



## **EUDAEMONIA** **Nutrition, with Dr Nicole Avena**

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Kim Forrester 0:00

If we want to enjoy an alert mind and a flourishing soul, we must also ensure we are properly nourishing and nurturing our bodies. I'm Kim Forrester, you're listening to the Eudaemonia podcast and, today, it's time for a conversation about nutrition.

Intro 0:20

Welcome to Eudaemonia, the podcast that is all about flourishing. Plug in, relax and get ready for the goodness as we explore the traits and practices that can help you thrive in life ... with your host Kim Forrester.

Kim Forrester 0:39

Dr. Nicola Avena is a research neuroscientist and a pioneer in the field of food addiction, whose seminal research work jump-started a new field of exploration in medicine and nutrition. Nicole is the author of several powerful books, including *Why Diets Fail*, and her brand new title is *What to Eat When You Want to Get Pregnant*. It's my delight to be discussing the topic of nutrition with Nicole today, to learn how we can best nourish our bodies, boost our brains and supercharge our sense of health and well being. Nicola Avena, welcome to the Eudaemonia podcast. It's just wonderful to have you here with me today.

Nicole Avena 1:22

Oh, thank you so much. I'm so happy to be here.

Kim Forrester 1:25

Nicole, I wanted to be really careful about approaching this specific topic because, from my observation, the whole concept of nutrition and diet can trigger feelings of self judgement, self loathing, self recrimination, guilt, blame, and other really, really unhelpful emotions. I'd love for our conversation to sort of transcend all of that stuff. So my first question to you is, in your view, what does a healthy, self loving, self nourishing approach to nutrition look like?

Nicole Avena 2:06

Well, I'm so glad that you said that because I completely agree that, when we start to talk about nutrition, the first thing that people often go to is self blame and blaming themselves for not eating the right way, or not, you know, following the right type of diet. And I think that, you know, it really boils down to people just understanding that this is a journey. And that if you're making baby steps in the right direction, and you're going in the right direction, that's really all that matters. And so when I talk about nutrition and health, and how people can improve their lives and their wellness via nutrition, it's really all about helping people to utilise the tools that are out there, so they can improve

their health, and leave all that in the past. Leave the blame and shame and self doubt somewhere else. Because there's really no place for that we're talking about improving your health and your wellness; not dwelling on things that are going to keep bringing you down.

Kim Forrester 3:10

You are both a neuroscientist and a nutritionist. I think that's a really powerful combination. What would you most like my listeners to know, or to understand, about the link between our brain and our diet?

Nicole Avena 3:26

Well, the combination of nutrition and neuroscience is something that kind of just fell together for me. I, you know, have a PhD in neuroscience. And I was so interested in nutrition and health and how that had an impact on our brain and how our brain conversely had an impact on the way in which we make decisions about what we eat. And I think that the one takeaway that I would love for people to know, out of all the things that are out there regarding nutrition and our brain health, is that we need to really understand that the modern food environment that we live in is designed to make us overeat. It's designed to have foods in it that, unfortunately, are activating our brain systems in ways that are like addictive substances, in many cases. And so we really do need to be mindful and sceptical in some cases of the different food products that are out there. We have so much processed food in our diet these days. And it affects our brain extremely differently than other types of foods that we traditionally eat, like fruits and vegetables and lean proteins.

Kim Forrester 4:44

I think that's really powerful for my listeners to understand. From reading through your work and reading through your books, I came to understand that we think that our dietary choices are, sort of, our own free will. But by injecting this idea of neuroscience - by injecting this idea of the brain and how certain foods can actually become addictive - do you feel that it kind of gives an extra depth to the choices that we make when we are eating? Can people sort of learn to understand that sometimes there are really powerful neurological and biological forces working against them?

Nicole Avena 5:24

Absolutely. And I think that's one of the takeaways that we're getting from the research that we conduct in my laboratory, is that we are seeing that when people eat the processed foods and the foods that are commonplace these days, that it's activating the brain in a way that looks just like what happens when someone is using a drug of abuse - like alcohol, or morphine, or heroin. And that is the telling, I think, example of how we can be pulled into consuming these foods. Just like people can be pulled into consuming these addictive substances. And so I think it's important that people are mindful that when we overeat these foods that are highly processed, that are rich in added sugars, that it's activating the brain, releasing dopamine, releasing these other neural chemicals that are going to cause these addiction-like changes in the brain. And that's also going to result in changes in the way in which we behave.

