



969: Healing vs. Curing: Paying Attention to the  
Nervous System With Dr. Sheila Kilbane

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This podcast is brought to you by LMNT, and this is a company you might've heard me talk about before, and I really love their products because proper hydration leads to better sleep. It sharpens focus, it improves energy, and so much more. But hydration is not about just drinking water because being optimally hydrated, a state called euhydration is about optimizing your body's fluid ratios. And this fluid balance depends on many factors, including the intake and excretion of electrolytes, which many people don't get the right

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Katie: Hello and welcome to the Wellness Mama Podcast. I'm Katie from [wellnessmama.com](https://wellnessmama.com), and I am back today with Dr. Sheila Kilbane to talk about healing versus curing and paying attention to the nervous system when it comes to health. We especially delve into her personal journey with this, how kids resonate with the predominant adult in their household in a nervous system way, and especially kids under seven, and how understanding that we can curate and help our nervous systems and their nervous systems to thrive within our house.

She provides a lot of practical takeaways in this episode. Small and very inexpensive or free habits that you can integrate that make a drastic nervous system different. And Dr. Kilbane is a board certified pediatrician with tremendous experience in this. She runs an integrative pediatric practice in Charlotte, North Carolina and wrote a book "Healthy Kids, Happy Moms: Seven Steps to Heal and Prevent Common Childhood Illnesses".

And in this book, she outlines her exact method that she uses to improve or significantly resolve altogether common recurrent childhood things like eczema, ear infections,

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asthma, allergies, and GI issues and more. And like I said, this episode we go deep specifically on the nervous system side, and she gives some really valuable action steps.

So let's join and learn from Dr Kilbane. Dr. Sheila, welcome back! Thank you for being here again.

Sheila: Thank you. It's always great to be with you.

Katie: Well, we got to have a great episode recently about some very specific ways we can support our kids in optimal health. And in this episode, I would love to broaden the scope a little bit and talk about nervous system health on a more macro level, and especially the nuance between healing versus curing and how the nervous system comes into play here.

And to start, I would love to hear your personal journey with this. What led you to look into this side of things more? And I know that there's going to be a lot of interesting links between parents and children, and we're going to get to delve into both today.

Sheila: Yeah. And thank you. That's such a great question. And I know you and I have spoken about this at conferences and things. And when I first got into Medicine, right? When I was just just out of residency a couple of years, I was pretty miserable and I was stressed and running from room to room. And I had always known I wanted to do medicine.

I wanted to do more of a kind of a wellness, proactive model. I didn't know exactly how to get there. And I think lot of your listeners may understand that same place is you know that you need to change. You may not know exactly what you need or how you can get there. And so that was the place where I was and how that manifested for me was complete fatigue.

I would go home from work and I would be on the couch. I could hardly get off the couch. So I started seeing a really amazing, wonderful functional medicine doctor here in Charlotte. He took tons of blood work and I was taking supplements, right? Morning, afternoon, evening, bedtime. But it had been about three to four weeks.

That was not the solution. That got me back to the place where I felt okay, that then I could make some decisions. I knew I couldn't make a decision from that depleted space. So, once I started feeling better, then I realized, okay, I need to quit my job. I need to, you know, start sorting through how can I start my own practice. And so when I did that, it was one of those things, I quit my job, I took a month off, I did a triathlon, actually in Florida. And then I worked where I could work for a couple of weeks, and then I could block time, and I did a bunch of traveling. And I had also prepared financially, so I was able to do it because I had been saving money. knew I knew I was going to have to take a change. So I was lucky in that regard.

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And then eventually, you know, started up a clinic and I eventually started my own practice in 2012. But then part of starting my own practice, I got back on that busy treadmill. And so then I really had to get deeper into making sure I continue doing my yoga practice, and meditation, and cold plunging. My nervous system out of balance, I get anxious, right? It impacts my GI system. And so doing cold plunging, which we know increases your dopamine level significantly, that was what I needed. Because I can also tend to, it's harder to pay attention for me if I'm in that stress state. So doing all of those things.

And meditation is a game changer, has been a game changer for me. And the thing that changed, I had been to so many meditation workshops, but I took a one on one. I did some one on one sessions with a friend of mine who teaches it. And she said to me, you go to yoga religiously, right? You have to treat meditation that same way. And that was what I needed, right? We take a shower for our bodies, we work out for our bodies, but I had to start doing that for my mind and my emotional space.

