



## Anxiety and sleep anatomy

**Guest: Dr Ellen Vora**

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### **[00:00:10] Meagen Gibson**

Welcome to this interview. I'm Meagen Gibson, cohost of the Sleep Super Conference.

Today I'm speaking with Dr Ellen Vora, a board certified psychiatrist, acupuncturist and yoga teacher, and she's the author of the number one best selling book, *The Anatomy of Anxiety*.

She takes a functional medicine approach to mental health, considering the whole person, and addressing imbalance at the root.

Dr Ellen Vora, thank you so much for being with us today.

### **Dr Ellen Vora**

Hey, Meagen. Thanks so much for having me.

### **Meagen Gibson**

So, Ellen, I would love it if you could start by explaining the connection between anxiety and sleep.

### **Dr Ellen Vora**

It's a two way street. That's the part we need to be appreciating.

We all have an intuitive understanding of the fact that when we're anxious, this impacts our sleep. And we think, I'm lying awake at night with racing thoughts and I can't sleep, or wake up in the middle of the night in a panic and I can't sleep.

That's all valid. What's also true is that the quality of the sleep is directly impacting our mental health. So, our anxiety levels will track with how well we're sleeping.

Some of that is out of our control. Some of it is actually very much up to us. And it's not to blame us, that we're doing a bad job of sleep. We just recognize that modern life makes it hard to sleep, but we can get strategic and improve our ability to sleep well.

**[00:01:26] Meagen Gibson**

I really like that you qualify that, too, that some of it is out of our control, and some of it very much is in our control.

I think sometimes the trap in wellness circles is that we feel like every single thing is within our control and it's a moral failure and personal failure if we can't completely dial everything in just right and make all the right decisions.

The human body and brain are a sophisticated machine that works together. So, letting us off the hook for some of the things that are out of our direct control, but making it clear what is in our control, is a great place to start.

**Dr Ellen Vora**

Yeah. That whole interface is really delicate stuff, and it's how to discuss the things that we can do to influence our mental well being and our sleep.

My hope is always that that's empowering and hopeful, and not blaming and shaming or overwhelming. It's a delicate balance.

**Meagen Gibson**

Yeah. Absolutely.

So, from a point of not blaming and shaming anybody, I love that you differentiated in the book the difference between false anxiety and true anxiety, and so I would love to talk about those two and have you parse it apart for us.

**Dr Ellen Vora**

Yeah. So this is the central premise of my book, which is basically to say, in contrast to what I was trained to do and how to categorize anxiety, I've learned that in my practice, what was steering management in a meaningful way was to think about anxiety as two types.

There's false anxiety, which could also be called avoidable anxiety, and then there's true anxiety, which is purposeful anxiety.

I recognize that the term false anxiety can come across as somewhat invalidating. I apologize for that.

It's not to invalidate the very real suffering of false anxiety. It's really just to speak to the fact that there's a straightforward reason for that anxiety, and a straightforward path out of it.

False anxiety happens when our body is tripped into a stress response. It usually happens from these seemingly benign aspects of modern life, and a blood sugar crash or a bad night of sleep or an extra cold brew coffee, and it puts our body in a stress response, and that can feel identical to anxiety and even panic.

Whereas true anxiety is not something to pathologize. It's not something that we should be trying to gluten free or decaf coffee our way out of.

**[00:03:49]**

It's not what's wrong with us. It's really in many ways what's right with us when we are able to connect viscerally to what's not right in the world, and so we can let that kind of anxiety fuel purposeful action.

### **Meagen Gibson**

If I'm hearing you right, true anxiety, there's a purpose, as you said, purposeful action towards it, it's the signal that has kept us safe and has kept human beings alive for millions of years, is having true anxiety.

If we didn't have true anxiety, we wouldn't survive a lot of situations and those are the signals that are very important to us and our very safety. Whereas false anxiety is the way that our brains make up stories.

I think I'm actually quoting you when I say this, but a wise woman once said that it's the way that our brains make up these stories about the way that we're feeling, and in order to justify my stomach is feeling this way, or my chest feels tight or something.

All of a sudden our brain starts to try to make and invent the situations for which they can explain these body sensations, when maybe you're just hungry or you had too much cold brew like you said.

### **Dr Ellen Vora**

Yeah, it's exactly right. With true anxiety, it's absolutely our inbuilt survival mechanism. It's an adaptation to help us stay safe and anticipate potential negative consequences and plan for the future.

I think true anxiety can be grander, too. It can speak to the ways that we know in a deep down way where we need to course correct, where we're out of alignment in our lives, where something is off in our community and the world at large, and we know that we belong on the front lines making a contribution to shift things towards something better.

So, that's true anxiety.

False anxiety, it's in certain ways like an unfortunate accident that we have this survival wiring and all of those anxious thoughts are a result of a stress response.

But in modern life, a lot of things can trip our body into a stress response, and not for some deep reason, not because a leopard is coming at us, but because we're inflamed, or our gut is unhealthy, or we're hungover, or some other aspect of modern life that's tripping us into a stress response.

