



Episode 605: Anya's Reviews on the Benefits of Being Barefoot and Why to Choose Barefoot Shoes

Child: Welcome to my Mommy's podcast.

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Magnesium increases GABA, which encourages relaxation on a cellular level, which is critical for sleep. Magnesium also plays a key role in regulating your body's stress-response system. Those with magnesium deficiency usually have higher anxiety and stress levels, which negatively impact sleep as well. But before you go out and buy a magnesium supplement, it's important to understand that most magnesium products out there are either synthetic or they only have 1-2 forms of magnesium. The reality is, your body needs ALL 7 forms of this essential sleep mineral. That's why I recommend a product my friends over at BiOptimizers created, called Magnesium Breakthrough.

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Katie: Hello, and welcome to "The Wellness Mama" podcast. I'm Katie from wellnessmama.com, and this episode is all about your feet, and in particular, the benefits of being barefoot and how and why to choose more minimalist, foot-friendly, barefoot-style shoes. And I'm here with someone who I've actually followed for years, and I really respect her work. Her name is Anya, and she runs Anya's Reviews, which I will link in the show notes both to her website and her Instagram. And her story is really fascinating. She discovered barefoot shoes after a long history of pretty severe foot issues. And by changing her footwear and strengthening her

feet, she was able to completely turn these around and change her life. And now, she's trying to change the status quo of shoes and foot health by making natural footwear options more accessible around the world. And like I said, her website is anyasreviews.com.

But in this episode, we go deep on how and why to transition and rehab your foot into a more foot-friendly form of footwear and just to being barefoot more in general. I actually got several requests for this episode because I talk about being barefoot quite a bit. My kids are pretty much always barefoot and almost never wear shoes, so their feet have always been this way. But I have seen drastic changes in my own feet and even the shape of my feet and the function of my feet by changing my footwear over a span of years. So, we talk a lot about this today, about how to choose better footwear, how to do certain exercises to rehab your feet, and so much more. Anya is a wealth of knowledge, and I learned a lot from her over the years. And in this episode, I know that you will as well. So, let's join Anya. Anya, welcome. Thanks so much for being here.

Anya: Thanks for having me. I'm so excited to be here.

Katie: Well, we're gonna get to go deep on the topic of foot health, and minimal footwear, and barefoot, and so many more things. But before we jump into that, I have a note from your bio that you studied four languages. And I think you might be the first person I've talked to to know four languages. I would just love to hear a little bit about how you became interested in languages, and how you ended up picking four different ones.

Anya: Well, studying foreign language doesn't mean you know them. So, I'll just say that. But I've always been really passionate about language. I just really love reading, and I love words. And I started learning Spanish when I was a teenager. I've got some Hispanic heritage. My grandpa is Mexican, but my mom didn't know any Spanish, so that was sort of what got me into it, was trying to get in touch with my heritage. And then I loved it so much that it taught me so much about communicating in English, learning a different language, and I found that I had a knack for it. I'm really... Like, my mind memorizes things well, so I just kept going. After I finished Spanish in high school, I started French, and then I minored in Russian in college, traveled around, lived in some Russian-speaking countries for a while. And then I was like, "How about Chinese?" And then I graduated and I got a full-time job, and had kids, and haven't had as much time, but definitely a passion of mine.

Katie: That's impressive. And you didn't pick easy languages, I feel like, either. I took a couple semesters of Mandarin in college, and it was probably the most intensive I've had to study ever for a class.

Anya: It's so hard. And you come away after, like, a year of study, and you don't know that much, because it takes so long to learn.

Katie: Yeah. Well, that's awesome. And now, you, it sounds like, have put your study and effort into obviously being a mom, but also into, now, you have a whole site dedicated to barefoot, and barefoot shoes, which we're gonna talk a lot about today. But I know from following you for a long time, you actually have a personal story that led you into this. So, I would love if you could give us a little background of how you started researching and understanding the importance of this type of footwear.

Anya: Yeah, so, I, just, you know, my whole life, I have hypermobility, so my joints are a little more lax. I tend to be flat-footed and things like that. And when I was nine years old, I was having tendonitis in my ankle, for no reason other than, according to my podiatrist, being flat-footed. So, they gave me an arch support. And it actually did make the tendonitis go away. So, I was told, keep wearing that whenever you're doing lots of walking, whenever you're exercising. And that was just the rest of my childhood and into my adult life, was I

needed to have my arch support when I was wearing my good shoes. And I might sometimes not wear my good shoes, but for most of the time, it was arch support.

