The Overlooked Connection Between Digestion and Anxiety Transcript

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Introduction to the Gut-Brain Connection

Have you ever gotten the feeling of like butterflies in your stomach? Of course. Yeah. Or like, um. When I met my wife. Yes. Yes. Right. It could be a good, good kind.

And then like, Oh, I'm so nervous. I'm feeling it in my belly. So that is very much an example of the gut brain connection. And the statistics are just wild on this too, because we're seeing it as a two way street with especially anxiety and depression.

where if people have anxiety or depression, it's something around 80% for anxiety that people also have digestive issues. Or when people have digestive issues, 80% of them have anxiety or depression.

So we're seeing these correlations. And now we're seeing it with things like Alzheimer's and Perkinsons and other things that are involving more neurons instead of just emotions.

But it all comes back to this microbiome and the vagus nerve. What if aging isn't about slowing down, but leveling up? I'm Dr. Isaac Jones. This is the Longevity Leaders podcast.

Welcome everyone to the Longevity Leaders podcast. I'm your host, Dr. Rudy Mueller. And today we have Emily Walbers, Dr. Emily Walbers with us. Emily, why don't you give a brief introduction to our audience about who you are, what you've been up to over the last few years as a physician?

Yeah, sure thing. I'm glad to be here. I'm a naturopathic physician. And I love helping people with the gut brain connection, lots of microbiome stuff, lots of nervous system and vagus nerve regulation as well.

And for the past, I'm in my eighth year of practice, eighth year of private practice and been just evolving and getting more and more into the gut brain.

Awesome, awesome. And so with your practice, do you have a physical clinic? Are you mostly virtual? I'm mostly virtual right now. I'd say even like 96% virtual.

And then 4% we've got a brick and mortar.

Emily Walbersu2019 Practice and Virtual Care

All right, nice. I think there's a lot of people that would be interested and I'm curious to know what was that transition like for you from going to from a brick and mortar practice to integrating maybe virtually slowly or you dove right in.

I just if you could give me a little bit more information about that and our listeners. Absolutely. And I will say I was doing virtual care when I started.

So even like eight years ago, pre-pandemic, all these things, but it was a small portion at that point. It was mostly in-person care and then just a little bit of virtual.

And then most, sometimes people just preferred having the virtual option. And then of course, when the pandemic hit, that opened up a lot of doors for more virtual care.

And I noticed for myself, I'm an introvert. And I noticed I had so much more energy at the end of the day with virtual care versus in person. And I love seeing people in person and I felt pretty tired at the end of the day.

And so it was just the little things of, oh, can I get you some tea? Like, here's the room, here's the restroom, walk them out, a little bit of conversation here and there.

And it just added up. And so now, being mostly virtual, I have a lot more energy. And with the transition, it's been relatively seamless. With the care that I'm doing, especially with the gut brain and just functional medicine at large, The pieces that getting from a virtual session doesn't feel like a diluted version of an in-person session.

We're still getting to connect with patients and still getting to listen and really hear people's stuff without needing the in-person modalities. Great.

And so when you went from that physical practice and started to add more virtual, were there certain milestones that you were aiming to hit to be able to know, like, I need to pull back here, I can go more into virtual?

Were there certain things you were looking for there? Like, what was your gauge of? Yeah. And that's a really good point. There was that pendulum swing where sometimes, so I would have my brick and mortar and I was at the brick and mortar location all day, but maybe only seeing one or two people in person.

And then the rest were virtual. And then I needed to switch a little bit. This is not a good use of space, not a good use of resources. So that's when I started to just move the dial a bit more to virtual and have dedicated in-person days and then dedicated virtual days where I could work from a home office.

I love that. Okay, so you're able to break it up into, okay, maybe two days a week, I'm seeing people in person, two or three days a week, I'm now able to do virtual.

Exactly. That's awesome. And so with that, were you able to, for your virtual clients, were they people that were local to you? Yeah. Sometimes. And then, of course, now that the virtual piece is so much more available and well-known, people all over the country, and they wouldn't even think about coming for an in-person session.

Growing Through Word of Mouth Referrals

But even for the virtual care, a lot of people were local, just didn't want to drive, you know, didn't want to face the traffic, didn't want to park, or it was just more convenient to fit into their day from the comfort of their home.

If you're a medical doctor, nurse practitioner, chiropractor, or other health expert that's stuck in a broken system, there's a better way. The Freedom Webinar shows you a proven five-step system to build a seven-figure virtual health practice or how to modernize your current brick and mortar practice without the burnout.

