

In A Bite with Charlotte Mei

Season 2 Episode 4 - Amanda Chong

Full Transcript

Charlotte Mei

Today's episode is a little different to the ones you may be used to, as we're not going to be talking to a health expert today. But I promise you'll love this episode just as much as the rest.

And for the ladies listening. Boy, would you feel seen and validated by some of the things you're about to listen to.

Today's guest is someone who does it all. She's a lawyer, playwright, poet, and a voice for social justice. And we're going to find out just how she does it. A multi-hyphenate in her own right. Our guest for today is Amanda Chong. In this episode, we'll be discussing her career from starting a blog on menstruation to being a sex crime prosecutor to writing a play *psychobitch* that sold out in 5 minutes.

We also chat about how she manages everything she has on her plate and what wellness looks like to her.

Please also remember to share this episode with friends and family if you're a big fan of In A Bite or Amanda's work. I hope you enjoyed this episode.

Charlotte Mei

Amanda, you're a lawyer, a poet, a playwright, a role model to many. If you told little Amanda that you would be doing this in your adult life, what would she say?

Amanda Chong

So it's really pretty cool that I found something from when I was 15 years old, which was essentially like a letter to myself listing out the things that I wished or hoped to be doing as an adult. And I found it pretty recently when I was going through like quite a low point. And I think that really starts like my faith in how my life has turned out, because in that letter there were four things.

It was —'I want to write.' 'I want to be involved in the theatre scene' —because I was always a drama buff. And 'I wanted to work in international law'. So there was like a little drawing of the UN, and I wanted to do work that would empower other people.

So when I read it as a 30 something and saw that, oh you know what like 15 year old Amanda wanted to do, had been manifest in my life currently, I honestly just felt really blessed that the paths that I took led me to this place and it just gave me, like, *fresh vision*, right?

Because very often when we're in the midst of all the drudgery of like leading our lives and like, dealing with like the pressures of you can kind of lose perspective. And that made me, it gave me the

bigger perspective, again, that I am so blessed to be doing what I do. So I would like to think that 15 year old Amanda would think I am pretty cool.

But I cannot...I can't guarantee that.

Charlotte Mei

Well, of course you wrote yourself a letter. God, that is so you and I feel like you were ahead of the game with this whole vision board thing. Like *you* did it. You did it way ahead of everyone. You just manifested it in that letter to yourself. How cool is that?

Amanda Chong

Well, it was actually an exercise that we needed to do in school.

So I think I have to thank my great teachers in RGS.

Charlotte Mei

Oh that's so funny. Okay, and so I'm really curious to know, when did your artistic career start and how does this fit into the larger picture of your legal career? Because that's a lot going on. And they're two very different spaces, aren't they?

Amanda Chong

Yeah, well, I've always loved writing, so even when I was a kid, it was something that I did all the time.

I think I started out liking to read a lot. I read a lot of like poetry books. I loved watching theatre. I was a huge musical theatre buff. My parents would take me to see a lot of musicals, and I was much younger, and that was always my CCA growing up. So like in primary school. I was in drama. In secondary school, JC —drama, writing, and I think I just never stopped doing my CCAs, is one way to describe it. Because, you know, it was just something I was so passionate about.

When I got to uni, I was deciding between doing law or literature and it was honestly a really difficult decision. But ultimately I chose to do law because I got a government scholarship that would allow me to study law overseas. Right?

So and the whole idea was always that I can pursue my love for literary arts outside of law. And then when I moved back to Singapore after four years overseas, I found that it was a time where a lot of things had changed in Singapore. You know, it was when Marina Bay Sands came up, it was when suddenly there were a lot of new MRT lines.

And yeah, it was just like a huge change from how I remembered it, like being in secondary school and JC. And in order to kind of make sense of moving back and finding my place in Singapore, I started to write more and then I developed like a writing community, writing friends, and that's always really helpful to keep pursuing an art form.

And then eventually led to me publishing my book in 2016.

And then I stumbled into playwriting in 2021, and I just really loved it so much. Because I feel that while poetry is a bit more solitary and it's you like crying on your bedroom floor writing poems, at least that's how it looks like for me. Whereas, you know, drama and theatre is you working with incredible artists who are making whatever you write even better and putting in their own artistry and imagination.

And it's led me down paths where I get to work with like some of my closest friends, including Sindhura Kalidas. She acted in the one-woman show I wrote, earlier this year —Psychobitch. It's just been a dream come true.

Charlotte Mei

That's so nice. That's so nice that you can say that. And would you say that writing is a form of...or rather would you say that writing is an outlet for you?

Amanda Chong

Yeah, absolutely. I don't know whether you're into the whole Enneagram thing.

Charlotte Mei

GIRL. Oh my gosh. You just opened up a very big can of worms. This was not on my plan to speak about today. I can speak about the Enneagram for hours. Okay, tell me more. Like what? Like, Yes.

Amanda Chong

So you'll get it when I say that, I'm like a '4 wing 3'.

Charlotte Mei

YES! Oh my gosh...oh my gosh...yes I would've totally guessed the 4! Amazing!

Amanda Chong

Yeah. So I have a lot of big feelings and I cannot just suppress them and continue leading my life. I need an outlet, I need to process them and I find a lot of beauty and connection when something that I feel, you know, resonates with someone else.

Right. Because I feel that that...there is...it's one of the beautiful things about being human. Right? When something that you feel is so incredibly specific, but yet it resonates and somebody else has felt that specific way and it just makes you feel less alone in this world. And I mean, that's my whole ethos behind creating art, right?

That I just want to be able to give people language to process difficult feelings and emotions. And because in my own life, I've been through, you know, grief, loss. And it has affected me in very specific ways. And to be able to share that journey with someone else, it's really what I want to do as an artist.

Charlotte Mei

That is so beautiful.

And going back to Enneagram, I'm really curious, how did you get introduced to it?

Amanda Chong

Oh one of my best friends is obsessed with it, okay... so and she's like done the course, you know, she's like, read the books. Okay, That's you?

Charlotte Mei

Yeah...yeah.

Amanda Chong

I feel that I have a very rudimentary understanding of it but I fully subscribe to it...okay.

So when I read the 4 wing 3 —I'm like this is 100% me. Y'know like, anyone who's a 4, *I'm like I get you.*

You know, we get each other. Is that your Enneagram as well?

Charlotte Mei

Uh..no. Uh so I'm 1 wing 2.

