

## EPISODE 170

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## [INTRODUCTION]

**[0:01:04] LW:** Hello, friends, and welcome back to the Light Watkins Show, where I interview ordinary folks just like you and me, who've taken extraordinary leaps of faith in the direction of their path, their purpose, or what they've identified with as their mission. In doing so, they've been able to positively impact and inspire the lives of many other people who've either heard about their story, or who witnessed them in action, or people who've directly benefited from their work. Someone who has been prolific in his work is my friend, author, speaker, and podcaster, Shawn Stevenson, who wrote the best-selling books, *Sleep Smarter* and *Eat Smarter*.

I originally interviewed Shawn back on episode number 27, and that's when we really got deep into his entire backstory of growing up in St. Louis and being diagnosed at the age of 20 with advanced, arthritic condition of his spine, and being told that he had low bone density, and he was essentially tiptoeing his way into obesity. Granted at the time, Shawn was eating fast food

300-plus days a year. The doctors told him that this was an incurable condition that just happens to some people.

Well, lucky for us, Shawn ended up taking matters into his own hands, and over the next several months and years, he was able to not just heal himself, but to start educating other people about your body's power to heal itself when given the right conditions. He talked about epigenetics, and he started exploring that, as well as the powerful effects that diet can have on your health, and anyone who goes deep enough into diet, into healthy eating, and the effects that it can have on the body, eventually you will conclude that you have to start cooking for yourself if you truly want to eat healthy more consistently.

Because look, eating out, and I have eaten out a lot in my life, it exposes our bodies to so many unhealthy ingredients, such as seed oils and sweeteners and preservatives, and even things like toxic cookware. That was the inspiration of Shawn's most recent book, which is the follow-up to *Eat Smarter*. It's a cookbook, it's the *Eat Smarter Cookbook*. When you hear that word cookbook, you probably are conjuring up images of recipes and really nice, beautiful photos, and all the things that are traditionally included in cookbooks.

Well, of course, Shawn does not do anything in a traditional way. His cookbook is more about kitchen culture. Sure, yes, there are easy-to-prepare recipes, they're healthy for your body, they taste amazing, but Shawn also talks about eating together as a family. He talks about the negative impact of loneliness on your health, and how to prompt engaging questions when you're stimulating conversation between whoever you're eating and sharing meals with, and the importance of making dinner time phone-free time. He also talks about how to get the kids involved in the meal preparation process, as well as the importance of sleep on food and digestion.

It's a more well-rounded, holistic approach to a cookbook, and I think you're going to get a lot from our conversation, particularly from hearing about the backstory of how Shawn became a lover of food and of the culture around food. He's one of the most well-read, well-studied health experts that I've ever had on the podcast. He's not only talking about what he believes, but he's also backing it up with facts and studies and research.

Buckle in for this one, because I think you're really going to like it. Make sure you also pre-order the *Eat Better Cookbook*, so that it arrives as soon as it comes out. If you haven't already listened to The Model Health Show, please do so. There's a wonderful interview between Shawn and yours truly that came out recently when my book, *Travel Light*, was published back in July of 2023. All right, without further ado, let us dive into my conversation with Mr. Shawn Stevenson of the Model Health Show.

[INTERVIEW]

**[0:05:25] LW:** Shawn Stevenson. Shawn, *Eat Smarter, Sleep Smarter, Cook Smarter*, all the things. I love it, man. *Eat Smarter Family Cookbook*. You've been on the show before. We went through your whole backstory. We're going to talk a little bit about that just for reference, because some people haven't heard your full backstory. But then, I want to talk a lot about your unique approach to this family cookbook. I did get a chance to read it. I didn't read through all the recipes, but I read the introduction and the first few chapters, where you talk about your background. Then you really give a very cohesive plan for making this stuff easy, which I think is super important for people.

I think, anyone listening to this conversation is going to come away from this with a better idea of how to incorporate a more holistic approach to the importance of eating. I wouldn't even say diet, because it's a lot more than that. It's about having your family, your friends around. It's about making it fun, asking questions, having prompts, so that you're not sitting – everyone's not sitting there at the table staring at screens, and you're actually engaging with one another, you're learning from one another, and you are supplying your body with bioavailable foods; bioavailable foods, which is super important. We're going to get into it.

But to kick things off, let's talk a little bit about, what gives you the authority to tell us how to eat? When I was reading your back story, I was like, “Oh, 300-plus days of fast food.” I think I got you beat on that. I think we probably had a good – I could count on both hands when we didn't have fast food for the year. I can definitely relate to that. Tell us a little bit about your back story.

**[0:07:11] SS:** Oh, for sure, man. I've been in this field, I'm almost at my 21-year anniversary of working in the field of health and fitness. Of course, I have the conventional university education

background, but the primary thing is really just being able to navigate how to be healthy in a society that is largely unwell, right? The CDC just shared their numbers from this past year. According to the CDC, 60% of American adults have at least one chronic disease now. 40% have two or more chronic diseases. The majority of our citizens, the majority of the people in our community are dealing with a chronic disease. Majority of people are not well.

To stretch that out even further, a recent study, and I cited this in the book as well, a meta-analysis stated that 88% of American adults are metabolically unhealthy. I mean, just to deconstruct what metabolic health looks like, this could be all manner of blood lipids, this could be blood glucose management, hemoglobin A1c, more of a longer view of what your blood sugar is doing, hormones, the health of our immune system, there's immuno metabolism. There's so many layers that we can deconstruct this, but we know that we're largely unwell as a society.

I believe it was Krishnamurti that said, it is – and I'm going to slaughter this, but it's something along the lines of, “It is not a means of health or means of success to be well adjusted to a sick society.” That's what we're trying to do is to be able to navigate, how do we actually create health in a largely sick society? I believe that there's a tipping point with these things. Right now, simultaneously where we have the most chronically ill society that we've seen in human history, there are these little communities that are popping up and expanding, where people are achieving levels of health that we haven't seen before. Just radiantly healthy.

We're talking about extending lifespan substantially, but not just lifespan, but health span, aging, healthfully. There are these two things going on simultaneously. My mission is just navigating this. You mentioned the authority and this piece, I'm coming from, and this just happened yesterday, Light. I'm going to just share this with you. I'm tired of people that are well-intentioned, jumping in and telling me that because of my circumstances, I have to be a victim, all right.

