

Episode 11 Post-COVID - The Rise of Anxiety and Social Isolation

Meryl: Hey everyone. Welcome back to the rebel nutritionist. I am so thrilled to introduce our guest today. Emily DaCosta, who is the newest team member here at the Brandwein Institute for nutrition and wellness.

She is a registered dietician. A recent graduate, our new brilliant addition to our team. She's been amazing and amazing addition. So, I'm really excited about our conversation today, about getting back into our new reality after the pandemic. And she has some great insight for us, our fresh take on, what we need to be thinking about and paying attention to moving forward. So, without further ado, I would like to welcome Emily. You can say a few words about yourself and where you are from and what your training has been. Cause you've had amazing training and we'll go from there.

So welcome.

Emily: Awesome. Hi guys. Thank you so much for having me, Meryl. I'm really excited to be on here. I'm excited for our conversation today. It's going to be great. But yeah, I mean, just piggybacking off what you said, I'm a registered dietician. I just started working for the Brandwein Institute in February and I'm so excited to be a part of the team.

I went to university of Southern California. I graduated from there with my masters in nutrition. And prior to that, I graduated from Villanova university with my bachelors of science in psychology. And I am originally from New Jersey, but just moved down to south Florida and, I'm so excited to be part of our team.

I think we were a great group of women and we are all in this to help people. And I think that's really awesome. We just mesh really well. So, without further ado, we can start chatting.

Meryl: So really, I think Emily and I talk about this a lot and we talk about this with our team. I loved our discussion. One day we had started talking about what new normal is for people after the pandemic and really how we are seeing so many people now come into the office who have had the, what do we call it?

The quarantine 15, the quarantine 20. Right. And they realize that it's. It's as much about their weight as it is now about their health, or maybe it's more about their health than it is just the weight and how people are now being forced to take a look at themselves in very much, a different way than perhaps before the pandemic, because there is a focus on health yet.

I still feel like there's such a dichotomy because we talk about the health. We talk about the wellness and yet there's been no change. You know, I always call it a paradigm shift. There's really been no shift. Nationally on it. And this is a big conversation that I always liked to have because we really need to have a huge paradigm shift, but it has to start with us.

Those of us that are doing small baby steps in that. And I feel like it does start with these kinds of conversations and getting it out there to people to have them realize what it is that we need to be changing. And speak to that in terms of what we've maybe known for a while, but have been ignoring what the pandemic has forced us to sort of listen to and take inventory of.

So, I'm going to let you speak to that because you've really spoken to that pretty well during our conversations.

Emily: Yeah. I mean, I think that going off what you study we all hear these terms, quarantine 15, we hear all these things about these individual issues that people are experiencing, whether it's their weight or they're coming out and they're really, really stressed or something like that.

And I think it goes back to preventative health, which is kind of why we both had gotten into this field because we've always believed in preventative health. You know, it's not always about. The immediate issue, it might be more about the root cause. And I think one of the major root causes that is being brought to light for many people who have gone through this pandemic.

And the year that we've had is how are they managing stress? Are they sleeping well? Are they exercising? You know, as much as they should be, are they drinking enough water? Are they finding ways to do stress management that works for them? And obviously everyone's unique. But just, it's kind of forced us to be with ourselves and try to understand how our own bodies work and what's going to work and what's not going to work, especially in a time of really high stress.

That quarantine 15, it could be because of the way that they're eating to deal with stress. It could be that they're not sleeping. It could be that inflammation is really high in their body. Maybe they were sick and they came out with a lot of inflammation or they're trying to deal with, the ramifications of all of that.

And then it doesn't help that there's such high anxiety in the world right now and that causes inflammation as well. So, I think there's just so many. Things to consider, but the pandemic itself has really forced us to bring all of it to light and say, wow, the preventative health is really, really important because when something like this happens, how our body's handling it and how can we help that along?

And what can we do ahead of time to be better prepared with our bodies being well and healthy, to be able to tackle, such trauma like this. I mean, a lot of people are seeing. this as a traumatic experience for them. And that's totally valid. This year has been very traumatizing for a lot of people.

So, I don't know if that answers your question, but I think it just all comes back to preventative health and it's important to focus on that and hone in on it.

