



Episode 323: How to Have A Genius Life Using Four Key Pillars of Health With Max Lugavere

Child: Welcome to my Mommy's podcast.

This podcast is sponsored by The Ready State. If you're at all like me, you might have perpetual stiffness and pain in your neck and shoulders from years of working, carrying kids and all of the demands of parenting. Or sore hips from too much sitting or multiple pregnancies. I found a great way to relieve my aches and pains and improve my fitness and flexibility. It's from someone I highly respect... Dr. Kelly Starrett at The Ready State. If you don't know Kelly, he's a Mobility and movement coach for Olympic gold medalists, world champions, and pro athletes. He's the Author of two New York Times bestselling books, including "Becoming a Supple Leopard", which has sold over half a million copies. He has over 150,000 hours of hands-on experience training athletes at the highest levels. A Doctor of Physical Therapy who helps top companies, military organizations, and universities improve the wellness and resilience of their team members. He created a program called Virtual Mobility Coach. This program is easy to do from home each day, making it ideal for me, and for most moms. And I can do with my kids. Every day, Virtual Mobility Coach gives you fresh, guided video exercises. They show you proven techniques to take care of your body, relieve pain, and improve flexibility. And you can customize your videos in three ways. If you're in pain, you can pull up a picture of the human body and click on what hurts. And from there, Virtual Mobility Coach will give you a customized pain prescription to help you find relief. Second, you can find a library of soothing recovery routines in the daily maintenance section. They're a great way to wind-down and practice self-care from the comfort of your home. And third, for athletes, Virtual Mobility Coach also has an entire section of pre- and post-exercise routines for more than four dozen sports and activities. They help you warm-up before your workout so you can perform your best with a lower risk of injury. Right now, you can try Virtual Mobility Coach totally risk-free for two weeks without paying a penny. And after that, you can get 50% off your first three months. Just go to thereadystate.com/wellnessmama and use code WELLNESSMAMA50 at checkout. That's half-off your first three months when you sign up for a monthly plan. And you'll get personalized techniques to relieve nagging pain and improve your fitness and flexibility.

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Katie: Hello, and welcome to "The Wellness Mama Podcast." I'm Katie from wellnessmama.com, and today's guest is Max Lugavere, who you've probably heard of. He is a filmmaker, a health and science journalist with a background in journalism, like mine, and the author of The New York Times bestselling book, "Genius Foods: Become Smarter, Happier, and More Productive While Protecting Your Brain for Life." He's also the author of a new book, just coming out, called "The Genius Life: Heal Your Mind, Strengthen Your Body, and Become

Extraordinary." His book has been published in eight languages. He's the host of the iTunes podcast, "The Genius Life," and he's appeared on everything from "Dr. Oz" to "Rachael Ray", "The Doctors," and many more.

And in this episode, we talk about his story of losing his mom and what he learned from the research around that, as well as the very simple, actionable, research-backed, practical tips in four key areas that can improve your life. So, like me, he's focused on finding the most effective and efficient changes that you can make that have a big payoff, and we go into the weeds on a lot of these today. The resulting conversation is an extremely practical and actionable one. Make sure to check out the show notes at wellnessmama.fm for all the links to the things that we talk about. I know that you will enjoy this episode as much as I enjoyed recording it.

Max, welcome. Thanks for being here.

Max: Thanks so much for having me. What an honor it is to be joining you on your show.

Katie: I am so excited to have you here. I'm a big fan of your work and especially your new book, which I just got to read. I know we're gonna have so much to chat about today. But to start, I would be really grateful if you could kind of introduce yourself to the audience by telling a little bit about your story and how you came into this world to begin with.

Max: Yeah, absolutely. So, my background is as a journalist. I started college on a pre-medical track, but I ended up halfway through realizing a love of storytelling and creativity. And so that kind of derailed my plans to go through medical school. And thankfully, my parents were okay with that. But I actually ended up getting a job as a journalist, which allowed me to be a storyteller while also covering stories that were of relevance to younger people. And, you know, the stories that I got to cover as a journalist ranged from the more, you know, topical to some pretty serious topics ranging from geopolitics to the environment to health. And I did that for six years out of college. And for those, you know, who might remember the network that I worked for, it was called "Current TV." And it was actually co-founded by Al Gore. So I worked for him, but it was not his political platform. In fact, I, you know, only saw him at the company parties. And it was really...I had free reign to cover topics that I was passionate about. And I did that for six years, sort of, you know, getting to hone my skills, cut my teeth with some of the best of the best in the field.

And when I left that job to try to figure out where I was gonna go with my career, it was at that point in my personal life, I started spending more and more time in New York City, which is where I'm from, around my mother. And it was then around the year 2010, 2011, that me and my brothers, we started to notice the earliest symptoms of what would ultimately be diagnosed as a form of dementia in my mom. Just to paint the picture for you, my mom was not old. She was 58. You know, she was in the prime of her life. She had all the pigment in her hair. She was a vibrant, spirited New Yorker. And suddenly, it had seemed as though her brain, she had had a brain transplant with somebody 30 years her senior. And it was confusing, to say the least, for me and my brothers to witness. And in tandem with the changes to her cognition, she also had an alteration in her gait, which is how she walked. So, there were symptoms that were indicative of a neurocognitive disorder,

but then also a movement disorder, like a more Parkinsonian sort of complex. And I didn't have this vernacular back then. Back then, I was just a son who was concerned for his mother.

So, what I ended up doing was accompanying her to doctor's appointments. And because, you know, as I mentioned, we were in New York, we started at NYU, then we ended up at Columbia. But ultimately, when we couldn't find a diagnosis for her because her symptoms were so strange, they didn't fit neatly into the Alzheimer's disease diagnosis, they didn't fit neatly into the Parkinson's disease diagnosis, it was really hard to figure out what she actually had. And so we ended up going to Johns Hopkins in Baltimore. And then ultimately, it was at the Cleveland Clinic in Ohio where she was diagnosed for the first time with a neurodegenerative disease. And that was the first time in my life that I'd ever had a panic attack. I was so scared and I felt so desperate and hopeless. Because what I experienced in those doctor's offices with my mom, I've come to actually call diagnose and adios.