You're exactly right. Our brain, this consummate meaning maker, is always all too happy to swoop in and tell us, oh, well, the reason we're anxious right now is that email from my boss seems to suggest that I might be underperforming at work, and that interpersonal interaction from seventh grade still irks me.

And that's actually a retrofitted justification for what is first and foremost a physical sensation.

**[00:06:33] Meagen Gibson**

I want you to say that again. A retrofit justification for what is a physical sensation. Did I get that right?

**Dr Ellen Vora**

Yeah, exactly, and that's just it. It's not that we don't have stressors. Where our mind goes is based on reality.

We did get a weird email from our boss, but the fact that it feels so overwhelming and so doom and gloom sometimes often has a lot to do with our state of physiologic imbalance.

**Meagen Gibson**

I'm going to quote you again, because this is something that stopped me in my tracks when I was reading your book.

You said, true anxiety taps us on the shoulder because we are in some way abandoning ourselves.

I wrote that down. It's been echoing and bouncing around in my head ever since I read it because I think it resonates as to how to tell the difference between true and false anxiety and when we should be really paying attention and listening.

**Dr Ellen Vora**

I'm very influenced by two authors in particular here. One is Marshall Rosenberg, and the other is Glennon Doyle.

Glennon Doyle, all of her books are wonderful, but *Untamed* in particular really teaches us about the conditioning that we get, especially as women, but we all have a form of this that teaches us that to please the people in our lives, to please the authority figures or the caretakers, we're expected to show up in a certain way.

Often that actually has an inbuilt way that we're abandoning our true selves, our real needs, our real passions, what we're about.

So, sometimes there's a real learning that happens in adulthood where we start to catch ourselves and be like, hey. Wait a minute. Why am I saying yes to this? Why am I doing that? Why am I signing on for this project? None of this is what I'm about.

And to recognize not only we're worthy of getting to do what we're passionate about, but it's about time, the world needs us in our zone of genius, in our passion. It needs us showing up for what lights our soul on fire.

Marshall Rosenberg, he wrote the book *Nonviolent Communication*. He talks about our true yes and our true no.

This is revolutionary for me. I realized I was going through my life, many of my patients go through their lives, handing out a false yes, which is when someone says, oh, hey, do you want to take on this project at work? Or, hey, do you want to meet up for a coffee next Thursday?.

**[00:08:56]**

And what goes through our minds is, no. This isn't a good fit for me. This is not what I'm about. I'm spread thin as it is. This isn't a priority, but what we always hear ourselves say is, okay. Sure! It's our false yes.

Can we actually catch ourselves, take a deep breath, check in with what our body is saying, and if it is saying no, then we need to start hearing our mouth say no.

We can do that respectfully, but we don't actually want to abandon ourselves and compromise our needs and our values. And by the way, every time we do, it assuages the tension in that moment, but it never ends well.

We end up flaking at the last minute, or resenting the other person, or we're not available for what is the priority in our life. It's an opportunity cost.

So, this doesn't play out well, and it's time for us to start showing up in the moment and basically respectfully, kindly stating our boundary.

### **Meagen Gibson**

It's almost like we're trading the short term discomfort that we would have from saying no with the long term discomfort of the repercussions of our yes.

### **Dr Ellen Vora**

Yeah. That's well said.

### **Meagen Gibson**

So, I've heard that you say that sleep is one of the most effective treatments for anxiety, and so I want you to unpack that for us.

Why is that? Now we know why they're so intricately connected, but if you're having trouble sleeping, how are you going to get sleep to help with that anxiety?

### **Dr Ellen Vora**

So, the thing we really know is that sleep helps with anxiety. The how and why is some of it we know, and some of it, I think, remains to be a black box that we don't fully understand.

Some of what we know is certainly when the brain consolidates memory, it sort of does a reset.

One thing that I think is really interesting, that's relatively new research, is around the Glymphatic system.

Most of us are familiar with the Lymphatic system, that's the vessels around the rest of our body, that are pulling out waste and helping us flush that from the body, so bringing it to the kidneys to be excreted, or to the armpits to be sweated out.

**[00:11:06]**

It turns out the brain, for a long time we thought didn't detoxify. Turns out, that's crazy and there is the Lymphatic system in the brain.

It's called the Glymphatic system, and it does its work while we sleep, and that's the kicker.

The analogy I like to draw is that our brain is like this little city with all kinds of shops and businesses and households, and it generates garbage during the day, and then at night people take the trash out, stack it in the alleyways and then the garbage trucks go around and pick up those trash bags.

That's the Glymphatic system. It's clearing up the trash bags. And when we're chronically underslept, it's almost like the garbage trucks didn't get to do their full route.

They don't get to do the full cleanup, and so then we are operating the next day with a city full of trash in all the alleyways and it makes it harder to think clearly, it makes it harder to have a stable mood, to have good memory and good focus and attention, creativity and resourceful thinking.

