Summit Introduction and Guest Background

Welcome everyone to the Gut Health and Longevity Summit. I am so glad you're here, and I want you to take a deep breath right now, because what you're about to hear in this session is something that I have personally found a life changing.

We are going to talk about the most underappreciated relationship in medicine, the one between your gut and your brain. Most people have been taught that mental health begins and ends in the brain, but the science is telling a very different story, one that starts in the gut.

The food on your plate is in constant communication with 100 trillion microorganisms that in turn shape your mood, your anxiety levels, your resilience, and your cognitive clarity.

So today's guest has spent her career building an entirely new field at that intersection. And this conversation is something I have been waiting to have.

My next guest is called a triple Threat in Medicine and Food. And I think that that's an understatement. She is a Harvard trained psychiatrist. She is a professional chef, and she's a founder of the entirely new discipline called culinary psychiatry, where the kitchen is a clinic and food is a prescription.

She is totally speaking my language. Doctor Uma Naidoo graduated from Harvard Medical School and holds advanced training as a professional chef. She is also a clinical professor at Harvard Medical School and director of nutritional, lifestyle and Metabolic Psychiatry at Mass General.

She founded the first hospital based nutritional psychiatric service in the United States. So I am so excited. She's also the author of two bestsellers, This Is Your Brain on Food and Calm Your Mind With Food, and you have probably seen her around on multiple, media channels, such as the Today Show, Live with Kelly and Ryan and CNBC.

Okay, I am going to say I've been waiting to have this conversation with you for the past few months since we met a few months in person. So I'm going to start with the first question here.

There is a phrase and I feel it's a really beautiful phrase. It's called the gut brain romance. And most people understand this story as one way. Stress causes a stomach ache, but the brain influences the gut.

You've now reversed that arrow, and you're saying the gut is actually the first author of our mood. So can you share with us what is actually happening biologically in that other direction?

And why does this change everything we know about mental health? Well, thank you so much for the question and thank you for having me. I'm excited to see you and talk with you today.

You know, the my first book, this is your brain on Food, really sort of put nutritional psychiatry on the map for the public. And the first chapter of that book is called romance because I wanted to share with people that, you know, mental health A is not an above the net concept anymore, but be the gut is hugely important.

And it really starts with the fact that the government brain originated from the exact same cells in the human embryo. Like you mentioned, they divide apart.

They are connected by the vagus nerve. And there's they also interacting with hundreds, you know, trillions of microbes in the gut microbiome. But rather than think about this as something originating in the brain, there are lots of other things that are going on in this that is bidirectional.

And the vagus nerve allows for communication of neurotransmitters like serotonin and others between the gut and brain and brain and gut. So this is ongoing communication.

How the Gut-Brain Axis Shapes Mood

And that's where food becomes a huge player, because food is being digested in the same place that we have about 99% of serotonin receptors and 90% of cell total production.

Now, it's also made us weird, but think about the fact that so much of it is going on there. I've also understood that about 70% of the immune system is located in 70 gut cells.

So there are so many different interactions that are happening. And then if we take a step back and understand that the research and mental health is telling us that the underlying factor for conditions like depression, anxiety, cognitive disorders and more is actually inflammation, and that the gut becomes a hotbed for inflammation when we're eating poorly or be very stressed in other factors.

So again, food comes into that picture. So, you know, even conditions like Parkinson's are now being seen. And sure, you've seen the research, as you know, looking at where does it.

And it's one of those origins that gut. So it's a very sending time for this field. And so very exciting time to see the direction in which we will unfold.

Committee and research. Yeah, absolutely. I think one of one of the things that, you know, always surprises me and I and I'm actually I'm really glad this is happening because since you're trained as a psychiatrist, I'm sure at some point in your career you have handed out a few, you know, antidepressants, anti-anxiety medication, and even in our training, there was no conversation of, okay, yes, we know the mechanisms of action of SSRI.

But when I think of an SSRI, which is a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor for the audience is, well, it's supposed to allow more serotonin to circulate in the body.

But as you just mentioned, if most of that serotonin, 90% of it is made in the gut, how is it possible for more to possibly circulate? Which brings me back to how do we get the gut to work, right?

So what has been your experience with this shift in this idea, now that the gut is also a strong contributor to mental health? Like where are you seeing the shift from the clinician perspective, especially for the audience who's listening going, oh, my doctor just gave me this medication and didn't talk to me about any of this.

