

Curatio Connects podcast with Dr. Scott Lear

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[00:00:02] (Robert) Hi and welcome to Curatio Connects, a podcast about health, wellness and staying connected.

[00:00:09] (Dr. Lear) Most of us are going to have periods of sadness every day throughout the day. That's going to be normal. That's another thing that can help us, realizing that anxiety is a normal and natural response to what's going on. Don't expect yourself that you need to be happy all the time, but make sure there are opportunities for you to be happy each day.

[00:00:31] (Robert) That's Dr. Scott Lear. He's a professor in health sciences at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver. He also does research on how your lifestyle can be helpful in preventing and managing chronic diseases. He'll be here to talk about that and doing that in the midst of a global pandemic.

Find out more about our app, called Stronger Together, designed to help you cope and thrive during COVID-19. You can download it for free from iTunes or Google Play. And for more about Curatio- visit us online at Curatio.me

[00:01:18] (Dr. Lear) I'm a professor in health sciences at Simon Fraser University and I also hold a research chair at St. Paul's Hospital. And for the past 20 years or so, I've been conducting research on how we can prevent and to manage heart disease and other chronic diseases. And on one hand, how can we get people being more physically active? How does the environment and where we live relate to our activity and nutrition? And on the other side, for people with heart disease, how can we get them better at self-management or support them in their self-care through things like lifestyle? And in the past few years, I have started a lifestyle medicine focused blog, www.DrScottLear.com because I was realizing that despite publishing my research in journals and getting papers out, nobody in my target audience was probably ever reading them and thought a blog and even doing things like this, podcasting would be a great way to share that knowledge.

[00:02:26] (Robert) Well, that's really interesting. So, you're kind of covering a bunch of different areas. So you've got the research side, you've got the teaching side, and then you've also got the, you know, the practical side and, you know, good on you for reaching out into other forms of communication to reach a much broader audience.

[00:02:42] (Dr. Lear) Yeah. And I made it in my parents' eyes once I was quoted in Reader's Digest.

[00:02:49] (Robert) Nice.

[00:02:52] So let's talk about the situation we have right now with Covid, where people are either self-distancing or social distancing or in self-isolation or maybe, you know, even in more confined quarters than that. How do they, how they go about keeping up a healthy lifestyle when they're really restricted in their movements and their ability to get around?

[00:03:14] (Dr. Lear) It definitely is a challenge, that's for sure. So, what I will touch on is not necessarily easy in a sense. And not saying that, you know, if you're not doing it,

you're not doing it well. But we have to also keep perspective that at some point in time this will be over. And there's a concern that if we're focused too much on the short term health, long term health of individuals ourselves and others, especially those who might have chronic diseases like diabetes, heart disease or at risk for these conditions as well as others, their health may be compromised in the long run. So probably the first thing that all of us are doing, I'm sure, it's just sitting more. So that's something that we should try to limit and a common rule of thumb is every half hour, get up, walk around for two minutes. It's not a big amount of time, but it's enough to keep our engines going. Our bodies are like those, you know, like the BMW that stops at the stop sign and shuts off and then starts again once you're ready to go, that's like our bodies and that's an efficient mechanism. But we're not meant to be sitting during the day like a lot of us do. Even outside of this, a lot of people have, a lot of us have desk jobs as well. So that small amount, that small break can be really helpful. And you could get up and, you know, unload the dishwasher or do some laundry or something like that or just even, you know, sometimes when I'm watching a movie, I'll just walk in place. So that's, one of the key things I think is important, because if we are at work, we would probably be walking from, whether it's our car, the bus stop, in and out of the office, going to the water cooler, maybe the printer chatting, maybe going out, even if we're going out to buy our lunch, we're getting out and doing those types of things. So those are things that most of us don't notice. Other things that can help, there's a lot of personal trainers, a lot of dance instructors doing online instructions for free. So, my daughter and I, we've done some ballet instruction. The American Heart Association has had a couple on the Ellen Show. Him and his wife three times a week so far have been doing some easy hip hop, just moving about for half an hour. And even before that, there's stuff, lots of stuff archived on YouTube. You can type in home exercise no equipment, because outside of toilet paper, fitness equipment has also gone off the shelf. My son uses four liter milk jugs, filtered water and does curls with those, bicep curls, just while he's watching TV.