Katie: Yeah, I have been on a journey with the meditation side as well, and learning to schedule those kinds of things first in my life. The things that increase capacity and bring more resilience and joy and peace to life. Because that feels like it sort of exponentially increases capacity in other areas versus trying to like squeeze energy out of an already depleted nervous system.

And I've heard you mentioned before to tie in the kid aspect of this, that kids resonate with the predominant adult in the household. And I've also read that, like, especially before age seven, kids, nervous systems are very entrained to the mother, especially, and that that's part of their nervous system development.

But I would love to hear more about how that works and how seemingly this might be the link of as parents, it's actually not at all selfish but very selfless to make sure we're taking care of our own nervous systems because of how profoundly that impacts essentially the entire household.

Sheila: Yeah, absolutely. And the first thing I want to say, I'm going to to read a little bit of it or go over a little bit of a case to give it and use it as an example. But I want to make sure that parents, especially moms understand this is not, we are not creating this in our kids. We're not causing it. What we can do, though, is we can take the situation and see how can we be a part of improving it?

I think that's a... I don't think parents need any more reason to feel guilty about anything. So this particular case that was a huge learning point for me is it was a young boy. He was probably seven or eight when he came to see me. He was a former preemie, he was a 29

week preemie, who weighed 3 pounds at birth. So he had asthma, and he had something called PFAB. So it was a periodic fever, aphthous stomatitis, pharyngitis, cervical adenitis syndrome, which is a lot just to say, he would get fevers about every 4 to 6 weeks, and he would get really painful oral ulcers. He had been to four different specialists.

They've been dealing this with this for a long time. He was missing many, many, a whole lot of school, and he was on several, many courses of antibiotics, steroids. And so when the mom came in to see me, mom was a nurse, and she said to me as we were going through the case, the first time she came in, she came in without him so we could talk freely, and she said, he was one of a twin. And she said, he's my sick one and the other one is my healthy one.

And I didn't say it at that visit, but after I got to know her, I started to talk to her about how can we sort of shift the way that we're even thinking about him? Because we know that our thoughts, we even know, research shows that the way that I am interacting with the patient and the parents impacts the child's immune system. So that's where, right, my first and foremost responsibility is to keep my own nervous system balanced so that I can just hold space for that family.

And so then I started teaching them, we do all the right, I do all the science things, quote unquote science things. We do blood work, we do the medications, I don't stop, right, if we need steroids, if we need albuterol for his asthma, we absolutely use that. But we start to incorporate these other things that we talked about in our previous podcast, Katie. As we talk about a good probiotic, we use a digestive enzyme, omega 3 fats, magnesium, right? Well, the things that we need to while we're working through the nervous system things. So I taught the family how to do, we did some auricular massage, just ear massages that helped calm his system down and helped with the pain of his ulcers.

And I showed them how to do, he was a kiddo who liked bear hugs and liked massages. So mom would start to notice when he would begin to go up, right? When he was starting to get, excited or anxious, and she would give him a big bear hug. And they were reaching, they were less and less reaching for the Tylenol, for the Ibuprofen. And a year after we started seeing them, we also got a really wonderful occupational therapist involved.

He had a lot of sensory issues. So even though he loved school, being in the classroom was triggering for his nervous system. So we made changes in the classroom, changes at home, And then parents started to really do a deeper dive on their relationship. They had great relationship. They were, they were hysterical.

They called me the voodoo doctor, but they, you know, they were coming because they kept coming because he was improving. Dad traveled during the week and so essentially mom was a single parent with three boys. And it was just a lot. And so dad shifted his work schedule so that he was able to be home during the week, and they started to recognize how their stress... How, if they decrease their stress, it could help the whole family system. And we were eventually able to decrease asthma meds a year after we started seeing him. We actually were able to stop some of his asthma medications and we do this in conjunction with a pulmonologist who does pulmonary function test. So I'm, I would never say just stop everything, right?

You want to work with your physician to do these things. But they, and this young boy ended up going, he's in college now and I think he's going to be a physician assistant because it changed so much for him. And mom is a nurse and she has started incorporating, like she would message me every so often and say, Oh my gosh, I had this patient, you know, and this was going on and I stopped and I did a massage with them and I breathed with them and it shifted their whole system and way that they were able to help him.

