

Quitting Alcohol and Managing Sugar Cravings with Laura McKowen – Insatiable Season 11, Episode 6

[INTRODUCTION]

[0:00:47.7] AS: Have you ever had a colleague, a family member or friend who smoked and was agitated close to their smoke break or if they otherwise couldn't grab a cigarette, or you may know someone who struggles with alcohol and has trouble resisting a or many drinks. Perhaps you have similar feelings, but they're directed towards cookies, chips other kind of carbs. We have labeled the staples of the American diet as an addictive substance for many reasons. On one hand, our agricultural policy in food production that revolves genetically altered crops that produce cheap carbohydrates represents a bigger lobby and more electoral laws than tobacco whose powerful lobby allowed cigarettes to be marketed as a healthy way to relax and safe for years including by doctors, despite widespread evidence to the contrary.

In addition to not being regulated, the sugar industry gets an estimated \$4 billion in annual subsidies courtesy of US taxpayers. On the hand, lobbies and food politics aside, food addiction and consequences require a more nuanced approach than abstinence as possible for cigarettes and alcohol. We die if we avoid food completely, and food is much more fundamentally woven into our culture in earliest memories than alcohol or cigarettes, which in all cultures are generally adulthood indulgences.

Do you remember summers at the pool with Swedish fish, or warm, salty soft pretzels from the snack shack, or holidays with grandma's amazing mac and cheese, or dad's famous mash potatoes, or like me, Friday night Pizza Huts where you cashed in your book reward for reading five books to a free personal pan pizza? Chances are if you scan your memory, some of your



best warmest memories involve sugar associating this ingredient with pleasure, celebration, ritual and reward.

For the purposes of this season, by sugar, I mean we think of as traditional sugar, like sodas, candies, cake and added sugar in processed foods, like salad dressing, breads, pretzels and other salty carbs. On the flip-side, your most difficult memories probably also involve sugar as a source of refuge. If like me, after another day of being bullied and isolated from “the cool kids at school”, you found bagels in the fridge to eat and numbed the pain of being othered, or right before a spin tap to see how far your cancer had spread, your parents took you to the Pancake House to try and bring some sort of comfort during the scariest health scare you’ve ever had. Who can forget SnackWells? A dieter’s low-fat bonanza where we thought we could eat the whole box because it was low-fat, not realizing that all the sugar was making us hungrier and hungrier.

Sugar has comforted most of us when we were isolated, in the midst of chaos, or for many of my clients, it was a lift when being emotionally neglected. Food companies methodically and relentlessly advertised to make us trust sugar and let these processed foods into our lives in a way not only we thought a warning label like cigarettes, but actually in a way we now come to see gout.

As a result, what was only used in a way that we use spices today, a little dab’ll do ya is now in the stable of our collective diets. While now it’s recommended to limit sugar, food companies didn’t create but can capitalize on our puritan Christian and capitalistic narrative of sacrifice equals reward to ignore the mind-body connection and the need for emotional intelligence and agility.

Adding insult to injury, we as taxpayers are paying to make ourselves and the environment, which is degraded immensely with our monoculture agriculture focused on sugar, corn, soy and wheat that will be processed in sugar and well, or subsiding ecological collapse in the resulting

in the pandemics like coronavirus. The decline of our personal and environmental bodies has led to an over-taxed healthcare that was never designed for the chronic diseases which in large part driven by our food supply and its consequences.

In this season 11 of Insatiable, we will look at how we as individuals and a collective can go in a sugar rehab physically and emotionally. We will explore how we arrived here, root causes of sugar addition, if sugar is really addictive and can we eat it moderately and how we can move forward with sugar and its proper pace in our life and what does that look like for you?

Without further ado, let's enter sugar rehab together.

[INTERVIEW]

[00:04:52] AS: Welcome, everybody, to season 11, episode 6; quitting alcohol and managing sugar cravings with Laura McKowen.

One of the most combinations I think we have out in our world that we normalize is alcohol and the sugar that accompanies it. And to talk about both today, we have Laura McKowen who wrote the soul-stirring book, *We Are the Luckiest*, about her path to getting sober. I preordered the book when it came out in January. I read it within the week I got it and I had a newborn, like 8 week year old, but it was like my little treat to myself every night. I was so sad to have it end. So I'm so happy to have her here today to share her wisdom.

Laura has had a long successful career in public relations in the madmen as drinking culture of advertising. After getting sober, she quickly became recognized as a fresh voice in recovery, beloved for her soulful and irreverent writing online and in print. She now leads sold-out retreats and courses teaching people how to say yes to a bigger life. I love that. It's not just like anti-addiction. Yes to a bigger life.

She lives outside Boston, Massachusetts with her daughter. Laura writes an award-winning blog, hosted the iTunes Top 100 Home Podcast in Spiritualist, and she's been featured in the New York Times, the Guardian, Web MD, Psychology Today, the Today's Show, and more. Laura has an MBA from Babson College and spent 15 years in advertising managing million-dollar accounts for Fortune 100 companies before transitioning to writing and teaching.

She's a registered yoga teacher and is currently earning her masters in psychology with an emphasis in addiction studies from Purdue University. She's the founder of several online programs for sobriety and personal development, the Luckiest Club, a sobriety support community, and she teaches workshops and retreats all over the US. And her first book, which I mentioned at the top of this, *We Are the Luckiest: The Surprising Magic of a Sober Life* released just this January. It was an instant bestseller.

Thank you so much for being here, Laura.

[00:06:53] LM: Oh, thank you. Yeah, I was trying to organize this interview, and all I wanted to do was read passages from the book. That's fine.

[00:07:02] AS: Well, I'm going to read some of them, but then I'm going to also ask you questions.

[00:07:05] LM: Yeah. Yeah. Okay.