And that's because usually what a doctor will do is he'll run a battery of esoteric tests. You really don't know what they're doing most of the time. They don't take the time to explain. They never once bring up environmental factors that might have led to the condition. They never talk about diet. They never talk about lifestyle. And that's not to say that these doctors weren't great in their fields, but I was left, to put it lightly, disenchanted by the whole process. And what I did was I ended up looking on my own into what's called the primary literature, which is our peer-reviewed, most respected medical journals where, you know, trials and, you know, observational evidence, and all kinds of, you know, studies, the research that we all draw on when we talk about health and nutrition and write books about it, this is accessible to anybody. And back then, I was just looking for help from my mom.

So what I did was I used those skills that I had honed as an investigative journalist to try to figure out why this was happening to my mom, what could be done to help her, and what I could potentially do to prevent it from ever happening to myself. And there was this huge gap in between what I was reading about in the research and what I had experienced in those doctors' offices. So I basically thought to myself, "This isn't right." I mean, people need to know that we don't need to sit idly on our hands as we await whatever is in our genetic hand of cards. I mean, we can take steps today that are going to boost our cognitive health and minimize our risk for conditions like Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia, which one of the most shocking findings I uncovered is that oftentimes, these conditions begin in the brain decades before the first symptom.

So from that point on, it was a...you know, there's this term that they use in astrophysics, singularity. It was like a singularity in my life where, you know, from one day to the next, I couldn't think about anything else other than researching this topic and reaching out to researchers around the globe who could provide further insight. And that really began my journey and that, you know, continues obviously to this day, you know, nine years later. And my new book, "The Genius Life," is really a reflection of all of the latest insights that I've been able to glean from the literature and from my interviews with experts and my personal experience going through this with my mother that people can really use to make the small changes in their day-to-day life that are gonna have big wins both in terms of their health and how they feel day-to-day.

Katie: Wow, that's awesome. And like you, I got into it for my own health with Hashimoto's. And my background is ironically also in journalism, that's what I went to school for. And when I couldn't find answers in the conventional medical system, I started researching for my own answers as well and was amazed at just how much there was that is not talked about in the mainstream. And I think something really important that you said, I wanna expound on a little bit before we move on, is the idea of not being controlled just by our genes, that our genes not being our destiny. I think that's something that a lot of people maybe don't fully understand is that just because we may have a genetic predisposition to something, that doesn't at all mean that we're going to necessarily have to have that condition or whatever it is expressed in our lives. So let's talk a little bit more about what you've learned in your research, specifically related to that and how we have probably a much more control than many of us realize over our genetic expression in what happens.

Max: Yeah, absolutely. So, you know, what I like to say is that genes are not your destiny, but they do help determine what the standard American diet and lifestyle will do to you. You know, for some people, eating the standard American obesogenic diet, they'll develop obesity. Some might develop type 2 diabetes, some might develop certain forms of cancer, which, you know, research suggests certain cancers are sensitive to diet. And our risk for cancer, in general, increases the more overweight we are. Alzheimer's disease is related to being a type 2 diabetic. So everything is interrelated in very intricate ways. And I don't pretend to have all the answers but, you know. And of course, there are genes...there are certain conditions where, you know, genes are destiny. So, I don't like to make blanket statements.

But when it comes to dementia, which today if you make it to the age of 85, you have a 50% chance of being diagnosed with dementia so that is a coin toss. The vast majority of Alzheimer's cases, which is the most common form of dementia, are not genetic. They're influenced by our genes. We have risk genes, but they're not due to deterministic genes, except for a small percentage of cases, which we call early-onset or familial Alzheimer's disease. But sporadic Alzheimer's disease, which again, is the most common form of dementia, but it's not the only form of dementia, make up 95% of Alzheimer's cases. And we do have some control when it comes to our brain health. Now, again, you could do everything "right" and still, you know, and I use air quotes when I say right because this is a constantly evolving science and 90% of what we know about the condition has been discovered only in the past 15 years.

But we know that the health of the body influences the health of the brain. And today, unfortunately, we live in a time where our bodies are unwell. If you look, statistically, two-thirds of adults are either overweight or obese. And we live in a nation where, by the year 2030, one in two adults are actually gonna be obese. So this is a startling statistic. Fifty percent of adults are either type 2 diabetic or prediabetic and the vast majority of people with prediabetes, which means that their blood sugar is starting to inch up to a point where it becomes chronically elevated, most people with prediabetes don't even actually know that they have prediabetes. And by being a type 2 diabetic, your risk for developing Alzheimer's disease increases anywhere between two and fourfold.

And we know, by and large, that type 2 diabetes is a lifestyle condition. It's driven by primarily an overly sedentary lifestyle, chronic stress, and eating foods that are associated with the standard American diet. So, ultra-processed foods that are just loaded with refined flours and fats. So, essentially, what I try to offer

people is a way of improving their metabolic health, which we know influences the metabolic health...the metabolic health of the body influences the metabolic health of the brain. And the guiding sort of thesis that I advance in my books is that Alzheimer's disease really stems from a kind of metabolic dysfunction in the brain. And what that essentially means in English is that the brain in Alzheimer's disease, one of the earliest measurable features that we can see in the brains of people at risk for Alzheimer's disease is an inability to properly generate energy. So that's essentially metabolic dysfunction.

And this is, as I mentioned, an evolving science but there's even evidence that suggests that transient hyperglycemia actually blocks the ability of glucose to enter the brain, which is the brain's primary energy source, sugar. So, I mean, it's kind of ironic that high blood sugar, you know, we would think, "Wouldn't high blood sugar be good because it's more sugar for the brain to use?" Having chronically high blood sugar...having transiently high blood sugar might actually affect sugar's ability to cross into the brain. So imagine what happens if you have chronically high blood sugar. So now, researchers have started to actually refer to Alzheimer's disease as a form of diabetes of the brain. Type 3 diabetes is what they have started to refer to it.

And this is a hypothesis that's gaining a lot of traction, especially in light of the fact that the prevailing hypothesis as to why Alzheimer's disease develops over the past few decades, the so-called amyloid hypothesis really has been met with abject failure in the way of interventional studies that try to use pharmacological interventions to reduce amyloid in the brain. So it's led researchers to sort of question, what is the earliest feature that we might be able to intervene and change in patients at risk for Alzheimer's disease that might improve their risk, or lower their risk and improve their chances against developing the condition? And it seems that this sort of impaired ability for the brain to generate energy is one of the earliest features that we might be able to have agency and, you know, change our course.