Kim Forrester 6:25

Wow. It's just fascinating. Before we go further into this idea of food addiction and how it is affecting us, and the way that we think, and the choices that we make, let's compare the modern diet with the diet of previous generations. I guess there is a pervasive idea that previous generations ate much healthier than we do now. But I think we also have to accept the fact that previous generations also died much earlier than we do and, generally, we're a little unhealthier than we are. Is it true, Nicole? Did humans ever truly eat well; eat nutritionally? Or is that just a myth?

Nicole Avena 7:05

Well, I think you're right in that there are a variety of factors that have contributed to our health. And in previous generations, where we didn't have the, you know, advancement in a variety of different medical practices, or even sanitary practices, that we were seeing people not being extremely healthy, or dying of other things that are not nutrition related, or dying at a younger age. And I think that nutrition is certainly always played a role in our health, and it's evolved as we've evolved. And what we do know from our history is that, people who are our ancestors - you know, we evolved from hunters and gatherers - and so we evolved to eat a diet that was essentially something we had to work hard to get. We had to look for a berry bush and find it in the wilderness, and we had to hunt an animal, maybe chase it for miles before we would get it. And our meals were few and far between; we didn't know when we were going to get our next meal. But if you flash forward to modern times, we are in a situation now where, fortunately, food is abundant. And we've also implemented a variety of different processes to make sure that the food can stay abundant. So we have preservatives, we have refrigeration, we're able to make sure that we have relatively easy access for most people, to food. But that comes at a cost. And I think the cost of that is that the quality of the food is different. We're talking about many man-made foods; these are processed foods that were created in a laboratory. They're designed to be shelf stable, so they can stay in the grocery store for a couple of months, if they have to, before somebody purchases them. And these foods tend to lack nutrient density, meaning that they're not really that good for us. Essentially, they don't contain the vitamins and minerals that we need. And I think that's something that's important for people to consider when we're making decisions about what we're going to eat, what a healthy diet looks like. And whether we've ever had one, I think is something that is a question that we don't have the answer to. But I think, right now, we certainly are in a situation where our diet is not meeting all the criteria for health and, if anything, it's putting people at risk for other types of diseases and conditions.

Kim Forrester 9:33

Your work focuses a lot on sugar addiction. But Nicole, I don't have what we'd call a sweet tooth. Right? I tend to crave savoury things - potato chips in particular. Does this mean that I'm immune to a sugar addiction?

Nicole Avena 9:50

You are probably not immune. I think that none of us are essentially immune to this, I think partly because we have this society that puts sugar in everything. I mean, it's funny, one of the little things that we do for fun in my laboratory is, the students and I'll try to come up with the most ridiculous place where we found sugar. Because it's in so many of the food products that we consume. I mean, you could go fry up some bacon and there's sugar in it. And there's sugar in many of the condiments that we use. It's just really pervasive. And in many of products that we consume, even

though we don't necessarily seek out sugar. So I often refer to it as secondhand sugar in the sense that, you might not even want sugar, but you could be consuming an awful lot of it. And, you know, there are many products out there that are marketed as being healthy and good for you, and no added sugar, but they contain lots of sweeteners that are sugar alternatives. Essentially, they are doing just as much damage in terms of promoting addictive behaviours, and changing our brain in ways that can promote addiction. So I think that certainly people who have a sweet tooth, they tend to struggle more with it, because they're really desiring sugar, and it's part of their diet, and it's something that they crave and want to have. But I think that, even those of us like - I'm like you, where I'm more of a savoury person - I really think that we need to be mindful of it as well, because it can sneak up on us.

Kim Forrester 11:28

If we have a craving that we know is not healthy for us - right now I want to reach for the chocolate or I want to reach for those potato chips - are there actions that we can take in that moment, Nicole, that can prevent us from feeding the craving?

Nicole Avena 11:44

There absolutely are. And I talk a lot about this in my book, *Why Diets Fail, Because You're Addicted to Sugar*. I talked about how, basically, cravings are a natural part of the appetitive process; we're supposed to crave foods, we have this ability to crave certain foods because, in some ways, it's our body's way of signalling when we might be a little bit deficient in certain nutrients. So for example, if suddenly you're craving a hamburger, that might be because maybe your body is a little bit low on iron. So you're going to be preferring a food source that would contain iron. And so that could be a good thing, an advantage. But I think for most people, the types of cravings that they encounter on a day to day basis are not cravings like that. They're more hedonically driven. These are cravings that are driven by different stimuli in our environment that cause us to recall or think about, you know, a pleasurable experience we had that's related to food. And so that's why when we see advertisements, or if we smell a certain food, we can sometimes suddenly feel like we're hungry again and we want to have that. And so I think that's really the type of craving that people often experience. And what I advise people to do when they encounter those types of cravings, is to essentially wait them out. Cravings are going to pass, they're fleeting. And if you're truly hungry, you're going to need to eat something. But if you're craving foods just for the pleasurable experience, then those feelings are going to go away. And so distracting yourself, you know, removing yourself from the situation ... The example I often encounter is the bread basket in a restaurant. That's a big trigger for a lot. When, you know, the server puts down that bread basket and people don't want to eat it, but they suddenly just are pulled toward it. It's sitting there, they can smell the bread, it just looks so delicious. And I say that's the time that you get up and excuse yourself and head to the bathroom and wash your hands and spend a few minutes in there. And then that craving will pass; you'll collect your thoughts, you'll move beyond it. And I think it's really about distracting ourselves and making sure that we stick to our health goals. And that's really what I think the end point can be for many people when they're trying to combat these cravings.

