

Mayo Clinic Q & A - Dr. Benjamin Lai - Kicking the COVID hab...

Tue, 7/27 1:19PM 19:59

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

patients, ben, stress, people, routine, feel, home, mayo clinic, helpful, habit, developing, pandemic, ruminate, motivation, create, exercise, anxiety, family, oftentimes, encourage

SPEAKERS

Dr. Halena Gazelka, Narrator, Dr. Ben Lai

-
- N** Narrator 00:01
Coming up on Mayo Clinic Q&A,
 - D** Dr. Ben Lai 00:04
It's okay to seek help. This is stressful for everybody. Everyone is adjusting to all of this. And it's okay to ask for help. It's okay to feel not as well as you'd like to feel.
 - N** Narrator 00:14
The COVID-19 pandemic has had a major effect on our lives. Many of us are feeling challenges that can cause stress, returning to work, the Delta variant, vaccine hesitancy, all can be overwhelming and cause strong emotions. Learning to cope with stress and manage anxiety can start at the smallest level.
 - D** Dr. Ben Lai 00:33
Little by little, you kind of make these small reintegrations. And oftentimes, if we start slow, we're able to kind of go back up again. If we give up there's zero chance for success, right? But if we do it again, there's at least a chance, even if it's miniscule, it's still a chance

that we can succeed and at least improve.

D Dr. Halena Gazelka 00:35

Welcome, everyone to Mayo Clinic Q&A. I'm Dr. Halena, Gazelka. Thanks for being here today. I don't know about you, but COVID has been tough for sticking to good habits and not developing bad habits. This last year and a half has created stress and anxiety and changes in many of our lives. And I've had to fight my way back from a few bad habits, and I bet you have too. I have a family practice physician from Mayo Clinic, Dr. Ben Lai, here to discuss this with us today. Ben and I are friends and work together on multiple committees here at Mayo, and I knew he would be just the person to talk with us today. Thanks for being here, Ben.

D Dr. Ben Lai 01:32

Thanks for having me Halena. It's great to be here.

D Dr. Halena Gazelka 01:35

Why in the world, Ben, is it's so hard to kick bad habits when you form them?

D Dr. Ben Lai 01:41

Yeah. So, you know, I think COVID-19 has presented with just a slew of changes. And I think this all boils down to stress. You know, when we're all under stress, we all revert back to what's comfortable, what we know that's familiar. So, let's look what is stress? Well, stress is novelty.

D Dr. Halena Gazelka 02:04

I know it when I feel it.

D Dr. Ben Lai 02:05

Yes, unpredictability, a threat to yourself or your ego, and a sense of loss of control. Well, with COVID-19, that's the perfect setup. This is new, none of us have ever experienced something like this before. We don't know when it's going to end, you know, many of us are faced with furloughs, changes in our routine, we're working from home now, the gyms are closed, and it's a threat to ourselves, you know. Are we going to get sick? Are we going to be safe at work? And we have no control over the situation. And when we're faced with

this chronically, and especially with COVID, because some of our traditional coping mechanisms are no longer there. We can't go to the gym anymore to exercise. We can't go visit a friend anymore because we're supposed to social distance. We go back to what's familiar, comfort eating, Well, some of us seek alcohol, some of us maybe spend too much time on social media. And so, it really is kind of a culmination, and it all boils down to, I think stress, chronic stress.

D

Dr. Halena Gazelka 03:16

And Ben, I think for some individuals, probably the varied change in how they work. So, you and I still go to an office to the clinic and see patients in the clinic, but many of our colleagues are actually working from home now. And I think that just that probably change in pattern as well lends itself to some bad habits.

D

Dr. Ben Lai 03:36

Yeah, I agree with you completely. I think it's that blurring between what's personal and what's work. I think it's the lack of routine or a change in routine, you know. Many of us just get up, and then we go to our desk, and we start working, and then we go back and, you know, to our families, all in the same living space. And I think oftentimes that blurring really it can create psychological and even mental confusion or havoc. And so, I think that really is creating more disruptions, if anything else.

