Mental Health Beyond Brain Chemistry: Dr. Chris Winfrey's Root-Cause Approach Transcript

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Podcast Introduction

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Hi. Welcome back. I'm Doctor Monica Haruki on the Truly Healthy MD podcast.

Guest Introduction and Background

Today we have a guest who's a friend of mine, Doctor Chris Winfrey. And what I want to discuss today is what if brain health and mental health is more than just chemistry?

What if we could heal the mind by healing the body? So today we're diving deep into cutting edge science with Doctor Chris Winfrey. He is a trailblazing psychiatrist who blends metabolic and mitochondrial psychiatry and psycho neuro immunology.

Wow. That's a big word. And functional medicine to restore brain function from traumatic brain injury to more toxicity and complex PTSD. Doctor Winfrey is redefining what's possible in mental health care, plus his unique insights into the intersection of faith and psychiatry.

Make this conversation one that you don't want to miss. Let's get into it. Welcome to the show, Doctor Chris Winfrey. Thank you for having me. Amazing. I love having you here today.

Tell us a little bit more about your yourself, your background. You're a psychiatrist, but you practice functional and integrative psychiatry. Is that correct? Yeah. Okay.

So where where did you train? How did you get to where you are right now? So I'm originally from Arkansas, some southern at heart. I love it. Love the fool of the culture of the South.

I was born and raised in Arkansas, and I did my medical training there. And I went on the transition into Dallas, and I started my postgraduate training in Dallas, and I finished here in new Jersey.

And I just stay after my training. And I had great opportunities and great support. And so I decided to stay, and I started, you know, practicing traditional psychiatry as I was trained right out of residency and went right into private practice.

I know that I've always was going to do that. I knew working in institutions and things was going to be more protocol driven, and I would I was very curious about how to think outside the box and and how to handle different situations as they presented themselves.

And so I'm just kind of, you know, stuck with what I was training with at first. And I ran into a lot of roadblocks. It wasn't really working. People got better, maybe 30% of the time, and just things were confusing, wasn't lining up.

So I originally thought it was my skills and I said, let me go get some more skills and let me go get some more supervision and and see if I can help these people.

And I realized it wasn't that, it was that the issues as they were presenting themselves are far more complicated than how I've been trained to think about it.

And that put me at a crossroads in the Crucible, and I had some decisions to make if I was going to keep pushing for, or if I was going to try to protect my ego and stay in this box that I was put in.

I love that, I love that, yeah. So as integrative physicians, we always try to add more tools to our toolbox to, to help our patients. So it's it's wonderful that you are able to do that.

And right now you're practicing both functional and integrative medicine, adding that to your conventional psychiatry approach. Is that correct? How absolutely.

Okay.

Functional and Integrative Psychiatry Explained

And so what what exactly is functional integrative neuro psychiatry. Yeah, I know a lot of people out there might be very familiar with what psychiatry is, with what functional medicine is, hopefully what functional medicine is a root cause approach.

Integrative medicine is integrating more modalities than just conventional medicine. But if we put all those together, how would you explain functional integrative neuropsychiatry.

So so traditional psychiatrist says look, I got depression, I have anxiety. I've been through this traumatic event. And if I put my symptoms together they meet a certain classification.

And then we give the diagnosis. But that diagnosis is not linked to an environmental sort of issue, nor is it linked to a bodily or biological issue. And so you're given some treatment, whether it is therapy or eMDR or biofeedback or some medication or something like that.

We still don't have an idea of what's happening in terms of a system in the body about what is happening. And so trying to guess edit about given this certain treatment and sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't.

So in a sense, functional psychiatry looks at what are some of the driving forces behind these symptoms as they're popping up. These diagnose as they're popping up was driving the train.

And we want to look at primary and secondary causation to these particular problems. And so we look at things like root causes like infections I see a lot of vector borne illness like tick borne illness such as Lyme disease.

And Bartonella. I see more toxicity. Quite a few people have that. Other environmental pollutants and things like carbon monoxide poisoning. And then we see a ton of people who have trauma related situations, nutrient deficiencies, diet and other sort of lifestyle issues.