There's even some data that shows that things like the tau oligomers, the residues that we see in the brains of patients with Alzheimer's dementia, is part of what is supposed to be getting cleared away by the Glymphatic system.

So when that's not happening, it's reasonable to extrapolate that perhaps this is even, in a long term way, contributing to the eventual development of dementia.

### **Meagen Gibson**

We don't know enough yet to know if it's causation or correlation and things like that, but we know that the two things are definitely related.

I know that one of the largest chapters of your book, which I was immensely pleased to see, was on nutrition. So if we're talking about things that we can control, what do nutrition and gut health have to do with a person's ability to sleep well and lower their anxiety?

### **Dr Ellen Vora**

Yeah. If it had been up to me, that nutrition chapter would have been a whole book unto itself, but it got highly edited.

So, basically, nutrition, everything about our body, certainly our brain, it's an organ, it's a piece of flesh like anything else, and it functions well when it has the raw materials which comes from our vitamins, minerals, nutrients, which comes from our food.

With sleep, I think there are a few factors in particular about how we feed ourselves that impact our sleep quality. One is actually just our blood sugar.

Every once in a while when I meet someone, and I'm always assessing their sleep and thinking, is the problem at the falling asleep phase? Is it staying asleep through the night? Are you sleeping through the night but waking up not feeling rested?

**[00:13:44]**

And when someone experiences what's called middle insomnia, or waking up throughout the middle of the night, that always just triggers a little question in my mind about blood sugar.

A lot of things can cause middle insomnia, but blood sugar is on the differential. I'm interested in knowing if someone is basically swinging on that blood sugar roller coaster and when that's happening, every time we crash, every time we're in a state of relative hypoglycemia or low blood sugar, our body responds by secreting our stress hormones.

Things like cortisol and adrenaline, and that's what helps restore our blood sugar. It saves the day. But, if we're awake, it's during the day, we're hungry. We're overwhelmed. We can't focus.

And if it's at night, I posit that that actually puts our body in a stress response which shunts us out of deeper sleep. I believe it makes our sleep more superficial. It makes us more likely to wake up.

We're not dropping into the deeper, more restorative phases of sleep, and so it's affecting our sleep architecture and we're not getting as good sleep.

And so, I like to test this and, diagnostic and therapeutic all at once, is to have someone take a spoonful of something like almond butter or coconut oil right before they brush their teeth at night, with the idea that this is slow to digest and slow to be absorbed, and gives you a safety net of stable blood sugar.

Then that can blunt any superimposed crash, and so for many of my patients, what they find is that they start sleeping through the night.

Some of my patients even keep the jar on their bedside table. They'll take a spoonful before they brush their teeth at night. When they wake up in the middle of the night, they take another spoonful, have a sip of water, lie down and fall back asleep.

It can be really nice because it can take someone from waking up throughout the middle of the night, to finally sleeping through the night.

That's just the blood sugar story. We can talk about some other features of our diets, if you'd like.

### **Meagen Gibson**

Yeah. I would love to and it's a great point.

I love that you differentiated the difference between light sleep, deep sleep, and they all have different jobs and some are more for memory and processing and things like that. Some are for dreaming.

I also love that you pointed out that there's that middle sleep part because I didn't know before I started working on the sleep conference, that waking up in the middle of the night is normal.

Staying awake, having trouble falling back into your next sleep cycle, not normal. So, if you wake up at 2:00 A.M. and then you're up until four, then that's one of those things that you're analyzing blood sugar for, right?

### **[00:16:18] Dr Ellen Vora**

Yes. Middle sleep is one of my favorite things to enlighten people about because it can be revolutionary, and it's a very poorly named term because middle sleep, it shouldn't be called that.

It should be called middle wake up, if anything. It's not a time when you're asleep, it's the wake up that happens in a normal physiologic way in between two symmetric blocks of sleep.

So, if you're someone with a sleep shoe size of eight, and we could talk about sleep shoe size in a moment. So say you need eight hours of sleep, then you might have two or four hour blocks of sleep, with a little wake up in between.

What happens is many of us have that wake up, and because we don't know about middle sleep, we start telling ourselves a story. We're like, oh no, I'm up in the middle of the night. Oh no, this is going to be a bad night of sleep. I'm going to be tossing and turning all night. Tomorrow is going to be lousy. I'm going to do a bad job on my presentations and so on and so forth.

That brings up our stress response, and then we actually do have a hard time falling back asleep. It becomes this self fulfilling prophecy.

So, now that we all know about middle sleep, we can just be like, oh, look at the clock. This is exactly four hours after I went to bed. Maybe I'll use the restroom, have a sip of water, and then I'm going to lie here with my eyes closed in the dark, trusting that I'm going to fall back asleep in due course.

Maybe that happens after five or ten minutes. For some people it's more like twenty or thirty minutes, but we can relax into that and it can make all the difference in terms of our ability to fall back asleep.

### **Meagen Gibson**

So now that we've been educated about the blood sugar component of it, and now we know it's normal to wake up, it's almost like our brain's arousal is what's creating that longer period of wakefulness in the middle, not that our body is waking up and it shouldn't be.

