



Nutrition: The Missing Link in Mental Health Treatment

with
Dr. Leslie Korn

Transcript of Video 1:
The Role of Poor Nutrition in
Mental Health Issues

Juliet Austin & Clinton Power

Mind Body Training Institute

TRANSCRIPT OF VIDEO 1: THE ROLE OF POOR NUTRITION IN MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

Juliet Austin: Hi. Welcome to the Mind Body Training Institute. I'm Juliet Austin, co-founder of the Institute with Clinton Power. And welcome to our free video training series called, Nutrition: The Missing Link in Mental Health Treatment.

This free training series will consist of 3 videos that will be delivered to your inbox over the next several days. Each video is about 20 minutes in length, and in this first video, I talk with Dr. Leslie Korn about the role poor nutrition plays in mental health treatment.

You might be surprised at some of the things you learn in this training series. And I hope you enjoy this first video.

So Leslie. Hi there.

Dr. Leslie Korn: Hi there. Great to see you.

Juliet Austin: So thank you so much for doing this course with us. And first of all, for people that don't know you, could you talk a bit about you know your background and how you got interested in nutrition and mental health?

Dr. Leslie Korn: Oh I'd be so happy to. It was really quite serendipitous because when I was 20, I went on an adventure and ended up in the jungle of Mexico. I got sick with absolutely everything there was to get sick with, and there was no doctor, no roads, no electricity, no running water. It was really roughing it.

I relied on the local women of a small indigenous community where I had strung my hammock to help me heal from all of these maladies. I

discovered that they were using plants and foods and special pastes and preparations. They were going out to the sea and gathering sea urchins — they were just so creative.

That sparked my interest in natural medicine and the role of foods.

Now fast forward after 10 years when I went back to the United States to continue my graduate studies.

I was trained as a bodyworker. I found that as I was touching people, they had so much pain in their body. And as they talked about their physical pain, they talked about their emotional pain too that was connected to it.

So I discovered that just making some simple recommendations like chamomile tea or ginger tea — some of the special things the women had taught me — reduced the pain they experienced. And all of this came together and led to my training in psychotherapy and in behavioral medicine.

So the 3 main streams that have influenced my work in nutrition, not only nutrition but psychotherapy and bodywork, and over the last 40 years of clinical practice working with mind and body, I have found that nutrition is the missing element in our work in mental health. That people who make changes in their nutrition benefited from the psychotherapeutic work exponentially.

And those who didn't, those who continued to drink Coca-Colas or way too much coffee, made some progress, but they didn't make it through to fully what their goals were. So that's a little bit about the broad brush of what led me into this whole field of mental health nutrition.

Juliet Austin: Now you have what's your formal training exactly again? You have an interesting formal background.

Dr. Leslie Korn: Well, after my training in the jungle of Mexico, I returned to the jungle of Boston, specifically the deep dark jungle of Harvard Medical School. And it's good I had training in the jungle of Mexico so I could cope with the craziness of the department of psychiatry.

So my first process was to get a master's in public health at the School of Public Health at Harvard. And there what was so fascinating is I was really interested in midwifery and nutrition.

I actually conducted research on the role of papaya and its contribution to health, and I'll talk about that later because there are some very interesting applications of what the papaya fruit gives us that's so important to depression, for example.

And so I studied that there, and I worked in midwifery. I was surrounded by all of these people interested in molecular biology to solve the world's problems, so I was a bit of a fish out of water there.

But then from there, I went into the department of psychiatry at the medical school. I was very fortunate to be able to introduce touch therapy into a very conventional psychodynamic, psychoanalytic department. But that's where I got my formal training in psychotherapy.

From then, I completed my Ph.D. in behavioral medicine, really applied psychophysiology — the idea of how does the nervous system work — because I trained really as a traumatologist working about the effects of trauma on mind and body. And that's really where I've lived ever since.

