



Conscious Life presents

Balancing Act: Hormones & Mindset Shape Our Weight

Guest: Emmie Keefe

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[00:00:09] Dr Anu Arasu

Welcome everybody, I'm Dr Anu co-host of the Hormone Super Conference. Today I'm joined by Emmie Keefe. Emmie is a nutritionist, she's also a specialist in weight loss, and the founder of Slim on Starch. Her work has been featured by Forbes, HuffPost and the Business Insider. Welcome Emmie.

Emmie Keefe

Thank you so much for having me, I'm really excited to be here.

Dr Anu Arasu

We're so excited to have you. Tell us the secrets to keeping the weight off when hormone imbalances are starting to happen. What's the link there?

Emmie Keefe

There's certainly a link because hormones are little messengers in our body, as you know, that tell our body to do certain things, and to not do certain things. It certainly can make weight loss more difficult, and it can also make people feel a little bit defeated because they think, oh, I have a hormonal imbalance so weight loss isn't in the cards for me. But that's actually not true.

Sure, hormones can make things a little bit more difficult. They can make us need to pay attention to certain things, but it certainly does not mean that weight loss is impossible, or not on the cards for you, or that you're going to be overweight forever. If you'd like, I can talk about a few hormones that certainly do affect weight loss.

Dr Anu Arasu

That would be great.

[00:01:28] Emmie Keefe

I would love to. Ghrelin and leptin are big ones, those are the hunger hormones. Ghrelin is the hormone that makes us feel hungry, and leptin is the hormone that makes us feel full. Naturally, we don't want our ghrelin to be too high, and we don't want our leptin to be too low, so that we can feel hunger in appropriate levels, and also feel satiety in appropriate levels.

Cortisol is another big hormone, the stress hormone. When we release cortisol, this has a mental health effect because we tend to get stressed. And when we stress, what do we turn to to make us feel better? Turn to food. We want to make sure that our cortisol levels aren't too high, and that we're practicing destressing methods so that we don't end up turning to food.

Insulin is another important hormone because when insulin is too high we don't burn fat too well. Then a couple of other hormones that aren't very thought about when it comes to weight loss, but are significantly important are dopamine and serotonin.

Dopamine is the hormone that motivates us to do things, and when we eat really highly processed, junkie, high-calorie foods, dopamine is like fireworks going off in our brain, and that makes us want to keep eating more of those foods.

Serotonin is the mood-stabilizing hormone. Now, a lot of people don't recognize that 90% of the serotonin in our bodies is made in our gut. So if we're not eating a properly balanced diet, and our serotonin is off, then our mood is not stable. Back to what I was saying before, when our mood is not stable, we end up turning to food to self-soothe.

Dr Anu Arasu

We see these hormone imbalances in bingeing disorders because this is what you're mentioning with the serotonin, we treat some forms of bingeing disorders with SSRIs. This is quite a big link, in your experience how much of a problem is this? And how much are people's lifestyles contributing to the hormone imbalance?

Emmie Keefe

Lifestyle factors have a major impact on hormonal imbalances, food choices being one of them. But also, what are your methods of regulating mood and emotions, and working through those? I think that it stems from not having appropriate methods of self-regulation, and not knowing healthy methods of working through difficult emotions. When we are unable to do that, if we're not practicing things like meditation, or talk therapy, or journaling, regular exercise. If we're not able to learn how to sit with difficult emotions, then what ends up happening is we turn to things that are going to give us that dopamine hit that feels really good.

We're going to turn to things that give us a temporary numbness so that we don't have to deal with all that crazy stuff. When we do that, now we rely on food for that feel-good feeling, and we're mucking up our gut. As I spoke about, if we muck up our gut and our serotonin becomes imbalanced, now we have a negative feedback loop. The gut's not producing serotonin, now our mood's unstable. We're going to look to that dopamine from food, and the cycle continues.

[00:04:49] Emmie Keefe

It's imperative that we set forth healthy methods of self-regulation, like I talked about, meditation, therapy, journaling, regular exercise to regulate our emotions so that we don't end up turning to food.

