The Healing Power of Meditation: A New Approach to Alzheimer’s Prevention Transcript

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Welcome and Summit Introduction

Hello and welcome to the Reversing Alzheimer's Summit. I'm one of your host, James Maskell. And in this summit, we are giving you the tools that you need for yourself, for your loved ones to prevent reverse Alzheimer's, to protect your brain and stay healthy.

And I'm super excited to have today my friend Dawson Church on the summit, because I think he really brings so much value, meaning and, and tool and many tools that can help in this regard.

So, Dawson, welcome. I'm so glad to have you here, James. A joy to be here, a joy to be sharing. Yeah. I'm excited. There's some there's so many places we can start, but I guess you've been involved in in many different areas, related to to human health and thriving.

And I guess I just wanted to start by asking you, like, what is it about about this Alzheimer's and brain health thing that really gets you and why you so passionate about this topic and bringing the tools that you've spent your life working on, researching and bringing to the forefront to this particular population?

I'm really focused on that because people tend to accept a diagnosis as inevitable. They read statistics like 56% of Americans, for example, are involved in dealing with Alzheimer's in some way.

A friend or relative, a family member, and it sucks them in. Americans spend about 50 million unpaid hours every year helping people with Alzheimer's, and so it's a huge burden on society.

And my father died after 15 years struggle with Alzheimer's.

Alzheimeru2019s Risk, Genetics, and Hope

And I actually have the ApoE gene three four combination, which from my early studies in genetics in 1970 is one of the first genes discovered, says you have a strong predisposition to Alzheimer's yourself.

So what people tend to do is think all of this is inevitable. And what new research is showing is that far from it, that we can do things, we can apply changes to our lifestyle, we can adopt mindsets and mental approaches.

We news energy therapies that dramatically affect our health outcomes. And so what I want to counteract is the prevailing view that if you had the APA gene 3 or 4 combination of the four four combination, if you have a genetic predisposition family history, if you have a certain lifestyle that if you got a certain diagnosis that you are doomed to a certain result.

And that is not at all true. So that's that's the big message here. Amazing. Well, let's jump into to that straight away. And I guess, you know, yeah.

Epigenetics is is the mechanism by which this all happens. You know, if you had to, you know, meet with someone and talk to them about what you think is like the most important thing for them to know going through this journey.

And, and obviously there's some way that you've had to, like, think through what is the highest leverage tool where where do you typically think to start with people and, you know, start in terms of research with the study published in 2020, that was really pivotal in linking negative thinking and positive thinking to Alzheimer's plaques.

And we have really sophisticated scanners at our disposal nowadays. MRI scanners look at like the resolution on

your cell phone. If you had a cell phone that was 20 years old that had very, very blurry resolution or your screen on your laptop back 20 years ago today, we can measure the activity, the firing of a single neuron.

So we have now these high resolution devices. And what these allow you to do us to do is to study the brains of people, not intrusive, including Alzheimer's patients.

And what that study in 2020 showed was absolutely stunning. It looked at the buildup of Alzheimer's plaques, Beta and Tal plaques in the brain, and it found that there was an association between all kinds of different lifestyle factors and mental factors, and the build up of those, including the Alzheimer's genes.

And that's was fairly unsurprising that all of these things are affecting the build up of those Alzheimer's plaques. If you look at them under a microscope, they look kind of like, you see you see this bright white neural tissue.

They look kind of like tar. They look like gun. It's like stuck to the neurons. That isn't allowing them to fire properly and transmit signals. And so that stuff builds up over time.

It doesn't get clear out of the brain properly in Alzheimer's. And then people gradually lose their neural ability. And so what this study showed was that negative thinking was correlated with the build up of Alzheimer's plaques.

But the stunning thing about it is that it showed that negative thinking was linked to Alzheimer's far more strongly than genetics. Even if you had the the APO gene, which again produces a strong genetic predisposition to Alzheimer's, impair the APO gene.

Negative Thinking, Plaques, and Epigenetics

If you didn't have negative thinking, that didn't trigger the expression of that gene as much, and so that factor of positive thinking and negative thinking actually overrode all of the other risk factors for Alzheimer's and the effect scaled.

