How Plants Helped Beat Addiction And Rebuild A Life Transcript

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Introduction and Guest Welcome

Well hello, everybody. Welcome back. Hard Rock. Joel Klein talking about reversing heart disease naturally here. And I have one of the greatest guests.

And it's the first time I've had a chance. Quite a lot interview him, but known him for over a decade. So it's, just another get together with Adam Sud Sunday.

Hi, Adam. Hey. How are you doing? I'm really excited for this. Thank you. And you're beaming in from a beautiful day in Austin, Texas. And I'm beaming in from a cold, gray day in southeastern Michigan.

But what are you going to do? You got a big smile. And I'm also smiling to spend this time with you. So I saw you starting to pop up all over the plant based world.

You know, about a decade ago. And mainly you came to Detroit and shared your story with our plant based nutrition support group, which was so impactful.

And, you know, not all of us have a story of hitting bottom and bouncing back. And, anybody looking at you and knows you've bounced back, you look amazing and vibrant and healthy and much younger than your 73 years of age.

Now I am, but, you know, now you've become a warrior in the plant based movement. But you have a perspective, and I honor it, that you've seen some very dark faces in your life.

You had some addictions that you openly speak about, and lots of people watching this summit. I mean, they're struggling because they got addictions, too.

And it might be the obvious drug and alcohol might be food might be other things. So tell us a little about you grew up in Austin and then, you know, how did you get in roughly such a bad place, you know, 10 to 15 years ago?

Yeah. So I was born in Texas, in 1982, and I grew up here in Austin, Texas. And so, you know, I'm I grew up in a Texas culture, you know, beef and barbecue.

Yeah, it was it was everywhere. It was in my houses and my friends houses and their friends houses. And my school was everything.

Childhood, Bullying, and Early Addiction

And, you know, I had this very, amazing childhood, you know, my my dad, who, you know, my dad taught me how to play every sport under the sun. And my mom inspired my imagination.

I was born with an identical twin brother. And then I have a younger sister, and we had all of our friends in our neighborhood. And, you know, I really had this incredible sense that my life was a safe, secure and hopeful place to be.

And then I started to experiencing, started to experience some things, hypercritical, parenting. I got diagnosed with ADHD and became the target of bullying.

By the time I was in high school, bullying had become a very difficult part in my life. Where I would get up every single day and I'd find myself inside of a body that was becoming, not a safe, secure, hopeful place to be.

I gained weight, I was certainly an anxious, depressed kid. I would go to school that didn't feel like a safe, secure, or hopeful place to be. In fact, the bullying was so bad my freshman year of high school that when I would get dropped off at school, the teachers would have to get their eyes on me to make sure that I made it into the school safely.

And so every single day I would go to this school for, you know, seven hours a day, and I would be constantly afraid. And I was diagnosed with ADHD before I started high school, and they put me on a medication called Adderall.

And I remember I would take my medication in the middle of class. And as I was walking out of class one day, one of the bullies stopped me and said, hey, you know, Adam, listen, I want you to know that all this bullying that's been going on, I want you to know that it's over.

You know, you have to understand. You're you're a freshman. This is the way it is. In fact, we want to invite you to a party. So why don't you bring that Adderall and we'll see you there, you know?

You know, I go to this party. I'm. I'm definitely awkward. I'm definitely a nerd. But I wasn't stupid. I knew exactly what was going on. And in fact, I felt, for the first time, I felt a little bit safe.

I thought, oh, my goodness, if I could be this person for them, if I could supply them with this thing that they want. Now, I don't get hurt anymore. Now I don't get beat up anymore.

And I go to this party, and I actually used Adderall as a recreational drug for the first time that night. And I can tell you that the minute that that high dose took effect, it was like it was as if the universe in this unbelievably warm and loving voice, had you figured it out.

Because immediately I was overwhelmed with incredible amounts of confidence. I had boundless energy. People seemed to want to have me around. It looked a lot like friendship.