Dr Anu Arasu

It's so nice to hear you talking about this aspect because I think we all, so many of us feel, okay, we know what we should be doing... And then there's this huge chasm between what one knows one should be doing, and the whole emotional aspect that's driving those decisions underneath.

The other thing that I think so many people can probably relate to, is that you talked about regulation. When their mood is off, when their appetite and their blood sugars are off, so are so many other things, like their sleep. What do you say to that?

Emmie Keefe

The way you do one thing is the way you do everything. So if one area of your life is off, there's going to be a domino effect on everything else. You brought up sleep. Sleep in my humble opinion, I put prioritizing sleep over prioritizing exercise. I think that nutrition is most important, and then I think that sleep is right below there.

When we don't sleep enough... I talked a little bit earlier about ghrelin and leptin. Ghrelin is the hormone that makes us feel hungry, leptin is the hormone that makes us feel full. If we don't sleep enough, ghrelin that hunger hormone shoots up, and leptin the fullness hormone shoots down. So now you're not sleeping enough, you're not feeling full, you're feeling super hungry. And on top of that, what do people tend to do when they're super, super tired and they need a quote-unquote pick me up? They turn to processed food. Another negative feedback loop.

Dr Anu Arasu

There's evidence that people who work night shift have greater risk of type 2 diabetes. What do you say to people who have hormone imbalances and are waking up in the night and eating? What's going on then?

Emmie Keefe

What I would say to that person is, be patient with yourself and be kind to yourself, because if your system is so dysregulated that you are awakening in the middle of the night and eating food, your circadian rhythms are totally off. Which also makes me want to note here that our gut, we have 100 trillion bacteria that live in our gut, and those bacteria have their own circadian rhythm. The bacteria that live in our gut, they eat, and they sleep, and they poop, they have their own rhythm that's going on.

If you're waking up in the middle of the night and you're eating, then it's not just your own circadian rhythm that's off, it's their circadian rhythm in your gut that's off, too. Be patient to yourself, and know that this is something that we're going to chip away at. I've worked with many clients that do

struggle with night eating, and it's something that we have to practice major compassion with, and kindness with ourselves about.

[00:07:48] Emmie Keefe

If your system is that dysregulated, it's certainly not something that you chose for yourself, or that you wanted for yourself, but it's something that you do have to be responsible with. So be patient and kind, work with a professional, and know that this is probably going to be a longer journey, but that's okay, and we will get it figured out.

Dr Anu Arasu

Fantastic. You mentioned stress, you also mention, or you write about how we can be slim on starch. I think what a lot of stressed people need is starch, but I think they're scared to eat starch, because they're scared it's going to make them put on weight. What would you say to that?

Emmie Keefe

Totally understandable, we've heard that carbs are the enemy, carbs are the devil, carbs make us fat. Especially from a hormonal side, you'll hear carbs spike insulin, and we can't have insulin be too high, because then we won't burn fat. I can understand people that are afraid of starch.

When it comes to insulin the reason why insulin doesn't work properly for many people is because the cell is all filled with a bunch of fat. Insulin is like the key trying to go into the cell to do what it needs to do, but it can't get in there and do its job because of the fat that's in there. So it's not the carbohydrate that's the issue, it's that the diet is so high in fat that carbohydrates aren't able to do what they're supposed to do, which is to give us energy, to put energy into the cell.

Also I want to note that a lot of people misunderstand what I mean by starch. I don't mean cakes, and cookies, and white bread, and all of them, processed table sugar. I'm talking about potatoes, sweet potatoes, brown rice, quinoa. These nutritionally dense starches that have fiber.

Fiber is going to blunt the insulin response so that you don't have that huge spike in insulin. Also we're keeping the diet modest in fat intake so that insulin can work properly. But the proof is in the pudding, and you probably won't believe it until you try it out yourself, and see how it goes, that you do feel much better when you are eating a diet that does have adequate carbohydrate content.

Dr Anu Arasu

I flag it up because people who are under stress, they need starch or their adrenaline goes even higher. Certainly young women who are having regular periods, if they don't have enough starch in their diet, they can lose their periods. What are some of the common mistakes that you see people making when they're trying to lose weight?