That was the other remarkable thing about that study. The more negative thinking people did, the greater the deposit of those beta and tau proteins in the brain, and the less likely thinking they did the more positive they were, the more they're laughing and they're grateful and they're happy and they're thankful that is doing all these good things we know are good for health.

Generally, the lower the level are, those plaques was in the brain. So that's really a powerful, a powerful argument for us to do all we can to affect our mindset.

It is having a dramatic effect on our bodies, regardless of our genetics. Yeah. It's amazing. And I just want to reflect back on that. You know, if you look at the methodologies that have been proven to be successful at reversing Alzheimer's, if you look at the Ornish methodology.

Right. And one of those is is love and connection, one of the pillars that it's built on and in Doctor Christine Burke, who's the, you know, the co-host of this summit, you know, in her true neuro methodology, you know, many of the actually three out of the eight pillars that she recommends are psychosocial pillars, right.

Connecting with others. But there's also reflection and growth. Because ultimately, like I think what you're saying is that it's one thing to think that like a biochemical protocol could reverse these kind of things, but ultimately, like if you think that what you just said is true and that you need to be in this mind frame, it's actually like those psychosocial factors that are going to determine, determine this sort of long term trajectory.

And that's why I'm super glad that you're you're, you know, bringing all of this research at the forefront because ultimately, you can spend a lot of time working out what supplements to take or what drugs to take or otherwise.

But if you don't meet that fundamental criteria, you're not on the right trajectory. What are some of the ways that you found to engender that in people who maybe that's not their natural disposition or actually in the process of,

you know, coming into this diagnosis, find it quite depressing that maybe they're not going to go back to their old life.

What's, what's how do you turn that back on? Yeah. So there are all kinds of simple things you can do. And you're right, there are supplements. You may need a medication that there are all kinds of simple things you can do.

Like for example, what I did first thing this morning when my wife woke up and walked out of the bedroom. I gave her a hug. Not just a quick hug, but, you know, about a 15 or 20 second hug.

So you're really settling into that sense of love and connection. I walked by my neighbor, I smile, how hard is that? You know? So we're doing all of these things and we, we, we share these connections with other people.

If you don't have enough people in your life, focus on your inner life. And there are remarkable studies on it's called relational spirituality and relational spirituality.

The earliest days were done in the 1990s, and they showed that over 100 genes were being affected when we had, relationship with something larger than ourselves, a sense of connection with our higher power, with nature, with ourselves.

So you can do all of these things without any kind of medical intervention. And they turned out to be powerful epigenetic influences. And so, yeah, I may well need to go get that medication.

You don't need that doctor's visit. You don't need the supplements. No, we need both alternative medicine. We need conventional medicine. We need self-help.

But look to what you can do to empower yourself, because so much of it is available, so much of it is free. And then again, if you're using pulling all these levers like being grateful.

The Gratitude Journal three Gratitudes today, how hard is that? You know, to think of three gratitude today. And by the way, you could cheat and repeat yesterday's gratitude tomorrow.

Okay, these are three, three new things to be grateful for. But James, when you start to focus on what to be grateful for, I sit here sometimes in my own meditative practice and I just tune it to my breath.

I'm so grateful I get to take this breath, then this breath, then this breath. I stand up, I take this step, then that step, then the next step. And so just being grateful for the pot plant outside your window, the roof of your head, and simple things like the body you have that functions is such a powerful practice.

And so you want to focus on those leverage points that are invisible but incredibly potent, that stimulate positive mood. In In yourself. Meditation is able to dramatically shift your sense of mood.

Simple Practices for Positive Brain Health

We measure this in brain scans and the genes by looking at the amount of gamma in in your brain and in long term meditators, they have an explosion of that gamma frequency in and their brains up to 25 times the amount of the average human being.

So you can make yourself simply by meditation, by spiritual practices, by what I call in my book, Spiritual Intelligence The Practices of Spiritual Intelligence.

You can have your level of gamma and your level of happiness go up 25 fold. Now you're talking about a potent intervention for not only your mood, but your gene expression and all of the effects it has on your body downstream.

