



## 975: Teen Mental Health: Why We Need To Rethink Our Approach With Leigh Schoener

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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

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Katie: Hello and welcome to the Wellness Mama Podcast. I'm Katie from [wellnessmama.com](https://wellnessmama.com). And this episode goes into the topic of teen mental health and where we may need to rethink our approach. This was a wide ranging and very helpful discussion with Leigh Schoener, who is a mom and quite the expert through personal experience in a lot of the topics we talk about.

She's a former elementary school teacher with a longstanding passion for holistic health and wellness, and the creator of Leigh Deborah Wellness, which is an integrative nutrition program that works with people all over the world. She specializes in supporting families with teens and young adults and navigating all that comes with this and in this. And in this episode in particular, we talk about the multifaceted strategies that come into play with

supporting teens in their mental health. Including some mindset shifts, nutritional and supplemental interventions, lifestyle factors, and much more. Let's jump in.

Leigh, welcome. Thank you so much for being here.

Leigh: Thank you for having me, Katie. I am so excited to be here. I've been listening to you since you started your podcast, and my kids were little, so thank you so much. It's an honor.

Katie: Well, it's a joy to have you here and we're gonna get to talk about a couple of really important topics, and I'm super excited for your insight on these. And in our first episode, we're really gonna dive into the topic of teen mental health and maybe some parts of our approach we need to rethink. Even kind of from a first principles perspective of the way we even think about mental health.

And I know this is a broad topic and very nuanced, and there's a lot of directions we will go in this conversation. But to start off broad, can you maybe walk us through what you see as what's going on with this sort of like epidemic of mental health problems we're hearing about in teens? And maybe even, are there any assumptions or things related to that that we need to like challenge and understand before we get to solutions?

Leigh: Yes, well in general that age group we know has a lot of stress, anxiety, overwhelm. They're going through a lot hormonally. But I've, as we have seen through the years, it's become more and more so, and more of an epidemic.

So since the pandemic, we know that it's gotten worse. So teens, I have a little theory too is that in the stage of teen hood they have so much expectation on them. They are going through a lot, hormonally, emotionally, physically, a lot of changes, learning about themselves, learning socially. Also how to just get along in the world. And what I have observed just through my own children and through, of course their friends and just through the world and working with teens, is that the pressure just becomes so much that it's almost like they don't get to show up as themselves.

They're almost taught to not feel certain emotions, that then get suppressed. So kind of that they're taught more to only feel the happy emotions and the good emotions. And the minute that they're feeling something else, they think something is wrong. So if they're feeling overwhelmed or they're feeling scared or they're feeling down or frustrated and mad society has kind of taught teenagers, even other people, that that's not okay to feel.

And through working with teenagers and even just having my own philosophy and letting my daughters know that it is okay to feel. I think it's amazing what can happen when we give teenagers and young adults permission to be able to feel their emotions and to be able to decide what to do with those. Learn tools and skills, to have for life, to be able to cope with

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those emotions and work through those emotions, rather than just suppress 'em and be told that they're bad to feel and that's not okay to feel that way.

And if we take it one step further. I really do feel in our country that we've gone through, we've gone to a quick fix, a pill for the ill. And that's not to say that medication doesn't serve a purpose in certain situations, but overall we are overmedicating. Overmedicating in many ways, but definitely in this realm of mental health with teenagers. And so I think it is just my passion, my desire is to impact and inspire families and educate families that it is important for life to teach our teenagers and young adults to be able to feel their emotions and how to cope with that. And that it's okay and for them to see us adults doing that as well.

Katie: Yeah, I think that's such a key and truly, like you said, this applies to all ages, but it seems to really kind of be in a pressure cooker, especially for teenagers with all those things. And I remember those years and how internally volatile they could feel at times. And I think of that phrase that exists probably in a lot of different cultures, but along the lines of what you resist persists. And if we're having them internalize this message of not feeling certain feelings, I learned, at least in my own life, that only works for so long.

