

Michael Roesslein:

All right, we're live with another episode of Rebel Health Spotlight. I'm your host, Michael. I am here with a friend of mine today that I'm excited to have on the show, Dr. Chris Bjorndal. Welcome.

Christina Bjorndal:

Thanks for having me. Great to be here.

Michael Roesslein:

Yeah, it's super fun anytime we get to talk. And also, we've had a couple podcasts that did get pretty, I don't know the right word to use to describe them, but pretty deep and pretty intense. We both share a similar backstory a little bit, and we'll get into that in a second. So for today, I guess we'll just start with that. I think that would be a good place to start is that you blend mental health and a functional medicine approach into with a mental health twist. And why is that? Why is that your jam? How did you end up there?

Christina Bjorndal:

Yeah. Yeah, I ended up there because of my own struggles with my mental health. So we won't dive too far, but I'll just list the diagnoses. So anxiety, depression, I've had three suicide attempts, one that left me in a coma with kidney failures on dialysis. It was rough, really rough. And then I had a psychotic event after being prescribed medication, so I got the bipolar disorder type one, I've had an eating disorder, might as well throw ADD and OCD in there too. What haven't I had? So basically it was just through my own struggles of trying to find help other than pharmaceuticals, medications, and a little bit of counseling here and there to really get me back to feeling good in life. So I was really somebody who was wearing this mask a lot that I would project out to the world that, "Hey, I'm doing okay." But really inside I was not okay at all.

Michael Roesslein:

I think a lot of people can probably relate to that, walking through life looking one way on the outside and feeling another way on the inside, whether it's mentally and depression and anxiety, or whether it's physically, everybody out there with chronic pain conditions and chronic health conditions who have to cancel plans and not go to things. And people will be like, "Oh, you look fine." And looks can be really deceiving when it comes to what's going on internally. So I see books behind you there, let's just get that out of the way right now and share what's up on your shelf.

Christina Bjorndal:

Yeah, I wrote a book called Beyond the Label: 10 Steps to Improve Your Mental Health with Naturopathic Medicine. And then the other one is just a guide, an eating guide. Sometimes people just need a place to start, so it's called The Essential Diet: Eating for Mental Health. And so for myself, because I've had that eating disorder piece, really when people said to me cut out sugar, cut out dairy, cut out wheat, cut out coffee, cut out all this stuff, I needed a guide to tell me what to eat. Don't tell me what not to eat, just tell me what to focus on. So that's why I created that.

Michael Roesslein:

That's really helpful because I've never... Eating disorder... Your long list when you were going through it, I could check off about three quarters of them, but eating disorder is not one that I've struggled with very much. I've used food as a coping, soothing, emotional crutch in the past, but I never would be diagnosed as eating disorder. But I've worked with people with eating disorders both professionally and friends and family

who have a history of eating disorders, and I found out firsthand how triggering that can be when you start giving them restrictive lists of food. Especially if it was anorexic related or bulimic related, then it's super triggering and brings up a whole bunch of things that they've tried really hard to get away from and it can be really conflicting.

So I think it's great to provide what somebody can do and what would be helpful for them instead of giving them a long list of no. And my clients actually informed me on that and I shifted the way that I presented recommendations was more like that. Do this, and I left off most of the don'ts. There were a couple that I left on, but I left off most of the don'ts and was like, "If you don't see it over here, it's not something I would totally recommend. And if you have a question, reach out to me and I'll give you clarification." But those long lists of don't eat these 39 things or don't do this, don't do this, I can see where that could be super triggering. And that book, when did you write that book? Because it's been out a while now. The first one.

Christina Bjorndal:

That one's 2017. 2017.

Michael Roesslein:

Okay. Yeah, I think that was right around the first time that we talked.

Christina Bjorndal:

Yeah, it's been... But I'm really proud, it's selling copies still every month and in more countries too. Not more countries every month, but more countries. I think I'm in 13 countries now or something.

Michael Roesslein:

How many languages?

Christina Bjorndal:

But same language still. I haven't had any offers to translate.