Learn to create high ticket programs, automated income, residual revenue, and attract clients ready to work with you. Book your million dollar strategy session today by clicking the link in the description.

or connecting on a lunch break or something like that. Yes, exactly. That's awesome. I think that that is one of the areas where in our practice, and I'll briefly touch on this, is my wife and I had a practice or still have our physical practice at Maine.

We grew it to a nice piece, but then COVID happened, and then we had to make all these changes. We moved to Florida and have the practice there. So the base that we built off of this was from that brick and mortar, and then from there, we're able to expand it.

So I'm curious, how were you able to expand it? Was there a particular marketing strategy? Was it word of mouth? What allowed you to start capturing people from other states or areas outside of Iowa?

Yeah. Yeah. And I'll tell you my crazy for just a moment. I had two brick and mortar locations. You had two. One in Iowa and then, and that's the one that's still existing.

Okay. And then one in Portland, Oregon, which is quite the community. Yeah, for sure. I was managing both for a

little while, like seven years or maybe, maybe six years.

And the word of mouth was great. So word of mouth, just being active in the community is wonderful. And that helped me to get people in both places, but then happy clients bring more clients.

And, and that is what spurred the people from like other States as well. Awesome. So it was mostly word of mouth. There was no big marketing push or anything like that, but besides you being out in the community.

Right, right. And I mean, one mistake that I learned was I didn't try to do a big marketing push with ads as a countrywide thing. It's expensive and not very effective.

We got a few discovery calls from like that cast in that wide net. That's good. But there it wasn't as like connected as a word of mouth referral. So it didn't stick.

And we've now switched it where we're not doing those big country wide ads anymore. But it's just working. Yeah, okay. Word of mouth. Yeah, that's awesome.

And what I love about word of mouth clients, and we have a very similar story, and we didn't talk about this beforehand, but like, It was, it grew from word of mouth and then it was, oh, we can see people virtually.

Oh, your patients, clients that have great success are now looking to, oh, my family members got this, but they live in another state, but you can still work with this person.

And those leads are strong leads because of the experience that a trusted person has had with them. Trust goes so far. And like, I want to take good care of them too.

It's my patients' family members. That's the most precious baby bird. Right. Right. Right. That's wonderful. I think that you have a great future in growing this virtual practice even more with that type of approach.

I mean, I think we get about 10 patients every couple of weeks just from word of mouth. Amazing. Yeah, that's, that's wonderful. I'm really happy for you and that you've been able to grow like that.

I think that's a proven strategy.

Understanding the Gut-Brain Axis

When you go into the community and you're able to market that way, whether it be, and still be able to convert people into virtually. I think that's easier than marketing.

Oh yeah. It's way easier and not that marketing is not enjoyable. I think it can be fun, but I do find it to be more enjoyable. Yeah. Getting people with that.

Are most people coming in? You mentioned the gut-brain health connection. Is that most people coming in for that? Yeah, it's interesting because so many things begin in the gut.

And I would say that maybe about half of our patients who are coming in are specifically looking for help with gut health. And then we have, so we've got our five pillars at the clinic and gut health is one of them.

This is the first one. Nutrition being the second one. Hormones is the third. Stress reduction and then mentoring. A lot of times people will come in for the gut health or nutrition, just wanting to heal from the inside out.

which is beautiful. But then some people want help with hormones as their main thing that they know is off and they want help with it. And so that would be their main complaint.

They come into the clinic, we're going to look at it from the lens of the gut, but then watch the whole body heal itself

over the course of working through those pillars.

Yeah, nice. And so you are a naturopathic physician, so that starting with the gut makes a lot of sense. It's my tell. So where did you go to naturopathic school?

Sorry, I wanted to ask you this before because you've mentioned Portland, you mentioned Iowa, close to Chicago. So where was your… So I went to NUNM in Portland.

Okay, all right. Very nice. That's a great school. That's a great school. Yeah, I loved getting to go there and it's got a lot of docs who have been in this field for a long time.

Yeah, and a lot of knowledgeable people around that area that are aware of naturopathic and The original functional medicine doctor. Yes, that's how I feel about it too.

And graduating from there, and then I opened private practice there for the six, seven years. Having so many mentors in that space, just in that city, or being able to go to continuing education with all these amazing providers that are living there and been practicing for decades, it was hugely beneficial.