[00:10:31] Emmie Keefe

A lot of people are under the notion that if we want to release weight, we need to eat less and move more. What a beautiful recipe for burnout. That's a delicious recipe for, I'm going to go balls to the wall, I'm going to eat nothing, I'm going to go to a boot camp every single day. Well, not only is that totally unsustainable, and you'll end up overeating and binge eating within a week or two, but because the topic of the conversation here is hormones, now your cortisol is through the roof, and your body is going to have a stress response to this.

You're going to hold on to more water, you're going to see that your face gets a little bit rounder, you are going to have trouble sleeping, you're going to find that you have more frequent urination. You're going to start to feel worse, and look a little bit worse, even though you're putting in way more effort here. What's that all about? That's because that cortisol response.

Another huge mistake is people go low carb, they cut out the carbs and what happens is the number on the scale drops because they're dehydrated. For every gram of glycogen that we store, that comes from carbohydrate, we also store a gram of water. So people do is they mistakenly go low carb. They see the number on the scale drop and they say, "Two thumbs up, low carb rocks, I'm going to do this forever."

Then they inevitably start eating carbs again, because we can't live without carbs. The number on the scale goes back up, but it's not because they've gained fat, it's because they have more water weight and they're rehydrated again. Then people get into this cycle of low-carb dieting, binge eating, low-carb dieting, binge eating, and it's an exhausting hamster wheel.

Dr Anu Arasu

I guess it depends so much on the individual, because post menopause, if we're not exercising much, we may get away with a lower-carb diet, or feel a bit better on a lower-carb diet for a while. But someone that is having regular periods, and who is burning the energy and perhaps under stress, if they go too low carb, that could be quite problematic. Do you find that there's quite a lot of variation when you're sitting in front of somebody? How much do we need to tailor this individually?

Emmie Keefe

For the most part, of course there's bio-individuality, and different things are going to work for different people. But what I see is there's more individuality in terms of the mindset than there is in terms of the food. For most people eating a diet that's going to be heavy in fruits, and vegetables, and whole grains, and legumes, sure there's going to be some nuances that so and so's body does better with a little bit more beans, or a little bit less, or different types, I do better with quinoa. Totally normal.

Of course, our gut varies tremendously, and that's something that I'm going to be okay with. But what I see more individuality with is the mindset, because we live in a world where there's not going to be healthy options everywhere. We live in a very unhealthy world where there's highly processed foods, greasy foods, delicious foods, but not great for our health. What most people have to learn is not what's healthy, and what's not healthy, from a nutritional standpoint. But how am I going to operate in an unhealthy world when my priority is health?

[00:13:59] Emmie Keefe

That is where I see major individuality. Some people, they have heart disease, they have diabetes, they have to learn how to stay on the straight and narrow everywhere they go. People that don't have those health ailments, what they need to really focus on is, how can I still have healthy indulgences and be intentional about my eating? But for the most part, make the most nutritionally dense decision. So to answer that question, where I really see myself getting into the sticks and the nitty gritty with clients is the mindset of how they're going to operate when they're outside of the home.

Dr Anu Arasu

Beautiful. I think this is so much needed to be heard because there's a wealth of information out there, but people are still struggling. What kind of mindsets do you see?

Emmie Keefe

I see major black and white thinking of, this is right, this is wrong, this is good food, this is bad food. People can exist inside their little controlled, clean vacuum home, making their healthy meals, and then they get out into the real world, they have one bite of a scone, and the world has ended. This is the end of the world, I've already messed up my diet, I was doing perfectly and now I'm off to the races, who cares? I'm going to throw in the towel, I'm going to start again on Monday. I see that black-and-white thinking.

I also see catastrophizing happen when people step on the scale and they don't see a number that they want to see. They will either think that a few things happen, they'll think that their body is broken and the number on the scale didn't go down, I'm destined for weight gain. That is not true, your weight is going to go up and down throughout your weight loss journey. That's totally normal, we're supposed to see spikes and dips, but overall the trajectory is downward.

Another major mistake I see when people step on the scale and the number has gone up is they think, what did I eat yesterday? And whatever I ate yesterday is bad, that makes me gain weight, I'm not going to eat that.