And so 90% of most problems are a combination of lifestyle and environmental factors. And so we can get a lot done by looking at those two layers. And so if we're not really addressing a root cause, and in a way we're still kind

of guessing and we're not able to restore the, the systems that kind of become, dysregulated.

And so we want to look at, for example, your hormonal system, your immune system, your communication system, such as your circulatory system or your lymphatic system.

These are symptom systems that become dysregulated because of these primary issues that then produce the symptoms to begin with. And so you have, for example, depression that could be related to several systems.

For example, if your circulation is off, you don't give hormones to your brain to help you with your depression. If you don't have a functioning gut, you don't get nutrients and the amino acids to your brain to help make those neurotransmitters.

If you have, immune system problems, you can drive, you can have a lot of inflammation that's throwing your brain off. And so we want to get to a place where we're repairing those, those systems so that we can get a resolution of those symptoms.

Integrative medicine says I want to combine treatments. I don't want to discriminate. I don't want to be in the conventional, modern, you know, world.

I don't want to be in the alternative world. I want to look and say, how can I bring all this together? Because somebody in front of me is suffering, and I want to be able to bring them every opportunity that I can to get better.

So I don't want to be on one side of the fence. I want to bring it all together. And so if that's yoga for some, if that's herbal medicine for some, if there's immunotherapy for some, if that's like pharmacology for some, if it's going to work to get the job done, that's amazing.

Yes, I love how you explain that and that that's true for what I do. I'm an internist, you're a psychiatrist. And whichever physician works in this kind of field, they will take what they know from their commercial training and expand it to the functional, integrative world.

When we expand our toolbox for patients. So it sounds to me like you practice a very personalized way of approaching patients. Is that correct? Yes. I think in some ways medicine has been protocol driven is easier.

It makes sense. You put somebody in a certain category, certain box, it might have a sure understanding of that. And for those that fit in it. So the box great.

Get well. You move on with your life. But for a vast number of people, there's not filling in those boxes. They're being pushed to the wayside. They've been relegated and and those are the people we largely see.

And we want to have a heart for. If you like this discussion, please hit the subscribe button and consider leaving us a review. It really helps people find us and we truly appreciate your support.

Absolutely, I love that. I love that I people out there are looking for a more personalized approach if they don't feel like they fit into those protocols.

And yeah, absolutely. There are some people out there that they're doing amazing with the way their primary care doctor or their cardiologist or psychiatrist doing things and and keep doing that.

We love our conventional M. D. colleagues. We, we, we applaud them. We want them to continue forward.

Personalized Patient Assessment

But for people who haven't found a path in commercial medicine, there are those of us who practice a more integrative and personalized approach, which makes it a bit harder for us as physicians. Is that correct?

Yes. Is more thinking, more time, more not writing, more investigation, more lab interpretation. It's a lot more work. That that's right. So what are the first things that you do in a visit to ensure that these things are personalized for each patient that walks through your door?

You know, I like to see someone for at least four visits. That way we can kind of get a sense of it's going to be a fear that. And also by the fourth visit, I've gotten a lot of information, get a sense of what's going on with them, you know, because this is a an investment and a commitment.

A person needs to know what they're going to get themselves into. And so I don't want to get down the line and the person is surprised by some of the commitments they're going to have to make.

So upfront, when I'm interviewing somebody and I want to work with them and they want to work with me, I want to know a couple things. Are they ready?

Number one, because a person who's not ready as much as they might need it and desire is it's not going to work out. They have to really come ready. And if not, then they need to be put into a psychotherapeutic track to help them develop their readiness.

The second thing I like to look for is investment. What are they willing to invest? Time, energy, their thinking capacity, money? They're going to need to invest something.

The other thing I like to look at is sacrifice it. In order to get something, you got to give up something. We only have so much capacity to hold something.

And if we're trying to hold space for healing, then we have to give up something. And ideally, we have to give up processes, thoughts, relationships, habits.

That was, you know, contributing to a unwell illness or illness. And so for a lot of people, this is the hard one, is that they want to get without giving up.

We have to really sit down and deal with that aspect of greed, of wanting more and more and not giving up something. So these are some of the sort of, intangible things that I like to work through as we kind of building the relationship and building rapport from there, I want to get a good sense of how they came to see me, why did they come to see me, and by what ways are they coming to see me?