Michael Roesslein:

You're selling the English-speaking one in 13 countries?

Christina Bjorndal:

Yeah.

Michael Roesslein:

Wow. And there's not that many people talking about that, a naturopathic medicine approach to mental health. There's not nearly... We talked about this on the podcast, blurring the lines between the mental-emotional side and the naturopathic or functional side, and that there really isn't two sides, that doesn't exist. Everything is super interrelated. So I'm a little disappointed there's not more out there on that, but it's a beautiful resource. And I'm curious, you started that a while ago, that's your life's work now, and I'm curious what you love about doing it or what lights you up now about doing it after this amount of time?

Christina Bjorndal:

Yeah, I think I feel a little bit like there's not that many voices that are encouraging people on this idea of wellness. So when you get diagnosed with a mental health condition, whatever it could be, whatever that label is for you, usually the only option available is pharmaceuticals. And I was taking five psychotropic meds at one point, and I don't mind if you take those, but the key here is you should get better. I was taking all those and I wasn't getting better. So you want to understand that that's the goal, and a big differentiation with naturopathic doctors is we're looking at trying to figure out why aren't you healthy?

So it's not so much focusing on the disease that has you, it's about how can we restore health and functionality back to the system that is you. So what lights me up is people who are coming in with anxiety or depression primarily, and them basically working through the 10 steps I talk about and putting in the time and the effort and getting well and really thriving. Some people making career changes, some people just having incredible transformations, and so that's what lights me up. And I think with bipolar disorder in particular, it's very rare to get the message that you can heal from that.

Michael Roesslein:

Yeah, I have a good friend who's been diagnosed bipolar, and he's made a lot of progress naturally by changing his lifestyle and the way he lives and some supplementation and some dietary changes. And I don't think he currently takes any medication, and when he was first diagnosed, he came to me and was like, "They told me I have to be on this and this forever, and is that true?" And I'm like, "Well, I'm not going to flat out contradict your doctors, but check out this information." And your book was one of the things I shared with him.

Christina Bjorndal:

Oh, thank you.

Michael Roesslein:

And now it's going on 10 years and he's free of medication. So bipolar is a tough one, but it's definitely viable and it's definitely possible. And so I can only imagine seeing yourself and those people who show up needing help with depression and with anxiety, and then knowing how much of a change in your life experience it was when those things were eased. Because I don't want to give the false impression that... I'm someone who's also suffered with really severe depression and anxiety. I don't want to give the idea that I don't ever feel depression or I don't ever feel anxiety, and I don't ever have days that are really hard and I don't ever feel like there's a cloud over my head, because I'm going through one of those stretches right now so it would be totally fraudulent. But it's about moving the ground or the needle or where the baseline is, is that what you're... That wellness, that aspect of wellness really moves the...

Christina Bjorndal:

Yeah. You know what I think is a big differentiation is if we use that cloud analogy, so you're not the cloud, what happens is the cloud of depression descends upon you and you cannot see your way through that cloud. But ultimately you're the sky and just like the sky, you can hold all kinds of weather, and so when we look at our emotional self... We've both studied with Gabor Mate, when I had an opportunity to sit across from him, he said to me, "What emotion have you depressed? What emotion have you repressed or suppressed or pushed down in you?" And so we want to understand that the emotions, they're all welcome. You're the home, you're the host, you're the landing ground. Another analogy is the ocean. You're the ocean, you hold all the waves and the waves are the emotions. It's when we suppress them, deny them, disown them that they beg to be seen.

And if you think about bipolar disorder, it's the extremes, right? It's the bottom end is suicidal ideation constantly, top end is psychosis. Those are the two super extremes of the nervous system. So I think when you're able to integrate your life from the physical level, the mental, the emotional, and the spiritual, all four of those aspects need to be looked at. And I agree with you. Listen, I'm sitting here at this point in my life feeling the best I've ever felt, but that does not mean that grief is not going to come my way. That doesn't mean that, like I was just sharing with you earlier that I had an upset because somebody I was counting on in a business situation walked out, and that left me with my feelings of abandonment. I didn't mention that I'm adopted, so that's my core wound, so it shows up, right?

