crawl, but whatever you do you have to keep moving forward." **LM**