So these are all the sorts of things that I explore in the book and make it really actionable and achievable for people to tend to. And, you know, we live in a time, as I mentioned, where people are just, unwell. We don't feel great. Most people are walking around, you know, and they've just sort of accepted their reality as par for the course. You know, feeling tired and bloated and mentally fatigued with brain fog. And I think that that has a lot to do with the fact that only 12% of adults today have what researchers would call good metabolic health.

Yeah, so in the book, I go into all these different facets. And the four tent poles of the recommendations, they fall under four different categories. One is nutrition. One is exercise, which can be subdivided into two categories. So we have thermal exercise and we have physical exercise. And we can go into those two arenas. But then we have light, the body's relationship with light and how important getting good quality light is in the earlier half of the day, and then how important it is also to have a break from light in the latter half of the day. And then our exposure to environmental toxicity. You know, we live in a world where on a constant basis, we're exposed to industrial chemicals that if it were one or two here and there, it might not be such a big deal, but the overall burden of toxicity is just overwhelming our defense forces. And so, I go into the more common of these chemicals that people should watch out for that could be affecting their health in invisible ways.

Katie: I love it. And so much we can delve into from there. I actually wanna start with light. I know that's not the first pillar you mentioned, but I think it's one that is not as well understood and one that can be almost universally beneficial. And something I've realized in the last couple of years, especially, is that so much of health and wellness is very much personalized. And at the end of the day, each of us is responsible for figuring out the things that are gonna work the best for us. But there are some universally applicable principles. And I think that the idea of circadian biology in light and how it influences the body is not as well understood as perhaps some of the others. So I'd love to start there. And I know that you have written about this extensively and talked it before, but for people who aren't familiar with this concept, we know that food affects our body. We know that exercise affects our body. I am a big believer that light might actually be more important, but let's start with this one. Explain how light affects the body.

Max: Yeah. So, our bodies are rhythmically influenced and the chief clock that our brains use to know what time of day it is and then to accordingly adjust how our hormones work and how our neurotransmitters work to cater to the activities that are associated with that, with whatever time of day it is, is light. So light being the primary time center that the brain uses to gauge what time of day it is, obviously, enters through our eyes. And it basically acts like a switch to either flip on or to not flip on proteins in the eyes called melanopsin proteins. And these proteins are actually not involved in sight and they're not super sensitive. They're only sensitive to about 1,000 lux of light. So lux is a measure of light intensity. And people can actually download an app on their phones called Lux, which can give them a sense of the relative light intensity in their surroundings.

And what happens when our eyes perceive a brightness of about 1,000 lux, it then flips a switch in a small region of the brain, it's about half the size of a chocolate chip, called the suprachiasmatic nucleus. And you don't really need to remember these terms. But when melanopsin interfaces with the suprachiasmatic nucleus, which is housed in another region of the brain called the hypothalamus, that basically tells your brain that it's daytime. Like, you know, up and at 'em, let's orient hormones and neurotransmitters in a way that is gonna give you the most focus, the most energy, the most coordination, the greatest sort of metabolic machinery that you can have over the course of the day that's gonna support your ability to forage, and to find new hunting opportunities, and to find new ground to settle on if you were, say, a hunter-gatherer or to find a potential mate.

So you're gonna be most energetic and most active, obviously, during the day. Now, the hypothalamus, which is where this structure, the suprachiasmatic nucleus is housed, is one of those primordial regions of the brain. It controls very basic survival-oriented functions like metabolic rate, our drives for food, our drives to procreate. So needless to say, this is crucially important to our survival. Otherwise, it wouldn't be in that part of the brain. It would be maybe in a higher, you know, order area involved with, you know, human consciousness or something like that, you know. But it's really in the reptile part of the brain that is just so crucial to our being as organisms. And when that occurs, when we experience light at that intensity, it sets off this 24-hour timer that influences, as I mentioned, daylight-associated activity as well as when we begin to get tired in the evening.

So people who expose their eyes to bright light in the morning have an earlier expression of a hormone called melatonin, which is involved in winding us down and getting us ready for bed in the latter half of the day. So, getting that bright light for about half an hour every morning is crucially important. And to be clear, I mean, the light that you'll get from an overcast day is sufficient. It doesn't have to be direct sunlight, necessarily, but just being outside, or being near an open window, or even commuting to work for half an hour without sunglasses on would be sufficient to essentially anchor your body's circadian rhythm. So that's where light, really, I think plays a role in helping us feel good. It boosts levels of serotonin in the brain. It can help reduce levels of cortisol.

And this is something that's super important. You'll see a lot of people today not getting adequate light exposure in the morning. And this is partially owed to the fact that we spend 93% of our time indoors, according to the Environmental Protection Agency. So, very important stuff and, you know, this circadian clock, it influences antioxidant status. It influences, as I mentioned, metabolism in the body. It influences levels of inflammation. And so light really kind of interfaces with all of these different systems in the body. You know, it's not just a visual phenomenon. It really influences our biology in a profound way. And at the later end of the day, experiencing a reprieve from bright light is equally as important.

Today, we live in a time where we're exposed to ever-growing, you know, TV screens that emit powerful light into our eyes. We're faced with unprecedented artificial light in our homes from our devices. And unfortunately, the light intensity that some of these devices give off, and even overhead lighting in our homes and other establishments that we may visit in the latter end of the day, can easily reach that light intensity of 1,000 lux. So if you were to walk into a supermarket or a drug store at 8 p.m., which is when your brain is supposed to be winding down and getting you ready for sleep and catering to all of those restorative and rejuvenating processes that we associate with, you know, getting good sleep, you're actually shutting off those processes if you walk into, say, a drug store and the overhead light reaches 1,000 lux. So, making sure that we're honoring our bodies' circadian inclinations in the latter half of the day has become one of the central challenges of modern life. And so that's where I think being mindful of the light intensity that you allow to enter your eyes is crucially important.

Now melatonin, which I mentioned earlier, it's a sleep hormone. It's not just involved in sleep, it's an antioxidant. It is involved in DNA repair. It is a gatekeeper to a process called autophagy, which I like to refer to autophagy as the KonMari method for biology. So, people who might be familiar with Marie Kondo and her love of tidying up, that's essentially what biology does. And the term for that is autophagy. It's when cells clean house. They break apart worn-out proteins and organelles that maybe have become old and dysfunctional. And melatonin is a sort of gatekeeper on that process.

