Introduction and Amber's Family Story

So I found, actually, I think it was a Thorne research document that had in there a lot of different things. And he was picky eater at the time. So what I did is I made him a banana peanut butter smoothie every morning for breakfast.

I put in their Omega, high dose vitamin B6, magnesium, probiotics. a multivitamin to be able to catch some of the things that may have been going on. Like I said, six months later, he's not on the autism spectrum anymore.

I was so confused at that time that I contacted the psychologist who did the original evaluation. And I asked, what am I supposed to make of this? And she said it doesn't matter.

He was not a borderline case. She said just keep doing what you're doing. So that's what we did. Your health is shaped by more than symptoms. Through real stories and expert insights, we explore how your genetics, environment, and daily choices affect your wellbeing.

We uncover root causes and share practical tools to help you find the healing you need. Welcome to the Forum Health Integrative Medicine Podcast. Welcome back everyone to our weekly podcast.

I'm really excited to be here today with Amber Shuey. She's one of our nurse practitioners and she has, I think, one the greatest stories. And honestly, you're going to tell me, I guess I don't want to say too much and be wrong, but how much this influenced how you practice medicine and that sort of thing.

But I'm really excited to have you. And I just want you to jump in and tell it, tell, me I, guess start with, start, with how, how decided to practice and then we'll segue into these personal experiences.

Maybe they're the one and the same. Okay. So I work as a health coach with Dr. Saxana and how I got what led me in that journey was my sons, actually both of my son.

I had a 36 year old son, he passed away last August. Yeah, I'm sorry, it's going to take me a minute to gather my thoughts here. There were inconsistencies with his brain that nobody really understood.

To make a long story short, the reason that I even found out that there was such a thing as health coaching and functional medicine was because of him.

I was looking for help. At that time, he was living in a group home. He was having grand mal seizures every couple of weeks. And he reminded me, honestly, of my dad who passed away of Parkinson's.

His brain function was so slow, his movement was very slow. 30 ish at the time and so I was really afraid and So that's what got me looking for some help.

I knew of the functional medicine concept because my younger son when he was eight He was diagnosed on the autism spectrum very high functioning on The Gifted end of things and It was just you know like He was having a hard time with stress and the answer through allopathic medicine was an anti-psychotic.

And I was like, nope, not going to do that to an eight-year-old. No, no. Amber, let me back up. You have two sons. One has passed away. Your younger son is still living.

He's the one that you said earlier was 23. Yeah. Right? And your older son passed a year ago. Yeah, it'll be a year in August. So when your younger son was eight or nine, somewhere in there, is when you sort of were made aware of other options for healthcare besides just your regular allopathic family doctor.

Correct. The diagnosis of high-functioning autism, that happened around what time? When your son three or four? No, when he was 8. When he was eight, okay.

So until he, was I don't know, four, five, six, did you notice that there were things that you thought, there's some differences? I did. In fact, I think he around two when I sought out a naturopathic doctor who at that time he recommended that we make some changes like gluten-free at the time.

And I didn't see a big difference, especially behaviorally when he young like that.

Younger Son's Autism and Nutritional Support

Okay. And meanwhile, your older son at this time would have been a young teenager. There's 10 years or 12 years in between them? Yes. Okay, and your oldest son, his health was normal when he was a younger teenager?

You know, he was a 10-pound baby. I thought he perfectly healthy. When he like preschool and I was trying to teach him the alphabet, I realized that it wasn't easy to him.

He repeated kindergarten, but it was never consistent. Like he didn't seem to be like he was intellectually disabled or anything. He seemed like, he totally capable, but it was just something was wrong.

And I couldn't, in fact, a psychologist told me at that time he five and I was told he is a diagnostic nightmare. I guess that's code for I'm not sure what's going on.

Yeah. So your older son as a young child, it was hard for the medical professionals to know what was happening. He was diagnostically challenging, but he was growing up.

And then your younger son was the one that was diagnosed on the autism spectrum, high functioning. And so that's where you were introduced to the idea of something outside of just going to your regular family doctor or pediatrician.

You said that it had been recommended that your younger son take an anti-psychotic. Yes, and so, you know, I went a little crazy and up all night, researching to see how I could help him.