I should just be like out at ten, up at six with absolutely no interruption whatsoever. Right?

### **Dr Ellen Vora**

Right. It's normal to wake up, but then I will caveat this with one other semi nutritionally related concept, which is alcohol.

So, alcohol, it's nobody's favorite conversation, I get it. We like alcohol, and part of the reason we like it is that it rushes our brain in something called GABA.

That's our primary inhibitory neurotransmitter in the central nervous system, which is very psycho-babble for this is calming. It makes us feel relaxed. It makes us not worry so much.

That's why we like alcohol. One minute we're all wound up, and the next minute we have a couple of glasses of wine and now we're like, okay, I'm confident. I'm calm, and I don't have any care in the world.



**[00:18:53]**

If the story ended there, I would say alcohol is a really good treatment for insomnia and anxiety, but it doesn't end there and our body, our brain, is not quite so concerned with whether or not we're relaxed.

It's concerned with our survival. So it sees all of this GABA in the brain and it worries that if a leopard were to come around the corner, we'd be too buzzed to care, and we could be in danger. So, it furiously tries to restore homeostasis, or the original state of balance, and part of how it does this is by converting that GABA into a very different neurotransmitter called glutamate, which is an excitatory neurotransmitter.

So, this one makes us feel irritable and on edge, and arousal, and I think that that is why after we've had a couple of drinks at dinner, we inevitably have a very restless second half of the night.

That's the GABA to glutamate conversion, and it lets us wake up in this irritated, panicky, racing thoughts feeling and then we toss and turn for the remainder of the night.

We know that alcohol disrupts sleep architecture, and I believe this is part of why and how it does that.

### **Meagen Gibson**

That's part of where the whole Sunday scaries term came from, is the aftermath of that, of having not slept well.

Also the quality of your sleep goes down as well when you throw alcohol into the equation, doesn't it?

### **Dr Ellen Vora**

Yes, exactly, and there's this GABA to glutamate conversion. There's also the blood sugar crash that can come from alcohol.

The Sunday scaries, I think, is a really interesting example where there's a lot of false anxiety, and a lot of true anxiety that all contribute.

We have social jet lag on the weekends. We hit the French press a little bit harder. We're eating out, and so eating maybe a little bit differently, and drinking more, and all of that can contribute to the false anxiety on Sunday night.

But, then, also we have the work week looming and the fact of the matter is we're burned out. We work excessively. We don't have sufficient autonomy and locus of control in the workplace.

So, I think we are understandably rebelling against that on Sunday night. I think that's very valid.

### **Meagen Gibson**

Yeah. Absolutely.

**[00:21:07]**

You brought up alcohol. I also want to talk about stimulants as well because that's the other half of arousal, if you will.

It can be things like caffeine, the cold brew, which I absolutely cannot drink, nicotine, sex for that matter, like actual arousals or stimulants can definitely throw off, can stimulate feelings of over-wakefulness and can exacerbate anxiety and sleep as well. Right?

**Dr Ellen Vora**

Yeah. That's right.

So, caffeine may be the second only to alcohol conversation in terms of it's an unpopular conversation, but basically with caffeine we just have to recognize that there's a lot of bio individuality.

One person might be a rapid metabolizer. They can have their double espresso after dinner and fall asleep a few hours later. No problem. If that's you, must be nice.

And, then for many of us, we're sensitive to caffeine. So, we might have had coffee like a month ago and we're still talking like we're on cocaine.

So, if you are sensitive to caffeine, you have to be honest with yourself about that and just get a little strategic about when you're consuming it and how much.

Caffeine has a long half life, so the earlier in the day you can consume it, that's going to make it so there's less caffeine buzzing around your brain when you're trying to fall asleep, probably not zero.

Nudging it a little earlier in the day, and sometimes decreasing the amount of caffeine we consume.

I find that with my patients, a big part of the benefit they're getting from coffee is the warmth and the taste and the ritual, and you can keep that, and just make it a half caff. That can be pretty protective of sleep.

PSA. You make all changes with caffeine gradually, not suddenly, because it's a real drug with a real withdrawal and if you go quickly, you'll have headaches and fatigue and irritability. You won't be a happy camper. So, you go gradually.

I always like to point out that we're in a lot of unconscious, vicious cycles with caffeine.

There's certainly the one where it's like, I'm tired because I didn't get good sleep. So, now you need a coffee at three in the afternoon, and then what do you know? I'm not getting good sleep, and then the next day you're tired and we need caffeine in the afternoon, and so on and so forth.

I think it's also just important to recognize that part of the reason we love coffee so much is that there's nothing like the antidote to its own withdrawal to just, feels great.

So, it's the solution to caffeine withdrawal, and that feels awesome, but we forgot to blame it for being the original source of the problem that it's solving.

And, so, that's my little mini vendetta against coffee.