Katie: That's so fascinating and in your book I know you talk about the difference between healing and curing and that's even in it'll be in the title of this podcast. And I feel like this is an important concept to anchor in, as we talk more about the nervous system as well. But can you kind of define what you mean by that difference and how this frames the way that you approach medicine?

Because I know that you take a really cutting edge holistic view, while like you just said, keeping into account all the things that are needed to support, especially a child, even within conventional medicine, that it's a very complementary approach. But what is the difference between healing and curing in your mind and when it comes to the nervous system?

Sheila: Yes. So this little boy was a great example because we saw huge improvements. He really decreased his asthma medications. He actually had a perfect attendance the following year at school. He still was getting the oral ulcers though, so he would still have these PFAPA flare ups, but he was so much better and they had a much bigger toolbox and a bigger resiliency. Again, so that they weren't having to use some, right, Tylenol and Ibuprofen can be totally fine when used in the right situation, but they take, right, Tylenol is clear through the liver. Ibuprofen is cleared through the kidneys. It can be a little bit hard on your GI tract. So we only want to use those if we absolutely need them.

And it allowed this family to see, okay, there's a much bigger realm that we can look at. And another one of the stories that they told me is that they were... because mom taught all of

their family members and they were out to eat at a big... it was somebody's birthday and you know, the whole family was at a big table. And William was sitting next to his grandfather and it was loud, there was a lot going on.

And his grandfather saw that he was starting to get agitated and his grandfather just reached around pulled him in into a big bear hug and, you know, sort of started talking to him and completely avoided the meltdown that would have ensued if they hadn't understood this. It's also recognizing not only the capacity of kids, but also for us. Like I am somebody I say no a lot to things because my happy place is sitting in the backyard, being barefooted, walking out in the woods.

It's, so when we realize that with ourselves, we can also help parents understand that for kids, like maybe going to an amusement park is fun, but maybe it's only for two hours. And birthday parties, right? Kids have birthday parties all the time. Maybe you only, if you have two in a Saturday, maybe you can go to both, but maybe you just go and stay for 30 minutes at each one of them. And right. So it's, we have to be cognizant of what we're putting in our eyes, our mouth, our ears, and then what we're exposing our nervous systems to. Because that parasympathetic, we want to exist more so in that parasympathetic state than that sympathetic which is right that fight or flight. And it doesn't always mean everything's going to go away, right?

We're not going to be able to cure every asthma. You might have cancer. You might have inflammatory bowel disease. And we're just, we're going to use the best of conventional and integrative medicine, but we're going to work with the nervous system of the individual and of the adults at home to make sure that we're optimizing cellular health and digestion for the kids and for the parents.

Katie: Yeah, I love that this seems like very much a both and, and very complimentary that it's kind of a whole family approach and the parents and the kids together. And you mentioned you say no a lot. This is something I was terrible at for a very long time. I've had nervous system stuff and some past trauma where I've only felt safe if everybody else was happy.

So I would over caretake in a lot of realms and I slowly learn to build the skill of honoring my no and in a very kind way, but honoring that no. And I think there's a big piece for parents in modeling this because it's one thing to like support our kids in it. It's another thing if we can give them an example of it, which also gives them, you know, subconscious permission to do these things as well.



And so I've made a point with my kids of my non negotiables. I go out in the sunshine every morning and drink and hydrate and put my feet on the ground and they can come join me. But I don't let anything interrupt that. Or I'll take a break from work in the middle of the day to go lay in the sunshine or to go for a walk in the sunshine, or to meditate or to do things that increase capacity.

And then I've noticed by doing that, they are more inclined to do that. And I'll find them on the front porch sometimes in the morning getting sunlight without me prompting them. And it's because of that modeling aspect. I would love to delve into any other practical things we can do that really support nervous system regulation for both parents and adults that we can kind of integrate as habits in our lives that will help increase that capacity.

