

Rebellious Wellness^{over 50}

Total Brain Health



Ep 13: Are you really losing your mind? Brain Health Strategies with Dr. Cynthia Green

Gregory Anne

This is the Rebellious Wellness Over 50 podcast for women over 50 who aren't done yet. You may have seen the worst of aging and are hoping there's a better way. There is. And I'm going to show you how in interviews, book reviews, rants and stories. Each week, I'm going to bring you the latest science based info on how to age better. I'm Gregory Anne Cox, and I believe it's time to bust the myth that aging equals decline in every area of life. It pisses me off and it's B.S.. Look, aging happens, but it doesn't have to ruin your life you just need to get a little rebellious in your approach.

Gregory Anne

Welcome back, everybody, to another fabulous episode of the Rebellious Wellness Over 50 podcast, my guest today is Dr. Cynthia Green. Welcome, Cynthia.

Dr. Green

I thank you. It's a pleasure to be with you. Thanks.

Gregory Anne

So, Cynthia is a psychologist and a leading expert on cognitive wellness. We're talking about our brains, girls. I know everybody has been asking, why don't you have a brain expert? Well, here we have our brain expert. Cynthia has written six books on the topic and is just a media guest of all the great places in the world to be including. I saw that you had a book that you did with National Geographic on your best brain ever.

Dr. Green

That was a really fun book.

Gregory Anne

That I'm just, it's a side note, but how does that happen with National Geographic and the brain? Put those two together for me.

Dr. Green

At the time, National Geographic did do a whole series of health books, and I think that they still do. So we don't think of them in that context. But the body is a wonderful thing to explore. And they had done Dan Buettner's books about the series, The Blue Zones. And I think that they have an undying interest, in fact, in the brain and brain health. So it was a wonderful opportunity to partner with them. And the book was really about, in a lot of ways, how the brain works and how the brain works in aging.

Dr. Green

And then I was able to intersperse different kinds of tips and activities and an awareness and understanding of what we can do to keep the brain healthy.

Gregory Anne

That's awesome.

Gregory Anne

And we're going to get to that in just a minute. But I don't want to shortchange this wonderful CV of yours. What you're known for is taking the complex science of brain health and information and making it easy to understand and actionable, which is exactly what all my listeners need. We just want to get the 411, the what to do. But we're going to talk a little bit of science because I think people do benefit from hearing the connection to the science, the proven things to the body, etc.

Gregory Anne

Right now, mostly you're working again in the media and giving lectures to students and other organizations, but you have a program and a website called Total Brain Health and you have toolkits. Tell me a little bit about those.

Dr. Green

So, I have had a company for many years really to get the word out, because what I always tell people is the science about keeping your brain healthy isn't complicated. Many of us just aren't aware of it. And we're not aware of how it ties to all the wellness things that I know everyone listening knows about and is trying to do already. Exercise, eat well, manage stress, get a good night's sleep. Those all really matter to brain health, as do a lot of other things.

So, what I have always tried to do is, as you said, you take the science to translate it into steps that we can actually take and that makes sense for us to do. I remember once sitting with one of the founders of one of the brain fitness software companies, which is a little bit of a misnomer because what they're really doing is training your cognitive skills. They're not training your brain fitness. But he was talking about how he developed the software and his idea was you'd spend an hour training for attention and then you'd spend an hour training for speedy thinking.

Dr. Green

And by the time you were done with his training, I looked at him. I said, but someone can't sit at the computer for seven hours a day to train these different skills. It was a little bit of a disconnect between what we call bench to bedside, right from the lab to what actually people can do. So I really think it's important to tell people what they can do and how they can do it.

Dr. Green

Our products from Total Brain Health, our group programs that are primarily delivered in settings where people gather in groups--a little challenging over the past year-- although we're really thrilled, a lot of our programs are run in active aging communities where now they are shots in arms.

Dr. Green

And so people are getting back into their small groups and socializing, but also in adult ed libraries and the YMCA and places like that. And those are our tool kit classes and they're really designed to teach about brain wellness and memory strategies.

Dr. Green

We also have a program called Total Brain Health Toolbox 365 that we launched, I actually have it here, we launched this right before the lockdown. And this is a personal brain training program. It's a fun game with a dice and a timer and a card. You roll the dice and you pick a card and you work out across body, mind, spirit or social. A lot of it is against the clock. That's why there's a timer. And I'd be happy to talk about why scientifically that's important.