Juliet Austin: So it's such an exciting background you have that formal and that nontraditional training, which is what's really cool about you, I think. Let's move on and talk about nutrition and mental health a bit here.

What type of diets — I know there's a lot of research in this area now, and you've had a lot of experience in this area as well. But what type of diets would you say are playing the biggest role in worsening — or

I guess causing would be too strong of a word — worsening mental health symptoms?

Dr. Leslie Korn: I think you could, Juliet, you could say causing. There's very clear evidence that specific foods like refined sugar, refined flour, and the trans fats are the 3 major culprits. And they're called pro-inflammatory foods. They are foods that cause a low-level fire in the system.

Now think about, we stub our toe, and our toe blows up, and it's hot, and it's red, and it's painful. That's a form of inflammation, and our white cells come to soothe that toe. And then over maybe a week's period, we put some ice on it and some salve, and it calms down, and it's healed.

So, inflammation is a positive experience, except what we're doing when we're eating a lot of sugar and refined flour and those trans fats is that we're stubbing our toe inside of our body all the time.

We know from the research that inflammation underlies depression and anxiety, for example, and now the research is extending even into autism spectrum, bipolar — So there is absolutely no question that these foods are major factors in contributing to poor mental health. That's not to say that adverse child events don't make their contribution, but biologically, these foods are a disaster for our health.

Juliet Austin: And there's just — still we keep on eating them, or at least most of us do. I don't eat much of them anymore, but most of us do. And there's not very much attention paid to it both in our general society but also in the mental health field.

I mean it's starting to, but there's still not that much attention paid to it, which is why we wanted you to do this course because I think it's really valuable information that psychotherapists, naturopaths, and other wellness practitioners should at least be aware of — at least how much research there is out there that is supporting these ideas.

Dr. Leslie Korn: Absolutely. I think part of this underlies this general philosophy that we undertake in psychotherapy is really understanding the cause and not covering the symptoms.

I think we're in a struggle between the idea of "Oh, you're depressed. Oh, you have a diagnosis of bipolar. Let's take a pharmaceutical and suppress those symptoms" — not address the cause, but let's suppress and manage those symptoms.

I think it's a real philosophical shift, whether it's in physical health or emotional health that we really want to understand the cause.

Yes, if I have a client who's been abused and is extremely anxious and is so anxious, they are suffering a great deal. Yes, it's true that a short-term benzodiazepine may be called for. But long-term chronic use of benzodiazepines we know really disrupt the brain and brain function.

And so I got into this field because I really wanted to help people really align themselves with the gifts that Mother Nature gave us and say, "All right. If I'm out of balance, how can I find the cause and then restore my balance through more natural means?"

Get off those benzos sooner, use them acutely, but then find some alternatives that won't cause other side effects. And that's really the gist of where this field of mental health nutrition is.

Juliet Austin: And worked more towards healing rather than just covering the symptoms.

One of the things that you didn't mention there are the financial interests of the pharmaceutical industry and stuff which is playing a big role too. I mean you know not a lot of people are making money other than you know some farmers off of Whole Foods, right?

I mean there's no big — none of the processed food industry gets any money, the pharmaceutical companies don't get any money from that.

So I think that's an important thing to remember.

Dr. Leslie Korn: It's absolutely true. And as you know from because we know each other, I have a very strong position on social justice and access and the political nature of our work. We can't separate it from what we do and how oppression contributes to poor mental health as well and food access and food insecurity; it's all related holistically.

We know that the pharmaceutical companies started promoting the myth — and it really is a myth, it's never been proven — that depression is due to serotonin deficiency or serotonin uptake deficiency in the brain in 1988, when Prozac came out. And so there has been a very concerted effort to promote and revise all of these SSRIs and SNRIs.

And yet there's excellent research that suggests they do not work. And when they do work, there's some research supporting the fact that they're really placebos working.

