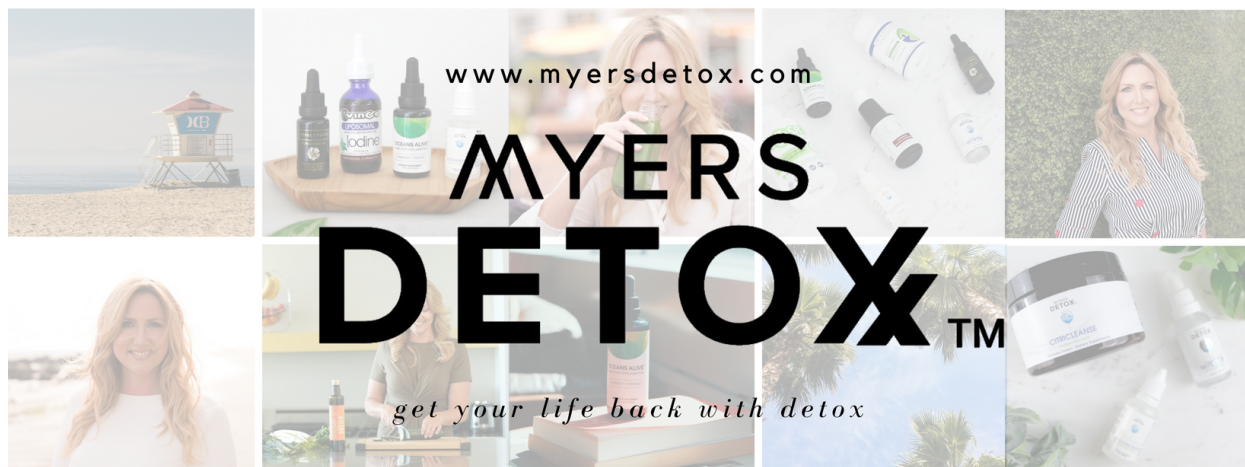




Transcript: #461 Habits of a Happy Brain: Retrain Your Brain to Boost Your Feel Good Chemicals with Loretta G. Breuning

Dr. Wendy Myers:

Hello, I'm Dr. Wendy Myers. Welcome to the Myers Detox podcast. Today we have Dr. Loretta Breuning on the show, and she's going to be talking about how to retrain your brain and the habits of a happy brain. Retraining it to boost your serotonin, dopamine, oxytocin, and endorphin. Those are all the feel-good reward chemicals that we're always after with all these little behaviors that we have every day trying to seek pleasure and avoid pain. Really, really good show. We talk about all of her tips on boosting these chemicals and why cortisol, the stress hormone or stress chemical, is so quick to release. We talk about why things that happened to us in the past help create these pathways in our brain and make us release dopamine if we see ice cream or release dopamine and feel rewarded when we look at our phone; we know that social media is there, and it's so entertaining.

We just talk a lot about a lot of topics related to that, and we talk about that famous rat study where the rats drank cocaine from a water bottle, pressed a bar, and got some cocaine, and why they have forsaken sex and food and water for the cocaine. Why is cocaine similar to ice cream, and why do we get that reward when we eat or see ice cream? There are a lot of really interesting tips today in the show; a very good podcast. Also, it's interesting and key to know what drives our behavior and how we can boost these feel-good chemicals because that's what you're after. We're just going to hack that brain a little bit today, hack those feel-good chemicals.

I'm really excited about a new program I developed called the Emotional Detox Program. This is another way to do a hack to feel better and feel more happiness, love, and peace in your life because that's what we're all after. We're not looking for detox. We're not really looking to listen to a thousand hours of podcasts. We're after feeling good, happy, peace and love. One thing that prevents us from feeling that way is we have a lot of negative emotions, a lot of

adverse childhood experiences or ACEs that happen to us in childhood that today are causing a lot of different maladaptive behaviors. Causing you to feel more stress, causing you to have physical health issues. The research shows that 65% of physical health issues are caused by emotional trauma.

If you have a chronic health issue, or you just feel like you've done everything for your health, or you're generally healthy, but you just don't feel good emotionally, you may want to take some interest in my free masterclass and take it; it's totally free. You can check it out at emo-detox.com, E-M-O, and dash D-E-T-O-X.com. In this masterclass, I talk about all the statistics around why you may not be feeling good, why you may be having these physical health issues, and the latest cutting-edge conventional medical research on using sound therapy to actually very easily tune these negative frequencies out of your energy field. To release these stuck emotions, release these emotional traumas, change your life, and access that joy, peace, and love you're after. I'm really proud of this work, and I really want you to take a minute to check it out.