I know it wasn't friendship, but it looked enough like it that I kind of bonded with this behavior. I also noticed that as I continued to abuse it, that I started to lose weight with ease and repeatability that was attractive, started making friends with ease and repeatability that was attractive.

My dad notices a change in my behavior. Hey, I'm not complaining about getting beat up anymore, not complaining about school anymore. I'm losing weight.

I'm starting to study with ease and repeatability. I'm finally becoming the son that my dad is proud of. All of these things happening with ease and repeatability.

Just the pop of a pill. And it worked. I lost weight, I had girlfriends, I got a scholarship because I wanted to go to, and by the time I was a sophomore in college, drugs had become the most overwhelming problem I ever faced.

More was no longer not even close to enough. I was running out all the time. I was having to buy drugs on the street. I ended up dropping out of school.

I moved back home to Austin, Texas, and I ended up becoming a criminal drug addict. I was 14 prescriptions. I was doctor shopping, I was stealing, I was buying and selling drugs on the street.

I was treating my family like absolute garbage. I was going through so much drugs so quickly that I would have to find something else to, like, distract me from being present in my life.

And so fast food became my secondary addiction. And by the time I was about 30 years old, I was doing a minimum of 450mg of Adderall a day for six days straight.

And on the days when I wasn't doing Adderall, I was eating 5000 calories of fast food a day. I weighed over 300

pounds. I was nearly broke. I was about two weeks away from being homeless.

My family had was having a very difficult time with me. My sister hadn't spoken to me in about a year. All my friends had abandoned me and life hurt in every single sense of the word, and I'd been battling suicidal thoughts for probably six months at this time.

But, you know, I hadn't really thought about acting on it. And then my dad came to me with an opportunity, and he he gave me the opportunity to attend an event hosted by a guy named Rip Esselstyn to learn about something called a plant based diet, and to be honest, I didn't know who Rip Esselstyn was. I didn't want to know who he was.

I didn't know what a plant based diet was, and I didn't want to know what a plant based diet was. What I was sure of is that if I can convince my dad and I was actually interested in this thing, I bet I could get him to keep giving me money.

So that's exactly what it is. Yeah, that was go. This sounds great. That's exactly what I want to do. You know, I'm really happy that you brought this opportunity to me.

And I show up to this event with rib. I'm high out of my mind, and I listen to everything that was being said. And it did make a lot of sense, and I wish I could tell everybody that that's all I needed.

Just hear the message, see, a little bit of the results changed my life and the story, but I wasn't willing to give up what was allowing me to escape a life that had become too painful a place to be.

On the gamble that this plant based diet might work for me. In a year, I was like, no, I can't do that. My life sucks. I've got no friends. Being alive hurts.

I'm two weeks away from being homeless. If I can't get, I get my dad to keep giving me money. Like, I don't know if I want to be here tomorrow anyway, so what's the point?

And about a year later, my life was the worst it had ever been. I was nearly 350 pounds. I was struggling from undiagnosed type two diabetes, high blood pressure, high cholesterol.

I had erectile dysfunction for reasons I didn't understand. And on August 21st of 2012, life was the most painful it had ever been.

Rock Bottom and the Turn to Plant-Based Recovery

Every single day that I was alive was the most painful day of my life, and I lived in full confidence that tomorrow was always going to be worse. I was I've been up for five days straight, on copious amounts of opiates and stimulants and vitamins, and I just kept taking more pills and just one after another, after another after another.

And I tried to end my life. And I can remember the experience of that overdose. I'd had minor overdoses before, but this one was distinctly different because I tried to stand up off of my couch.

I feel like I got stabbed in the right side with a hot knife. My entire right side of my body cramps and I start to fall forward and my vision goes black. Now I'm going to tell you that the feeling that I had in that moment, and I'm not talking about the physical description that I just laid out, I'm talking about the feeling that I had of being completely severed from everything and everyone that had ever meant anything to me, and not because they didn't want to be there, but because I had made it impossible for them to do so.