So where can people find hope that, hey, there is a conversation happening in the clinical level? So that's a great question, and one that I'm working very hard in my career to help fix change and sort of move along.

And the reason I say that is the two things I often hear from patients, that they might see a gastroenterologist and be kind of, you know, have an eyeball when they talk about a leaky gut or something they read, even if it is a magazine or a media or read online.

But then also in the psychiatry office, people are not necessarily talking about the gut. They might mention side effects of SSRI, but they don't connect the fact that those initial first 5 to 10 days, almost two weeks of gut symptoms, nausea, discomforts, maybe sometimes a little bit of diarrhea even are related to certain and the SSRI and location.

So it's an interesting time because honestly cannot say that psychiatry is there yet. But certainly the fact that the integrated health conferences there's lifestyle medicine, lifestyle psychiatry and nutritional psychiatry coming forward with the voices that we bring forward in terms of integrating this information.

People are more aware of conversation, but I'm not sure it's happening in the psychiatry office yet. I know that there are some private practices trying to adopt this method because they have the liberty to do so, but the average

hospital practice is not necessarily addressing your gut health when you see a mental health doctor.

So all practitioners. So I think it's an important full term for change to start to ask the questions and for people to feel empowered that there's more information they can ask about before they accept that prescription.

Yeah. Well so let's talk about anxiety then. Anxiety is the most prevalent mental health condition on the planet, affecting over 284 million people worldwide.

And the gut as we've already talked about, is almost never part of the clinical conversation. So what does the research actually show about the role of a microbial imbalance driving anxiety?

And why is this connection so systematically overlooked? There are a couple of reasons that it's overlooked.

Clinical Gaps in Treating Gut-Related Mental Health

One is that even though The Lancet showed, which is a highly respectable journal in medicine, that globally anxiety increased by 25% during Covid, which is the one of the main reasons that I wrote my second book, Calm Your Mind With Food, because that's what I was seeing in my virtual clinic throughout Covid was a heightened level of anxiety.

It felt like just everyone was anxious. The funny thing, though, is that people don't often identify that they're anxious for many different reasons psychological otherwise.

But sometimes anxiety hides under sleep. Sometimes it hides under symptoms like nausea, butterflies in the stomach. People not realizing that it actually could stem from.

Another reason is that I think that other conditions, like a depressed mood or a lack of focus, a lack of mental capacity, sometimes a little bit more obvious because there are ways that people have learned to manage.

The anxiety may not be something that heals the anxiety, but they might exercise more, or they might go for a run, or they might meditate, or they might do something that actually helps them manage the anxiety.

But then there's a break through moment when it continues. So I think that sometimes diagnosis or identifying enough solves is a little bit challenging.

But then on a microbial level, we understand more about some microbial species that are increased or decreased when people are more anxious. And we also understand which is why I put together an anti anxiety eating plan.

And then a protocol notebook that you can eat a certain way and shop a certain way to actually help calm your mind. Simple things like choosing those vegetables, you know, choosing different types of produce with different colors, but then targeting how you can heal your gut in a certain way becomes important too.

So we do understand a little bit more, and I love the fact that that research is ongoing. Yeah. So I've read that there are certain imbalances in specific bacteria like Lactobacillus and Bifidobacterium and populations that have more anxiety.

And when you have that deficiency or imbalance, you're creating that more inflammatory pathway which is going to activate the HFPA axis or your hypothalamic pituitary adrenal axis.

So what have you seen in the in your clinical setting with individuals like are you doing any testing. Are you or patients bringing you testing. Are you making any recommendations based off of that?

Because if there's something going on in their microbiome, then how? Like, yes, the food is great, but how do we actually see what's going on? That's a great question.

Part of the limitation here is that as far as I know, U. S. hospitals have not, through the insurance carriers, approved the gut microbiome test. And this has been a hang up because often patients will pay a lot of money to get this privately tested.

And then it's up to us to sort of interpret that information from an outside lab. Now, some of the companies that do the testing will then recommendation make a recommendation to food is supplements.

And sometimes those those can be helpful because they might pick up on the fact that someone is eating a certain type of food which is otherwise healthy, but maybe may not be helping the microbiome.

So I've had a certain level of assistance from outside testing in that way. But I think the fact that in mainstream medicine we don't have an approved microbiome test is a massive deficit in the system because a, it costs the patient more money to go and get it and takes the provider more time.