And yet we know there are significant side effects that are quite deleterious to our clients. So anytime we can find some alternative means — and you're absolutely right, not only do clinicians not always have access and know about this, but I've had many patients that say, "Why didn't I know this was an option?"

And so I think that's where clinicians can even know what's out there even if they're not going to carry it out themselves knowing who to make referrals to. It's going to be very beneficial to their practice.

Juliet Austin: So in terms of mental health conditions where nutrition helps, I would say probably all conditions. But can you talk specifically — you've talked a little bit about depression and anxiety, you mentioned ADHD. Can you talk a little bit more maybe of some of the research or some of what you know about some of the other conditions as well like PTSD, bipolar, maybe addiction?

Dr. Leslie Korn: Well yes, and that's quite a lot. I think we can consider that there are some basic underlying influences that are common to all. I think inflammation is one of them.

So any time that we can reduce inflammation in the body, and there are 2 approaches in this work — And I think it is analogous to what we do in psychotherapy. We reduce the triggers, and we increase the capacity to cope at the same time.

And so everything that I talk about, I ask you to consider: how do we do this as psychotherapists or as healers in other fields? We want to reduce the exposure to the trigger.

Let's say your friend is pushing you to drink, well, maybe that's not such a good friend. So we reduce that exposure. And then we increase your capacity to cope and learn how to say no, or learn how to set boundaries, learn how to set limits.

So we have the same thing in what we do in, let's say, inflammatory process: we want to reduce the exposure. That's the trans fats, that's the refined sugar, and that's the white flour – which, by the way, are addictive. There's no question that they are addictive substances.

And then we also want to eat in certain ways that reduce our cravings for those substances. And that's generally making sure we're getting enough protein.

Protein is so important for depression, really for all of the mental illnesses, because proteins contain what are called amino acids. And amino acids are the building blocks of our neurotransmitters in the brain, and that is what affects our mood and our focus.

For example, when I'm working with a child with a diagnosis of ADHD, I want to make sure that they're not getting, let's say, Cheerios and cow's milk in the morning, but maybe they're getting bacon and eggs. Because that's what's going to help them focus, rather than give them

this quick energy that makes them often nervous and anxious as some of these refined foods does.

Juliet Austin: And healthy fats would fit in there too, right?

Dr. Leslie Korn: Absolutely. Healthy fats. Yeah.

Well, I was going to kind of think about depression. So the idea of reducing inflammatory foods is a good first step and then replacing these foods. It's not like I'm asking people to join a nunnery or a monastery or go sit on the mountains of the Himalayas and give up everything.

It's identifying what might be poison for my system — and it really is poison, no question about it — and how can I find a good replacement for it.

So when you say good fats, yes, get rid of the canola oil or the corn oil. But how about some nice good raw butter or some good olive oil? So you can still have your fats, but you're just changing out the quality so that one is poison and one actually becomes medicine for the brain.

These are some of the first steps that we do for depression, anxiety, ADHD.

Juliet Austin: A lot of people don't realize how much canola, soy oil, all these trans fats, and sugars that are in processed foods without even realizing that you're eating all that stuff. It's not just the sugar; it's also the trans fats that are in these foods.

Dr. Leslie Korn: Absolutely. There are hidden things in these foods. We know, for example, that even a lot of people think, "All right, I'll give up sugar. Let me try some artificial sweeteners."

But they often don't realize that things like aspartame really exacerbate

mood disorders. There's quite a bit of research on exacerbation and bipolar. And so what I tell my clients is if you can't pronounce it, do not eat it.

And I really encourage people to begin cooking fresh foods. I think that's another step, not just because it's healthier for you, but it can become almost a meditation and time for self-care. That's part of what we do when we're eating well for ourselves and our families.

Juliet Austin: Well this is a good place to end video 1, Leslie. Thanks so much for your time and valuable information. And we'll see you again in video 2.

Dr. Leslie Korn: Thank you, Juliet. It's my pleasure.