What I mean by that is when I'm sharing some of this cutting-edge science and sharing the voices of the leading people in their fields that are all about empowerment, education, providing tools for community to navigate this situation, and I'll share this, and then someone, again, well-meaning will jump in, “Well, that's easy for you to say, because there are so many people that

don't have access." I did this. I transformed my own health while living in Ferguson, Missouri, where when people talk about a food desert, I mean, it doesn't get any more of a food desert than this.

I grew up on food stamps, wheat program, getting food from charities, right? Even my Christmas gifts were from charities. Many years, I kept getting Yahtzee, every year for Christmas. It's not fun. I come from those circumstances. When we talk about access to movement and exercise and those things. I was just talking about this with my wife. I lived in conditions where literally going outside, it's not a high risk, or high probability, but there is a chance that I can get killed in a drive by. It's like that. That was the nature of the community that I lived in.

Going to a basketball court, there are multiple shootings each year on the basketball court I go to. I understand what that's like. But what people who are not from those conditions don't understand is that there's so much beauty in this environment as well. There's so much creativity. There's so much inherent optimism, because you have to be optimistic just to walk out your door, knowing that there is a possible threat.

There's such a feeling tone of community and looking out for one another as well. There's all these great resources. All I needed was just a directive on how to point my creativity. All I needed was exposure to know what the difference was with different foods and my outcomes, my health outcomes, because every – I'm not exaggerating. Every person in my family had at least one chronic disease. It doesn't sound like it's abnormal, because again, it's the majority of our society. For me, every person. My mom, obesity, diabetes. She recently underwent full hysterectomy for endometrial cancer.

The physician that I talked to, ultimately, he said that – when I asked him, "So, what caused this cancer with my mom?" He said, "Well, you never can really know for certain. It's probably her genes." He didn't run a gene panel. He didn't mention the fact that she's been obese for 50 years. I'm sorry, 40 years. That she's been smoking for 50 years. That she's been riddled with the life of stress. Even being stabbed multiple times, trying to make ends meet, working at a convenience store for us. The list goes on and on and on.

Here's the thing, because I'm a scientist, and this is what I do, I know the numbers. Endometrial cancer, there's a seven times higher risk of her having endometrial cancer if she's obese. This also speaks to navigating different terrains with our family, because just like, why on earth is my mother experiencing obesity with all that I know? Trust, there are so many people in my family whose lives have been transformed, absolutely.

My mother, she's a different story. She has her own path. Right now, I'll tell you what? I'm going to share this with you, Light. I haven't shared this yet. After the full hysterectomy and the physician is just like, "I think we got all the cancer, but we'll know later." He brings her back in. There was no cancer that was evident. There is a cancer antigen panel that can be run, and the number was now about 60% lower than it was pre-surgery. This largely indicates that the cancer was local to her uterus, okay.

Then, because he was saying chemotherapy and radiation might be an option later after we do the surgery, then we find out. We find out that those numbers have gone down. Looks like she's cancer free, but he said, "But the number is still high." I asked him about this. I'm like, "You want to put her through chemotherapy radiation now. Where is the cancer at? Where is it? She can't seem to tell me, so I'm just curious." He said, "Well, she has some swollen lymph nodes over here. Could be from the surgery. Could be – We don't know. But this is standard of care." That was number one.

Number two, me asking what causes cancer, don't we need to remove the cause just in case, so this doesn't keep coming back? Number three, I asked him, since he said that he's been doing this for 25 years, 26 years actually. I asked, "With the survivability of this treatment, it would really help my mom's mental health if you could share some case studies of people that have gone through chemotherapy and radiation, since you've been doing this with patients for 25 years that have –" Because the survivability benchmark is five years, Light. This is how they manipulate numbers.

I was just like, "If you could just share a couple case studies, that would be great. Maybe even my mom, she could talk to somebody who's gone through the treatment that's alive and well today, that would be awesome." He's like, "Actually, I have a patient who's going through her last treatment today. Would love to talk to your mom." I was like, "No, no, no, no. Not somebody in

the treatment now. But somebody that has gone through the treatment who's around five years later." He laughed uncomfortably. This is true story. He's like, "I'd have to look at my old notes from my practice back in Montana." He's in Missouri now. He couldn't bring one person to mind that he's put through the treatment that's alive that my mom could talk to.

That's the difference with us is that, Light, you name a condition, I can give you the numbers right now. You can call them right now. Because there's a difference between standard of care and truly being successful at helping to reverse these conditions. I was just, to put a bow on all this stuff, what I'm working to communicate is right now, my mom's cancer antigen number is not just – she didn't just go to normal. It's below normal for the population. She's lost 80 pounds so far. There's this vitality that is exuding from her. It took her to get cancer for her to change. Fortunately, she's changed.

This is what it's all about is like, we can create a community of health within our own households, because this conversation and where I want to direct it to is about culture and how our environment affects our choices and our health outcomes. It's going to extend to your outer perimeter, your other family members and/or your community. What I also want to share with people in advance of this is like, we can't make people change. That creates so much frustration in our lives trying to get people to change. What we can do, first and foremost, is change ourselves. We hear this, but it's real. We can change ourselves, and we can create a culture in our own household where health is just normal, where having healthy options and healthy access and outputs is normal, regardless of where we come from.

Again, I did this in Ferguson, Missouri, in a food desert. I was able to transform my health and from there, be able to impact the lives of millions of people, despite my circumstances. That's what this is all about. That's a lot, but that's what this is all about.

**[0:17:12] LW:** I love that part of the book where you say – I forget who the original author of the quote was, but kids don't do what you say, they do what they see. I think that's what you're referring to in a larger scale as well, like your community, your family, etc. You've been hinting at the fact that food saved your life. Just for the listener who has never heard your story before, what did you mean by that?

**[0:17:35] SS:** Absolutely. This was again, a little over 20 years ago, I was diagnosed with a so-called incurable spinal condition. I had degenerative spine disease and bone disease. My disc had two herniated disc, because of the degeneration. I was just 20-years-old at the time, Light. I had an advanced arthritic condition of my spine, and I broke my hip at track practice, being an athlete. It wasn't a fall. There wasn't any impact or trauma, it was just because my bone density was so low. It's incredibly abnormal for a kid to have bone density so low.