There are so many factors that are going to influence what the number on the scale says. We have 5 to 20 pounds of fecal matter in our body at all times, so of course there's going to be a little bit of fluctuation. Have you had a bowel movement, urine contraction, or bladder contractions? Hormones, as we've been talking about here. The weather. Intracellular water. Extracellular cellular water. What time is it? What time did you go to bed last night? What time was your last meal? Was there salt? There's so many factors that affect your weight. We can't see fat loss from day to day. Those are two major mindset mistakes I see.

If someone is trying to lose weight, how often should they weigh themselves? Is there a rough blueprint of how long they should try to lose weight for? And then if they should take a bit of time off, or relax the schedule a bit?

[00:16:57] Emmie Keefe

Great questions. The way that I do it with my clients is I have them weigh in on Wednesday, Thursday, Friday. We take that average and we compare the average from week to week. That's how we do it.

What I consider a quote-unquote plateau is if the client has weighed in, if they weigh in one week, their weight is one number. The next week it's the same number. I don't consider that a plateau yet, I want us to go another week, and if it's still the same number, then I consider it a plateau, where we're going to want to reevaluate the diet, make some tweaks to get that number to go down.

Dr Anu Arasu

Interesting, it's a more slow response so that the body has time to reset its metabolic point.

Emmie Keefe

Oh, yeah the slower you go, the faster you get there. I find that we live in the Amazon Prime Society, things are at our door, it could be here today, we could order something online and it's at my door today. We've become so accustomed to fast results, we want things now. But unfortunately, weight release doesn't work like that. It's a disservice to your body to do it so quickly too, because as quickly as you get something, as quickly as you'll lose it, you'd regain the weight right away. We want this to be a low and slow process.

Dr Anu Arasu

What role do you think exercise has in all of this? Should we be changing what we're doing depending on how much we're exercising?

Emmie Keefe

I find that exercise is majorly overemphasized, the amount of calories that we burn in a day, about 10 to 30% of those calories are through exercise. People totally overestimate that, they think 80% to 90% of the calories that we burn in a day are due to exercise, but it's not that high.

You spoke a little bit about earlier, hypothalamic amenorrhea, how women can lose their menstrual cycle. If we exercise too much, the body will start to pull calories from other processes in the body, such as the menstrual cycle. We need to find a healthy balance with exercise. With my clients, I don't force them to do any exercise, but what I believe is that we want to find a way of moving our bodies that is sustainable, that we enjoy, and that celebrates our health. As opposed to being a method of punishing our body, or trying to get the weight off. I think that walking every day is a great way to stay active and keep your body limber and moving.

Dr Anu Arasu

Fantastic, do you have any tips for particular foods that are really good for us to help balance our hormones as well as shift the weight?

[00:19:42] Emmie Keefe

I work with a lot of women that are menopausal and postmenopausal. Menopause is a process that's supposed to happen from age 35 to 40 to 55 to 60. It's supposed to be this gradual 20-year process of estrogen just slowly declining. But unfortunately, we live in a world with very high animal product consumption. Animal products contain estrogen, and if we're eating way too many animal products, then our estrogen stays really high, because we're getting the hormones that the animals have.

What happens is women get to their mid-fifties and they still haven't gone into menopause. They should have started that process 20 years ago, but their estrogen is still so high. Then inevitably we get to the point where women can no longer bear children and estrogen drops dramatically, this is what causes this drop, that's what causes hot flashes, that's what causes the weight gain around the midsection, that's what causes the brain fog. All the symptoms that women suffer from in that menopause drop are due to the drop in estrogen.

We want to regulate the estrogen levels, and a way that's great to do that is through a plant-based diet, with the phytoestrogens that help balance out our estrogen levels. People are very scared of soy products because they latch onto the estrogen receptor, but that's old school thinking. The new school thinking is, wait a minute, we have two estrogen receptors, alpha and beta. What we've learned is that soy products will properly latch on to the alpha, or the beta receptor, to either speed up estrogen production for women that are low estrogen, or slow it down for women that have too much estrogen and are estrogen dominant.

Dr Anu Arasu

It can certainly be a great thing for also perimenopausal women, who are swinging between high and low estrogens, because phytoestrogens almost find that way to give a bit more help when you need it, and to block too much when you have too much. Are there any other really nutrient-dense foods, or any other particular foods that you think people should have their attention on?