D

Dr. Halena Gazelka 04:13

Ben, before you and I were going to do this podcast today, I was trying to think up a list of bad habits that I could think of that were a potential during COVID either that I've had, others have had, or that I could think of being a possibility. One is being at home and so stress eating and eating comfort foods and then maybe not staying your exercise routine, like you mentioned, because the gyms weren't always open. Now, some of them are opening in some areas. Alcohol, drinking more because it's an anxiolytic I guess, and because we're home more. So, a lot, but there are many, many things. And what else do patients talk to you about?

D

Dr. Ben Lai 04:53

Well, I think a lot of people spend too much time or more than before watching TV, tuning into the news, social media is a big one. Many just lose the motivation to do their normal tasks. So, they just end up sitting and not doing very much. They worry, they watch the news, it's very concerning, and there are multiple issues going on in the news that can

consume their energy until they feel very lethargic. So, one of the biggest things that I hear from patients is that I just don't have the motivation to do anything anymore. And, you know, alternatively, there is a small group of patients actually, who actually are taking charge and doing more things. I actually have some patients who have lost a lot of weight, because they're no longer eating out. They're not working as many hours. So, they're taking the opportunity to go for more walks and exercise. But I think by and large, the majority of patients who seem to have lost that motivation to want to do things, they no longer go on vacation, they can't. And so, there is nothing really to look forward to. I remember one patient telling me, well, we know we used to go out for movies every weekend, we can't do that anymore, so, what do I do with my family? So, I think that is the biggest issue that many patients struggle with, many families.

D

Dr. Halena Gazelka 06:18

Ben, how do you know when someone is facing a lack of motivation or difficulty engaging, maybe even socially, because of stress? Or how does someone know if they're really suffering from significant depression that they should talk to their clinician about? Because that sounds like it could be depression, I imagine.

D

Dr. Ben Lai 06:42

Yeah. So, I mean, it all, you know, initially, it's an adjustment. We all kind of adjusted to this new way of living. However, if it's prolonged, if it starts to get in the way of them doing their daily routines and their tasks, or some patients are very open with me, they say, I really just don't see a point. I think those are definitely red flags for me to seek help. And it's okay to seek help. This is stressful for everybody. And, you know, that's what I tell a lot of my patients. We say that this is perhaps a bit of a hidden pandemic, really, is that everyone is adjusting to all of this. And it's okay to ask for help. It's okay to feel not as well as you'd like to feel. So, I encourage my patients, actually every time they feel something that's different, to come and talk to me. It doesn't hurt to talk about it, and if we deem that this is an adjustment issue, we have plenty, you know, we have some tools to help our patients through. And if we feel that the patient needs a higher level of care, we certainly would offer that.

D

Dr. Halena Gazelka 07:50

Oh, that's great to know. So, Ben just thinking back to taking an example of a habit, maybe we can each identify one habit that we that we'd like to tweak or change that that has resulted from COVID? What are the steps that someone takes when they want to kind of reverse things?

D Dr. Ben Lai 08:12
Well, I think let's use weight loss as an example. You know, this is very common, perhaps even more so with a COVID pandemic. Typically, you know, I might have a patient that comes in and says, you know doc, I'm 50 pounds overweight, I need to lose this right? Well, 50 pounds is a huge challenge. It's a big mountain to climb. I think one thing is for us to break things into bite sized chunks. Go out for a walk, even if it's a five-minute walk, that's five minutes you didn't do the week before. So, and if you're able to meet these small goals, it gives you more motivation to kind of do more the following week. Sometimes it's helpful.

D Dr. Halena Gazelka 08:15
Okay.

D Dr. Ben Lai 08:52
Oh, go ahead.

D Dr. Halena Gazelka 08:53
No, go ahead, Ben. Sorry.

D Dr. Ben Lai 08:54
That sometimes it's helpful to write your goals down or to tell somebody about your goals, tell your husband, tell your wife, tell your children. That's a commitment goal, now you've committed yourself, and other people are there to keep you accountable, or they might want to join you. So, you know, your wife or your husband might say, you know what, I think I need to go out for a walk too. And that sometimes is helpful.

D Dr. Halena Gazelka 09:16
And it is easier to form a new habit if someone else is willing to do it with you.

D Dr. Ben Lai 09:21
Absolutely, and then to keep each other accountable. I think setting your environment up so that it's easier to do these things is helpful. For example, you want to set your shoes up in front of your door and then that way it's easy to do it. Or if you want to eat better,

perhaps stocking your fridge up in your pantry up with healthier options rather than some of the unhealthy options. That way if you're tempted to snack, well, you have to snack on the healthy stuff.