From that point, my aspirations of collegiate sports, and that was what I saw, because that's how I saw in my environment, that was my way out. It just sent me down a path, a rapidly deteriorating path, where now my physician is telling me, "Yes, you have the spine of an 80-year-old man." Coupled with that, when I asked, what can I do to heal this situation, to get out of pain? He told me that, "There's nothing that you can do. Unfortunately."

**[0:18:40] LW:** It just happens. Nothing to do.

**[0:18:43] SS:** Right. He said it just happens. He put his hand on my shoulder, he said, "I'm sorry, son. This is something that just happened. I'm sorry it happened to you." Now, again, Light, it's so ironic, because this is supposed to be about medicine and science. That's abandoning basic laws of physics, like causality. Our universe, I know there might be some Ant-Man, whatever quantum, I get it. There could be other realities. But here in this universe, we have causality. Nothing just happens. There's a cause and effect. We might not understand the cause, but it's there nevertheless.

Because he didn't know what the cause was, he just relented to say that, "Basically, this is idiopathic. This just happens. It happens out of nowhere. We can't explain it. I'm sorry." Because I wasn't aware of my own body, I wasn't aware of my own power, I outsourced what I believed to him. There's nocebo effect. It's the opposite of a placebo effect. I went from a nuisance of a pain that I've been dealing with for a couple of months, to chronic, debilitating pain. He gave me, of course, some prescriptions to treat symptoms of the pain, which at the time, there were two hot drugs on the streets. One of them was Vioxx, and one of them was Celebrex.

Fortunately, and I mean this literally, fortunately, he put me on Celebrex, which I ended up having some side effects that had not been diagnosed yet, or hadn't had their special drug to



address the side effect, which was restless leg syndrome. I didn't know that was a thing. I just go to bed at night, and my legs felt like they were trying to get up and leave me. It was happening every night for the longest. That's number one. Vioxx, these are in a category of drugs called nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, NSAIDs. Vioxx ended up killing, and this is factually, killing 40,000 Americans and injuring through cardiovascular events between a 100 and 300,000, at least cardiovascular events from taking Vioxx, okay.

A lot of this happened even in young people, all right. There's many stories of young people, just athletes, again, who might have had injury and got put on Vioxx and ended up dying from a cardiovascular event. This was a drug that was put to market by Merck. You would wonder, if they factually, and this is, again, this is documented. This is a fact. It sounds crazy, I know, but they killed 40,000 at minimum. It was 40 to 60,000 Americans died. You would think, okay, so did they have any new parameters put in place for their business dealings, any harsh fines, everybody going to jail? None of that. No, no, no. Merck is doing better than ever today. They had that Olivia Pope spin person, and they reframed it, and they're still doing business today. Light, if you or I killed one person, we're going to have some serious problems. Let alone, 10 people, let alone a 100, let alone a 1,000, 40,000 at least, and not to mention all the people whose lives are destroyed from the drug.

**[0:21:59] LW:** Being the mass serial killers, how does it come off in the news and the spin cycle? What do they say?

**[0:22:06] SS:** It's everything. This is all about perception. It's all about perception. Unfortunately, what happened at the time was that they hid the data from their clinical trials, demonstrating that, hey, there's this notable higher risk of a cardiovascular event taking this drug. They were able to effectively, again, they have the most powerful legal team in the world, pharmaceutical companies. Also, looking at, basically, and this is just put in simple terms for people, and this is one of the experiences right now with the opioid crisis is societies like ourselves, like America, this capitalist society, which is nothing wrong with the capitalism part, but it's utilizing, or taking advantage of sickness and human capital. It's essentially a place where, does this company mean more to our economy than the risk of allowing them to do business?

Right now, we have a society and that Merck was just a demonstration of that, where these pharmaceutical companies mean so much to our economy. It's just the framing. We have a 4.2 trillion-dollar health care system here in the United States as of last year. This is somewhere around 20% of our gross domestic product. Our economy is dependent on sickness. It's dependent on pharmaceutical companies to treat these diseases. It's one of the most surefire bets to put your money into pharmaceuticals, because it's just going to keep going up, versus a lot of other things that are uncertain in our society.

That's part of it. We can do a whole show just talking about that. Just to finish off the story, getting put on this medication, I was obviously not getting well. Now that I'm getting a permission to give up, I'm getting permission from the position to basically, also, he gave me bed rest. I didn't have to work. I had a note from the doctor. That's the dream, right? I don't have to work, and give little workers compensation. I'm living in the hood. I'm living in Ferguson, Missouri. It's just like, now I'm not doing anything. Not only is my spine and my bones atrophying, the rest of me is. Now, I'm gaining all this excessive weight and it's just a snowball effect of being unwell.

Just to fast word of the story, because obviously, as a happy ending, it took two years, but everything changed. I had to hit rock bottom, man. It was dark. It was dark. I was in chronic pain. I felt alone and isolated, I'm very much was. It was just a little glimmer of hope. This could come in so many fashions. For me with my grandmother. Just in that moment of seeing this, another doctor getting another opinion and telling me the same thing, just thinking of my grandmother and what – and her picture's over there on my bookshelf right there, she's hugging me in my wedding. This was before she passed away.

She would call me and just like, it was getting on my nerves. It's just like, "I'm fine, grandma. I'm fine. Fine." But she knew I wasn't fine. She had invested so much into me, so much love, right? That ingredient is invaluable. It's an energy thing. There's an energy transfer that she was pouring into me every day. She loved me so much. Even when she saw me right here on that picture, and I'm about to get married, she is torn to pieces, crying, because I'm her baby. I didn't get it at the time.

She also gave me these powerful insights about education. She spent time with me, basically, learning how to learn and the importance of it, and give me directives. I remember, she had me go to this McGruff the Crime Dog, like just say no thing at the school. I was in second grade. But that carry with me, because many of my family members, as she knew, were addicts. I have this thing that's just like, "No, I don't want to do that. I don't want to feel like that. I don't want to lose my ability to control what I can control and control my own body." Some of that had gotten muted.

Just thinking about her really invigorated me to say, "You know what? Enough is enough." I've already blamed everybody that I can blame. I've been pointing fingers and I'm not getting anywhere. Everything changed when I just decided to take responsibility for my health. Stop outsourcing my potential to others. Also, being somebody who, athlete, working in science, having a pretty strong grip on the English language, from just my background in writing and different stuff I was doing in college, and doing research, I didn't just decide to get well and it just happened. I also put a rational plan together and focused on giving my body, like you said, when we was getting started, eating fast food. I was eating fast food 300-plus days a year, real talk.

