

Nutrition: Learning from the Guilt-Free RD

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SPEAKERS

Valentina Castano, Melissa Joy Dobbins, Ricky Telg

Ricky Telg 00:04

This is Science by the Slice, a podcast from the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences Center for Public Issues Education. In this podcast, experts discuss the science of issues affecting our daily lives, reveal the motivations behind the decisions people make, and ultimately provide insight to solutions for our lives.

Valentina Castano 00:44

Hey listeners, this is Valentina Castano, Media Coordinator at the PIE Center. Thanks for tuning in to the second episode in this month's nutrition series. Today we'll be hearing from Melissa Joy Dobbins, a licensed and Registered Dietician Nutritionist, also known as the guilt free RD. Melissa is the CEO and host of the Sound Bites podcast, which provides a wealth of knowledge focused on sound science, smart nutrition, and good food. Keep listening to learn more about Melissa's unique approach to having guilt free conversations about food and health with her audience. So I wanted to know, on your platform, you refer to yourself as a dietician nutritionist. So what does that mean? Because I colloquially just hear people say I'm a nutritionist or a dietitian. I've never really heard those terms together. So what does that mean?

Melissa Joy Dobbins 01:39

Well, that's a great question. It's the million dollar question because I think the average person does not know that there is a difference or what the difference is, so we need to kind of spread the word. So the terms nutritionist and dietitian people think they're interchangeable, but it's really not the case. Dietitians can call themselves nutritionists, but nutritionists cannot call themselves dietitians. The term dietitian is actually very involved the studies and the credential and it's regulated. And what makes it a little bit more confusing is prior to several years ago, we used to just call ourselves registered dieticians. But because of this, this term nutritionists, we started incorporating that into our name. So now we're registered dietitian nutritionists, hopefully trying to not confuse the situation more but to clarify that just nutritionist is not a

credential or a licensed credential. So if you are a registered dietician, or registered dietician nutritionist, you must have a minimum of a bachelor's degree in nutrition. And starting in 2024, they're also going to require a master's degree, which is following suit with a lot of healthcare degrees like physical therapists and occupational therapists. But when you study nutrition, and you get your bachelor's degree in science and nutrition, you have coursework that is very diverse subject areas like microbiology, biochemistry, had a lot of chemistry, research methods, nutrition and assessment, and most importantly, medical nutrition therapy. That is what people with just you know, the term nutritionist, they cannot practice medical nutrition therapy. So that's kind of going beyond giving somebody like general advice, but the waters get a little murky. In addition to the bachelor's degree, dietitians must complete a hands on dietetic internship, where they work in a variety of settings, community clinical, inpatient, outpatient, also food service management, and then once they're done with that, they can sit for the registration exam. And then of course, after that, there's continuing education requirements. So anybody can use the term nutritionist. And it also gets confusing because it varies state by state. In my state, Illinois, we have licensure. So, you know, I'm a licensed registered dietician nutritionist, but when you hear terms like nutritionist, nutrition coach, nutrition therapist or even health coach, that could be a red flag that the person does not have a degree in nutrition.

V

Valentina Castano 04:16

Got it. Okay, so to make sure I have it clear, does that make the current standing of how the education works? So are all dietitians? Also nutritionist but not all? Nutritionists are also dietitians.

M

Melissa Joy Dobbins 04:28

Exactly, yes.

V

Valentina Castano 04:29

Got it. That makes perfect sense. And I've seen on your platform too. One thing that you bring up quite often is the idea of being a guilt free RD. And can you just explain what that means?

M

Melissa Joy Dobbins 04:39

Absolutely. So I am the guilt free RD and RD of course stands for registered dietician because my tagline is because food shouldn't make you feel bad. And it really is just a theme and a gut feeling that I've had throughout my whole career even back to when I was a student. I didn't have these words for it. But the reason I became a dietician is because I wanted to help people not be afraid of their food and it can range from anything. I did a lot of work with eating disorders early on in my career, or weight management. I'm certified in diabetes education. And as you know, I talk a lot about agriculture. So it could be, you know, I don't want somebody to feel bad, you know, I shouldn't eat this cookie, because it's not healthy, or I need to lose weight, or I have diabetes, or where did this cookie come from? And is it gluten free, or non GMO, and all of those fear factors that can come into our food. So that's what being the guilt

free RD means for me, is that I'm really in the business of helping reassure people that their food is safe and wholesome, and that there are a variety of options. And different people have different needs and different preferences.