And I was spending the last second of my life completely alone. That was the most painful moment I've ever had. And now I can tell you, I don't know what it feels like to die, but I do know what it feels like to believe that you're dying with a life full of regret.

And that is a very, very scary place to be. I survived, I finally had the courage to call my parents and ask for help.

Checked into treatment two weeks later and was diagnosed with all those four mentioned conditions.

And I was I was faced with a with a challenge because the doctors had said, there's nothing you can do about this. You're gonna have heart disease for rest of your life.

You're going to be overweight for the rest of your life. You can have diabetes for the rest of your life. We're going to medicate you. We're going to medication. We're going to medicate you.

And I was determined to figure out, okay, it's my rest of my life going to be a daily attempt to just not use, because that's what they're asking you to do.

Adam, if you want your life to get better and you just have to stop using drugs, and I'm thinking like, what are you talking about? I know what my life feels like when I don't use.

That's why I use you want me to not use for the rest of my life. I don't know how to not use till noon. Like, this is a terrible strategy. And when I kind of got into this conversation with my dad because I called him from the rehab facility saying, you know, I don't know if I can do this, I decided what I wanted to try to do is figure out how to reverse engineer aliveness.

I wanted to be the architect of a life that, over the course of time, would become such a safe, secure, and hopeful place to be that use was no longer necessary.

I didn't know anything about addiction or depression at the time, but I knew for some reason I just had this internal knowing that that plant based diet was going to be the way to get going.

So I built my, recovery on a foundation of plant based nutrition. And five months later, diabetes, heart disease, erectile dysfunction, gone. Ten months later, 150 pounds going a year later off of all of my medications, my antidepressants, my mood stabilizers, my secret medication, my anxiety medication, my ADHD medications, I checked into treatment the sickest and most disconnected human I've ever been in my life, and a year after that, I was the healthiest version I've ever been.

I was most excited to wake up and to be present in my life. I was the most hopeful for my future than I've ever been, and I've now been in recovery for 12 continuous years.

I've been eating a plant tofu plant based diet for 12 continuous years. Every single year has been better than the last, and I'm just so honored that now I get to share this message with people.

What's, so remarkable? And, you know, most of us haven't been in that dark of a place, but we have dark moments, so, you know, we can all take what you said and find how we adapt that in our own life.

And some people listening are probably in that dark of a place. Yeah, actually, gone on quite remarkably given, you know, you don't have a medical degree or a PhD after your name, but you've actually, you know, participated in a published research study.

I read it with our mutual dear friend Tara Kemp. But, tell me about that. What you guys did that ended up in the research world using plant based nutrition.

Yeah. So I was really I was really curious. You know, I've been told this story about what addiction is, you know, that there is that there's there's some people who are addicts and there's some people aren't.

And, and I had been inspired by a guy named Doug Lyle who gives a phenomenal he's an evolutionary psychologist, gives the talk called the Pleasure Trap.

Essentially what he's talking about is the psychological and motivational architecture that compels behavior and that within specific environments, our behaviors tend to our our our internal guidance system.

That motivational architecture is a really is really good at figuring out what's the right move to make. But as you start to mess with the environment, as you start to introduce things into that environment that were never supposed to be there, those internal instincts, that guidance system gets fooled and misled, and all of a sudden you find yourself attracted to things that even though you know they're not good for you, you can't seem to stop doing them.

And I thought, that's really interesting. I wonder what role my nutrition played in, kind of recalibrating my internal guidance system to making sense of my life.

Like, did that have or did that have an impact on addiction recovery outcomes, seeing as how The Pleasure Trap really does talk about the compulsive, addictive behavior.

And I looked at my personal experience compared to the people I went to recovery with. And yes, every single one of them was actively in recovery for those first six months, which you can't use when you're in a facility.