I was able to kind of suppress emotions for a solid decade and I got to live in entirely sympathetic nervous system dominance that entire time. And then eventually I got to face those feelings and feel them, which is actually how they can move through us and not hold on forever.

But that was a lesson I didn't learn until I was an adult. So I love that you're taking the approach of how do we actually help our children build a solid foundation around this? Which I would guess, like you said, a big part of that is doing that ourselves and modeling it. Because at least with my teenagers, it seems like they might not always pay attention to what we say.

They sometimes pay attention to what we do and hopefully something in that energy actually sticks. And it seems like also it's so easy, especially at that age where you're in the kind of identity formation phase and you're trying to understand who you are and how you exist in the world. If there's a struggle to like have that become part of your identity.

So I saw this in my life when I said would say like, I have Hashimoto's or I am sick. And I learned to shift away from that 'cause that's not my identity, but I could see teens kind of internalizing I am depressed or I am anxious. And that becoming part of their story. So this seems like a, you know, big and kind of far reaching thing and probably not one that has a simple overnight solution.

But what are some of the factors that are kind of great starting points with teenagers or some practical ways we can build that conversation with them?

Leigh: Absolutely. And what you said is so true about how it does become part of their identity when they are taught to say I have, or I am. And that is something I work with people that I coach and, and also my own daughters is to rephrase that. And it's, I feel this and I get to do, and we'll talk about what, to be able to help cope with that. And that it's okay to feel this way and I am not all of those things.

Those make up part of who I am and maybe in the moment they're making up part of my personality, but that we get to grow from that. We get to learn from it. We don't have to suppress it. And I like what you said too about how you went through your own journey. 'cause I did as well. And it was really when I started to learn about the power of our thoughts that I kind of peddled backwards into my own life.

And then I was able to equip hopefully my daughters with better skills to not have to be, you know, 38 years old and just figuring that out. And so part of it is emotionally based teaching kids. It's really an integrative approach. So you have a lot of people think about with health and wellness, you have nutrition, you have exercise, you have mindfulness, all different aspects of what makes up health and wellness.

But one of the most important aspects is our thoughts. And teaching, educating parents and the child and, you know, or if it's a young adult, about the power of our thoughts and that our brain and gut are connected. In our gut we house a lot of hormones. A lot of people don't think about that in our gut. We have, we produce our serotonin, we have our 80 to 90% of our immune system in our gut. And it connects to the brain through the vagus nerve and also other organs.

And so when we teach kids that, when I do a lot of visualization, connecting the brain to the gut, and how our emotions can play a role in our health and wellness, it really becomes empowering to them.

They almost feel from when I'm working with them like a weight is lifted off them. That I get to feel, I have permission of how I feel. And when they learn that their thoughts also control what their, how their body shows up. And like I said, I do a lot of visualization work. It also allows them to embrace their emotions and learn to express emotions, even how to name them. How to name the emotions without labeling themselves as whatever it is that they've kind of been labeled with.

So if you have a teenager who tends to have anxious tendencies and their body is reacting to that and their thoughts are reacting to that, we can teach them that it's okay to have the

anxious tendencies. We wanna identify that. You want to even name that and then decide do, how does that feel?

We wanna teach kids to feel their emotions also, not just express them. So to name them and feel them, that it's okay to feel it. And even if it lasts for a little bit, it doesn't even have to be just for a moment. And then we get to decide. Do you wanna stay there? Do you wanna stay in that feeling or do you want to change that?

Do you want to evolve and grow from that? And maybe in the moment they're feeling like, well, this is where I wanna be. It actually feels a little comfortable. So we give them tools to be able to manage that. And if they want to be able to evolve and grow, then we give them tools to be able to do that. But when a teenager gets permission to feel their emotions, it's just like a weight is lifted off of them. Instead of feeling like they have to show up in this box and show up, you know, just happy all the time and joyful all the time and feeling good all the time. And so when we teach them that, they'd be able to be able to move forward and give them the skills to be able to do that, which we could talk about as well.