V

Valentina Castano 05:50

Right, that makes sense. And so getting into all that, it seems like kind of quite a jump to go from being the guilt free RD and all these principles that are really important to you, making sure that food is neutral, and that everybody can enjoy the food that they're eating. So how do you go from that from having that idea? And then starting this platform that you have? How did that go?

M

Melissa Joy Dobbins 06:09

So I had a pretty traditional start to my career. I did not have that hands on dietetic internship, I did what's called a coordinated program, which isn't as common anymore. So I did have some clinical rotations and community experience. But I felt that I needed more clinical. So I started off in a clinical hospital setting. But I really was an educator at heart, I am an educator. And so after a couple of years of my clinical experience, which was very important and very helpful to have that foundation, then I became an outpatient dietitian in a hospital setting. I did a lot of community work, and corporate wellness and teaching classes and of course, one-on-one patient education, whether it was you know, weight management, or diabetes or child nutrition. But I started getting I'm in the Chicago area, which is the third largest media market. And so on my first day of my outpatient job, a TV station came to the hospital and needed to interview a dietitian. And so I was sort of like thrown into that. I had no idea what I was doing. But I remembered thinking, gosh, if I don't say yes to this, who are they going to talk to? Is that person going to be qualified. So that kind of planted a seed there. And after that job, I became a supermarket dietitian. And that's when I did a ton of media. And I was on TV almost every week, I did a lot of radio interviews, this is before social media really existed. So a lot of traditional media experience. And while I have to say there's, there's a lot of dietitians out there who love doing media, I did not love it. But I knew it was important. So I had wonderful training as a supermarket dietitian in media. And then after that, I went on to work for the Dairy Council and I had even better media training in that role. And so, you know, it was really impressed upon me that communication skills are really important. And if you think back to as a dietitian, I have to be evidence based. I can't just say whatever I want. So it's kind of hard to compete and be compelling. Compared to all of these other people without credentials, who can really say whatever they want, they can be very sensational, very inflammatory. And so I really had this desire to have more dietitians get their voice in the media. And then when social media started, I jumped right in, and, you know, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, all of that. And I just really, like I said, I didn't like it very much, but I knew it was important to do. And along the way along my career, I was missing some of that patient education because I love diabetes education. But I was doing all this other, you know, speaking to groups, working with farmers as a dairy council dietitian, learning more about agriculture, and just seeing how important it was not just for dietitian voices to get out there, but agriculture voices to get out there. And those traditional media opportunities were shrinking, and the social, digital ones were expanding. And I much prefer like the radio type, format versus TV. On TV, you have to pretend to be a food stylist and you have to have all this food and props and it's it's important because you want to engage the audience and with those visuals are really great, but I really just want to talk. So when I found

out about podcasting, I thought this might be a good fit for me. And the rest is history. My my podcast, Sound Bites is almost seven years old, and I'm almost at 200 episodes. So what really spurs me on is that I get to interview experts and share their information. So I kind of, you know now I'm on the other side of the mic, so it's kind of fun to be on, back on the guest side of the mic with you today, I had to learn how to be a host and everything. But I really love being curious and talking with my guests and having them share their expertise with my audience.

V

Valentina Castano 10:13

Of course, yeah. And we're so excited to have you here, as well. And so, once you've got your platform kind of going, and you understood that you wanted to do more of this work, what was it that made you decide that you were going to incorporate agriculture under this nutrition framework, because I think there's a few different sources that talk about nutrition and personal health. But maybe we see less of those sources that do mention the role of agriculture in this process. So what was it that made you decide to make sure that that viewpoint or aspect was included in what you discussed?

M

Melissa Joy Dobbins 10:43

Well, first and foremost, it's just I find the topic very interesting. And, of course, when I worked for the Dairy Council, I learned a lot about farming, and agriculture, you know, in animal agriculture. But interestingly, my master's research was kind of agriculture related because it was about bovine growth hormone in cow's milk, and what did health professionals know about it? And this is back in the early 90s. So I had to I had a survey that I send out to dietitians, what do you know about this? What do your patients ask what are you telling your patients, and in addition to that, I had to learn the science of it, and the environmental impact of it. And what was really interesting to me is that all the research showed that this supplemental hormone growth hormone for cows, which by the way, is something that is almost not even used anymore today, because there was such a consumer rejection of it, because they didn't understand the technology. And it sounds scary. So it was really interesting sort of case study to say, okay, when you look at the science, it's safe for human health, I won't bore you with all the details. It's a bovine hormone. It's not a human hormone. Also, it it helped produce more milk with fewer cows. So it's actually better for the environment. And what I learned in that whole process, I learned a lot about risk communication, and why people fear certain things, and something called locus of control, if we don't feel that we have control over something, and somebody else is making these decisions for us and we don't understand the science and the technology, we are afraid and we reject it. So that seed was planted very early on even before my first job. And so then, you know, eight years into my career, I end up working with dairy farmers and learning even more about agriculture. And a lot of these sort of aha moments where it's like, oh, humane treatment of animals does not mean treating them like humans. And just the more I learned, the more I wanted to learn. So I left the Dairy Council in 2011, and started my own communications business, primarily to teach other dietitians and other health care professionals to be better speakers, to do media, to do social media and I started getting invited on farm tours. And whether it was crops or animals, you know, ranches, farms, all over the US. I've even been on farms in Canada. And I've been on a salmon pen, a seafood trip to Norway.