But they didn't seem to get off their medications. In fact, a lot of them gained weight. A lot of them went on higher doses of the medications, and they continued to struggle with this sense of, I don't know if I'm going to do this.

I don't know if I can make this work. And I thought to myself, well, here's an interesting observation. Their life hasn't become any more safe, secure or hopeful.

They're just abstinent from use. Does nutrition play a critical role in creating a sense that your life is becoming a more safe, secure, and hopeful place to be?

That your future is a safe and exciting place for you to want to get to.

Research on Nutrition, Resilience, and Recovery

And so I wanted to run a study on a population of individuals in a treatment facility and compare a standard diet to a plant based diet, and see if there were increase effects in the early addiction recovery, stage, which is within one year.

And it turns out that there is it turns out that within ten weeks, there is a statistically significant increase in two very specific outcomes resilience and self-esteem.

Now, interestingly, if you were to look at, early recovery outcomes and you were to see groups that did really well versus groups that did not so well, the two most important factors for determining success in the short term within the first year is self-esteem and resilience.

Those are unbelievably valuable markers to see noted rises in order to determine whether someone's going to do well within that first year. And so we noticed that between the highest performing group in our study and the lowest performing group in the study, it was A5X difference in fiber intake, which shows that like this is great because whether you are motivated to be fully plant exclusive or you're just trying to move yourself into more of a plant based lifestyle, the more fiber the better.

So don't worry about anything else. Just eat whole foods that are rich in fiber. Get your fiber content of your dietary pattern up. Use that as a method to increase your ability to gain resilience and self-esteem in your life.

That's powerful. And, you know, you're reaching a lot of people right now, which I'm very, grateful for. But you're the publication that ends up in the National Library of Medicine.

Well, you know, searchable by everybody in the world. So it's a big, big thing to end up in the American Journal of Lifestyle Medicine. Now, you do lots of things now, and so many of them circle around plant based world, which is wonderful.

You've got your own, non-for-profit plant base for positive change, and you keep that going, right? Yes, sir. Yeah.

So that's actually I started that nonprofit in order to fund the research study.

And so now in conjunction with, the nonprofit, I've actually, joined as a strategic advisor to the Kennedy Forum, for, there's an alignment for progress initiative, a five year initiative to rewrite public policy around mental health.

And so I've joined that in order to inform better decisions for nutrition and mental health. This is a I think this is really important because if you were like, let's let's take for example, you take somebody who checks into treatment on day one right there.

If you were to ask them, you know, what is your life look like in five years, given the trajectory of the life has that's been going to go? I don't know, it's going to be horrible.

I mean, nothing has been going well in my life. I don't see any reason why I want to get to that point. I'm certainly not resilient in my effort to be be, you know, disciplined in, in any way, shape or form that that's a scary, painful place for me to consider.

Now, if you were to take that individual and you were to just take away their drugs, you're not ensuring that they're actually going to be able to become the architect of a life where that future becomes a safe, secure and hopeful place to be.

You're not actively replacing that use with something that allows them to build something, to have any kind of esteem attached to you. But if you were to take that individual and you were to put them on in a plant based environment, and you were to ask them to live there long enough, what that person is going to start to notice over the course of time, they're going to notice their energy getting better.

They're going to notice the metabolic conditions getting better. Because most people who check into treatment for substance use disorder are also accompanied by either being underweight and undernourished, or overweight and undernourished, so they're usually accompanied by some kind of metabolic condition, whether it's high blood pressure, high cholesterol, a lot of times diabetes, a lot of times, you know, just this obesity.

And as they live in this plant based environment, they start to notice hanging out. Wow. Hang on a second. That that trajectory of that five year, five years down the road looks very different.

After three months. Man, when I checked in here, you know, three months ago, I was 15 pounds heavier. My blood pressure was out of control. Now it's not.

