



Nutrition: The Missing Link in Mental Health Treatment

with
Dr. Leslie Korn

Transcript of Video 2:
The Revolution in Mental Health
and Nutrition Research

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TRANSCRIPT OF VIDEO 2: THE REVOLUTION IN MENTAL HEALTH AND NUTRITION RESEARCH

Clinton Power: Hello, Leslie. It's so great to be back here with you talking about nutrition and mental health. And I want to ask you what do you say to people that have misgivings or misunderstandings about the role of nutrition in mental health? I think for many people, they don't even think there's a connection.

Dr. Leslie Korn: I think you're right. We haven't done a very good job of helping people understand the connection between what we eat and how we feel and some of the symptoms we can experience. I begin very simply with people — I have in my book a questionnaire called the Food Mood Diary, and I ask people to write down what they eat and then how they feel.

And it's very common that people feel up and down during the day — their energy goes up, their energy goes down; their mood goes up, their mood goes down — and this is where I begin with people because they don't realize that mood follows food. When we put food in — if it's the right food, our energy goes up; we feel balanced and strong.

But, have you ever noticed, if you have just a doughnut and a cup of coffee, you feel good for about, oh, maybe an hour, and then you plummet. And you want to bark at someone, you're tired, you grab some more donuts and coffee, and you go up and down like this throughout the day.

So just like in our work in therapy, it's about awareness and helping people make connections between their behaviors and their feeling states and their relationships — kind of the whole gestalt. I think nutrition is a piece like that as well. And so I begin with awareness and sharing very simply some of these principles.

Clinton Power: I love that strategy. It's such a simple intervention, but I imagine it can just raise the awareness of the person in such a short amount of time starting to think about what they're eating and the connection with their moods. What are some of the inaccurate beliefs you've heard from your clients and people over the years about nutrition and mental health?

Dr. Leslie Korn: I think the biggest inaccuracy is that there's one right diet for everyone. Oftentimes, we're subjected to these fads every year. There's the paleo, there's the vegan, there's the vegetarian, there's the low-carb, there's the high-carb, there's everything, and they're usually a lot of marketing routines too.

But they keep people riled up not knowing what they should do, and then they jump on the bandwagon thinking, "All right, this has solved the question. This is what I should be doing."

But the fact is, we are diverse peoples who evolved genetically and environmentally in very different locales in the world. For example, the right diet for a patient of mine that, let's say, lives in northern Alaska who is an Inuit who is indigenous to Alaska —

What has her body evolved to eat and thrive on? Fat, blubber, protein, almost no carbohydrates. Now when she ate, and her ancestors ate that for millennia, she was very healthy — no heart disease, no mental illness.

But that would not be the right diet, let's say, for a client of mine who's from India or Africa where vegetarian-style diets rich in legumes and vegetables — all those wonderful curries and very small amounts of animal protein — nourished those people.

And we carry those genetics. No matter where we live in the world, we carry the genetics of our ancestors. And so understanding our own right diet for who we are is the most important step we can make and not listen to what the latest fads are, what other people, even physicians, are telling us to do.

Clinton Power: That's such great information, isn't it? Because we all know ourselves and probably friends and family, so many people undertake diets, and they fail. Why do you think that is?

Why do so many people change their diet? Maybe it works for a while, but then they just — it fails, and they go back to their previous weight or mental health problems.

Dr. Leslie Korn: Yeah. Well, I think because it's often not satisfying, it's not congruent with what their body needs. I think everybody's a little different — I gave you those examples of let's say Alaska and the Inuit and India.

We're all a mixture really from all over the world, and so we generally carry the mixture of our parents. That means that some of us need more protein and more fat. Some of us need more carbohydrates and less protein.

And so what happens is if we really need more protein and fat and less carbs, but we say, "Oh, fat's bad for us, I'm going to not eat it," the body rebels in time. And the mind does too, and it says, "No, I need more of this." And so we're really incongruent with what are our body needs.

That's why I talk a lot about this idea of really getting in touch with what's truly satisfying, what we really need to feel good. I believe, deep down, people know what truly nourishes them. They'll benefit from just a little bit of information about the what and the why.

Clinton Power: Well let's kind of move into talking about research because I know a lot of people want to know what is the leading research that supports this link between nutrition and mental health. Where are we up to at the moment in that research on this?

