Hey my friends, how are you? Welcome back. We're on episode 18 today. We are talking about eating at night and how to stop doing that. I got an email from a listener who asked me to do a podcast on this topic and I thought it was such a great idea.

So if you wish that I would do a podcast on any particular subject, please go ahead and shoot me an email and let me know. And you never know, I might do a podcast on it. I probably will. So my email is katrina@katrinaubellmd.com. Now, I just wanna mention that I know that some of you may have a glass of wine or two at night in addition to snacking or instead of snacking.

So if you are a wine or other alcoholic drink drinker at night, then I want you to just sub in your beverage of choice where I reference eating food in this podcast. It's the same issue, just a different substance. So nighttime eating, this was seriously the bane of my existence for decades. My family's culture growing up was to have dessert or some sort of snack a few hours after dinner.

So I grew up having dessert in the evening, you know, only of course if I was a member of the Clean Plate Club, right? And it became a complete habit to eat at night. The way our brains work is that when we eat something especially pleasurable like sugar, our brains take note of the dopamine release we get, and this is from an evolutionary standpoint, very protective and survivalistic.

When there was food available, our brain's job was to make sure we kept eating more of that food so that we could survive long enough to procreate basically, right? If the apples were ripe on the tree once a year, we needed to be sure to take advantage of that and eat as many apples as we could.

But now in modern day, we have concentrated pleasure in the form of sugar. That sugar releases even more dopamine, which creates even more pleasure for us. So our brains really take note and then our brains tell us to do that again. They go, that was great. You most definitely need to do that again. And so we do, and that desire is so strong. Then we start having a dessert or snack every night when our brains remind us to do that, and then it just

becomes a complete habit. I know for me though, that it was even more than that during residency, if I wasn't on call and was home than having a dessert or snacking at night made me feel like I was doing something nice for myself and treating myself for working so hard. And then when I was in the hospital on call, I'd have some dessert or a snack to try to make that call experience less terrible. And then I had kids.

So those of you with children will understand what I'm talking about here. The kids finally go to bed and it feels like the finish line, right? You get to have your free time to yourself to do whatever you want. What you really need to do is just go to bed early.

But if you do that, then you'll miss out on catching up on your show or falling down a social media rabbit hole, and for sure you won't get your snacks, so you stay up. For me, I would then get a second wind, so I didn't feel so tired anymore.

Plus, I never wanted my free time to end prematurely by me going to bed early, so I would stay up way too late. Then the next morning, I'd wonder what was wrong with me and why I couldn't ever get to bed at a decent hour, and that for sure I was gonna go to bed right after the kids that night, except that that night would come and I would repeat the same cycle over again over and over and over.

And then on nights when I was on call at home, once I was out in practice, I'd always stay up really late too, because I didn't wanna be woken up by pagers any more often than I had to be. Some of my partners always said that they just did their usual routine, and if people woke them up, then so be it. I had a hard time with that.

I told myself that if I was only asleep for like 30 minutes and then get woken up, then that was like a nap and I couldn't fall back to sleep for a long time, so I might as well just stay up. But there were so many times where I stayed up late and nobody called and I could have been sleeping. And I also really believe that if I was woken up and couldn't fall back asleep,that that was some sort of horrible thing.

Luckily, that's just a thought though. It's not a fact. Now I see that if I was woken up and couldn't fall back asleep, that I could just do a guided meditation to relax, or I could read a little bit or something else until I could sleep again. But that belief system that I had seemed so non-negotiable that I never gave my brain the opportunity to problem solve and come up with any other solutions to this situation.

Now, if you don't have a problem with nighttime eating, then I wanna make sure you understand how lucky you are. This may seem kind of like a silly problem to have, but it felt like a major unsolvable problem. I tried all kinds of things to get myself to bed on time, and they just didn't work. I tried setting bedtime alarms on my phone up to three different ones, staggered throughout the night. I would just turn 'em off and ignore them in the moment because my desire to stay up and have more free time was so strong.

I knew I needed more sleep and I just could not get myself to do it. I knew it would have to be entirely self-driven too, because my husband is a night owl and needs less sleep than me.

So if I always waited to go to bed when he went up to bed, it wasn't ever gonna be enough sleep for me. But a big driving factor in this issue for me was the eating. I usually ate really well, at least for the most part during the day. But of course, I wanted to have the snack or dessert, so I needed to stay up so I could have that.

The idea of just skipping the dessert was not one that I was generally very open to, and it wasn't even always tons of cookies, although there were plenty of times where it was, but I'd have something I think was healthy like a yogurt or apple and peanut butter or something like that. You know, a banana and peanut butter.