So I would love to find a better solution to that. Is there any specific testing that you do in the hospital from a neurotransmitter standpoint or inflammatory standpoint that is worth mentioning, just in case you know, somebody is going to, you know, somebody outside of the health care system for their mental health?

Is there anything that you do recommend? So I always work in conjunction with a primary care clinic or the primary care physician. So metabolic panel making sure the electrolyte, you know, simple things like magnesium.

Many Americans are deficient in magnesium.

Anxiety, Microbiome Imbalance, and Testing Limits

So things that, you know, are not as as complex as we might think. Vitamin panels, depending on where they live or what their symptoms are like vitamin D, a lot of people in the northeast, maybe vitamin D deficient, someone can actually present as prevalently anxious or depressed, and they might be repeated in vitamin D.

So some of that and then inflammatory markers depending on the situation and always in conjunction either with a functional gastroenterologist or primary care doctor.

So there can be more guidance there. So these are things we should, you know, people can be asking their doctors about and, you know, finding out more information and saying, well, should what I benefit from this test.

You know, maybe I have this deficiency. For example, if you know, vegetarians, you know, should be checking the B12 level. You know, I have had to do that throughout the course of my life.

So you'd need to replenish with supplementation or a shot or however your doctor chooses to replenish that for you. So I think that these these questions become important.

But again, you know, even from when I first started this work, it's become much more personalized, as you might have talked about before. So it's who's sitting in front of you, but is there a specific diet?

What are they actually eating? What are the other medical conditions and how do we find tune the nutritional psychiatry plan for them? So speaking of which, next question.

But even that, just like my patients, I see almost all of them. I mean, I would say unless they're supplementing a majority of my patients, both omnivores, carnivores, vegetarians, vegans, many of them have B12 deficiencies and many of them also, even in the state of California and Florida, have vitamin D deficiencies.

So that brings me to the next question, because I think this is a lot of what's going on. So when you're thinking about food and what it does to the brain, can you walk us through the what happens in the first bite?

Especially like if we think about what does an ultra processed food meal do differently neurologically? Microbiology

compared to a meal that's rich in polyphenols and fiber.

Can you kind of walk us through what is happening and why people want to listen up? Yeah. So you know, the one that is not chewing our food and the whole process of digestion starts.

We understand that the food is going through our digestive tract, you know, things that we learned in school. But when food is being digested, it's being digested in this area where these hundreds of thousands of microbes and like in life, there are the good microbes and the not good microbes and the band microbes.

Right. And the good microbes love to be fed with healthy foods and fresh vegetables and, you know, beans and legumes and nuts and seeds and all the great benefits of these foods and different colors of foods, the carrots, they flourish when they are fed.

This way, adequate proteins and healthy fats from avocado or from, you know, olive oil. And when they're fed this way, they their digestive breakdown products are healthy, short chain fatty acids and shortchange fatty acids are healthy for the fiber biome they found of inflammation.

They help rebuild the gut lining because that will sell. Lining of the gut is very delicate, so they're really helping that gut flourish and thrive. But when we're eating things that we, number one, don't identify, the names of, the ingredients are so outer processed foods.

You know, someone said, interestingly, junk. The new word for junk food is outer processed foods. And it's probably true in a way, if you think about it, because algebra houses foods are highly processed, packaged, have ingredients that help make them shelf stable, help, you know, create flavors and artificial ingredients, and sometimes contain artificial sweeteners so things that are just not healthy for our gut.

Now, does it mean that you can never have a snack? No, that's not what I mean. But if that's all that you're eating and the major part of your diet, then it's going to impact your gut microbiome.

So what happens in a similar way that the food, you know, that's healthy plant poly phenols that is being digested the similar way the ultra processed foods get broken down, but they get broken down and they attract the negative bad microbes.

And their breakdown products are toxic polysaccharides, which immediately start to damage the single cell lining of the gut. Now, you know, eat that offer processed food.

You you may have some sort of feeling, or you may not feel great, or you may feel great. Often people feel great, need it again, but it's a long term effect that's a problem.

But over time it's going to damage that single cell line, and over time you are likely going to develop from that information. You get neuroinflammation or brain information, but you also start developing a leaky gut or intestinal permeability.

And this is where for mental health perspective, you see an uptick of symptoms of depression or anxiety of focus. And you sort of thrown off by, well, someone's either taking medication or they're not, or some new is presenting with these symptoms, as I had many times in Covid, because people's diet changed dramatically as the given the restrictions on Covid and the fact that, you know, for the first time in the US, people think empty grocery store shelves.

