

The Building Blocks Of Happiness



With Erica Terblanche on the Lundi Khoisan show
on Mix FM 93.8

Tune in every Wednesday at 10h10 for your weekly
soundbite of scientifically validated, practical happiness
coaching and learn one new happiness habit every week.

WEEK 8

Eat Right

This week we shift gears.

Over the last seven weeks, we have been working with the building blocks for mental and emotional well-being, and how these impact our physical health.

This week, and for the next few weeks, we will cover the building blocks of physical wellbeing and how profoundly our physical habits impact our mental health.

So... if you forget everything else we discussed and just remember 3 things for a longer, happier and healthier life it is these three:

MOVE OFTEN

EAT RIGHT

REST ENOUGH - including quality sleep and practices for rejuvenating



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www.thrive-guru.com

This is a topic that elicits a lot of emotion and debate.
And one around which there is great confusion.

The list of diets and eating approaches are as multiple as they are contradictory. From the all protein high fat Atkins diet, through Paleo and all the way to the vegetarian and vegan options, and the Mediterranean diet in between. Some are low-fat, high carb and some are high fat, low carb. Some avoid wheat, and some avoid meat and for every diet, you can find a million avid believers and supporters.

THE REASON I BELIEVE, IS THAT DIFFERENT THINGS WORK FOR DIFFERENT PEOPLE.
WHAT YOU EAT AND NEED TO EAT IS HIGHLY INDIVIDUALISED.

So, the first thing I want to say to listeners is to notice what your body craves. The body knows.

The next time you get a craving Google it - GET CURIOUS.

Sometimes when we crave crisps, we need salt. Or when we crave cheese and dairy, we often need essential fatty acids or when we crave chocolate, we need magnesium - deficiencies are common and destroy our ability to sleep well. When we crave that steak, we may need b12 or iron.

HUNGER AND CRAVINGS ARE A RECURRING INVITATION TO BOOST OUR HEALTH or to detract from it.

The trick is to become aware of what the body craves and then to find the healthiest and most nutrient-dense ways to satisfy your body's needs.

But with all the confusion out there, what is healthy?
Like with every other topic in this series of podcasts we turn to science and peer-reviewed research.

The first study I will mention is perhaps one of the biggest research studies on the impact food has on our health. It is called The China Study and was conducted over 20 years, with 6500 adults, and resulted in 8000 statistically significant associations between diet and disease variables.

I have included a link to the findings in the write-up on my website.

Let me summarise in one sentence what they found.

"People who ate more animal-based foods got the most chronic diseases and especially heart disease and cancers. People who ate the most plant-based foods were the healthiest."

MORE PLANTS

Let's look at another study that I find even more useful - the study of the BLUE ZONERS - those people who live in regions where the population has an inordinate amount of people who live to well beyond a hundred and who are healthier in old age.

Some of these regions are Okinawa in Japan, Ikaria in Greece, Sardinia and the 7th day Adventists in California.

Studies of these regions revealed that these populations have several things in common :

- They have a sense of meaning and purpose (ikigai as we discussed in week 6).
- They have a sense of belonging in a community where young and old live together - as we talked about in week 5 - Relationships.
- They practice a communal faith-based practice 4 times a month - or once a week.
- They have habits that help them de-stress, rest and rejuvenate - we will touch on this again when we talk about sleep in a few weeks.
- They eat mostly plants - 85% of their diet, fish and meat four times a month or less.
- And they do not overeat by eating in moderation and only until they are 80% full

These studies are powerful windows into what makes us healthier - **EAT MORE PLANTS.**

And the list of superheroes in the plant kingdom are long and bountiful.

- Spinach is a superfood - it has magnesium and iron and it helps lower blood pressure
- Kale provides vit K and A and lowers cholesterol
- Beetroot - Oh Beetroot reduces oxidative stress, is a blood cleanser and promotes heart health
- Sweet potato - is a slow-releasing Carb that is great for diabetics
- Broccoli - this is my personal superfood hero - helps eliminate toxins from the body - is anti-inflammatory and protects against cancer
- Asparagus protects the liver from toxins

And so I can go on - listing carrots and avos and vit-c packed blueberries and garlic and turmeric and mushrooms and cauliflower and apples.