I was making my body out of these very low-quality materials. I didn't realize it. Because again, it's just normally my environment. By me making the decision to get well, suddenly, the things that were always there, I can see them. One of them was my friend who I've been talking to, seeing on and off for a couple of years. She was in chiropractic school. I just thought she was so weird. Her and her friends, I just thought they were weird. Like, why are you guys cracking each other, whatever? It's like, weird food stuff.

Now that I basically changed to a different station, she ended up taking me to Wild Oats. In St. Louis, by the way, again, number one, at St. Louis, even this past year, this was the murder capital of the United States. There are other cities that sounds sexier, Chicago, or whatever. New York City. No disrespect, but St. Louis is a very dangerous place to live. Being in St. Louis is also one of the most chronically diseased states as well, as far as heart disease, diabetes, obesity, the list goes on and on. We're not doing well there.

There was one Wild Oats in the entire city. St. Louis is a big-ass city and one Whole Foods in the entire city. I live in LA now. I could throw a rock in any direction and hit a Whole Foods. It's crazy. Just even the access to that thinking, organic food, this kind of thing. She took me to one. They had some books there with a bunch of peer-reviewed studies as references on healing degenerative disc disease and increasing your bone density and just all this stuff that my physicians didn't give me any.

They said, I can't do anything about this, but the data says different. I just started to put those things into place, flooding my body with these new building blocks. I changed my movement practices from none to progressive. Just a little time on the bike, stationary bike, to walking, doing a couple of weights. Once I got out of pain and not on these medications anymore, I could sleep well. Funny enough, with Celebrex keeping me up at night with my legs kicking. Now that I'm sleeping, well, this is when you really repair yourself is when you're sleeping, when you're recovering.

I got better so quickly, man. Eventually, nine months later, I got a scan done on my spine. My two herniated disc had retracted. Now, the degeneration that had my disc looking like these thin, dark objects, now there was like, I can see the light shining through them. They were more thick and robust. That's not supposed to happen. That led into my career path, which has shifted over my core study, doing more in biology, working with people at the university gym, and eventually, opening my practice as a nutritionist. Started writing a couple of books. I met Light out on the street walking one day. It put me right here to talk to everybody.

**[0:30:06] LW:** I wish we have more time to get into some of those details, because there's such good stories about all of those things you talked about. In the interest of time, I want to do a semi-speed round, because I have a lot of notes on some things I saw on your upcoming family cookbook. I hate saying it, because it's not just a cookbook. It's a lifestyle manual, really is what it is. Although I'm no authority on cookbooks, I have interviewed several people who've written cookbooks and I've never seen one like this before.

You come from a very strong scientific background. You know how to read a study. You know how to assess other variables outside of food that can help people in establishing good health. I want to just touch on as many topics as we can in the time we have left. I want to start with this

idea of bioavailability and what that actually means in real-world terms. If you're at the grocery store, let's say you're at a someplace as not necessarily known for organic whole foods. You're at your Piggly Wiggly's, or your IGA's, or those kinds of places. It's full of boxed items in the middle, and some conventional stuff on the edges. What is bioavailable food and how do you find it?

**[0:31:24] SS:** To make this super simple, there are essentially two different food substrates that we're all consuming today. We have ultra-processed foods on one side of the spectrum, and then we have real foods, like undenatured, whole real food. In the middle is where humans have survived, created from four centuries, which is processing those whole real foods into our products that we're eating. For example, taking tomatoes and some spices and making pasta sauce, or taking olives and pressing them with the cold press, stone press and making olive oil. That's a processing and it's creating a food that still has the essence, or it's very close to, has that proximity of where it came from. Also, with that, it also still is retaining a vast amount of nutrients.

Whereas today, we have the majority of our food in our society today is in the form of ultra-processed foods. According to the BMJ, British Medical Journal, 60% of the average American adult's diet is ultra-processed foods. All right, this is crazy. In *Eat Smarter Family Cookbook*, this is the first time in book form that this new study has been shared, and this is from the Journal of the American Medical Association, denoting that our children, the issue is far worse. The average American child in adolescence diet is almost 70% ultra-processed foods, right? It's gone up from 61% around 1999 to in 2018, it was 67%. It was already bad in 1999. Now, it's just continued to increase. Precipitously, it just keeps going up.

Ultra-processed food is when we take something like, we'll just say, fields of corn, right? I might have visions of Michael Jackson in *The Whiz*, and have corn, all these fields of corn, scarecrow, whatever. Corn seems like, it's maze is another name for it, right? It's like, the people have been eating this for a while. When we take corn, and then we turn it into through high heat treatments, through the addition of additives, preservatives, food, dyes, and colors, extraction methods, maybe even hexane extraction, eventually, that corn is turned into lucky Charm cereal. It is so far removed from its initial. Also, the sweetener as well, coming from corn in the form of corn syrup, right? It's so far removed that it no longer carries any of the essence. It's including now

so many synthetic ingredients that it's fitting into this category of ultra-processed foods. All right, so I want to make that distinction.

Now, within that, we have real food-based nutrients, and we have synthetic nutrients, okay. This is to answer your question directly. For example, we have whole food-based vitamin C. When I was in my nutritional science class in school, in my university, I was told to make sure that people that we work with, including ourselves, that we get our essential vitamins and nutrients. It was very vanilla in that dictation. Make sure that you're getting vitamin C, magnesium. Today, we know that there are multiple forms of vitamin C. There are multiple forms of magnesium, for example. There are multiple forms of just about any vitamin people know about, for example, vitamin D having multiple forms, right? Vitamin D2, D3. There's this B vitamin complex as well. Even within that, B12, there's multiple forms of B12. It's going to depend on the food sources coming from, and also the co-factors, and how our cells are going to be able to assimilate and utilize any of these.

Now, because of our so-called advancements in science, we're able to isolate and find, okay, this product has this vitamin C, and we can isolate it into a synthetic form. But is this the ideal form for this person? Is it the ideal form for humans overall? Now that it's isolated without all of its co-factors, can the body interact with it in the same way? I'm going to share the study with you, because, and this is crazy man, most people don't know that most vitamin C supplements are actually coming from GMO corn syrup, or corn starch.