And then as I got to be mom, those pregnancies really exacerbated that joint flexibility. And I started getting really bad foot pain, big toe pain, in particular. And I noticed it a little bit after my first child, but when I was pregnant with my second son, it came in really strong, and my big toe was just constantly hurting. It was really inflamed. I didn't want anything to touch it. And after he was born, I went to the podiatrist and I got the same advice, but doubled down. So, it was now, you need to wear arch support 100% of the time. Wear shoes in the house. They can't bend at all. Every time I'd come, she'd roll up my shoe, and if the front bent, then she was like, "Oh, they're too flexible. Like, don't wear a shoe that does not bend in the big toe.

So, I was shopping around for shoes, and I was trying them from... Fleet Feet was the store that she recommended to me, and they've got a variety of orthotic type shoes, and they cater towards running, and also towards people who are having foot problems. And I would go and I would get a pair, and then I'd wear them for a little bit, and my big toe was still hurting in them. And so then I'd go back and I'd exchange it, and I'd exchange, and I'd exchange, and I finally settled on Birkenstocks, actually. And it kind of brought the pain down a little bit, some of the inflammation, but then I couldn't ever not wear them. So I was wearing shoes 100% of the time. If I woke up in the middle of the night and had to go to the bathroom, I literally crawled, or I put shoes on. That's how severe my foot pain was, and how dependent I was on these shoes. And then I started getting back pain, and hip pain, and my mobility went down. And when my mobility went down, my foot pain kicked back up again.

So, it was just, like, this saga of events, and it lasted about a year and a half. And by the end, I was taking 1,000 steps in an entire day, because I was in so much pain. And I wasn't driving. I was, like, needing help with doing my dishes. And I got so depressed and was in so much pain everywhere. My good friend recommended the book "Whole Body Barefoot" to me, by Katy Bowman. And it was very eye-opening for me because her perspective was, instead of resting the foot, supporting it, bracing it, not moving it, do the opposite. Start waking up the nerves, start exercising the muscles, start, you know, putting weight on it, so that you're having to learn how to support yourself. And, basically, it's rehabilitation for the feet.

And I thought, "Well, this makes a lot of sense." I stopped using my foot, and my foot got weaker and less able to support me. And then it was just this cascading, you know, downward spiral of weakness and pain that got worse and worse. So then I thought, "Okay, well, I've tried everything else. I'm staring down surgery, and I'd rather avoid that." So, I started doing foot strengthening exercises, trying to walk barefoot, to expose my feet to different textures. And I love Katy Bowman's book, because it's not just the feet. It's really, like the title indicates, it's a whole body experience. So, she talks about strengthening your hips, and your core, and how it all can relate.

And it was a one-way street for me. I started getting results. And, of course, a huge component of that, that I managed to leave out was the foot-shaped footwear and the barefoot shoes. So, it's not just strengthening your feet, but also adopting footwear that sort of compliments the rehabilitation, that allows your foot to move inside the shoe the way it would as if it were barefoot, lets your toes splay out. And the first time I tried a foot-shaped shoe, it was the biggest eye-opening experience of my life, because I finally realized why all the other shoes were hurting. It was because they were pushing my big toe in. And my big toe was what was so painful. So, to get that space, so that my big toe could now lay flat and not be pushed in, it was instant relief. And then, of course, I had to go through the whole process of rehabilitation.

But that simple change, of a tapered toe box shoe, which was supposed to be really good for me, to a foot-shaped shoe, it really, really changed my life. And then I worked away from the arch support, and I worked down the thickness of my shoe over time, to, today, I wear barefoot shoes or minimalist shoes, that are really thin and flexible, and then, of course, have that toe space, and no arch support, which is just the opposite of where I was, and where, you know, I was told I would never be able to wear shoes like that. So, that's it in a nutshell.

Katie: Yeah. There's so many important points in what you just said. And I feel like your story really illustrates how much of a difference that can make. And I'm sorry you had to go through such the journey to find that out, but you now get to help so many people through that knowledge. And it makes sense, I think, if we think about it kind of intuitively and on a higher level, that any other part of your body, you wouldn't say, like, "Oh, the best thing for it is for it to be essentially immobilized and not used, so that it atrophies." But I received the same advice when I was little, I have high arches, so use lots of arch support, and make sure your shoes are very cushioned, and very supportive, and all these things. When any other part of the body, we would be like, "No, let's look at mobility. Let's look at full range of motion. Let's rehab that." And I feel like women's shoes, especially, can be really bad for this, and sadly, children's shoes too, with the squeezing of the toes.