Katie: Yeah, I love that. And it seems like especially relevant for teens and also for parents with young kids, something we can integrate when they're very, very little. Like that was something I've learned with my kids as they've grown, is not to name their emotions for them and not to kind of gloss over their emotions.

So not just say like, it's okay, or you'll be fine. And or not to say like, this must be what you're feeling, but to get curious around it and ask them and then to have space for them to feel that feeling. Because often, especially in little kids, it seems like they pass very quickly when they don't resist them.

And that if we can stay kind of in that calm nervous system state to be that space for them, they get to have the experience of processing it. And I know that gets a little bit more difficult with teenagers. I also love that you talked about the brain and gut connection. I love that in general we're talking more about gut health as a society, but it seems like especially for teenagers, because of all the hormones, this can be something where it can be a little volatile and some extra support can be really helpful.

And I'd be curious, any strategies you find yourself using often with teenagers? Are there nutritional strategies that are helpful? Supplements that are often beneficial in the teenage years? I know I'm always encouraging my kids to also just get sunshine and get outside, make sure they're hydrated and getting basic nutrients.

Because they also respond so quickly to everything. But what are your common strategies for supporting the gut side? Because it does seem like for teens that one can have a really high ROI.

Leigh: Oh yes, definitely. And I'm so glad you asked that because I'm so passionate about educating and empowering teens about this gut brain connection. And I think education is really important. Like I said before, doing a lot of visualization and getting them to see that connection. That alone is a big piece of it. Not just giving them the skills and the action plans, but educating them to understand what is actually happening in their body. And so once they have that understanding, there's different, that integrative approach, the nutrition, exercise, mindfulness, it all affects our gut. So teaching that to them as well, not just the nutrition.

Nutrition wise I teach them about how the processed food industry has kind of taken over and how that has impacted health overall, especially for teenagers. Because teenagers are one of those biggest markets for processed food. And we talk about sugars, we talk about ingredients. I teach kids to learn to read labels on different food products. I also teach them that the difference between a whole clean food and what we were really meant to eat, you know, way back in the day, meant to eat naturally. So I teach them the difference between whole clean foods versus what I call a food product. So a product that is made in a factory and it might have some food ingredients in it.

But I teach them about what other ingredients in that could be impacting your health and wellness, and also more extreme health and wellness, more extreme conditions, more serious conditions that can happen. So about inflammation in the body and again, the gut brain and how these foods and ingredients can impact our endocrine system, our hormones. And so it's a lot of education. And then teaching them about making the choices of eating whole clean foods and giving them recipes, even going to the grocery store and really hands-on, I think is really important.

I always encourage parents to get the kids in the kitchen. Kids are more apt to eat what you are cooking if they're involved. And they become more connected to real food and what it does to their body. And then going back to emotions, talking about, and getting them to really be in the moment and see how it feels when we're eating real clean foods. Eating the rainbow, eating for energy, eating for emotions. Versus loading up and depending on more of these processed boxed foods.

With that said, I do think in reality that it is here and we do want to teach our kids how it feels when we're eating all those other foods. But we also, same thing that we were talking



about with emotions, we don't wanna suppress it because it is here. I mean ideally, I wish that we lived in a society that didn't have all these, crappy foods, but it is here.

So if a kid is taught to never touch this and never eat this, and, you know, it's horrible. And then that's going to affect them too. That's gonna cause a lot of stress and anxiety in itself. It's also gonna cause bad relationships with food. And we, we definitely don't wanna go there.

We wanna teach healthy relationships with food. So I think it also comes down to choices. And again, getting kids to realize on their own, through the education and through this visualization work, how the foods make them feel. Because eventually they're gonna make those choices on their own. So even as someone that's been in the health field for a very long time and just very aware of natural health and wellness. I always had the cookies and different things in the pantry. And, but I just, you know, kind of just taught my kids to really feel their feels and feel how they're feeling when they're eating the food and not like overly because that becomes stressful. But if they say, oh, my stomach hurts, then I'll say, oh, what'd you eat?