Michael Roesslein:

Me, too.

Christina Bjorndal:

Yeah, we have that in common. So it shows up still. So you're like an onion and all of these emotions are within you, and it's just a matter of tending and befriending yourself, not disowning and criticizing and saying to yourself, "Why am I feeling that? And I shouldn't be feeling that way." The reality is you are feeling that way, and how can you turn towards yourself in love and compassion versus, for me, I was walking through the world with this real, real disdain for myself, real disdain. And the reality is, you're going to be with you longer than anybody's ever going to be with you, so get the relationship right with yourself before we look for love from somebody else. And that was all messed up and reversed for me. I was so focused on outward achievements, living on that material plane versus orienting myself vertically on that spiritual plane, and when I shifted... Because society sends you the message, "Oh, you got to get that job and you got to climb the ladder."

Michael Roesslein:

Have those things and do this thing.

Christina Bjorndal:

Jump over there. And as a recovering people pleaser, I can tell you it's been challenging for me to actually factor my own needs into the equation. So that was a long answer to your question.

Michael Roesslein:

No, no, no, it's great. It's great. I think a lot of people in our community, I've heard that theme come up a lot when this stuff gets brought up that they've never had their own self or needs as a priority. There's a lot of people that end up in a chronic disease state, whether it's physical or mental or emotional, because they've, for their whole life, put everyone around them first and done all these things. And sometimes that is necessary for a parent, for example, but it's a chronic behavior pattern that we learn when we're young. And-

Christina Bjorndal:

It's a trauma response.

Michael Roesslein:

Switching it to doing things for yourself and making yourself a priority. I've worked with people now on the more emotional trauma side where it outwardly seems like a really simple decision. Like, "Hey, go get that massage. Go take three days off work. Don't do this thing that you are going to do or whatever." But they have

the hardest time. They'll find eight million reasons why they can't do that for themselves or they shouldn't, or they then carry guilt about it or anything. So there's a ton to unpack there, and it's not so simple for a lot of people. Because if someone out there's listening to this and they can identify with it, they're like, "Yeah, it is really hard to do things for myself." But other people see that and they're like, "Oh, just go do the thing." And it's like, "Okay, you have different wounding than that person."

So yeah, the work with Gabor has been fascinating. I like that you brought up, "What are you depressing? What are you repressing?" And we just went through and are going through a period of really heavy grief and I'm finding if I don't have an outlet for that, if there's no way for me to express that, if I have to put a smile on for a bunch of days in a row and don't have any space to feel sad or cry, that cloud of depression then shows up and everything gets tinted like that and everything's negative and everything's going to go wrong and everything is this. And after I do have that space to express that and feel that and cry and whatever, it clears up a little bit. And my example right now is grief, but it could be anger, it can be all kinds of different things.

So we got way off naturopathic medicine, but I think this is a very good conversation for people to hear. And just to tie back in before we go, the naturopathic medicine end of it, like the diet, the lifestyle, those kinds of things, we've talked a lot about self-compassion, self-love, allowing emotions to be present, and the more trauma therapy, mental emotional side of things. Where do you see that the making the dietary changes, the lifestyle changes, the wellness side of things, how does that impact somebody aside from doing that other deeper work? What can somebody notice when they shift those things?

Christina Bjorndal:

Yeah, yeah. And that's where it started with me with my journey into healing. It started with a naturopathic doctor, and I didn't realize that... So serotonin is one of the key neurotransmitters, you have other ones that are important in mental health like dopamine and norepinephrine, GABA, etc. So those are important, then you have your hormones, and every single hormone in your body plays a role in mental health so your hormones need to be balanced, but those are made from the precursors you give it from nutrition. So there's essential amino acids that what that means is the word essential means you can't make it in yourself. You know how we upgrade the iPhone all the time? Human beings need to go in for an upgrade, and the upgrade I would ask for is the ability to make tryptophan and phenylalanine and vitamin C so we don't die of things like scurvy. We don't hear people dying nowadays of that, but some of these nutrients you need for you to live.