Now, when we experience bright light in the latter half of the day, you're basically suppressing the release of melatonin to a profound degree. And so that's not only gonna affect your sleep, but it's gonna affect your body's ability to repair DNA damage. And DNA damage is at the root cause of cancer and even aging itself. So, in the sense that light can actually affect the way that your body repairs DNA that has become damaged, light at the latter end of the day can actually serve as a potential carcinogen, which is a very powerful concept and one that needs further testing. But it's perhaps no surprise when you look at all of the data coming from

animal labs, you know, and you see the observation that people who work night shifts are at increased risk for certain types of cancer. So, it's definitely something I think that is worthy of having our attention, being really cautious of the level of light intensity that we allow to enter our eyes in the latter half of the day. And then also, of course, getting good quality light in the first half of the day.

Katie: Got it. Yeah. I love that. And I'm also a big believer in that 30 minutes of light early in the morning, I'll often sit on the front porch with my husband and sip a cup of tea or coffee, and just be outside, and that's such an underestimated, easy thing we can do. It's free and it's amazing. I've seen results in my labs. I've seen results in my energy level, all the things that you've mentioned. And I think really, like, light seems to be a key because, as you mentioned, we're seeing a rise in obesity and all of these diseases at a rate that mathematically and statistically does not make sense. We haven't seen this ever before in history at this rate. And I think if you look at the data, like, what you've done, light is the one really logical potential answer because that has changed so much over the last 50 to 70 years.

And so, looking at that in the same way that you would diet or exercise, I think is really important going forward because this is obviously not a problem that's going away. We're not moving away from technology and artificial light. So it's important to learn, based on all these tips that you've talked about, how to navigate that and to use it to our advantage versus our disadvantage. And I think based on your pillars, the other one that people...my listeners are probably above the curve on, but a lot of people don't fully understand is the environmental toxin component here as well. And this is another area that's changed so drastically over just the course of one generation and that can have really dramatic results in our life. But I feel like people often find it easier to ignore because it's not as immediately noticeable as nutrition or exercise. So let's go deep on the environmental side now and what you found when you started looking into the research on this.

Max: Yeah, absolutely. So, I mean, as I mentioned, the overall burden of toxicity today that your average human is exposed to is unprecedented. And many of the kinds of harmful chemicals that I think we need to be concerned with, we've been exposed to for the entirety of our lives. There was a study that found that, you know, in utero, fetuses are exposed to about 287 industrial chemicals. And I'm not, like, trying to be chemophobic. I'm certainly not trying to fearmonger. But, you know, we live in a world that has just, you know, become mutated in so many ways. And many of these chemicals we're exposed to on a daily basis and are foisted into the marketplace so that humans are exposed to them prior to really, I would say, you know, the kinds of robust research, that we really need to feel safe about these chemicals has been done. Oftentimes, certain compounds are just assumed to be safe because we don't eat them the way we do food. We don't take them the way we do supplements and medicines. And so, they're not subject to the same regulatory scrutiny.

But in the book, I go into two different kinds of pollution, I guess you could categorize it. So first is, you know, the external environment, the environment outside of your house and pollution like, air pollution, which, you know, a growing body of research is now suggesting is very harmful to the health of our brains and even just our overall cognitive function. There is a type of air pollution that many people are exposed to in the United States called fine particulate matter. And fine particulate matter is basically, airborne particles measuring 2.5 micrometers or smaller. And, you know, 166 million people in the U.S., 52% of all Americans are exposed to

unhealthy levels of outdoor air pollution. I grew up in New York City, I live in Los Angeles now, you know, there's certainly things to be gleaned by living in the world's great cities, but air pollution is definitely a growing concern.

And what we see is that people that are exposed to high levels of air pollution seem to have dramatically increased risk for cognitive decline. There's a study that occurred across 48 states and found that high exposure to air pollutants increases the risk of cognitive decline in women by 81% and Alzheimer's disease by 92%. Now, there are probably confounding variables in this, people who are exposed to higher levels of air pollution are probably in more industrial areas. Maybe it's harder to find healthy food in those areas. We don't yet know. But what we do know is that fine particulate matter is after we inhale air that has these particles in it like magnetite, which is made of iron, it's actually able to enter our circulation and pierce the blood-brain barrier and accumulate in the brain where it creates pathologies that look a lot like what you'll see in a brain with Alzheimer's disease way earlier than Alzheimer's disease would typically present its ugly head.

So, what you'll see, and a lot of these studies have been done in very polluted parts of the world, like Mexico City or in China, they'll find that once these particles accumulate in the brains of people, even younger people, they will start to show increased levels of amyloid-beta, which is the protein that serves as the backbone of the plaques that we associate with Alzheimer's disease. And people who are at risk genetically for Alzheimer's disease, carriers of the ApoE4 allele, might actually have a higher vulnerability to outside air pollution. In fact, one-fifth of Alzheimer's cases might be owed to air pollution alone.

So you definitely wanna be cognizant of the air that you're breathing in on a regular basis. And if you do happen to live in a polluted part of the world, there are things that you can do. So overall nutritional status is gonna go a long way towards helping protect you. So making sure that you're eating a diet that is rich in antioxidants, fruits, and vegetables, and also properly raised meat products, which most people don't think about grass-fed beef when it comes to detoxing. But animal proteins provide sulfur-containing amino acids, which are really important in the synthesis of glutathione, which is your body's master antioxidant or detoxifier. So making sure that you're eating a diet that is providing you ample nutrition, that's super important.

Taking a fish oil supplement can be useful. They found in both humans and animal trials that fish oil, which we know can be anti-inflammatory, especially for people who are not regular consumers of fish, can actually reduce the harm that comes from being exposed chronically to air pollution. A B vitamin, a B complex can help support your body's detox pathways as well. And just, generally speaking, knowing your ApoE4 status. So knowing your genetic risk for conditions like Alzheimer's disease, you know, might actually affect how frequently or how regularly you allow yourself to spend in time in, you know, areas of higher pollution.

The other type of pollution that I talk about in the book "The Genius Life" is indoor air pollution. It's a major problem and it's not just in the indoor air environment. It's compounds that we're exposed to in our food, the BPA, which is able to leach out of the plastics we use to store our food or phthalates, which are plasticizing chemicals as well. We're inundated with compounds that serve as endocrine disruptors. They disrupt the way

our delicate and finely tuned system of hormones functions. And this can be associated with certain cancers. It can be associated with alterations in the way that our bodies handle glucose. It can be associated with weight gain.