Wow. I know there's lots of different sources and educators in the meditation space. And and ultimately there's a lot

of different styles. Is there anything you've learned from your work as to what a style of meditation or what structures or what, lessons can be most effective?

Because I'm sure they're not all equal when it comes to this. Yeah, there are hundreds of styles of meditation, and in my earlier book, This Brain, I cover seven of them and different meditation researchers divided in different ways.

But I have seven of them, everything from sitting quietly and observing your thoughts to a walk in nature, moving meditation, qigong, yoga, things like that.

And so the best kind of meditation, though, of all those kinds of meditation and of all the hundreds of styles that are out there, the best meditation of all is the one you will actually do.

Take one. I say treat it like a buffet. Walk down the buffet line, try your favorite things and find your favorite food, your favorite flavor, and then do that.

But do it regularly in the yoga. So it was a Patanjali. You said there are three kinds of meditative three kinds of people, on the journey, on the spiritual journey, one group is people who are intermittent meditators, intermittently interested in spirituality is a nice add on to life.

The others have a sense of duty. The third group is what, some of these traditions called God intoxicated fools. They are so absolutely passionate. The Hildegard of Bingen is talking about fiery lights from heaven pouring through her body.

Rumi, Mary Oliver, there were all these wonderful modern as well as ancient examples of that, that passion. So you want to find one, find a meditation style that drives you to write poetry, to run through the rainstorm screaming with laughter and and singing uncontrollably.

So once it brings that way of joy to your life, because research shows that that kind of meditation is one of the three things that sparks the quickest neuro plastic growth in your brain.

Passion. Your brain recognizes that when you're passionate about something, it's important. If you just sitting there and thinking, oh well, this is nice.

Nothing much is happening in your memory and learning centers in the middle of your brain. If you are absolutely passionate about what you do, you know if you're going to love your wife, love your wife unconditionally, your children, your elders, the people around you fill your life with the passion of a Rumi or a Hildegard, and suddenly it sparks remarkable shifts in the brain.

Andrew Newberg, one of my research colleagues, says the brain has had that kind of passionate, intense connection with something larger than itself. One time never goes back to its original state of information flow.

So find your passion experiment, find what really makes you alive, and then like what woman picks up lit workshops at me? Dawson, I been using your meditation and I said, I'll do it 30 days without fail.

And so that's great. You made a 30 day commitment to using that meditation in my book. And I said to, and what day are you on today? She said, I'm on day 168.

That's passion. That's what you need. Yeah. I wonder about that, that concept, because I just feel like, you know, in some of the other research that I've seen over time, you know, it's really about connecting people to purpose in their life, which is, you know, Aids longevity.

And it seems like, if I put those two things together, you know, having that purpose is what gets you passionate, gets you excited. And from what you're saying, there's real changes to the brain from from engaging in that way.

And it's interesting that there's like a physiological mechanism to back up, you know, sort of psychosocial efforts,

you know, like, ideas. Absolutely. No.

If you look at the rate of muscle growth, so you go to the gym, you start working out, pumping iron, and after a while you see your muscles getting bigger.

It takes though six months or a year to see discernible change picks up on the volume of your muscles. Your muscles grow very, very slowly compared to you on your ones.

If you start firing a neural circle on your brain, there's one one case history in my book, Spiritual Intelligence of a, of a TV host called Graham Phillips.

He began to meditate. Yeah, that meditation. And he had brain scans, brain volume scans, measuring the volume of each component of his brain before and after eight weeks and after eight weeks, a part of his brain that governs emotion regulation.

Really important, governs regulating be annoyed, angry, resentful, all those negative emotions. That part of the brain. In eight weeks it grew by 23%.

Now think about that. Imagine if your muscles in two months the gym grew 23%. You look like you know a Chris Hemsworth in a year.

Meditation Styles and Finding Passion

His is emotion regulation areas called the dentate gyrus grew 23% in only eight weeks. Your brain is exploding with activity when you do this, and all of the parts of your brain that handle emotion regulation, that handle effect of top down control, but you aren't subject to all of your impulses that govern memory and learning.