Amanda Chong

—Oh gosh, I was feeling '2' vibes from you

Charlotte Mei

I mean I do apologise to any of you listeners who don't know anything about the Enneagram. But it's super interesting, go check it out. I mean I am actually at a point where I'm looking into the science behind it. Because I'm the kind of person where I can do *woo*...I can do, you know, like things a little bit more abstract. However, I still like to know, like the history of it, how did it come about?

The Enneagram is one thing that, I mean, you know, you read the horoscope, you can give me anyone's horoscope and I'll be like, 'Oh yeah, I can kind of resonate with that'. But with the Enneagram, it doesn't feel that way. It's a lot less specific. And what I love about it, is that it doesn't box you up, you know, it tells you that you have all these different traits or motivations, but one are stronger than the other.

So yeah, I'm a super strong one, which is like, I will...like justice is very important to me. And it's also very important to be 'right', to be a 'perfectionist'. And that's why, you know, I mean, before recording, you were telling me about how like my videos look so perfect. It's because I need them to be that way. And if they're anything other than that, it will not like be seen by anyone's eyes.

Amanda Chong

Yeah, no, but I, I think it's actually an incredibly useful tool. Like I don't think it is *woo* or anything. I'm not into horoscopes but with Enneagram...I do feel there's a science behind it and it actually helps

you to be a better communicator and it helps me to understand the people around me. And because it basically identifies the fears and motivations.

So even at work, I think it's really helpful to understand yourself, but also how you can best work with other people.

Charlotte Mei

100%. I did a course in the Enneagram because I was living with my brother at that time. And I thought that he was just doing things on purpose to piss me off. And then when I did the course and learned about it, I realised, oh gosh, like, this is nothing that he was doing on purpose to me, this is who he is.

And I could understand his motivations. And it was life changing for me, it helped in my relationships as well. And yeah, it's anyway, I can go on talking about this. But yeah that's fascinating that you're into that as well. But yeah, for anyone listening to this, if you want to go check it out, it's like, like what Amanda said —it's such a good tool to help you in your everyday life.

Okay. So going back to the questions that I wanted to ask you about. Y'know, when it comes to the issues that you advocate for, you know, there are several, right? And how do you incorporate that into your work, be it in your legal career, in your writing, etc.?

Amanda Chong

Yeah, I think I really had, I guess my dream first job —which was that I was a sex crimes prosecutor and I got to do that for five and a half years. And I've always been someone who's really feminist and really interested in, you know, people of all genders being treated equally in society. And also kind of looking at the dynamics in our society to see that even beyond superficial equality, you know, there's so much more there's so much more stereotypes and gendered expectations that we need to address.

And so that has very naturally come into my work, both as a poet and as a playwright. So, for example, my book *Professions*. Well the title itself has two different meanings, which is, you know, professions as in confessions, but also as professions, as in occupations. Right?

And the backbone of that collection is actually a series of dramatic monologues in poem form, in the voice of an enigmatic muse, talking to different lovers of people that she's inspired like, men of different professions.

So we have poems like —the physicists, the astronomer, the lawyer, the writer, the playwright. And on one level, the poems are talking about how...or how women have been sidelined from all of these occupations and just relegated to the role of the muse. But on another level, they were all about romantic dynamics that I had experienced. And, you know, so it operates on both like a public level as well as a private level.

And that has always been something that I've loved to explore in writing. And so when I went into playwriting that naturally came in...to the way that I explored the themes. So one of the plays that I

wrote is called #WomenSupportingWomen. And it's on...very broadly it's on sexual assault, and it's on the different kinds of feminisms that we have across the intersections of race, class and generation.

So that was staged by Tworks in 2022. And again in Cambridge University this year.

And then I also created the play *Psychobitch*. Which I wrote specifically for my friend Sindhu, and that addressed the trope of a woman who is emotional. And I think that stereotype of a 'psychobitch' is definitely something that I kind of identify with, y'know?

I actually do. Actually where you are a Type A woman and you're always trying to do things to like the best perfectionist ability. And what happens when you translate that dynamic into romantic relationships where y'know, you aren't able to control how people react to you. I mean, so that's one level of the stereotype of 'psychobitch'.

And on the other level, there's the stereotype that when a woman is emotional, it's immediately like connected to hysteria, right? Or that she is 'psycho'. And there's so much baggage attached to female emotionalism that we don't have when a man is emotional.

And the premise of that play was actually based...so it starts out with this Type A —overachieving journalist and she shows up at her fiance's office all ready to give this presentation about the four times she cried in public at the cost of her relationship, right?

Charlotte Mei

And this is a true story, right?

Amanda Chong

Yeah, the premise is true. I mean, yeah, it was based on something that happened to me, right? And nobody asked me to make any kind of slide deck or presentation. In my case, I actually wrote 13 pages of submissions...

Charlotte Mei

...Really?

Amanda Chong

Because I'm a lawyer. Yeah.

Charlotte Mei

Oh my word...

Amanda Chong

Yeah, it was insane. It came from like — 'I'm a perfectionist. I cannot lose an argument'. But it also came from like, this deep need to prove myself and to, to show that, yes, 'I'm not emotional, I'm perfectly rational'. Y'know, here is an infographic of my menstrual cycle that shows like that the times I cried, correlated...close to my period.

It's so funny when I think back. I mean, it was such a painful time of my life. But when I thought back about it, like, this is so funny, like it just shows so much brokenness that we carry as women.

And, y'know, if I can put it up on stage and make people laugh and also like open up that conversation about why we behave in this way, then yeah, then, you know, I really want to be doing that.

Charlotte Mei

Okay, so where...can we actually find this 30 page submission anywhere?

Amanda Chong

Oh no way! No.

Charlotte Mei

Awww no...that would totally be my bedtime read. That's so fascinating. And I'm so curious to know what the feedback on *Psychobitch* was. I mean, it was was this, you know, like, tickets were sold out, you know, you had to do reruns. People loved it.

But did you have any conversations about, you know, like the contents of it and what how people felt watching it?

Amanda Chong

Yeah, I think a lot of women did feel very seen because I guess it's a one woman show. It goes very deep into this interior monologue that this particular character has. And it was actually an amalgamation of a lot of the experiences of women that I met, right.