And then they'll say what they ate and then they make their own connection, rather than just never having it in the house. And then that's the kid that goes to the party and totally over does it and gets very sick or goes off to college and then it's just a free for all. And, you know, that's when they're on their own and it could get even worse.

So if we can kind of teach them early, set them up for when they're going on their own into young adulthood, it's really gonna be empowering for them. So that's a little bit of the nutrition piece of it.

Katie: Yeah. And I think that even the mindset piece around that is so important. And then, like you said, not attaching morality to food or to emotions or setting up them as being more appealing simply by nature of them being forbidden. It seems like the human psyche has, and I've shared this before, but I had that experience in the realm of, I always wanted to get my ears pierced when I was little and I wasn't allowed to.

And then I was finally able to get my first piercing when I was 13, and my mom said absolutely no more. And so then when I was 18, I had all the piercings in my ears and eventually I had to realize on my own like, oh, these actually are uncomfortable to sleep on they're work to take care of. I didn't want these, they were only exciting because I couldn't have them.

So I've tried to be aware of that with my kids and not assigning morality or good or bad to food, but really more like how do we tune in. And for adults too, how do we tune in to how

we feel? How do we most nourish our body versus coming from a mindset of restriction. How do we learn to hear the signals of our body at a young age?

I think that's a tremendous benefit that I, again, had to learn as an adult. And I also love what you said about honoring their autonomy in that and realizing the benefit of if they can insource those decisions versus, coming from us externally, that's gonna be so much more powerful long term because it's their own intrinsic motivation.

And I think any parent knows we can't actually force them to do anything, especially teenagers. But even a 2-year-old, you can't truly force them to eat something if they don't want to. And so, like you said, one day they're gonna have this decision entirely on their own. So how can we help them build that at a younger and younger age and trust them as they learn that wisdom to honor their own bodies?

And I think that's, even that mindset shift alone, I bet is such a paradigm shift for a lot of teenagers who then get to like, feel their own responsibility for that and feel ownership for it. Versus it being something that's like a energetic battle that maybe is even unspoken.

Yes, very much so. I think, it's all about empowering the teenagers. This is the age where they want to start moving away from depending on the parental decisions, and they want to feel independent. And if we can empower them around health and wellness to feel that, that's going to help them later in life.

And that's why I do feel in this kind of age group of this, you know, tween to kind of 22, right when, before they graduate college, it's kind of this lost group of kids who society just kind of blows it off a little bit. Just kinda like, oh, they're teenagers. That's why they're having a tantrum or whatever, just kind of, or stressed, and they're just overwhelmed.

Oh, they're teenagers, so it's hormones. They're supposed to feel that way. And it's just, that's not true. I mean, if they're taught, that becomes their message. If it, if we keep saying, oh, it's hormones, oh, you're a teenager, like we said earlier in the conversation. But if we're empowering them to be able to have their own decision making and their own identity and being in tune with their bodies and understand what is really happening in their bodies, then they're gonna be more apt to be able to have these tools to be able to go off into the real world.

And not wait until they're an adult and say, oh, if only I would've had this, then. It just, it gives them that sense of independence to be able to do that. And I feel that way with all of the aspects of integrative health, not just nutrition. It all goes together.

Katie: Yeah, absolutely. And I think that's also, as parents, it can be a tough thing because when we have teens, they were once our babies and we once provided everything for them.

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But I remind myself it's psychologically appropriate that they're wanting to individuate in that age and that they're preparing for that jump into adulthood. And it's, like it's a very healthy psychological stage for them to go through, even though I might miss the baby age and the cuddliness of the little ones. And so how can I be their partner in that versus a force that they're pushing against in that process? And I'm curious also, I know I talk a lot about lifestyle factors and even things like exposure to nature, certain supplements that can be helpful.