If there is only one thing you do this week, make it to add another portion of vegetables to every plate you eat this week. Your body will love you for it.

Next week we will talk about the hidden dangers in our food, the role our genes play in our nutrition needs and some tips for managing a healthy weight.

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WEEK 9

Eat Right - The Hidden Dangers in Our Food

Last week we did the first segment of EAT RIGHT and the invitation to listeners was to cut through the noise of nutrition misinformation and confusion and to introduce more plants into their diet.

I extended an invitation to honour our hunger and cravings as precious opportunities to nourish our physical and mental health. Make good food choices!
Lundi reminded us to drink water because often thirst masquerades as hunger.

Today, we will go a bit deeper and talk about the hidden dangers in our food, sugar and the role that our genes play.

Next week, we will talk about techniques for weight management.



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THE HIDDEN DANGERS IN OUR FOOD

I live by my own advice and eat a lot of veggies and fruit. Despite being super healthy, I had strange episodes of debilitating migraines and the symptoms of neurotoxic poisoning that would lay me low for days at a time, suddenly.

It turns out that I was being poisoned - by the very foods that were supposed to make me better.

I like many other people was unable to process the high pesticide load in the fruit and veg we buy commercially from the large supermarket chains.

In the US the food and drug administration publishes a list of the DIRTY DOZEN
The twelve veggies and fruit that has the highest levels of pesticide load and that are in the harmful range.

The top culprits change from year to year but the top ten invariably include apples, grapes, strawberries, peaches, nectarines, tomatoes, celery, blueberries, spinach, cherries, and sometimes even potatoes.

The advice of the FDA is to buy organic in these product categories and if you can't - at the very least, do not feed it to your kids.

Many people struggle with asthma and allergies and frequent headaches. It is worth considering the toxic load from pesticides and being extra careful about the fruit and veg that have high loads. If I can't get these fruits and veggies organically and at an affordable price, I replace them with produce that I know are safer.

For example, sweet potatoes instead of potatoes. Fruits with a peel - melons bananas oranges - and stinky veggies - broccoli and cauliflower and brussel sprouts, because they need fewer pesticides to keep the goggas away.

The second source of concern in our food is additives. The dreaded e-numbers in processed foods.

There are many additives that are extremely bad for our health. Today, I will highlight one that affects all of us because of its ubiquitous use. And that is **aspartame** and related sweeteners like saccharine and xylitol to name only a few.

Aspartame has been described by the normally understated UK food and drug administration as 'possibly one of the most harmful substances that have ever been foisted on the unsuspecting public.

These sweeteners - are the stuff that we find in diet soda, sugar-free gum and sweet low calorie treats. The stuff we find in low sugar bread and bakes and in ready-meals and even in children's cough medicine and vit C lozenges have been linked to Alzheimer's, dementia, stroke, cancer and mood disorders and migraines to name a few.

I include a write up that lists the scientific studies here:
https://usrtk.org/sweeteners/aspartame_health_risks/

Aspartame - that diet aid - has also been linked to depression and ironically, to weight gain. This diet drink is making you sick and sad and some studies suggest, even causes you to gain weight. Please stop it. It is not worth it. The evidence is overwhelming and it is curious to me that its use has not been banned.

Replace it with water - sparkling water with a dash of bitters or lemon juice or a sprig of mint if you can. But just quit the diet drinks and don't buy foods with sweetener in it. It will only undermine your health and your weight loss attempts.

And now let's talk about sugar. It once used to be the poster child for energy. But what we know now is that backed by compelling scientific evidence that sugar:

1. Can be a depressant - it inflames the brain. Inflammation of the brain causes lower mood - yes, sugar after the initial lift is a downer - both in mood and energy.
2. Is addictive - it triggers our addiction pathways and the more we have the more we want. This is a disaster when it comes to maintaining our weight and it suppresses leptin - the hormone that tells us we are full. Welcome to the sugar treadmill of "can't-get-enough-ever!"
3. It inflames the body with a high probability of triggering overtime insulin resistance and type II diabetes, cardiovascular disease and cancers.
4. It accelerates cell ageing - consuming large amounts of sugar actually makes us older before our time

I attach an article that lists the research studies.

https://www.healthline.com/nutrition/too-much-sugar#TOC_TITLE_HDR_2

There is no benefit to sugar - only downsides - don't eat it.
And when you choose an apple and a handful of almonds as a snack rather than a crispy cream doughnut, you have not sacrificed - it is not deprivation - no you have chosen life - health - energy - vitality - longevity. Every time you choose.