Dr. Leslie Korn: We're really in a revolution in the research, it's very exciting. And we were

talking about pharmaceuticals earlier — Even now, the pharmaceutical companies are integrating vitamins into their formula because they know that the brain needs B vitamins, in particular B6, to synthesize our mood chemicals. So, there's a lot of great research going on.

One is that the B vitamins, particularly B6 and B12, are very important for cognitive function. One of the major symptoms we see in elders, for example, is cognitive decline, and it's often misdiagnosed as a dementia when in fact they're really low in vitamin B12. It's a very simple intervention that can improve their cognition, really all of us at any age.

The other big revolution that we have is about the second brain, the microbiome, the fact that our gut is really like a big garden in our body. Anyone who gardens knows that we've got to have the right mix of soil, we've got to add the right natural fertilizer, prepare it, and move it around before we add the seeds so the flowers can grow.

Our gut is like that; our intestines are like that. So, we know that if we feed our garden the right fertilizer, meaning the right food, not only flowers will grow but in the form of brain chemicals that make us happy.

And the revolution here that's of so interest to us and mental health is related to anxiety, that we have these anti-anxiety chemicals in our gut. We used to think that people who were anxious, people who had colitis needed to calm down. And we'd teach them breathing, and we'd teach them relaxation exercises.

But now we know that it's really their gut that needs to be better nourished in order to nourish those anti-anxiety chemicals in the brain. We make more of those chemicals in our gut than in the brain.

And so that's another piece of research that's been quite revolutionary, and it's led to calling our gut the "second brain." That's how important it is to our mental health.

Clinton Power: It's just extraordinary. Now let's talk about — What do you say are the top 5 nutrients or foods that really improve mental health and cognition?

Dr. Leslie Korn: Great. Well, there is no question that good-quality oils improve our mood and our cognition. We know that if a mother is pregnant and eating lots of good fats, that this will prevent learning disorders 10 years later in her children.

That means the obverse is true: we're finding that low-fat diets are making children vulnerable to learning disorders because the brain is 60% fat. It needs good fats. So good-quality fats like even a good-quality leaf lard, butter, raw butter, olive oil, even sesame oil. They should be virgin oils.

But in addition, supplementing — we know the research shows that supplementing with anywhere from 2,000 to 9,000 milligrams of fish oil a day is very effective, not only for depression but for bipolar. And we're using high-dose fish oil in the psychotic disorders as well.

Now just one caveat that's so important to this whole field: we need to have a very healthy functioning liver in order to emulsify those oils. And so, the other complement to those fats is a lot of those bitter greens and the bitter greens like arugula, like dandelion.

Even the practice after dinner of eating bitters or drinking some bitters is an old practice we know in the British Isles; I don't know if you practice this in Australia. The drinking of bitters stimulates the liver. It breaks down those good fats so they can be used by the brain for good mental health.

So this is why our ancestral knowledge has so much to teach us. The other things I love for good mental health --

We know the fatty fishes like salmon, raw nuts — not roasted nuts and not peanuts, but raw almonds — are one of the best foods for mental health. There is the Ayurvedic medicine has a saying, "10 almonds a day keeps the doctor away."

So bone broth, a very important source of lysine which is anti-anxiety, we use it for panic attacks. Anything — certainly, I don't want to leave out the fresh fruits and vegetables and a combination of raw and cooked. Those are among some of the best foods for our mental health.

Clinton Power: Wonderful. I mean that's a great start for people just to think about that. I'm not sure if we have a tradition of drinking bitters, but we do have lemon, lime, and bitters. Does that count?

Dr. Leslie Korn: Well, I don't know. I may have to come over and test it out with you, Clinton. I forgot, one of the best foods are eggs.

Eggs are one of the best foods for mental health and for cognitive health. We've had a lot of myths about eggs not being good for you, but they are Mother Nature's gift to the brain, especially good for maintaining memory, so 2 eggs a day at a minimum for mental health.

Clinton Power: I want to ask you about animal fats. Everyone has an opinion about animal fats, and there are people who think vegan diets are best. What's your perspective on that? I know you're saying that there's no one diet that works for all, but animal fats do seem to cop a bad rap.

Dr. Leslie Korn: And that really goes back to very bad research from the 1950s. I won't bore you with that research, but I can certainly provide you with the references.