This podcast is brought to you by Danette May and Mindful Health LLC featuring Danette May's top super food product from her Earth Eco foods line called Cacao Bliss. I love Cacao Bliss; it's so delicious. Nothing feels better than being able to enjoy rich, smooth, creamy chocolate and knowing that you're doing something good for your body. They start with 100% organic cacao beans. They're naturally kissed by the sun, maintaining its miraculous health benefits. Then they blend it with turmeric, MCT oil, coconut, Himalayan sea salt, cinnamon, and black pepper for the perfect blend to make you feel the best that you ever have.

The result is that you fall in love with a truly decadent, healthy, guilt-free chocolate, removing your cravings, facilitating weight loss, boosting your energy, and reducing your inflammation with one simple drink. Not only that, but it's friendly to paleo, it's gluten-free, it's keto, and it's also friendly to vegan and vegetarian diets. For the last eight years, they have been a leader in the superfoods market and are proud to have served millions of customers worldwide. You can try some Cacao Bliss and get 15% off by using the code detox. Go to link shop.earthchofoods.com/mdetox, and you can learn more at Instagram [@thedanettemay](https://www.instagram.com/thedanettemay) and [@earthchofoods](https://www.instagram.com/earthchofoods).

Our guest today, Loretta Breuning, is the founder of the Inner Mammal Institute and Professor Emerita of Management at California State University East Bay. She's the author of many personal development books, including Habits of a Happy Brain: Retrain Your Brain to Boost Your Serotonin, Dopamine, Oxytocin, and Endorphin Levels. As a teacher and a parent, she was not convinced by prevailing theories of human motivation, and then she learned about the brain chemistry that we share with earlier mammals, and everything totally made sense to her. She began creating resources that have helped thousands of people make peace with their inner mammal. Dr. Breuning's work has been translated into 12 languages. Before teaching, she worked for the United

Nations in Africa, and she is a graduate of Cornell University and Tufts. The Inner Mammal Institute offers videos, podcasts, books, blogs, multimedia, training programs, and a free five-day Happy Chemical Jumpstart. You can learn more about Loretta and her work at innermammalinstitute.org.

Loretta, thank you so much for coming to the show.

Loretta G Breuning: Nice to be here.

Dr. Wendy Myers: Yeah, why don't you talk to us a little bit about why our brains produce so many ups and downs and why it's so hard to be happy? So many people struggle with that, and that's what we all want; we all want to be happy. Why is it so difficult?

Loretta G Breuning: I'll give you two simple biological reasons. One is that happy chemicals are only meant to turn on in short spurts. They're not designed to be on all the time. They're designed to motivate specific survival behaviors, and then when the short spurt is over, there you are. If you can accept that rather than thinking that I should be on a high all the time, that's one thing; that's the happy chemical side. Then on the unhappy chemical side, whatever triggered your unhappy chemicals, your cortisol in the past, wired you to turn it on faster today when you see something similar. Each of us is seeing the world through the lens of the worst moments of our life and projecting that onto whatever comes along.

Dr. Wendy Myers: Great, and tell us a little bit. What is the job of these neurotransmitters like dopamine, serotonin, oxytocin, and endorphins?

Loretta G Breuning: I'll give you a really short version of each one. First, we've inherited these happy brain chemicals from earlier mammals. The reason I focus on these four chemicals is that their only job is to make you feel good and to motivate a specific survival behavior, like hundreds of other chemicals with different jobs.

Dopamine is the core that rewards you with a good feeling when you meet a survival need. A simple example would be from an animal perspective, the animal is hungry, and it finds food, and dopamine turns on. That relieves its hunger, that feels great, and it builds a pathway so the next time the animal sees that food, the good feeling turns on, and it motivates the animal to go toward it. That doesn't require any conscious thought. Now, if I find myself drawn to a tub of ice cream or a video game or whatever it is that people feel drawn to, sometimes healthy things too, it's because it met a need in your past. Dopamine turned on and said, "Wow, get me some more of this. This is what I need," and that's why it turns on so easily today.

Dr. Wendy Myers: Yeah, I definitely have had a lot of rewards for eating ice cream in the past. Luckily I don't have that trigger. I think I broke that path in my brain, so I don't go there anymore.