So what did people do? They rushed to get processed foods that per package and shelf stable. It was a difficult time. And so we started eating more of that and that persisted.

How Food Affects the Brain and Gut

So all of those things do affect the digestive process and they affect those negative microbes. Yeah. And actually

what I saw was, yes, the food grocery store shelves were empty.

But one place that was open is the liquor stores, which and I heard of a drive thru liquor store. But where I live the first time I witnessed that and I'm like, wow, okay, drive thru and delivery, you know, which I don't think people had been doing as much of before Covid.

You know, people would go and buy a bottle of wine or something, but it definitely increased. So, so let me let me kind of summarize that for the audience.

Okay. We've got the ultra processed food. When you're eating ultra processed food and it's going down in your body, you can also create a sugar spike, a glucose spike, which then is going to make that inflammatory cascade kind of happen when inflammation happens.

We're now disrupting the blood brain barrier. Right. So that's never good. Your dopamine and your cravings and all that is getting hijacked. I'm all about like I can see when somebody's body has been hijacked.

But now if we chose another meal, one that's rich in plants and polyphenols. Right. We've got the prebiotics in there. We've got the antioxidants in there.

We're feeding a bacteria, which I love. Then we're making more tryptophan. If we're making more tryptophan we can support our serotonin our feel good neurotransmitter.

Right. So this is it. You know, people just think food I put in my mouth, I eat and then but they don't realize there's this whole like there's a cascade cascade.

There's a biochemical factory happening. There's like, think of it like this. Your next bite is basically like a rain shower on your cells. And it's it's all doing all this stuff. You can't see it.

I can see it because I just spend way too much time living and looking at cells. But so is this why we see people who. And I tested this like I'm like my own science experiment.

But when we see people who eat ultra processed food feel worse over time, not just heavier, but they get more anxious, they get more reactive, they get more cognitively foggy. Yes.

Yeah. Right. So this is exactly right. So they develop all of those symptoms because what they're actually doing by eating the ultra processed food is driving inflammation in the gut, which drives inflammation in the brain.

Because we now understand this this circuit. And when that happens you have a you have to spy on imbalance of the gut. You may have damaged that cell lining of the gut.

You have inflammatory cytokines circulating in your body. You develop neuroinflammation. And all you're doing is experiencing something from a mental health perspective.

Poor sleep have you have cravings, like you mentioned, when you're driving those sugar spikes and basically developing resistance? We understand from research that when we are consuming foods that constantly feed us with sugar and others, that simple carbohydrates break down into sugar.

So when they are not complex so they don't have additional fiber in them, they can be problematic. And so when you have all of that being driven, we know and understand that sugar spikes act on our dopamine one pathways, similar to street drugs like cocaine.

So those cravings are very real when they develop and we create more of the food once you start eating it. I offered us asking my patients, you know, if you've ever done through that drive through and you've upsized or supersized one of your items like fries, don't you probably feel like you did feel like having more dinner or the next day because you've set up that craving system in your body.

And so I think it's important to pay attention to that and understand that one of the ways to help yourself is to take a step back and say, what can I be set here?

Instead of ordering that take out every single day for lunch and dinner, can I, you know, think of going through to a healthier takeout, get a fresh salad with fresh ingredients, go to the supermarket if they have a salad bar.

You know some of them do, even if you don't want to put it together. Can you go to a place that you put that together? But it's actual food, and the more times we can actually we can eat real food, the better it is.

So the classic examples eat the apple, skip the straw board, apple juice. Same thing with an orange because those lacked the fiber and often have added sugars.

But the fruit itself will give you the fiber, the vitamins and minerals that your butter that your body needs. Yeah, and I think, you know, meal prep is absolutely underrated.

Like this weekend. You know, okay, me being bad is get ordering a vegan pizza on ancient green crust and eating that for three days in a row because that's me being bad.

So not fast food or anything like that. But then on Sunday, I at home. Sunday I did my meal prep. So I've got my four wedge salads ready to go with the rainbow on them.

Right. So we've got the cucumber, we got the radishes, we've got purple cabbage, we've got sprouts, we've got is on there carrots. I was chopping up something else.

There's a few other things on there. And then having it with my protein, my tofu and white beans. Right. So that's meal prep. And then the second meal prep I was deciding what to do with this, this bunch of cilantro I have because I'm heading out of town.