[00:07:07] AS: But the writing is just so soulful and it pierces at so much truth, which is really my favorite writing. In *We Are the Luckiest*, and this is about recovery of alcohol and becoming sober. But as I was reading it, I couldn't help think this is a very similar process to healing our relationship to food. Because as you said in your talk at the Strand, it's about straightening out our stories and digesting our stories about ourselves. In my language, I think you talk about

facing ourselves, our emotions, and learning to embrace our creative power, which in your was creative writing.

One of the things you talk about in the book and on social media is how we normalize drinking. When there's nothing normal about our relationship to alcohol as a collective. And big part of my work with clients is helping them see the stories they been socialized into and what they think are their choices because of this socialization versus what really works for them and what they want to choose.

Can you describe your process of recognizing our collective story around alcohol is quite unhealthy even though that's not only been socialized to think?

[00:08:14] LM: Yeah. When this first faced with the fact that I had to get sober, which was in 2013, I actually remember this distinct moment where, for context, I was working and I had a very high profile job at this PR marketing agency in Boston. I was traveling all over the world for work. I was leading a leading a team, managing these big accounts. I lived in a pretty affluent place. I had lots of friends and family that wanted me around. Everyone around me drank too, whether it's work or home or – Well, I was separated at the time, friends, all that.

Alcohol was very ubiquitous with my circles, and I think that's pretty much the case for most people. I remember this moment, like I had hit a point where it was like I had to face the fact that this does not going to work in my life anymore if I wanted to keep my daughter and probably I won't keep my job. And I remember riding on a train to work. So I lived outside the city. I was riding on a train, and I had been trying to get sober, trying to go to meetings, trying to piece together days. Just really profoundly struggling for a couple months at that point, and I had drank the tonight before, and I was hung over again and I was so defeated and so deflated and so angry that like I didn't know where the anger was coming from. But I remember coming up out of the train station, I remember it being like a very steamy day in the city. I remember coming up and just I was thinking of all my friends. I was thinking of like

everyone I know and I just had this like moment where it hit me, “This is – We’re all diluted. This so much bigger than Laura has a problem, or Laura is an alcoholic,” as I had been told. Laura is unique. This is so much bigger than that. We’ve all bought into this insanity around drinking. I happen to cross some sort of elusive imaginary line at some point that put me in the problem category. But man! There were so many – Everyone I knew, the alcohol was not doing them any favors, right? There were so much that occurred to me in that moment and I didn't even have the words for it then or like I didn't have my argument solid. I didn't understand fully what I meant, but I just knew like this is so much bigger.

We don't even understand the water we’re swimming in. It just started this like process of like really not just dealing with my own issues. For example, I hated – It was crazy to me that the only place I could go to talk about alcohol and my problem with alcohol was in a meeting, in an anonymous meeting, or I can read about it in a book. No one was talking about it. It was like the last thing we really want to talk about even with my girlfriend, where we would talk about anything. Literally, anything. No one would talk about alcohol.

So that was something to me. It was like why do we protect this so much? Why am I suddenly now supposed to go deal with this problem alone and shut up about it? If I had cancer, or if I had depression, or if I had whatever, that would be the case. I mean, sure, there’d probably be friends that are more or less willing to talk to me about it because of their comfort with. But this was like just a hard no. Like no one knew what to talk about. No one wanted to go there.

That was a tipoff for me. It's like we’ve got some weird shit going on around here. Then I started doing just research and just sort of like – Because that’s what I do. I just want to absorb information and figure this out and learn more. It’s like I learned that alcohol is the most dangerous drug that there is. It caused more deaths than all the other drugs combined, except for cigarettes. If it was created as a new drug today, it would be banned. There's no way it would be legal to sell alcohol.

I learned all these things and it's like – And yet we love it and we prize it and we put it in these beautiful bottles. In my mom's circles, it was like we basically promoted like over drinking. Any in my friends circles and in my work, the go hard or go home attitude, and you work hard and you play hard. I mean, everyone was drinking a lot. Not only did we not think much of it. It was like a badge of honor. Yet, here I was and this thing literally almost killed me many times over.

I just started to put these pieces together. It's like, "Wait. Okay, yes I have a problem that I have to deal with," and I'm not saying that everybody has the same relationship with alcohol that I do or did, but also the culture around alcohol is insane and we have to look like ask questions that aren't even being asked. There are so many assumptions that we don't even think about and we don't realize how blind we are to it.

[00:14:27] AS: Yeah. And I love that you mentioned, you didn't have the language for it. But there was this intuitive we'd have to look at the collective, because I think one of the things around health and wellness that is so dangerous that mixes with this American narrative of individualism. You are responsible for your health. You were responsible for your finances. All of these stuff, we basically think we have to go at it alone. So we never think to look at the collective. To your point, we don't know the questions to ask. That's not something like, "Well, let's look at how I'm socialized or like how I'm being influence," because we're like, "No. We are the rugged individual that is rebellious and free."

I know, as someone who likes to think of themselves a rebels, it's always humbling when I'm like, "Oh, no. That was not really your idea. You've been brainwashed," or not brainwashed, but socialized.

[00:15:17] LM: Culturalized. Yeah.

[00:15:18] AS: Yeah, culturalized into it. But I love that you follow that intuitive sense even without the language. Then, isn't it amazing, once you start to get that like intuitive

questioning, then you find all the data and then you're like – Did you feel – Because this is how I felt about as I started to learn about food for being a source of medicine instead of just calories or whatever. This was 20 years ago when I figured this out. But did you find it kind of isolating? Because the more you learned, the more society looks insane and you're like, "Wait. Why don't we think it's normal to treat animals like this industrial agriculture? Whatever it is."

[00:15:58] LM: Yeah.