Yeah, that's great. The, you know, as a naturopathic physician, picking the gut seems like an obvious choice, but when we talk to practitioners that are interested in having success in their practice or even going virtual, we talk about how important it is to have a niche.

So was the, was that just an easy decision or was that something that you kind of worked on and maybe ran into some roadblocks, tried, I don't know, weight loss and tried something else first.

And then you're like, no, you know what, I've got to get back to it. So I'm curious about your path there. Yeah, I am a nerd to my core and I knew I wanted to do gut health.

Okay, all right. So I did a specialized internship since school. And my background in dietetics, so it was also a nice funnel since the nutrition and the enzymes that goes so nicely with the gut.

That was an easy fall into and then wanting to learn more about it. But then the gut brain, that was something that came a little bit later. Okay. All right.

And so with the gut brain, for someone that doesn't know what the gut brain connection is, could you give us a little bit of a base or a foundation there?

And then maybe how do we know if we're dealing with a gut brain access this long? Yes. Okay. This is great. I'll try not to talk about it for too long.

You run. So the gut brain, sometimes people even say that the gut is the second brain. And for good reason, because there are so many nerve cells in the gut alone.

I mean, the gut meaning from the mouth to the end of the intestines. And there are so many nerve cells that if you've, have you ever gotten the feeling of like butterflies in your stomach?

Of course. Yeah. Yes, right. It could be a good kind and then like, oh, I'm so nervous. I'm feeling it in my belly. So that is very much an example of the gut-brain connection.

And the statistics are just wild on this too, because we're seeing it as a two-way street with especially anxiety and depression.

Testing for Gut Dysfunction

That's where we have a lot of studies on. where if people have anxiety or depression, it's something around 80%

for anxiety that people also have digestive issues.

Or when people have digestive issues, 80% of them have anxiety or depression. So we're seeing these correlations, and now we're seeing it with things like Alzheimer's and Perkinsons and other things that are involving more neurons instead of just emotions.

But it all comes back to this microbiome and the vagus nerve and the way that the gut and the brain talk to each other. Talk to each other through the vagus nerve.

Talk to each other through the vagus nerve and through the microbiome, the little bacteria or viruses or yeast or all the things that are alive in the gut.

All right. Nice. Nice. And so are there any particular signs or symptoms of person? I mean, you mentioned anxiety, depression. Is gastrointestinal dysfunction enough to be thinking, Hey, I might have a gut brain connection.

So, yeah, I think it's worth looking into and being a human being. If we were just to look at the physical side of things, I think it ignores a huge part of what it's like to be human.

So even if there's, even if somebody's coming in with digestive issues alone, just a physical thing, I always want to get curious about if there's anything else that's stuck or a nervous system pattern that's stuck too.

Yeah. Okay. All right. I like it. I like it. And so with the, when you're looking at the gut, what are some of the things that you're testing or what signs or symptoms may say, Hey, I need to, that push you to have a test.

And what would those tests be that are like your priority number one? Totally, and very individualized for each person. Go through their whole risk factors.

You know the gel. But a lot of times if people are showing risk factors for intestinal overgrowth like SIBO or EMO or something like this, I'll do a breath test to see if there's something there.

But I'll often do a stool test. I mean, I love like vibrant wellness with their gut zoomer. I also love GI map. Those are great. stool test to see what's going on in the mapping of the microbiome.

Are we seeing some patterns or a lack of digestive enzymes, places where the pH could be supported differently. Okay. And then, so that's, that's the nerdy side.

Like let's look at the data and see what's going on internally. And then with the more emotionality side, I don't have any testing for that, but instead it's just a listening ear and really holding space for patients.

Yeah, okay. That makes a lot of sense. And so with the breath test or the stool analysis, you mentioned a couple of companies that you really like. You're pulling out microbiome data.

You're pulling out digestive enzyme data. What other data points are important for you in knowing that maybe the gut and the brain, there's some dysfunction maybe even occurring in the brain?

Because I think it's weird. You know, if somebody's listening and saying, wait, we're looking at the brain through testing the stool. Does that make sense?

But you can pull out some really interesting information, so I'm curious to see what you… Yeah. And there's a couple of markers that you can look for.

Even things like food sensitivity testing. If people get an IgG food sensitivity test and it comes back with hundreds of foods that this person's reactive to, that does not mean that they should cut out all those foods, in my opinion.

Instead, it could be a sign of like the quote-unquote leaky gut or intestinal hyperpermeability. And that causes

inflammation in that gut brain system.

So that's something that I could look for. If somebody has a panel that they see all these foods and they want help navigating it, that clues, okay, maybe there's some repair that we can do.