Ultimately, I still wanted a treat at night, like I'd always had my entire life. So with concerted effort, it took me about five months to stop the nighttime eating pattern. I want you to know this because I think we often assume that when someone else has solved a problem for themselves that it only took them like a day or two and just like that they're cured.

But if it took 40 years of eating the nighttime snack to create that habit, then I had to be okay with it. Taking months for me to undo that habit, I had to figure out why I was eating those snacks. Almost never was I actually physically hungry, and if I was hungry, it was because I had stayed up way too late so late that I was hungry again. So I was definitely eating for emotional reasons.

So what were those emotional reasons? It's not always that easy to figure this out. It takes time and awareness and dedication and commitment to solving the problem. A really good motivator for me to commit to stopping eating at night was when I found out that our insulin responses to food increase as the day progresses into night. So the same apple and peanut butter eaten in the morning would result in a smaller insulin surge than if I ate it in the evening.

That was like the nail in the coffin for me. I always knew it wasn't great to eat at night, but once I had that more research based reason to stop, I knew that if I continued doing that, I'd end up undoing all the progress I had made with my, my weight loss and my thinking about food.

So when I started thinking about what was going on for me in the evening with wanting to eat, the fact that I was tired and was once again looking to food to keep me awake was blatantly obvious. The eating and the going to bed at a reasonable hour were completely intertwined. I ate to stay awake longer, but I also stayed awake longer so that I could eat. You see that? It's like the chicken and the egg, which results in which?

So first I cleaned up my eating in general to reduce my insulin searches and get my hormones functioning like they should for healthy humans. That definitely helped with my energy levels throughout the day. I used to feel like I needed a nap after lunch every single day. I just thought I was getting older and needing more sleep was the name of the game. I was very pleasantly surprised to notice nice even energy with my better eating plan.

Another pleasant side effect of that cleaner eating was that I started getting tired at the right time. Before this, I'd be so unbelievably exhausted after dinner that putting the kids to bed was like torture. I had no patience for the going to bed antics, you know what I mean? No energy to be fun or even nice sometimes.

I remember just laying in my son's bed while they'd be getting ready and just wanting more than anything to fall asleep, except it was only like 7:00 PM and that seemed too early. So I dragged myself through bedtime and then cleaning up the kitchen and making lunches for the next day, and then I hit that proverbial finish line I could eat. So I'd grab my snack and plop down on the couch and start watching TV while eating, and then if the TV show wasn't interesting enough, I'd jump on Facebook on my phone as well.

I thought I was doing something relaxing for myself to unwind after the day, but research shows that watching TV or being on the internet doesn't actually de-stress us. Our cortisol levels do not go down. My hypothesis is that this is one reason why I kept wanting to stay up later because I wanted to feel de-stressed and relaxed rather than questioning whether I was doing, you know, whether what I was doing was actually creating that for me. I just thought I needed more of it until I was so tired again that I couldn't keep my eyes open and I had to go to bed whether I was de-stressed or not. In hindsight, I can see how ridiculous that was, but it really was just my reality for so many years.

If you're doing the same thing or something similar, then you know what I'm talking about. When I look at it now, it's no wonder I had so much trouble with my weight, chronic lack of sleep, and chronic overeating. It's a total recipe for waking. I had to figure out why I couldn't just stop watching TV after one show and go to bed like I wanted to do.

I would turn on a show, tell myself that I'd only watch one and then three later drag myself so ridiculously tired up to bed. When we watch these shows or scroll through social media, we're getting dopamine hits too. So of course our brain is like, one show was not enough. Do you know how easy it'll be to get more pleasure if you just watch another show?

And so our fingers magically start the next show? Or if you're watching Netflix, the next show just starts on its own. Netflix is so smart, they know a lot about human psychology. You don't even have to do anything at all to get the next dopamine hit and find out why Kanye canceled a leg of his tour and is having a mental breakdown.

When I spent more time delving into what was causing me to overeat, I figured out that I was often bored or I was irritated, or I was just generally in a low grade state of dissatisfaction. I think that's an important point here. The emotions that are driving us to overeat at night and stay up too late might not be something really huge and negative and intense.
It could just be this undercurrent of negativity that you're looking to escape, and food will help with that, or at least distract you away from it. Have you ever had a day at work that was so frustrating or annoying or just generally not good that you couldn't even talk to your spouse about it? I had days where when I got home, I didn't even have the energy left to go into how my day was.

I mean, I could have if I really had to, but I was so exhausted and I just wanted, didn't wanna get into it, and there's nothing wrong with that. But instead of talking it out with my husband, who as a doctor himself totally understands, I would eat to escape those emotions. And as a note, this would have been a terrific opportunity to go to bed early because I was so tired instead of looking to food again to make me feel more energetic and less irritated, and finally I had to realize my thought patterning in my brain.