And I found the right information. I'm still so grateful to this day that I've found that information and now, working along with functional medicine doctors, realize how wise the information I have found was.

It worked. So I applied these strategies within six months. I entered him into a study at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia because I saw how much these things were working and I wanted to help other people.

I didn't know that they were going to re-evaluate him for the spectrum and they said he no longer fit the criteria. Oh, so he didn't qualify for the study anymore.

Right. Exactly. They didn' care why. He's not autistic. So, yeah, we're not interested in the solution. We were just going to do a study. Yeah. Wow. Tell us the things that you did for him that made it so that he no longer met the diagnostic criteria.

What were some of the things? Yeah. Yeah, so I found actually, I think it was a Thorin research document that had in there a lot of different things and he was picky eater at the time.

And so what I did is I made him a banana peanut butter smoothie every morning for breakfast and I put in their Omega, high dose vitamin B6, magnesium, probiotics.

a multivitamin to be able to catch some of the things that may have been going on. Like I said, six months later, they're like, sorry, he's not on the autism spectrum anymore.

I was so confused at that time that I contacted the psychologist who did the original evaluation and I asked, what am I supposed to make of this? And she said it doesn't matter.

He was not a borderline case. She said just keep doing what you're doing. That's what, that's, what we did. And, and he, he's very intelligent, very business minded.

It's been 15 years. Cause you said he was 23. So 15. Yes. I assume he still takes those supplements. He's learned through diet what things are, like both of my sons had a major issue with gluten.

So he's learn what thing that he can do and you know, at 23 as you probably already know Dr. Peterson, it's an adventure. They're still figuring out what they're doing.

Sure. But he is careful with what he eats because he knows it makes him feel different. Exactly. He's put that together. And this is where my older son, when I realized that, you know, where I, I got scared and I seen that traditional medicine with being on At least four different seizure medications wasn't working.

He was still having seizures every couple of weeks and he was heading downhill and I seen it. So I got desperate. That's when I looked. What I did is I contacted the Institute for Functional Medicine.

I saw Dr. Hyman at that time had an article, somebody else that he is able to help with seizures. I was trying to figure out how, cause I knew I couldn't handle that myself.

So I got put in touch with Dr. Saxena. When I Got in Touch with her, that's when they mentioned health coaching. How long ago was that? That you, after, you know, working with dr.

Hyman and his protocol, how long, How Long ago did you start seeing Dr Saxen? I would say it was probably five or six years ago now. Now, I guess I feel like we almost need to tie these two cases together.

Both of your sons had inflammation in their brain. Exactly. And the brain's interesting because it does so many things. As physicians, maybe this is a little bit of an indictment and maybe it's too strong.

We're pretty, it's pretty hard for us to miss some of the physical presentations like seizures, right?

Older Son's Seizures and Functional Medicine

Like you have a seizure and the doctors all say, oh yeah, that's a real thing. You have brain inflammation that causes cognitive dysfunction or causes, you know, emotion to be different.

That's harder to identify. And so perhaps there's reason why autism wasn't something that we noted as early as seizures, right? That seems obvious, but inflammation in the brain can affect all sorts of things and both of your sons had inflammatory situations in their brain and similar triggers caused different symptoms, it sounds like.

Is that accurate? Very accurate, yes. Yeah. And similar therapies had benefit to both of them. But in one case, your younger son was able to cognitively function in a more typical way.

Is that maybe that's the best way to describe his resolution of the high functioning autism? Yeah, and you know… Neurotypically? Yeah, and you don't know what you do not know.

So whenever I was younger and my older son was young, I didn't understand what was going on. Fortunately, by the time of my youngest son, i was starting to be able to put the pieces together.

I would be I, was able, to help him from an early age. My older, son he was an adult before I even stepped in to try to, help at that time. And this is the message that I'd like to get across is that if you as a parent notice something isn't right and get help, I mean, Dr.

Saxena, how she was able to help my older son, even though it was for a time because of his choices later, it wasn't amazing. The difference was I'll never forget the changes on him.

It's so sad. I let you continue to talk. Well, no, talk about the things that you guys did together. Talk about, because when you went and saw Dr. Saxena for the first time with your older son, what's his name?