Healing Leaky Gut and Dysbiosis

And then acromansia, the probiotic acromansia, or probiotic is an option, but even more specifically just the bacteria. If it is very, very low on one of those stool tests, that can also be a sign of hyperprimerability in the intestines.

So that can give a clue, oh, there's probably some inflammation here or something that needs to be repaired and then re-inoculated to work. And so with this, the leaky gut is causing a problem with the brain.

And what's a common approach that you would utilize? So you see the patient, initial consultation, you order the labs, you get the labs back, it's showing gut dysfunction.

Let's say leaky gut is there, disruption in the microbiome, some sort of dysbiosis. What's kind of your next phase there to be able to help the individual?

Is it diet alone? Is it nutrient supplements? What's that approach for? Yeah, yeah. So diet for sure. And then that is individualized. But usually at the beginning, we're just trying to decrease inflammation.

Like let's get rid of any offending foods, like cut out alcohol, sugar, dairy, gluten, just corn, all these things for just a couple weeks to clean the canvas, give the body some opportunity to heal.

And then if there's something that is overgrown, like an opportunistic bacteria or a dysbiotic bacteria, I'm going to sweep that out. Using just some herbals is usually what I'll go for to decrease some of those bad bugs.

And then repairing. So doing things like glutamine or zinc carnosine if somebody has ulcers, or doing some HCl, like betaine HCl goes a long way, just to help with the digestibility.

And helping to repair the things that are lacking. So thinking about like toxicities and deficiencies, just getting those rebalanced. And then get to go into the fun stuff of the repopulating and then prevention phase.

And that part, that prevention phase, I think often gets overlooked of why did this start in the first place? So that not only can this person feel better, but can we make sure that this doesn't come back in the future?

Sure. Sure. So when you're talking about this and you're talking about the repair phase, if we could just take a step back, we mentioned leaky gut, we mentioned intestinal hyperpermeability.

I'm curious, how do you explain that to a client? Is there an analogy that you use? How do you describe that to a client? I usually use my hands. Okay, show it off.

Let's do it. So the term leaky gut, even though it's not necessarily a medical term, it makes sense as to why it's named that way. Because in the intestines, there is these tight junctions and they're called tight junctions because they're supposed to be tight, like really nicely interlocked.

But in a phase of leaky gut or something that's looking like that, the tight junctions get less tight and there's more space. And eventually, there's even more space.

And within that space, that's when food particles don't get digested as well. That's when any type of microbiome imbalance can happen there or the body is more susceptible to get sick.

That's what happens when that space is there. So what we're doing is we're getting to the root as to why is that

space created. How can we rebalance the body, get rid of things that are causing inflammation, and then we start to repair so that we're not just patching up the roof by putting a bucket underneath to catch the water.

We've got to make sure that this is going to be an issue even when it rains again. That's the analogy that I'll use. Definitely moving the tight junctions in that way, it's exactly what's happening in the body.

Yeah, yeah. I love it. I love it. The way we describe it is often the way that people are coming into us is they're often addressing their symptoms or the downstream effects of a leaky gut or intestinal hyperpermeability.

And it's like turning a fan on and blowing the smoke out of a house that's on fire, right? Like you must get to the root issue. I like your bucket analogy too.

That's good. I had a patient say, he was a roofer actually. That was his whole thing. I was like, okay, I'm going to try this analogy with the bucket.

And he was like, yeah, the hole in the roof is only a problem when it rains.

Nutrition, Prebiotics, and Brain Fog

Exactly. And what if it's not sunny every day? Yeah. No, that's perfect. And from a nutrition perspective, I didn't realize that you had a background as a registered dietitian.

So I think that it makes a lot of sense for your first two pillars that you mentioned earlier, the gut and nutrition. What's a common nutrition plan? Like if I'm dealing with a gut problem and I'm listening to this, what's the first thing that I should be thinking from a nutrition side that's going to benefit me before I come see you or before I go see another functional medicine naturopathic doctor?

Yeah, that's a great question. And it's so highly individualized, so it's just the beauty and just the bear, because it's hard to give a blanket recommendation.

But I do recommend that people experiment and see what things feel like when you cut out all of the known inflammatory foods. And I would say the known inflammatory is being the dairy, the gluten, alcohol, sugar, corn, peanuts, eggs, and soy.

Those, and then red meat and citrus, they can be kind of inflammatory too, but those cast a pretty wide net of maybe there's something within that. Try that out for two weeks if you can.