Kim Forrester 14:09

That was really insightful. Nicole, let's stick with this idea of addictions because I wanted to know, do you feel from your experience that there are mental or emotional addictions that can also contribute to a poor diet? For instance, can we be impacted poorly by an addiction to self judgement, or comparison, or an addiction to drama, which I feel some of us can have?

Nicole Avena 14:34

Absolutely. And what ends up happening is that we end up using, in many cases, food to self medicate a variety of different other types of mental conditions or situations that arise in our life. And that's where I think things tend to get dangerous. Because if we're having an issue with, let's say, anxiety, instead of finding out what's causing the anxiety and getting rid of it or mitigating it, a lot of times people will just turn to food to help them feel better; to self soothe. And that's a way in which we're using it as a medicine. But it's not a medicine. Food is not meant to be used in that way. It's meant to nourish our bodies and to, you know, help us to stay well fueled, and to help us to basically stay on the top of our game. And I think what ends up happening is that it's the socially acceptable form of self medication. I mean, clearly, if you had somebody in your life that was going through a tough time, or they're stressed out, or they're anxious, or depressed, or whatever it might be, and they said to you, "Oh, I'm either going to use drugs, drink a whole bottle of wine, or have a piece of cake, what should I do?", it's more socially acceptable to tell them to eat the cake. Because that's just the way it is. And so I think that people kind of view it as a harmless method through which they can cope. And in the short term, yeah, it can be fine. You can have a piece of cake if you had a bad day. You can, you know, have a piece of cake whenever you like. But we're talking about chronic consumption, chronic overeating, chronic use of sugar, and how, over time, this can catch up with us very, very easily. And it can cause health implications and problems that are not quite so easy to get out of once we have them, like diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and other conditions.

Kim Forrester 16:35

Changing our diet, losing weight, moving beyond food addictions, all of these things can be really, really stressful for many of us, Nicole. We can be stressed out from trying to get it right, from trying to avoid disappointment. But stress, you say, can contribute to a poor diet. So how do we navigate that terrible contradiction there? How do we navigate the stress of dietary change in ways that doesn't actually undermine our goal for greater health and well being?

Nicole Avena 17:08

I think that it's something that people struggle with. And I think recognising that it's not easy is the first step. I mean, this isn't going to be easy. We're up against the mountain, essentially, especially if we look at our modern food environment. And the fact that when we try to embark on this journey of wellness and eating healthy, we're doing this in the face of, you know, a grocery store that's loaded with processed foods and other foods that are essentially not good for us. And so we are facing these barriers from the get go. And I think that when people approach this in a different mindset - instead of looking at it as something that's stressful and difficult to do, if people can take the mindset that this is something that is necessary for health, this is something that's going to allow them to grow into a better person, to live longer, to feel better - that it's more of a positive spin on it. And I really think that the attitude people take about changing their diet can really have an impact on how successful people are at changing their diet. One of the things that I often will suggest to people is, to not have these lofty goals. I mean, people will often come to me and say, "Okay, I want to lose 25 pounds or 30 pounds." Okay, that's great that you want to do that. But are you now going to be disappointed when you don't lose 20 pounds in a month or, you know, in a couple of months? I mean, it's just, it could take some time. And so I think reevaluating your goals and having more short term goals that are attainable, like I want to lose, you know, five pounds in the next, maybe, month and a half. That's a realistic, attainable goal. That is something that I think people can really get behind and be able to achieve, and it's going to motivate them. Whereas if your end goal is to lose 20 pounds and you're a month into it, and you've only lost three, you don't feel like you've made much progress.

Kim Forrester 19:17

Yeah, I struggle with that. That's actually great advice there. So set shorter, more realistic, more attainable goals. And I also wonder if it's worth reframing the whole process in that I want to eat healthy rather than I should eat healthy. Do you feel that would be helpful?