Sugar has been called the new smoking - it is a silent killer that has crept into almost everything we eat. Just look at the labels on processed food. It is hidden everywhere. So even if you consciously choose to avoid the obvious culprits, you can still fall prey to the sugar trap. So I have a few simple rules that help me through the morass of food choices and dangers - especially avoiding the pesticides and the additives and the hidden sugars.

EAT ONLY WHOLEFOODS

I try and eat food that is not sold in a packet or a can, a box, or a wrapper.

We can't always tell what is in processed food. When I do buy something that is sold in a wrapper or a tin I ALWAYS READ THE LABELS - and if there are e-numbers and sweeteners or added sugars, then I leave it on the shelf.

I try to avoid sauces and dips and the stuff I know is loaded with sugar - yup, ketchup, chutney, sweet chilli sauce - all of our favourites. It's not worth it. I use a lot of spices instead - cumin - turmeric, curry coriander, ginger chilli - these all have insanely wonderful health benefits.

I **EAT ORGANIC** where possible and affordable. It's not that easy in South Africa. But one can choose the fruits and veg that is least contaminated - and I find buying directly from the local farmers is a whole load better than from large chain supermarkets who further process fresh produce for longevity.

I **CHOOSE FOR NUTRIENT DENSITY** - the first question I ask myself in choosing food is whether this food honours my hunger with health and how nutrient-dense is this food? It is astounding how quickly one's body begins to crave healthy food rather than the addictive and inflammatory foods we may have once preferred - yup I crave broccoli much more than I crave ice cream. By a long shot.

But yes, sometimes I do have ice cream, chocolate or a treat of some sort. If I am not at my best or most motivated I allow the 80-20 principle. Most of the time, I eat healthily and now and again, I allow myself to indulge - maybe on cheat Fridays or when we go out to the movies and have your popcorn or one morning before work lay my hands on the biggest banana and date muffin I can find.

It is ok and prevents binges of rebellion. But in the long run, it doesn't make me feel better or more satisfied. Eating it just reminds me why I feel at my best when my eating is squeaky clean. Feeling fantastic is addictive.

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To Summarize:

- Eat a lot of plants - ideally 85% of your plate.
- Eat organic wherever possible.
- Eat whole foods and skip the processed.
- Eat right at least 80% of the time.
- Eat moderately.

These are general and good principles for eating right that applies across the board.

There is a way to go one step further and really custom design one's eating habits for optimal health and longevity - and that is to do one's genetic testing and understand one's particular genetic strengths and weaknesses

We don't have a lot of time to go into genes but what I will say is that our genetic code gives us invaluable clues for how we can adapt our nutrition to help us attain the best physical health possible and to avoid activating genetic predispositions to disease.

For example, if one has the Alzheimer's gene it has been shown that certain dietary changes could prevent or delay the genetic pathway being activated for example quitting sugary snacks and alcohol and increasing intake of omega 3's and leafy greens.

If one is genetically predisposed to addiction SKIP THE SUGAR! It is heroin!

If one is genetically prone to depression and low mood, eat high dopamine foods - eggs, poultry, almonds.

If one is prone to hormone imbalances really take care with dairy and especially avoid milk for its high hormone levels. Eat Brazil nuts to increase levels of selenium.

If one is prone to hold on to weight - go easy on the Carbs.

If one is prone to inflammation, eat foods that support the oxidative process - eat broccoli and vit C and cranberries.

I got my genetic profile done as part of a research study on endurance athletes and had the results analysed by a dietician, Dr Judith Johnson: jjohns@mweb.co.za

All I can say is that the insights from Dr Johnson have been one of the most helpful on my journey to specific and individualised optimal nutrition. At the very least, it has given me a renewed commitment to keep on choosing healthy alternatives.