[00:15:59] AS: It can be kind of isolating, because what you're doing to your point, like it was kind of a badge of honor in all your circles.

[00:16:06] LM: Yeah. It's hugely isolating. I mean, I luckily had a friend that I made really quickly who I have no doubt we were brought together so that we could go through this path. But that felt the same way I did about all of it and we would talk and confirm each other's suspicions and like tests our ideas and things like that.

Yeah, because it is isolating, because even in AA circles, which I love, AA saved my life. It's also a very different way of thinking. In AA, there are alcoholics and then there are normies, people who can drink "normally". While I do believe in the concept of alcoholism, for sure, the idea that alcohol is okay for everybody else that it doesn't have this deleterious effect on anyone who drinks it is such a fallacy, unless you're an alcoholic, then you're fine. It's such a lie.

Later, that was 2013, and I started writing. You figure these things out as you go. You figure out language, because there are so many different pieces to this. I also like want to comment on the individualism and that, yes, I agree with what you are saying and I also deeply believe in personal responsibility, deeply, but you have to look at the reality of cultural norms and the way that your influenced. And just sort of these foregone conclusion, these things that have made their way into your subconscious to operate the way that – That form that way that you operate, right? That stuff is real too. You have to look at that too.

It's tricky. It's layered. It's not a straightforward argument. It's testing paradox. So it's taken a long time. Still figuring out certain ideas. But then 2017, this Lancet study came out and said there is no safe amount of alcohol. That the amount of alcohol that is safe is zero. I was like, "Thank you! Fucking thank you."

[00:18:18] AS: That's the challenge of rewriting our stories, is like what are we measuring, right? In the story of, well, alcohol can be safe. It's like what does that mean? Like you're not driving drunk? That's often we think is these black and white extremes versus – I cited a study and well-rounded about how like alcohol raises your blood sugar and it makes you lose capacity for emotional resilience.

[00:18:42] LM: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

[00:18:44] AS: What are we really measuring when we say this is safe or this is normal and that's what you really have to unpack, I think, in terms of the narrative around anything. It's like, "Well, how –"

[00:18:55] LM: Yeah, absolutely. Then there're reasons why studies like that don't get published. It's a big industry, and there're all kinds of factors. Yeah, I mean, what we're measuring. One of the ways that I have been able to get through to people, especially women, is to talk about anxiety and alcohol, because there is a correlation, a very strong correlation between anxiety disorder. What the hell is it?

[00:19:22] AS: General anxiety is often what it's called.

[00:19:24] LM: But it's the most common diagnosis and especially for women, and yet, and women are these sort of emerging-market of drinkers. We're drinking more than we ever have. Yes, there are many factors that play into anxiety, but the research also shows that there is a

direct correlation to anxiety and experienced heightened anxiety after drinking. It's a depressant. So there's that too.

I never put it together, which is so funny, because the anxiety in the end was what actually just murdered me. My last day of drinking, the thing that I said to myself was not – It wasn't that I can't never experience making those mistakes again. I can't ever experience saying things I don't want to say again. I can't never experience driving drunk again. All of that, yes, I didn't want to experience that again. But it was anxiety that I said that I can't ever feel this way again. Not even one more day in my life. It was so horrific. I just wanted to die. You feel like you're dying. Yet, I had have been experiencing that for years, like 15 years, and I didn't put it together. Because what we're told is that it helps. It's relaxing. Have a drink. Take the edge off. The reality is you have that relieve when you get that hit of dopamine for about 20 minutes, and then there's a rebound that you pay for hours, sometimes days.

[00:21:02] AS: Yeah. I love that you say that, because I think so many people struggle with anxiety and they don't know it because it's been normalized, or it's part of the matrix of getting out of these stories. To your point, you're like I've been experiencing this for 15 years, which is part of why it's hard to recognize it.

[00:21:18] LM: Exactly. Right. It's just a state. Look, it's so easy to just get medication. Just medicate that. I knew exactly how to – It's like this mad scientist. I knew how to regulate my state with caffeine, alcohol, Xanax, Ambien. I knew exactly how to do it so that I could maintain this sort of shitty level of existing, I guess. But I didn't know how bad it was. Like you said, the matrix is a great way to put it. You don't know how bad it is until you step out of it.

[00:21:53] AS: Yeah. I love that you said, because I think owning our story – I mean, again, we talk about owning our stories a lot here and I think it's becoming a lot more in the mainstream, and I love that you said that you were making it up as you go. Because in your book, you wrote – I just love this passage. You said I wasn't any of the stories I had been telling myself. I was just

a girl lying on a rug feeling something by herself, but not alone. I had witnessed her. She had been witnessed. This might have been the first time I experienced true intimacy.

That, like – Because I think intimacy is what we're all, especially emotional intimacy, craving so much, right? Part of why we need each other in connection. So how did you learn to discern? You also said, I love this line, put yourself in the house where the truth is told. How did you learn to discern what was the truth for you? Not what was the worst of your struggles or thoughts you had about yourself?

[00:22:52] LM: It's such a good question, because it's really hard.

[00:22:56] AS: Right? Yeah.

[00:22:56] LM: Yeah. Well, for a while, for a long time I had to lean on other women who could see me and had been through what I had been through and come out the other side and could reflect back to me who I was before I believed in.

[00:23:19] AS: That just gave me chills.

[00:23:21] LM: Yeah, I couldn't do it myself. That's part of this whole collective thing. I couldn't do it myself. I believe so strongly, and I am the most anti-joiner. I would rather die than admit that I need help. I'm much better now. But I couldn't do it by myself. I've always been a seeker. I've relied on spiritual texts to help me a lot. I relied on other women primarily honestly to do what I said to really reflect back to me what was true until I internalized it. And those were people in AA. Those were therapists. Those were friends who wanted to see me grow. People like my brother. That's how it started.