Dr. Green

But this is something people can get and do on their own. We have people telling us that they love to do it just with their morning coffee. Some people are doing it in families. One of the feedback we got early on was a guy who won it in a raffle for one of the companies that I was speaking at. And he went home and played it with his teenage kids and he was talking about what fun it was. I've had people say they took it on their girls night out to a bar.

Dr. Green

And going back a few months, right, and they played it together with a girlfriend. So there's a lot of legs to this program. It's also great if you have a parent we were just talking about. I just visited my parents who I hadn't seen for almost a year. And this is the kind of thing that you can send to them as a gift to keep everyone active and stimulated. So it just it's a really fun program. And it's the way that we've been able to extend the expertise that we have here a total brain health into something people can do on their own.

Gregory Anne

In less than seven hours,

Dr. Green

In less than seven hours.

Gregory Anne

Let's let's talk a little bit, you did mind, body spirit, which made me think about, let's start with the mind, the brain and the body, which we're all connected. And sometimes in Western medicine, we tend to treat this thing or treating the brain. We're treating the stomach. You make a point about the importance of knowing the connection between the heart, the cardiovascular health and the health of our brain. Can you talk a little bit about that, though?

Dr. Green

When you look at the real science of what it takes to be brain healthy, it isn't training your brain against games or the crossword puzzle? Well, let me just start by saying, when we talk about brain brain health, we have to think about what our target is. Right. So for many of us, the target is lowering our risk for dementia. So we want to do whatever we can to keep our brains vital and so we stay independent and highly functioning right every day of our lives.

Dr. Green

But the other target is staying sharp day to day. Right. So we want to be able to function well. We want to be able to be at work and not feel like we're underperforming or feel a challenge that we can't keep up. We want to be able to travel, to hang out with our friends and to kind of do things smoothly that require our thinking skills to be spot on. So when we talk about and look at those two goals of targets for being brain healthy, when we look at the research, we need to do a lot of different things.

Dr. Green

Right. So we might not think that the heart, for example, as you mentioned, matters to the brain, but in fact, the cardiovascular system is implicated in the second leading cause of dementia, which is dementias that are related to vascular incidents like stroke and stroke as a major brain injury. But people always worry about dementia. They don't necessarily think about stroke as a brain injury. They think of a more kind of physically something that is the result of having hypertension or diabetes.

Dr. Green

But it is a leading injury and a leading cause of death. Right. So it's something that we need to be aware of in terms of the brain.

Gregory Anne

I think that one of the things that I would love for people to take home from this conversation is understanding that if you're worried about your memory and you want to take good care of your brain, you need to be well and you need to engage across physical and intellectual wellbeing as well as spiritual wellbeing, which would be fun to talk about in terms of thinking about how we can stay brain healthy.

Dr. Green

We really need to think across body, mind and spirit. That's where the science is. There's are a number of very large epidemiological studies that have come out really over the past decade that have emphasized the importance of living well to brain health, particularly in terms of preventing dementia. And they have found that leading a brain healthy lifestyle that includes things like maintaining a healthy weight, getting regular

physical exercise, not smoking, using alcohol in a moderate amount. And in one of those studies, doing cognitively stimulating activities could cut dementia risk significantly up to 60 percent.

Dr. Green

And then included in one study for those who had a genetic risk. So I know many people who may be listening worry that if they had a parent or sibling who was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, that they are at increased risk. And that might be true depending on the configuration of those genes. But this study did show also that you can modify that risk by the choices that we make day to day in terms of how we live. And I think that's really important information to get out there.

Gregory Anne

It's important and it's good news or we don't. And I always I talk often about epigenetics, the science of the environment and how it influences the gene expression.

Dr. Green

That's exactly right. And that's exactly what this is. And that was a study from 2019 so these are very recent findings. But what we teach from is from the science and we teach from wellness. So I think that a lot of the folks who are listening probably you already know about wellness, right. About why physical exercise is good for your heart, why keeping your weight down and not having a lot of weight around your belly is also better for your risk in terms of long term vitality.

Dr. Green

It's all true for your brain as well.

Gregory Anne

I was thinking about. I need this definition, Alzheimer's physiologically is different than dementia. Can you just give us a quick overview of the differences?