And I know I've seen on your page how essentially even our feet shape has changed, as humans, a lot, in the past couple centuries, probably even before that. But I had a friend a few years ago, when I first met him, asked me, "What's your toe spread like?" I'm like, "What?" I never considered that. But it's been interesting. I've had sort of a parallel journey without kind of the extreme pain that you had, but just watching my feet change when I started being just barefoot as much as possible, and then wearing barefoot shoes when I couldn't be barefoot, my toe used to kind of point in, like kind of how you were talking about yours, and now my foot is much wider at the top, but I feel like I have more mobility in my foot. So, maybe let's talk a little bit more about sort of the philosophy behind that, because I feel like the recommendation to wear these overly supportive shoes is so ubiquitous now, and even for babies, are being told to wear these restrictive shoes. And it makes sense when you explain it. You know, logically, we want mobility in our feet, but I feel like that's a new concept for a lot of people.

Anya: Yeah, it is a new concept. And I think that there's some disconnect, because people say, "Oh, the feet are already not capable of supporting us." You know, they're like, sort of, like, mechanically flawed almost, or maybe it's our modern lifestyles, or, you know, reasons why we need to be wearing these types of really overly supportive shoes. And I do believe that they have a place, that, sometimes, if you're in rehabilitation, like, I did need some arch support to get me through that transition. I couldn't just immediately go to barefoot shoes. And there are people with certain conditions and, you know, things where they might want to be open-minded about different types of shoes. But, to just out of the gate say that feet can't support us, and that they must be artificially supported with a shoe, it just doesn't quite compute. Because we've been barefoot for a long, long time, before we had shoes. And the design of the foot, there's so many intricate parts, there are so many muscles, like you said, we wouldn't talk about other parts of our body as if they can't improve, and they can't get stronger.

So, if you think about your hands, you know, you need to be able to spread your fingers, you need to be able to flex them, and extend them, and have dexterity, and also grip strength. You need to have both the mobility and the strength. And if you were to put them in, like, a tight glove, and they never moved, well, we know what would happen, because it happens... You know, we've seen this often enough, that if you don't move something, it gets weaker and it stops being able to move. So, your hands would atrophy, you would lose the ability to spread your fingers, and to move them independently.

And that's sort of what we've been doing to our feet, is we bind them, we put them in shoes where they don't actually move at all, and then they stop being able to move. And you'd come out of those shoes looking compressed and rigid. And it's the same sort of thing that can happen elsewhere in the body.

Feet really are meant to move quite a lot, and they have a lot of shock absorption capability. So, when we step, they should flatten out, so that they can support your weight, and then they need to stiffen back up, to propel you forward. And they do a lot of things that we don't really appreciate. And they're sitting there at the bottom of our bodies. And, you know, they're really these mechanical wonders, and we just sort of neglect them. So, I think that orienting your mind to that is such a huge first step, and it's something that's missing in a lot of people's... You know, when they go to the doctor, they go to the podiatrist, they go to the physical therapist, it's a component that's, it's missing for a lot of people, but can really make a big difference.

Katie: That makes sense. And I think back to when I was a kid and I had a pretty bad break in my leg, in my lower leg, and both bones actually broke, so it was immobilized for a long time. And at first, they had to set it with my knee bent a little bit, because I couldn't fully extend it with the way the break was. And even in just the eight weeks I had that cast on, my muscles in my knee atrophied so much that I could not straighten my leg, even in eight weeks. So, when you talk about, you know, if we don't use them, and have that full range of motion, it atrophies, I think of how quickly that can happen.

And, to your point, when we're talking about the feet, I think I read that a quarter of our bones in our body are in our feet. There's so many bones, and so there seems like there's so much more to move in there that we actually would wanna focus on more mobility and more movement and more strength, as much as possible. But, like you said, it's not an overnight process.

And I do remember trying to go for a run on concrete in FiveFingers, which I don't recommend to anyone. The first time I ever worked barefoot shoes. But that brings up the question of, like, how do we make the transition into this more minimal type of footwear. Then we'll talk about specific types, but, so people don't just, you know, jump from, like, super supportive shoes to just trying to go for a run on concrete in minimal shoes. Are there any things that are helpful in transitioning and strengthening our feet, and getting that mobility back?