Then what happens, the other piece of that is I started talking. There's a reason we tell stories, and when you say owning your story, that means many things. One of the things that means to

me that I always encourage people do, and I think you have to do, is speak your story over and over and over and over and over again until you start to rewrite it and straighten it out. Not rewrite it in like some fictionalized sense. But you start to understand it.

Speaking is alchemical. It's transformative. There's a reason that we share things through the ages by story, because that's the primary mechanism of which we understand life from a psychological perspective. You do have this capacity to understand your story.

The way I always envisioned it was like, if you remember, like old cassette tapes and the ribbon would come out and it would get all tangled up.

[00:25:25] AS: Yeah. Oh! I hated that. You try to untangle it.

[00:25:28] LM: Yeah, right, and like twist it and sometimes in knots, and you'd have to go really, really slow twisting and twisting and twisting to bring it back into the cassette and straighten it out. But it can be done. I think that is what happens in the processes of recovering for me, recovering for anybody from whatever you're recovering from, wherever you're headed to. It's like you have to really understand your story, because so much of what we believe ourselves is based on limiting beliefs that we absorbed as a childhood that live in our subconscious. We don't even know that we have them, right?

[00:26:06] AS: Preach. Preach.

[00:26:07] LM: Yeah. Like 95% of what we're operating on how we behave is run by our subconscious. 95%. So there's a lot of junk in there, we have start to pull apart what's true. I guess you said like how do you know what's true versus lie. I mean, the way I think about it is – I read about this in the book actually. Truth can be uncomfortable, but it feels expansive.

[00:26:39] AS: Yeah, I love you talked about that.

[00:26:42] LM: But like there's something not true or something dishonest or a lie is also uncomfortable, but it feels restrictive. There's nowhere to go with it. Whereas the truth is, it's confining. Lies or confining. Untruths are confining. There's nowhere to go. Then worst, truth is expansive. It's still uncomfortable, but it's expansive.

Yeah. Then there're many other things I could bring up too. I saw, because I did see my own darkness. I did see my own shadow. I did see all these horrible things that I was capable of. Yet, I was still here. I knew that I had goodness in me too. I knew that I had a loving heart. I knew that I loved my daughter. You start to understand that we all have all of that inside of us. We all have the capacity – I am either all good or all bad, or 75% good and 25% bad. It's like, “No. We have everything in us. We all have everything in us.” That's just a fact, right?

Accepting that and having a lived experience of that has a potential to breed a lot more compassion for yourself. Through that, I could start to see myself as someone who is just in a lot of pain, and therefore did the things that she needed to do to get her needs met because she was in a lot of pain and she didn't know any better versus someone that is just like this debased piece of crap.

[00:28:16] AS: Yeah. That was a question that I had for you, is like is that what you come to believe? It's like alcohol is a symptom, not the problem, right?

[00:28:24] LM: Totally. Absolutely. 100%. Percent. It's a solution. I mean, I know you talk about sugar that way.

[00:28:32] AS: Yeah. It's a solution of the problem. Yeah.

[00:28:36] LM: It's like alcohol is my friend, man. I needed it. It got me through a lot.

[00:28:42] AS: I love that you just mentioned about developing compassion for ourselves so that we can hold the “good and bad”. Although the more you do it, I love that you said paradox is what you kind of have to hold, because you start to realize good and bad are constructs as well, right?

[00:28:57] LM: Yeah.

[00:28:57] AS: But in one episode this season, I talked about his sacrifice reward story that I think causes us to eat, but I also see it causing people to drink, whether they consider themselves alcoholics or just at night they needed unwind. In the group you talk about being in a running group and you say, “I was always proud of myself for the willingness to pick myself up off the side of the street and get the training run done. It tracked with my resolve to be “strong” like I had learned to do as a kid. Now looking back, I wonder if this active “discipline” was mostly just an act of self-aggression. I wonder if what I needed more than to pick myself up and keep running was to admit that I needed to stop. I wonder what I needed was to ask for help. I wonder if this is what so many of us need when we think we need to get our shit together to let it fall apart instead.” I have chills just reading it again.

Can you talk about, again, a little bit of your process of learning to stay and why this is crucial for really owning our story, but with our “good and bad”?

[00:30:01] LM: Yeah. For me, it all comes back to learning to stay. I’m a huge sort of follower, lover, believer in Buddhists practices and Buddhism itself. I’ve learned so much from my Buddhist teachers. The natural tendency when we experience discomfort as human beings is to want to get out of it, right? Emotional discomfort, physical discomfort, psychological discomfort. It’s our natural instinct to want to get out of it. Unfortunately, we have developed a million ways to do that. You really don’t have to be with herself at all and the way that we live.

[00:30:45] AS: Right. Especially with social media. I mean, it’s like –

[00:30:48] **LM:** Oh. Yeah, don't even get me started. Right.

[00:30:50] **AS:** Yeah.

[00:30:51] **LM:** We had a whole conversation about that before we even started. Yeah, you really don't have to be with yourself. What Buddhism teaches is that is essentially to learn how to be okay with what is, with the present moment, with what is. That's the thing that we all fight. And those that struggle with addiction, I mean, that is the root of addiction. It says I'm in too much pain, and you are. The way I talk about this is like the original, the sort of defense mechanisms we develop as children are very intelligent. For example, I learned to shape shift really fast so that I could get my needs met. By shape shift, I mean I'll be whatever I need to be so that I can get my needs by my dad, say. What that looks like is saying that I'm fine. Not showing weakness. Not showing sensitivity. Never being able to predict anger and avoid it at all costs.