Loretta G Breuning: Yep, exactly. I had a funny experience where my refrigerator broke, and the ice cream melted; that was a big help. You can see how that's part of everything. But then, let's get to the more social rewards because dopamine is a reward, which is anything that meets a need. In the modern world, where your survival needs are more easily met, we focus more on social needs. But we have to remember that the system evolved for our ancestors, who had to spend almost all their lives foraging for food, so they got very excited when they found water, protein, and fruit. They were always looking for one thing or another, and that's what we're always doing: when you have one reward, you look for another reward.

When your physical needs are met, you look for social needs. There are two kinds of social needs. There's the Disney version that we hear, which is, we'll call it, acceptance and belonging. But from an animal perspective, it means that you're protected by the herd. If I'm a zebra and I'm trying to fill my belly, but I have to spend every minute looking for a predator, I can't eat. But when surrounded by my herd, I can let down my guard. That's what we all look for, that good feeling of like, "Oh, I can let down my guard because I'm surrounded by my herd." That's really effectively a selfish feeling like, "I want you to protect me from predators so I can eat." But the Disney version of it is, "Yay, we all stick together and protect each other," and that is healthy because if I just want you to protect me, then you're probably not going to go along with it. Oxytocin rewards us with a good feeling when we take action to get social support, and then it only lasts for a few minutes, which is why people are always looking for the next way to get social support.

The next big one is serotonin. People have heard of this from antidepressants, but that's not how it works at all in the animal world. This is very different from what you hear anywhere. For a whole century, researchers knew that animals were very competitive and always trying to one-up each other. If I try to grab a banana and you're a bigger monkey than me, you're going to bite me. I don't want to get bitten, so I'm going to pull my hand back, but I still want a banana. So I'm going to look for a place where I'm a bigger monkey, and then my brain will reward me with a little serotonin. Says, "Oh, I got it going on. I'm strong enough to do what it takes to meet my survival needs despite a world of rivals." You can see how much we want that feeling. A nice way to talk about it is to call it confidence.

Dr. Wendy Myers: Yes, and then what about endorphins?

Loretta G Breuning: Endorphin is chemically the same as an opioid or morphine. Our body naturally releases it when we're in physical pain because in the state of nature when you're in pain, you have a short window of a good feeling to mask the pain so you can run to save your life. After that, you feel the pain because that tells you to protect your injuries. Everyone can imagine this if you slip and fall and people say to you, "Are you okay?" And you say, "Yeah, I'm fine," but then 15 minutes

later, you say, "Wow, I'm really injured," because endorphin masks pain with a good feeling for 15 minutes.

You can see why this is attractive to people, and a simple example is if you get into a hot tub and that's a real pain, and it feels so good, that's why it feels good. But then, after 15 minutes, it wears off, and in order to get more, you would have to make the water hotter, but that would be crazy stupid. We are not meant to purposely inflict pain on ourselves to get endorphin; it's only there for emergencies. We're meant to seek others but not endorphins.

Dr. Wendy Myers: Yeah, that's why you see a lot of people running. They want that runner's high and those endorphins. I've never ever experienced runner's high because I just don't run. But yeah, that's one way I'm avoiding that pain and whatnot. But yeah, we want to seek out pleasure and avoid pain, and that's why we have all these behaviors that we do to get the hit, like the little rat with the bar, trying to get cocaine out of the water, we're trying to get rewards. That classic experiment of classical conditioning where we're seeking pleasure and trying to avoid pain.

But what about cortisol? Cortisol's our stress hormone. Let's talk about that because a lot of people are chronically stressed, or they have a very high-stress set point from having a stressful childhood. Why is cortisol turning on so easily?

Loretta G Breuning: Sure, but do you mind later if we go back to the rats and the cocaine?

Dr. Wendy Myers: Yeah, let's do the rats and cocaine, yeah.

Loretta G Breuning: Oh, okay. I spent most of my life in academia, and there can be nasty wars over little minutiae, and there's a nasty war over this rat and cocaine thing.

Dr. Wendy Myers: Of course, I had to bring it up, bring up the controversy.

Loretta G Breuning: Yeah, I just don't want to get in trouble, but anything I say is going to make somebody mad. But in the past, rewards were equated with pleasure, and if you have this pleasure definition of reward, then in a way, it doesn't make sense because why would a rat push that lever to the point of dying? Because, as they said in that experiment, the rat goes without food and water, and sex opportunities and just keeps pushing the lever until it dies. The modern way of thinking about it is that dopamine, which is chemically similar to cocaine, is the anticipation of reward rather than the reward itself. That's what academics say.