**[0:35:53] LW:** I was thinking of the Flintstone vitamins that I used to take as a kid. I'm pretty sure that comes from that category.

**[0:36:00] SS:** Of course. Those are synthetic forms of these nutrients. Man, I know there was a time I got into the Flintstone vitamins, and I ate a bunch of them. I know I was high. I'm probably got enough, I don't know, man, like vitamin B12 to like, I don't know, fuel a rocket to see the future or something. Here's the thing, again, it's this synthetic form. Just looking at vitamin C alone, the study was published in the Journal of the American Medical Association Internal Medicine. This was in 2013. What they found was that participants taking synthetic vitamin C supplements had twice the incidence of developing kidney stones. Taking the synthetic form of something healthy, right? We need our vitamin C. We need our vitamin C. But if you're taking it

in this synthetic isolated form, not only can it potentially not get the benefit, but also can be very dangerous. Most of you have no idea about this.

They're trying to be healthy, grabbing a little vitamin C supplement, grabbing a little emergency little vitamin C supplement, and end up having problems down the line, because it's not in its real whole food form. Now, what does that look like? Well, obviously, getting vitamin C from real whole foods is the ideal thing, because our genes have been interacting with that forever, all right? If we want to up-level that, so maybe we're trying to get a vitamin C supplement, because we're in need of it.

By the way, vitamin C is essential, yes. For the function of our immune system, that's what most people know for. Vitamin C is critical to your skin health. It's critical for the regulation of cortisol and your stress management. One of the fastest ways to deplete your body's reserves of vitamin C is going through a stressful incident. Your adrenals just dump out vitamin C, and it's getting wiped out.

Let me give you an example here of a good whole food source of vitamin C. This is from a randomized placebo control study, all right. It's gold standard. Published in the Journal of Cardiology. They had people with a habit that drains their body of vitamin C to take a vitamin C synthetic supplement, or a whole food-based vitamin C source. I'm going to explain what that is. These were people that were smoking. These are habitual smokers, and they were giving them either synthetic vitamin C, or a whole food concentrated vitamin C from a berry called camu-camu berry, all right? C-A-M-U, C-A-M-U.

Over the course of the study, they tested all their biomarkers, and they found that taking the whole food form of vitamin C in the form of camu-camu berry led to significantly lowered oxidative stress. It's slowing down the aging process and oxidation of their cells and lowered their inflammatory biomarkers. This could be things like, C-reactive protein, homocysteine, basically, inflammation was going down. Inflammation is tied to a lot of chronic illnesses.

What's more, there were no changes in the synthetic vitamin C group, all right? No changes. None. Again, it's just like, we're getting marketed to get these things in. This is a strategy, and I talk about in the book, of health washing, right? Using something that the public knows to be

healthy, but then turning that into something that is far less efficient, or lacking efficacy, because you're not really getting the thing that you think that you're getting. You can slap gluten-free on something, or fat-free on something, or rich in vitamin C on something. But in reality, it's an ultra-processed food that doesn't really have the goods. I hope that makes sense to really have that distinction between synthetic and whole food-based nutrients.

**[0:39:43] LW:** I was in the grocery store not long ago, and I was looking at the ice creams, and they were like, excellent source of protein. I was like, "Oh, man. Y'all doing the whole baby switch." What all this reminds me of when I read your book, in terms of the holistic approach, is the idea of the blue zone. People have this idea that, oh, people in the Mediterranean, some people in Japanese cultures, they've created this cultural environment where there's movement, there's community, there's eating whole foods, and that ends up not just even extending life, but increasing the quality of life.

What you're essentially writing about in this cookbook is that you can create your own little blue zone in your household. Let's talk about, let's just go through some of the things that someone listening to this, this week can implement, whether it's bringing the family together more, whether it's structuring the kitchen differently. What are some of the things that you talk about in the book that can help someone create that same zone that will enhance, or optimize for health, for longevity, for connection?

**[0:40:55] SS:** The blue zone's paradigm is really great, because it brings to bear where certain spots around the globe have these higher rates of having centenarian. It's people that are living a 100 years and beyond, and oftentimes, healthfully. Now, here's what's not often talked about is that there is a diversity of diet frameworks in these different places, because we tend to get into this like, well, they're doing this one thing over here. It's a vegetarian over here. It's a pescatarian over here. That's the thing. That's what's going to help you live up to be a 100.

In reality, these diets are diverse. Certain places in Italy, for example, they're eating a certain food, a nice proportion that might be seen as a dirty word in the form of pork, all right. It's just like, there's these different diets at different places, but here's what the number one ingredient seen in the data. I'm not just saying this. This is based on a meta-analysis of 148 studies. Meta-analysis is looking at all these different studies to identify what is the real causative agent here.



This was a meta-analysis of 148 studies, and over 300,000 participants. This is a large data set. It uncovered that adults with strong social ties have a 50% boost in longevity.

Said another way, this was from researchers at Brigham Young University. They identified that having strong social connections, basically reduced the risk of death from all causes by 50%. That's the tying factor of all the blue zones is community, is the social bonds. Because it is a powerful epigenetic factor. Determining how our genes are getting expressed, determining how our DNA is operating, our telomeres and how basically, this biomarker of how long we're going to live, how quickly we're cutting off, or shortening our telomeres is going to be based on our feeling of connection, our feeling of community and support. Our feeling of contribution. These are all deep needs.

We know that isolation, historically, means death, really. We have a deep ancient programming to know that isolation from the group is extremely detrimental to survival. We need each other. With that being said, I leaned into this and looked at the social implications of our food choices. I looked at the social science aspect that is, I couldn't believe how overlooked this was. Because what we try to do when we're trying to eat better, or get people to eat better, again, well-intentioned is like, giving out commands and telling them like, do this, eat this thing.

It's like treating a symptom with a drug. It's not addressing the root cause. Very likely, the behavior and/or symptom is going to keep popping up. The root cause of our food culture today and the food choices that we make is the environment. Because we're going to eat what's around us for the vast majority of us. It's unconscious. We think that we're making choices about what we're eating, but we're going to eat the foods that are a part of our culture. Whether it's a culture in Maui, whether it's a culture in Nairobi, whether it's a culture in Hong Kong, the culture that you're around, you're going to eat the foods that the culture promotes, or has available, or that you see in your environment. It's going to differ depending on where you are in the world.