Meryl: It's funny, it's not even so much even the question. I think it's about the ongoing dialogue that people need to just hear consistently. It's the consistent message of what

we're trying to say and prevention, prevention and more prevention. And even more than that, like you said, well, is it sleep? Is it stress? Is it, is it all of these things? And it, and the answer? There's no one individual thing. I think people try to focus on the fact that, oh, well it's gotta be just weight loss.

And if I lose weight, everything will be fine. And while that is a big part of the picture. I think we give a lot of lip service and I've said this over and over. We just say, oh, well, it's stress. I can't do anything about the stress or, oh, well, I'm not sleeping, no big deal. Or maybe I'm not moving my body, and we minimize these things that, individually may seem inconsequential at the moment, or relative to maybe what they think, right. Everybody thinks it's diet, diet, diet, yet. We all know sleep is just as, or if not more important than diet or as important, perhaps. And it's the same thing with stress reduction. Breathing and finding time to relax and just be in the moment without having to cross off our to-do list is just as important as eating well as sleeping well and so forth.

And I think that until we start paying attention and really focusing on that and really just emphasize that. We're missing a whole big piece of this puzzle and the anxiety piece. I definitely want to spend more time on that because in addition to everybody coming in with the 15 to 20 pounds on them, that they want to lose the biggest increase in behavioral factors that I've seen.

And that we've seen is definitely the anxiety piece. And for so many reasons, I mean, one of the things that we had talked about is misinformation or the lack of information, right. Emily, we had that whole conversation and I'll come back and address some of the stuff that you said, but let's get into a little bit, like what you said about the, the information piece, because I loved your take on that.

Emily: So, I think anxiety is so high. We definitely know that we see people coming into our practice all the time with heightened anxiety and anyone that I talk to says, I'm just so anxious all the time. And I think the biggest thing that I've noticed about the root of all this anxiety is that the unknowns, I think people they don't, they're not used to having so many unknowns.

With something that's really affecting their life. And obviously COVID has dramatically affected all of our lives. And just the year in general, that we've had being forced to stay inside, not being able to do the things that we're used to doing all these unknown uncharted territory is that we've had to kind of all walk towards together is really scary.

And I think people are coming out with a little bit of trauma from all of that, and that's totally valid and they're not alone. I think a lot of people are already experiencing it. And I think what it really comes down to and what I was saying the other day, when we were talking is. I think we're all used to such a systematic way of learning.

We go to school. I mean, I was calculating it earlier. I think I was in school for like 20, 21 years of my life and I'm 26. So, you know, I'm so used to learning in a school system that I'm so used to learning from my parents and from professionals and experts in a field where you still learning from scientists where you still learning the tried-and-true things that have been

proven in our world. And when something like this happens where an unknown virus is released into our world and we don't know how to deal with it. Everyone is kind of in the unknown. And that scares a lot of people because a lot of people are reliant on other people for teaching them things that they don't yet know.

And so, we look to people like professionals and doctors and our government officials, and a lot of people who are supposedly authority and they might know the answers. And when they're saying, hey, we don't really know. And we all need to kind of find out together. That's really scary for people.

So that is definitely a root cause of a lot of people's anxieties. that's pretty much kind of my take on it. I think that the unknowns of just thrown a lot of people for a loop and we still don't really know, and that's kind of still really scary for a lot of people.

And we might never know fully the answer is on all of this, but the things that we do now is what we really do need to hang on to. And I think some of those things are that we need to look for ourselves for some answers. Go back to our intuition. What feels healthy to us? What seems healthy?

What do we know is healthy? What do we know has been tried and true for stress management? We know that sleep is important and our bodies wouldn't do it. If we didn't need it, obviously like we really, really need sleep. And the things that we've been taught our whole lives, I think we really need to pay attention to them finally and listen, and kind of go back to our intuition and listen to our bodies because our bodies know the answer many times.

So, kind of finding the knowns within the unknowns. I think it's going to help us through it.

Meryl: Absolutely. And here's the thing, right? What do we know? I mean, we actually know more than, than we think, right. We know that obesity is a co-morbidity with COVID 19. So, we know that if we can offset obesity, if we have a, if we're 30% or more above our let's call it ideal body weight.