Matt. Matt, so when Matt and Dr Saxana met, and you were there, I'm sure, right? So the three of you are meeting. Talk to me about what happened. What did she suggest?

What were his symptoms at the time? Because I want our listeners at home to think, oh, wow, okay, I can sort of see how this happens and what things could give my child or my loved one a change.

Yeah. So we met with her virtually and I can still remember being on that video with. And my son was like, he was on a different screen and he having a hard time even staying awake.

You know, so that was the beginning of it. She found some things that were really instrumental. she found, she said that he had one of the lowest omega three, the omega levels that she had ever seen.

Okay. So that was one of the things that she recommended was starting him on omega supplements and, and we did that. Gluten was another thing with him.

It was definitely inflammatory. I knew this from the time he was young because, you know, I seen he had loose stools, very often after gluten exposure.

it's different when you hear from a doctor, like to stay away from. Yeah, for sure. For sure and for the patient as well. And I think it just depends on.

where people are at, but I've told eight year old kids that they can't have gluten and they've sometimes responded better than 35 year-old men, right?

Yes. So it just, I think hearing it from someone when they have some testing is helpful too, sometimes there's not a test that shows it and you just have to trust the provider that you're talking to.

But so your son started taking omega-3s. He started, he was willing to eliminate gluten. Yes, he moved home. He moved in with us for about a year, year and a half.

And of course, in our house, we really tried to just eat whole food, real food. So got him away from all the fake stuff basically. No, was that true? Like when he was growing up, were you more of a healthy eater?

And then when He moved away from home the first time, like his symptoms got worse? Because now he… When he young, I was very, very young. Too young actually.

So you weren't eating this way when you were raising? No. And what symptoms did your older son have? when like you talked about the seizures and I'd like to dive into that a little bit.

When did seizures start for him and what other symptoms besides seizures did you know? At Forum Health, we uncover the why behind your symptoms. With advanced lab testing, hormone optimization, and cutting-edge therapies, We help you heal and perform your best.

And now, through shopforumhealth.com, you can access physician-grade supplements trusted by our providers, supporting everything from adrenal health to focus and longevity.

Learn more at forumhealth.com and explore supplements at shopforumhealth.com. Yeah, so it was just like the inconsistency in that brain, you know, his cognitive function.

One time he was good and then another time, he just wasn't. Behaviorally, ya know he had symptoms when he young, but he always a really caring person.

Like he never had, it just, So I felt like there was just something going on and I just didn't understand what it was. So yeah, that had always really stuck in my mind.

What in the world was the connection with that? His very first grand mal seizure, he had just smoked a cigarette. Okay. Wasn't a little kid. How old was he at this time?

Yeah, right. He was 18. 18, so 18 he had his first seizure and he'd always had some atypical neurologic where sometimes he's good, sometimes not emotionally or cognitively, but that's the first time you saw a seizure.

It was right after he has a cigarette. So, presumably some high amount of dopamine, post nicotine, and he has a seizure. And then he had seizures pretty consistently from then until he was in his thirties?

Yeah, off and on. You know, he would have them, the seizure medications, sometimes they, I don't know if it's that they didn't work. Sometimes he didn' always remember to take them because he have memory issues as well.

But yeah, that first cigarette at 18 and then when he was 30, he diagnosed with primary progressive multiple sclerosis. And when we got that diagnosis, it didn't make sense to me because he wasn't typical multiple sclerosis.

Like he walked just fine. He didn' have numbness and tingling. he didn have any of those symptoms that you would typically see with MS. And I got to thinking and I was like, I wonder if he like had MS all along, like since he was young.

So I looked up pediatric multiple sclerosis. And this is where I found these medical articles that were so intriguing to me because basically pediatric onset pretty much starts in the brain.

It's more brain involved. So all of those things made sense with that. There's two triggers for it becoming a more progressive kind of MS. One was a lack of vitamin D and the other one was cigarette smoke.

So, we don't know retrospectively though, it seems like this may have been the case all along. When you were working with Dr. Saxena and he started taking omega-3 fatty acids and was eating differently during that time, did you see that he had fewer symptoms?