My blood sugar is out of control now. It's not moving hurt now it doesn't. I'm sleeping better, you know, another another three months from now might be a really exciting place to be.

I'd like to see what that looks like. I'm now hopeful for the future and a long time. For the first time in a long time. And I think that's a really important factor that nutrition plays, that nutrition isn't just this collection of calories on a plate.

Nutrition can be a vehicle that allows people to reconnect to the experience of feeling meaningfully alive. And I know that I've experienced that for myself.

I know that nutrition for me is an act of self-care. It's an act of self-love. I grew up believing that my body was my adversary, and I've been taught that by my parents, by my bullies, by myself, that my body was just constantly out to get me and I could do the best I could, right?

I could overexert or I could restrict enough. And maybe when a couple of days of battles on the scale. But eventually I was going to lose the war. Like that's the story I'd been telling myself.

And I remember being in treatment and talking with my, house manager, an amazing guy. And he asked me, we got to this point where you ask me about the day that I survived my suicide attempt.

And, you know, it's really interesting because I don't think I was really ready to have that conversation with him. And he asked me a very specific question.

You said, Adam, why do you think you didn't die? And I was I think I was angry at him for asking. And so I just really quickly said the first thing that came to my mind, I that I don't know, Phil, I guess my body didn't want me to die.

And Joel, the minute my ears heard those words, I completely rewrote this boy's story that I've been telling myself my what if? And this is this is the case.

Recovery Philosophy and 12-Step Perspective

What if my body's been fighting me for me every single day since the day I was born? What if the reason why I survived everything I've ever been through?

The bullying, the diseases, the drug use, the copious fast food, all the self-harm, the only reason why I survived all those things. Because my body has never given up on me.

What if my body is the greatest ally I've ever had in my entire life? If that's the case, my job isn't to compete against this, this ally. My job is to be a caretaker, to be lovingly devoted to the behaviors that encourage this body's ability to keep me alive and thrive for the rest of my life.

That that, I think was one of the most impactful moments in my recovery was like, I'm not avoiding meat, eggs, and dairy and drugs. I am actively choosing to eat whole plant foods, to move my body with purpose, to drink more water, to get more sunshine, to have more meaningful relationships, to practice self-care through meditation and therapy.

Those were things I was actively choosing to do. Those weren't acts of of abstinence and avoidance of a life I no longer want. That was me building the life I've always wanted.

And so much of that comes down to what you put on your plate. I do not believe in the term abstinence. I think it's a terrible, terrible descriptor of what people are doing.

Like, for right now, I didn't choose to not stand for this call. I decided to sit. There was no abstaining from standing in this thing. This was an active decision.

And I don't believe in the abstinence model whatsoever. I think that people need to to start to decide, what do you want your life to look like? What do you want your best life to look like?

And then do everything in your power to make your environment look like the life you want, and then live there. Wow. Wow. Powerful. So let me just ask you on a personal basis, were you involved in 12 step programs?

Is still a ten hour anonymous or something like that? Yeah. So, one of the things that you do early on in recovery is you do something called the 90 and 90, which is 90 day, 90 meetings in 90 days.

And, yeah. So I went to all the AA stuff and I found that there is some value there. I don't personally resonate with the AA model. One thing I love about AA is that it's free.

And anybody can go there and be completely anonymous, and you'll be find yourself in a room of people who not only believe you, that you're that you're struggling, but they also are going to give you a sense that there's a way out of it.

And that's a very powerful place to be, especially if you're in a situation where you don't think that there's any way out of your out of your struggle.

One of the things I'm not a big fan of is defining yourself by what you struggle with. I really am not a fan of that. And there's a there's a phenomenal journalist named, Johann Hari who wrote an incredible book on depression, anxiety and addiction.

It's called Lost Connections. And Lost connections, I think, is the best descriptor for, for addiction and depression, he says. What if depression is, in fact a form of grief for your life, not being as it should?