And I don't love those height, weight charts, but if you are 30% above what your let's call it, weight should be. You are technically obese and obesity is a predisposing morbidity to this. And so, I'm not saying, oh, it's easy to go out and lose weight. Absolutely not. That is extremely difficult to do for many people, especially if they are a fad dieter, and they have no solid food foundation.

Right. And we're going to get into that in a second. But if you've been a fad diet or all your life, and you've just been on that rollercoaster of weight, gain up weight down, up, down, up, down, you've got no foundation from which to start and it's confusing. And that in and of itself creates anxiety like, oh, what diet should I be on?

Well, let's talk about. What a healthy diet looks like. It's not about going on a four-week, five-week, six-week meal plan. And then going back to your old ways, it is really looking at slowly changing those behaviors that got you here in the first place. And so, it is a process. I

think that is where I feel like I beat this like a dead horse at this conversation about it being a process, but I feel like people have to hear it over and over and over again.

Because what keeps us healthy is the consistency with which we practice these healthy habits. It's not a one, two, three quick fix. So yeah, we know obesity is an issue. We know having a compromised immune system is an issue. So, if you are eating processed foods, you are eating sugar, you are eating foods that have no nutritional value.

Then, of course your immune system's going to be compromised. Right? how do we fix the immune system? We basically go eat fruits and vegetables and things that come out of the ground, or as mother nature intended them to be. And so, vitamin D is low vitamin D I mean, that's an easy one as well.

So, there are lots of things that we do know it's going to the right people to make sure the experts right. Instead of. The people on Tik TOK instead of the people on Instagram, instead of these people who are claiming to be. Knowledgeable because I don't know. I saw some guy do a TikTok this morning on broccoli and that basically that every you know, that cauliflowers broccoli, that kale is broccoli, that, and I'm going, oh my God, I wanted to bang my head against a wall.

Right. I mean, and this is what people are listening to like, okay. Cauliflower's not broccoli. It actually comes from a different plant, but that's a whole other story and I digress. So, you have to be really, really careful where we're getting our information from and who you're listening to. And I guarantee you those TikTokers are not for the most part, nutrition experts. So yeah, that, that we have to be particularly careful about. But I agree with the unknown. So, finding an expert in talking to somebody about what is it that I can do for myself that I can take control of and feel comfortable with is certainly one way. To help offset that anxiety that we're feeling because yes, it is pervasive.

I mean we've dealt with it with clients. We've dealt with it with family members. And so that's something that we really need to pay attention to. Emily talks a lot about the food freedom piece and the intuition piece. So, I do want you to talk a little bit Emily on.

What are some of the things that we can do that, that allow us to set ourselves up for success? You know, we've talked about the weight and the health, like we say, just because you lose weight, you're not healthy. Right. So, speak to a little bit of that. And like you said, being self-aware so Your perspective is certainly I've been doing this a long time.

You're new to the block, but I love your perspective. Because you may be new to the team and new to the world of let's call it professional dietetics, but you're certainly not new. You've got really amazing insight and A fresh take on it and I love it. I love the perspective and I really think that people need to listen to what you're saying as well.

Right. And so, you speak to that piece a little bit.

Emily: Yeah. So, I think that probably the best thing that you can start by doing is if you are obviously, you're feeling anxiety is to find ways to manage that, that work for you. And, and don't be afraid to try different things, right? I mean, we hear about.

People who meditate all the time. I love meditation and we talk about meditation all the time. You know, people roll their eyes at it, but it's, it's not something to roll your eyes at. It works. It really does. It brings your breathing down. It helps you get centered and it really does lower the anxiety levels in the body.

It. Literally, it was proven by science than biochemistry. So, I think that's something that's worth looking into for a lot of people. And I think journaling is very important. Writing down your thoughts, writing down, even the foods that you're eating and just helping yourself to get stuff down on paper.

So, you can even go back and look at it later on and become more and more self-aware. As you start doing these behaviors are going to become more and more self-aware. And. Obviously the food piece is really important. So, though you want to look at what you're putting in your body. Anything that goes into your body is going to affect your body in some way.