Dr. Green

I think we worry that it's something people don't always know. Dementia is a broad category that defines any disease that impacts memory and other cognitive functions. So in general, when we diagnose dementia, we're looking at someone who had a higher level of functioning previously. So there's a decline that's significant, that's impacting their short term memory in general, but their memory and then usually one other area of cognitive function. So maybe they're verbal production, right. They might have more trouble finding words or have what we call aphasia, where there's a paucity of words or where the words come out scrambled.

Dr. Green

Perhaps they are having impairment in judgment and reasoning so they can't do calculations in the same way they could or they can't find. Right. They can't find their way around an environment. Alzheimer's is a kind of dementia. It's defined by the course of dementia clinically. So how it progresses and also if there is evidence on at diagnosis, often we don't see this till later, but it's really defined by specific pathological changes in the brain that are different and that are defining of Alzheimer's disease, what we call plaques and tangles.

Dr. Green

So we don't see those in life. Right. But on autopsy, we know that that distinguishes Alzheimer's. So when we make a diagnosis, we usually make it based on the course and other kinds of tests, such as neuroimaging tests and clinical tests like blood work.

Gregory Anne

So back to the idea that the whole body is going to affect brain health. There are some docs and things that I've read that refer to Alzheimer's as diabetes type III. Is there a relationship between high blood sugar in the body and the brain health?

Dr. Green

So it's an interesting area of research and the relationship is really one of inflammation. And as you probably know and many of your readers might, there's tremendous interest in the role of inflammation in the body across the board in terms of disease and in terms of aging. So the researchers that have talked about Alzheimer's as a potential type three diabetes come from that model. And it's still theoretical. But it is very interesting because we really don't know what causes Alzheimer's disease.

Dr. Green

And Alzheimer's disease still is a disease of exclusion. In other word I diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease clinically in general, when I can't have you know, there's no other explanation, I don't recognize or see on your neuro imaging studies, for example, evidence of small strokes. Right. So in that way, it's a mystery, and so we are always looking for answers. We know what it looks like in terms of when you present with Alzheimer's disease, what the course of the disease looks like, but we still don't know what causes it.

Gregory Anne

So interesting. Let's bring it down to the every day. My girlfriends and I have often said "I lost my car keys and they were right in my back pocket. I must be losing my mind."

When it's those simple little things, how much is aging and to be expected and when do we start worrying, I guess, are we losing our mind just because we lost our keys?

Dr. Green

So if we lost our minds when we lost our keys, then every teenager in America who got locked out of the house would really be in trouble.

Gregory Anne

That is true.

Dr. Green

It's really interesting. We do start to worry, like I used to joke in my talks that it's almost as if at 40 there's a button that goes off that says to you, oh, when I forget an appointment or a phone number or to run an errand, now I'm having memory loss. But if we did it before that age, we wouldn't really think of it as memory loss. We'd think of ourselves as being distracted or tired.

Dr. Green

Right. So rest easy, ladies. It's not necessarily memory loss just because over forty five or fifty, suddenly we're forgetting the same kinds of things that we did as teenagers. I mean, how many times when you were in high school did you forget something in your locker or at home or that you were meeting someone someplace? I have a teenage daughter right now and she's adorable, but she doesn't have perfect memory. Right. So that's one thing. Now, it is true that as we grow older, what happens is that we lose our ability to have certain things changed.

Dr. Green

So our hair color changes, our vision changes, but also or certain cognitive skills change. It doesn't mean they go away and continue to work on them.

And research shows that we can better maintain skills like attention processing, speed, nimbleness and memory by exercising those skills. Interesting.

Gregory Anne

I think you have a certain three things a woman should do every day to help keep her mind sharp, or you have some little tips, as you just said, a couple. But let's read through them.

Dr. Green

So, you know, one of my favorite things is also not to burden you with more than you're already doing. I think we all, especially right now, have plenty on our plate. Right. We're

trying to juggle a lot of balls. So one thing I would say is to find a way to exercise, to think and to be together every day.

Dr. Green

Here's one of my favorite suggestions came from actually Art Kramer, who is a researcher who's done a lot of work on the relationship between exercise and brain health. And he once in an interview suggested doing a walking book club with friends, which I said, Art, I don't need a book club. I just have my friends. Right. So if you get together and you walk, think of all the things that you talk about on that walk. So you are both getting physical activity, right.