Anya: Yeah, adding in foot strengthening exercises, and also true barefoot time. You don't have to go running, but just being barefoot more often on textures outdoors, if possible. But, you know, I know sometimes that's not possible, so if indoors, you can find things to stand on that are stimulating, that can be a really amazing first step that can complement your transition, as you're trying to get used to this type of footwear. My personal recommendation is if you get one pair of shoes that's minimalist or barefoot-friendly, and you try them out for short periods of time, and then you kind of swap back and forth, and slowly increase the time that you spend in those shoes, then it allows you to sort of feel it out without overdoing it. And for some people, it will be an easier process, and for some people, it will be a longer, more difficult process. And that's okay. But one pair is just sort of a good place to start. You know, don't overwhelm yourself, don't swap everything out, because it might wake up parts of your body that you haven't felt in a while and, you know, you might...

Like, a lot of people have more calf soreness, or their heels feel really sore at the end of the day. Some of those things where they're realizing that the way they were walking before was maybe a little bit heavy, like, heavy on the heels, and things start to sort of come out of the woodwork that you didn't realize were there, because you're no longer wearing those shoes that mask it. And that's okay, but you don't wanna push

through it and overdo it. So, being able to go back to what you're used to is I think a really good way of going about it.

But definitely, the barefoot time and the toe yoga, you know, trying to practice lifting and spreading your toes, massaging at your feet, just sort of getting to know where you're at. You know, you start doing that sort of thing, and then you might realize, oh, gosh, my feet are super, super stiff, and then you start working on it, and then you get immediate benefit... You get really big gains in a short period of time. So, there's a lot that can be done without jumping into it, and you can start to see the effects pretty quickly.

Katie: Yeah, I'm a huge fan of barefoot time, and we don't even wear shoes in our house ever. But I think back to lockdown and when we weren't really going anywhere for months at a time, and actually all of my kids outgrew their shoes, and we didn't even know it because they hadn't worn them in months. But thinking about kids in particular, I feel like babies, in so many ways, just kind of come out of the box with these wonderful mobility and movement patterns naturally, that we sort of train out of them by having them sit too much and all these things we've talked about. But I'm curious if there's any advice for kids, especially moms with little babies, about if we don't ever put them in restrictive shoes, it seems like all of my kids, having never really worn tight toe box shoes have really wide foot spread, and, like, a lot of foot mobility, so they don't have to make that transition. But is that true, do you think, for the most part with little kids, is, like, if we don't inhibit their foot function from an early age, they don't have to go through this transition process that many of us have to as adults to rehab our feet?

Anya: Yes, absolutely. I have seen it with my own kids. And, like you said, most babies are born with feet that are fully capable, and they've got this huge toe splay. You know, their toes fan out. And if they stay barefoot as often as possible, or in unrestrictive shoes, then they never need to transition. And there are some factors that do contribute to it, like sitting, excessive sitting, which is hard to avoid if your kids go to traditional school, which mine do. And that can sort of bring about some foot issues indirectly, even if they are doing everything else right.

But I would say that one of the best things that you can do for their future foot health is never putting them in shoes that bind their toes, and not introducing support unless it's necessary, which, you know, there are some...I have some family members with muscular dystrophy, and they need support. But that blanket, just giving all kids support as soon as they start going to school, if we can scale back on that and make sure that we're choosing our footwear more intentionally, and only giving support if it's actually needed, then we can keep those feet strong and mobile, and it really pays dividends.

My kids are so used to being barefoot that the weather's turned and they're still running outside barefoot. And I'm the one who's like, "Go get shoes on." And they're like, "No, I'm fine." And I'm like, "Okay." You know, I have to sort of, like, turn my mama bear brain off and remind myself, you know, they know their bodies. Their feet have been used to this. They're okay. It's 40 degrees. They're okay. But I'm wearing shoes, which is just so ironic because I'm the one who's always barefoot.

But I love seeing it with my own children, that they hate shoes that are too tight, and they even hate socks that are too tight. They just have gotten so used to it. And as adults, we have a tendency to be like, "Oh, you have to wear the uncomfortable shoes, because we're going to..." whatever. And to now recognize that that instinct that they have, to not want to put something uncomfortable on, is great, and we should honor that. And even as adults, we can honor that. We don't have to stuff our feet into something that we hate.

Katie: Yeah, one of many things we can learn from our children I feel like. And I've had the same experience, where my kids are so used to being barefoot. And luckily, we live in an area where they can be actually barefoot almost the whole year. But the times where we've taken them, like, climbing or skiing, and they have to put on tight footwear, it's almost unbearable to them. They're like, "What is this?" And I'm like, "You know, some people wear this kind of stuff every day, by choice." But that brings us to the idea of I feel like now there are so many great options when it comes to barefoot shoes that didn't, they weren't there 15 years ago, when I first was trying to find this. And in fact, I think back, like, the first few I found were kind of, like, odd-looking shoes, because it wasn't a very mainstream concept yet. There weren't a lot of companies that were actually making more barefoot-friendly shoes. So, if this is new for people listening, what are some of the things you wanna look for when you're trying to find more foot-friendly footwear like this?