And so, I think trying to go back to what you had said before eating foods that come from the ground, eating foods that come from nature is probably your number one priority, trying to avoid man-made products and processed foods. That's important too, because those just lead to inflammation and are probably not providing you with very beneficial nutrients.

And so those are definitely some important things that you can do. Sleep is very important. Getting really good sleep and, and trying to get that eight hours in, or at least trying to go to bed before, before midnight, every night or at least just get in bed and try to relax yourself.

Finding the balance in your life is important. If you're working a lot or you're trying to get back into the real world and that's requiring you to just work, work, work, because you haven't been working, you kind of have to check, check yourself on that and make sure that you're finding balance and you're keeping balance.

I think we just went from one extreme to another with this year too. It's, we're stuck inside all the time. And then now people are just going out and doing a million things and they're not able to find the balance. And that's. Something that's really important to try to do. Doing things that just bring you joy and happiness is really important.

But from a millennial standpoint too, I think one of the things that we tend to forget and get a little carried away with is using technology, being plugged into the world so hardcore that we don't have time to just be with ourselves or be with the people around us. And I think putting that away as best we can putting our phones down, putting it in a drawer, trying to disconnect every once in a while, throughout the day is so, so important. One of the things that I find when I talked to a lot of people about the year that they've had is they've been so engulfed in the news and in social media and trying to stay connected to people via media that they're just like coming out of it, like so used to doing that now, and they can't break away.

So, baby stepping away for that is really important too. we all know that while watching the news can make us crazy. And being plugged into, like you said, TikTok, like trying to learn

from people on TikTok and trying to just unplug is probably the best thing that we can do right now.

So yeah, again, I don't know if that covers everything, but I think from my perspective, doing a couple of those things every day and slowly but surely making yourself more aware and. You know, getting yourself back on track with the balance and the wellness is going to be really important.

Meryl: Absolutely. it literally hits the nail on the head and going back to some of the things right. Meditation. people always say to me, especially the Type A like, go, go, go, right. Like me. Oh, I can't meditate. I can't sit. It's so hard for me, but I always tell people that's exactly why you need to do it.

Right, that go, go, go that revving, that sort of what I call that internal vibration. You know, if you're just feeling like you're, are you going a million miles an hour, even more reason to, to stop. And, and if you have been so plugged into technology, even more reason to take a step back because you know, technology is advancing.

At such a pace it's actually outpacing our brain's ability to keep up. There's been lots of documentation about that. And I think that's also a partially where the anxiety comes from is that technology is just advancing so rapidly that we can't wrap our heads around it. And so that creates anxiety. So, I do think it is so, so, so important to disconnect.

It is important to take the time to breathe. You don't even have to meditate it as well. I can't meditate for a half hour, take five minutes. even doing that five minutes of breath work at a stoplight don't close your eyes, right? If you're at a light, but taking a few minutes at your desk or wherever you may be just to engage and breathe and to be.

It's so, so important as is, you know? Yes, of course the sleep piece. And again, I think people minimize the fact that they're not sleeping well yet. We know that inability to lose weight. People who have weight issues, it often is tied back into the lack of sleep, right? We know there's issues with shift workers and so forth, but it's not even that it's, if you are not sleeping somewhere between 10 and two, right, 10:00 PM, 2:00 AM kind of thing.

You are not getting the restorative sleep that you need for your body to recover. And that's important for the immune system. Right. It's not just the food that we eat, right? The sleep is hugely important for the immune system. So not to minimize any of these pieces, they're all super, super important.

And they're all connected on some level, right? The sleep is connected to, to our recovery, which is connected to our weight, which is connected to inflammation. I mean, we are one being after all, we are one body and we are all connected. And so, to think that we function separately on these different Factors it is a silly thought.

And the other part of that is moving people often think, well, right, because gyms were closed for so long. Oh, I couldn't exercise. Just get up a walk. Right. Do something to move your body. I don't care if you're dancing in the middle of your living room, right.