Like there was a period of time when I was writing this play that wherever I went all around the world, New York, Washington state, I'm like, Tell me your 'psychobitch' stories. And yeah, and I saw like very common threads across cultures, across each groups. So I think it really resonated with a lot of women.

I was also quite, quite fascinated by how men reacted to it. Some of them were like, 'No, she's not psycho at all', y'know because they have experience with partners who have yeah, who have cried in public. Some guys had very strong feelings that, you know, that she had just, you know, messed herself up, you know, and that like, you know, she needs to have her locus of self validation within herself and not externally. And I'm like 'okayyy, sure'

Yeah. Yeah. So it was fascinating to hear people speak, relate their own experiences to it. So yeah, I really enjoy that dynamic of creating art in Singapore where, you know, it's a conversation that you have with the audience.

Charlotte Mei

For sure. Y'know, I have to say that the work that you put out, you know, it touches on so many important themes, but it's always *fun*, you know, And is that something that you keep in mind? Y'know, you do on purpose? How does that all come about?

Amanda Chong

Yeah, I think um, well, when I wrote poetry, I had less room to be funny. I mean, I maybe wrote like a couple of funny poems in my life, but I felt that that made me go into this very lyrical, confessional headspace where it is really humour doesn't really enter the picture.

But I have always enjoyed, you know, just I've enjoyed just talking and blogging and yeah, just having ridiculous kinds of of like analogies and metaphors and, you know, histrionics when I write.

And it's actually started from when I was a teenager and I had a blog called 'Menstruate.livejournal.com'.

Charlotte Mei

Oh LiveJournal days...okay

Amanda Chong

Yeah. So and I would just talk about my period all the time in a very dramatic, crazy way. And that has always been a way that I've enjoyed communicating. And so even in my Instagram stories, right, like every time I'm bored or like I'm on the loo at work and, you know, I need to occupy myself, then I would be, you know, posting random stuff.

And then I realised that when I went into playwriting, I could bring in that humour with me. And honestly right, like I never thought of myself as funny. So I told this to the audience who watched *Psychobitch* that it was so cathartic for me to hear so many people laughing at the play and at the jokes in the play. Because I had another ex-boyfriend who told me that I wasn't a funny person and that when people are laughing around me, it's because they're laughing at *me*.

Charlotte Mei

—Ouch!

Amanda Chong

And not at my jokes. So I was like, 'oh my gosh, everyone is laughing'. Oh y'know, this is like really validating.

Charlotte Mei

Amanda, you cannot imagine that every single time I read your stories, I am smiling or laughing. I find it incredibly entertaining in the best way possible. And please never, ever stop that. Gosh! You do have a wonderful sense of humour and just so witty, you know?

Amanda Chong

Oh thank you. I feel so validated again. Yeah—

Charlotte Mei

Oh absolutely

Amanda Chong

Really appreciate it.

Charlotte Mei

And it's funny that you mentioned that, you know, with poetry, sometimes you can't bring humour into it. One of my favourite ones of yours, this is like a friend actually shared it with me is —*Office Lady*.

Amanda Chong

OHHH

Charlotte Mei

That is hilarious. The line on women being like *biscuits* and they go *lao hong*. That was golden.

Amanda Chong

So that's probably like one of the four funny poems I've ever written. And it was actually inspired by, I think it was the prompt, it was for Singapore Poetry Writing Month, and the prompt was like, write a poem about your future self. That was one prompt and I combined the other prompt, which was write a poem that would make your mom really happy.

And you know, at that period of my time of my life, my mom was always bugging me about like, you know, 'maybe you should get married', etc.. So I was like, okay, let's like combine these two things and write this ridiculous poem...

Charlotte Mei

Well it's hilarious...

Amanda Chong

Yeah, and ultimately, it's about skewering all those gendered expectations and stereotypes about *when* women need to reproduce or *when* is that timeline of attractiveness for women.

And that's the kind of thing that I'd like to respond to in my writing.

Charlotte Mei

Yeah, for sure. And, you know, so many women can resonate with that. And on that point, I, you know, I would like to know how you manage societal expectations in that realm.

Amanda Chong

Yeah. Yeah, of gendered expectations, you mean?

Charlotte Mei

Yeah

Amanda Chong

Um the thing is that, I think like it's not that I don't feel them. I definitely do, but I don't feel like it is something within my control to be able to fulfil, right?

Because I don't think that like I mean, I know that like stories of women who decide, like, now's the time for me to get married and get a partner, and then like, I'm going to, like, go on the apps, I'm going to meet 7 people a week.

I've met these women like, you know, who have gone on these kinds of...made it their project, made it their mission and fully succeeded. And, you know, I applaud them. That's fantastic. But I don't think it's within my capabilities, y'know.

Firstly, I don't, I just don't think that I think that...these sorts of things are organic. I think, you know, like, I can't force myself to be into, like, create chemistry with someone.

And I'm very much in the mode of, you know, if it's God's plan for me, if it happens, it happens. And I don't...and frankly, I'm so busy that it's not like...and I've gone past the stage right where dating is a fun activity. Y'know?

You know when you're in your twenties and you're like, you know, it's actually fun to hang out with someone who I don't know. Oh and the possibilities, the magic behind that. I'm like, 'no no no...I'm so done with that'. It's not fun now.

Charlotte Mei

Now it's like, I don't know, it's like another meeting.

Amanda Chong

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. It's like, oh my gosh. Like, no, I don't want to have a conversation with someone. I'm not sure that I would even be able to have a good conversation with. You know, like, I would much rather take that time and hang out with someone I know I totally resonate with. So I think it's like, yeah, like, I don't feel...I mean there are certain biological realities about being a woman, right, that you have a certain window of fertility.

And very often I do wish I do kind of think wistfully about what it would be like if I were a man, right? Because I feel like so many things would be different and frankly, like I've been called, like 'intimidating' to a lot of men. And I feel like that would not be the case if I were a man, because I don't get that from women.

Like women don't call me 'intimidating', only men do. Yeah.

So and for whatever reason, I feel that if I was similarly, had the same kind of like CV or credentials and went to like the same schools but was a *man*, people would receive me differently. And I think that's just a reality we have to accept. Right?

And then I also think that, you know, that I wouldn't have this kind of like conception at the back of my mind that I have like 'x number of years' where I yeah, you know, it's it's possible for me to have kids and then I would just be like focused on like living my best life and doing whatever I want to do.

