

EPISODE 1267

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[INTRODUCTION]

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FT: Welcome to So Money, everybody. I'm Farnoosh Torabi. A friend of the show, Minda Harts, is back on So Money today. This time to discuss her latest book, *Right Within: How to Heal from Racial Trauma in the Workplace*. Filled with Minda's signature wit and warmth, *Right Within* offers strategies for women of color to speak up during racialized moments with managers and clients, work through past triggers they may not even know still cause pain, and reframe past career disappointments as opportunities to grow into a new path.

Minda last joined us on So Money when her first book was released, *The Memo*, dubbed the lean in for women of color, which offered a no BS look at the odds stacked against women of color in professional settings and how they can secure their seat at the table. Here's Minda Harts.

[INTERVIEW]

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FT: Minda Harts, welcome back to So Money and in a new location. You're in Los Angeles now. You moved out of New York. How's it going over there?

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MH: Happy to be here with you. Yeah, it's impacting my mental health in very great ways, Farnoosh. It feels good.

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FT: I'm glad to hear it. Mental health, we're prioritizing that these days more than ever. It's important. Speaking of, you have a new book out called *Right Within*. Congratulations. This book follows your previous book, your initial book, *The Memo*, which was more about how women of color could secure their seat at the table. This time, *Right Within* focusing on how to heal from the trauma that may have transpired at work as a person of color. You talked about this in *The Memo* a bit, but this is really an opportunity for your readers to learn how to move on so that they can even maybe take that seat at the table or secure their seat.

Let's focus on the title. I love exploring the behind the scenes of book titles and what drew authors to choosing a title. It's so hard. But *Right Within*, for those who are familiar and fans of Lauryn Hill, that's pulled from a song that she sang. The verse goes, "How you gonna win when you ain't right within?" When I heard that, I said, "Of course. That is a great connection to what your book is about." But for you, why was that the right expression for your book?

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MH: Yeah. A big Lauryn Hill fan. When I started to listen to that song more so as an adult, it hit a little bit different, right? I remember the line in my youth. But then as an adult, I'm like when you're doing this equity work, you could hope that your colleagues will have all the unconscious bias trainings and different things. But if that doesn't happen, what are we going to do to make sure that we are right within? I think that that just really resonated with me and I went through a series of different titles that I thought I wanted to have. But I landed on *Right Within* because I just felt like it was so apropos for the time period that we're in and some of the racial inequalities that are at the forefront of the conversation.

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FT: Yeah. You definitely wrote that the experience of writing this book was different than when you wrote the memo. This one was more of a struggle you admitted largely because of the stress, the exhaustion, the trauma that 2021 delivered. What were some of the learnings from that year and continuing to learn that maybe found their way into the pages of your book, onto the pages of your book?

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MH: Yeah. That's a great question. When I originally signed my book deal, I had really more so wanted to write about just what it's like for women of color, people of color to heal from some of these workplace traumas that we've been exposed to day in and day out. Then once I was going through – We were all going through a pandemic, multiple pandemics at once during the year. So I was like, “Wow.” We can't heal alone. We actually need our managers, our colleagues to be a part of this process to heal the workplace, right?

Because regardless if you're a person of color or a woman or you identify as LGBTQ, however you might identify, at some point you've experienced or been exposed to a workplace traumatic experience more than likely. So we don't realize how that may distort how we show up in other areas of our life as well or we take that to our next jobs. So I just really had to think about it holistically, right? Yes, I could give women of color tools and share my experiences on the journey to healing. But then also I wanted to write to managers as well to say, “This is part of your responsibility as well.”

So I wrestled with that, Farnoosh, while writing because I wanted to be able to make sure that I was like giving this holistic view of what healing could be.

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FT: I couldn't agree more. I mean because so much of the advice space, it's very one-sided like, “Okay, you're feeling this way. Here's what you can do to combat things like sexism, racism, ableism, all of it at work.” But yet we forget that who is the one that is inflicting this, right? What are we telling them? What advice, what mandates do we direct towards them?