The pattern I figured out is that my thoughts can be pretty bad at night. I've mentioned this before, that seven 30 rolls around, and it's almost like clockwork. My brain just starts telling me all the reasons why everything sucks, why I'm failing at everything, why nothing is going to work out, and I go into my victim mentality, blaming anyone and everyone for why I feel the way I do. When I wasn't aware that this was my primitive brain just having a field day, I believed these thoughts, and then of course I wanted to avoid them by eating because nobody wants to feel that way.

Now that I'm onto my brain patterns, when my brain starts offering those thoughts up every night, I can recognize that none of it is true and that I should just work to go to bed sooner, because once I'm rested, being inside my head is a lot more pleasant. So you can see how unbelievably multifactorial this issue was for me.

That's why it never worked for me to just decide to go to bed earlier or just commit to not eating after dinner, or why setting those alarms didn't work. I had the desire to sleep more and to stop eating after dinner, but I had all these other very strong competing desires that made it pretty much impossible for me to consistently go to bed on time. What was a great first step for me was to make sure I was eating enough fat with my dinner so that I legitimately was not hungry in the evening.

That took away the chatter and negotiations about whether I really did need more food or not. I made sure I ate until I was a plus four on the hunger scale, and then I knew that no more food was needed and the kitchen could be closed. Then I started looking at ways to actively de-stress since snacking and watching TV don't actually de-stress us. One thing that contributes to my stress is when the house is cluttered with stuff like toys and school papers and mail and unfolded laundry and things like that.

So even though I was tired, I'd put in earbuds and listen to a podcast, I'd tell myself that all I had to do was tidy up or fold laundry for the length of the podcast and then I could stop. It's pretty amazing how much you can get done when you know you have a stopping point and you're listening to something that you enjoy. If you're listening to this podcast, you're probably a podcast person, but other options are listening to music or an audiobook. So even though this takes energy and I'm tired at the end, I feel so good. I've accomplished something, and accomplishment is a form of natural pleasure for us.

So automatically I feel better. And cleanliness is also a form of natural pleasure, so that makes me feel better too, knowing that the house is cleaner and neater. Plus, I've consumed some sort of audio material that I'm interested in and is entertaining to me, so I was entertained and productive at the same time. It's a total win-win.

Taking a bath is a nice way of de-stressing, even though we have a really nice bathtub, I don't often take a bath to de-stress, but a nice long hot shower without being interrupted by my kids is actually really de-stressing for me. Meditating is another very effective way to de-stress. I'm obsessed with the Calm app right now. I listen to their daily meditation as I go to sleep every night. They're on 10 minutes long, and the speaker has a really soft, soothing voice, so I get my short meditation in every night while I'm going to sleep.

For me, this was the only way to make sure I was actually meditating on any kind of regular basis. I fall asleep faster and the quality of my sleep is better. And as a side note, if you want a one month free trial of that calm app, you can just go to www.calm.com/physicianwellness.

I do not get any kind of affiliate compensation or anything for telling you that, but I like trying it for a month for free first before I paid for it, and you might too. So you can see how this crowd's out getting sucked into the couch and dorking out on Netflix. My brain was also really habitually programmed to suggest eating something when I sat on the couch to watch tv.

So just avoiding the couch for a while helped me to avoid that trap. Even today, I still have to be very careful about staying up too late. If I start watching tv, it's old patterning that wants to come up anytime there's the slightest chance of me getting sucked into the couch. But now I'm aware of the tendency and can plan for it.

It's not a mystery to me anymore why I couldn't get my butt off the couch. And once we know what our patterning is and what our habits are, we can come up with some decisions ahead of time regarding our evening routine, and it'll be a trial and error process for sure. You'll have to test some different methods and see how you do and what works for you and your family.

But I'm telling you, figuring this out is so worth it. It's seriously changed my life no longer eating after dinner. It's true freedom from all the chatter and negotiations when I'm tired and my primitive brain is very convincing. That might sound dramatic, but it's really how I feel about the experience. I no longer beat myself up for not doing what I know I should be doing.

And that's how we build up that relationship with ourselves, which ultimately ends up resulting in permanent weight loss. So let me know your thoughts about this by heading over to the show notes page for the episode and looking for the comment section. You can find that at katrinaubellmd.com/18. And just as a reminder, if you're practicing MD or d o and are interested in learning about working with me through a coaching group in the future, make sure you get on the waitlist by going to katrinaubellmd.com/group, and entering your name and email. You'll then wanna make sure you open your email and confirm that you wanna opt into the list. All right, can't wait to hear from you guys. Have a wonderful week and I'll talk to you soon. Take care.

Bye-bye.