Oh my goodness, there was so many things. Yeah, his cognitive function majorly improved. Towards the end there, he got a job. He went into a car dealership and he applied as a detailer at a card dealerships.

The sales manager saw him and said, you don't need to detail cars. You need a sell cars and he had him go through the training, which we've never seen him be able to do that before to like really focus in on the.

He got to learn all about the different cars, and it was amazing. And his metabolic health had majorly changed because he went from pre-diabetic. He lost like 40 pounds.

You just, he looked so much better. Um, you know what happens at a car dealership? You know, what the salesmen usually do. Yeah. They, they smoke cigarettes and they, You.

Know, They eat a bunch of gluten containing stuff. I know you want to be like everybody else and I get it. Right. And unfortunately, that was the start of the decline and I saw it coming, Dr.

Peterson, but there was nothing I could do, you know, at that time. Yeah. You know it's the autoimmune. underlying etiology of MS is well accepted even in conventional medicine.

Brain Inflammation, MS, and Treatment Response

What the triggers are, I think, are less well appreciated, right? And it seems like what you're describing, your experience has been that with Matt, You didn't know initially what was going on, but there was something that would come and go with respect to his cognitive function.

And then it slowly progressed and was triggered with this cigarette. Then it improved when you took out these triggers, when the gluten improved. the possibility of his membranes in his brain to function better because he had omega-3s and then things were good and and Then because of triggers like gluten or nicotine the the autoimmunity the inflammation the brain got worse again in a way, I don't know to me the story that that people should that what you said is probably the very most important.

If something doesn't seem right, then keep investigating. But then the other thing is, this is not a situation in life where biology just either we got the answer and here's the drug or we know what's wrong and we cured it and now you're better.

Our health is something that's an ongoing process, which shouldn't seem like a surprise. I can't discover that I need to drink water and have it once or twice and then not have again and think I'll be fine.

When we discover the things that are creating these inflammatory processes, whether it's arthritis, dermatitis, or neuroinflammation, whatever autoimmune presentation you're having, you are going to have to continue to do these things for the rest of your life or the autoimmunity will flare back up.

So as a coach, that's probably what you spend your time doing is helping people with that very thing, right? It is, yes. Talk to me about that, your journey.

At some point, you decided to make this a career for yourself as opposed to you being a person in need of this. It wasn't at some point, actually I was a business owner as soon as I knew that there was this functional medicine health coach.

I stopped everything else I did and I dove right into it. And I went right to the functional Medicine Coaching Academy and yes. So this was, this, was immediate.

This was like a calling for you. You were like, if I had known this before, I would have done this. The moment you find this out, you're now an evangelist for true health.

Yes. Wow. And how long have you been doing this? I started with Forum Health. It'll be four years in December. So tell me some of the highlights. And then I'm going to ask you about challenges because patients have agency, right?

And so there's times when you've probably transformed someone's life and then times and you thought, Oh, there so much more we could have done. Let's start with highlights.

What have you, what, give me a few things that you'd done where you were like, that was amazing. I helped someone. know what, I really honestly have a hard time pinpointing because there's been so many of them.

I will say that one of my favorite things to coach is our GDRX program because that's one thing I've learned. You give your body what it needs, you take away what's harming it, and the body is, it knows what to do, right?

And I have seen that time and time again. So GDX, we're Eliminating a lot of the fake food. We're giving the body of nutrients, you know, in these shakes and supplements.

And just during that five weeks, so many things will, clear up for patients. I really don't even know where to start because it's so often. I've seen that with GDRx.

One of the highlights of being able to work with Dr. Saxana is that particular program. I came from the perspective of taking care of people with chronic Lyme disease, chronic mold toxicity.

And it's not that I ignored the gut, but I didn't treat it as well as I do now, thanks to Dr Saxanna and that program, and there's a lot of times when Just do that and you won't have to do much else.

So the gut, it really is the foundation of our existence as multicellular animals, right? There's pretty simple animals in the world like sea cucumbers and starfish, and they don't all have the additional features that we have.

They're just a gut. And they can be healthy as long as their gut works. We can't divide our body into all these different parts, our cardiovascular system and our neuroendocrine system or whatever.