V Valentina Castano 13:12
Oh, that's awesome.

M Melissa Joy Dobbins 13:12
It was unbelievable.

V Valentina Castano 13:13
Yeah.

M Melissa Joy Dobbins 13:14
So I just the more I learn, the more I want to learn. And that's where I bring those experts onto my podcast, to share their deep knowledge of sustainability, on-farm practices, animal care, things like that.

V Valentina Castano 13:30
Right. And so now that you've been doing this for a while, and you've had several of these guests, certainly you've had several interviews related to this topic. Why do you think that it's important for individuals to hear agriculture nutrition together to hear these topics together when they're learning about their personal health?

M Melissa Joy Dobbins 13:49
Well, I think that more and more people are wondering where does their food come from? How was it produced? Which is great, I think we're in a really exciting time right now, where people are interested, and they're interested in personal health too. And I mean, if you think about it, the food that we eat and enjoy every day is it's personal. It's cultural, it's emotional. And it's, it's really intimately connected to our health and well being. So when you think about how the food is produced, distributed, access to food, these things can all impact our health. And most importantly, I think that it sort of demystifies the people don't know they're so far removed from the farm. It's good that they're interested. But it's like sometimes they don't know what they don't know. And so I find for me, the more I learn, the more reassured I am about our food supply, and the hard work that farmers and ranchers do and oh my gosh, the technology that they use, and the business sense that they have, you know, it's not just a an old guy in overalls standing there with a pitchfork. It's so not the case.

V Valentina Castano 15:05
Right. And it Yeah, I agree. I think that a lot of us, even myself who I'm an agriculture communications major, I don't always remember those things. You know, even though I am involved in this industry in some way, I am still very privileged that I get to go to the store and

buy milk and I don't have to be involved in every step of that process. So there definitely is that separation. So as you've had more of these guests on your podcast and on your platform, and you've learned more and more from them, is there anything that you've learned about agriculture through this process that has surprised you or changed your mind on certain things?

M

Melissa Joy Dobbins 15:37

I think the biggest thing and and I talk about this a lot on my podcast is the concept of trade offs. And if you if you kind of use the analogy of personal health compared to agriculture, each person has individual needs and preferences and and what works for them. Same with agriculture, what is a sustainable practice or an efficient practice on one farm in one geographic location may not work on another farm and another location, and also the complexities we know that human health is complex, you know, not one food is gonna make or break your diet. Same with farming, there's so many details that go into everything. It's not just a simple, well, this is sustainable. And this isn't. This is good and this is bad. If you are, you know, using less fertilizer and pesticides, that's a good thing. But does that mean like organic, that actually has pesticides as well, and they're just organic pesticides. And so it's I think there's just so much to to uncover. And, again, with the analogy, like, as a dietitian, I know more about nutrition than the average person. Well, these farmers know so much more about what goes into a healthy, sustainable production system than we do.

V

Valentina Castano 17:02

And earlier you mentioned, we've talked a little bit about your podcast, but you're not just a podcaster. You're also on social media, for example, Twitter. And so I'm just curious, how have you used this type of media, podcasting and Twitter to reach broader audiences? And how has that kind of gone for you?

M

Melissa Joy Dobbins 17:17

Yes. So I think I sort of had this built in audience or network of my peers of healthcare professionals. Back when I got onto social media, I was working with the Dairy Council at the time, and I was the National Dairy Council spokesperson so I had that national network of dietitians. Prior to that, when I was a supermarket dietitian, I had that national network of dietitians. And then when I became an academy spokesperson, I had that national network of dieticians. So sometimes I feel like I'm sort of preaching to the choir, in a good way. Like, I think I'm sort of training the trainer. So I think a big chunk of my audience are dietitians, and other health care professionals. And I feel like they come to me and my platforms to see what they can learn, and then turn around and share with their clients and patients and audiences. And certainly there are some non-healthcare professionals that I think, you know, if I had to describe them, I would just say, you know, they're just highly interested and educated and want to learn more about these topics.