In my teens it seems like, especially like magnesium's a big one and certain B vitamins have been helpful to them. But I'm curious if there are any kind of recurring themes that come up with teenagers that are like a little extra nutritional support can be helpful?

Leigh: Yes, definitely. So before we get to the nutrition, I like what you said too about sunlight. I, the other thing I teach and educate on is just our natural circadian rhythm. I feel like that's just a term that nobody really understands. When I tell parents, they're like, what? And so teaching that and how our body naturally just thrives on natural sunlight. And we are so exposed to artificial light through all of our devices, computers, phones, everything.

And so teaching the importance of getting natural sunlight to be able to help with stress, overwhelm, chronic health conditions, is just such... first of all, it costs nothing. It's always here. And when we say natural sunlight, that can even mean on, it's natural light. So even on a cloudy day, just stepping outside early in the morning before you go to school. Taking five extra minutes to be able to do that can really change the whole trajectory of the day. Instead of sitting on their phones for, while they're waiting for the school bus or something. But just being outside, getting that light.

And then after school, giving kids permission to be able to not come home and do their homework right away. Because we know homework now is mostly done on the computer. So then we're going from all the artificial light in the school building to then coming home and sitting in front of a computer. But giving kids permission to take a break, get outside just like we did way back in the day. Get outside and play, go hang out with your friends and get that light, get the movement, get your blood flowing. That's just so, so important.

In terms of supplements. Yes. So I always encourage, parents to get a baseline of blood work. I remember when I started getting blood work and my kids, you know, probably like tween age maybe 11, 12. I remember the pediatrician kind of looked at me like I had 10 heads.

And of course then my daughters were a little bit like, she's the crazy one who wants to get blood work. And of course they don't wanna do it. But I think it's so important to have a baseline. It always amazes me that in pediatric, they don't really do gut health testing and blood work to get a baseline. And if we have that baseline and then they're getting into teenhood and we're testing just once a year, just some basic blood work, then we know individualistically what your child needs. Unfortunately, we would love to believe that in today's society, that we can get it all through food, right

That we can get all of our nutrients through food. But unfortunately in today's society, our soil is so depleted of nutrients. And also by the time even whole clean foods get to our refrigerators or our fruit bowls, and by the time it's kind of gone through getting from where it's grown to us, it's also lost a lot of its nutrients. And like we talked about also, teenagers are depending a lot on products.

And so many kids are deficient in some of the top things like vitamin D, because they're not outside as much, and magnesium. And so I do encourage, again, making sure doing the check because everyone is an individual. But most people today are deficient in those two top very, very important vitamins and minerals. And then testing everything else and then supplementing appropriately. And also making sure that you're using a good high quality product to supplement as well. And we don't want to over supplement either.

We don't wanna, just again, be encouraging taking a pill for everything, even if it's a supplement. So just kind of choosing what's really important and teaching the teenager why it's important. In terms of food, it's really important to teach about the different food groups, different, protein, fruit, vegetables, healthy fats, healthy carbohydrates. Teaching the difference between carbohydrates that just kind of turn into sugar.

So more of our sugary foods that are out there and really having a well-rounded meal especially for breakfast. A lot of kids do not get good nutrients in the morning. They're eating quick kind of bagels, waffles, pancakes, things that really just, once they're in the body, they just turn to sugar and then they can negatively impact a child's whole entire day.

Now, I'm not gonna say here that don't have pancakes, don't have waffles because, you know, they're good and kids love them. But there's different ways that you can make it more healthy. First of all, you can get, you can look for brands that again, you're looking at ingredients that are low on ingredients. So there's different brands out there that I like to recommend. Really making pancake batter is not that hard to make yourself. So getting some flour, a banana, a little bit of vanilla, mixing it up and making some pancakes. You can even prep them and then keep them in the freezer. The kids can make it themselves.