Because at any point of time it would be possible for me to impregnate someone, right? If that was what I desired. So I think we have to accept that these realities are real and that we experience them. But I do think that it actually takes actively, like setting them aside and just yeah, I think for me it is really like a journey of faith for me because yeah, like I, I have... I believe that God has a plan for my life and that at the right time, the right things will happen.

And, you know, I shouldn't be panicking right now just because I don't see it happening. And it doesn't mean that there aren't things for me to do in my present that, you know, and I'm placed here to do things and that's what I want to do. I want to live for the where I am without fear of what is happening or what's not going to happen...um in the next 5 years. Yeah.

Charlotte Mei

That's so wise of you. And I think and I think that would be very helpful to a lot of people listening in. You know, I think for our generation, especially, a lot of us are focusing a lot more on our careers. And, you know, I would say settling down happens at a much later age.

I mean, I personally myself have been thinking about this whole like, you know, the biological realities of being a woman. And it can get really frustrating at times.

But I think it's so helpful what you said that a lot of these things are outside of our control. And you know it's, it's like having faith —like what you said. But it's I guess at the same time it's frustrating because it's not like you can do anything about it.

Amanda Chong

Yeah. I mean I think there are a lot of options for women right now. Right. Like whether that's freezing your eggs and I think everyone has to go on that very personal journey to to decide whether it is an option for you or not, right. And I do have friends who have decided to freeze their eggs. I do have friends who have had kids by themselves, right. You know, without having a partner.

But for me personally, you know, I don't feel like this is something that I want to do, right. Yeah. So I think it is important to go through that process with your...for yourself to really determine what options you want to take out and what's not for you. Yeah.

Charlotte Mei

Yeah, well, at least we have options now, right? Especially now being able to to freeze our eggs. Although it's not as simple as the process sounds.

Amanda Chong

Yeah, for sure

Charlotte Mei

So you mentioned earlier that you have a very busy life. There is no doubt about that. How do you manage, you know, the different aspects of your life, like your wellbeing, your mental health, physical health, etc.

Amanda Chong

Yeah so when, when Charlotte first asked me whether I wanted to come on, I was like, Charlotte, you can't look at me and ask me for like wellness tips...because I'm going to be just throwing the questions back at you...because I am *not* an ambassador for wellness.

You know, I can hear my mother laughing. Seriously if I told my mom 'I'm doing a podcast for wellness'. She will just like LOL for like a minute straight...okay...because she's always telling me about how, you know, like I need to take care of myself better etc.. But I think frankly, like this year I've been so busy.

Like generally, like what I try to do is to optimise as far as possible, right? Meaning that if I have to exercise, my exercise routine is going to be the most efficient one. So I'm very into it. Because that's like 25 minutes, right. You can, you can spare 25 minutes. I say this like I've been regular at doing it. I am not.

Charlotte Mei

When was the last time?

Amanda Chong

No, oh my gosh. Like months, months!

Charlotte Mei

Okay, it's a seasonal activity. We get it.

Amanda Chong

Exactly. Exactly. Okay. But when I'm in, like, my best state, right, then I do it like, twice a week, right. And it's very optimal, you know, when it comes to, like, skin care, I'm like, into those products that do everything at once, right?

So, so all of these things, I always tend to take the option, which is like the least resistance. Yeah. So what what has been...so backstory about my year, right. Like it's just been very very full on at work and I travel a lot for work. I sometimes spend 2 to 3 weeks overseas, come back for a couple of days or a week and then go again.

And then like I had a play going on in August. So I've just not been in Singapore that much. And you know, when you get out of Singapore, you are on a travelling schedule. A lot of the routines that you build up in your regular state that just completely falls away, right? And your body is like jet lagged.

Yeah. So, I mean, it has honestly been very, very challenging for me. But generally speaking, I like to like, be kind to my body, meaning that like I, I eat what I feel like eating. I've never counted calories, you know, because I just don't feel like that's going to bring me joy. So life is really hard and stressful as it is, and you want to, like, get as much joy as possible.

Charlotte Mei

100%

Amanda Chong

But the other thing is, I'm very into sleeping, even though I don't sleep that much. I always say that if I had superpowers, like it's not needing to sleep that much, right. And I, you know, I sleep maybe 5 to 6 hours in the regular day, and that's good enough for me. But I sleep more on weekends. But I'm very into like perfect sleep conditions.

So I have like, earplugs. This particular brand of earplugs because I've tried so many, right? And I love like the manta sleep mask. So it's like completely blacked out. I'm very into like taking like melatonin, magnesium, glycinate. All of those things that, you know, you see all those Tiktok reels, telling you that, these are the things that you have to do to get a good night's sleep. Like I am down for that.

Charlotte Mei

Look you're setting yourself up for success here. You're like, tick, tick, tick, tick. What is your brand of the earplugs that you use?

Amanda Chong

This one —Max Ultrasoft Earplugs. So good.

Charlotte Mei

Oh wow, you have a whole tub of it!

Amanda Chong

Yeah, like I've recommended it to so many people. I am the kind of the go-to person if you have like you need to find, like, things, paraphernalia associated with sleep...you come to me, like amongst my friends group.

But this one is so good because I actually first tried it in an Airbnb in Vietnam. I think it was in Ho Chi Minh City and terrible street noise. The moment I put this in my ears...absolute silence. And I had the best sleep ever and it's not expensive. You can get on Amazon and you get this giant tub right, and you can use it forever.

Charlotte Mei

Amazing...

Amanda Chong

So yeah, it's great.

Charlotte Mei

Okay. Wow. Okay, so it's an eye mask, earplugs. And then the supplements.

Amanda Chong

Yeah, no, and I use lavender essential oil as well.

Charlotte Mei

Oh I love that...okay, well, there you go. Like, look at that. And that's like your whole wellbeing recipe, right there for sleep.

Amanda Chong

Yeah. You know, because I need to sleep well and there have been times in my life when I have to struggle with sleep right?

And the thing is that we, we treat our bodies like computers. Or at least I do, right. Where it's like I'll be working late at night because I am more productive at night.

You know, there's this whole thing about chronotypes, which I actually believe is true, right? Where there are certain people who are just more functional in the morning and those people are optimised for living in society.

But there are people like me who, you know, if I back in like the caveman era, I was probably meant to be like some sort of like warden, guarding the cave from predators at night, because I am just so productive at night and in all of respects, like both in the legal respect, but also in terms of creative work, right.