Historically, there were real foods, or low minimally processed foods. Today, that paradigm, as we already talked about, has changed dramatically. In the United States, we are the king by far of eating ultra-processed foods. We eat more ultra-processed foods than anybody by far. We also have the highest rate of obesity of any nation by far. The same thing with our chronic disease rates. Now, many other countries are catching up. Let me not say by far. There are

some other countries that are catching up. But we are really a dominating force in this. I feel that we can also be a dominating force, or may a benevolently dominating force in change and demonstrating what's possible and turning this situation around. We're going to have to be able to identify that there are very powerful entities, corporations that are profiting mightily. We're talking about to the tunes of billions, trillions of dollars from our collective sickness. It requires sickness in order for the business structure to be successful, and that's twisted.

With that being said, moving into, okay, so how do we influence our own genes, activate our own longevity genes and being able to mute genes related to accelerated aging and inflammation and the like. I went through, like you said, there's never been a cookbook like this because there's over 250 scientific references in a cookbook. This has never been done before, but also in a way that's fun, that's colorful, that's explained in very clear language, where it's just like, "Oh, that makes sense. Oh, yeah. Okay." Here's what changed, and here's the big mission behind this is that I'm teaching our society, our communities to leverage social science to make healthy choices easy, to make it automatic.

What I mean by this is one of the most powerful unifying factors that we evolved with food, previously to the last century, we're talking about all the thousands and thousands and thousands of years before that, it was about community. It involved community. We gathered food together, we hunted together, we prepared the food together, we ate together. This was all a community integration. That experience is now in the endangered species list.

My question was, was the way that we were eating, not what we were eating, protective in some way for human health? The data that I came across blew my mind. One of them, which has been a long running study by some researchers at Harvard, and I've got a bunch of colleagues there, and they've been tracking family eating behavior for years. It was just a treasure trove of information. What they found was that families that eat together on a consistent basis have significantly higher intake of real whole food nutrients and higher quality foods and a lower intake of processed foods and things like chips and soda. Again, not to villainize those things, but that was a dominant part of my diet growing up.

That is just like, okay, that's interesting. I took it a step further. I came across a study and I broke it down in the book as well. The study basically found that children, in particular, this impacts

children more than anybody, that ate together with their family four days a week, had a significantly higher intake of fruits and vegetables. About five servings a day, most days of a week, and dramatically lower intake of processed foods.

What jumped out at me about that study is these were kids from minority families that would generally be in the context of low-income communities. It's just like, even where I come from, just eating together, which I'm not exaggerating, Light, I could count on my hands how many times I actually ate together with my family. We ate at the same time a lot, but we just grab food, disperse. I'd eat with my brothers and sisters. But most of the time we're not eating along with our parents. This leads to one other study. This is the objective for today, my challenge to everybody, but also a good challenge, a fun challenge that you're just going to reap a lot of benefits from.

This was a combination of different studies, but one of them was published in the Journal of Pediatrics. What the researchers uncovered was that families that eat together, any meal, that eat together three times a week at minimum, just three times a week, the children in those households had significantly lower rates of obesity, lower rates of disordered eating, and downstream metabolic issues, just by eating together three times a week. My challenge that I want to pose everybody is to make it a mandate, schedule it, because especially today, we got so much going on, make it a must, put it on a schedule, because if we don't schedule it, it's not real sometimes today. Pick three meals a week. Whatever that looks like. This could be family dinner on Tuesday and Thursday and family brunch on Sunday, right?

Give your family this fortification. Give them this advantage by eating together. Of course, I deconstruct in the book why this has this impact as well. One of the things that can jump out and might seem a little bit obvious is just the intention that goes behind it. There's inherently, if you know we got a family dinner on Thursday night, this could invoke some planning, right? Just being able to think about, "Okay. Well, this is what we're going to eat."

Even if we're ordering in from DoorDash, just making it a mandate in the house that we eat together on these days, because the dinner table is also a unifier. It's a communication channel to connect, to feel heard and to be able to listen and experience what's going on in the lives of the people you care about. In the book, I also provide a lot of prompts and how to, because

depending on where your kid is on the age spectrum in their environment, sometimes communication could be a little bit laggy, there could be more static on the line, especially if historically, our families, we haven't been eating together, being in front of technology. The way to change and how I've been so successful in this field is I'm not just taking away things that people enjoy, because we enjoy our technology. We have to make it something of equal, or greater value.

Adding in these prompts and these tools to make the entire food experience more fun, more rewarding, and also, giving these tools to our children to move forward, because another one of the studies that I shared, and I couldn't believe it, the majority of children from our most recent generation don't know how to prepare food for themselves. They don't know how to cook. What are they going to do? They're going to eat more ultra-processed foods, because they don't even have this valuable life skill.

It's really, again, this is a change agent. This book is so powerful and so rich in science, yes, but most importantly, it's change that we can eat. We can eat change. We can actually, because food is not just food, it's information, right? Being able to enjoy this process, having delicious food, having increased connectivity within our family structure. Here's the bottom-line reason why I wrote this book at this time. I feel like, this is my life's mission. I've written books in the past, *The Paradigm Changers*. *Sleep Smarter* was the first sleep wellness related book to become an international bestseller. I've got so many of the translations back there on my bookshelf. We have 22 different publishing deals. Man, it's crazy. It's crazy.

That all led me to this point, which is one of the greatest gifts, I think, that we all have is being able to understand what comes easy to me that might be challenging for others, right? My purpose might be in the mix there. Also, being able to see what comes naturally to me, what feels good, my family. I've demonstrated, I've proven that this model works. We get to be a model to show families what is possible and is so exciting, man, because this isn't just me this time. This is my entire family. With that, it's infectious. It's infectious in a beautiful way, in a good way, because that's all I needed back when I was by myself in Ferguson, I just needed to know what was possible.

Even if I could see somebody that even looks like me, for example, like any connectivity, right? Maybe it's whatever that quality is. If it's a busy mom. My wife is busy. You're going to get to hear from her, her perspective and her story along the way. My sons, I've got a 22-year-old son and an 11-year-old son. I've got the spectrum of age brackets. How does this stuff work for them? How are they showing up? What is their life experience like really? Bringing a level of authenticity, a level of empowerment, and also, again, just giving people a blueprint on how to do this stuff.