It's our gut. Where we are just a big gut with a bunch of additional features. So I love that that's the thing that you've seen be so powerful. And maybe, are there times where you've tried to help a patient and you thought they're just not getting it or maybe some of those moments?

Well, honestly, Matt, it was my biggest challenge. And sometimes you just have to learn that people are their own people and everything for them, but they have to want it on their own.

They have want to it themselves. And coaching, though, motivational interviewing has really helped me, even with my younger son now, to be able to talk.

Because it's patient-centered. It's not about what I want, it is about they want. Yeah. Well, that's a reality is we only get to make choices for ourselves.

We can try to influence people and hopefully we influence them for good. Yeah, so Matt did well for a while, but then in his job, it was the cigarettes, the gluten, all the toxins that just created more inflammation.

And then the seizures became more frequent. Yep. Yeah. It was a seizure, a grand mal seizure that eventually took his life. And in the autopsy report, it was inflammation in brain.

So exactly what you said, that was the reason. You know, as far as a lot of people wonder, like, how can you be so strong, you know whenever you're a mom?

a part of them lives in you, you know what I mean? But I have a very firm faith, so I really truly believe I'm gonna see him again, and he's not gonna have seizures, he'll be able to really enjoy life.

He wasn't even able drive. I am not saying he never did it, because I know he did, but that was not, I did a lot of worrying as a mom too. Yeah. Yeah, well, I agree with you.

And I think that that, that we're in the majority when it comes to having a sense that there's something greater than just this and that. We will be with our loved ones again.

So I am confident that you will see Matt again and, and yes, he won't have neuroinflammation anymore.

Loss, Coaching, and Lessons for Parents

It is, it's a remarkable thing to see a parent that has the love for their children to both try to help them, but also know that they are independent agents and there's no reason to blame yourself and no need to be mad at Matt.

Life is a fragile thing and a precious thing. And that's probably what makes it precious is that it is fragile. Right. If it were not so fleeting, then we would take it for granted.

Like we do everything else. You're diving headlong into helping people. This was when you started to become a coach, Matt was still. Living and doing well, right?

And the tragedy of his death hasn't dissuaded you from saying, well the truth is still the true and I'm still going to share with people, which is remarkable.

Fantastic, really. Well, as a health coach, let's leave our listeners with a few things that they can do. Things that you think would be valuable for them in their lives.

whether it's as a mother, whether is as patient. What advice would you have for our listeners? Well, first of all, you know your kids, right? So if something's not right, get help, find out.

And the other thing is, I would say, Just because things are popular, you know, like fast food and just even, what is it, 95% maybe, 90% of what's in a grocery store is not real food.

It matters. You know, so the habits that we start for them when they're young, they are going to carry on into adulthood. So sometimes they'll coach parents and they will be like, well they buy these things for their kids.

And I'm like oh my gosh, now's the time to like really help them. They don't end up like the majority of people out there, which you know heart disease, diabetes, autoimmune, I can go on and on.

Yeah, really, I mean, every disease that we experience, whether it's chronic or acute, is going to be influenced by the foods that eat, right? We get sicker and we'll get up.

You're more likely to get pneumonia and a UTI if you're eating poorly. It's not the cause of the pneumonia or the UTA, but your immune system is struggling, and for certain, all of our chronic diseases.

So food is the foundation of everything. My daughter and well, she's 13. My wife and daughter are teaching a cooking class because summer has started and my 13 year old wanted a job, but she is too young.

And so she said, well mom, can we teach her cooking classes? So she has got all these eight year olds downstairs right now. Today they are doing curry.

Yesterday they did chicken and couscous with a tzatziki dressing. I can't remember what it was the second day. It's been fun to talk to Lydia and Sarah and how these eight-year-olds, like one of them, one the moms down the street, texted and said, her daughter, she's like, my daughter won't eat anything but like chicken nuggets and macaroni.

And she came home with this plate of food and she was tasting everything. She brought me pickled onions that you guys had made. I'm like yeah, you just have to expose them to it.

Just give them the food. These kids want to eat it, right? Yesterday, when they were doing the baked chicken, my wife said, yeah, a lot of the kids were really squeamish about, you know, we rinsed off the chicken and we had to pat it dry, and then we put olive oil on it, then put a rub on and the kid didn't want to touch it.