Essentially, I learned to lie. And that's a really – It's an intelligent mechanism as a child to survive your environment. There many of them that we develop as an adult. And what business when we do that is we leave ourselves. Essentially, I grew up abandoning myself and over and over and over and learning that that's what was required to be okay in the world, to be okay with friend groups. To be okay – Just to be okay to achieve enough like homeostasis internally to survive.

Of course, I didn't know any of this. We can talk about it now, but I've always been extraordinarily sensitive. I've always been a big feeler and I learned what I needed to be to be liked, to be accepted and to get my needs met, and that's all we're ever looking for. It's all anybody is ever looking for.

You go forward into adulthood and you carry these same patterns, but they're destructive to relationships since your life, really. As you progress through life, the way I talk about it is having – Like I was many different people. Many versions of Laura out there in the world. That is an extraordinarily painful way to live. I think we've all lived that way. I think you kind of have to live that way until you reach the painful spot where it's no longer tolerable. I think that's a process we all go through.

Essentially, this is a problem of not being able to stay with yourself. It's thinking how you feel. Say, shame comes up, anger comes up. Well, that's wrong. I can't feel that way. I can't stay with it. It's too uncomfortable. I have to do something to take it away. Then so we reach for alcohol. We reach for food. We reach for our phone. We reach for whatever it is. And those things work. They do. They work for a while.

In the process, we become addicted. What happens when we don't stay and say we don't feel our way through a feeling is we don't get the lesson in that feeling.

[00:34:19] AS: I love that.

[00:34:21] LM: Shame has a lesson. All of our emotions are useful. They're not like ghosts that are trying to haunt us or kill us. They're energetic messengers and they all carry a specific message. Anger has a message. Shame has a message. Grief, sadness, even jealousy and envy. They are neutral, so to speak, but they were created evolutionarily to keep us safe, keep us alive, keep us with our tribes, so to speak, but we learn to – We don't like to feel them. The energy of shame is like no one likes to feel that. Feels fucking terrible.

[00:35:00] AS: Totally. Oh! Its' the worst.

[00:35:02] LM: Yeah. Anger, for a lot of women, is demonized.

[00:35:07] AS: Yeah. I love how you say, these are essentially neutral. Bug again, if we think of stories, you can't be an angry woman.

[00:35:15] LM: Yeah, be an angry woman. Right. You can't be a sensitive man or whatever all the –

[00:35:22] AS: There are so many stories around what we're allowed to feel and not feel.

[00:35:24] LM: Right. What that means is we do things to manage that, because you have to. The other part, emotions and trauma and all that, we none of us gets away with anything. When we don't digest these experiences, it's like they just go away. They get stuffed. They make us sick. They don't go away. They have to come out somehow. The process of learning to stay is really what sobriety is to me. It's learning how to stay with whatever is.

I think it's the hardest thing to do. I mean, there's a reason that Buddhism has been going on for so long. There's a reason why, essentially, Buddhists are tasked, the Buddhist monks. All they really did, really, is learn how to breathe and stay with what is. It is these sort of pif instruction. What that means for me, what that started to look like was like, "Okay. Can I sit with what's coming up for me right now? Whatever it happened to be and not drink." That was the practice for a long time. Just not drink, right? Then it was, "Can I sit with whatever's coming out and not engage in other behaviors that I'm escaping to?"

It's not like we seek to become like just pure renunciation of everything, but it's like there's no way we can grow without the – I guess burning is the word that comes to mind, but the burning through of those emotions. They are meant to move through us. They are meant to inform us and inform our lives and how we make decisions. That's how we become integrated, right?

[00:37:26] AS: Yeah.

[00:37:27] LM: That's how we become ourselves.

[00:37:29] AS: I love how you used the word burning, because I think if we apply that metaphor to health, like when you have a fever, your body is really – Everyone work to putting the fever down with medication, but it's like, “No. The body is actually –” The fever is helping burn through whatever –

[00:37:44] LM: Yes. It's a necessary process. Right.

[00:37:47] AS: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. But it's like you – People take Tylenol or whatever. Again, sometimes it's so high, you need help. So it's all about context. But it's like so uncomfortable and people are so afraid of it, but you got to burn through whatever is there. I love – I think it comes back to your earlier point and like that payoff is the expansion. It's meeting who you really are. Not kind of the story you've told yourself or all that kind of stuff and had a deeper intimacy with your life and what your purpose and relationships at home, that kind of stuff.

[00:38:21] LM: Yeah, and really with yourself. Most people just don't know who they are. We have referenced who we are based on the outside for so long that they can't even answer simple questions like, “Am I tired?” “Am I hungry?” “Am I cold?” “Am I angry?” It's like you really have to get to know yourself and that's not just like navel-gazing. There's a whole wave that that can go wrong in thinking, that you just self-love and get to know yourself and it can all sound so like BS.

[00:38:58] AS: Love the life.

[00:38:59] LM: Yeah.

[00:39:00] AS: That's not where the interesting stuff is.

[00:39:02] LM: No, but it's like you have a part to play here. You have a part to play here. If you are not, if you do not become who you are, you are not playing that part. I look at it more as like this beautiful responsibility.

[00:39:19] AS: Yeah. That's one thing that I wanted to comment earlier when you said in-person responsibility, because that is so true, and I found that when you can understand the structures at play, it's not to blame the structures per se, but it gives you compassion and it often totally reframes. You're like, "Wow! I am actually doing pretty decent considering the structures that are in my life."

[00:39:42] LM: Yeah.

[00:39:43] AS: I always share the example of like when I was – I mean, I'm obviously still building my business, but like I would find, I would see all these people appearingly, seemingly like zooming ahead and I was like, "What am I doing wrong? What am I doing wrong?" Then Dartmouth did a study and they were like looking for the entrepreneurial gene. What they came up with was the gene is actually 80% of people who start businesses have family money and so not actually taking any risks. I mean, they take some risks, but it's not the same risk for those of us who don't have family money.