So I'm like, I don't want it to go bad. I was either going to make a salad dressing with it because I pulled out the lemons, but then I'm like, you know what, I'd rather make juice shots.

So I made orange, lemon and cilantro juice. So they came so good. That combination. Yeah, yeah. Polyphenol fix for the morning. So it's also a matter of let's get a little creative and think about food in a different way.

So since we're talking about food I want to move to the next question which is your anti-anxiety shopping list. Right. So specific foods with specific mechanisms to calm the nervous system through the gut.

So walk us through the ones that have the strongest evidence. Tell us why behind each one. Not just what to eat, but what is it going to do to our brain?

Correct. So, you know, I love those Christopher's vegetables. They often really at the top of my list. And these are things like cabbage, cauliflower, broccoli, Brussels sprouts and also things like a ruler.

So ruler is a Christopher's vegetable. So they left, for example, has a slightly bitter taste, which ends up being better for our gut microbiome then rich in sulforaphane.

And there's a trick about when you prepping them to allow for that development of the sulforaphane. You can chop them and leave them for 20 minutes or chop them in the morning, leave it in the fridge and eat it in the evening for your steamed broccoli or roasted broccoli, whatever you're making.

So the sulforaphane is very powerful. Now. They also contain other ingredients rich in fiber, vitamins, and minerals. But this is this is one that really does help fend off inflammation in the gut and help lower your symptoms of anxiety over time.

That's a staple of your diet. They also very low calorie. So in mental health, one of the things we have to pay

attention to is sometimes people have developed side effects of medications already.

They've made, may have gained weight from it, or are kind of being depressed or anxious. The appetite is kind of really often they choosing not they not choosing the healthiest foods.

Anti-Anxiety Foods and Nutritional Psychiatry

So they so having options that are not as calorie dense low calorie but high nutrition value is important. And cruciferous vegetables. If you spice them up the right way, you know, whether it's fresh herbs or other ingredients like spices, that makes it, you know, extremely nutritious for you to be eating, then you move on.

Are you saying that any cruciferous vegetables we should chop up and wait 20 minutes? What does that do to the sulfurous pain? So the louse, the greater development of the sulforaphane.

So mostly when I do that, I really pay attention to cauliflower, broccoli and Brussels sprouts that way, and sometimes cabbage. But the study is mostly done on broccoli.

So it's just a you know, it's something I talk about in my book. And it's a neat thing if you think about it. So the meal prep really helps with that because now you're chopping.

And by the time you actually get to eating, which already activated it, you've been back to it. Exactly. So the other sort of group that I'd like to pay attention to is the healthy fats.

So the avocados, olive oil, make sure that maybe you have sliced avocado with your breakfast or lunch on your salad, or you have an avocado oil dressing on extra virgin olive oil dressing.

These are good ways to bring in some healthy fats. Then I like to think about the fats like the mega threes from chia seeds or walnuts. These are great to add into your diet as well.

And other sources. And then, you know, making sure that you have probiotics. Maybe you have a coconut yogurt or you have a milk yogurt. There are ways to bring these into your diet that are really important.

So there are three biotic fibers and probiotic fibers and prebiotic can get from the alien family, like garlic leaks and onions. The fibers are going to nourish and feed your gut microbes.

So all those favorite gut probes that we love, like I mentioned, others are going to be fed by these prebiotic. And then you get your probiotics from.

And fermented foods are also really key, like kimchi. Every culture has a fermented food. Yeah. So, you know, tapping into something that you really used to eating.

That fermentation process also brings in really important anti-inflammatory properties. A study done at Stanford University towards the end of Covid actually found that eating and adding invented foods to your diet will help lower inflammation in your gut.

So these are just simple things that you can start to get used to. Find one that you like, and then add a little bit to meals every day. The only caveat I have, which I call nutritional psychiatry nuances, is just loading on five of mentioned foods.

For someone who has a gut health condition can be problematic because if you have IB s IBC, also colitis or Crohn's and other conditions, you you know, you should be talking to a specialist like Doctor Monisha because you can't just load on these foods, which can then cause you more discounted.

So you might have to have a more specialized plan. It's not that they unhealthy, it's more that what can your gut tolerate and when. So those are just important things to remember that not everyone can do the same thing, but

these are foods that have positive effects.

And then remember when you're leaning into the plant plant rich foods, you are just getting a natural source of plant polyphenols, which is why we say eat the colors of the rainbow.

It's actually referring to these different plant polyphenols that are so powerful. Yeah. And I would say to the audience that's listening, start slow.