Nicole Avena 19:35

Absolutely. I think that a lot of times, people when they start realising that they need to change their diet for whatever the reasons might be, if they're having, you know, health complications, or even if it's just because they don't like the way that they feel or look, that they are coming from this point of telling themselves that they have to do it. But if you really just change that one word, and if you tell yourself that you want to do it - you want to be healthy, you want to live as long as you can, you want to feel good, you want to feel energetic - then that can really be empowering. And then you're doing it because you want to do it, not because you have to do it. And those are two very different things. And I think that that small word can actually have a big impact.

Kim Forrester 20:23

I love that you bring up the idea of us changing our diet for various different reasons. Because if we are looking to boost our immunity, say, are our nutritional needs the same as if we're aiming to lose weight? So my question is, is it wise to adapt our dietary intake depending on our specific goals and needs, or is it generally just about eating healthily?

Nicole Avena 20:48

Well, I think that the ultimate goal will be achieved if you eat a healthy diet, regardless of what that goal is. And that might sound counterintuitive. But if you're eating a healthy diet, and it's balanced, and you're getting all the nutrients that you need, then you're likely going to lose weight if you have excess weight on you. You're likely going to support your immune system, you're likely going to support your cardiovascular system. And I think that for many people, it's just a matter of understanding what does it mean to eat that healthy diet? What's on the list of healthy foods? And that's where I think a lot of people struggle, and a lot of the clients that I work with are struggling in that capacity. Because, you know, we're all told "Just go eat a healthy diet." Okay, but what is it? What does that look like? I don't know what that means. And it's really frustrating for many people, and it differs from person to person, you know. Not everybody eats meat, not everyone's a carnivore, there's plenty of people who are vegans or vegetarians. And so what is a healthy diet look like for them? And where do we go to eat out? If we're eating out, like, is that healthy? I mean, so that's a lot of the types of questions that I think people encounter. And I think that, at the end of the day, it really boils down to avoiding processed foods, avoiding added sugar, and just being careful about what you put in your body. And making sure that you're thinking about it before you do it. And yes, there's room for slip ups, there's room for cupcakes, there's room for cookies. But I think that we need to be mindful when we're consuming those things, that it's not a habit, that it's not something that we're doing on a regular basis. Because when that happens, that's where we seem to see the introduction of these unhealthy behaviours that can quickly derail people from their health goals.

Kim Forrester 22:48

And as you mentioned, I think very early on in the interview, I think one thing that we can also do is be very, very sceptical of all of those products that say low fat, healthy, natural, good for you. Is that right?

Nicole Avena 23:00

Absolutely. I actually believe that those marketing tactics are not good for companies to use, because I've been advising people when they see things like that advertised, that they should walk away from the product. Because that's like a cover up for the fact that there's probably something in it, that isn't good for them. And so I think that really being critical of the different processed foods that are out there. And sure, there are plenty of companies out there that produce processed foods that are good, that are good for us. I mean, I'm not saying all processed food is bad. But I think that the vast majority of what we see in our grocery stores is not good. And so you do need to be very sceptical, and really just be mindful of the ingredients. I mean, it even comes down to little things like, for example, tomato sauce. If you know you're buying tomato sauce in the grocery store, then you need to look at the label and see if it has sugar in it because a lot of these tomato sauces have a lot of added sugar. And that is probably not something that you need in tomato sauce. And so, you know, you can look at the labels and better understand which products are going to contain the ingredients that would be more like what you'd get with home cooking, and less like what you would see in a grocery store situation where they're just trying to kind of hook us into getting these foods by adding these different ingredients to them.

Kim Forrester 24:29

I love the way you say that - make it more like home cooked meals. Because I'm sure in our home cooked meals very few of us put in ingredients with 15 syllables that we can't pronounce.

Nicole Avena 24:40

Exactly.

Kim Forrester 24:41

Nicole, what is the importance of new foods in our diet? And I ask this question on behalf of every mother that has ever lived, where you get to the point where you're cooking the same five meals, you know, the same five favourites every week. How can a varied, adventurous, spontaneous perhaps, diet impact our well being, as opposed to sticking with those same few favourites?