So because I had an eating disorder, which was really the least of the concerns, if you will, but yet contributing to all the other concerns because I wasn't getting the essential nutrients I needed. So how can I make... You can't make these things out of thin air, you got to give yourself those precursors to do so. So let's make sure that the foundations are in place, and nutrition is a super important one. And we've gotten way off track in our society from the sprays that we use and the pesticides, the chemicals, the food colorings, the quality of the water, just all of it, the sugar. There's a lot of challenges there. And you're in Europe, I remember one time you posted a photo and I was like, "Wow." And you posted that basically the whole store is organic, and the exception was the exception aisle. Whereas in our country, it's totally the opposite, the organic is the one aisle and everything else is... Right? What do you think? I think that people in Europe seem to have healthier lifestyles than in North America.

Michael Roesslein:

Yeah, it's shifting as that permeates more places, the hustle culture and the food processing, but there's a lot more resistance to it. I get asked questions here in Italy sometimes, "Why do you let them put that in your food? Or why does American food have these things in it?" But some of the lifestyle things of taking really long lunch breaks, there's a three-hour window where everything's closed here if you're in a traditional place. But if you go in the more modern places where the tourists are all the time and where there's big cities, that's gone.

So now they're working the same, and so their slow eating and their relaxation and their connection aspect of their culture is going away because they're fitting into the hustle, grind, faster, more, bigger type of thing. That's starting to permeate everywhere, but as a whole, there's a lot more awareness around food ingredients and that food colorings, for example, most of those are illegal here.

And the food preparation too. Right now we have a baby, I'm creating multiple new work endeavors, we just went through a three-month period where our dog required full-time care, so shopping and cooking and prepping food can be really difficult in those situations. Where in the States, I think a lot of people would go to fast food, which doesn't really exist in most places here, or a frozen thing from the grocery store that you pop in the oven that's really processed and full of weird things and salt and weird things.

Where on my street within three blocks of here, I have three grocers who make stuff you can buy that's like roasted chicken or sliced beef or roasted vegetables or this kind of thing, or beans or whatever that they cook there at the place with local ingredients. So yes, you didn't cook it in your kitchen, but it was prepped in a healthy way right here using local ingredients and I can buy that and throw it in the oven and heat it up. And it's really common, those shops are all over the place for working people. They scoop it up in the morning, they heat it up when they get home. So that's a huge difference in food quality, but it is shifting. The hustle culture is getting more prominent.

Christina Bjorndal:

Prevalent, yeah. And one thing I just want to mention about those dinners that you mentioned that you pop in the oven or in the microwave, they're all in plastic containers and so [inaudible 00:20:00].

Michael Roesslein:

They're heated in plastic.

Christina Bjorndal:

Yeah. I don't know if people are aware of that. That's really bad for you.

Michael Roesslein:

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Christina Bjorndal:

Really bad.

Michael Roesslein:

I have a visceral reaction now when I see something get heated in plastic. It wasn't always that way, but once I did enough work with Laura Adler, she beat it through my head that this is super, super, super, super toxic and don't ever heat anything in plastic. And yeah, all of those come in plastic. So I actually bring our own containers now to the places down the street. They weigh my container, they fill it because all that stuff's by weight, and then I just throw that container right in the oven and they're Pyrex glass.

Christina Bjorndal:

That's glass. Okay, good.

Michael Roesslein:

But yeah, that's a whole nother thing. And then those chemicals in the plastics are, Laura calls them obesogens, but they affect your metabolism, your energy, all kinds of hormones. And hormones dictate how we mentally feel.

Christina Bjorndal:

A lot of endocrine disruptors, things that disrupt the hormonal system. And the other thing too is they can block receptors. So it might not be a deficiency problem. Typically mental health with a lot of these conditions, it's looked upon as you're not making enough of neurotransmitter A, B, C, or D, but maybe you are, but it can't get in the cell because you've got a bouncer blocking the door, which is all of these chemicals. And let's face it, it's the air, the food, the water, those cosmetics we're using, it's everywhere. So it's very ubiquitous. And the more that you can support your body from a detox perspective, whether you do saunas or steams or you sweat, sweating is the best way, the best to work on getting things out, doing the hydrotherapy. So anyway, there's just so much to health, but I think the really important message that we want to leave people with is just what I said at the very beginning.