Right. So when you're increasing your fiber, you also want to increase your hydration. But start start slow and you know, you'll hear me talk a lot about 30 different plant foods in a week, or for me, maybe in a meal.

But the variety is what matters, not necessarily quantity, right? Because we want all of these. The fermented foods that Doctor Mumma mentioned are beneficial for the Gaba producing strains like Lactobacillus, the dark leafy greens.

There's so many to choose from for magnesium. Then you have the omegas that she mentioned for that neuroinflammation, right. So there's so many. We've got the alien family for the prebiotics.

Is there one food on your anti-anxiety food list that consistently surprises people, something they would never expect to find on the list. So it's actually a purple version of it is on the cover of my book.

It's a purple sprouting broccoli, which is seasonal, so you can't always get it, but it, you know, a form of people. I like to say, Malaysia, that when people you know are craving something, they're not reaching out for broccoli.

But the surprising thing is that it's very powerful. And if you can find a way to love it and embrace it and but it's roasted or make it made into a salad, whatever it is you do with it, you know, people even make, I think, shots from broccoli sprouts, you know, things like that.

These can be highly nutrition. But why is it surprising? Because it's low calorie, is high in fiber, rich in sulforaphane. It's giving you so many nutrients.

But I think that people struggle with well, it's usually when I'm on my plate. So this is how you think about it when you go out for dinner. Think about getting that as one of your side dishes.

Think about adding it into your rotation. If you're having, you know, if you're having a chopped salad, think about using your roasted broccoli from the night before and adding it into your salad, because it's it's just an option that can be super delicious if you if you embrace it.

Okay. You just convinced me I am not a broccoli person. I will eat an entire head of purple cabbage. I do broccoli sprouts. I am going to make the strong effort to start adding in some broccoli.

You know I'll still do my sprouts and my other cruciferous, but I will make a strong effort. Now, the broccoli usually sits in the freezer, so I forget about it, but I'm gonna do a soup with it.

You know, you could do a suit people to throw some broccoli because it's a strong effort since Doctor Uma said so. So let's talk about this. Are you a field called culinary psychiatry, where you actually teach mental health professionals to cook as part of their clinical training?

And I'm also trained in culinary medicine. So I, you know, I do this with my patients. We do cooking classes and they're like, it's like they're in my kitchen with me where I'm like pulling stuff out and I'm showing them how to do stuff.

But what is the act of cooking a like why actually is the act of cooking a clinical intervention? And what does a psychiatrist learn when they're putting that apron on that they can't learn from a textbook or a prescription pad?

A few different things. You know, we launched some congregation classes at the American Psychiatric Association national and International meeting in 2025.

So for the first time, together with the president and someone who really leads lifestyle psychiatry doctor, we were able to coordinate and conduct classes for mental health clinicians who attended the conference and who wanted to do this extra training, and we used the Los Angeles training kitchen at their country school.

So they were actually in an environment that was a real culinary school. It was a lot of fun. But how the direction that I've been using and taking this area is how do you interpret a simple recipe to a patient?

How do you teach them? Like you and I talked about broccoli, you know, what can you do with broccoli to make it interesting? You can use a frozen steam it and zest, fresh lemon zest and a squeeze of lemon.

And it'll be with salt, a little bit of pepper. It can be super delicious. There's not much you have to do to something. And sometimes I had a very interesting client who I would not never have guessed militia, who was a business executive, and said to me, everyone tells me to have a car and I don't know what to do with it, right?

And it never hurt me. She just didn't like to cook or didn't. It wasn't something she enjoyed. So she was trying to figure out, well, what do I do if I get it?

You know, so simple things of, well, have you ever tasted guacamole? Well, you can do that at home. Or look at how easy it is to make this happen. Or you can slice it and make your own avocado toast.

Cooking as Clinical Training

So it's interpreting that in the moment with healthy ingredients and teaching people how to make healthy swaps, I devised a method called the Soul method SAW, which is swap and walk, and this is a way for someone to find a jumping off point for themselves to start making healthy changes.

So it's often overwhelming to get that list of 20 vegetables or 20 foods to eat. But you can start with the anti-anxiety shopping list. You can choose what you'd like and then decide, what's that one thing I want to swap?

Maybe it's, you know, from Covid giving up certain vegetables that you couldn't get fresh, or adding in ice cream to your meals every night. And you and I still doing that, you know, several years later.