[00:06:28] (Robert) Right. Right. So, don't let the idea that you don't have to have a home gym in order just to keep doing exercises.

[00:06:34] (Dr. Lear) Yeah, most definitely. There's a lot of things that you can do with just things in your house. And as long as you have, like, you know, a space of about two feet by four feet, you can probably do some sort of home activity.

[00:06:50] (Robert) How do we rearrange our expectation of what our exercise schedule should be given the circumstance?

[00:06:56] (Dr. Lear) Yeah. So again, it will depend on individual situations. I know people living in apartment buildings who don't go out pretty much. Not because they're inactive, the person that comes to mind, has been an international orienteering competitor, but because of the physical distancing she's concerned about getting into the elevator and that is a barrier for her to get outside and she's on the 23rd floor. So, going up and down the stairs isn't appealing to her number of times a day. So, in an ideal world and we live far from an ideal world, is you do a bit of both, limiting your sitting and getting in anywhere from 20 to 30 minutes of activity that gets your heart rate up per day. And we know that even those people who sit for six to eight hours a day and exercise for an hour later in the day, that's still not as good as if it was interspersed throughout the day. And in particular because most of the time during the day, even if we're just having three meals, we're going to be metabolizing that food and if we just sit down right away, the engine shuts off. And then things like blood sugar, that's in our blood that we use for energy accumulate in the bloodstream.

[00:08:17] (Robert) So, you know, this sounds like advice that probably we could use even under normal circumstances. But in these circumstances becomes so much more important because we're not getting, as you say, those distance walks say if you do go to work, we're not getting just any kind of social walking around because we don't. Do have to get our heart rate up or is it just really just move around?

[00:08:38] (Dr. Lear) The minimum would be just moving around. Getting the heart rate up fits in with the recommended guidelines for physical activity, which say doing 20 to 30 minutes of moderate to vigorous activity. So that would be a brisk walk and above, a bicycle ride.

[00:08:56] But the biggest gains occur from going from the couch to moving and so even if you go from zero to a tiny bit, that's still better. People who are working from home have a bit of routine and that keeps their mind focused. But there's a lot of people who aren't working and that time without that routine, for some people can actually increase their anxiety, mental well-being may start to go down. And so, building in walks, if you can exercise, that builds that routine. But then you also get the mental wellbeing effects of being active as well.

[00:09:36] (Robert) Can explain what actually happens there, what's actually happening when I get up and move around, why does that help me psychologically?

[00:09:41] (Dr. Lear) It gets you focused on something else first off. And so, if you just think of, let's say you're working on a problem or you've got something really pressing on your mind, you get up and walk around. Even if you're walking around in the room, it gives you, I wouldn't say necessarily a different environment but it's sort of like that. When you start getting active and when your heart rate gets up, it releases different hormones which are actually similar to opioids in the sense of pain suppression, endorphins are considered the happiness hormone. I kind of think of it as it's like clearing your mind. And if you're going for a walk, especially if you're outside, especially on days in the spring, the summer coming up, that exposure to nature also has a restorative feeling. And then you come back in and you feel a bit more able to handle things. And again, if you've had a more vigorous workout, it can kind of burn off that anxiety and stress that you may be feeling beforehand.

[00:10:49] (Robert) And what are some other thoughts or what are some other tips you might have for us around that whole idea of mental wellbeing? So, you know, getting up and moving around is going to help you physically but also mentally. But what other things can people do or what other tasks can they put in their day to maybe help them with that?