**[00:23:52]**

I think you bring up a really good point. Many people think about stimulants as coffee, caffeine, but there are so many sources, and whether that's soda, energy drinks, tea, cigarettes, stimulant medications like Adderall, Vyvanse, Concerta, and these are all sources of this.

I was at a hotel last weekend for a speaking engagement, and I was coming home from the gala. It was probably 11:30 P.M.

This is late, passed my bedtime, and I was at the bar trying to order a water to bring up to my room, and I saw a family there with this little tiny kid who was up at 11:30.

Whatever, okay, I don't judge, and they were letting him choose a drink and he chose an iced tea. And I was like, no!

So, let's hope he's a rapid metabolizer. No one in that household slept that night.

**Meagen Gibson**

The bravery of those parents, right? I'm just like, in awe of that choice.

**Dr Ellen Vora**

Desperate times call for desperate measures sometimes, right?

**Meagen Gibson**

Yeah. It all has a consequence, doesn't it, and so that's why I really like to talk about it.

As I think we've found out from my jokes about cold brew, I don't metabolize caffeine well. I still have coffee every day, but it's very early in the morning, very limited, because I know I'm very sensitive.

I can't eat things like dark chocolate late at night because I can get that sensitive, right, but just the self awareness of knowing that as well.

Also, I might get some of this wrong because I know just enough to get myself in trouble, but doesn't caffeine block something as well, either a hormone or neurotransmitter?... Adenosine or something.?

**Dr Ellen Vora**

Adenosine. I think you're right. So, yeah, that's how it's creating wakefulness. It's just blocking sleepiness, basically. It's not giving us energy.

**Meagen Gibson**

Right.

**Dr Ellen Vora**

Think of it like stealing energy from the future.

**[00:25:49] Meagen Gibson**

Oh. I like that. I like that context. Caffeine is just stealing energy from the future. All right.

I also want to talk about gut health as well because, and nutrition based, not just for the stimulants and depressants, but how your nutrition is going to affect both the production of all of these hormones that fluctuate throughout our day, and how we're able to rest and also that anxiety, sleep, concentric circles of impact.

So, I'd love it if you could say just a little bit about nutrition as well. We've talked about caffeine, we've talked about sugar, but just actual nutrition in and of itself.

**Dr Ellen Vora**

Yeah, and did you say gut health in there as well?

**Meagen Gibson**

Yeah.

**Dr Ellen Vora**

So, all of these things work together in this interconnected web. Gut health in particular, like anxiety and sleep, gut health and anxiety is a two way street.

We are now at a point where our public conversation is that we know that anxiety, stress, is impacting our digestion. We know that if we're under a lot of stress, we might have nervous diarrhea, it might make an impact on our IBS, but what we're not yet talking about is that it's a two way street.

The gut is also communicating back up to the brain all the time, and if everything is good, it's saying, okay, everything is copacetic down here. Go have a great day.

But, in modern life, which makes a broad assault against the health of our digestive tract through our multiple courses of antibiotics and the pesticide residues on our food and the fact that we're eating processed foods and added sugars and alcohol, and then we're chronically stressed and we don't consume fermented foods.

Basically, all of this together means a lot of us have a pretty decimated gut flora, a very inflamed gut lining, and leaky gut, often, and so all of this is sending a really different signal up to the brain.

It's saying, everything is a mess down here. Feel uneasy, and it's going to make us feel anxious and tired and uncomfortable during the day.

It certainly impacts our sleep quality and it's basically working together, it's trying to convince us to rest and make different choices, but in modern life, we're just so chronically inflamed that that communication doesn't even work.

We just go through our lives feeling like, well I guess this is just what life feels like. We just feel lousy all the time.

**[00:28:16]**

Nutrition is such a complicated topic. It's the stuff of tribal warfare on the internet, and I think that we need more of a nuanced conversation of that dialectic between orthorexia and getting obsessive around eating in an exactly right way, and body positivity, which has this incredibly, really good spirit to it, right?

To finally talk back to patriarchal pressure and all of us getting into a war with our bodies and making ourselves small and denying ourselves pleasure.

I'm so glad we're finally having this movement and this conversation, but what you see is that sometimes people run the other direction and in the words of my friend Elise, start eating like teenagers.

What we need to get back to is feeding ourselves in a way that has an eye towards nourishment without inflaming us, and doing that from an attitude of ease and pleasure and affordability and convenience, and not from a place of fearing food, or feeling like our bodies are fragile, or obsessiveness, or letting meal prep become a part time job.

I find that two compasses that I always come back to, one is that the goal is just to generally try to err on the side of eating real food and avoiding fake food.

That usually takes care of a lot of the hyper palatable, processed foods hijacking our appetites and our cravings, and it allows us to intuitively reach for what our body needs.

And, then, the other compass I like is that you always want to make all eating choices from a place of radical self love. It's never from a place of punishing ourselves or self negation.

It's not from a place of trying to control everything in our lives through perfect eating. It's an act of, here's how I show myself that I love myself and I take care of myself.