Anya: Yes. And even though things have really changed and there are a lot of options, it's still not mainstream. Like, you're not going to see it as one of the options at DSW or at Zappos. I mean, there are FiveFingers. But, you know, it's not like something that is really presented to you as a viable option. So you do have to search out a little bit, and you do have to be more aware and intentional when you shop. So, the main things to think about are foot-shaped, which is asymmetrical. So, you're going to have a shape that mirrors a natural foot. And then flat, which can be deceptive because sometimes the outside looks flat, but you actually want the inside to be flat as well, so that the whole foot is on even ground, and the heel is as high off the ground as the ball of the foot is. And we call that zero drop. So, sometimes brands use that in their marketing, so that you know it's totally flat. Sometimes they don't. But for the most part, brands that are keyed into this concept, they're telling you. They're zero drop, or totally flat. And then the final component would be flexible.

So, being able to bend with your foot, in all directions, ideally, you know, because your foot actually twists. It doesn't just bend at the toes. So, having that mobility in the shoe, so that when you're walking, your foot can do that as well, those are the three components that are my sort of baseline: flat, flexible, foot-shaped.

Katie: And yeah, you're right, I don't think... I haven't seen, like, Nike having a barefoot line, or any of the big brands. But I know that there are some companies that are catering to this type of footwear. And I know you've reviewed probably hundreds or thousands of these by this point. So, are there any that are, in general, brands that are better to start looking at, and/or specific, like, models of shoes that you have found performed best in all your testing?

Anya: So, I shy away from telling people what the one shoe to start with is, because it really varies on the person. And if you're just gonna start out with one, then you should buy a style that you like, and that fits into your life. So, if you don't ever wear athletic sneakers, and you don't like that, then don't get a...you know, don't have that be your first one. You're not gonna enjoy wearing it. So, I have some guides on picking your first pair, and how to transition, that sort of steps, walks you through the things to think about, so that you know where to look for your first pair, whether that's price, which is, you know, a lot of people want to choose something that's cheap the first time, because they're not sure how it's gonna work out for them. If it's location, you need something that is gonna ship from close by, that's easy to return if needed. That's something to think about. And then sole thickness. So, I started out in a pair of Altras, which are not really a barefoot shoe, but they are zero drop, and they have a foot-shaped sole, but they're quite thick.

And where I was, you know, I was going through a lot at the time, and was really weak. That was a good first shoe for me. Some people aren't gonna need that. They're gonna be ready for a thinner shoe to start with, and they can just swap back and forth. So, those are the things that I walk you through to think about. And then I direct you where to go to find a shoe that meets that criteria.

And then, for kids, it's sort of the same thing, where, you know, price is a really big factor for a lot of people, because they don't wanna just dish out, you know, \$75 on a fancy shoe that, you know, you might not end up loving. So, trying out the concept in a way that's not threatening I think is really important. And then you can sort of go from there. And I do have reviews on a whole spread of styles and sole thicknesses and, you know, regions around the world. A lot of them are located in Europe, the ones that are more mainstream-looking, you know, the ones that are less sporty. And so, that can be a challenge for people. That's one of the reasons why I started my shop, actually, was to bring them here. So, we import a lot of European brands, so that they're closer.

So, there's a lot, and it can be overwhelming. So that's why I say, you know, just pick, you know, your top criteria, and then just go with it, and see how it works. And then you can go from there.

Katie: Yeah, and I will definitely link to your website to those guides, and also to your Instagram, because I know I have found from you many types of shoes that I didn't even know were available. Like I said in the beginning, it was, like, sort of there with athletic footwear, in the minimal category, maybe, and, like, FiveFingers. And I'm still a huge fan of shoes like Earth Runners for hiking, and, since I live in a warm climate. But thanks to you, I've also found out, like, you can find now dress-looking shoes that are foot-friendly. And even there's boots now that are foot-friendly, and cute sandals. I feel like there's so many more options. And I know you've been directly involved in getting a lot of those here. The same is true for kids. But it's just amazing to me that we've, now have so many options available, when I think back to how hard it was to find any of them in the beginning.

Anya: Yeah. Things have changed. Fifteen years ago, I mean, that's early days. Vibram FiveFingers and Vivobarefoot was basically all there was back then. So, it has been really fun to see everything that you can find in a natural foot shape, and then a healthier, you know, flexibility and all that.