That's another big thing is empowering kids to make their own food. But, that first meal is so important. I have worked with kids that the very first thing I'll ask them, well, kids that have processing or focus issues at school, teachers are concerned about their behavior. And, you know, they've gone through with the pediatrician.

They're kind of at a loss. They don't know what's happening. And then I'm the first one to ask them, well, what are they eating for breakfast? And when they start saying, oh, a quick bagel, or a muffin from the bakery, or croissant from the bakery. And then we start looking, okay, what are they eating for lunch?

And then it's some more food that isn't wholesome. And then we have a kid who's struggling, but we're not connecting nutrition to that. And so once I'm able to educate a parent on what nutrition is, how it's impacting their gut health and then impacting their brain health and then impacting their physical health and emotional health, it's just like an aha moment to these parents.

And they, they feel empowered then like, oh my gosh, I get to really help my child through using nature and through using nutrition and lifestyle. And it just becomes incredible. And especially to the, whether it's a child or teenager as well. And then we get them set up and we don't, like I said, we're not gonna just take everything away from them. We're gonna teach the family how to have these foods in a more healthy way to be able to support them, and their bodies.

Katie: Yeah. So many good tips within that. And I know we have like flown through half an hour so quickly, and I know there's so many, so much more we could cover in this episode or future episodes, but anything I didn't ask you that you feel like is especially relevant that you wanna make sure we add in before we wrap this episode up?

Leigh: I think just my message to parents, because I know it's moms who are gonna be listening, is to take a step back, take a pause within yourself as well, and really listen to your child. I think that teenagers just don't feel heard. And encourage them to feel their emotions. And then from there, learning to take some of the things that I explain.

I know a half hour is so short and I don't get, I didn't get to explain everything, but take some of these nutritional aspects and the other lifestyle aspects like we talked about with nature and exercise and mindfulness and feel empowered yourself as a mom. That it's okay to not necessarily feel like you have to go to the quick fix. And that there really are people out there to support you and educate you. Wellness Mama is one of the best resources that there is.

And people like me who are there to help support you and to be able, it might take a little longer, but at the end of the day, your child is going to flourish and be able to be in tune with their own bodies and their own wellness. So that when they do go off to college, you feel empowered to be able to send them off with these tools and skills that are gonna last a lifetime.

Katie: I love that, and I'll make sure we have links in the show notes. I know you have resources around this specifically for parents, and I'll link to them there, but can you let parents know what you have so people can find that in the show notes?

Leigh: Sure. Absolutely. So I have put together a guide, especially for your audience, Katie. It is a health and wellness guide. And in the guide I give simple, actionable tips to take on the main aspects of health and wellness, the integrative approach. So nutrition, exercise, mindset. I do talk a little bit about reducing toxic loads.

So using things like essential oils, taking out candles from the homes, things like that. So very simple actionable steps that you can do together with your teenager right away. And I always say when you get the guide, it does have a lot in it, but pick two or three things to work on. Habits are meant to be stacked together and to be understood, so understood educationally, but understood in how it helps the body.

And I encourage the whole family. We're talking about teenagers, but really it's about the whole family getting in on these simple, actionable steps and doing it together.

Katie: Amazing. Well, I will link to that in the show notes at [wellnessmama.com](https://wellnessmama.com) for all of you listening on the go. And also stay tuned because we're gonna get to do a second episode that goes deep on holistic healing and the topic of POTS. But for today, Leigh, thank you so much for your time. This was such a helpful episode.

Hopefully gave parents a lot of tools that can really support their teenagers. I'm very grateful for your time. Thank you so much.

Leigh: Thank you so much, Katie. It's just been an honor to be here and like I said, I've been listening to you for many years, so I'm excited to just be part of your community. You have an amazing community.

Katie: Well, thank you and thank you as always for listening, and I hope you will join me again on the next episode of the Wellness Mama Podcast.