What if your depression makes complete sense? What if you're not crazy? You're not a machine with broken parts? What if you're just a human being with unmet needs?

And the same thing with addiction is that addiction is about not wanting to be present in your life because your life has become too painful a place to be present.

Therefore, if that's the case, then your addiction makes sense. What you do and why you do it is not an act of crazy. It's a reasonable response to environments socially, physically and emotionally gone terribly wrong.

Work with Complement and Closing Remarks

So I'm far more, aligned with the kind of Doug Lyle evolutionary psychology, Johann Hari, outlook on addiction and depression that they're not these, you know, quote unquote disorders.

Yes, they do cause disorder in your life, but they themselves make complete sense. Well, all right. Powerful, powerful things are sharing well in the last couple of minutes, I mean, you've been involved with mastering Diabetes.

You've been involved with, Rip's plan strong and other really prominent, you know, online communities and physical communities. I know I see you now all the time working with a wonderful company that has the, website love complement.com and, maybe known more formally as outlier health but love complement.com and you're involved.

The company is dedicated to making high quality nutritional support for the plant based community. Currently, maybe it'll expand beyond that, but you've got my mind.

The best multivitamin for vegans. Compliment essentials. An amazing compliment. Unflavored protein powder and green powders and, creating muscle support.

So tell us, just a little bit your role there and how that's all going. Yeah. So I, I'm, I'm the partnerships manager for compliment, which is great because I get to work with people like you because you're an amazing partner for us.

And so my, my role is to, nurture our current partnerships, find new partnerships, work on our big events like our Plant Palooza online summit, and our, you know, our big sale events like our Black Friday, Cyber Monday in New York, new you.

But it's great to work with a company that I'm very, mission mission aligned with, one that has a very specific viewpoint on, on supplements. I'm very much a believer in what Dan Buettner has to say about blue zones.

The big difference between the Blue Zones and Western culture is that, people in Western cultures are going are going out every single day, and they're trying to purchase back their health every single day.

They're trying to purchase back additional years of life. And if you were to go to a blue zone, what you'll notice is that none of the people in the blue zones are doing that, that they have designed lifestyles and environments that encourage longevity, that encourage their opportunity to get to 90 compliment.

It's a very similar view that you should be doing everything you can to live the healthiest lifestyle possible, and then compliment that life with only what you need in order to benefit better longevity outcomes.

Right? This isn't. We're not asking anyone to take our supplement in lieu of doing better in their life. It's it's it's a complement to the healthiest lifestyle possible.

And so we're really proud to be a part of a company like that. That's great. And, I will give a, high five to you digitally because I've also been very enamored with working with the company.

And again, L.o.v.e. Complement.com is a place people have never heard of it or never looked at, you know, really a unique multivitamin just for vegans?

It's a very good product. I take it every day. And it's, both, attractive and has a great little peppermint flavor or something like that. And that's the thing most people comment on is they go, I was expecting it because it has it has a significant therapeutic dose of, of the Omegas.

And so people are kind of expecting that like kind of algae taste. And you don't get it. It's this mint flavor. Now you can get some really bad tasting vegan algae.

Omega three I agree, I just groove on, finding one that's just so pleasant. Well, I want to thank you for your time and thank your wife for your time.

And next time you see your parents, please, please say hello and give my regards. It's been a while since I've been in Austin, and here. Well, I'm going to say.

I was sharing what you shared as of atoms.com ada msu.com. Yeah, I know you're on Instagram. I see a lot and maybe tick tock a little bit or something.

A little bit mostly Instagram. Okay. That's where we can aggregate so we can show our beautiful. Plant based addict on Instagram. Oh yeah. That's right. I appreciate you pointing that out.

Plant based at a very powerful, you know, little name there that catches attention every time I see it. So thank you so much. And, we're going to share this with tens of thousands of people.

You did a real good thing sharing from your heart. My pleasure.