And there's really no limit to the negative effects that we can experience when regularly exposed to endocrine disruptors. I've become kind of friendly with an organization that I think people should support or at least know about, called the Endocrine Disruption Exchange, which is dedicated to raising awareness for and tracking ultimately about 1,400 potential endocrine disruptors that people are potentially exposed to every single day. And so while it's impossible to talk about all of them, you know, the most common of them would be these plastic-related compounds. Most people are unaware of the fact that, you know, compounds that are used to make plastic can easily leach into food and beverages when stored in them.

So if you take a plastic water bottle, for example, and you pick that water bottle up from, you know, say, the airport, which, you know, I'm not perfect. If I'm thirsty and I'm traveling, I'll buy a water bottle. I'll try to buy my water in glass, but I'm not always so lucky. You have no idea where that water bottle was stored before being in the store. You know, it could have sat in the hot cargo bed of a truck for days, weeks, months, and heat catalyzes the leaching of compounds like BPA or phthalates into the liquid. It's one of the reasons why in my home, I've gotten rid of all of the plastic Tupperware containers and I will generally only store, you know, foods and beverages in glass.

A lot of people will keep water bottles, plastic water bottles in their cars, you know, which can be a very warm environment, especially in the summer. That's a big no, no. You definitely wanna get rid of any of these plastic water bottles, you don't wanna reuse them. And even when we're avoiding compounds like BPA, unfortunately, manufacturers have now started to replace BPA with BPS. And there's no reason to suspect that any of these alternative plasticizing compounds are any safer than BPA. In fact, they could be even more treacherous because there's just less research on them. And it's been known for almost a century, at this point, that BPA has profound estrogenic properties in the body. Meaning it can act like a hormone estrogen once we consume it.

Other sources of BPA, most people are unaware, store receipts. So if you are touching a store receipt that happens to be printed on thermal paper and you can always tell that these receipts are coated with BPA because you're able to sort of write on them with your fingernails, that provides a powerful source of exposure for BPA. Oftentimes, we'll touch these receipts and then we'll hold the hands of our little ones and hormonal disruption earlier in life when we're children can have potentially lifelong implications. So we really wanna be cautious of our exposure to these compounds. And one shocking thing that I discovered the other day that I wasn't even privy to, you know, I had known about BPA on these receipts, when we use hand sanitizer on our hands before touching these receipts, it dramatically increases the absorption into our bodies of these chemicals. So, you know, that's kind of counterintuitive. Most people might touch a store receipt and then use a hand sanitizer or use a hand sanitizer before touching the store receipt. Certainly, you see this all the time with people who work at the registers, you know, which is unfortunate. You definitely don't wanna use a hand sanitizer prior to touching these receipts.

And another surprising source of these compounds, not BPA or phthalates, but actually compounds more similar to Teflon, which we know, you know, can serve as a potent endocrine disruptor is glide dental tape. So, I'm a big advocate for oral health, dental health, and flossing is certainly very important. But if you're using one of these dental tapes, like the kinds that are marketed for being able to slide more easily between teeth, those tapes are actually made with Teflon. And what we see is that people who use those kinds of tapes have higher levels of these endocrine-disrupting compounds in their bodies. So you wanna use dental floss but you wanna make sure that it's more of like a string as opposed to this dental tape. Usually, they're called glide. You wanna make sure that you're avoiding those.

So there's a lot of different potential tips that people can use to better detox. As I mentioned, the three Ps, pee, poop, and perspire. You wanna make sure that you're going to the bathroom regularly. You wanna make sure that you're drinking ample fluids throughout the day, making sure that your urine is either clear or light yellow because, of course, a solution to pollution is dilution. So making sure that you're staying hydrated. And then also perspiring on a regular basis. Now, exercise is one great way of making sure that you're sweating on a regular basis but, you know, some people just don't sweat that much when they work out. I'm one of those people. I don't, you know, sweat all that profusely when I'm working out. But that has made me become a huge fan of saunas and doing things that are gonna increase, you know, how much I sweat.

So sometimes I'll work it out and I'll work out with, like, a sweater on or, like, a hoodie just to make sure that my body temperature is increasing and I'm able to purge some of these compounds. But I'm a big fan of sitting in a sauna and really sweating it out. People who more regularly engage in sauna bathing, we're seeing out of the University of Eastern Finland, have reduced risk for early mortality, which is essentially dying early. We see that they have reduced risk for Alzheimer's disease, cardiovascular disease, and stroke. So saunas really are a powerful healing modality. I'm a huge fan of saunas. And, you know, just one of the many mechanisms by which the saunas boost our health is that they help us excrete certain of these environmental toxins.

Katie: I love it. I'm also a huge fan of saunas. We actually have a couple of different types at our house. And based on what I've seen in the research, it seems to be the gold standard of getting four to seven sauna sessions per week. And most data is at least 20 minutes. I usually am for 30 to 45 minutes. And temperature ranges vary, but I try to aim for about 170 degrees. And you're right, the statistics are really incredible for reduction of all-cause mortality and cardiovascular events and all kinds of things. I think that's an easy one. It can be difficult to sit there if you don't enjoy the heat, but so many benefits. And I love everything you said about endocrine disruptors as well. This was actually the impetus for our new company called Wellnesse, which is personal care products, but most people don't realize even your personal care products and beauty products can have plastic chemicals actually added to them and in them because it improves the texture or the performance, but then you're absorbing those things into your body.

And like you said, babies are now born with hundreds of those already in their body because we're just so bombarded from so many angles. And I agree with you. I don't wanna be alarmist, but I think when we have this many negative inputs, we do just at least have to be aware and a little bit proactive about avoiding what

we can and doing things to give our body a fighting chance in other areas. I wanna make sure we get to all the pillars. So let's talk about nutrition a little bit. Like, again, I feel like there is a definite personalized aspect when it comes to nutrition, but there's also some universal things that are beneficial to all of us. So what did you find in your research when it came to nutrition?