So all my plays I've written on all nighters. So if I tried to be a functional human being and just operate within like the 9 to 6 p.m. of productivity, I would just wouldn't have done, I wanna say 3 quarters of things I've done in my life because that's just not the way I'm wired, right.

And I think like very often we try to to like, you know, I have to be a morning person. I have to like, be like Obama and get up at 5 a.m. and run. And that's just like the model of what a productive, optimised person is. But I don't think...we get to just allow our bodies to do their natural thing right.

And if my chronotype is at night, then I'll just organise my life such that, you know, I can work late into the night.

But then the difficulty there is that, as I said, like thinking, my body's a computer, so when I'm done working, I'm like, okay, now shut down. And actually it doesn't work that way. And so that's why I have a routine to kind of ease myself into shutting down, which involves, you know, showering, doing the skin care, keeping myself moisturised, right.

And then doing the whole, like, lavender oil. Putting my eye shades on and reading. So all of that is shutting down.

Charlotte Mei

No, you're right. I mean, I do that, too. I would just shut the computer, go straight to bed, and I'm like, okay, now it's time for me to sleep. And my mind's just racing and I dream a lot at night.

And I think that's just my brain, like, slowly shutting down, going, okay, let's just close all these tabs. You know? Yeah. No. So I like that reminder that we really do need that that routine before sleep.

Amanda Chong

Yeah. No, when...when you were talking about the tabs, right. I was just like looking at my, like 40 tabs that are open right now.

And I feel like that's a perfect metaphor for, for my brain because I'm always thinking about 10,000 different things at any one time. And shutting that down is going to take a certain amount of time. You can't just expect everything to be like Ctrl + Alt + Delete, right?

Charlotte Mei

Yes. I wish I could do that. My goodness, just save all these bookmarks and close it and I'll open it another day. But it doesn't happen that way.

Amanda Chong

Yeah, exactly

Charlotte Mei

So. Okay, so sleep is a big part of your personal well-being. And you said when it comes to your eating lifestyle, it's just listening to your body.

Amanda Chong

Yeah, because I love food

Charlotte Mei

Oh yeah, absolutely. Me too. Have you ever had any struggles with your eating lifestyle or your diet and anything like that? Especially, you know, you grew up in a girls school and I can imagine what that was like back in the 90s as well.

Amanda Chong

Yeah, actually, you know, I always had a pretty healthy relationship with food, so that wasn't something that I struggled with. Like, in fact, yeah, like I think was only like later in life when I, my metabolism started slowing and then I was just like, okay, you know, like now I get why there's all this kind of like hang ups about what I can eat or what I can't eat right?

Like, but I have seen people struggle a lot with food. Yeah. So it's but at the same time I also feel that it's such a...one of those pleasures in life, right? And so that's why I don't want to deprive myself of anything. And yeah, and I also just tend to eat when I'm hungry, right?

And I'm not sure you need to tell me from a nutritionist perspective whether this is good or not. But if I'm not hungry, I'm not going to like eat that much, right? And I sometimes my mom is like, 'Oh you know, you might give yourself gastric if you don't eat regular meals'. But if i'm like really not hungry, like, why do I need to abide by the conventions of having three meals, right?

Charlotte Mei

Fair enough. You know, I really like that approach and that this is something that I also advocate for, which is to listen to your body.

You know, as as babies, we are really good when you know, at saying 'No', like 'I'm done'. You know, a baby cries or pushes away the spoon when they're full.

And I feel that as adults we forget to like we forget how to listen to our hunger and fullness cues. And it's almost as if, 'Oh it's 12, it's time to eat.' But how is your body actually feeling?

So I like that you are very in tune with that. I would say maybe the only thing to to think about is the types of foods that you're eating, because if you're not eating as often, you would have to prioritise eating nutrient dense foods so that you are meeting your daily requirements.

Amanda Chong

And what is a nutrient dense food? What's an example?

Charlotte Mei

So for example...um...

Amanda Chong

It's like Brands Essence chicken?

Charlotte Mei

No, no, no, no, no, not exactly. So for example, if you are having a snack, you want to have something that has protein. Like some nuts or some greek yoghurt that will also, you know, that will keep you full. Adding some fruits in there so that you get your antioxidants, vitamins, minerals, vegetables, that sort of thing. Rather than y'know snacking on maybe crackers and peanut butter.

Amanda Chong

Okay, okay. So I'm very into greek yoghurt with like granola

Charlotte Mei

Oh perfect!

Amanda Chong

...and everything. So I feel like somehow I have...

Charlotte Mei

—Yes!

Amanda Chong

...done the Charlotte thing

Charlotte Mei

Yea for sure, greek yoghurt is actually one of my favourite go-tos in terms of like snacks or like a quick meal. But also going back to something you said earlier about your metabolism slowing down.

So a fun fact for everyone listening to this is that your metabolism doesn't slow down until...

Amanda Chong

Does it not??

Charlotte Mei

It doesn't, as a woman, until about your 60s or when you start menopause.

Amanda Chong

Okay, then what is it that I'm experiencing Charlotte?

Charlotte Mei

Exactly! So there's this huge misconception, but it's because when we enter, well, I wouldn't say adulthood, but our careers, we're not moving as much.

And it's because of that, that the I mean, you know, we've all heard the whole 'calories in' and 'calories out' thing. It's a very basic way of like explaining it. But essentially, we're not expending as much energy, but we're eating just as much. So it's not that our metabolism is slow, but we're just not as active as before.

Amanda Chong

But okay, so can I...I'm sure the science is right. But I just need to tell you anecdotally, like what I experienced and then you can kind of like tell me what is up, right.

But when I was in school, in secondary school, I would eat so much. I would literally have mee rebus and mee siam. Yeah. And potentially even a third main for my recess.

Like in fact, people used to gather around me to watch me eat because they just thought, this is ridiculous. Like how is this girl...just like and I eat really fast. Like, in fact, I was very into, I think, one of my careers... 'potential' careers would've been competitive eating...

Charlotte Mei

No way—

Amanda Chong

I was on a Japanese reality TV show before. It had nothing to do with eating. It was about the environment and conservation and I was a teenager. And there was this Japanese guy.

And we had like a competition on who could finish the entire bento fastest, right. And I was competing with this guy who was like 16 and I'm 14 and like I did...I can't remember...I'm pretty sure I put up a very good fight considering that I was like, smaller than him. Okay, So I'm getting into like eating quickly and that was and I would just eat whatever I wanted, right?