Emmie Keefe

I promote a whole food, plant-based diet, so getting in as many real whole foods as possible that don't have an ingredients list, don't have nutrition facts, your grandmother would know what it is.

It's just a normal food, it's rice, beans, potatoes, broccoli, apples. Foods that are real whole foods. If your diet consists of a majority whole plant foods, you're doing a great job, because whole plant foods all contain phytoestrogens that help regulate our estrogen levels. Soybeans and flaxseeds, those are great hormone powerhouses that help regulate our estrogen levels. No matter what side of the coin you're on, they really do benefit women of childbearing age, and then women that are postmenopausal.

Dr Anu Arasu

Quite a range there. For women that are still having cycles, are there particular things that... How should women address that in the lead-up to the period when they just want to crave and binge on everything?

[00:23:03] Emmie Keefe

It's very important for women to recognize that from the day of ovulation, which is around day 14 of the cycle, up to day 28, the day that you have your bleed, your metabolism is going to steadily increase to the point where right before your bleed, you're going to burn an extra about 100 to 300 calories per day.

If you're experiencing cravings, that's just your body's way of saying to you, hey, we need some more food at this time, we're burning more calories. What I tell my clients to do is to work with their hunger at that time, recognize that the cravings are the body's way of communicating with you, that it needs more fuel at that time. That's totally fine, totally normal. We don't need to be threatened by it, let's eat some more, no big deal. Let's have some more sweet potatoes, let's have some more fruit, some more rice, let's have some more nutritious food, because that's what your body truly needs at that time.

Dr Anu Arasu

How do you advise people who are struggling with the sugar addiction? Because cravings, or at least being hungry is one thing, but then I suppose the craving of particularly sugar, is such a prevalent thing. Do you have any tips for people who are stuck in that spiral?

Emmie Keefe

I talked about dopamine a little bit earlier. Dopamine being the motivation hormone, when we eat food we release dopamine. This is because eating food allows us to live, so dopamine being the motivation chemical, we have to release dopamine when we eat, or we wouldn't be motivated to eat and then we would die.

We also release dopamine during sexual intercourse, that's because that allows the human race to keep on keeping on. This is why dopamine is released when we eat. The more calories a food has, the more dopamine we release. This is why potatoes taste better than lettuce, because potatoes have more calories.

Then we bring in something like potato chips, or cookies, or cake. You can only imagine how much dopamine that releases, it is like fireworks of dopamine. That's a super normal stimulus that humans were never designed to feel, so no wonder you feel addicted to it. It is like a cascade of dopamine, it is this ultimate high. So if you're struggling with sugar addiction, there's nothing wrong with you, your brain is just reacting the way that it would react to something that's extremely high calorie.

First realize that you're not broken, there's nothing wrong with you or your brain, it's having a supernormal reaction to supernormal stimuli. What we want to do here instead is replace what you're eating with nutritionally dense foods, like a Slim on Starch diet, that is high in nutrients but low in calories, high in volume but low in calories, so that we can give your body what it truly needs from a nutritional standpoint, check that off the list.

[00:25:55] Emmie Keefe

Then we need to explore, where else can we get dopamine outside of food? Where else can I get feel good feelings? Am I engaging in habits and hobbies that bring me joy? Do I have social connection? Do I have purpose? Do I have spirituality? What else is going on in my life that can make me feel good besides just food? Is food my primary relationship? Do I need to form more social connections so that food doesn't take center stage?

Dr Anu Arasu

Yeah, that's a big one. What about alcohol?

Emmie Keefe

Alcohol has a twofold effect from a nutritional standpoint when we drink alcohol, our fat cells are filled with toxins. Alcohol is a toxin. When we drink alcohol, our fat cells stay nice and plump. When we release weight, we don't burn away a fat cell, we just deflate a fat cell. We have however many fat cells we have, we have them they're never going away, when we release weight, we just deflate the fat cell. When we drink, what we do is we plump up that fat cell, and that's why people gain weight when they drink. That's the nutritional side of things.

Now let's talk about what happens when we have a few drinks. Now we get a little bit more snacky, now we want to eat a little bit more. That's the snowball effect that I see when people start to bring wine back in, they start to snack a little bit more, they start to eat a little bit more. There's a twofold effect there.