One of the things that I thought was so sad that you talked about very openly in your book was just when people don't believe you. There is this issue of this problem of being gas lit or saying, "Hey, my manager was unfair to me, and I think it has to do with the color of my skin or the fact that I'm a woman and others saying, 'We couldn't even imagine this person ever behaving in such a way. This person doesn't act like this to us, towards us.'" What do you think of that, and how do you heal when you feel like no one believes you?

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MH: That's the hard part, Farnoosh, like because – I'll speak from my personal experience. Being in my former career, if I was met with something like that, first of all, I would question myself. Am I making this up? Is this what it is or am I being treated this way? It's hard not to think that it's like racial or sexism or whatever because when you're the only one and it's only happening to you, but then everybody else is dismissing how you're feeling, it's like, "Well, when was the last time you were a person of color in the workplace? How would you know that this is the experience that I'm not having, right?"

So I think we have to be very careful, our colleagues. Two things can be true at the same time. You may never experience what it's like to be me in the workplace, and I may never experience what it's like to be you, and we could both be working at this place and have two very different experiences. I think we have to be careful. If we want to be allies, if we want to be good managers, then we have to hear each other out. Just because you have an experience, Bob saying something to you that's inappropriate, it doesn't mean that he didn't say it and it didn't land that way. I think we have to also know that you might not have intended harm, but it still caused harm. So what are we going to do to solve that problem?

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FT: How do you communicate this, especially now where a lot of us are working virtually? By the way, is that a good thing or a harder thing when it comes to reconciling these issues and trying to have constructive meaningful conversations about race and equity at work? But firstly, like how do you even bring this up to your manager in such a way where, let's be

honest, it doesn't backfire and you don't get penalized perhaps or outcast at work because you're expressing these feelings?

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MH: Yeah. I think that's an important point to make. I think before 2020, if somebody decided that they were having this issue, 9 times out of 10, it had gotten to a point where they finally felt like they had to say something. It wasn't just like some isolated situation. It is that fear, right? You're being courageous to come and say, "Hey, this landed this way with me." Then you're often met with, "Oh, you took it the wrong way," never just totally dismissing.

I think at this point, because of all the racial unrest that took place, now we're talking about race in the workplace in a way that we weren't talking about it before. So it's this weird juxtaposition of don't talk about race, don't play the race card. Now, in 2021, let's talk about it. So it's really interesting that there's a community of people who want to talk about it. But if you're a person of color, you may not feel comfortable because you've never had the psychological safety to talk about it in the past, right? So I think our colleagues also have to have that emotional intelligence to say just because you're ready to talk about it doesn't mean that the other person feels comfortable talking to you about it.

Then lastly, I feel like some apologies need to be made in the workplace from our leadership because it hasn't been a safe place for women and people of color to address certain experiences that they had without fear of losing their job. I have a friend right now who's going through a situation where she's being gas lit at work, and she's the first black woman in the role, and everybody's – She feels like she's being pushed out because she did speak up against – She felt like she was getting racial discrimination. Now, she's – Her pension is hanging in the balance, and it's unfortunate that in 2021 we're still having this discussion of, no, it's not how you're experiencing it. Yet you're the only person there. So I do think there's some accountability.

But to your point of how do you have this conversation, I'm asking women of color or people of color to finally center themselves. The part of the equation that you could solve is

letting people know what good looks like to you. Then I'm asking and inviting our colleagues to be courageous listeners to say, "Yeah, I might not have intended that. But because I'm glad they felt comfortable enough to tell me so that now we can work toward not doing that anymore, right?" That's what I hope happens. I mean, isn't that what we all want to be able to just do our job?

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FT: Right. This is good for everybody. This is – To be able to not have this be a continuous bump in the road. I would love if you would just maybe share anecdotally examples from your book, yourself of what this looks like in the workplace because sometimes you bury it. Sometimes, to protect yourself, you ignore the aggressions or you think, "Oh, well. They didn't mean it." But I think it's important to bring these to the surface and say, "If you've experienced X, Y, Z, this is something you need to address first internally with yourself and then also with your employer, if you care to continue working there. But can you share some of these examples for us, so we just know what to look out for?"