I want to know what matters to them and what's bothering them, and how they think they can be helped, and what sort of avenue that they want to approach.

And then from there, I want to get into all the details. I want to know everything about them. And so because I'm psychoanalytic trained and I'm also biologically trained, I can get a lot of information about this person and the way the mind works and the way the body works.

And so I want to get as much information as I can from them in doing so. And then from there, we want to look at all this information together, make sense of it, try to form a narrative that makes sense to their reality, and then we want to try to start trying for it with some sort of a plan and execution of their plan.

Yeah. That's amazing. I was think I was listening to a thought leader yesterday that was talking about how people truly heal, and he was saying that people cannot heal if they have the same mindset that they had when they got sick.

So it's a really transformative experi ence when people start wanting to make a dramatic difference in their life and wanting to get to true healing. It's a lot of work and a complete change in their mindset and a change.

Hormones and Mental Health

A lot of things like you were saying and their habits sometimes in the the people they have in their life. So it's a lot of things have to change sometimes for people to get to true healing. Absolutely, absolutely.

Yeah, absolutely. And so and so you still have some medications that a psychiatrist will prescribe in conventional medicine. Is that right? Yes. I still prescribe, you know, all the regular psychiatric medications.

The difference with me compared it to a traditional psychiatrist. I'll prescribe all of those, and then I'll prescribe anything else that I can prescribe that will be helpful to the presentation at hand, whether that be some sort of anti-microbial, anti-inflammatory, herbal medicine supplements and other sort of treatments such as some of my doctors are still peddling medicine, OMT and acupuncture, sitting in some of the physical therapy, aqua therapy, you name it, if it's necessary and it makes sense, I'm going to do it within the the, you know, the realms of what I can do medical legally.

And I think in that regard, we're trying to target several systems of the body because sometimes and this is true for so many people, they've been on Prozac and they Prozac either was working and then it stopped or it just never really took off.

And they switched to another medicine and another medicine, and it just can't seem to get a good handle on it. So the way my practice run, I'm investigating why those medicines are not work.

And somewhere in the system, the one of those systems that we named earlier and others is off. And so I need to be able to pivot to some other medicines and some other treatments when these sigmas are not working.

Wonderful. Yeah. And amongst the things that you've mentioned today, I know that hormones are something that people don't typically think about their life.

Psychiatrist they're not gonna talk about the hormones. Right? Is that something that you talk to patients about? Yes. Hormones are the key of life. They're a part of our signal system.

And when your hormones are, your signals are off. So when we're talking about mental health, when we're talking about the mind, we're talking about the ability to perceive what you feel inwardly and what you experience and feel outwardly into your experiences.

And if your hormones are your hormones are key to those signals in terms of whether or not you get the signal, whether or not the signal is delayed, whether or not the signal is intense or not.

And if your signaling is off, then the communication that you're processing is going to be off. And then therefore, if you're in a relationship or if you work in the job, then the way you're going to experience that person or that job is going to be altered because those signals in those communications are altered.

And so if we're talking about having optimal health and optimal functioning, then having the optimization of our hormones is key toward that. And so I love talking about hormones because, you know, they work also in the brain, even your sex hormones.

Your brain needs testosterone, which helps calm the brain down. And it makes people feel more masculine. Estrogen is so key for a lot of women. After menopause, they become more anxious and confused and things of that nature because they lost estrogen in their brain.

Thyroid hormone is really critical because it not only regulates your thermostat and raise your body temperature, which makes everything in the body work better.

It also regulation of serotonin in your adrenaline. So thyroid hormone helps with depression is one of the things it gives off when consider when and how depressants don't work.

If your thyroid is not optimized and functioning, and your serotonin system is not going to be optimized and

functioning, then therefore a lot of the antidepressants are not going to be very effective.

So we really do need to consider, you know, hormones as a part of the process because they also are having a role in how neurotransmitters are made that is regulating things like anxiety and depression and how the whole system works.

That's amazing. That's amazing. And so what I'm gathering from what you're telling me is that perhaps once people's hormones are better regulated, then maybe they won't need that psychiatric medication, or they'll need less or they'll feel better.