Those parts of the brain in Alzheimer's patients started to go. They start to degrade the memory. Learning centers of Alzheimer's patients who meditate get bigger.

They actually reverse that brain shrinkage and they increase. So you're having this remarkable effect on your brain by by doing this. And it isn't happening in a year or five years or ten years.

It's happening within a couple of months. Wow. Well, look, I'd love to just to to take this to the another level because I just feel like, you know, having experienced it myself in the last year with my father, you know, there's a there's a very special relationship between the carer, the especially the family carer and the potential patient or the patient.

And, you know, as you said at the beginning, 54% of people involved in some way, it's because most people are in the care of someone who is in that. And I just I see those numbers and those numbers look staggering.

If we don't really turn this around, you know, it ends up being like 100% pretty quickly, right? Either people who have Alzheimer's on the path, Alzheimer's, or people who are looking after them.

So there's a lot to do. But I also see that what you're saying, there's some special connection that can happen, you know, in those moments and ultimately, like for a carer to start to meditate and to meditate with the potential patient and, you know, could be a really lovely thing to do together.

Can you talk to, like, some of the interactions in the brain that happen from the sort of like two people in agreement over what's happening, as opposed to just one person trying to do it by themselves?

It's powerful when you have both people participating. And also the data for caregivers is shocking. One study showed that caring for an Alzheimer's patients shortens your life by 5 to 8 years.

Take a deep breath and think about that one 5 to 8 year shorter lifespan for those carrying with Alzheimer's. For

Alzheimer's patients, it is that that's stressful.

And so when you have people meditating together as a group effect, and I've looked at the whole range of MRI research and one of the three things that really stand out in terms of producing quick, positive change in the brain.

One of those is intensity, which we mentioned before. Another of the three is community. If you meditating in a community, the effect is enhanced in the research into that in months studying, doing meditation in a cave alone versus those studying in a monastery, we find that those in the monastery meditating together have quicker, positive neoplastic change in the brain.

The third of those three factors is compassion and just feeling compassion. Now, compassion again. It can be a two edged sword if you have that compassionate connection to somebody else and of suffering and you can't help that can turn into a deficit in your life.

But compassion, when it flows from that sense of connection to something greater than yourself. Again, this is this is a game changer. When you are able to relax your grip in meditation with spiritual intelligence, if you can relax your grip, the conviction that your own little life is all you have to think about, and you're able to merge with something greater than yourself if you're able to release your what, Larry Darcy calls your local mind, your local self, and merge with something greater than yourself again, hundreds of genes change their expression in a healthy way.

Then you have compassion and caring. You have love. You have unconditional love. And it's not coming from that clinging little local cell. You're simply participating in the endless, boundless love of the universe.

And you notice this little local expression of that. Rumi says that we aren't a drop of the ocean. We are the ocean in a drop. So here you are. You're living your life as an expression of that grand whole.

And it again radically shifts everything you do in the outer set. So it's powerful to connect with people. And when you connect with people in this meditative space.

And I think that also we did one range of studies that we had to do during Covid. We had to see and assess the results obtained from these practices done on zoom versus those done in person.

And we were pretty nervous. We're thinking, you know, we'll probably not get anything like the results on zoom that we got from the in-person interaction.

We got the same statistically significant results from zoom connection as we did from in-person connection.

Brain Changes from Meditation and Purpose

So it's not like you'll never even see another human being in your whole life other than on a screen that you want to find a way of meditating with people.

When I meditate in the morning, I visualize all the millions of people meditating that same time of day. And that connection is powerful. I have I have a meditation buddy.

She lives half the world away and I hardly ever see her in person. But once a week we meditate together and that energetic connection is so powerful. When that begins, like last week when our time came arranged time for our meditation together, even though it was virtual, it hit me like a ton of bricks.

I mean, it was so powerful to feel the energy enhancing there. So find that connection. Find community. In Buddhism, this is called the Sangha of people.

The community of people practice with them. And that's going to reinforce everything else you're doing. Compassion, intensity and community. Wow. That's like, I really feel like getting like a step by step guide.

And I would just reflect back to you like, inadvertently find myself like, you know, finding those things, you know, at this time. And I feel really grateful for that.