While you can make a delicious ice cream from bananas and you can even make a chocolate flavored. So there are ways to rethink what you're doing. And that's what culinary psychiatry does in the moment.

It really helps the client, but also the clinician, to be able to learn this method to teach as part of their clinical practice. Yeah. You know, I often I talk to patients and I see that many, you know, if you've grown up as a latchkey kid where there was just frozen meals and you're just, you know, you're not sitting down and you're you're not in a family that's cooking.

When you grow up as an adult, you also do not know how to cook. So I run into many patients who they're like, I don't like it. And I'm like, well, why don't you like it?

And they're like, well, because they were trained because their parents weren't doing it right. So this is why I love doing these cooking classes with my patients, because their eyes go, oh, I didn't know that that was so simple and possible.

Right. And, you know, so it's always good to see that, you know, we can learn something at literally any age. Now, if you were sitting in a room full of psychiatrist today, what is the one cooking technique you would insist that they master and why?

That's a great question. What are we getting our psychiatrist? Probably. Probably learning to work with any

vegetable. Like how do you think about a vegetable?

What do you do with it? How do you wash it? How do you prep it? How do you cut it? Pepper. You know, simple things that can actually make life easier because you can make a salad with that.

You can add that to a stir fry. You can make it into a soup. And how do you trim as part of this, you know, so maybe a whole bowl of fresh veggies and from the from, say, romaine lettuce to asparagus, what do you do with these and what are some things that you can then cook with them?

Can you steam them? Can you make a roasted vegetable tray with them. And you can, you know, split half that train. You can bake your tofu on the same sheet pan with the similar spices.

You know, they're easy ways to do this, I think prepping things, learning how to do that, and then understanding that you can use things like frozen broccoli, frozen cauliflower as well, you know, there's a sauce package. Just ignore that.

Use the actual whole food because frozen foods are flash frozen in the United States, so they frozen at their peak. So they actually healthy options for us.

And things like frozen base are cost effective options. So there are lots of things you can do that just make life easier. And to your point, when people realize how easy it is to steam broccoli, they think to that, you know, they sort of the eyes open and they're like, wow, I can do that.

You know, this is not this is not rocket science. What do you do with the water after the steamed broccoli that night? Like nice green. Green what? I'll tell you what I do, but you tell me what you do.

So I usually say. But either for a smoothie or shocked with. Sometimes the flavor is not that delicious, right? It's not that tasty, but it's rich in polyphenols.

And I will use the cool it and use it for smoothie the next day. Or use it for juice shop where there's a little bit of fresh injury time that overpowers that taste, but I'm not getting the nutrition from it.

Soups, soups. That's the other thing. Yeah, I don't know if this is the right thing to do, but I feed my plants like I will go water my plants with that for you, right?

That's a good idea. Yeah, it's nutrient dense. Yeah. So, like, I have a window sill with all my herbs and fresh herbs. So I'm like, okay, you guys are getting a little getting used to.

Yeah. That's great. I love it. Okay. So you have worked with a number of patients for who food genuinely changed the trajectory of their mental health.

Can you share, without any identifying details, a case where the gut brain connection was the real turning point in what happened to that person? You know, I had a woman who appeared.

This was before Covid appeared in my office for the first time, an initial evaluation. And she came to me saying, young executive in her office down the road from the hospital.

And she came in saying, I need Zoloft. I read about it. I think it's going to help me because I'm so anxious. I just can't manage. So, you know, written about her in one of my books, and part of it was because it was such an eye opening moment.

So, you know, I still prescribed medications if and when needed. But I said to, would you be open to conversation during the evaluation, realized that she was this upwardly mobile executive in our office who was single and lived in local area, walked to work, you know, exercised, maybe had a dinner out with friends on the weekend and a cinema, glass of wine, maybe 1 or 2 glasses of wine, but perhaps, you know, took the lunch to work and had

generally a healthy lifestyle, which had gotten promoted about three months prior.

And all of a sudden six out of seven days she was traveling. So she was not home. She was keeping up with exercise, but she was eating completely differently.

So no, she wasn't able to carry lunch on the plane as she wasn't able to meal prep. And she was eating in airports.

A Patient Case and Practical Gut-Health Changes

She was eating at, you know, when she arrived at a hotel late at night, she would catch a snack with, you know, something to drink, or she'd be eating out of the fridge in her room, which would have unhealthy snacks in it.