Regardless of whether they took the psychiatric medication or not. Is that correct? Yes. So let's say let's say thyroid hormones sometimes if you're a, you know, and this is something that people can do at home, you can check your body to get one of those old fashioned thermometers and you check your temperature after you wake up three, six, nine hours after you wake up.

And you average those temperatures across that day for five days. And if you're not here in 98.6, your thyroid is off. I know what the doctor said about your lab work.

Energy, Mitochondria, and Oxygen

I know that your lab says you have some T4 and different things in there, but your the way your system works, you need to produce it, which is what you're seeing in the blood, but it also needs to transport to where it needs to get to.

But then inside of your cells, it needs to be sensitive to the hormone to use it. And for a lot of people, their cells are not using the thyroid hormone.

So they have low thyroid symptoms, although their blood work might look okay. And so this is a situation where, you know, if we can get thyroid hormones optimize and they body temperature increases to 96 consistently.

People feel better in the summertime compared to the wintertime. And so that will be very helpful to your mood overall. Just body temperature regulation and is also one of the hormones it drops in the wintertime.

Why people have seasonal blues is literally drops and they know it's not being regulated very well. And so if we can get thyroid hormone, optimum body temperature is, you know, burning like a furnace.

We can get in there, start cooking some things really. Well then yes, you're going to feel better and you won't start having your other neurotransmitter and a better regulate like serotonin and adrenaline just because the thyroid hormone all by itself.

And yes, at that time, for some people, they can't come off their anti-depressants and they might need a lower dose until we can figure out what is the next system that's all of them might be impacting their mood and things.

That's amazing. Yes, I love I love when people get to to real healing and not just be depending on on certain medications. And you know, I always tell people if you need some medication for a while, that's that's fine.

I absolutely prescribe antidepressants, proton pump inhibitors, which is a medication to suppress stomach acid. It's perfectly fine if you if you need to use it for a little while.

We don't people to be suffering, but once we get to the root causes then people can kind of come off these medications and feel better than they thought they could feel better, definitely better than when they were on the medications, but for better than before they came to see us.

So that's just where true healing happens. Absolutely, absolutely. And another topic that we talk about a lot in this whole cell, eugenicists trying to get back to health is is energy.

And I listen to a lot of thought leaders regarding energy mitochondrial health. Is that something that you've incorporate into your practice to when people come to see me?

The number one thing that's bothering people, whether they directly say it or not, they intimated, was some other nonverbal communication. The number one thing that is communicated to me is that there haven't been energy problem, the number one symptom, hands down of any problem.

Every problem can be tied and linked to an energy problem and can get better if energy is better regulated, the whole entire body operates of energy. And if we're talking about the brain, which is about 2 to 3% of your body weight, but demands anywhere from 25 to 40% of the energy production, we're talking about a large amount of energy.

And so when some people say, I have brain fog, I can't remember where I put my kids. I'm having trouble with ADHD, like symptoms, or I'm feeling procrastination or I'm lacking motivation.

These are all words, descriptions, or symptoms that make me first think above all else. They got the energy problem. It is very hard to procrastinate and lack motivation.

If you got Bountiful energy. If you got energy, there's just oil into your body. I don't see how you can sit on the couch is very difficult. It'd be my body. I don't see how that would be possible.

And if you in some ways can send signals through your brain because you got energy to produce a signal, it's very difficult to have ADHD like symptoms.

It's very difficult. And so I think that's the thing that I think about first, when it come in, in the number one thing that people communicate. So I'm trying to work on energy production right out the door.

And when they come in, in one of the things that we talked about early earlier already contributes to energy production. One of the main things is thyroid hormone. T3.

The mitochondria need that to begin to make more of my the cons you need that hormone any cortisol. There are two hit hypotheses there and how they regulate the mitochondria.

You also need other things like B vitamins and magnesium CoQ10 in a, D and several other things for the mitochondria to work well. And I think that starting from there and getting people to have more energy, they function about now in a therapeutic process, in the interpersonal process, sometimes people don't face their problems.

They don't talk about their feelings. They don't have those crucial conversations because they lack energy. They get a signal inside. This is going to take work.

And in order to do work, you need energy. And if I'm just too tired, which is something I commonly hear and it goes not knows very well because we normalize or made it very common.