I wish for this to become an affordable resource available to many as it will significantly reduce our personal and national medical expenditure.

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NEXT WEEK we will finish EAT RIGHT with ten practices for managing our weight.

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WEEK 10

Eat Right - Weight Management

For Week 9, we looked at the dirty dozen sugar, pesticides and eating according to what our genes need most.

This week, we are going to look at ten practical habits and ways for managing a healthy weight.

The first thing I want to say about this is that the weight management and weight loss I am talking about here is about living a happy, energetic, vital, healthy and long life.

I am most certainly not talking about achieving levels of weight that are harmful to one's health even if the fashion magazines and social media advocate for these unhealthy weight ideals.

Be your own woman and your own man. Choose the level of weight at which you feel most vital and healthy and make that your benchmark.



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Don't let someone else dictate to you what your weight or your waistline should measure to be worthy of love and adoration. In fact, I can't think of many things more evocative than a curvy woman that carries her body with a certain sassiness.

Right, that said... If you find that you have let your health and your weight slip then there are some sure and very effective ways to get back to your healthy ideal.

I am going to give ten ways to support your weight loss efforts. I can almost guarantee you that half of these or more you already know. The question today is not whether you know, but whether you are practising these approaches?

- **SET A REALISTIC GOAL** The very first is to set a realistic goal. Determine how many kilograms you want to lose and then decide over what period. My best advice is to set a super realistic goal - aim to lose half a kilogram a week. Losing weight too fast may mean that you are starving yourself and causing havoc for your hormones which can backfire as weight gain.

BE PATIENT - BECAUSE THE WAR IS WON LITERALLY ONE GRAM AT A TIME AND IT WILL TAKE TIME TO LOSE WEIGHT SUSTAINABLY.

Weight loss is a slow process and one has to celebrate and witness it a gram at a time. That is why consistent small wins over time is what are needed. Even if you don't feel any shifts in the beginning it is happening. Just trust the process. And once weight loss starts some research suggests that it improves our dopamine functioning - where dopamine is the hormone responsible for motivation. So it becomes a positive cycle that supports itself the more momentum we gain. All you need to do is make the next good choice. And the next. This brings me to the second key to weight loss.

- **SET A CLEAR DAILY CALORIE DEFICIT TARGET**

It is super important to be really clear on what your DAILY CALORIE TARGET is - because calories are an input target that you can directly control. The grams lost is an outcome target - and one can't always see the wins on a daily basis - because there are fluctuations in water retention etc.

Focus on what you can control. Only weigh yourself once a week.

Ok, let's calculate a typical calorie target to lose half a kilo a week... Over a week, to lose half a kilo, one has to lose 75 grams a day. To do that, one has to create a daily deficit of consuming 550 calories less than what you currently are. Now we have a target. It is concrete. You can do something about it. And you can measure whether you hit the target or not.

That is the power of this approach.

- **WRITE IT ALL DOWN** - BECAUSE ONCE YOU BECOME AWARE OF WHAT YOU EAT AND THE ENERGY YOU BURN, YOU MAKE DIFFERENT CHOICES. The single most powerful tool I have ever used in weight loss has been to write down every single thing that I eat in a day. Every sip of coffee, every grain of salt and to work out what the calories are from that. There are many apps that can help you with this but I use an old fashioned excel spreadsheet. I also record my physical activity and calories burned - and people! Doing this, one realises very quickly that one can never out-exercise a bad diet.

The act of typing in 6 squares of chocolate and seeing how it wipes out the 550 calorie deficit/ and nullifies that 10km run or that hour and a half on the stationary bike is one of the most powerful motivators to help you not eat it and to stay on track in the small daily choices.

Lundi, you said you do this as well. Can you say something about it?

- **DESCRIBE AN IDEAL DAY** - not everyone does this but I find it extremely helpful to describe the ideal day in terms of nutrition and exercise - because it doesn't only set a target for calories but for the kind of nutrition and movement I aspire to on my best days. I write down the ideal, right down to the grammage and the exact mix of veggies and protein source, every bite of my healthy snacks, yoghurt and fruits, my nuts and my oils and my coffees and teas.