[00:11:05] (Dr. Lear) Yeah, and one of the one of the key things is having a routine. The reason for that is if our mental well-being is deteriorating, which there's probably a lot of challenges going on for people right now, it's mainly as a result of this uncertainty, we don't know what's going on, we can't control what's happening in the world. And we might have people that we're concerned about, you might be worried about our own health. And right now, for a lot of us, our coping mechanisms have been taken away. We can't go to the gym, no dinner parties, social engagement is limited. So, we need to look at ways that we can control things around us and having a routine is an excellent way to do that. So when I usually start with the foundation of a good night's sleep and to have a consistent wake and bedtime each day and to resist the urge of like staying up till midnight, 1:00 or 2:00 in the morning, sleeping until 10:00 and shifting everything around because our bodies don't like that, our body has its own internal clock. And if we're consistent, then we'll be far better

refreshed than if our bedtimes are different if we're getting adequate amounts of sleep. And then building things like that time for the walk. If you're working from home, that will provide some structure, but also make sure you build in breaks. If you like to read the news, build in time for that and try not to go into an endless rabbit hole. Because if you read too many negative articles, that's not going to help your wellbeing. Plan in time for doing things that you enjoy. If you're not working, doing things like starting a task, like a puzzle or a hobby and working on projects, whether it might be cleaning out your closet or reading a book and building that time in, those types of things, especially when they're physical like a puzzle or cleaning out a closet, actually gives us a sense of control, a sense of mastery, which also can help to relieve anxiety as well and try to stay socially engaged. So, we want to physically distance, but we don't want to socially distance. The reality is that most of us are going to have periods of sadness every day throughout the day, and that's going to be normal. That's another thing that can help, is realizing that anxiety is a normal and natural response to what's going on. Don't expect yourself that you need to be happy all of the time, but make sure there are opportunities for you to be happy each day.

[00:13:58] (Robert) I'm wondering too what you think about, like we are kind of having to learn as we go this new way of living and getting by. And it's not that we've suddenly been given a set of new rules that are in place, they're changing. It's almost every day or every few days, things change. How hard is that for us, just as a as a person to cope with? Is that a challenge in itself, the fact that we're in this kind of fluid environment?

[00:14:24] (Dr. Lear) Yeah. And we're probably starting to see things change less often than they were maybe four to six weeks ago. Every day there was something new coming out, new recommendation from a science and health point of view, we're learning as we're going. So that adds to that uncertainty, and we're creatures of routine. We like to know that, okay, this is going to happen today or that's going to happen tomorrow. But oddly enough, most of us are exposed to change all the time. You know, if you have kids, you know, you have hardly much control over what goes on in the house, even in the best of times. There is sometimes in jobs where you don't necessarily have that control. So that change can feed into that uncertainty. So that's why it's important to find a few things in your life that you can actually have some control over. So that can be the routine, that can be doing the sour dough, that can be reaching out to people, that can be doing some exercise. Another thing that can help people is actually helping people. One thing that is beneficial about helping is that you help two people, actually. Research has shown that usually the giver gets more out of something than the recipient. First off, if we're physical distancing, that's helping, that's helping the community, helping ourselves. The other thing is there's, we probably all know some people who are living alone and regardless of what age. So contacting them, reaching out to them, having that social connection is a value. For those people who are working, you might be saving money during this period because you're not paying for gas, you're not driving around, you're not going out for restaurants. But there are the small businesses that are suffering. Some of them offer gift certificates that you can purchase. Some of them are doing takeout so you can support them that way. Another thing is our local food banks, their donations are shrinking because people aren't physically dropping off food, but they all take online donations. And the need, unfortunately, is probably going to increase as well. And another area that people can help with is blood donations. So, blood donations have decreased for the same reason, people are concerned about being out with other people, but they've also decreased because the blood donor clinics have set up elaborate physical distancing. You can no longer do drop in, to the clinic. They have far less appointments than they used to, but their need for blood hasn't gone down. So those are some ways and those other things that people can

do. Like if you're going grocery shopping and you know your neighbor needs something, just pick it up for them and help.

[00:17:29] (Robert) As you say, the helping is actually twofold, because you're helping people around you and you're helping the community and you're also providing some benefit to your own self.

[00:17:38] (Dr. Lear) Yeah, definitely. There's a few studies that have looked at kind of areas of the brain when people are helping others and find that those people, who are on the giving end it lights up, what we call reward centers in our brain as opposed to people who are on the receiving end.

[00:17:57] (Robert) Dr. Scott Lear. On Twitter and Facebook he's @drscottlear and he also has a blog and podcast at drscottlear.com. And his last name is spelled L-E-A-R.

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For the team at Curatio and the Stronger Together app, I'm Robert Ouimet. Thanks for listening.