And then bring those foods back in one at a time to see how are things going. If you have a reaction to one of those foods, write it down or just take a mental note of it.

And that would be a good foundation just to help navigate the nutrition world a bit more. Sure. Yeah. And what foods would you be focusing on? You would talk about removing certain foods.

What would you focus on? Look at all these foods. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Right. Right. All the veggies, especially when people have got stuff going on, cooked veggies.

Those cooked squashes really get things soft. No salads for right now, because that can be irritating. But all the veggies, the dark-skinned berries, all these good anti-inflammatory fruits.

I'm a big fan of eating good sources of animal protein as well, like salmon or sardines. grass-fed beef or chicken, that's all good, especially when people are trying the anti-inflammatory.

I'd say more towards the light meat type of things, but those would be great. And then in terms of grains, some people feel better generally without grains, but a lot of people feel good with them.

So having some really basic white rice or brown rice that's rinsed, quinoa, couscous, but not when you're on the no wheat part. Right, right. So easy to digest.

And then once we're in the, we've got through those first couple of phases, the gut's starting to repair. Then we get to do some prebiotics. Talk to me a little bit more about prebiotics.

So prebiotics being the precursor to probiotics. That means you're fueling the body with a substance that will inspire it to make its own probiotics. And this is the long-term medicine.

We can get this through food, through ground flaxseed, through pomegranate seeds, through artichoke hearts. These kinds of things are so good for helping the body stimulate its own probiotics and its own diverse microbiome.

So probiotics are great too, but the prebiotics really uses the body's own intelligence to inspire more growth and diversity. Beautiful. And the prebiotics and the healthy gut will lead to longevity as well, right?

Yes, exactly. And one thing that I can't believe I neglected to say this because I see it all the time. Anxiety and depression, of course, are showing up with gut stuff.

But more than anything as well is brain fog. And that is where sometimes people come in because they've got this brain fog. They think it's got to be my hormones.

It's got to be my thyroid. It's got to be something. And it might be. But when we start to heal the gut, we see that brain fog piece help, too. And that's where the longevity piece comes in.

Because, of course, we want this body to be healthy, but we also want this mind to be healthy and sharp, too. Right. And so if a listener is hearing this, what are the three things that you would be recommending that they would do let's say they're experiencing brain fog or anxiety or depression, just kind of recap some of the things maybe that you've already mentioned, but like three ideal things that would be good for them to take action within, you know, the next 24 to 48 hours.

Daily Habits for Gut and Mental Health

Within 24 to 48 hours, a little bit. Okay, so make sure you're pooping. Just get things moving. And eat your plants, lots of diversity with plants. I love to give the recommendation of 30 different plants per week.

So eat a variety and get those different organisms exposed to the gut because that helps with the microbiome. So get pooping, eat your plants, and get your feet on the ground.

Get your feet on the ground. Well, they're just putting your feet on the ground or walking around in the grass. It can be so good for the mental health piece.

And just as a, as a reminder of how the gut and the brain are so intimately connected and it doesn't take long at all for your body to feel a difference.

Wonderful. Wonderful. Dr. Walbers, it's an absolute pleasure to have you on today. You know, I like hearing about the gut brain access, but I really appreciate how your journey has led you from being in a physical practice, a dietician, transitioning to a naturopathic doctor, how those two pieces have really come together for you, how you've made your practice your own, to be able to now go virtual and help people with those foundational things through your work of pillars, your pillared system, gut, nutrition, movement.

Sorry. Am I missing the other hormones? Right. I mean, I think that's a beautiful way to think about it. As you were going through those pillars, it makes sense completely how you go through it, but I'm very grateful to you and the work that you're doing.

If anyone has interest in connecting directly with you to be helped with any of these issues, what's the best way that

they can find you? Instagram? Yeah, Instagram or our website.

We've got our free discovery calls. Like, please give us a shout. We'd love to connect. Okay. And what's your, what's your? QC and naturalhealth.com. Okay.

And then do you know your Instagram handle? QC Natural Health. Okay. Keep it easy. Awesome. Rudy, thank you so much and congratulations on your practice as well.

It's so cool to see you helping people in a variety of ways. Awesome. Thank you. Thanks for listening to the Longevity Leaders podcast. A Longevity Leaders community is on a mission to transform a hundred million lives by 2040. If you enjoyed the show, please share this with somebody that you know, especially another doctor or physician, but also click that follow button.

Until next time, stay strong and live life.