So when I serve that extra portion of chicken or eat the whole tub of yoghurt I know exactly how much I am deviating from the ideal and what the impact is on my 550 calorie deficit target.

- **DRINK WATER** - Lundi you mentioned it a few weeks ago, and research studies have shown that 60-75% of us are chronically dehydrated.

Thirst most often shows up as hunger. Keep a bottle with you and make sure you drink at least a litre and a half of life-giving water a day.

- **GOOD CHOICES START IN THE CHECK-OUT QUEUE** - we've all been there - hungry in the queue and loading our basket with treats and crisps and a small tub of ice cream and a bar of chocolate.

Fight it. Take it out when you get to the till. Just don't buy it because what you have in your cupboard: you will eat.

Buy clean and then the probability that you will eat clean is a great deal more likely. Don't tempt yourself!

- **CUT THE SUGAR** - we spoke about it last week. Sugar is a downhill slope - once you start, it is hard to stop. It is super addictive and one innocent spoon of sugar in your morning coffee will most likely snowball into an irresistible desire for mini cupcakes before bed and you will wake up with a raging craving for a giant chocolate muffin. Don't go there. Cut the sugar. The beauty of it is that you will feel better emotionally too and over time like Lundi said, even an almond will taste sweet!

- **DON'T STARVE YOURSELF** - the body is an incredible survival machine. If it detects that there is a sudden and dramatic energy deficit, it will stimulate the hormones that preserve your energy and fat stores and suddenly your weight loss will hit a wall.

Eat enough high quality, nutrient dense food to satisfy your hunger - EAT lots of lettuce, mushrooms, the stinky veggies, spinach, kale, asparagus, with a small portion of carb veggies like sweet potato or beans, sprinkled with a handful of healthy seeds like chia, sesame and sunflower seeds and add a small portion of lean chicken, sardines or eggs.

Eating this way, you chase hunger and disease out the door. Don't restrict yourself from eating all day and then arrive hungry like a wolf at that fridge door. It will only lead to a binge (that's why people who eat breakfast have a lower body mass index than people who don't). Feed yourself for health.

- **INCREASE YOUR MUSCLE MASS** - yes, do weight training because the more muscle you have, the more calories you burn, even at rest - and besides - it is great for preventing osteoporosis and for your physique, especially as we get older and lose strength, bone density and muscle mass.
- **FIND AN ALTERNATIVE TO COMFORT EATING** - honestly, I have never met anyone who doesn't take some comfort in indulging in sugary treats, crisps or scones and clotted cream or late night ice cream.

We are wired to comfort eat, and in a world of great abundance, it is so so easy to fall into the habit of it. Make a point of identifying your most vulnerable moments and the triggers that make you go there - and find a replacement activity. My trigger is after dinner when I insist on working late and I need a treat to keep me at the laptop or I tell myself a story that I somehow need a treat before bed. When I need to lose weight - especially coming up to an important race, I short-cut across my danger zone by doing a brief relaxing meditation straight after dinner and going straight to bed, perhaps with a book.

That brings me to the final weight loss tool...

- **SLEEP** - The research is unequivocal - sleep deficits trigger weight gain. And enough good solid sleep promotes weight loss. If one doesn't sleep enough, the cortisol that is triggered by fatigue will only hamper your weight loss ideals. Sleep! And let the pounds drop off as your body enters a state of being sufficiently rested.

To recap what we have covered these past three weeks of **EATING RIGHT**

- Eat mostly veggies - remember the blue zoners eating 85% plants.
- Eat organic - to avoid the dirty dozen pesticide overload.
- Eat whole foods - and avoid everything processed to escape the harmful additives like sweeteners and hidden sugars.
- Cut the refined sugar - completely.
- Eat enough but not too much.
- Choose for nutrient density and health before all else.
- And when you lose the way, know that you can reclaim your life and your health and your vitality even just after one week of conscious and aware eating - keep a food diary.
- Drink water
- Sleep

That's it for EAT RIGHT.

NEXT WEEK - SLEEP ENOUGH BUT NOT TOO MUCH

Next week we will talk about optimal sleep and how to achieve it.