And I never deliberately exercised. I was in all these art CCAs, I'm sure we pranced around a lot, but it's not like we ran or did anything super physical, right?

And then I started working out at the age of 27. Okay. Because before that I was not into the gym. But at 27, I went through this really bad breakup and I needed to find something that I could do which blanked out my mind because I have so many thoughts.

We talked about the 40 tabs, right. And I realised that when I'm doing something that requires a lot of physical exertion, I can't do anything except focus on it because, you know, I'm not gifted in like athletics. So my entire brainpower is concentrated on that.

So and despite all of this exercising right, I feel that now I can't eat as much as I want without feeling more conscious that I'm putting on weight.

And I certainly, you know, I used to be very skinny and then I, I just, you know, my coat sizes have gone up, right? I mean, and that's just like to me, I feel like, okay, this is just normal. I'm a woman, right? But like, if that's not associated with metabolism, then what are we looking at?

Charlotte Mei

It could be a number of factors. I think also genetic makeup is really important here. Women, you know, I mean, like you as a kid, I was stick thin and then suddenly I'm like, why do I now have hips? Like, why do I now have these, like, you know, like love handles that were never there?

And that's also partly, you know, biological, like preparing us for motherhood—

Amanda Chong

—Childbirth

Charlotte Mei

Yes, exactly. But a lot of it really boils down to movement at the end of the day. So, okay, one of my biggest secrets...exposing for the first time...so when I don't, I mean, I love walking. I'm a big walker and I'm that weirdo that will walk in Singapore. Like if I know, you know, I can take the train, like for two stops, I'll be like, nah, I will walk it in this heat with my heavy bag because I love walking.

And I think that that really contributes to like the energy that I expend. And it's these little micro movements and it's also micro, but, you know, incidental movements that will help, you know, expend the energy and sort of like balance things out. So you're not like putting on weight per se.

Amanda Chong

Yeah, no, I can kind of see that because I can think of like, you know, when you're in school, there's so much more incidental walking and moving that, you would do, even if you're not in a sports CCA, right? Like, whereas, you know, when you're a regular office worker, I just show up in the office, I sit in my chair and then I leave at the end of the day and there is nothing that happens...

Charlotte Mei

—Yeah it's really tough

Amanda Chong

...in terms of physical activity. Yeah, yeah.

Charlotte Mei

Have you ever thought of like, I don't know. I think now the trend is to get like walking treadmills like under the desk. I don't know. I can't multitask when I work, so that will not work for me. But have you ever thought of anything like that?

Amanda Chong

So I do have a standing desk which I also have heard many like health reasons to have a standing desk. But shameful secret is I've never stood up and used it.

Charlotte Mei

Haha really?

Amanda Chong

It's so ridiculous. Yeah because I have one in my office and at home as well. And I was like, yeah, I need to get a standing desk. And I have never used it.

Charlotte Mei

That's hilarious. Yeah, it's just one of those things. It looks good on paper, but in reality, I'm like 'eh'.

Amanda Chong

Yeah. But, I would add something, right?

Which since we're talking about diet and everything, which I realise that there's a huge disparity in my diet or in what I feel like eating or my hunger levels depending on my menstrual cycle

Charlotte Mei

For sure. Yes. So leading up to your period, you would actually need more energy. So around about 300 calories. So a lot of people would say like, you know, I feel like I'm eating more before my period or I'm craving chocolates and this and that.

And that's...I really, really want to tell all women out there that this is completely normal. Like your body actually needs more during this time. So don't beat yourself up if you're eating more because your body actually needs it. And it is about 300 calories, which is not...it's not little. Y'know.

So that's yeah, it's completely normal. It's not it's not something to fix.

Amanda Chong

Yeah, yeah. Well, thanks for validating that for all of us. Because, y'know, in the span of my menstrual cycle, I can vary my weight, it can be a difference of 2 kilos, y'know. And that's why I don't really bother weighing myself, because it's always gonna be within this certain range, depending on where I am in my menstrual cycle and how hungry I am.

Charlotte Mei

Yeah, it's so good that you're so well tuned in to that. You know, almost like, 'yeah, it's that period, this makes sense, it makes sense that I'm eating more.'

I even have like a set of clothes that I go to when I'm at a certain time in my period. Cause I'm like, yup, this is bloating season. If you see me in my flowy clothes, y'know what's up! Nothing is hugging my, you know, my torso.

Amanda Chong

Yeah, yeah, no, I'm 100% with you on that. Yeah...

Charlotte Mei

It's so important

Amanda Chong

Yeah. And I mean, not just in terms of diet, right? But I feel that in terms of your emotions, there are certain changes that I observe in myself, in the lead up to my period, that, you know, just being aware of it makes you feel much more sane. When you are like just so emotional about everything or the day before my period, I will always have difficulty sleeping.

And I could have, I know, I could have done everything right, but it will just be just before my period. And I've heard that this is a PMS symptom for some women. And that's why I'm very into like everything periods. Because I feel that it affects women in so many ways bodily, emotionally.

And we just have to be more aware of these things because it just helps us feel that we are not insane.

Charlotte Mei

Yeah, yeah, it's that validation that you totally need. And it's so important for partners to know this as well, but also this brings me to the next point, which is your period care reviews on Instagram that I love!

Everything from like cooling pads, which I didn't know existed, koala bear shaped pads, these like heating packs, like walk me through that entire, you know, journey of doing these reviews and wearing them...

Amanda Chong

Yeah. So, so for me, like, I have always been very into my period, right? Simply because I had very, very bad menstrual cramps and till today like apparently there's nothing wrong with any of my lady bits.

Because I've done the whole gynae thing, done every single kind of possible check, y'know, we can do. And I know a lot of women who have gone through this journey and there just aren't enough resources out there.

And for me, when I was a teenager, I used to get terrible cramps and like really, really heavy flow. And it would mean that I had to skip school, right? Like I would actually have to just go and get to the sickbay and lie down because I just could not continue. And I always felt that there was this kind of idea that, like, this is not a proper excuse, y'know, or you feel bad about it.

Like, this is not really a medical reason. I don't know why we had, that it's just not valid. And maybe it's because we don't talk about it enough. And when I went to JC, I realised that like some of my male classmates, had like all of these, like strange ideas about periods.