I was like, "Okay. If I had family money, I would sure as hell take it." But I don't. But look how well I'm doing considering that I don't have that. So it was like, "Oh! Rather than beating myself up, I feel like a badass now."

[00:40:29] LM: Exactly. Yes. Yes.

[00:40:31] AS: That's a concrete example of we can look at alcohol or even food is encouraged in the same way. But looking at the structures of how we normalize trauma and how we don't

want to look at pain is like, “Oh, I'm actually considering how much we numb. I'm actually doing pretty great”

As clients start to unravel their story around food, I'm like, “Isn't it amazing that you're not eating all the time?”

[00:40:31] LM: Yeah.

[00:40:53] AS: And realizing pain you're carrying.

[00:40:53] LM: That's so true. It's such a good point. It's such a good point. Yeah, because I wasn't coming out and saying, “Oh my God! This is such a fucked environment. It's all everyone else's fault. Da-da-da-da.” It's just like having a clear view of the reality that we live in. I say like it's not your fault. The traumas that happened to you were not your fault. The culture that you live in is not your fault. All of that is not your fault. But then the second part to that is it is your responsibility.

[00:41:28] AS: I love you make that distinction. When I read that once, again, that's why I love your social media feed. It's like I just went to church.

[00:41:28] LM: Oh my God! That's funny.

[00:41:43] AS: One of the things that you do talk about in the book is that how you started to pay attention to your diet after getting sober. You also said you had a history of eating disorders, and so you did want to have too much structure, which I love that you bring that up. You noticed the sugar habit was, you said, well, excessive.

[00:42:02] LM: Well –

[00:42:04] AS: And I understand, because I actually never really drank because I wanted to eat all my calories. It wasn't like a noble thing. It was just like, "Well –" But anyways, will you describe what happened with that? Because I do get a lot of clients who have given up alcohol and then sugar really increases for them and that's [inaudible 00:42:24] coming for me. I think people would love to hear what that process was and now your current relationship to sugar, because it shifts and changes. It doesn't necessarily end at an endpoint.

[00:42:35] LM: It does. Yeah, yeah, it does. This is fun. I haven't talked really about this much. I just noticed when I stopped drinking, I literally found myself like standing in front of the freezer, eating frozen gummy bears and spooning ice cream like in my really early days of sobriety. Like it's completely unconsciously and I was like, "Huh!" And it was helping me feel better, right? It was like this really strong craving. I was like, "Huh! Okay. This is interesting."

I remember texting my sponsor and being like, "What's up with this?" She's like, "Oh, yes. Totally normal thing." I was like, "What happens to everybody that's real?" Your body is trying to replace dopamine and whatever. I'm sure you have a much more specific explanation.

[00:43:24] AS: No. That's pretty much it, and it's a numbing devices.

[00:43:27] LM: It's a numbing device. Right.

[00:43:29] AS: Taper off, numbing device as an intensity.

[00:43:31] LM: Right. I just kind of went it. Honestly, I didn't give a shit. As long as I wasn't drinking, I let myself do everything else. That was what I needed to do. Because, for me, everyone is different. That's just how it had to be for me. I kind of said whatever. I'm going to tackle these things in the order they're killing me. But then I got to be like three and a half, four years in and I was like still having a lot of ice cream every night, and I would get like bags of candy at 711. It was like not eating sugar in my foods, but mainlining sugar to the point where I

didn't feel good. Like my energy was terrible and my sleep was not great. I just knew it was, "We got to look at this."

But I also had a history of really bad eating disorders. So any kind of restriction for me, any kind of diet. Really, even just the framework of a diet for me would put me in a pretty bad place, right? This is an interesting process. What I started to do was I did – It started with a Wheat Belly. I read that and I was like, "Sure. We'll try that. Sure. Why not?"

Then I did that for a little while and I pretty much hated it, but it did bring my sugar down a lot. Then I did like the whole 30, and that helped with the sugar. But it really had me over focusing on food, which I hated. I know everybody is different. I realized that anything that had me focusing on rules around food was no good for me. As soon as I have rules, I over-focused on it to the point of obsession and being miserable and then worrying about 15 calories, and like I can't live that way. I already lived that way, and it's hell for me. It's an absolute hell. It is the most miserable I've been as a 17, 18-year-old. Obsessed about my diet and weighing absurdly low weight and all that.

I started to learn more about, and this is I think the most important point. What I had been doing all along in sobriety was a lot personal development work, therapy, spiritual work. I really kicked it into seriously high gear around the time that I realized dieting doesn't work for Laura. I had this like stuff come around. I call it my like original woo-woo dose. This stuff around relationships, of romantic relationships, and I went into like this really intense therapy with therapists. I did a lot of different things. I did lot of like energetic stuff.

At the same time, I said there are no rules anymore. There's no rules for Laura and how eats. I just sort of paying attention to what I felt like when I ate things, and that's about it, right? For a while things went haywire. I was like would eat all the forbidden foods, but it honestly lasted for like two weeks. I'm like, "Okay. This isn't even interesting anymore." But I think the more important part was I was working through the emotional stuff. I was really working through

that and not focusing on the food. It was hard. I had to give myself permission to not focus on the food, and especially about the sugar, and I just noticed that it slowly started to leave.

[00:47:12] AS: Yeah, because you were doing the work around relationship. What you call your

–

[00:47:18] LM: My pain, my issues. Whatever you want to call it. I was doing that work, and that really brings me up until a couple months ago. And what my relationship looks like with food now is like it's never ever been before. It's no big deal.

[00:47:35] AS: Yeah. Oh, I love that.