What I say is this cocaine is more dopamine than you could ever get naturally. That's why it's a bigger reward. That's why you're ignoring food, sex, and water to the point of dying because your brain says, "Oh, this is better," and that's why you're fooling it. Where do we get this idea that I anticipate a reward? Is this going to feel so good? It's from dopamine in your past. What in my past told me that ice cream is going to feel so good? Partly in a way, it's like cocaine because there is no ice cream in the state of nature. There is nothing that's that good.

Dr. Wendy Myers: I love how the ice cream is now the cocaine.

Loretta G Breuning: If you're on cocaine, ice cream's better. But anything that's more rewarded than you would get naturally or more rewarded than you got in your past, your brain says, "Wow!" And the wow builds a dopamine pathway, and then you look for that.

Dr. Wendy Myers: Okay, okay. Got it, got it. Okay, let's go back to cortisol. Cortisol is a stress chemical. Why are so many people dealing with constantly releasing cortisol? Why does it turn on so easily?

Loretta G Breuning: Sure. In the state of nature, you have real survival threats all the time. You didn't find enough food, you were hungry, you were thirsty, you were cold, and you heard lions roaring in the background. This constant, constant sense of threat that people had was real. So that cortisol system, you're only focusing on the most immediate threat. I always say if a gazelle waited for the world to be 100% safe before it went out to look for food, it would starve to death. So you're always just dealing with the most immediate threat.

But in the modern world, there are no immediate threats, so we learn to focus on more distant threats. What are the more distant threats? Well, there are two things. One is you could turn on the news and have people constantly terrorizing you with this threat and that threat, which is what many people do. But in addition, how your brain defines a threat is whatever turned on your cortisol in your past. If you grew up without hunger and thirst and cold and predators trying to eat you, then whatever turned on your cortisol, maybe your brother stole your cookie. Maybe you didn't get invited to a birthday party. That's the cortisol circuit that is your navigation system. Now anything that fits the basic pattern of your brother stealing your cookie or not getting invited to that birthday party that's what turns it on. You could see how in your workday, 100 things can turn that on.

Dr. Wendy Myers: Oh yeah, exactly, exactly. You mentioned these chemicals depend on being wired by past experience, but what does it take to rewire that and to just get what we want and turn on those happiness chemicals we want with the rewiring?

Loretta G Breuning: Sure, there are a few different ways, and two of them work, and one of them doesn't work. I'm sorry, there are three ways, but only one of them is going to work for you. The big way is to be young. When you're young, your neuroplasticity is high, which is why the expression children are sponges, and that builds a new pathway from anything. But while that window of opportunity has passed for many of us, the next one is for a big surge of chemicals. A simple example is if you get a promotion if you fall in love, something big happens and that wires you to then look for that in the future. But that's not reliable. You can't count on things like, "Oh, I fell in love with a person with red hair in the past, so now I'm going to spend my whole life looking for someone with red hair," that's not real.

So we need a more conscious way of building a new pathway, and that is repetition. Repetition is un-fun, and that's why not everybody is motivated to repeat the new behavior until it wires in. That's why I always focus on animal trainers who have perfected the art of repeating a new behavior. I can explain how to do that.

Dr. Wendy Myers: Yes. Yeah, well do. Yeah, explain that.

Loretta G Breuning: Yeah, I should tell you my most exciting example of this. You may have heard that dolphin trainers are the ones that have done a lot of work, dog trainers of course too. But dolphin trainers, the inventor of clicker training, was a dolphin trainer and effectively invented clicker training. The principle is that you give a tiny reward for a tiny step because when you want to try a new behavior, if you don't know how to do it like a dolphin doesn't know how to do a flip, then a big reward isn't going to motivate you because you just don't know how to do it. But if you get a tiny reward every time you take a step toward it, then you have the incentive. But it only works if the trainer refuses to give you the reward unless you take a tiny but new step toward the reward. You can't reward things that are not going toward it.

The reason it's exciting for me, in Mexico, they have dolphinariums, places where you can swim with dolphins, and they have a behind-the-scenes day with the dolphins. I've done that twice, and it's the most exciting thing ever. Not only do you get to go in the water with the dolphins, but they teach you the hand signals, then they allow you to even make up a new one and teach a dolphin a new trick. It's very cool if you get to do it.