D Dr. Halena Gazelka 09:51
Right, no tortilla chips are in the cabinet.

D Dr. Ben Lai 09:53
No tortilla chips but plenty of vegetables and fruits and things like that. And I think one thing is, you know, none of us are machines. You know, we're all humans. And I think learning to forgive yourself, you know, we all could revert back to our old habits. The thing is recognizing it, picking it up and do it again. If we give up, there's zero chance for success, right? But if we do it again, there's at least a chance, even if it's minuscule, it's still a chance that we can succeed and at least improve. So, those are kind of the main things.

D Dr. Halena Gazelka 10:29
I like what you said, Ben, it made me think of in my own life routine is helpful to me, I'm kind of a person of structure, I kind of tend to follow about the same schedule every day, so that I know that I'm going to get up, and I'm going to work out, and I'm going to fit that in my day, somehow. Sometimes I'll even jot notes to remember to go walk up the 20 flights of stairs in this building during the break during the day or something like that. I like goals to set, and I like routine. So, I think that your techniques for fitting it into your day and making sure that it gets done. That's really helpful.

D Dr. Ben Lai 11:04
Yeah, routine is very important right, and I encourage my patients to write things down. Timetable your days, you know, set yourself a lunchtime, set yourself a time when you go out and exercise. Going back to the example of my patient that says, well, I don't know what to do with my family anymore because every Sunday, we would go out for movies. Well, I told that patient, I made the suggestion, why don't we pencil in a family night, we make it something special, we put on a really nice movie, but then we maybe make a meal together as a family with the kids. And that way, even if you can go out and do what you previously did, you can still make it a special occasion, that way creating a routine and then having something to look forward to is important.

D Dr. Halena Gazelka 11:49

It is, and I could see that being very valuable to those who work at home, too. You mentioned making sure that they have a schedule for the day. Well, it's easy to miss lunch when you're just keeping going on zoom meeting after zoom meeting after zoom meeting, or I'm just going to finish this document because I'm at home, and I can run grab something anytime. So, I think that those are really good points.

D Dr. Ben Lai 12:09

You know, Halena, one thing that I have identified is that many of us during this time ruminate. You know, we all think about, boy, you know, what am I going to do? Am I going to lose my job? What are my kids going to do? And so, there's a lot of kind of pent up anxiety and stress, and irritability, and anger, even, you know, and that's part of the stress response going back to stress, you know, we all have developed a stress response as mammals to run away from our danger, you know, so when we're stressed, you know, all our stress hormones are elevated, and it raises our heart rate, it increases our blood sugars. Well, sometimes it's helpful to rechannel that energy and actually doing something more meaningful and more active. So, I encourage my patients, well, you know, instead of ruminating, let's write that down, let's try to plan ahead, you know, use that energy. And that way we make it into something that's constructive. And I think that is helpful for many of my patients. And again, just writing it down, developing that routine has been helpful for some.

D Dr. Halena Gazelka 13:20

That's really interesting. Ben, it triggered in me that someone had once told me that anxiety is trying to control things that you don't have control over. And sometimes you have to find a way to control what you can but give up those things that you can't. And probably making lists and writing them down is a good way.

D Dr. Ben Lai 13:39

Yeah. Yeah. That's a great point.

D Dr. Halena Gazelka 13:41

That's great. You know, we were talking now, Ben, we're past the Fourth of July, when we had such big lofty goals for getting the United States immunized. And many people have been vaccinated against COVID and feel that maybe they should be re-engaging their

families, re-engaging, people are starting to have weddings, again, they're starting to have events. But there may be those who have sort of a reluctance to re-engage just because it's become a habit almost not to. It's easier sometimes to stay home on Friday night, than to decide that you're going to go, even if it might be safe to go. What ways can we encourage individuals who need to re-engage, but are having trouble doing so to do that?