[00:47:36] LM: Oh! This is so interesting. When the pandemic hit, and I'm sure you heard this so much. I was like, "I got to go on a diet. I got to have a plan." Because I started to eat more, and that scared me. I saw that happen and I was like, "Nope. We're not doing. We're not doing that." I watched this cycle happen. It was like you're going to consume more food, maybe more sugar for a little while and then it just went back down to regular. Just even now again.

[00:48:08] AS: Yeah. Well, and I think the other important point, which is, again, you – The anxiety is what you connected with alcohol, right? Is when you start focusing on how you feel versus these artificial and being good or bad or getting ahead with my weight loss or behind with it. When you focus, I call them on the quick fixes. Like immediate intrinsic rewards.

[00:48:29] LM: Yeah.

[00:48:30] AS: That paired with the emotional work is so – Because, again, you're doing it for yourself and to be with yourself in a better way versus for the external payoff of weight loss or being able to say, "I'm sugar-free." Because that's then, "Oh! How do you do that?" or like

whatever it is. But I so appreciate you sharing that you did the work around relationships. Do you think that is part of what also drove the eating disorders as well?

[00:49:01] LM: 100%. It was the same pain, the same trauma, the same stuff that drove the alcohol. It is exactly the same stuff. Food came before alcohol, by the way. I was using food to medicate. I remember like so clearly as a child, my eating disorder really blew up at the end of high school. Then what happened when I left high school, as I went to college, and what happened then? Started drinking.

[00:49:29] AS: Oh! That's where my eating disorder exploded in college.

[00:49:34] LM: So I had done this thing where I had major restriction up until I went to college. As you know, that can only go on so long before the body freaks the fuck out.

[00:49:47] AS: Yeah.

[00:49:49] LM: And I call it like the rubber band snapped, and I just binged. For the next 10 years, it was binging, binging, binging, binging, binging, purging. So I gained a lot of weight back. But the alcohol supplanted the food thing. It just did. It like mast it – By the end of my drinking, I just wasn't eating, because I was so sick. Then when I quit drinking, the food thing came back, and I hear this literally every day. It's the story for a lot of people. The food – It's because it all comes from the same place. It all comes from the same place. We're trying to medicate our internal state. So not being able to – That's that concept of staying, is what works for all of this too. But with help, I can see the biggest shift in my relationship with food as a result of the emotional work. It had nothing to do with like somehow setting at the right food plan. The food plan is literally no food plan. I have no food plan. I don't even talk about food.

[00:50:51] AS: Yeah. Well, because it's like, for me, food is just a vehicle to feel good so you can do these other things. Why are we trying to be healthy?

[00:51:00] LM: Yeah. Right. I don't berate anyone who does plans, because I know that doesn't work for anyone either. But just for me, it had to be – Literally, there are no rules anymore. There will never be rules again.

[00:51:15] AS: Yeah.

[00:51:16] LM: Yeah, and I had to deal with gaining weight. I gained a little weight. I was like it's fine. We're going to just roll with this. That turned out to be just fine too.

[00:51:27] AS: Yeah. And you stayed with – Like, again, this concept of staying. Making it concrete in terms of sugar is like when COVID hit, you were like you stayed with it's going up a little bit. But like it's almost like when you give yourself the permission, then you don't have to rebel against the restrictions. So it's like the world didn't fall apart. It will go up sometimes. It will go down sometimes.

[00:51:49] LM: And that's actually what has to happen. The restriction breeding obsession concept was what solidified it for me. It was like right. Restricting is what breeds obsession for me. So we're not going to do that anymore. We're not counting calories. We're not doing anything except for paying attention to how I feel. I have friends that this is like this would never work for them. For me, it's what means freedom, and that's what I want. I want freedom more than anything.

[00:52:24] AS: Yeah, and I love that point. I mean, we're all different. But for a lot of us who had so many rules around food for so long, it's like it just doesn't work, because – I was in my Truce with Food group this week and it was nice. Clients were like, "I'm so appreciative that this is such an integrative process." Because they're like, "If it was about the food, I would've found a perfect plan."

[00:52:46] LM: Just sad really. Yes.

[00:52:50] AS: I love that you can articulate and have done the emotional work around your relationship issues and it's like, "Oh, the food is just a symptom. Just like alcohol and other stuff." I think that's so important for people to hear, and it doesn't mean things go away magically. It's like coming back to that stain of like "Okay. I'm at a pandemic. Eating a little bit more." But do you find at least – I don't know. I think my clients find this and I found this. It's like you work with the pandemic because you were also doing the emotional work and gave you some permission. It wasn't like you're going out and buying the bags of frozen gummy bears anymore. I do think it gets a little bit better each time that you practice.

[00:53:29] LM: It does. But if I do, it's like no big deal.

[00:53:33] AS: Oh yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

[00:53:35] LM: But no. Overtime, it's doesn't occur to me, or things will sit in my house and go bad. That would never have sat in my house and go bad. I'd be obsessed about them until they were gone. It's a lot like quitting drinking where you just realize the amount of energy and time and effort just to try to manage something. That could be spent in a million different ways, other ways.

[00:54:03] AS: Yeah. That's another thing I work on with my clients on the emotional side when we're talking about what are you measuring. It's also measuring over the longer term instead of like in moment, right?

[00:54:15] LM: Totally.

[00:54:16] AS: Because it can create a self-fulfilling prophecy for many people when you put the restriction on. It's like, "Okay, the next day." It's like, "No. Let's look at this over months and

bigger pattern that you just what you did last night.” But that takes a lot more staying in trust I think of ourselves, which can be challenging.

[00:54:35] LM: Yeah. It's a process. We're in a process. We have to look at it that way, and sobriety is a process of any kind. I'll be sober six years this year. I always tell people like, “Take whatever timeline you have for yourself improvement and extended it out like 10 years.”