**[0:53:36] LW:** Share what your family experience is actually like around mealtime. What are you guys doing? What are you talking about? How do you keep people engaged? Or, how does it happen? What have you noticed that the kids have done over the months and years of you being very intentional about cultivating this particular type of vibe during the mealtime?

**[0:54:01] SS:** When my youngest son was about three, we started doing this gratitude practice before we have a meal, right? We sit down and all of us would go through one by one at the table and share three things that they're grateful for from that day. Of course, we get to hear what the experience was of our loved ones. But we also get to articulate it for ourselves and reach into that. It's like a different energy that gets invoked. It's a feeling of gratitude that just gets turned on and it helps to really reduce stress. That's been our practice that we've done for many years now.

We do it maybe 90% of the time now. Sometimes, again, different stuff is going on. We might not do it every time, but it's been a practice we've been really consistent about. Also, involving them in the process somehow. Maybe it's a dessert choice, or something like that from my youngest son. He's like, he has this psychological thing. If he's trying to game with his friends, he wants to unplug, hang out with his family, and also, to get his hands on whatever this goodness might be. Maybe it's the meal that we made, and/or. Also, him being involved in making food as well. All my kids could cook, which is really cool. They've been doing it for years.

Also, we know that most of the time when we have a family meal, we're going to end up hanging out with each other for post-meal time. We're just all just sitting around. Just happens. This might very often actually transition into a rap battle, or saying somebody's – it's dancing, or whatever. We're very playful. There's a playful spirit in our family as well and also, a spirit of

creativity. Those are some of the thing. I'll tell you this from today, Light. I was going outside to work out with my wife. I went outside, and I didn't know, because I was up in my office working and I went outside. There's a chair sitting in my driveway. I'm like, "What is going on?" I'm thinking, my oldest son, maybe he's out here filming something for – he's a trainer now. He's a personal trainer, which again, come on.

But the chair was there. Then five minutes later, they come around the block. They were doing sprints on this big hill over here. They came over and my youngest son plays basketball at AAU. My oldest son was just sitting in the chair in the middle of the street and just basically, having him run drills and giving him hand signals from the chair. It was just like, bro. We're all out here together, all four of us, it was not planned, but it is a part of our culture. I didn't tell them to do that. The same thing with my wife, it's a part of our culture.

Yes, life can pull us in different directions. We can get stressed. We might fall off here or there. But our baseline is that of fitness and family and connectivity. I know it's possible, because I don't come from that. I don't come from that at all. I never even met my biological father. I don't even know who he is. I had a stepfather. Again, the whole story, the alcohol abuse. He actually just passed away. We just had his funeral three weeks ago. Drug and alcohol abuse. I grew up in, again, this is during the crack epidemic. Lost so many family members, all right.

This is possible for us. We can write a new story for our families, for our children. It is the most important use of our time and our energy from my perspective, because it pours back into us, too. It's so fruitful for everyone.

**[0:57:22] LW:** Let's say, you're listening to this and you live with other people. They're eating the 12-year-old standard American diet. You think, "Okay. Well, I don't want to eat any more seed oils. I don't want to eat any more high-fructose corn syrup. I don't want to eat any more fried foods." How do they do that? How do they take your book and inspire the people around them to start to integrate some of these suggestions to change the culture of that house?

**[0:57:51] SS:** Awesome, man. I'm doing this in different layers in the book. Just speaking to, some people are just visual. Some people just want to be told what to eat. Some people want to know why. Some people want to know deep science, because there's a lot of different food

camped out here and everybody's debating. They're in fighting. Largely about minutiae, right? I focused on the macro pieces.

For example, it's not going to be that complicated to upgrade. Like, you just mentioned, seed oils. In the book, I break down these three cultural food contagions that we need to protect our family from. Just to give a tiny summation, tiny, one of the studies that I referenced in the book regarding canola oil, vegetable oil, and it was research published in the Journal of Inhalation Toxicology. This is the top journal for toxic substances and how inhaling them can cause problems. The researchers found that even smelling the fumes of canola oil, vegetable oil, while cooking can damage your DNA. That information isn't just out there on a random book, or random post.

Of course, with social media, there's some great stuff out there, but there's a lot of garbage, too and there's a lot of here today, gone today. To be in this format, in a book that has such a big reach, I think it's going to make a huge impact. This is something we did not even – it is a newly invented ultra-processed food when it boils down to it. Canola oil, “vegetable oil,” which is soy oil, corn oil, the list goes on and on, these are ultra-processed. They have to be treated with extremely high temperatures that cause a vast denaturing of the fat's oxidation. Also, they're treated with deodorizers. They're also utilizing chemical washes. The list goes on and on, to try to create this uniform product.

What I did was, yes, hey, this is an issue here, this is what you do instead. Something you probably have heard of, extra virgin olive oil, right? We just make that simple swap. I share the science on it. Oleocanthal rich extra virgin olive oil research at Auburn University, found that this is one of the few substances ever discovered that can help to reduce inflammation in the human brain. There's something about this oil that is restorative and protective of the human brain. That's where it's controlling so much of our reality, our bodies.

That's what you're going to find in the recipes, right? This isn't going to be something that's so outrageous, where you need an overhaul, where instead of you having a bun on something, you got to have a dehydrator, you got to dehydrate your buns for 48 hours to make your raw food burger. Not like that. It's just upgrading the ingredients of the foods that we love. Pancakes. My family loves breakfast foods. Have sweet potato pancakes. It's just, oh, that's so good.

**[1:00:47] LW:** My mom, for instance, I'm all in on olive oil, but if she's cooking, she likes to cook with Crisco oil. You have to say, "Hey, mom. I'm going to cook for us." Do you take that cookbook and you just cook? Or, how do you inspire people to use these other healthier ingredients? Because they're not interested in hearing my opinions on canola oil, "Oh, if you breathe it, it's going to mess up your health and that kind of stuff." They're like, "Whatever."

**[1:01:10] SS:** I came from that, too. Crisco. Then we switched over to vegetable oil, because it sounded healthier, but it's not broccoli oil. It's not asparagus oil. It's just, again, it's health washing. There's two parts to that. What I did before writing this book, and again, I'm very grateful for my background, because it enabled me to ask this question that I ask, like, how do people use cookbooks? How do people actually use them? I surveyed, I mean, people from online, further reach, to literally, just people in my block, on my neighborhood that I might say hi to. I start interviewing them basically, and just ask them like, "When you have a cookbook, do you read a cover to cover? Do you go write keys? Is anything particular that jumps out at you and makes you really use a recipe book a lot?"