Yeah. I'll just share from my own experience we, you know, I wrote a book on group medicine, and I was really looking at how groups of people could come together and support each other and healing.

And, you know, all kinds of things happen in those groups. Some of the groups, like Jim Gordon's groups, were focused on mindfulness based stress reduction, but other groups were focused on specific diseases or otherwise.

And we always see this like sort of potentiation right from groups of people doing chronic disease reversal work together. And it was funny, I brought out that book in in January of 2020, and then Covid hit, and I was so passionate about groups and I was like, there's not going to be any groups.

And we started a journey to work out. Would groups work over zoom as well? And we found, there was actually some, some potentiation of it because, yes, maybe a session on zoom, you know, may be equal or not quite as equal to a session in person.

There's something special about being in person, but being able to connect with people in between the sessions, we found, was really valuable, because it was like continuing the relationship.

Yes, you're not in the run. People are going about their everyday life. But if you could get a message from someone else in that group, hey, I was thinking about you.

You know, you mentioned this, that something you were going to be doing. I've been part of a men's group for the last five years and and just seen the power of just having other people caring about you enough to check in on what's going on and holding you accountable and, and, you know, supporting you through the journey.

I think there's something really powerful there. I think, you know, particularly when it comes to Alzheimer's, there's a lot that can be done in this sort of like people supporting people way, and we are going to have to get a lot better at that, because ultimately, if we have a society where everyone either has Alzheimer's or is supporting someone with Alzheimer's, there's not a lot of time for productive work.

Yeah. And so by those people who make your heart sing, I also want to go a little further. And I was I want to say ditch those people who don't. People hang on to old friendships like my wife had some old friends do.

You're saying? Yeah, you know, I really enjoy being with them, but I've been friends them for 20 years. It's like, if they aren't supporting your well-being, if you know people's has a connection to them, if your life's just a pathway, has has distance itself from their life pathway, it's time to let them go.

Find people who absolutely make you inspired, who bring out your vibrance, who bring out your your genius. And so do that on the lateral level. Know the family members as as much as you possibly can.

It's limited to the family members, because sometimes that new member is going to be more difficult than others. But to the extent you can do that with family members as well, just sitting with even a difficult family member and just listening and doing active listening and reflect, this thing is going to have a positive effect and then do it on levels other than the physical.

And for example, those things are relational spirituality. Show that connecting with your higher power, whatever you can see above to be, you don't have to believe in any, any, any particular religion or philosophy.

And if you do have a religion that really supports you, use that those religious beliefs.

Caregivers, Community, and Compassion

But even if you don't, simply having a sense of connection with that which is greater than yourself is going to

amplify your ability to nurture yourself and to have that sense of connection to all the epigenetic gifts that it brings.

So connect laterally. In Patanjali's Yoga Sutras again, which in one study of Alzheimer's patients, they used meditations based on these Yoga Sutras. And over the course of six months, MRI scans before and after show that using these body based methods that Battaglia espouses and recommends, their brain shrinkage stopped and their brains began growing again.

Then their meta learning centers began growing again. The emotion control centers began growing again, the executive said was began growing again, and the control group just kept on degenerating.

So it's powerful to use these these techniques, these body based techniques, they can literally reverse the shrinkage typical of Alzheimer's brains. And again, you do it laterally.

And Patanjali says in the Yoga Sutras, be friendly. He says it in their four books, in the Yoga Sutras and all four books he says, be friendly, be friendly in one place.

He says in book three, here's the secret of accelerating your spiritual growth. Be friendly. Be nice to other people. Be nice to random strangers. So then you're doing it.

They're laterally in local space and time. Do it in non-local space and time. Tune in, breathe in and connect with your higher power. Connect with that which is greater than the greater than yourself.

Who knows what might be out there on the nonphysical level? And when you invite that energy in our benevolence of kindness, you know, pick a mentor picks and Francis, pick on your own.

Pick mother married and just have these invisible sources of well-being in addition to the lateral ones. Now, when you're alone, say you have a eight hour car ride all by yourself.

You're tuning into Saint Francis, you're having a having a, you know, just spending eight hours with some Francis or Mother Mary. I mean, now you're having all of this sense of support from the invisible as well as the visible.