[00:54:54] AS: Yeah. I was like, “That is radical honesty?”

[00:54:58] LM: That is the reality.

[00:55:00] AS: Yeah. I love when you say at the end of the book, it says believe me when I tell you, you will not be left out of the miracle if you keep going. I think, I was like, “That's so true.” I always just want people to keep going, because it does get –

[00:55:15] LM: Yes. Yes.

[00:55:18] AS: I would love you to just describe when you keep going. So many of my clients find that creativity, and it doesn't have to be just like our typical art or whatever people think of as typically creative. But how important creativity is in part of that miracle you're describing? Because I think you said unused creativity is not benign, and I was like –

[00:55:41] LM: Yeah. Yeah! It's not, because it's potential. It's your unused potential, right? It goes back to this Gospel of Thomas quote that I love that says, “If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you.” If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you.”

I think that, for me, that is absolutely true. The alcohol is killing me, for sure, but not using my potential was absolutely crushing my spirit. I knew it. I felt it. It was devastating. I was supposed

to be a writer. I was supposed to be writing. I was supposed to be doing what I'm doing now. I know that, and I wasn't doing it. It was like it goes back to what I was saying earlier about you have a darma. In yoga [inaudible 00:56:31] talked about as darmas, which is a truth. It's a path. It's a unique blueprint that each of us has. When we don't fulfill that, it's a soul death. It's like a spiritual death. And creativity looks different for everybody.

Life is a creative act. You're creating your reality every day, whether you're a lawyer or a writer or whatever. It is not about your job so much either. It can be part of it, but it's not just about that. It's about –

[00:57:05] AS: I'm so glad you brought up that point.

[00:57:06] LM: Yeah.

[00:57:06] AS: Everyone wants to monetize everything.

[00:57:09] LM: No. God! Ugh! Yeah, it's like – Oh! Do you want me to share the best story? You're going to love this. Sorry. Someone brought this up in a meeting that I was hosting recently, and I will never forget it. It is a story called Why Were You Not?

It goes there's a tale of the Hasidic rabbi named Rabbi Zusha. Zusha was a timid man who lived a humble life. One day, Rabbi Zusha stood before his congregation and he said, "When I die and have to present myself before the celestial tribunal, they will not ask me, "Zusha, why were you not Moses?" Because I would say, "Moses was a prophet and I am not." They will not say, "Zusha, why were you not Jeremiah" For I will say, "Jeremiah is a writer, and I am not." They will not say, "Why were you not Rabbi Akiva?" For I would tell them, "Rabii Akiva was a great teacher and a scholar, and I am not." But then he will say, "Zusha, why were you not Zusha?" To this, "I will have no answer."

[00:58:11] AS: I love that. Because I think that sums up what you've been saying, is like when you learned to stay with yourself, you realize like you don't want someone else's life. I mean, it takes a lot to wean through, but you start to be with also that creative potential, which sometimes there's some darkness, right? Our pain can be transformed. But it also is like what they would call the golden shadow, the parts that we're not owning that are powerful as well.

[00:58:38] LM: Yeah. If you aren't – It's like that is the only thing, is to become who you are. It's the only thing. That is the only job any of us has. Because that's what gives our life meaning, and meaning is actually what we want. It's not happiness, or pleasure, or like all of that. Those things can be byproducts of meaning that if we don't have meaning, we're done.

[00:59:04] AS: Yeah. There's actually a lot of medical – Well, not a lot, but a few studies on how meaning. Like people who describe themselves as having meaningful lives actually move longer than people who consider themselves to have like happy lives in terms of hedonistic pleasure.

[00:59:20] LM: Absolutely.

[00:59:21] AS: I think it's like the most underscored health metric.

[00:59:25] LM: Yes. Well, it's like if you've read Victor Frankl, who wrote Man's Search for Meaning. That's basically the premise of his entire book. And he was in concentration camps and he survived a wife, brothers and sisters, and I think maybe even parents. That's what he found there, that if you can create – those who were able psychologically survivor or those who could find meaning even in those circumstances. It's a real thing.

[00:59:53] AS: Yeah. Thank you so much, Laura. You have created so much meaning out of your challenges that all of us are benefiting from. Is there anything you'd like to add that I didn't ask before we wrap up?

[01:00:07] LM: No. Thank you. It was so nice to talk to you again.

[01:00:10] AS: Yeah. And all of your – I mean, the links to your website and everything will be in the show notes, where also you'd like people to be able to find you. I know you're taking a little social media hiatus.

[01:00:20] LM: Yeah. I mean, I'm on Instagram as Laura_McCowan. Everything I have is on my website right now, and that's just my name also.

[01:00:30] AS: Yeah, which is L-A-U-R-A M-C-K-O-W-E-N.com. Again, we'll have all of these in the show notes as well as the transcript.

[01:00:39] LM: Awesome.

[01:00:40] AS: Yeah. Thank you so much for being here. This was – Again, I felt like I went to church. My version of church. Devotion, I should say. Maybe it was [inaudible 01:00:51] or something.

[01:00:53] LM: Oh, I love it. I love that.

[01:00:55] AS: Thank you so much.

[01:00:56] LM: Thank you. Love you. Bye.

[01:00:57] AS: Yeah.

[END OF EPISODE]



[01:01:02] AS: Thank you, health rebels for tuning in today. Have a reaction, question, or want the transcript from today's episode? Find me at alishapiro.com. I'd love if you leave a review on Apple Podcast and tell your friends and family about Insatiable. It helps us grow our community and share a new way of approaching health and our bodies.

Thanks for engaging in a different conversation. Remember always, your body truths are unique, profound, real and liberating.

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