Dr. Wendy Myers: Yeah, nice. Yeah, and it's really interesting. I mean, I remember when I would train my dog, Jezebel, she's dead now. But when I'd train her, she was very highly motivated for food. Even the dog trainer was like, "Wow, she's so motivated by food," so she was very easy to train because that was her little currency. And other dogs are not as motivated by food for whatever reason. I can't imagine not being motivated by food because I'm such a foodie.

But anyways, let's talk about social media a little bit and how this is maybe shaping our behavior. A lot of people are addicted to social media, and a lot of people spend a lot of time on social media. What is this social comparison? How does it lure us in, and how can we stop it from making us unhappy, because the research shows that when you're on social media, you're comparing yourself to other people. Other people seem happier than you are, and then we end up feeling less than and miserable. What's going on there?

Loretta G Breuning: Sure. First, I may address the healthy side of social media, so people understand why they're drawn toward it. Part of it is that you're meeting that need for having that feeling that you have a herd immediately. Then the serotonin, when the animal feels that it's in the one-up position and it's going to get the banana,

gets that immediately. Then what if I'm bored and I can't think of a way to have a herd or to be in a one-up position? Then my dopamine tells me, as soon as I look at a phone, it's a pathway that said in the past it felt good. So you anticipate that it's going to feel good now. Those are all the natural reasons that you would want it.

But also what I think is so important is why don't we just meet these needs in other ways? I think what people need to understand is this thing about rejection. If I invite you for coffee and you tell me that you're busy, that's not a survival threat. But if in my past I had a bad feeling about rejection, so my cortisol turns on, and I'm like, "I don't want to ever do anything that gets me rejected. I don't want to apply for a job where I might not get it." When people say, "Oh, but if I just live in the digital world, I never have to deal directly with that rejection," I think that's a big part of it. That's why people go there. Now people are being told to blame social media for the bad feeling, but I think it's important to understand why you're doing it and what you're getting out of it.

But social comparison is something that mammals have always done because, in the animal world, I have to have a realistic sense of my strength. If I think I'm stronger than you and I'm not, you're going to bite me, and it could kill me. If I think I'm weaker, I'm a little monkey, and I'm never big enough to get anything, then not only am I not going to fill my belly, but I'm not going to get a mating opportunity, and my genes are not going to get passed on. Natural selection builds a brain that says, "I'm going to assert myself. I just have to find the right moment." That's why it's always doing the social comparison thing and rewarding it with a good feeling.

Even before social media, people went crazy for social comparison. A great example is that when people wore corsets, everybody would make the corset tighter and tighter to the point of practically killing themselves.

Dr. Wendy Myers: Yeah, yeah. I'm so glad I didn't grow up in those times; I'd be dead. Tying that corset super tight. Yeah, and back in the '90s, when I was growing up, you did it through magazines. You compared yourself through magazines and television and things like that. There's always a way to compare yourself.

Do you have any tips on social media? Nice to recognize why we're comparing ourselves, but is there a way to be happy and be on social media?

Loretta G Breuning: Sure, it's very individual, so people can come up with their own plans. But what's universal is we all want to meet that need for feeling one up. We all want to meet that need for feeling like we have a herd. We all want to meet that need for doing whatever relieved my cortisol in the past. If you give yourself other ways to meet those needs, then social media will just drop off on its own. What are other ways to meet that need? Let's get to the big one. My inner mammal wants to be in the one-up position, so how can I do that? The bad way is to put yourself up by putting others down. If you do that, you build a lens on the world

where you think other people are putting you down. The simple answer is to look for ways to put yourself up without putting others down.

What I recommend is, for one minute, to focus on your own strengths. Don't dwell on other people's weaknesses, don't dwell on other people's strengths; just focus on your own strengths. Do it for one minute and do it three times a day. It takes time and repetition to build the practice because first, when you do it, you think, "Oh, my strengths are so lame." But then, with practice, you say, "Well, yesterday I had a problem, and I solved it. Last month I had a dilemma, but it's gone." You can just build that confidence in what you do, and then that builds a pathway. Then you may say, "Oh, well, that's fake," but your obsessing over your weaknesses is just as fake.

I'd say it's like putting contact lenses over the glasses that you've already learned to look at the negative in yourself. Then you're putting glasses over the negative to adjust to having both.