Katie: And I know we'll probably get questions. I, like you, tend to be just barefoot all the time. But I do occasionally go to, like, fancier events or something, and wear heels. And I know we're gonna get questions from women of, like, "Is there an 80/20 rule that comes into play here? Is it okay to wear other types of footwear sometimes when an occasion presents itself?" And I'm curious of your take on this, because my take has sort of been more of, like, a 90/10 or even smaller percentage, but just that I feel like my feet are strong and healthy. And when I occasionally wanna wear heels for an event, I don't feel like that's harming my feet, when I do it occasionally. But I'm really curious your take, and I know you've done a lot more research on this. So, is there a time and a place to not wear minimal footwear, and to, if your foot's able, wear something that's not functional, but cute?

Anya: Yeah, I think that the foot that's going into the shoe is really the most important thing. And that's something that I have to remind people, because we want the shoe to solve all of our problems. And it doesn't. It's the foot that is...that's the focus. So, if your foot that's going into the heel, or the restrictive shoe for, maybe it's for a sport that you love, if that foot is capable of doing all the things that it needs to, then you're probably gonna be fine for short periods of time in those shoes. So, whether it's 80/20 or 90/10, or whatever works for your life, it's the foot that matters.

So, for me, I am 100% in barefoot shoes. And I can, because I have enough, that, you know, I don't need to be limited because of I only have a few options. I also work from home. I don't go to a lot of fancy places. But when I do... I went to a wedding this spring. I went to a funeral. I've been to things where people might wanna wear heels, and I just don't, and nothing really happens, and it's fine. But that's my choice. And I understand

that somebody else would really want to wear heels on that occasion, or a certain type of footwear that makes them feel a certain way, or that helps them feel like they fit in better.

I think that's okay. And I don't think that there's a specific rule about how to go about it. But it always comes down to the foot. So, if you're gonna wear shoes that might be uncomfortable for a night, maybe after you're done, give them a little extra TLC that day. Make sure you're doing your foot-strengthening exercises the rest of the time, so that you're able to sort of counteract some of those effects. But I would say that someone who has a really strong, functional foot is gonna be more okay occasionally wearing shoes that are really pinchy and with a high heel than someone who has a weak, underdeveloped foot, that they actually might suffer more in that type of footwear than... So, if you're in your process of transitioning, and you're sort of rehabbing, going through... Maybe you've been dealing with some foot pain that you're trying to recover from, maybe be a little more careful at those time. But, again, it's all about dosing, and your life, and making it work for you. Because if you only are wearing barefoot shoes for part of the time, it's still gonna be a lot better for you than none of the time. So I'm still saying that's a win.

Katie: Yeah. That's a good perspective. And I feel like to set expectations for someone who is gonna maybe go through this transition with their feet, how long did that process take for you? How long do you feel like it takes on average? Just so people have realistic expectations going into it.

Anya: Yeah, that's a great question, and that's actually one of the things that I made a note of to talk about was managing expectations, because it does take time for your body to adapt. You know, you've got muscles, you've got ligaments, you've got fascia. And when you put your foot flat, if you're used to wearing heels all the time, which, you know, your running shoes probably have a heel in them, you know, basically, every shoe has a heel in it, besides zero-drop barefoot shoes, then that's gonna take weeks to months, to maybe a year or more.

So, for me, it did take me about a year to completely get rid of my arch support. I think that if I had had “me” back then, you know, if I knew what I knew now, then it would have gone a lot faster. I have more exercises in my arsenal. I have a better understanding of, you know, how much to do it. I was maybe not taking it as serious... I wasn't realizing how impactful it was at the beginning. And I was sort of lazily going about my exercises, but I was the one who really needed them. So, I think that I could maybe do it in six months, if I was, like, my own coach back then. But it's reasonable to expect that it will take time. Weeks to months, for most people.

Katie: Yeah, I think that's really helpful perspective. And like you, there's so many things on my list of if I could go back and tell myself when I was younger. But like you, I'm so glad I now get to share those things, and hopefully, shorten other people's journey in the same way.

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You mentioned foot-strengthening exercises, and you've talked about a couple in particular. I know you write about this as well, and I can link to some of the specifics. But are there, kind of, categories or specific exercises for people to think of when they're starting to implement just a program to get that mobility and strength back in their feet?