Dr. Green

Great. For your heart rate, for your brain. You're getting the intellectual stimulation and you are also socializing. And I think that especially as women, we may discount the degree to which the social aspect of our lives really is good for us. We think of it as just something that we do right. But in fact, social engagement is huge. It's huge for our well-being. It's very big for successful aging and for our brains.

So there is a tip that I hope everyone can easily work into their lives.

Gregory Anne

Absolutely more time with friends and as you pointed out, more jabs in arms means more likely that we will soon be back with our friends again.

Dr. Green

And also, I'm on the East Coast, so spring is around the corner. So warmer weather, even without jbs IN arms, means we can safely be together outside, even if we're wearing masks and kind of rekindle that. In a way, it is important.

Gregory Anne

Something came up for me while you were speaking back to the heart health. Do blood pressure medications, theY aid with blood pressure. I understand that. But is there any indication for brain health with staying on a blood pressure med for a long time?

Dr. Green

There's nothing that I've seen. I think that medications in general are an area that we need to manage.

Dr. Green

And as we grow older, we tend to be placed on multiple medications. Sometimes those medications can and intentionally interact and impact our functioning. So I would say to everyone, if you have concerns about your medications and by the way, your supplements, because your supplements actually do do something, even if you can buy them in the grocery aisle. So you should talk to your doctor and to your pharmacist on a regular basis, review all the medicines you're on, even if it's not something that they are prescribing to you.

And just make sure that there is not an interaction there that you should be concerned about. The only medication, sometimes people have complained about statins and their impact that they can potentially have on cognition. When they first became popular, there was some information about adverse impact that people were experiencing. That's really diminished in the literature. And I think that because if you put on a statin, you have increased risk for stroke or other kinds of cardiovascular incidents, the benefit of being on a statin really outweighs the risk.

Dr. Green

That was the upshot when I last looked at that literature. So I think that the bigger issue with medication is really just keeping track of what you're on, making sure that you talk about that regularly with your doctor or pharmacist so that you're catching any potential negative effect.

Gregory Anne

Since you mentioned supplements and one of the questions, ginkgo biloba was the superstar ago, not some years ago, and then brain formulations formulas came along. And is there any supplement that directly correlates with better memory or better brain health?

Gregory Anne

You're shaking your head.

Dr. Green

No, no.

Dr. Green

As Jack Rowe, who was the head of Mount Sinai at the time that I was running the memory program there was once quoted "not on my plate."

Dr. Green

So, I'm not taking something. I would never recommend it. I'm not big on supplements. I'm big on getting the kinds of foods that you should in your diet. I think a multivitamin is a great insurance policy. If you can't eat well on a particular day, there is some evidence that omega three fatty acids can have a neuroprotective effect and that information.

Dr. Green

But the science of that has grown more substantially. There's little downside to taking an Omega three fatty acid. Right, and adding that to your diet. But you can also get that by eating good food sources of omega three fatty acids like cold water fish. There's also evidence that some of the B vitamins that are in nuts and the antioxidants that are in dark colored fruits and vegetables have neuroprotective impact. But again, those are things that are healthy and we should be eating in our diet.

Dr. Green

But we can supplement with a good multi or with a B complex if our diet is deficient in those areas.

Gregory Anne

Right and the word supplement should indicate that it is supplemental treatment, not necessarily in charge of the whole program.

Dr. Green

Now, it is interesting because if people are concerned about their memory, there are things that should be checked. And one of the things that can cause changes in cognition is B12 deficiency. So there are real good reasons to make sure that you are getting the right array of vitamins and sometimes the B complex and B 12 can be harder to digest as we grow older so our gut doesn't absorb it as well. So there might be things that are worth supplementing.

Dr. Green

I'm not saying that there aren't, but there's no magic cure.

Dr. Green

And I think that we'd all love to have a magic cure. We'd love to have jelly fish produce something that would make our brain sharp and perfect. And that's just not how it works. It's about following what we call our total brain health blueprint, where there are nine action points that we take along body, mind and spirit, including exercise, diet, getting sleep, managing medicines, being intellectually engaged, using memory strategies, which we haven't really talked about.

Dr. Green

But I have a great tip for remembering your keys where they are and also working out these intellectual skills. So working out against the clock like you do with a timer, with our program or with anything. So you're keeping those skills sharp. And then on the spirit side, being emotionally balanced and managing and taking care of paying attention to your emotional wellbeing, socializing and then being confident in your ability to take care of all these things. So really believing in yourself and believing in your ability to think sharp and to be.