Dr. Wendy Myers: Got it, got it. You've written a book about all this stuff, *The Habits of a Happy Brain: Retrain Your Brain to Boost Your Serotonin, Dopamine, Oxytocin, and Endorphin Levels*. Can you tell us about that and some ways you suggest for boosting these feel-good chemicals?

Loretta G Breuning: Sure. I've written a lot of books, and the book that's mostly about the one I just said is called *Status Games: Why We Play and How to Stop*. That's the one that's mostly about social comparison and how to rewire your social comparison. My introductory book, *Habits of a Happy Brain: Retrain your Brain to Boost Your Dopamine, Serotonin, Oxytocin, and Endorphin*, has a shorter treatment of each one. Since I already did the serotonin, I'll do a quick one on dopamine and oxytocin.

The simple way to rewire your dopamine is to have a short-run goal, a long-run goal, and a middle-term goal because steps toward a goal trigger dopamine. If you have some huge giant goal, then everyone knows that feeling that you just get frustrated. If you have a short-run goal every morning and you know I can reach it, then you have some of that dopamine every day. Then you could take a tiny step toward your long-run goal every day, and when that path is blocked, then you have a middle-term goal, and you focus on that so that you can shift your focus all the time and always be making progress because that's what triggers dopamine. Okay, great.

Loretta G Breuning: Oxytocin, the simple way of looking at that is that I used to call it trust, but it's really trusting yourself to be able to get the support you need when you need it because the core mammal brain is very tribal. I feel safe because I'm with my tribe, but animals have a lot of conflict in their herds, and they'd just as soon spread out. They only cluster when there's a real threat. People who live in tribes don't get to make any of their own choices; they just have to follow the herd all the time. We don't really want that. Your inner mammal wants

protection all the time, but it doesn't want to deal with the frustration of always following the herd. It wants that protection from a parent, but then it doesn't want any of the frustrations of having a parent. It's like, "I want my freedom, and yet I want you to do things to make me feel safe."

We have to be somewhat realistic with ourselves, and in adult life, there's a mutuality that I offer you protection, and in exchange, I can get protection. But if you look for one-for-one reciprocity, you get disappointed. I learned this from monkeys we've seen in videos when they groom each other's fur. If I groom your fur, you may not groom my fur back, but then when a predator comes, you may help to protect me. So we invest in other people, and we do nice things for other people. What I call it is we build a bridge with other people, and we can't predict when they will cross it, but we trust that we have a support network that we need. It's not about giving money to strangers because when you give money to that homeless person, they're not going to be there for you when you need it. Really you have to take the risk of building bridges toward real people you know, but not build bridges in a way where you're trying to run their life. You're just building a tiny brick every day for a different person and then being grateful when they cross the bridge.

Dr. Wendy Myers: And be careful, don't keep giving, giving, and giving and giving and then not get anything. You have to know when to stop investing in this person.

Loretta G Breuning: Yes, exactly, and that's why only one little brick one day to one person and another little brick another day to another person, so you don't become a slave to any one person. Even the monkey brain knows how to do that. When a monkey grooms someone and then they don't return the favor in any way, like in mating season that they forget them, then they stop grooming them and groom someone else.

Dr. Wendy Myers: Even the monkeys can learn that; you can too. That was a really hard lesson because I'm a giver. I love giving. Now I know I want to cut those monkeys off. Can you talk about any free resources you have that delve deeper into these topics?

Dr. Wendy Myers: Sure, depending on how deep a person wants to go because it varies widely. For people who don't love to read or if you have someone in mind who doesn't love to read, I have a video series, youhavepoweroveryourbrain.com, and it introduces all of this; it's free. I made a new video series that's not going to be free, it's an online course, but it's not out yet. But the free series is in five-minute segments, and they're very entertaining and explain everything I've said.

Then I mentioned the book. My website has everything, innmammalinstitute.org, innmammalinstitute.org, has all my social media and a wide variety of resources for whatever learning style you have.

Loretta G Breuning: Okay, great. Yeah, I thought that was a really interesting website. Really caught my attention.

Dr. Wendy Myers: Thank you.

Loretta G Breuning: Yeah, but I think it's nice. It just ties into everything you're doing and that animal behavior and transfers it to us as humans. Well, thank you so much, Loretta, for coming to the show.

Everyone, I'm Dr. Wendy Meyers. Thanks for tuning in every week to the Meyer Detox podcast where. I just hope one little thing that you take away from this that could help you to improve your life, and that's why I do this. Thanks for tuning in, and I'll talk to you guys next week.