Get up and move. We are meant to move. We are not meant to sit. And part of the reason that we did see the weight gain that we've seen is because. People were stuck inside. They weren't moving, they were eating right again, a whole myriad of factors. But I think that, that those kinds of things speak to the fact of why we're perhaps in some cases more unhealthy than we were going into the pandemic.

I know at the very beginning; a lot of people were cooking more. Right. And they were enjoying that. I wish we'd go back to that more because now all of a sudden, like you said, people are going out and they're out and they're eating out now we're sort of back in that cycle of that. So, you look, we're not going to solve the world's problems today, unfortunately, but I think bringing it to light, especially this anxiety piece we've talked about a lot and I think people are still a little bit ashamed that, that they're coming out of the pandemic, more anxious, not feeling well.

and forget about less connected. We're all less connected. I know people are starting to come into the office and I'm dying to go back and give everybody hugs. our instinct is to go give someone a hug. And so, we've started doing that, which feels so good, but.

We are, we are social beings. We are meant to be social. And the fact that we have not been able to be social I know that that's had effect on you. Do you want to speak a little bit? I mean I know I was affected by not being able to be social.

That's how I went into the office every day. At least I was able to see the four walls. Right,

Emily: right, right. Yeah. Yeah, no, I mean, I have no problem speaking to that. I think as we've talked about, but I definitely had some anxiety going back into the social world. And honestly, it's weird because I feel like my brains in a tug of war.

I want to be social. But I also am concerned for the people I love. And so, I'm concerned for myself, safety wise and health wise and all of that. So, I think a lot of people are experiencing that. I want to be social. I am a social being, we all, like you said, we all are, but it's challenging to say, okay, should I do this for myself?

Or should I keep my family in the back of my mind and go out with those friends and maybe take my mask off wherever I am or whatever. And. Try the I'm trying to live my life while also loving my loved ones and caring for them. So, I think that's a challenge. A lot of people are experiencing.

But kind of going back to what you said with us being social beings. Like I think that's where a lot of anxiety definitely comes from. And I think that we are social beings, but we've also kind of learned through this year to be with ourselves a lot more than we ever have before. And so. I'm sure a lot of us have learned a lot more about ourselves and about how we deal with things and how we just are.

I was talking to my friend, my best friend yesterday, and I was kind of telling her I was going to do this podcast and we were going over like some things that I wanted to say on it. And she was like, it's so true that. We've just kind of been stuck with ourselves and it's like, we

have nowhere to run to, like, we were stuck in the four walls of our homes and we couldn't run from ourselves.

Whereas before we would like go out and hang out with friends to ignore what we were thinking so much about, or we would overthink something and say, I'm going to go to just go talk to a friend or go. Distract myself by going to the gym or doing whatever and we couldn't do it. And we were like kind of forced to think and be in our heads a lot more.

And I think for some people, they came out probably stronger, mentally stronger, but for other people's their people, they're having a lot of anxiety because they're still kind of stuck in their head and they're realizing a lot of things that maybe they didn't know before about themselves. So, and it's, it's good and bad.

It's a blessing and a curse like we talked about in the beginning your body kind of has the answers for a lot of the things when it comes to health and wellness. So., I think becoming more self-aware about, that was probably a blessing. like you said, we're not going to solve all the world's problems, but we definitely have talked about a lot of them today.

Meryl: So, when you said, that we were forced to be with ourselves right, and the anxiety of wanting to go out, but then. Being concerned about your loved ones, which I know, majority of people that I've spoken to, including myself, right.

we are concerned about that. Right. I have my dad who, who up until he got the vaccine, it was it was a concern. What are some of the coping mechanisms that you have used that you've found to be helpful? Because I think people want to hear that.

Emily: So, with regards to like kind of the tug of war I was talking about with, do I be social?

Do I not? Do I do this? Cause it I might be putting other people at risk. I think trusting my intuition is definitely been an important one and trying not to lose that through this full year. You kinda know. Deep down if something's like way too risky or not. And trying to just keep your priorities in check.

Obviously, my family and my fiancé and my best friends and you guys at work, you're a huge priorities to me, keeping you guys safe is important. So, if I'm going out and I'm saying I, I don't really care about them and all that stuff then that's probably not the way to go. You want to kind of keep that in check, but also within myself, like I've been saying meditation, journaling, writing down, my thoughts has been so helpful because then I'm able to look at them and rationalize by looking kind of more from the outside.