Gregory Anne

Well, it's interesting. The almost everybody that I've interviewed has brought the mindset mind awareness piece into body health in any aspect. So I just I'm pointing that out for the people who are not so geared towards thinking I can change my thinking. Right. I can have a different belief than I have if I work on it.

Dr. Green

Yeah. The quote that I always share, Gregory, is whether you think you can whether you think you can't. You're right.

Dr. Green

Which you might as well think that you can.

Gregory Anne

Absolutely

Dr. Green

And on the brain health perspective. There's a lot of evidence that what we do has impact on the outcome.

Gregory Anne

OK, give us that tip on how to remember where our car keys are.

Dr. Green

Oh, OK. Besides, your girlfriend's telling you that they're in your back pocket. So we suggest organizational tools all the time. And they work. We use them. You and I knew to come on this call because we had it in our calendars.

Dr. Green

Right. And we used to do lists all the time. So one of the ways we could remember where we put things to use an organizational strategy we call a FORGET-ME-NOT spot. What that entails is putting things always back in the same place.

Dr. Green

The reason we lose things like our reading glasses or sunglasses or keys is because we don't pay attention when we put them down, right. So I come into my office and I start putting things down, but I'm late for a call. I get home.

Dr. Green

My kids are clamoring for my attention. I'm late getting dinner on the table. My mom calls, so I'm not paying attention when I put down my keys or my wallet and suddenly I can't find them. It's not that I can't remember where they are. It's just that I'm not paying attention and I never will. By the way, like usually these are things. It's just not going to I can say to myself, I'm putting my keys here, but invariably I'm going to be listening to someone tell me about what a crappy day they had on the phone.

Dr. Green

It's going to be distracting. If you always put them in the same place, if you make a Forget-Me-Not spot and so without thinking about it, when you walk in the door, those keys always go in exactly that spot. They're not going to walk away. Right. That's where they will be. And that way you don't have to pay attention when you're putting them down.

Gregory Anne

That's a great tip. My downfall is in the winter. I have many layers and so many pockets and the keys invariably go in a pocket of the jacket, gets hung up or thrown on a chair, depending on how I'm feeling.

Gregory Anne

But then I forget that I've put them in the pocket if I'm not going to use that coat or I don't need the keys to get in the car. So this is a great idea to just make a habit of putting them one on, maybe get a little dish on it.

Dr. Green

So, the memory enhancement program that I started at Mount Sinai Medical Center was based on a research program and it was sponsored in part or funded in part by the Dana Foundation. And in that study there were they taught these strategies and they actually had a woman who decouped a wooden box to put all of these things in with different pictures of keys, glasses. And she created her FORGET-ME-NOT spot, which is incredibly creative and would be really fun.

Dr. Green

Did we leave anything out? I think we've given our listeners lots of good, juicy stuff.

Dr. Green

I mean, I hope so. And I hope that there's even more to talk about. Maybe people will send in questions and we can do this again and again. And I just hope that the message that right now one of the best things we can do is find ways to be together, even if it's like this, still a resume to challenge each other's thinking by just even talking and sharing ideas and sharing books that we read or TV shows that we watch, and that socializing is a great workout for the brain.

Dr. Green

We are social animals. It's good for our spirit. And when we can, we can even go out and exercise together again.

Gregory Anne

That will be so much fun to take a class in a gym full of other people with great music blaring. And that's one of the things I really miss. Coming soon, though.

Dr. Green

Yeah, hopefully.

Gregory Anne

Dr. Green, thank you so much for all your great information and for your time. I will post your website on our TBHtoolbox365 dot com will be posted on the page or that they can go.

Dr. Green

Anyone who's interested can go right to the website and order and thank you. I hope to join you again.

Gregory Anne

Yeah, that would be awesome. We will do that. Thanks. Till next week. Everybody be will.

That's the end of another episode of the Rebellious Wellness Over 50 podcast. I hope you've enjoyed it. If there's anything that you heard or hear when you tune in that you think would benefit a friend, a sister, a mother, a even some guys send it my way, would you? And if you've not ever been to the website, Rebellious Wellness over 50 dotcom, head on over there, there are resources, things that I don't always get to on the podcast that might help you age better be well till next time and stay that way.