Dr Anu Arasu

I suppose it drops the blood sugar, then they start to crave the food, and as you said there's this toxin effect. How much do you think toxins play a role in weight gain, or us holding on to weight?

Emmie Keefe

When it comes to toxins and hormones, and everything that's outside of thermodynamics, which is are you eating more than your body truly needs? It's certainly going to have an impact, but it's not the end all, be all. I know a lot of people think, Oh, if I want to lose weight, do I need to eat organic? Or if I want to be the healthiest that I can be, do I need to be organic? If you can afford it, sure go for it. But if you can't afford it, or if it's not available in your area, don't think that this whole thing is awash.

You certainly can do a fantastic job on your weight loss journey and your health not having organic products. But if it is something that's available to you, or if it's the same price, or if you feel better while you're having it, then absolutely go for it, and have the products that are cleaner, that don't have all those toxins.

Dr Anu Arasu

Really the take-home message is very much nutrient-dense, plant-based food, not empty calories, getting in touch with the drivers behind the eating, is this an emotional component? If there were

any tips, any take-home messages, or things that you would like people to implement right now, people who are listening, what would they be?

[00:29:03] Emmie Keefe

I would focus on getting in as many whole plant foods as possible. Don't focus on, well, I can't eat this, I can't have that. Let's not have that scarcity mindset and looking at food as a threat. Let's look at food as our friend that's going to help us reach maximum peak health. And how many nutrient-dense foods can I bring in to my diet? What fruits do I really like? What vegetables do I really like? Do I like potatoes? Do I like rice? Let's bring that in and use the concept of crowding out, as opposed to looking at, I can't have this, I can't have that, well then what can I have?

Dr Anu Arasu

Yes.

Emmie Keefe

Then I would also say don't be afraid or ashamed to ask for help, asking for help is a sign of self-awareness and self-respect. I say that to all of my clients who say, I'm so embarrassed I'm on this call. I can't believe that I need help in this area. I say, I really respect you for that because you're proving to me that you want to change, you're worth changing, and that you're willing to invest in yourself. Which I find to be a very admirable quality.

Dr Anu Arasu

This one's huge, isn't it? Because the underlying things that make our decisions are not logical. These dopamine drivers or these serotonin drivers they can just be so powerful. How much can people do by themselves? And how much do they need to be on the path with someone else? What kind of support should people go for? Because this is hard, it's not necessarily just obvious.

Emmie Keefe

Information is the first step, but it's not the last step. What I do is to help people close the gap, mind the gap, if you will, between information and implementation. How can we close that gap? Maybe you know what to do and you just aren't doing it, we can close that gap. But if you don't know what to do, I got you covered there too.

With my clients, they work with me, but also we have a mindset coach, and a nutrition coach, so that we can take a three-pronged approach, and make sure that physiologically, from a nutrition standpoint, you're all good to go. But we also need to dig into the mindset side of things. So gather information, do research, find somebody that really resonates with you, and then say, okay, I'm going to go to that person because I have this idea of what I want for myself, but now I need to put it into practice.

[00:31:41] Dr Anu Arasu

It's like contemplating and meditating on this stuff, because what I'm hearing so much from your messaging is that, yes, the information is the first step, but then in order to implement it, we need to be going over that, the mindset, the patterns get broken down and they get reformed.

Emmie Keefe

Yeah, it takes a lot of self-awareness, vulnerability and courage to step back and be honest with yourself and say, what behavioral patterns am I engaging in that probably are going to keep me stuck and not get me to where I want to be.

Dr Anu Arasu

Very powerful work. Where can people find out more about your work Emmie?

Emmie Keefe

So healthyemmie is the name, healthyemmie.org. Then on all social media platforms, I am at the handle [healthyemmie](https://www.instagram.com/healthyemmie). I run the Slim on Starch program. Like I said, you work with me as well as a nutrition coach and a mindset coach. If this has resonated with you, I would love to help you, and work with you on both nutrition and mindset.

Dr Anu Arasu

Fantastic, thank you so much for all your help today.

Emmie Keefe

Thank you for having me, I really appreciate it.