I found out that demographics use different cookbooks differently generally. Men just go to – they see a picture they like, grab and go and make the picture. They'll say what's on the picture. Whereas, older women tend to, a significant portion read cookbooks cover to cover. They want to know what's going into this. They want to know what is the framework, or the principles they're going to be following. Not all, but a significant percentage. I was surprised by that. That's what drove me to make the front portion book so beautiful and inspiring and information rich. But again, in a way that's not invasive, that's fun and inviting.

That's what I did for our grandmas, who, there's a good chance they're going to look into a little bit of that information upfront, but it needs to be attractive as well. That was the biggest key.

Man, we spent a lot of time and energy to make sure that everything is beautiful, that it shows my family throughout the book. My family is all up in this book and just showing our culture and our unity. Even if people are just stopping on a page where they see a beautiful picture and being able to see something that's going to pop right out to them, maybe about Crisco, or whatever the case might be, but just to be like, oh, okay. Leveraging that with the recipes



themselves, just following the recipe, they're going to be including higher quality ingredients. There isn't Crisco on the menu.

Also, even with that, and this is the last piece I want to share here with this is that, unfortunately, a lot of diet books, there's a religiosity about you're supposed to do all this stuff right. Also, there's this movement that has happened in recent history of eat to live, don't live to eat, right? Food should be fuel. I went, and I added some of this into the book. Humans, we evolved. The reason that we eat certain foods is that we're driven to eat tasty things. We're driven to eat things that bring us joy.

Yes, food manufacturers, food scientists have manipulated our desires for tasty things, but we could take back control of that as well. I feel that the bridge to do that, and again, just being able to work with all these people over the years is by providing real whole food based recipes that taste amazing. Avoiding the ultra-processed, or synthetic ingredients that typically go into these foods. If somebody's into an enchilada, or a scramble, or pancakes, or whatever the case might be, we've got something for you that is going to literally change the information you're putting in your body through the lens, or through the pathway of deliciousness.

We are big time foodies. And so, just like for me, I'm even surprised that it took all this time to create this, but it was just like - there's a great quote from Churchill, says that, "There's nothing more powerful than an idea whose time has come." I just feel like life was qualifying my family for this moment. I think that we can make a big difference.

**[1:04:59] LW:** *Eat Smarter Family Cookbook*. We definitely want to get a copy of that. Then also, I was thinking, you could play your podcast while people are preparing meals together and get the little education happening at the same time. This book comes out in October?

**[1:05:17] SS:** That's right. It comes out on 10/10. 10 out of 10.

**[1:05:20] LW:** Beautiful. Beautiful. It's my mom's birthday. Well, look, man –

**[1:05:23] SS:** Oh, come on. See? All right, everybody got to go get a copy for Light's mother's birthday. That is so awesome.

[1:05:32] **LW:** When people do cookbooks, there's no audio version, right? Because that wouldn't make sense. Or is there an audio version? I don't know.

[1:05:37] **SS:** I mean, just the fact that it is information rich, there could be a part that would be like that. But for a cookbook, no, because then it would have to have an attachment of this vast – Yeah, there's an audio. But the physical book, there's obviously, there's the digital brand of it and people can find all of this stuff and all the bonuses as well, because you have a summit that people get free access to. The ticket for the summit is \$300 and it's free for people when they go to [eatsmartercookbook.com](https://eatsmartercookbook.com). You get access to the summit. We've got speakers like, Laila Ali. Everybody has kids. They're not just telling you theory. Laila Ali, Gabby Reece, Dr. Amy Shah, Dr. Daniel Amen, the leading expert and mental health for kids, child psychiatrist, big on nutrition and exercise, all those things.

Anyways, you get to see and hear what do they do? How do they handle picky eaters? How do they handle preparing meals for their family under schedules? How do you save money with groceries? You get to hear all of these things. It's not just me. It's not just me. It's a really special thing as well.

[1:06:47] **LW:** Beautiful, man. Well, thank you so much for being so generous in writing this book and sharing it with the world. You keep hitting nothing but net. We're just excited.

[1:06:59] **SS:** Thank you.

[1:07:00] **LW:** Excited about this hit the market and seeing what else you come up with after this. Thank you so much.

[1:07:05] **SS:** It's my honor. I appreciate you, man. Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[1:07:08] **LW:** Thank you so much for tuning into my interview with Shawn Stevenson, podcaster and author of the *Eat Smarter Cookbook*, which is available everywhere books are

sold. I'll, of course, put links in the show notes, which you can find at [lightwatkins.com/podcast](http://lightwatkins.com/podcast). Please, take 10 seconds to leave a review for this podcast. It's honestly the best way that you can support this show. What people don't realize is that one of the ways a potential guest will vet a podcast is they'll go to the podcast page on Apple and they'll look and see how many reviews, how many ratings does this podcast get? That tells that potential guest that this is a podcast that people are indeed engaging with and that it may be worth their time to accept the invitation.

Because look, the biggest guests are busy. They have a lot going on and it's just a quick way to see, "Okay, this is a podcast that would be worth my time." It's not personal. If you want to help me out, it just takes 10 seconds. Look at your screen, click on the name of the show and scroll down past the first seven episodes and you'll see a space with five blank stars. You can leave a five-star rating. If you want to go the extra mile, just write one line about what you like about the podcast, okay? Thanks so much in advance for that.

Also, remember, you can watch these interviews on YouTube, if you want to put a face to a story. Just search Light Watkins Podcast on YouTube. You'll see the entire playlist. If you didn't already know, I post the raw, unedited version of every podcast in my Happiness Insiders online community. If you're the type that likes hearing all the mistakes and the false starts and the stuff that we cut out of the episodes, then you can listen to all of that by joining [thehappinessinsiders.com](http://thehappinessinsiders.com). You'll also get access to my challenges, including the 108-day meditation challenge, which has an 80% completion rate.

All right, I look forward to hopefully seeing you back here next week with another story about someone just like me and just like you taking a leap of faith in the direction of their purpose, so make sure you subscribe to the podcast so you don't miss out. Until then, keep trusting your intuition, keep following your heart and keep taking those leaps of faith. If no one's told you recently that they believe in you, hey, I believe in you. I really do. Thank you so much. Sending you lots of love and have a great day.

[END]