Understand that as an organism, you're meant to be healthy and your body has wisdom and it knows how to do that, but you've got to help it a little bit. It's like if you're going to build a house, you want to use solid bricks, you're not going to build it with grains of sand. So making sure that you're getting these foundational pieces in place, the nutrition that we've been talking about, the other pieces on that foundational level are sleep is another super important one, and exercise. And then looking at this whole stress piece, which is massive. Massive. So we could talk for eight hours on that subject alone, but I remember Michael Paulin saying this, "We've given up in the last 30 years two hours a day to technology and what have we given up? We've given up movement, exercise, we've given up community, connecting with people, and we've given up cooking." So let's get back to that.

Michael Roesslein:

Promote health. Yeah, thank you for sharing all of that. And if people do want to take a deeper dive with you and your work, is there one spot where all of it is, or do you have multiple places to send them? Where can somebody go to find your work, your program, your books, you just hosted a retreat that was really cool. Where should they go?

Christina Bjorndal:

Yeah, my website, so [Dr.ChristinaBjorndal.com](http://Dr.ChristinaBjorndal.com). Easy.

Michael Roesslein:

Okay. We'll throw the link right down below so everybody can find you there. And then I always ask the guests on this show for a little takeaway for somebody, either one or two, maybe three, whatever your little easiest needle moving simple wellness practices for mental health or overall health that you'd like to share with the audience.

Christina Bjorndal:

I know we've been talking a lot about nutrition, but one of the areas that's moved the needle the most for me and my health, and with bipolar disorder especially, is sleep. So I would suggest that you put your phone to bed at 7:00 PM and you do not look at it. And that two hours a day we just mentioned between seven and nine is where you're engaging with your family or you're playing a game with your partner, or if you're single like I was until I was 40, you read that book or you do the journaling or you do the art project or you go to the

gym. So putting the phone away, I think technology's really... Obviously it's got its pluses because we're able to connect now, but it's also got a lot of minuses and it really disrupts...

Michael Roesslein:

There needs to be some boundaries.

Christina Bjorndal:

Boundaries around that for sure. So put your phone to bed would be the first thing, and the second thing would be when you go to bed, take your water, not in a plastic bottle, please, in a glass or stainless steel. And first thing, when your feet hit the ground in the morning, I want you to chug a lug. Like this much.

Michael Roesslein:

So chugging water first thing in the morning, putting the phone to bed two or three hours before. And the phone, a lot of people know about all the blue light, so I have these right here. Luckily, I don't know if you can tell in here, but my light in this office is pretty warm, it's yellow, orange for nighttime, so I don't wear these usually because I've got a tint on my screen and I've got a tinted light. But they make the glasses and then people are like, "Well, I wear glasses when I go on the phone in the evening." And that may be great for the blue light aspect of it, but there's a whole nother aspect to being on the phone that misses the conversation in the functional health space a lot of the time. It's not just the blue light, it's what are you doing on your phone and what are you looking at and what are you reading and what is going into your brain?

And how many of those things trigger the very reactions that you're trying to avoid, either depression or anxiety or swings from one mood to the other, or it causes instability, mental. Most of the stuff that most people are doing on the phone most of the time is not healthy and not helping. Yes, it's good to be informed in what's going on in the world, but do it in a window during the day, not when you're trying to wind down and go to sleep. Because I'll have so many people tell me, "Oh, I can't fall asleep at night so I scroll my phone." And I'm like, "Holy shit, I wouldn't be able to go to sleep either if I just did that."

Christina Bjorndal:

Yeah, I know. It's everyone. You got to remember, there's algorithms, and you're being pushed... It's all being pushed onto you and you are not, I don't like using the word control, but you're being programmed, let's just put it that way. And so this is your brain, and your brain is your most important asset, it's your most important asset. So be really careful what you allow into this because things get in there and there's comparison [inaudible 00:26:40] that can happen with people.