Anya: So, a few of the basics that are just really good, no matter where you are in your journey, is the toe yoga, which is both a strengthening and a mobilizing exercise, which is basically just, you plant your foot down, so that the ball of your foot is fully down. So, some people wanna cheat a little bit and lift up parts of the ball of their foot, and sort of move it side to side, but no. Your heel, and the whole ball of your foot is down, and then you try to lift those toes individually, or maybe all up at once, and all down, and you sort of lift them up, press them down, spread them out, reach them. Doing things like that is a really great beginning, but also even advanced exercises, sort of crosses the whole spread, no matter where you are. It's useful.

Another one that I learned from Gait Happens, which is, like, a little group of people who are gait specialists, and they work with people individually, they do something called the foot twist, which I love, because it helps get your foot into an active stance, and sort of helps to feel what it's like. And you place your big toe down first, with your foot twisted in, and then you twist out as you place the rest of your foot down. So, it sort of makes your big toe splayed out, but you're also having this really great contact through the ball of your foot,

through your toes, and through your heel. And that gives you that sensation of groundedness and stability, which we should be feeling when we walk, and which is really hard to feel in stiff shoes.

So, I love those. They seem so simple, but they really wake your foot up, and they really help you feel what you should be feeling when you're moving, and that you might not have been feeling for a long time.

Katie: Yeah, I think of my friend Hunter, who's also been on this podcast, who does what he calls CARS, which is controlled articular rotations of every joint, and I'll link to his video about that in the show notes as well, because I feel like this is...like, the whole body benefits from mobility. But I remember the first time I worked with him and he had me do that, where he's, like, just lift only your big toe, and it was like, my brain was, like, "Ahh, I don't even know how to do this. I've never done this before." And he can even lift each, like, his middle toe, his, like, all these individually. I was like, "Whoa." It blew my mind, and it's been something I've been working toward. I'm curious your take on things like the yoga toe spreaders, and, like, the things that actually kind of manually help spread the toes. Do you think those are beneficial, or are they kind of taking away the body's ability to learn it itself, by forcing it?

Anya: Yeah. That's a great question. So, a toe spacer is technically an orthotic. But I do find them beneficial for a lot of people, because a lot of people are trying to sort of counteract the shoes that have been squishing their toes together. So it's like the opposite. Rather than compressing it together, it sort of coaxes it apart. And it can really help break up dense tissue throughout the whole foot, and spread the toes, and sort of put them back into functional alignment. It can be really helpful with bunions, or plantar fasciitis, those types of things.

I don't think that they're necessarily a requirement for everybody. I have a more lax foot, so I don't need it so much, because my foot is already, you know, pretty able to spread out. I just needed to work on it a little bit, and it was, like, ready to go. So, they definitely have a place. I love wearing Correct Toes while I'm exercising, because it puts your foot into that shape that is optimal for movement, and it's really stabilizing. And so, even though you might have a good toe spread, like, if you think about it, and you decide to spread your toes, you might still be moving with your foot like this, just because we're used to doing that.

So having those toe spacers in, it gets your foot spread out, and it's just more conducive to moving well. So, I love going on a walk or on a run with the toe spacers in, because it's sort of a cool experience to feel what it's like to move with your toes spread out. And that might be new for a lot of people. So, yeah, I do like toe spacers.

Katie: And then, what about as a, like, supplemental, just to help in the transition? What is your take on things like manual therapies, or bodywork to actually help, like, move that fascia some, and help the muscles? Do you think that's beneficial? I know, like, Hunter, for instance, would say, like, "That's not gonna fix the root of your problem. You still wanna address your mobility and your movement." But, like, sometimes those can be helpful for, like, relief, for instance, in the transition process. But what's your take on that?

Anya: Yeah. So, I have done a lot of bodywork over the years. I do see a chiropractor, and I have a lot of fascia release tools at home. And I find them really helpful, because, one, my lifestyle is still... So, I work at a computer, you know. So there are some things where, ideally, I would be doing things differently in a perfect world, but I'm still sort of trying to combine the realities of my lifestyle with what is optimal. And that's gonna mean sometimes I need to roll out my calves. And sometimes, you know, I need to, like, give love to certain parts of my body that are maybe being a little stressed a little more, because, I'm sitting for an hour. You know, I'm sitting right now, for an hour. And maybe, in the perfect world, I wouldn't be doing that, and then I would never need any kind of bodywork.