Nicole Avena 25:08

Yeah, I can totally relate. I'm a mom too. And I just think that cooking for the family, when you finally find those five dinners that people love and the whole family will eat, then you tend to just stick with them. Because, hey, the crew is happy. Right? But I think it's so important to diversify things and explore. We need variety in our diet in order to get all the nutrition that we need to stay healthy. And so, if we're just eating those same couple of meals in and out, it's not going to serve us well. One of the things that - just from a little personal note - that I've been doing, and it kind of started with the pandemic, when I was home all the time with my family, we were all home, we were cooking three meals a day. And I started to use the New York Times cooking app. I just love to cook, I'm a recipe

developer. And so this is something that, you know, kind of comes naturally to me. But I got the app, and I gave it to my older daughter. And I said, "Look through this app and pick out a couple of different dishes, we're going to make them." You know, exotic things; things that we would never cook like Korean food, for instance. We love Korean food, but we go to a restaurant and get it because we're not Korean and we don't have, you know, family history to teach us how to cook Korean food. And so we have been making all these different recipes and dishes from all different cultures and tastes and backgrounds. And it's just been such a great experience, because we're trying different things, first of all, which is wonderful. We're experimenting with different ingredients. And we're also allowing ourselves to be exposed to different types of foods. So now that five typical meals that I would cook has expanded into, you know, 20 different things that are on the list of delicious things that the whole family enjoys. And so it is important to try new things. And, you know, not even from the standpoint of health. But I think also just from the standpoint of exploring culinary deliciousness and exploring the fact that there's so many delicious types of foods out there that we don't even necessarily know about, just simply because we're not exposed to them.

Kim Forrester 27:21

Exploring culinary deliciousness. I think we can all celebrate that one. Nicole, my final question is a question I ask every guest on the Eudaemonia podcast. Can you share a morning reminder - so this may be a practice, a mantra, or an affirmation - something simple that can help my listeners integrate better nutrition seamlessly and with self loving intent into the day?

Nicole Avena 27:49

My morning mantra would be, just do one little thing. One little thing. You don't need to wake up and revamp your whole lifestyle, your whole diet, your whole exercise routine. That's not realistic, nor is it necessary. What you need to do is take one small step in the right direction. And so that might mean that, if you typically wake up and have coffee with creamer in it, and that creamer has, like, added sugar and flavouring, maybe you decide, "You know what? Today, I'm going to ditch the creamer. That's sugar that I don't need." And if you can do that, then you're on your journey, you're headed in the right direction. And so one small step is all it takes. And if you take one small step each day and not step backwards, you're eventually going to get there. And it might take a little bit of time. You're not going to run there. It's not a sprint. But it's going to set you on the path for health. And I think that is where we want to be. And we have to remember that this is a marathon and not a sprint. And, you know, people who adopt these types of diets where they just kind of go all in and cut everything out, and they're miserable for a couple weeks because that's just what they have to do to get where they want to be, that's not sustainable. That's going to come back to get you. If you are in it for the long haul and looking at it from the standpoint of "I'm doing this for my health, and I'm going to stick with this plan", it's going to be very easy to stick to and it's going to be much more rewarding in the long run.

Kim Forrester 29:30

I love that. One small change a day. And then celebrate how awesome you are when you've made that small change. Right?

Nicole Avena 29:36

Absolutely. And I think we have to reward ourselves. Just don't do it with food all the time.

Kim Forrester 29:42

Nicole Avena, your website, your books, just a treasure trove of really fascinating and powerful information about nutrition. How can people find out more about you and the work that you do?

Nicole Avena 29:55

So if you go to my website, [www.drnicoleavea.com](http://www.drnicoleavea.com), there's plenty of information there about things that are happening, different events. All my books are listed there. My new book, *What to Eat When You Want to Get Pregnant* is out as of April 1, and so definitely check that out. It's a book about how people can utilise the power of nutrition to boost their fertility, which is something that is on the minds of many people these days, as people are delaying the time to which they, you know, start to plan a family. And it applies to both women and men. Men are a part of this too. There's a lot of information in the book about how what we eat can actually impact men's fertility too. So definitely check that out. And I'm on social media as @drnicoleavena.

Kim Forrester 30:45

Well, it's just been such a pleasure having you here on the Eudaemonia podcast. So much food for thought, excuse the pun. Thanks so much for choosing to give your time today, Nicole.

Nicole Avena 30:56

Oh, it was a pleasure.

Kim Forrester 30:58

As the author Julie Murphy wrote, "You are what you eat. What would you like to be?" You've been listening to the final episode in season nine of the Eudaemonia podcast. I'll see you back here in early May for season ten. In the meantime, if you'd like to learn more about how to live a truly flourishing life, please subscribe, and check out [www.eudaemoniapod.com](http://www.eudaemoniapod.com) for more inspiring episodes, or follow me on Instagram for my regular 'bite-sized thrives'. You'll find me @iamkimforrester. I'm Kim Forrester. Until next time, be well, be kind to yourself, and nourish yourself with healthy nutrition.