Back in the 50s, they conducted very bad research suggesting that meat and fat and high cholesterol was the cause of heart disease, when in fact, now we know it's actually refined carbohydrates that cause inflammation in the arteries that are the culprit. That myth has taken a long time to die, but the research bears this out quite clearly.

Now let's remember that there's this saying, "Asking people to change their diet is like asking them to change their religion." Diet and food is almost like an ideology. We all have our opinions.

As a recovering vegetarian and vegan, I can speak to the fact that it's very ideological. We've got our ideas about food, and we're going to stick to it. But this approach that I'm suggesting creates a place for everyone.

There are people — I mentioned the Inuit; they have a 90% diet of saturated fat. They weren't dying at a young age until refined flour, alcohol, sugar, and soy was introduced into their diet. Saturated fat never caused heart disease in them or any kind of depression.

On the other hand, we know through the very exciting research that's going on now with Dr. Bredesen that some people with the genetic marker called the APOE marker — which is a risk factor for Alzheimer's disease that I write about and we'll talk about in this course — do not digest and metabolize saturated fats as easily.

This is the genetic basis for this. They do better with very little saturated fats. And that means everything from meat, red meat to coconut fat, for example. But let's remember that saturated fats and fats in general are required to metabolize the fat-soluble vitamins A, D, E, K.

And let me just throw one little more thing into this discussion that will get people all aquiver: there is no such thing as a vegan diet in nature. And in traversing the world's cultures, veganism is a construct that we've created. As an animal lover, I understand, I've been a vegan.

But if you travel the world, you will not find one culture that is — and I mean indigenous cultures, I mean traditional peoples of the world — there's not one area of the world where people are vegans. There's no such thing. And I think that this reflects the wisdom of traditional peoples around the world.

Now that doesn't mean that people can't survive on a vegan diet. They

are, but those are people who are already natural vegetarians because there's nothing that will make you sicker faster than if you're an Inuit or a natural carnivore and you switch to a vegan diet.

This can be the cause of many illnesses. In particular, I see this in many young people — because a lot of people of all ages — a lot of young people experiment, as well they should, with veganism and it can lead to very high levels of anxiety. That's one of the signs if you're not biologically meant to be a vegetarian.

But just to put a fine point on that. All cultures of the world integrate at least some kind of animal protein into their diet.

Clinton Power: Is there a way that you can find out, and perhaps it is experimentation — How do you find out what is the combination of foods and nutrients that would work best for you?

Dr. Leslie Korn: I work at a number of levels when I'm doing this with clients, and I've certainly written about this in my books to help clinicians walk through this process with clients. Again, it's very similar to what we do in psychotherapy when we're working with clients to ask them to identify what they need and how can they get what they need, whether it's from a relationship or a work life.

It really is about tuning into — So the first step is tuning in to how certain foods make me feel, not ignoring them.

For example, if I drink a lot of coffee on an empty stomach and it gives me a pain, well not to medicate it with a proton-pump inhibitor or an antacid and say, "Oh, I've got this pain, I better cover it up." It's to say, "Oh, maybe I'm not doing the right thing for myself."

So again, it's awareness and how we feel and respond to our foods is the first step. The Food Mood Diary is the second step that I do.

But there are also very — We can do testing in the laboratory. So when I'm working with people, we traverse through the simplest step through the more complex as those needs accrue.

I can do hair analysis because how we excrete minerals in our hair reflects our endocrine system, which reflects our mineral levels. That's a very complicated way to check that in the laboratory. There is also something called metabolic typing and metabolic testing through how we metabolize glucose.

It's kind of similar, Clinton, to how do you know what kind of fuel to put in your car? Well, I guess it came with directions. Are you putting in low-octane or high-octane?

And that's one way to think about the food we need. Am I a low-octane person? Can I get along with almost anything? Or am I a Jaguar, and I need a very high-octane specialized diet?

And that's where you work, that's the kind of thing I teach in the course and in my book. That's where you develop an increasingly sophisticated approach to this work.

Juliet Austin: This is such wonderful information, and I hope those people watching are getting very excited about the information you're sharing. I know you're going to be back very soon in video 3 to share more great information, so thanks so much, Leslie. I really appreciate it.

Dr. Leslie Korn: My pleasure, Clinton.