And when you do that, you have community in every sense of the word. Wow, Dawson. Well, look, I really want to just share my appreciation for, you know, everything that you've shared here today.

I know that, like, taking on these kind of new, ideas for many people listening to this, you know, could can be sort of somewhat overwhelming. But what I really appreciate about what you've shared in the last, a little while here is just how practical and simple and straightforward so much of this is.

And I recognize that, like, some of the shifts you're talking about are simple but not common. And that ultimately, you know, if we can make this more of a commonplace starting point, I think there's, so much that that that can come from that.

And, yeah, I would say, like, obviously this is a lifetime of work for you and that there's a lot, there's a lot that anyone can do. If someone's interested in following this thread, where would they where would you recommend that they start in your body of work?

Well, one good place to start is my book, Spiritual Intelligence. And when I began to write the book, I had hadn't given a thought Alzheimer's disease. Since my father died many years ago.

And yet I found as I was reading studies done on spiritual intelligence, that it grows your brain. And then I began to wonder about research showing spiritual intelligence with Alzheimer's patients.

And that's where this whole body of work began to become apparent. So definitely read Spiritual Intelligence. It'll show you the research. I'll explain it in simple layperson's terms.

Not a hard book to understand. And so there you'll get a sense of how to apply this, not just if you are directly involved in Alzheimer's, but for brain health at any age.

The Alzheimer's plaques show up in the bloodstreams of people 30 years before any Alzheimer's symptoms become apparent. So we're taking blood samples from 30 year olds, and if they have elevated levels of those plaques, they'll be the ones to develop Alzheimer's.

30 years later. So you want to make sure you're doing this at every age, even when you're 20 or 30 or 40 years old. And so that's one thing, is that that book, Spiritual Intelligence, it's that the paradigm that we need now after emotional intelligence and that that's a good starting point.

You can also download a free meditation at my website, Dawson gift.com. That's just my name. Dawson gift. Dawson gift. There's a meditation there. And that meditation we used with people and we did MRIs on then on a group of people before and after using that meditation for 30 days.

And we compare them to a control group and the control groups. Brains didn't change. And in a month the group using that meditation at dose giphy.

Where to Start: Books, Meditation, and Testing

com, they had growth in brain volume to do with emotion regulation and with cognitive development. So rapid brain changes in only a month using that meditation that and giphy.com.

So just download that free meditation, read the book Spiritual Intelligence. And again you'll start to feel the changes right away that meditation unlocks neurochemicals like serotonin and dopamine and oxytocin and nitric oxide and beta endorphin and anandamide in your brain.

And you literally feel the flood of these neurochemicals in your body. You start to feel much better. That's why that woman who took the 30 day meditation challenge was still meditating at day 168 because she just got hooked on all these wonderful feelgood drugs in her brain every day.

So give yourself that support and don't wait till you have a crisis. Build resilience now when you don't have a crisis, when the next event happens in the world, or in your own life, or in your own health, you are a resilient person.

You've been firing those neural circuits, wiring them in your brain before you need them. That way, when we had life's inevitable setbacks, we are well prepared.

So don't give up on meditation, read spiritual intelligence and open yourself to blessings. When you are attune to that greater cause of something larger than yourself, you have no idea how much love might be there for you.

And it turns out that the wisdom, the kindness, the love, the well-being you do you you access when you're when you're there is incredibly powerful and changes not just your body, your cells, but your entire outer life as well.

So love yourself enough to start practicing these things. Not tomorrow, but today. A great message doesn't church. Thank you so much for your wisdom and bringing it to the reversing all sign of sun. That so much for everyone in there.

And I'm really glad that you mentioned the, the blood testing too, because ultimately I feel like that is information for everyone. Thank you so much for being here.

And, thank you so much for listening to. I hope you'll take some of the tools that Dawson is talking about, implement them in your own life and chart your journey back from Alzheimer's and prevent reverse, protect your brain.

I know your host, James McGill, is the Alzheimer's summit reversing Alzheimer's. And, thanks so much for tuning in

and enjoy the next talk.