Sheila: Yeah, and you named several of them that are super easy, they're free. Getting outside barefooted and kids love this. And we're, you know, as long as it's safe, right, wherever you are. But that, we absorb millions of negative ions from the earth, right? The best places is a sandy, a wet beach, but grass, you know, dirt anywhere, you know, like painted pavement isn't going to do it. But I will go to a track around near my office and just because I can walk on the inside of the track barefooted. It no matter what the weather is, I will go out in the cold weather. So that's a great way. And we had talked about in our previous podcast about deep breathing, extending the exhalation longer than the inhalation is what activates the parasympathetic nervous system.

So you can use Andrew Weil, who's the guy with the big white beard. He's the one who started the integrative medicine fellowship training that I did. And he talks about a four, seven, eight breathing, right? You inhale for four seconds, you hold it for seven seconds, and then you exhale slowly through your mouth for eight seconds. Do that for two minutes, and you can feel the whole, you can feel the whole room shift. And you'll activate, when you're activating that parasympathetic nervous system also, Katie, right, you know this, you get a shift of blood flow. You get more blood flow to your frontal cortex, which is where you make decisions. Right?

Our kids are going to be able to do their homework, focus better. And you're also going to get a blood flow shift to your gut. So you're going to digest your food better and absorb your nutrients. And we've got that, we all, people have heard about the gut brain connection. When you have one... if you've got your brain and your nervous system in that relaxed state, you're going to get better GI function. And motility absorption of your nutrients.

But the other thing I want to mention for our nervous system is physical activity. Nothing we can do out of a bottle or pay for is going to recreate what physical activity does for our

nervous system. Right. It releases endorphins. It increases our blood flow, and it may, you know, physical activity is going to increase the sympathetic side.

But then as we finish and recover, we're going to have an activation of the parasympathetic side. And sweating, right, is going to help us with detoxification. So watch a kid on a daily basis, and that's what we need to be doing.

Katie: It's so true. When my kids were young I had one day where I decided I was gonna try to move exactly how my two year old moved for the whole day and by like 2 p. m. I was completely and utterly exhausted because they squat and crawl and climb so much. And it was, it really illustrated that for me of like their constant motion and they're built like that, which is awesome.

And I, again, there's so many lessons we can learn from our kids. And anytime there's talk of nervous system regulation and nervous system health, I think about how easy it is in modern society to become kind of detached from like our integration into our nervous system, detached from our bodies. And how we can run on programming that was adopted or patterned when we were young or programming from others versus connecting deeply within ourselves.

So I would love any tips you have for helping break free from that to sort of reconnecting with our bodies and our nervous systems. And since it seems like kids are innately very in tune with their nervous system, how we can as parents support them in maintaining that connection.

Sheila: Yeah, so one of the things that I love and was another big game changer if we're just starting with the adults, is there's something called the five minute journal and it's when we.. Also research shows that when we journal that supports the nervous system. And you write down three things. So I got the five minute journal and then I just do it on my own now.

So it's three things I'm grateful for three things that will make today great. And then you do it at the, you do it in the morning and you do it at the end of the day. I am a night, I'm a night owl. And instead of fighting that now, I just, I do my meditation and I do my writing at night. And then when I wake up, Right.

I do my cold plunge and I get outside. So it's more of a, I kind of get my mind set at night for the day. Right. I'll write about, we're going to have a great podcast. And, and as the kids see you doing that, you give them that. Maybe they have one word or they have one thing so that you were also getting ready for the next day. And thinking through and sending those intentions to what's going to happen the next day.

One of my good friends, Kristen Oliver, she has written a wonderful book, I think it's called The Connected Parent, but she talks about kids feel what we feel, not what we say. Right. And so that's where it's about embodying those things and just even touching your thumb to your finger is going to help bring you into your body. And that's where it takes you back inside so that you're going to be present where we are. And when you think about just stop and take a breath during the day and you realize how your brain may be a completely different space. And it's, I do a lot of hot yoga. So it's sweating is detoxifying but it's, I could be, you know, really riding high and once I get in there and I get settled it's a complete game changer.

Katie: I love that. And I've also read your mentions of wanting to see families belly laughing. And I would love to talk about ways we can curate more joy and playfulness into the healing process. This is another area I think kids are naturally good at and that we can learn from them about, and that as adults, we kind of forget to stop playing. But what are some ways we can bring that back into our lives and especially in connection with our families, nurture that more?

Sheila: Yes. So doing whatever it is you love to do. And whether it's you're playing a game of cards, maybe you're doing, like there is a hysterical game where you do, I can't think of the name of it right now. But you make up different accents. And you have to, you go around the table. Or you are the physical activity kind of things, whether it's volleyball.