For example, I told one of them was like, 'Yeah, I'm, I think I'm having my period.'

And then like, I went to the bathroom and I came out. He was like, 'Oh so you're done with your period now?'

And I was like, 'No, dude is not like, you know, going to like, lay an egg or something.'

Charlotte Mei

That's hilarious.

Amanda Chong

Yeah. And this is like in JC, right? And you are 17, 18. You definitely should know more.

And I think some of them even thought that it was just one day. Meaning that, you know, you learn in bio right? 28 days and then, so they think that your period is one day and then the cycle starts again, right?

Charlotte Mei

Oh boy. I wish...

Amanda Chong

Yeah, me too. And that's when I decided to start my blog Mensturate.livejournal.com, which does not exist. So don't try to look for it, if you are.

Charlotte Mei

Aww man...

Amanda Chong

Because it's so embarrassing. But basically I would just talk very, very frankly about my period problems, right. Which includes getting my period in the middle of a 3 hour math prelim. And because I have such terrible cramps and heavy flow, I basically described it as 'by the time I stood up after the 3 hour exam, on the on the back of my uniform —my skirt it was like the atlas of an apocalyptic world.' Y'know, and like someone behind me had to lend me a hoodie to tie around my waist.

And then I had to go home and take all my pills because I had all these painkillers and sit another 3 hour exam in the afternoon.

Charlotte Mei

Oh my...

Amanda Chong

And it's always just been like just very full on, very intense. And I just felt like, okay, you know, I want people to know how hard it can be. And, and hence I had this blog, right?

I think that's always just been my kind of way of talking about like periods, even amongst my friends, in my writing.

And then when it got to the pandemic and I was just cooped up at home and not having any social interaction like the rest of us, I just thought like, okay, you know what? I'm going to try all these fancy pads and see what's up, right.

And that just became my way of alleviating pandemic boredom. And yeah, and like, kind of, I learned so much and one of my friends made me, like she handsewed pads for me...you know, reusable pads.

Charlotte Mei

No..wow

Amanda Chong

Yeah. Like she just asked me, like, 'hey, what's your...what is your preferred size?'

And I said, 'Oh I need the pad that is like, bigger than my face...'

Charlotte Mei

Super long

Amanda Chong

The kind that is like looks like a diaper. Yeah, I need that. And she just made it for me and I love that, you know. Because I only use pads because I do not want to deal with so much drama, y'know. And I have very bad cramps, so I feel like ok there's already one main character in the story. I don't really wanna insert like a cup or anything.

I mean I know friends who have said that this is an absolute game changer, but for me, I'm like, I can only focus on one thing. I'm not a multitasker.

And so I've, I've since discovered like, there's so many wonderful like sustainable solutions for people who prefer pads or like...

Charlotte Mei

...Or like period underwear.

Amanda Chong

Yeah. Period underwear is so fantastic. I use the Airism one

Charlotte Mei

That's from Uniqlo right?

Amanda Chong

Yeah, Uniqlo Airism period underwear

Charlotte Mei

I haven't tried that one. But I use this, it's a local brand it's called Mooncheeks, what I really like about it is that they actually look pretty. Because a lot of period underwear is just like some black thing and just it looks very like boring, but this one has like a nice little lace and then I wear one at night.

It's such a grandma panty like situation, but it's so comfortable and you feel so safe in it. Yeah. I love period underwear.

Amanda Chong

Yeah, me too. And, well, you're now as a woman in my 30s. The other ancillary benefit of your underwear that I really appreciate is that it's kind of like control underwear, you know, because it cuts quite high.

Charlotte Mei

Yes, yes, yes, you're right.

Amanda Chong

You know, when you get like very bad bloating and it just I mean, it doesn't cinch you in, in an uncomfortable way. But it kind of like just keeps things like, oh okay, y' know, the general shape.

Charlotte Mei

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. It keeps it together.

Amanda Chong

Yeah. And the Uniqlo one, the reason why I really like is because it's like a seamless, right.

And I need that when I'm wearing my office clothes.

Charlotte Mei

So many good tips. And what's your go-to pad...wow and this is not a question you hear every day on every podcast. But yes, what is your go-to pad?

Amanda Chong

Okay. I really I, I've always used Kotex. I'm really into Kotex and the only way I can describe it is the one that is bigger than your face, lah right. It's really like if I hold it up, it's going to be like this big.

That's the one that I use at night. And actually, right, like, it is pretty expensive, you know? I mean, that's one thing about pads, but I'm also a fan of the cooling pads like the ones, y'know, I had a review on it in back in my pandemic period days....

Charlotte Mei

—I saw that and think, yeah, something about blowing—

Amanda Chong

...so sceptical

Charlotte Mei

It's something about blowing air, right? On your lady parts. I read that and I was like 'I don't think I can handle this'

Amanda Chong

Oh it's so good. As someone who, like, was sceptical at first. Now I absolutely, I use them because, especially if you're on a like a long day, right, I feel that it increases the longevity of your pad.

Okay. You know, like it actually makes you feel comfortable for a longer period of time, right. And if you're going to spend...okay, to me like obviously you should change your pad whenever you need to. But, y'know, sometimes you just want it to last longer and like, you don't have time to keep changing it and it's still comfortable, you're not going to like, change it.

Because I come from like a tradition of having to change my pad every hour when it's really heavy y'know?

So the longer I can, I can let it rest, the better it is for me. Yeah. So, I mean, to me, I really just feel that the more we talk openly about this, the more people can understand, right?

People who don't go through this experience

And we can just like build empathy and realise that this is actually a proper health struggle, right? And yeah, you know, you see all those like Instagram reels of men who are trying, they have like

some weird device that like, puts up, like lets them experience the pain of a period. And then they're all like freaking out and we're like, 'Oh this is what we go through every month, right?'

Charlotte Mei

Yeah, yeah, I'm exactly the same as you. My period cramps are so debilitating. It really feels like someone is wringing my womb. Like, just doing this. Yeah. And it's so painful. But yeah, like you, I went to see my doctor and they're like, 'Yeah, this is fine. Just some people experience it'.

And I remember back, you know, like when I was working at a company or when I was in school, I felt lame that I had to say 'Oh my cramps are so bad, I need to stay home', because not everyone experiences it the same.

So I can imagine for someone who experiences pain, like two out of ten would be like, 'huh?' y'know, like 'just that pain? And you're staying home?' But I'm like, 'No, my pain is like 15 out of 10'. And it's so hard to get someone to understand that.