So there was this, this big, big change. And then she was socializing more because of networking for work. So almost every evening she was out, she was at a very fancy dinner, and everyone is having 2 or 3 glasses of wine.

So to keep up, she wanted to socialize and, you know, be part of the milieu. And she was now drinking maybe two glasses of wine and night. What it happened is she gained weight because she'd kept up with exercise, but she had developed as bios in her governmental bar and been thrown off.

And I said to her, well, given what you're telling me, this is what I think has happened, would you be open to trying this through a nutritional lens and starting this first while we work on your anxiety?

So we did, you know, trot and breathwork exercises and in a couple of classes and sort of mindfulness exercises to help manage the anxiety but also changed her died.

So we gave a whole plan of how she could manage travel, carry healthy snacks, stop at a supermarket and buy fresh food. You know, skip every single boss of wine, have one for the evening.

Or to maybe, but really drink lots of water. That looked like a little bit of a cocktail, but it's actually sparkling water. Gave her tip several lifestyle tips that helped her still be popular with her networking clients, but really were helping reduce inflammation and had got and help her eating healthier foods, even for, you know, taught her how to read restaurant menus ahead of time and choose the healthy choices.

So when she sat down with everyone, she wasn't just getting the stake in potatoes, she was actually getting a, you know, plant based build up as well balanced, healthy, but rich in those plant polyphenols and healthy fats.

So it took time, and she was very willing to try this and not take the medication. And it was so great to see us working to help clear the information in a gas microbiome so that reducing eventually she didn't need a medication, but that was highly unusual because she was very motivated.

And sometimes you would have to stop the medication to help the anxiety and help and do the nutrition plan alongside that. Yeah, absolutely. I feel like I have met many similar patients and I'm like, you're going to stay on the medication until I know your gut is strong enough, and then we'll talk about tapering and that.

But, you know, it takes the body time to kind of build up all these biochemicals, neurotransmitters to start functioning against. It's not overnight. And they've got to be patient.

And and I think that's the key here is to just it's possible but be patient with the process and just, you know, with the right guidance there is a way.

Right. So last question I want to make this as concrete as possible for our audience. Is someone that's listening right now that's managing anxiety, low mood or brain fog and has never once connected the that to their gut.

What are the three most important changes besides broccoli that they can make to what they eat this week? Like,

let’s make it realistic. And when might they first notice something?

If they start making some changes? This week of year three recommended changes. So I’ll go back to what I teach people in the first session, which is the swap at work.

I’d like them to swap one unhealthy habit with its ice cream. Not enough vegetables, drinking a soda, drinking and energy drink doctrine, enough water that can, you know, all add to swap.

Swap that out for one healthy habit and easiest thing to do is add in more beans and legumes for your plant based protein or more vegetables. Plant you know, fiber, nutrients, minerals, helping feed those gut microbes.

So adding in veggies is very easy and many of us just don’t need enough eat enough servings of vegetables. So that’s often the add. But sometimes some people are want to bring up hydration again, because when you’re dehydrated, you can feel more anxious.

So just drinking and sipping enough water is important. And the W for work can be a mindfulness practice. It could be a breathwork exercise. It could be doing 20 more minutes on the treadmill to help help you with that feeling of angst.

I’ve had patients say to me, when I feel that panic attack coming on, I will get on to elliptical machine, distract myself for 20 minutes, listen to music and that helps.

So you can take either any one of those three and start with the one that bothers you the most in one of those categories to make it easy for you, and definitely doesn’t have to be rocky if that’s what you’re you’re into.

But that creates a framework for people to get started, and sometimes it’s as simple as adding in several glasses of water to your day because people, especially where it’s been this hot this summer, it’s just hydrating is so, so important to amazing.

All right. So we’re gonna swap. We’re going to add the fiber and we are going to stay hydrated. So thank you doctor uma. This has been genuinely one of my favorite conversations because you have given people not just information but permission.

Permission to understand what they feel in their mind might also be a message from their gut. And that single trip to the grocery store can be the first step towards really feeling better.

So thank you so much. Now doctor Uma Naidoo can be found at her website. You umanaidoomd.com and I also encourage you to check out her books, particularly This is Your Brain on Food and Calm your Mind with food.

Now here’s my key takeaway for you guys on this episode. Your gut is not just digesting your food, it’s writing your mood, and every bite you take is either sending a love letter or sending a warning signal to your brain.

So stay tuned because coming up next, we’ve got another great speaker. So thank you very much. Thank you.