V

Valentina Castano 18:19

Yeah, definitely. And have you heard anything from any healthcare professionals that do subscribe to your platform? Have you heard back from them and have they discussed anything

subscribe to your platform? Have you heard back from them and have they discussed anything that maybe they heard from you that changed their perspective or see things a different way?

M

Melissa Joy Dobbins 18:32

Yes, that's the most exciting part. Because as you can imagine, I'm speaking into a microphone to a computer screen. And as an educator, that's kind of depressing sometimes because, you know, I mean, we're all used to the Zoom stuff now, but to not have a patient or a client sitting right in front of you or a classroom, it can be sort of lonely. So when I get that feedback from my listeners, it's just so exciting. It can range anything from a dietetic preceptor like a dietitian, internship, teacher will say, I share this with my students, the podcast, you know, we have a discussion about it. Or like I have people reaching out to me, one of my recent episodes is with a pediatrician who married a farmer. And she was a big fan of the podcast. And she really liked some of the episodes that I was talking about pesticides. And she had a very specific scientific question for me about pesticides that I couldn't answer. So I connected her with some of the guests that I've had on the show. And we just struck up an email conversation and an email relationship. And I thought, gosh, wouldn't it be interesting to have her come on the show to talk about, you know you're a pediatrician, you work with families all the time, what questions are you getting about nutrition? And since you're married to a farmer, and people know that, are they asking you about, you know, pesticides and farming techniques? So it's really fun. And then another similar one, I grew up studying ballet and I had an avid fan listener reach out to me and say, I'm a ballerina turned dietitian, and I would love to come on your show and talk about nutrition for ballet dancers and other performance athletes. And I hadn't covered that topic yet. And I was like, Oh, that's so fun. So we struck up this, you know, online relationship as well. And I had her on the show. And it's just been really, personally rewarding. You know, I have a variety of topics on the show, which, when I first started off, I thought, gosh, maybe I should just, you know, niche down and focus on diabetes, because that's what I'm most interested in. But then I'm still interested in agriculture, I'm still interested in weight management, I'm still interested in all these different topics. And I thought, well, if I have a variety of interests, maybe my audience will as well. And I have had people say that the podcast is sort of like a buffet, they take what they want, they leave the rest. So I don't think every person listens to every single episode.

V

Valentina Castano 20:55

Right. That's a great analogy for a nutrition podcast. It's a buffet. I love that. So on your platform, because you mostly, as you said, right, for professionals, and you're teaching that teachers, have you come across instances where you've seen misinformation on these platforms, and how do you kind of approach that?

M

Melissa Joy Dobbins 21:13

Yeah, I mean, there's tons of misinformation out there. If I feel like it's, you know, something that is really important or really trending, I will address it, for example, when COVID hit in the early phase, when we're afraid to you know, we're wiping down our packages from the grocery store, or the mail is being quarantined in the, in the garage for you know, several days. There was this video that went viral of this person, I don't know what their credentials were, if they had any, but they were dressed in scrubs and they were showing us how to wipe down the

packages, you know, with bleach or whatever. And then they threw a bag of oranges into a sink full of soap and bleach, and I almost lost it. So I said, Okay, I have to do a podcast about like, what is not safe, it is not safe to do that with your oranges. That is really scary. And so occasionally there will be something like that, that that makes its way into the podcast. But in general, I try to focus more on those sort of more evergreen topics that people are like, you know, are fresh fruits and vegetables best? Is organic best? Those sort of age old questions that we keep coming back to and reassuring people and giving them enough science so that they can think about things a little differently, and maybe take a step back and feel reassured with whatever choices that they make.

V

Valentina Castano 22:35

So going forward, as you continue to talk about nutrition, and agriculture on your platforms. What do you think is your main goal when you bring on a person from a different viewpoint? In this case, agriculture on your platform? What do you want your viewers to take from that situation?

M

Melissa Joy Dobbins 22:51

Whether it's agriculture, or any topic, really, I want people to think about things differently, open their mind. It's hard. We all have what's called confirmation bias. We all have our lens that we see the world through. And so I want people to feel comfortable and safe to sort of check some of that at the door and learn and think about things differently and mostly walk away feeling reassured and you know, good about whatever food choices that they are making for themselves and their families.

R

Ricky Telg 23:29

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