I have become one of these people on the pickleball craze. And when you're doing playing those things for some people, it might be just. You know, again, I want it. It doesn't have to be something that's super expensive, but it's something where you forget about everything else, and you're just right there. And encourage kids.

Like, maybe you have a thing where they have to bring a joke to the dinner table every night. And having those times one where you're fostering things that are going to make you laugh because getting the kids used to it, anticipating that laughing and then also doing those games, the sports that you're, right. With pickleball, we laugh so hard on the court because there's always, there just something is always happening.

And when you're setting the stage for that, having fun, right. Cause you can't, you can't just say, all right, we're going to sit down and have fun now. It's something that you want to keep building and creating the atmosphere so that those are the times that you're going to have it. Right. The times that you're going to just be sitting. And if kids see parents laughing and joking and having fun, that's always going to be the biggest thing that's going to encourage the kids to do that.

Katie: Yeah, and I love how the theme of this conversation goes back to largely free tools. That it's simply the matter of making the habit around or integrating into our lives or understanding the importance of so that we schedule them or prioritize them and not let them get pushed out of our schedules. And some of the key takeaways I've picked up from this are things like that I joke that I'm solar powered, but really it's humans. We kind of are solar powered.

And I say like modern humans kind of have nature deficit disorder. And to the degree that we can reintegrate ourselves into nature into natural light into walking outside and getting fresh air like that's a tremendous free tool that is at our fingertips at any time.

It also seems like a theme is small habits that can make a big difference. These are not like two hour a day practices. These are five minute things that we can integrate that can really drastically shift the nervous system. And as you've explained, when we support the nervous system, we support literally everything.

I know I was an example of this having been, I was in for sure sympathetic nervous system dominance for a decade and was trying all the physical health things and had spreadsheets of supplements and it wasn't until I addressed the nervous system that all of those things started working. And you also talked about how nothing replaces activity and movement and how important that is for us as humans.

With so many practical takeaways. I know you have tremendous resources available for people to keep learning about this, but if people could only take away one key insight from this conversation. What would you hope it would be or where would you encourage them to start?

Sheila: Well, I, there is a, a psychologist, psychotherapist. She's a Belgian psychotherapist, Esther Perel. And she, I love her quote, the quality of our relationships determines the quality of our lives. Right. And I feel like what I do in my day to day practice is, right, it's, we're going to talk about nutrition.

We're going to talk about supplements, but the goal in all of that is more belly laughs. And if we, right, you can be sitting and meditating, which is great. We want to do that because usually you're enhancing your relationships. But if that also means cutting out certain relationships, keep that in mind.

And we just because we want to foster these good relationships that enhance our lives and make us feel better and kind of put away because it's almost like the Michelangelo. Right. They said that like the David Michelangelo, there was the rock and David was in there. He had to take away the rest of it.

So I think for a lot of us, it's taking away what we don't need. And the essence has always been there, we just have to let it come out.

Katie: I love that and where can people find you and keep learning from you and or if parents want to work with you directly with their children, is that still possible? Are you taking new patients and how can they find that information?

Sheila: Yeah, absolutely. So our website, we do have a brick and mortar practice in Charlotte, North Carolina. And my website is [SheilaKilbane.com](http://SheilaKilbane.com) and there's a link, you go into the private practice and you can schedule a call with our wonderful patient care coordinator. And she can kind of talk you through what that process looks like.

And I have a book, it's called Healthy Kids, Happy Moms, Seven Steps to Heal and Prevent Common Childhood Illnesses. And we have a lot of great resources online. We've got some great downloads that you can download for free and kind of look at the process of what we use in our practice.

Katie: Awesome. Well, I will put all of those links in the show notes for any of you listening on the go. Those will all be at [wellnessmama.com](http://wellnessmama.com). Dr. Sheila, you are a wealth of information and an absolute joy. So fun to talk to, and I'm always grateful for our conversations and especially for your time. I know that you help so many people and you have many requests for your time. I'm honored that you chose to spend it with me today. Thank you so much for being here.

Sheila: Oh, Katie, thank you. I, you do incredible work and I so appreciate you.

Katie: And thank you as always for 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.