Michael Roesslein:

Yeah. Yeah, a lot.

Christina Bjorndal:

It's just not real, it's not reality. It's such a fake... Anyway, I have this love hate thing because I do love reading your posts-

Michael Roesslein:

Yeah, no, there's great aspects of it.

Christina Bjorndal:

Yeah, inspirational things for sure. But limit-

Michael Roesslein:

Yeah, that's how we do what we do. That's how we've reached as many people as we have, that's how I know you, that's how I know so many incredible people. But there needs to be containers around it, it can't just be all consuming because the mental stimulation of it alone is... How long in human history has it been where the nighttime was the time for bright lights and mental stimulation? That is not where our physiology is. So you talk about hormones and neurotransmitters, you talked about eating the stuff that gives you the things to make them. You can eat all the stuff you want that gives you the things to make them, but if you got bright lights on and you're freaking yourself out at night, it's not going to make them.

Christina Bjorndal:

You're not going to get ahead. And I just think about these kids, there's so many children, so many children their screen time is way too much. Way too much.

Michael Roesslein:

I agree.

Christina Bjorndal:

And we have a big, huge mental health challenge in these 10 to 25-year-old age group and a lot of dopamine challenges.

Michael Roesslein:

Well, more people need your book and your program. You've got a great... You want to tell about the program too real quick before we go?

Christina Bjorndal:

Yeah, sure. Yeah, you bet. Thank you. I have a program that I work live with you and it's a group setting and it's 10 weeks and basically it's deeper dive into the book and all the 10 steps that I talk about. And so I will help you with it, and I coach you through these steps to help you regain your mental health depending on whatever it is that you're struggling with.

Michael Roesslein:

A plus, recommend. Thank you for doing that, thank you for being here and sharing so much. We'll link down below to the podcast episodes we did together because those were really moving and powerful. They were some of my favorites I've ever recorded because we share so much in common, in the struggles, in the background, from the adoption to the depression, to anxiety to suicidal ideations and on all of it. And the similar trajectory too, we both ended up in Gabor's training without knowing each other, I think, and so I think we-

Christina Bjorndal:

I've been stalking you. No.

Michael Roesslein:

Okay. Well, I think we actually met and did one of these after either you had finished it or I had, I don't know. But it wasn't like we talked about it together and said, "Oh, we're both going to do this thing."

Christina Bjorndal:

I think it was around the same time.

Michael Roesslein:

We found our way to it also without calling each other and being like, "Hey, we should do this training." We just had a lot of things. And the podcasts get pretty heavy, so I enjoy about you that you also don't hold things back or sugarcoat things. And there's no shame in where we've been, and I think a lot of people who have struggled with depression and with anxiety and had really hard go, they don't want to talk about it publicly or they don't want to share it or it looks bad, or what are people going to think?

And there was a time where I thought that way, and I didn't lead with, "Oh, I was suicidally depressed and I used to drink a lot and I used to do all these things." I used to hide all that when I got into this work because what are they going to think? They're going to think... And I've found that the more open we are and the more vulnerably we share where we've been, that it has a bigger impact and that there's a trust building thing there. So I applaud your openness with your own struggles, I think it's a real gift to everybody who encounters your work.

Christina Bjorndal:

Thank you. Thank you so much. Yeah, it's been hard to lead with love and it's hard because I didn't love myself. Yeah. We're all just here trying to walk each other down the road a little bit further. And so if I can... Yeah, there's so much not in the book. I am writing another one, and it's funny, people say, "Wow, there's so much in there." And there is, but I think 90% of it's not in there, of what's actually happened.

Michael Roesslein:

[inaudible 00:30:53] really big book to incorporate all of it, so maybe a number of books is the way to go. But I'm looking forward to it, and let's connect again soon.

Christina Bjorndal:

Lots of love to you. Thank you so much.

Michael Roesslein:

You too. Thank you.