Amanda Chong

And I just feel that again, this is one of those like things that if men experience this, that would be a concept of *menstrual leave*, right? Yeah. It's just because that a lot of the systems that we work with are structured around a history of male domination.

And sometimes like all of these little things, which actually is not that little to us, that it doesn't get factored into like the way that yeah, like our HR systems, our policies are run.

And I mean even when it comes to like taxing menstrual products or like whether, the conversation of whether it should be provided free, especially maybe to students, y'know. I mean that's not even something that we are talking about in this country yet.

But I feel that, you know, like it is to me, I hope that conversation goes in that direction eventually, right. That yeah, because it is such, I would actually call it like a public health cost, right. That like women are facing. I mean some women experience like great amounts of pain or have mood related symptoms, right.

And so often we are just made to feel like, okay, this is your burden to bear. You know, like just be quiet about it. Be a good worker. Yeah.

But then you realise that it is actually pretty tough, especially if the pain is like 15 out of 10 as you were describing.

Charlotte Mei

Yeah, I mean, hopefully we'll see a day where HR has a chart of everyone's menstrual cycle.

Um...I've taken up so much of your time, Amanda. But I have three very quick questions to ask you before we go. So one is, what is on your bucket list at the moment? What is something that you really want to do?

Amanda Chong

Well for me, right? I would love to take one of my plays overseas. I've been thinking about this a lot, right. And maybe even *Psychobitch*. I've been thinking, y'know, that would just be a very fun opportunity. And I mean, because again, the performer of *Psychobitch* is a really good friend of mine, it would be like a new adventure for us to pursue together.

Charlotte Mei

Oh that would be exciting

Amanda Chong

So that's something, I'm thinking about.

Charlotte Mei

Well, write that, write that down on a paper. Manifest it the way you did when you were 15. And the second thing is, what do you do for fun outside of what you've spoken about today —like writing and, y'know, exploring more of the creative side of things?

Amanda Chong

I feel that all of my things, all my hobbies are like part of my artistic career.

So for me, like, I really, really love reading and I love watching plays and seeing what other people are creating. And so that's how I spend like my *fun* kind of time because I don't really I don't watch Netflix. That's like another quirk that I have. Like I, I—

Charlotte Mei

—Totally fair—

Amanda Chong

—Yeah, I guess I feel that I don't have enough time. So like, I, I like, 'I can't watch Netflix because I got to read books'. But the reality is that I don't watch Netflix but I watch a lot of TikTok and Instagram reels.

Charlotte Mei

Fair enough, look like what you said —just optimising, right? What's the most efficient? So this is efficient entertainment for you.

Amanda Chong

Yeah. So I actually spend a lot of time just blanking out, which I think is very important...

Charlotte Mei

For sure

Amanda Chong

...Because a lot of things connect in my brain when I am blanking out, right?

Like people in my family, like they'll describe it as screensaver mode where like it looks like nothing is going on. I'm like just staring into space, but, you know, I feel like that's when I'm like looking through the tabs in my brain and trying to form connections.

Charlotte Mei

For sure. For sure. Yeah, I experience that too. Like, it's like the best ideas come when you're taking a shower or when you're on the toilet right..

Amanda Chong

—Yeah, or just walking

Charlotte Mei

...Because you're actually not thinking, yeah.

And the last question is, you know, I ask all my guests this question. It is, you know, like we all love food and, you know, this podcast about nutrition, food and everything under that umbrella. What is a dish that you've not had for a very long time that you know, that you crave for? Like it brings you back to a special memory, perhaps.

Amanda Chong

Well, I think it's TeoChew Mui

Charlotte Mei

Oh my favourite...

Amanda Chong

Like, I feel really, really love TeoChew Mui. I haven't had it in a while, right, and its like so comforting and it reminds me of being sick and a child. Right? Because that's what you know usually...

Charlotte Mei

Haha what a memory...

Amanda Chong

Yeah, well no, but it's like, don't you love being sick when you are a kid, right?

I mean, I'm not talking about anything particularly prolonged. But when you stay home from school and you know you have a bad cold and then you just lie in bed and I would read books all day, and then I would get like porridge. And yeah, I feel like that's something that I don't usually eat that often. I mean, it's 100% still my comfort food. But I haven't had it in a while.

Charlotte Mei

Okay, that's so interesting that you mention that because I was in Europe and living there for five years. And every time I came back to Singapore, the first dish I had to have was TeoChew Mui. Which is what TeoChew porridge for, for those of you listening in are not familiar with it.

Yeah It's my go-to food. I mean, it's nothing. I don't think it's like a Singaporean like it's not one of like our, you know, like top ten national dishes or anything.

But it's so comforting, like whoever the person is in the kitchen whipping this up, like they could be like it feels like their family member cooking for me. It's like home cooked food.

Amanda Chong

Yeah. No. And I love the diversity, you know, and yeah, how warm and comforting it is. And even though you can go a bit wild and get like, spicy, ikan belis, right? But like, it's still grounded by the TeoChew Mui itself.

Charlotte Mei

Yes, yes, yes. Do you have a favourite spot to have it?

Amanda Chong

Oh I always go to the one in Upper Bukit Timah. Yeah, I can't remember the name because, you know, it's like one of those places where, like, you just go, you know it, by where it is. Yeah. But it's like, near Beauty World.

Charlotte Mei

Okay, I'll go find out the address. I'll put in the show notes for anyone who wants to check it out but, thank you so much for being on the show, Amanda, I really appreciate your time, it was so fun.

Amanda Chong

Yeah. Thank you so much for having me and for, like, correcting so many of my misconceptions about nutrition and metabolism, so I really needed that.

Charlotte Mei

Oh that was such a great conversation, I had so much fun chatting with Amanda, and trust me when I say that it could have gone on for another whole hour. I was just very mindful of putting out an extremely long episode.

I hope you enjoyed the conversation. You learned a thing or two about Amanda —how she deals with everything on her plate, her sleep routine, how she goes about her eating lifestyle, and much, much more.

As always, don't forget to rate the show so that we can keep bringing in content that you enjoy. And for more nutrition content, follow me on social media and subscribe to my weekly newsletters.

All the links for that will be in the show notes, see you in the next one!

For the full transcript of this episode, head over to my website at thecharlottemei.com/podcast.