### **Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely. I love that contextually as well, and there's so much research around if you've got too much control or you're trying to exert too much control over your nutrition and things like Orthorexia, that it can cause much more stress and high cortisol levels and things like that, and have a negative impact on your health because you're trying so hard to be healthy.

So, I love that kind of balance of knowing and being educated, knowing what you eat, what you put in your body, is going to impact your ability to sleep.

It's going to impact your anxiety. It's going to impact your mental health, but also, is it accessible? Is it affordable? Am I doing the best I can to make great choices to support my body and the life that I want to live?

### **Dr Ellen Vora**

Yeah, and I think just to underline something you said right there, the reason this matters for our mental health is that our mental health is just this piece of flesh, our brain functioning well.

**[00:31:10]**

If it's functioning well, we have good mental health. We have the ability to sleep and focus and be patient and be creative and have good skin and live a long time.

If our brain has disordered metabolism, if it doesn't have all of the vitamins and minerals and nutrients it requires to function properly, if it doesn't have the neurotransmitters that are relying on certain bacteria in our gut to contribute to the manufacturing of those neurotransmitters, then it's a machine with the springs popping out and it doesn't really work that well. And that shows up as poor mental health.

So, oftentimes, and this is one part empowering and hopeful, and one part overwhelming and feels like, why are you telling me this? I didn't want to know that what I ate mattered, but it matters.

I hope that we're mostly emphasizing the fact that you have more control of your mental health than you might realize.

If you're struggling or if you're feeling hopeless or defeated by the current treatments on our very limited menu, don't despair because there's so much more we can do and nourishing ourselves and giving ourselves juicy nutrition that really gives the brain everything it needs is a very effective strategy for having better mental health.

### **Meagen Gibson**

Yeah, and I always like to, when we softly approach this part of the conversation, I always like to tell people that I have absolutely no problem with mental health medication.

I think people should take it. I think it is fantastic, especially in a lot of situations where there's no access to any other better resources for mental health support.

I think it gives people, and obviously you can speak your expert opinion, I am not a psychologist, I don't play one on TV, but that it gives people a place of support from which to investigate all of these other avenues.

They can get nutrition support. They can get educated about their mind and body. They can pursue these avenues from a place of safety and support that is provided by medication. So, I always like to say that.

### **Dr Ellen Vora**

Yeah, I'm so glad you brought it up, and just a little touch upon the nuanced conversation around psych meds is that, I do think we lack informed consent around the risks, around side effects, around the real efficacy and the process of getting off of it and what that might be like. We haven't been giving people the information they deserve before they take that first pill.

But my view on meds, I'm a psychiatrist. I prescribe meds. I'm not dogmatically opposed to them at all. They can be an incredibly helpful bridge, and when it's working for someone, I count that as a victory.

And, so, if that's you listening right now, if you are at home and you're helped by psych meds, this is great. I'm here to say that you're lucky and keep taking your meds.

**[00:33:54]**

And, then, I think that there's these other millions of people who are suffering in some way with their mental health, and the existing paradigm has not been satisfactorily helpful for one reason or another.

Maybe they took a med and it was helpful at first, but the effect waned, or maybe they experienced side effects, or maybe they have a contraindication. They can't take it anymore.

Whatever the reason, that's where I just feel like we've been doing a disservice to people by having such a limited menu and our training is so limited, and it's the only tool we've got. Therapy and meds.

If you are someone who you feel like you've tried everything, and you go back and you try a new pill and you raise the dose, and that's the only strategy, and if it hasn't brought you relief, you can start to feel really demoralized, and you can despair.

So it's for those folks that I'm here to say there's always reason for hope, and we can expand our understanding of how we support our mental health.

These are two paths up the mountain, and if they're working for you, great. If they're not working for you, come over here. We can take a different path. And so I just want everyone to realize there's a path for them.

### **Meagen Gibson**

Thank you for the excellent context and expanding on what I said in a very limited way.

And I also want to touch on melatonin as well, because a lot of the people that I've spoken to casually in conversation, because we all have our area of expertise, and everyone's area of expertise is not the hormones that are naturally produced in the human body, and so I'll talk to people about melatonin, and they're like, what are you doing? Oh, I'm doing a sleep conference.

Oh, well, have you told people about melatonin. I take it every night, and I'm like, strangely enough, did you know that your body makes melatonin? And then they're like, what? I thought it only came in a gummy.

And I'm like, yeah, actually, your body is supposed to make melatonin. A lot of people don't have the basic knowledge that they don't have to take melatonin.

And then melatonin is a fantastic support in limited situations. If you have jet lag or if you're a shift worker and things like that, where you're going to need to jump start your circadian rhythm.

I just found that a lot of people actually don't know that melatonin is made in the body.

### **Dr Ellen Vora**

I love that. They're like, my pineal gland makes gummies. That's incredible.

## **Meagen Gibson**

Right? Exactly. It just churns them out on a little factory.

## **[00:36:10] Dr Ellen Vora**

Yeah, melatonin. It's always an interesting conversation. We think of it as a sleep aid, like a safe, over the counter sleep aid.