And I'll call to be okay with lack and energy. People are not going to address really important things because they lack energy. And people not only can get up and, you know, do chores and things that they need to do.

If they have more energy, they can also address some emotions. They can also address some memories. They can also address some abandonment issues. They can also address some difficult relationships that they've had, that they've been putting off and having some crucial conversations with when they have energy.

Energy makes all of that possible because all that feels like work and strain, and people will avoid that if they don't have the energy to melt it. So energy across the board is crucial for everything.

And I have found that sometimes when people are stuck in therapy, some of these things, like we're talking about

right now, are the issues behind seeing them getting stuck in therapy because the brain can't process certain information and get to the next level if it doesn't have the energy to produce that emphasis for the next level.

Yeah, that is such it's very new paradigm, right? I think we think of things in a very mechanistic way, the way that we're taught in medical school and residency.

And this energy paradigm is, is very new and and groundbreaking. But at the same time, it's very it's old too. If we look back at in the past how we thought about the body, it was more of an energy sort of way.

And then we kind of got lost the last few decades thinking of everything very mechanistically. If we can combine these two and think both of the mechanistic things and the energy, then that is how we can get the best results.

How about so the use of oxygen, is that something that you also talk to your patients about. How do you explain that to patients. So oxygen is is crucial to what we were just talking about as it relates to energy.

And because the main thing that your body needs to make energy is oxygen. And so oxygen is by far the most important treatment molecule that for us. And so when we're not processing oxygen very well or we stop processing oxygen very well, we call it death.

So we all die by one mechanism not producing or processing oxygen. Now how we come to that, whether it's an accident or some other sort of health crisis that brings us to that place, that is what the definition of death is.

TMS and Brain Optimization

So if that's the definition of death, then the definition of life has to be at a cellular level. How well we're processing oxygen. And if we can process oxygen very well, we can live very well.

And so because we live in toxic conditions and we have a lot of acidic conditions, acidic foods and chemicals, that makes our body acidic, we don't process, you know, oxygen very well.

And so one of the things I like to talk about with my patients is just that. How about we start to work on your acid balance in your body and making your body more alkaline and more basic?

We were shifting you toward a higher end. That would be an aid in better processing of oxygen. How about we work on your circulation system? So many people that are sedentary, they on the couch or they're not working out.

Their blood is not flowing. They're not making new blood vessels. You can't get oxygen to critical places that it needs to get to, so that you can make that energy in the brain is the most important thing.

So I have a pulse ox in my heart in my office. It's not something most people think about when they come to a psychologist office. They don't get a pulse ox on a finger.

They try to get a basic sense of how the oxygen is flowing. But that's what I want to do. I want to see at a very peripheral level, what are the oxygen concentrations in their blood?

And some people are running 92, 93 just sitting there. That tells me they have a sluggish cardiovascular system. They're not transporting, you know things very well.

And that's another reason why they're tired. And so I think I want to make that very clear. We need to get oxygen to the brain. Period is essential. And we need by any mechanism get it in there.

Give influence. Because if we're talking about rebuilding the brain, we need oxygen to do that. And we got to get it transported there. So we want to work on those sort of things.

That's that that's really amazing. And I don't think most people get that from most of their psychiatry visits, or even

for most of their medical visit.

These are things that we're not talking about. So I think this is such a wealth of information for for our listeners, and hopefully they can find an integrative physician to, to work with and, and get more of this as an actionable item.

Another thing that I know that you use in your practice is TMS. Can you tell our patients what that is and what how that could potentially help them if they find a provider with TMS in their practice.

So TMS stands for transcranial magnetic stimulation. So transcranial across the cranium. Magnetic stimulation not to be confused with ECT. Electrical convulsive therapy where you're shocking the brain.

We're not shocking. The brain was stimulating the brain. That's very different. We don't want to shock. We want to stimulate no shocking stimulation. And so by stimulating the brain, we get to stimulate it in organized, methodical way.

And that there are brain, there are systems in the brain. And if we stimulate certain similar systems, we can produce or foster certain improvements, whether that be anxiety or PTSD or depression or memory or ADHD or for autism, we can take TMS, we take the magnetic probe and we put it on the brain.