D

Dr. Ben Lai 14:25

Yeah, that's a great point. You know, the re-engagement is another big change, right? For many of us, we've gotten so used to this, we've developed these routines now, working from home, home schooling, and learning not to leave our house and working out at home. And all of a sudden, we're bombarded with these changes. And there's also so much uncertainty, especially with the Delta variant, you know. There are pockets in the country where COVID is really surging again, so that creates a lot of anxiety and stress and unpredictability in patients. So, one thing that I encourage people to do, again, is to take things small bits at a time. One of my patients, for example, who I saw recently said, I just am not fully comfortable going back to my gym. And I said, well, this is summer, this is the perfect time to walk outside, enjoy the outdoors. Let's try just doing a 10-minute walk outdoors every day. And I think part of that is to create a routine, so that you feel comfortable, and you feel safe, at least exercising and going outdoors again. And you know, one thing that I always ask people to do, is that this has to be a continual daily process. Give yourself no more than one day's break. Because if you break two days in a row, then you're more likely to kind of break it again, that third day, and that fourth day, and so forth. And once you feel comfortable doing that exercise for 10 minutes, maybe you can expand that to 15 minutes, or 20 minutes. And then maybe you can call up one of your friends who you used to go to the gym with and see if you could go together. And again, just little by little, you kind of make these small re-integrations. Similarly, people who are concerned about gatherings, you know, I would often encourage, why don't we send them an email, send your friends or your family email, maybe give them a call, do a zoom meeting, you know, if you feel comfortable, maybe just start gathering in small groups, just one or two outdoors. And oftentimes, if we start slow, we're able to kind of go back up again. Certainly, you know, letting them know that there's still the possibility of getting sick. And you know, if anyone develops any symptoms, they need to seek the appropriate health care and contact their health care providers.

D

Dr. Halena Gazelka 16:42

And I do think that one of the silver linings, I'm always looking for silver linings of COVID, is that it's okay for people to say, I'm going to wear a mask, or maybe we could wear masks,

even if that's not the recommendations of the of the state or the area that you're in. If there's concern about, you know, children who aren't vaccinated or others who you know, maybe aren't vaccinated, it's socially acceptable now to wear a mask.

D

Dr. Ben Lai 17:08

It is, it is, and I say, excuse me, and I say go for it, you know, if you feel comfortable wearing a mask, and you should. And so, we often think about, you know, when people are stressed out, we often think about trying to just tell yourself that it's okay. You know, if we're around people who are stressed, we become stressed. So, sometimes it's helpful to be the one that breaks that cycle, right? It's that phenomenon called stress resonance. If I'm in a very stressful meeting, even if I go into the meeting in a good mood, i come out feeling like there's butterflies in my stomach, you know, and I think it's important to start, you know, developing these positive habits and a positive way of thinking so that we can, people we can surround, we can spread this positive energy and this positive outlook to others in our family.

D

Dr. Halena Gazelka 18:04

We can usually find something to be grateful for, can't we Ben?

D

Dr. Ben Lai 18:07

Absolutely. So, that's a great point too Halena, you know, positive reframing. You know, we want to make sure, you know, even though this has been a tremendous change for all of us, really, there are things that we perhaps can still be grateful for. And so, oftentimes we think, you know, at the end of the day, what am I grateful for today? Maybe it's going to work, maybe it's with your family, maybe it's just beautiful weather. And I think sometimes in the midst of all the bad news and all the catastrophic news that we hear on TV, it's important to remind ourselves that there are still things that we can be grateful for.

D

Dr. Halena Gazelka 18:46

I love that, Ben. I think gratitude is a great habit to develop.

D

Dr. Ben Lai 18:50

I agree. And I do it every day, so.

D Dr. Halena Gazelka 18:53
That's wonderful. Thanks for being here today, Ben.

D Dr. Ben Lai 18:56
Thanks for having me.

D Dr. Halena Gazelka 18:58
Our thanks to family practice physician, Dr. Ben Lai, for being here today to talk to us about habits, some of them bad during COVID, but how we can develop some new better ones. I learned a couple of things today. I hope that you did too. I think thinking about making lists, being accountable, and fitting things into your routine is really important. We wish you the best with that. We wish everyone a wonderful day.

N Narrator 19:23
Mayo Clinic Q&A is a production of the Mayo Clinic News Network and is available wherever you get and subscribe to your favorite podcasts. To see a list of all Mayo Clinic podcasts, visit newsnetwork.mayoclinic.org. Then click on podcasts. Thanks for listening and be well. We hope you'll offer a review of this and other episodes when the option is available. Comments and questions can also be sent to mayoclinicnewsnetwork@mayo.edu.