It's not exactly a sleep aid. It's something that tells your body what time of day it is and your body, the poor thing, doesn't have an inbuilt iPhone connected to a satellite image.

It has no way of knowing the time other than using light cues, and so our eyes are constantly scanning the landscape, sending that information to the suprachiasmatic nuclei in the brain, and it's coming to some assessment of what time of day it is based on the light.

And so melatonin is what we secrete in response to darkness, and it tells our body, it's night time, it's time to go to bed.

And call me old fashioned, but I actually really like to encourage our body to secrete endogenous melatonin in response to the actual time of day. And so that just requires getting appropriate light cues, which is easier said than done in the modern environment.

So we need bright light during the day, like taking a circadian walk in the morning, making sure we get actual sunshine into our actual eyeballs as early as possible.

And then to really make sure that we're witnessing the transition of light at sunset and being surrounded by authentic, convincing darkness in the evening, which is tough because we're surrounded by a psychedelic light show of overhead lighting and TVs and laptops and iPhones.

And so I like people to get themselves a pair of blue blocking glasses.

## **Meagen Gibson**

Those are fantastic. I just had a time warp.

## **Dr Ellen Vora**

You got to block the blue spectrum light from getting into your eyes. You put them on at sunset. There we go. Yours are much hip-er.

You put them on at sunset. You wear them until bedtime, and it doesn't give you my blessing to fully just scroll Tik Tok until one in the morning, but at the very least, it will not let the blue light of our modern life suppress our melatonin in the evening.

And I like this kind of health intervention, something that's non invasive, it's inexpensive, it has high potential benefit. Honestly, it's these things and the squatty potty, those nail that demographic.

And I think that they make them looking cute and trendy now you don't have to look like you're doing...



And then I think what you're doing is you're helping your body secrete melatonin endogenously. That said, exactly as you put it, for jet lag, for shift labor, I think melatonin has a role and it can be really helpful, but relying on it all the time just tells me that we need to fix your light cues so that your brain can start to do this on its own.

### **[00:38:53] Meagen Gibson**

And if anybody feels like... I'm in the middle of this process right now, just to tell everybody that they've got a companion on that path.

I'm literally trying to get off melatonin, and getting up at six o'clock every morning, getting light into my eyes before 9:00 A.M. without sunglasses, going through the process of slowly weaning myself off. And it's hard, but it's worth it because I want to be able to produce it naturally.

### **Dr Ellen Vora**

It is hard, and good for you for this process. We're all in this, right? I don't do this work because all of this comes to me easily. I'm in this journey. That's why I care.

And one note, just because this is true for me, I get my circadian walk in the morning when I drop my daughter off at school. But I'm usually, let's face it, not taking the time to put on contacts first thing in the morning.

So I wear my glasses and they have blue blocking lenses. Not like this, but like subtle blue blocking lenses. So I always make sure that at some point after I've dropped her off, I turn east, take off my glasses, I'm like, okay and then proceed with my walk to make sure I get some sunshine without that blue blocking filter.

### **Meagen Gibson**

I'm glad that you said that because there's got to be more than one person watching that wears glasses that would be in the exact same scenario. I put my contacts in right away because I'm very, very blind.

I love that you named blue blocking glasses. Also, people can change their computer screen so that it dims and has more of a yellow light, than blue light.

What are some other things that people can do today if they're struggling with their sleep, tonight, steps that they can take?

### **Dr Ellen Vora**

Yeah. I think what you just mentioned, those are no-brainers, Flux on your computer and on your phone, night shift mode and night mode, which doesn't entirely solve the blue spectrum light problem, but it helps. And why not do it? It's free, sort of 'set it and forget it' in the background.

So if you want to help your sleep tonight, ideally you saw some sunlight this morning. Ideally you're getting outside and getting some movement and some fresh air and all of that sensory gestalt of activity and fresh air and that experience of being in nature and moving our bodies.

You've pushed your caffeine a little bit earlier. Maybe you consume less of it. Maybe you take a night off from drinking tonight. Doing something blood sugar stabilizing in the evening. Trying to wrap up your eating around seven or eight P.M.

### **[00:41:17]**

You can certainly take a hot shower about an hour before you're going to climb into bed, and that can help with your circadian queues around temperature.

Keeping your bedroom cold, optimal for human sleep is around 65 degrees Fahrenheit. That's pretty chilly. You can have a warm comforter, but I do more like 67, 68.

And all of that transitioning from a hot shower to a cold bedroom helps cue your brain. It's reminiscent of the fact that when we were still sleeping outside after the sunsets, it naturally gets colder.

And then a little magnesium glycinate is a nice support. I think magnesium, whereas melatonin is not my first line supplement for sleep, magnesium is.

And magnesium glycinate is a nice, safe, gentle supplement that you can take in the evening, and it helps. It goes beyond sleep. It helps with anxiety and headaches and menstrual cramps, muscle tension, digestion, longevity, everything.