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MH: Absolutely. I think, again, like you mentioned, sometimes because we're not – Have the lived experiences of someone else. We're not really paying attention to how that might – You're just like, "Oh, that's just Tim being Tim." But should Tim be doing that in this environment, right? I think one good example is a woman recently, she had sent me an email, and she's a senior, a black woman on her team during the pandemic. I know we're still in one, but she didn't feel as if she could go and get her hair done professionally.

Long story short, over the course of months, she was wearing her hair in a protective style. I guess like braids or something like that. When she felt comfortable going to the salon, she came back on the virtual screen to all staff meeting. In the middle of the CEO giving a presentation, he stops what he's talking about and says, "So-and-so, I see you finally got your hair done." Hundreds of people on this call, right? So she sends me a message and she says, "You know, Minda. It was just so triggering. I can't believe that he did that."

Months have passed when she had reached out to me. Months had passed, and she said, “None of my colleagues, nobody said anything to me, asked me if I was okay. The CEO never apologized to me, so that meant that probably no one addressed him about it, right?” Obviously maybe saying it in that moment in that hundred-person Zoom call wasn't the right situation, but I'm asking people to – We all know when something awkward has been said. We all know when we're like, “Nobody should say that.” Now, you don't have to be the hero but you have to do something.

So as that woman of color, I told her. I said, “If you feel like you need to address this, maybe go to HR or have a conversation with someone that you feel comfortable with. Let them know how that landed on you. I know he was trying to compliment you.” She knows that, but it still caused harm. Now, she's triggered every time what hairstyle she's wearing when she comes on to that call, and I'm sure all of her colleagues knew that that wasn't the right thing. So what would it have looked like if somebody would have approached her and said, “Hey, I just want to acknowledge, see how you're okay in that last meeting.”

That makes a difference when someone affirms your experience and then or someone maybe goes to HR and says, “I noticed that there's been some toxic behavior in some of these meetings. I just wanted to make you aware of it.” I just hope that people can think about what would you want someone to do for you if you were in that situation.

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FT: Thank you for sharing that. There are so many ways to compliment someone's hair. First, don't do it in a meeting with hundreds of people. But if he had said anything, he could have just said, “You look great.” Because what he's really saying, what it's really implying is that for months she looked like crap.

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MH: Right. Right. Exactly. Like I didn't like your hair before, essentially, right?

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FT: What was he thinking about her in all these other meetings? Oh my God!

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MH: Yes. Exactly.

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FT: And it's just such a stress that you don't need. Those are things you should not have to worry about at work. One of the things you also recommend as advice to employers in your book is these restoration agreements. Can you talk a little bit about what this is? Bring this to life for us a little?

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MH: Yeah. I was thinking about healing, Farnoosh, and I thought, "Okay, well, I can give tools of what's been helpful to me and invite women of color, people of color to explore what those look like. But then there has to be something that accountability inside the workplace. And so I thought about my experiences and I thought, "You know what? What lacked was the trust." right? because even though many companies are saying that black lives matter, that we want to create a better environment for women. But if you've never demonstrated it, if you've never created that psychological safety, then we need to restore trust, right? I have to be able to believe what you're telling me, because a lot of companies made commitments last year and nothing has changed about their about us pages. Nothing has changed about the leadership gap. But you're constantly telling me that diversity, equity, inclusion is important. So I actually need you to show me that I can trust you as an employer, that I'm valued here.

And so the restoration agreements is asking leaders and managers to think about the different spaces in which we occupy to create that safety. And so one area that I talk about is team meetings. I know for me, I gave an example just how bad a team meeting can go. But in my previous life, team meetings were the most aggressive place that I would

experience toxicity of racialized experiences in my opinion. And I talk about having meeting advisors. And I know some people will think, "Oh, do we need people monitoring the language and behaviors of people inside of meetings?" And yes, I do believe we need that until people can do better by themselves, right? And I think that that also holds the accountability and it doesn't make it solely that person of color, women of color woman to have to call it out every time it happens. You have somebody else who is holding the manager accountable.