Max: Yeah. So, you know, when I first began my journey into health, you know, I encountered a lot of people who feel very dogmatically about certain macronutrients. So you'll see a lot of people who are anti-carbs. You'll find a lot of people who are, you know, anti-fat. I feel like the anti-fat sentiment that still remains comes predominantly from the plant-based community. But then you'll see a lot of people that are zealots on both sides. You'll see, you know, low-carb people. Ultimately, what I tried to do in the book is to...I tried to look at what the research really says and to paint a picture for people and to make it really actionable and achievable so that people can reach their best health with food and nutrition in a way that is not dogmatic, but it's gonna give them the most bang for their buck.

And so the two big takeaways that I offer in "The Genius Life" really, number one, is to avoid ultra-processed foods. I mean, we could argue about the benefits of low-carb versus low-fat, you know, until the cows come home. And, you know, what you see online is that argument is something that is, ever-occurring. But ultimately, if you do, you know, just one thing in your life, it's to avoid these packaged, processed convenience foods. I mean, for one, oftentimes these foods are loaded with these endocrine-disrupting chemicals that we were talking about earlier. So actually parabens, which sometimes you'll find in your cosmetics, are actually also used in packaged processed foods because what they do is they serve as an antimicrobial, so they prevent the growth of microorganisms that might make you sick. So I mean, it's one of the reasons why food today is so safe. You'll see a lot less foodborne illnesses than, you know, we've seen in prior centuries.

But these foods, you know, they're loaded with industrial chemicals that, again, it's not any one to be concerned with, the dose makes the poison oftentimes. But that's just one aspect of it. People who consume processed foods, they have higher amounts of these, you know, compounds in their bodies, phthalates, parabens, and things like that. But the real reason why I think these foods are worth avoiding is that they drive their own overconsumption. And this was actually shown very eloquently in a study that was funded by the National Institutes of Health over the past year that found that people who consume predominantly ultra-processed foods, when eating to satiety, consume a caloric surplus of about 500 calories. Now, if you're basing the entirety of your diets around these ultra-processed foods and you're eating 500 additional calories every single day, that's a pound of fat stored every single week.

The other problem with these ultra-processed foods is that they're basically pre-digestible. And when I say ultra-processed foods, I think it's good to offer a quick definition. These are foods that, you know, they're convenience foods. They've got long ingredients lists. They range from, you know, the chips and commercial breads and rolls to pizzas, and burritos, and ice creams, and granola bars, and things like that. These are the foods that you'll generally find in the aisles of your supermarkets, not on the perimeter. They're shelf-stable. And the thing about these foods is that they are 100% digestible and so you're getting 100% of the calories that you consume when you eat ultra-processed foods.

This is actually in contrast to when we eat whole foods where a small but significant portion of the calories that you eat in the form of whole foods might not actually be fully digested. And so you get a bit of a caloric free ride with whole foods that you don't get with ultra-processed foods. And this was actually shown in this study funded by the USDA, which came out just a few weeks ago actually, that found that when people ate whole nuts, they actually passed about 30% of the calories that they had consumed through their stool that they didn't even fully absorb. And that actually warranted a reassessment of the amount of calories that we assume to be in whole nuts. Now, this wasn't true for nut butters, which are processed, right? One hundred percent of the calories that we consume in the form of nut butters, in the form of wheat snacks, in the form of potato chips, in the form of ice creams, we mainline, essentially.

So, this is one of the contributing factors to the fact that, you know, the modern health milieu is defined in part by energy toxicity. We're just consuming too many calories, and ultra-processed foods are at the sort of helm of driving that overconsumption. There is also a sort of metabolic advantage to consuming primarily whole foods. We actually burn about twice the calories just in the digestion of whole foods alone that we don't burn when we're consuming ultra-processed foods. It's a far smaller thermic effect that we experience when we consume processed foods.

And so, that's really one of the primary recommendations that I make is, you know, whether it's carbs or fat, if you can, you know, maybe live by the 80/20 rule and 80% of the time eat primarily whole foods, the foods that you're gonna find around the perimeter of your supermarket, dark, leafy greens, cruciferous vegetables, grass-fed beef, eggs, fish, meat, you know, poultry, you're gonna get the most bang for your buck. And then, you know, maybe, you know, if it's gonna help your adherence to those foods to have on a weekly basis the planned indulgence of, you know, the processed food of your choice just to make it a little bit easier for you, then that's great. Then essentially, I mean, you're winning if that's your strategy. And when it comes to when to have a planned indulgence, I always recommend the post-workout setting because your body's just primed to partition energy in a way that's very efficient in the post-workout setting.

The other point that I make in "The Genius Life" is really to prioritize protein. So, this isn't about demonizing any one macronutrient, but to prioritize the macronutrient, which is protein, that is gonna be the most satiating macronutrient available to us. I mean, I think in the fitness community, this has been known for some time, the value of protein. But I think for most people, the benefits of eating higher protein diets, it's just gonna lead to much greater satiety, much greater bang for your buck in terms of the maintenance and promotion of the growth of the lean mass, which becomes increasingly important as we age. And people who eat less protein tend to eat more carbs and fat.

Carbs and fat tend to be energy, whereas protein is the substrate that we use to promote muscle protein synthesis, which is the growth and maintenance of lean mass in the body. So, prioritize protein at every meal. It can help reduce what I call snacksidents. If you're feeling, you know, a hunger pang, reach for higher protein food. Again, it's very satiating. You'll rarely see people that overeat high protein foods like chicken or fish. You know, like, if you think about when the last time was that you binged on chicken or grass-fed beef, you know,

it's probably gonna be hard to think of the last time that occurred. But if you had to think of the last time you overindulged on foods that were composed primarily of carbs and fat, I mean, this occurs on a regular basis for most people.

So prioritizing protein to really satiate your hunger, that's something that I think is a powerful tool that is underappreciated. And, you know, I go into the nuances of protein and, you know, why protein is so important and why some of the fears surrounding high-protein diets really have not been born out in the literature and why they're unwarranted for most people. But those are the two nutritional sort of, you know, keystones that I offer in the book that I think are gonna give people the highest bang for their buck in terms of helping them easily shed weight without having to count calories, gain muscle, which I think is crucially important no matter what your age or gender is, and ultimately, achieve better metabolic health.

Katie: I agree. And I'm a big fan of using the 80/20 principle in a lot of aspects of life. And I think that this is an area where it definitely can simplify things. There's so much dietary information out there that it can get overwhelming. And I think, like you do, sticking to a few simple rules that have a big payoff is an easy way for a lot of people to really see the benefits over time.