But basically, you just take, 120 to 140 milligrams is what I usually take, but everyone has to gauge it for themselves. You can work with your practitioner about the right dose for you.

Basically take a little magnesium in the evening, either in pill form, or you can take an Epsom salt bath, which is also a nice way to absorb...

### **Meagen Gibson**

I learned that from your book. I was delighted. I was like, this is why I love Epsom salts. My ten year old has gotten so boujee. He's like, I want the lavender Epsom salts tonight, and then he sleeps like... But I had no idea, I didn't know the connection until I read your book.

### **Dr Ellen Vora**

It's a great hack for parents, too. If our daughter gets out of sync with sleep, it's Epsom salts in the bath.

And then basically, if you want to take a spoonful of coconut oil or almond butter before you brush your teeth, set yourself up for stable blood sugar.

And then perhaps most importantly of all, you're not bringing your phone into the bedroom. I know that's a tough one, like, if you haven't already made this change, you're like, what? There's no way. It's impossible.

But what you do is just pilot it. You don't have to commit to this, but just try it out where you set up your notifications differently, set up a different alarm.

If you need an alarm, maybe it's an Alexa or Google home or an analog alarm clock. And then you set up your charger somewhere else in your home other than your bedroom.

**[00:43:30]**

And then around maybe 9:00 P.M., you kiss your phone good night, phone, I love you. I'm going to miss you. And then you proceed into this phone free sanctuary, and you might even read a paper book by dim light, and wear your glasses.

And then that motion of your eyes going along the page is very soporific. It's conducive to sleep. And the phone, on the other hand, is so activating, partly the blue light, which you can block out, but it's partly the fact that social media apps have no natural stopping cue.

So we scroll endlessly. And it's the attention economy, so it instills uncertainty and doubt and controversy and preys on our fear response to keep us glued so that they get more clicks and more ad revenue and more scrolling.

But our sleep and our mental health are the collateral damage. So not having your phone on your bedside table is a very impactful change you can make to protect your sleep.

### **Meagen Gibson**

It's another tough one that I'm in the middle of. I've broken up with my phone. I now have a Kindle without a backlight. So I'm reading the Kindle. I will get the Kindle out eventually and go to paper books.

But just to say I'm with everybody on the change train. It's harder than it sounds. So we have talked about a lot. We've covered the spectrum. Right?

So if somebody wants to do a deep dive but they're a little bit overwhelmed, other than the tips we've obviously told people that they can apply today, where would you recommend that people start when trying to evaluate their anxiety and their sleep issues?

### **Dr Ellen Vora**

Yeah, and I have that tendency to overwhelm people with like, here are the 5000 things.

### **Meagen Gibson**

Well, I led the way.

### **Dr Ellen Vora**

I think that, in my book I rephrase it as, think of this as a buffet. You're not expected to do all of this.

Figure out what you're drawn to, what resonates. You start there, and then you make some incremental progress and maybe the next change feels accessible.

I think if you want me to help triage a little bit, here's what I think are the most impactful changes when it comes to sleep.

A circadian walk in the morning where you're seeing sunshine as early in the morning as possible, keeping the phone out of the bedroom at night, and supplementing a little magnesium, I think is a really good combo.

**[00:45:51]**

And for anxiety more broadly, I think prioritizing sleep is really impactful for anxiety. Keeping your blood sugar stable. And then I would say prioritizing community.

And even if that means not prioritizing eating perfectly or getting everything on your to-do list done, or even getting into bed early, I think that community is a big part of how we feel calm and at ease.

I think this has to do with evolution. I think that on the savannah of evolution, we were not the fastest species or the strongest species. We were the ones that figured out how to cooperate with each other.

And for that reason, when we feel socially connected and held in community, we feel safe. And when we feel isolated or disconnected or ostracized, on some level in our hard wiring it feels like a matter of life or death.

So, the more we can prioritize community in whatever form feels good to us, even if we're introverted, it doesn't have to be a networking event. It can be a walk in the park with a close buddy.

But something that helps us feel held in community is very calming to anxiety. It promotes longevity and better brain function, and it also just makes life worth living.

### **Meagen Gibson**

So thank you for contextualizing the importance of community. I think that's a great point and one that we've overlooked in the last two and a half years, for sure, as we all get back into those routines and slowly ease back into the activities of our kids and the activities of our communities that we all enjoyed in the before times.

Dr Ellen Vora, how can people get a hold of you? How can they learn about your work, and your book?

### **Dr Ellen Vora**

Sure, yeah. I mean, the three best ways. One is on social media. I'm @Ellen Vora MD.

My book *The Anatomy of Anxiety* is, like, my life's work in 250 pages.

And if somebody wants to work with me, I actually haven't been taking new patients for many years now, but I'm moving towards some kind of online group program. So the best way to stay informed about that is to sign up for my newsletter on my website, which is [ellenvora.com](http://ellenvora.com)

### **Meagen Gibson**

Fantastic. Thanks again so much for being with us today.

**Dr Ellen Vora**

Thank you so much, Meagen. It's been a pleasure.