Another area, promotions, for example. Let's look at what are the metrics? How are we moving people through the pipeline? And if there are some areas where we don't have a lot of representation, then let's be intentional about creating that space. Because, again, we can't say that this is an equitable environment if we never see it in the rankings. And so I think, again, there's so many ways in which we can create a better organizational culture through that restoration.

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FT: Yeah. And I've also seen how companies sometimes in large meetings are starting every meeting with a check-in on how we're doing in terms of hiring, in terms of promoting within our company, looking at a pie. So this is like the percentage of white versus people of color, women, trans. And that's keeping not just a nice sort of sense of transparency, but keeping the company accountable because they know that the next time they have this meeting, which is every month, people are going to be looking for progress. And I think that's so healthy.

How did your first book, *The Memo*, which, thank you for coming on the show when that book came out? And it has made such an impact in the world. How did *The Memo* inspire this book in some ways? Because we often finish a book and we then bring it into the world and we realize through conversation, we understand what the next book needs to be. Was that the path towards *Right Within*?

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MH: Kind of. It's so funny, because I don't have any physical children. So I do look at *The Memo* as like my first child. And I'm like, "I think I'm only going to have one child." That was how I felt. It's like I didn't think I'd write anymore. But the more that I started to think about the workplace and all the messages that I'd get from women of color who read the book, and I realized that there was like this theme in their messages and it was they're still battling with those past and current exposure to the you know racialized experiences and it's starting to appear upon their mental health. And I started to think about my experience and how racism started to impede upon my mental health and caused me a lot of anxiety and depression at certain points in my career. And so I thought, "Whoa! I guess I do have to have a second child. And I need to talk about how we heal from it." Because we can't just keep this bottled up inside because, for black women in particular, we die at earlier rates due to chronic stress, which some of that chronic stress is race related. And so I want us to be able to live a full and healthy life and we have to let go of some of that that baggage that we should have never been exposed to before at all.

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FT: Yeah, absolutely. You say racism doesn't just kill people. It kills careers too. We spend so much of our time at work with other people who may not have had the training and the education, the life experience to have the empathy and the sense to know how to talk to people in a way that doesn't hurt them. Do you think companies are doing enough? I mean, we talked a little bit about how in 2020 there were all these posters and Instagram, we believe in black lives matter. But yet, what is the net of that? Are you optimistic about where corporate America is headed in terms of creating these safe environments for all people to work? And what are some of the areas that still need a lot of work and attention from the employer's perspective?

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MH: Yeah. I am optimistic, because like we talked about, this wasn't a conversation two years ago, right? Some bad things happened and now we're talking about them in a way we hadn't been talking about them out loud. And so I do believe that's a good step in the right direction, because at least we can now point to say, "Hey, you said that this was

important to our company, right?” And there's something to hold on to. Before, we didn't have anyone saying that. So you couldn't really hold people accountable in that way because they wouldn't acknowledge it, right? So now that you have the acknowledgement.

But I also think the next step is the demonstration. And I think there're only a few companies that are actually demonstrating that they're actually moving forward with their plans. And you mentioned a word that I love so much, is transparency. I think in order for us to get to this place where the workplace works for everybody, we have to be transparent even if we're sad or embarrassed about how much progress we've made or haven't made. I think if you're a person of color sitting in a company right now, you want your managers or leaders to say, “Hey, we didn't do what we said we had hoped to do. But now we know that we actually have to do more. And here's what we're committed to do.” right? That's going to make you feel better even if you haven't experienced it, but just to keep talking about it and never doing anything. So now that we've had the conversation, let's move into the demonstration. And I think that's partly how we're going to get to this equitable place, because we talk about equality, but it's not enough for equal footing if you don't have equity, right? And so I'm asking companies to think about what does it look like to create equity. So even if you are the only, you still feel like you're seen. You still feel like your voice is heard and that you don't have to shrink. And so I do think there's a lot of opportunity to go back to those restoration agreements to say, “Hey,” like I said, we may not have done what we said, but here's what we're committed to doing. And I think we can't just pretend that nothing has happened and go back to normal.”