And reading through it as if maybe it's. You know, someone else asking for advice. Like I write down my thought and then I say, okay, pretend this is someone else who came to you with this problem. How would you address it? Because it's really hard to take your own advice, it's so easy to give it to someone else.

So, I like to try to think about my problems as if someone brought them to me. What would I say? And you know, obviously not being afraid to. Find help professional help if you need it. And looking to people who have probably been through what you've been through finding

comfort in what they've done, that might've worked and obviously everyone's different, but you might find something that might work for you.

And, being open about talking about it, I think is very therapeutic. Keeping it bottled up is, is obviously not the best idea and I'm definitely like an external processor. So, I do talk to a lot of people. I try to process things and I value other people's advice. So, I think not being afraid to express how you're feeling to other people, because you know, you'll find comfort in the way that they react.

And the way that they choose to advise you and help you. Getting great sleep has been very important. We keep talking about it, but I can't stress it enough. I mean, your body heals with sleep. It heals overnight. I can't tell you how many times I'm anxious at night. And I wake up feeling like a refreshing new person.

So definitely doing that unplugging you know, it, when I'm trying to figure out if something is safe or not, it's not the best idea to figure that out by watching other people at bars and doing all this stuff, mask less cause you know, everyone has a different idea of, of what they're comfortable with, so trying to stay within your own comfort zone and being forgiving of yourself too, and not comparing yourself to other people is, is really important.

Cause at the end of the day, I truly believe that like your intuition will guide you the best that it can. So yeah, I think. And getting outside, getting outside is very important. We're lucky we live in south Florida. I know this pandemic has been tough for people who live up north I'm from New Jersey.

My whole family was like cooped up inside during the winter and everything. And that was challenging. We at least could have gone for a walk or seeing the beach or something. So, if you can do that, don't take it for granted. Definitely take advantage of it. And yeah, I think those are some bullet point ideas that I have for how to deal with what you might be going through right now.

Yeah.

Meryl: I love it. I mean, I think it's really, really useful for anybody millennial or not anybody can use that advice and yeah. Yeah. We do have to go back into ourselves and listen to our instincts. I think we really, part of what social media and technology has done, has really forced us almost, to become disconnected from our own bodies.

Right? We are so disconnected from our own thoughts and from our own sense of intuitive conversation and what our bodies are actually telling us and what our minds are telling us we talk ourselves out of things and. Or into things that maybe don't resonate. And I think we do have to go back to what is it that really resonates with me and self-care, right?

Like you said, I think there's a fine line between being selfish and self-care. And we have to pay attention to that. You've got to pay attention to what does my body want? Does my body want a rest? Does my body money eat well, does my body want this? And so, the more we are go, go, go. And on the run, the less connected we are.

So, like you said, that what I think some of what the pandemic has taught us is. Yeah. We've had to slow down a little bit. We've had to look inside of ourselves a little bit. And for a lot of people that's scary. Right. They've never been that quiet and that alone with themselves I love my alone time.

I was like, yeah, it's good. I don't have to deal with people. Great. Right. But, but then on the same token, like I wanted to be with people, but we do really need to take those moments and be with ourselves and connect back to. What is it that makes me whole, what is it that makes me balanced? So, I love that.

I love that conversation. I love this conversation and we will continue to have more of them, but yeah, I think it was great. So, thank you again for all your insight. And you know, the other thing that I want to tell people is if you really are confused about what to eat on our website, we do have a free.

Week long meal planner. There's a code gift G I F T seven, that you can put into the meal planner and it will give you a free week and it'll at least give you a jumping off point with a meal plan with recipes, with grocery lists, where you can really get a sense of this is how I create my food foundation.

So, I think it's a great place to start and you know, take a look at it, but. For today. I think that is where I would like to leave everybody. Emily. Thank you again.

Emily: Thank you so much for having me. I'm excited to be here. This is a great conversation.

Meryl: Absolutely. To be continued and thank you everyone. Thanks for listening.

And until next time, this is the rebel nutritionist signing off.