So, to me, I don't have any strong opinions on it, but I think that if it's a tool available to you, then use it. I love using the foam roller. I use it a little differently than you might find if you searched online. A lot of people roll on the foam roller. And I actually use it for fascia release, where I will find a spot that's a little sore and sticky, and I just stay there. And then I might, like, if it's my quad, then I will raise my lower leg up and down, and sort of move the quad muscle underneath, pinned and between the foam roller. Anyways, I do love fascia release, and I find it really helpful. But I also think that in a perfect world, if you're moving perfectly, then you wouldn't need it. But who lives in a perfect world?

Katie: Yeah, that's good perspective. And similar to you, even days like today, where I have multiple podcasts in a row and I'm standing most of the time, but still just in one spot, I've realized with kids, especially, like, if you can put the things that you want to do in your own way, you're more likely to use them. So, I have all kinds of things on the floor, like stones I can step on, balls of different sizes, different things like wedges I can put my feet up on to stretch my ankles, because I feel like even just that little bit of movement helps me from just getting that fatigue of standing still, which I think also is really illustrative of how that lack of movement can be just as bad as poor movement.

I think of the times when I've recorded for, like, 8 or 10 hours in a day on the tile floor, just standing still, and how my feet were so much more sore than if I had walked for 10 hours. Same thing with standing in this podcast room. So, it's like if you can put those little mobility things in your way, whether it's, like, something by the couch, if you're gonna watch a movie, or, like, we have a climbing hangboard in our kitchen, so the kids just naturally do pull-ups when they walk through that door, whatever it may be, if you can put it in your own way, you're more likely to do it than if it's just kind of out of sight, out of mind.

Anya: Oh, absolutely. And I love that philosophy. I have a, you know, a sensory mat under my feet as well. And I've got stuff all over my house that's both for me and for my kids, that, you see it, you use it, and it's much more effective to have it out there and readily available than if it's tucked away and you can forget about it.

Katie: Absolutely. And I know, like you said, there's so much on your website and your Instagram. And that, like, the brands, obviously are more specific to the person and what they're gonna prefer to wear, but you have so many resources there. So I'm gonna make sure we link to that. Highly encourage you guys listening to check out and follow Anya, she's got a absolute wealth of information on her site and her Instagram. And I know that there's so much more we could go into in this, but I feel like we got such a good primer on not just how to do this, but why it's so important.

And I feel like, for all of us, especially as we age, this seems like a really important thing to keep top of mind, as we know, like, that lack of mobility and lack of strength, in all parts of the body, correlate to shorter lifespan. And that increased mobility, increased strength in all aspects of our body correlates to longevity. So, this is something that benefits us in so many different ways. And as we get close to the end of our time, a couple other questions I love to ask, the first being if there is a book or number of books that have profoundly impacted your life, and if so, what they are and why?

Anya: So, I mentioned the book "Whole Body Barefoot" earlier, which I think has had the most direct impact on my life in a really concrete way, with, you know, changing my direction in terms of foot health, but also sparking what is now my career. I love that book. I recommend it as a first step for anyone who is interested in learning more about the concept. Another book that I really, really love, and it really changed my life, is "The Body Keeps the Score." And it's a little bit more... It's deeper, and not so directly related to feet, but it really changed my whole outlook on how I was dealing with my own body and how I approached other people, and recognizing the emotional-psychological connection. And I just think it's a must-read for everybody.

Katie: I 100% echo your recommendation on that one. That book changed my life as well. I'll link to that in the show notes, as well as to Katy Bowman's book, and to her site. Her work is phenomenal as well. And, you know, she has resources for all types of movement, and how to incorporate it in your house. A big fan of her also. And lastly, if you have any parting advice for the listeners, that could be related to all the things we've talked about, or entirely unrelated?

Anya: So, one piece of advice that I would give is that I wish that everybody could know, that you don't have to be a foot nerd, you don't have to wear only barefoot shoes, or be barefoot all the time in order to benefit from this information. Just paying attention and sort of reorienting yourself towards prioritizing the foot just a little bit more, and paying attention to it, can really drastically improve your quality of life. So, that would be my number one piece of advice is, you know, don't feel overwhelmed. Don't feel like, "Oh, gosh. This is just one more thing that I have to change, or that I have to do better about." It's really an opportunity... Low amount of effort can have big results. And that is what I wish that everybody could know.

Katie: I love it. I think that's a perfect spot to wrap up for today. And thank you so much for sharing your knowledge today and telling us your journey. Like I said, I've followed you for a long time, and it was such a joy to get to chat with you and to learn from you today. Thank you so much for being here.

Anya: Thank you. I really appreciated the opportunity.

Katie: And thanks as always to all of you for listening and sharing your most valuable resources, your time, your energy, and your attention with us today. We're both 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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