The last thing I'll say is there's a report that came out a couple months ago and it said that 53% of black employees felt like they belonged at their companies for the first time working from home. And so that's a sad statistic. And so if I were a leader in a company I'd say for me to say just come back on October or November, whatever the day is, is not enough if some of our workforce doesn't feel safe to return back. So we shouldn't be returning back to normal. We should be returning back to better. And what are we going to do so that people feel like they can come back and feel safe? And so those are the kind of conversations. Humanizing, right? It's not enough to say, “Oh, let's put 20 black women in this role.” No. Do those 20 black women feel safe here and want to stay? That's the better question.

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FT: That is really, really smart. Yeah, how can we work better? You know, Minda, I'm hearing, and I'm sure you're seeing this more because this is your world. I'm hearing anecdotally of black women leaving their jobs in 2020 or 2021 signing NDAs because it was not an amicable departure. The company maybe acknowledged that this was not their best performance and they pay them off. Similar to what we saw to so many women in the MeToo era who signed NDAs. The reason we didn't hear about these stories was because they were paid off they and they were banned from sharing their experiences with others. What is your advice to somebody who is in the process of maybe leaving an employer over a racial issue and the company saying, "Okay. Yep, our bad. Here's some money. Sign here. Please don't ever talk about this to anybody." How do you reconcile that? Because we want these stories to be out there. We want these companies held accountable, and yet we don't want to also do it at the detriment of this person who deserves to be paid and paid well. What do we do?

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MH: Yeah, like you said, it's a weird space to kind of reconcile because you do want women who've had to experience that or anybody to feel like they have a little bit of retribution, right? Is that the right word? But then I think that there should be legislation, in my opinion, that would ban companies from having to implement that that you should if you experience racism or sexism or any type of discrimination. That if you choose, you should be able to talk about it. And that's a part of holding companies accountable. So I do feel like there should be some legislation where companies can't impose certain NDAs for certain situations. And I think race related or gender is one of those things that I would implement, because how will we know if we're going to be re-traumatized in an environment, right?

So yes, maybe the one black person got paid. But if I enter into this space, am I going to experience the same thing? Have any lessons been learned? And a company that wants you to be quiet about any type of discrimination is a company that is not committed to equity. And so we need to know who those companies are. Just like Yelp and all these

different things, right? You know, you go there and you say, “Is this a restaurant I want to eat at?” And we know by the reviews. And I think that there should be a similar setup for these companies and put it out there, right? So if you're not doing what you need to do to create that equity, then you have to sit with that scarlet letter until you do the things that make it a better workplace. And so I do think we need kind of revolutionary laws to hold companies accountable. Otherwise, they're just going to keep passing that paper and hope that they can make it through another year without somebody calling them out.

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FT: Right. They think they can just throw money at the problem and never actually fix it, fix the problem. Oh gosh! Yes. Lots of work left for others to do. But I would vote for that. I would definitely vote for that. And congratulations, Minda, Time Magazine calling *Right Within* one of the must reads for October. And I'm sure only the beginning of all of the accolades and the awards for this book newly out. Thank you so much for contributing to our show and for all your contributions, Minda. Wishing you continued success. And come back anytime.

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MH: Appreciate you. Thank you.

[OUTRO]

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FT: Thank you so much to Minda for joining us. Check out mindaharts.com for more about her books and also how to contact her for speaking. Coming up on Wednesday, a conversation with Alana Karen, an early Google employee who has advice on how to thrive as a woman in the tech industry. I hope you'll join us for that. In the meantime, I hope your day is so money.

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