The magnet is about the same size and strength of an MRI machine. Most MRI is about 2 or 3 Tesla and strength. And so the TMS is two Tesla. And we take that magnetic stimulation.

We put it on the brain somewhere and we send magnetic pulses into the brain. The brain is electrical and there's a magnetic stimulation. So we create an electro magnetic field.

And if anybody knows anything about physics, when you have an electro magnetic field, you get movement out. And so by taking this magnet and creating an electro magnetic field with the brain, we can move the brain waves with the TMS probe.

And if we put it into a certain simple system, we can move the brain to deal with not only just certain symptoms, but even brain optimization. So for people who have conditions PTSD, Alzheimer's, multiple sclerosis, stroke, traumatic brain injury, anxiety, ADHD, autism, they can benefit from TMS.

And what if you don't have those conditions? Let's say you have functioning doc like yourself. You run an operation, you got family, you got a business, and you're trying to do more.

You're trying to expand your capacity to be able to handle the things you need to handle in your life. We call that brain optimization. You two can benefit from TMS.

You don't have to have a condition. TMS, which is in help. It will help to enhance your brain performance that you perform with what you already do and have more capacity to do with as well.

And so there are a couple different versions of TMS. One is called TMS or repetitive TMS. And then there is TMS magnetic resonance guided TMS, where we're using the EEG machine to kind of give us an idea of how to go about the treatment.

So different couple ways we can mix up the TMS, but amongst the different ways we can use it to do some pretty good things for a patient. That's that's really amazing.

I know you provide that, but there's there's clinics all over the country, right, that also provide this, not just you. Yeah. So Mert is I'm using a company called Wave Neuro.

So they have training. They have locations throughout the country where they train people in this particular treatment protocol. So yes, people can find one of the providers all across the country with this particular treatment protocol.

This treatment protocol is doing very well in the autism population, really take in that population. And we are seeing kids being able to have improvements very quickly, such as going from not being able to speak to speaking in 1 or 2 weeks in some instances where their kids, their brains are starting to be more organized, they can make better eye contact.

The communication is a it's a really great treatment.

Key Takeaways and Closing Remarks

Amazing, amazing. Yeah. So it sounds like a lot of people out there, I think in part psychiatry is a little bit stigmatized in our society. People think, oh, I don't I don't need a psychiatrist.

But it sounds to me like the therapies that are available in integrative psychiatry are things that can help a wide range of people. Most of us have some amount of anxiety, depression, or like you said, even if we're early, we're high functioning.

We can still optimize our brain. There's this is something that anybody out there listen to this might be able to, to benefit from not just the, the last modality talked about, but all the things that you talk about, the hormones, the mitochondria.

So, so that's such such useful information. I loved every single bit of it. It's it's a lot to digest, a lot to try to wrap our brains around. So before we let you go, could you please tell our listeners what the key takeaways would be from your message and from this conversation in 2025?

There's never been a better time to be alive in 2025. There's never been a better time to be alive. We have more at our arsenal now than we've ever had.

We have better understanding than we've ever had. We have better technology than we have better had. And so now, in the times of trying to live well, trying to live healthy and to pursue your full optimization, becoming who you need to be so you can do what you need to do.

There's never been a time to be alive, dead now. And so there's no shortage of treatments. There's no shortage of options. We have plentiful treatments and options.

It comes down to access politics, ego, philosophy, ideology, geography. Those are the barriers. I mean, it's not the lack of treatment. Yeah, it's not the lack of treatment and it's not the lack of finances either.

I know that sometimes people feel like functional medicine is only for people who have a lot of money to invest in tests, but but no, the basic things that we teach in functional medicine come down to things that are free for everyone.

Being able to live more in sync with nature, being able to make the most of our social interactions. So absolutely, these treatments are to some extent available to absolutely everybody out there, anybody can or to achieve a better health if they are just a little bit more informed.

Absolutely, yes. Thank you so much for being on this podcast. I really enjoyed this information. I know that our listeners out there are going to love this, and I can't wait to have some more conversation with you in the future.

Absolutely. Thank you for having me. Thanks, doctor Chris Winfrey, we'll talk to you next time. Thank you for tuning in to Doctor Talks. We hope today's episode has enlightened and inspired you on your path to optimal health.

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matter to you most.