This podcast is sponsored by The Ready State. If you're at all like me, you might have perpetual stiffness and pain in your neck and shoulders from years of working, carrying kids and all of the demands of parenting. Or sore hips from too much sitting or multiple pregnancies. I found a great way to relieve my aches and pains and improve my fitness and flexibility. It's from someone I highly respect... Dr. Kelly Starrett at The Ready State. If you don't know Kelly, he's a Mobility and movement coach for Olympic gold medalists, world champions, and pro athletes. He's the Author of two New York Times bestselling books, including "Becoming a Supple Leopard", which has sold over half a million copies. He has over 150,000 hours of hands-on experience training athletes at the highest levels. A Doctor of Physical Therapy who helps top companies, military organizations, and universities improve the wellness and resilience of their team members. He created a program called Virtual Mobility Coach. This program is easy to do from home each day, making it ideal for me, and for most moms. And I can do with my kids. Every day, Virtual Mobility Coach gives you fresh, guided video exercises. They show you proven techniques to take care of your body, relieve pain, and improve flexibility. And you can customize your videos in three ways. If you're in pain, you can pull up a picture of the human body and click on what hurts. And from there, Virtual Mobility Coach will give you a customized pain prescription to help you find relief. Second, you can find a library of soothing recovery routines in the daily maintenance section. They're a great way to wind-down and practice self-care from the comfort of your home. And third, for athletes, Virtual Mobility Coach also has an entire section of pre- and post-exercise routines for more than four dozen sports and activities. They help you warm-up before your workout so you can perform your best with a lower risk of injury. Right now, you can try Virtual Mobility Coach totally risk-free for two weeks without paying a penny. And after that, you can get 50% off your first three months. Just go to thereadystate.com/wellnessmama and use code WELLNESSMAMA50 at checkout. That's half-off your first three months when you sign up for a monthly plan. And you'll get personalized techniques to relieve nagging pain and improve your fitness and flexibility.

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And I love that you use the term “planned indulgences” versus “cheating”. I've never liked thinking of food in terms of cheating because, to me, there is room for that within a nutritious overall lifestyle plan. I'd love that you reframe that for people as well. And I saved exercise for last because this is actually where I'm most personally interested right now. I feel like all the other areas I have very much dialed in and I've been experimenting more and more with exercise these last six months in different types of weight lifting and high-intensity training, and looking at the research, and then also trying it on my own. And I know that this is something you also systematize and make easy in the book. But walk us through what you learned when it came to exercise.

Max: Yeah. So I break it down into thermal exercise, which is exposing your body to variation in ambient temperature, which I think is really important for metabolic health, body composition, mental acuity, and even mood. And I think that's a really important part of the equation. So just making sure to regularly step out of your comfort zone where it comes to, you know, climate control. A lot of us live, you know, thanks to the wonders of modern technology, in a state of chronic climate control. And, you know, this is certainly comfortable and I wouldn't give up my air conditioning living in Southern California during the summer months. But I think, you know, whether it's sauna, which we talked about, or even exposing yourself to mildly cooler temperatures, which research shows can actually boost metabolic health and improve insulin sensitivity, I think that's a crucial part of the equation.

And I give very actionable and specific, you know, tips in the book, but physical exercise is something that I also talk about. I mean, there's just no getting around the fact that physical exercise is a form of medicine for the brain. And I break it down into different categories in the book. So, we have resistance training, which I think is crucially important to anybody's exercise regimen. You gotta be lifting weights or at least doing some form of resistance training, even if it's bodyweight exercises. You know, growing stronger muscles, you know, having greater strength and larger muscles is just important. It's directly related to better metabolic health, lower levels of inflammation.

And, you know, for people who are listening, like, you know, I see this a lot with women. You know, people will say like, "I don't wanna get too big or too bulky." I've been lifting weights for 20 years and, you know, like, it's very hard to get jacked. You know, there's so many pieces at play, you know, hormones and things like

that, that you really shouldn't worry about getting too big from lifting weights. I mean, you're gonna get as big as your biology allows, but it's not, like, you know, somebody goes to the gym and then overnight wakes up looking like, you know, G.I. Jane. Like, you know, when Demi Moore famously transformed her body to get ready for that role. I think a lot of women sort of began to fear weightlifting for that reason. But it's super, super, super important and there's been this bias in the literature, I think, towards aerobic exercise, but there is a bounty of evidence now coming out showing us that having stronger legs, a stronger upper body directly related to better brain health.

So I talk about resistance training and how important that is. I also talk about high-intensity interval training and how for people who don't like steady-state cardio, and I would put myself in that category, I've never been a fan of long bouts of cardio, high-intensity interval training can be a much more efficient way of boosting what's called cardio-respiratory fitness. And I give tips on that in the book and how to really maximize that. Essentially, what it comes down to is doing something at the peak of your ability, for 10 to 20 to 30 seconds and then recuperating, and then doing it again. So really pushing yourself so that your cells really have no choice but to keep up. And in so doing, they learn to adapt and become more efficient. So this is really crucial for overall metabolic health, for brain health as well.

And then I talk about aerobic exercise, which aerobic exercise is super important. What we see is that people who, you know, do aerobic exercise, they have greater endurance, which is important. It's a way to boost endurance. You can also boost levels of BDNF in the brain with aerobic exercise. Although the research is now validating other forms of exercise and means of doing the same thing. But BDNF has been referred to as the brains miracle grow protein and it's been shown for some time now that a regular aerobic exercise can lead to not only an increased expression of BDNF but actually growth in the brains of vulnerable memory center, which is important to note because the size of the hippocampus actually will typically decline with age.

And then there's another form of physical activity that I talk about in the book called non-exercise physical activity. And this can be anything from dancing to walking the dog, to folding laundry, to carrying groceries. So this is not deliberate exercise, but it's, you know, any form of movement other than just sitting on a couch and watching reruns of your favorite show. So just moving more throughout the day. You know, yard work, for example, cleaning or maintaining your house can expend 10 to 50 times more energy than sitting in front of your television. So just by doing these simple movements, you're burning a tremendous amount of calories.

And one thing that I really kind of drive home in the book is that a lot of people will do long bouts of cardio, you know, for weight maintenance or even weight loss because, you know, we get on a treadmill and we look at the calorie counter. But actually, non-exercise physical activity can account for anywhere between 300 and 1,000 calories daily. It's an attribute called non-exercise activity thermogenesis, which is a way larger calorie burn than, you know, anything that you can expect, any number of calories that you can expect to burn on a treadmill.