And well, we have to come in contact with our food and say, this is what is keeping me alive. These are my nutrients. This is my experience. And so Lydia was really excited yesterday when she was talking about this little girl down the street who had been so picky.

Now she's the one that's volunteering to try everything. She wasn't squeamish at all when got to pat the chicken dry and that sort of thing. But I think there's a significant issue.

We're not connected to our Right, we I don't know I didn't grow up on a farm but at some point people used to actually pull their food out of the dirt and You know clean their own chickens and you know, whatever they hunted so We need to get back to that.

I agree All right. Well, Amber, your willingness to share this story is really remarkable. Your strength and your dedication to your health, but also the health of the people that you get to interact with as a health coach is a beautiful thing.

Thank you. Thank for letting me listen to your story and thank you for being willing to share it with our listeners.

Your explanation of this neuroinflammation and that you couldn't quite put your finger on it, but then you could see it go away.

Right? It's important. It is important for people to understand this. There's so many things that can be done. So thank. Any parting thoughts before we wrap up?

I'm just grateful to be able to help other people. That's what gets me through. If I didn't do that, I think I would be a lot worse, you know, because it's like I have a reason, to move forward.

Well, I mean, and it's love that connects us, right, as humans. And we don't necessarily say it that way, but you're connected to these people and you are helping people because you care and they feel that.

You're sharing some of yourself with them, some love, they're showing some back. We don't do that any stronger than with our children or with their spouse, right?

Which is why it's such a, when we lose those connections right now in the here and now, it sad, but you're still connected to Matt because you know that the hear and know is not all there is.

And so you were able to just move on with that, with love. I wish we were better at this in. as a culture of just telling people. I think that the best we do is we say thank you and you're welcome a lot, which are two sort of nice ways to say I love you without it being over the top.

Right. But your patients probably experience that when they tell you thank for teaching me and say, I'm happy to do it. Thank you for letting me, right?

Yeah. That's why, because even though There's a gap, I'll call it a time right now in your connection with your son that you don't get to talk to him the same way that could have before, but you will again.

In the meantime, you get still stay connected by sharing your love with other people and feeling it back from them. I was just in Tennessee for a gospel music fest this past weekend, and I'm not evangelical the way I grew up, but I loved this term that they seemed to use everywhere in the state, it felt like, that instead of saying that someone had died, they would say, he's crossed over.

That's the right way to talk about it. He's just not here now. So anyway. Yeah. You know, the Bible says that they're sleeping. It refers to death as sleeping and to me that, you know that makes sense because, when you're, sleeping, and you wake up, You have no idea how long you were asleep for.

And that's the way with him. And yet you were still there and you weren't interacting with anyone because you're sleeping. So you don't know how long it was you are asleep and people know that you sleep and they're like, oh, he's just in the other room asleep.

I don' want to disturb him right now. Yeah. The other thing I was just going to mention to you, Dr. Peterson, is that the education that we get from Forum Health, I mean, Doctor Saxana, she's an educator.

Like every week I meet with her at case conference. And I love that. I loved being able to continue to learn and then being enabled to be at a case conferences, you know, at those conferences or not, not case, conference, the yearly conference that go to.

Oh yeah. Yeah, yeah, Yeah, like just all of that is really good for me, you know. Yeah. Well, thank you. And I love that at Forum, we're all doing it together.

There's not like, oh, We're going to have a conference for the MDs and we'll have another conference. For our PAs, and We are going have different conference, for our coaches.

It makes sense to just say, look, were all caring about patients. Let's all get together and participate. Yeah, that's

how we learn. I remember the first year.

I didn't understand a lot of what I was hearing, you know, when I went to the conference, but this past year, I think I understood pretty much all of it, like the more you learn, the you grow.

So it's really awesome. And our round tables, we just continue to learn. Yeah. I appreciate that. Well, your always on the round table and I always love seeing you there.

so I can tell that you love it. Thank you. Thank you for joining us on the Forum Health Integrative Medicine podcast. Each episode, we help you understand your health from every angle and inspire your lifelong wellness journey.

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