And there was actually a study that found...it was performed at the Mayo Clinic, where they found that they wanted to see whether or not NEAT, non-exercise activity thermogenesis, alone could prevent a person from

becoming overweight. And what they found was that after giving normal weight subjects an additional 1,000 calories worth of food every day, the equivalent of a triple Whopper sandwich, they found that people with higher levels of NEAT were able to preserve their leanness and prevent weight gain to a remarkable degree. In fact, the increase in activity was able to explain a tenfold variation in fat gain between the subjects.

So, just staying active, anything that you can do to not be sitting on your butt throughout the day is crucially important. And for people who are desk jockeys that are stuck at, you know, working desk jobs throughout the day, you know, anything that you can do, whether it's getting one of these desks that's able to transform into standing desks and going from a seated to a standing position and just kind of stretching in place as you work or every 30 minutes, you know, doing a lap around the office, taking the stairs whenever you can, parking, you know, at a further parking spot than where you normally try to park, you know, when you're getting your groceries. Just trying to build more of these simple, spontaneous movements into your day are really gonna go a long way towards boosting your metabolic health, lowering things like triglycerides, blood sugar, and also boosting blood to the brain.

So these simple, spontaneous, daily movements, you know, actually create micro-alterations in your blood pressure that pushes fresh blood and nutrients up to the brain, which is crucially important when you consider the fact that being sedentary for an extended period of time actually drains blood from your brain. So, anything that we can do to just be more active. You know, this does not have to be something that you need to buy a gym membership for. Just, you know, spending more time walking or, I don't know, doing chores around the house, or trips that are gonna just get you off of your butt. I can't underscore enough how important just staying active is and not being sedentary for an extended period of time.

Katie: Wow. I love it. That was so much clear and precise and actionable information in such a short amount of time. I've been making tons of notes that I'll make sure they get into the show notes at wellnessmama.fm. And of course, I will also link to your book so people can find them, but they're also anywhere books are sold I know available as well. You've mentioned so many great resources. For those of you who are listening, while hopefully getting some of that non-exercise activity thermogenesis by walking or cleaning or whatever it may be, check out the show notes at wellnessmama.fm to find all of those links. Another question I love to ask toward the end of the episode is, other than your own, is there a book or a number of books that have had a really dramatic impact on your life? And if so, what, what book and why?

Max: Yeah, absolutely. So two books actually. One is, "We Are Our Brains" by a neuroscientist named D. F. Swaab. I just love the way that he talks about neuroplasticity and the hope and optimism that's coming out of neuroscience these days, which was a stark contrast when I read it to what I was experiencing in the clinicians' offices with my mother. So it was just very enlivening to me to be able to read something like that written by a neuroscientist. And then another book in a similar vein, "The Brain that Changes Itself" by a neuroscientist, Norman Doidge. both of those books were very inspiring to me and really kind of got me to investigate the topic further and to really learn as much as I possibly could about how to encourage brain health. You know, our brains really are who we are, as is the title of that book, "We Are Our Brains."

And, you know, the brain is the only...you know, we have so much agency when it comes to bolstering its health. And yet when we look in a mirror, you can't really see your brain. It's not something that you can flex like your biceps, you know. But by strengthening our brains, it's gonna improve our quality of life. It's gonna improve our health and our lifespan. And it's gonna avert these kinds of diseases like Alzheimer's disease, for which there really is no meaningful treatment available to sufferers of the condition. And I truly wish that there was. But taking the steps, you know, do whatever it is that you can today to bolster your brain health and to just make, you know, whether it's incremental changes or, you know, sort of a one-and-done approach, they're really gonna pay off in a big way.

And it's not just our long-term brain health that's on the table here. It's our mental health. I mean, one of the most shocking findings, and really the revelation that caused me to write my book, is that the same steps that you can take to sort of buy stock in a better, healthier future, are actually they pay dividends in the here and now. They bolster your mental health in a time where so many people are struggling with things, anxiety, fatigue, depression. This is just something that I think is crucially important, you know, at least to try before reaching for medications, which, you know, so many people are on. And I place no stigma on medicine.

If I had a blockbuster drug available to me when my mom was sick and I could give it to her, I would in a heartbeat, you know, run to the local pharmacy to get that prescription filled. But unfortunately, there were no, you know, viable medical interventions for my mom. And, you know, lo and behold, when you look at statistics, 99.6% of Alzheimer's drug trials fail. And it's really not looking good for the future of sufferers, you know, with the condition. Although, you know, I continue to support measures for research and to promote awareness. But I think, you know, you owe it to yourself to do what you can, starting today.

To quote John F. Kennedy, "The time to fix the roof is when the sun is shining." And how that applies to your health is, you know, if you're younger, if you're healthy, that's when the sun is shining. And that's really when you wanna work on that roof. And even for people who are in older age and, you know, might be suffering from brain fog, it's not too late either. I mean, you know, I cite research in the book that shows that even when you're in advanced age and with at least one risk factor for developing dementia, people can have a marked effect on the way that their brains work, on their cognitive function, on their performance, on their processing speed, on their executive function. So, yeah, you're never too young or too old. And those two books, you know, definitely ignited my journey. And it's a path that I'll be on for the rest of my life.

You know, over the course of writing "The Genius Life," I lost my mother and obviously that was incredibly traumatic and, you know, she was the person who I loved most in the world. And so, understanding why she, you know, just had such bad fortune from the standpoint of health is a question that I'll be asking for the rest of my life. And so, I hope my work resonates with people. And yeah, again, just, you know, spread the message, spread the word, and take care of yourself and your loved ones.

Katie: Well, I'm really sorry for your loss, but I think that your work is helping so many people and I think that's a perfect place of encouragement to end. I know that you are incredibly busy and doing amazing work. I'm so

grateful that you took the time to be here today. Thank you for sharing with us. And again, you guys check him out. His books are linked in the show notes. I highly recommend them. Thank you so much, Max.

Max: Thank you so much. It's been a real pleasure and I can't wait to welcome you on my podcast sometime soon.

Katie: I look forward to it. And thanks, as always, to all of you for listening and sharing one of your most valuable assets, your time, with both of us today. We're so grateful that you did and I hope that you will join me again on the next episode of "The Wellness Mama Podcast."

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