

Military OneSource Podcast — Nutritional Wellness in the New Year

Episode transcript

Intro voiceover:

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Bruce Moody:

Welcome to the podcast. I'm Bruce Moody, and let me be the umpteenth person to say Happy New Year to you. I wish you all the best.

What we're going to do in this episode is talk about nutrition and wellness and how you might think about that when you're making plans for 2024 goals that you want to set, that sort of thing. We have with us an expert today. Jenn Claro is a registered dietician. She has been for 14 years. She leads all things nutrition and food over at Joint Base Meyer-Henderson Hall, which is just down the road from the Pentagon, so you know where that is. Anyway, Jenn, welcome to the podcast and Happy New Year.

Jenn Claro:

Thank you so much, Bruce. I'm glad to be here. Glad to contribute, and definitely looking forward to a nice 2024 as well.

Bruce Moody:

Yeah, so we'll get into how we can make that happen from your point of view. Let's get a sense of a little bit about you, your background, and what is it that you do as a registered dietician.

Jenn Claro:

As a dietician, I'm very passionate about helping people work toward their own goals, taking them from where they are to where they want to be and giving them the tools and empowering them to be able to do that. I get the fortunate blessing of working with our military population service members, retirees, their family members. Typically it's within an individual setting where we really get to dig in and customize some individualized approaches, again, to get them individually where they want to be. Most people have a pretty good idea of what's healthy, maybe what's not so healthy. Where I come in is kind of helping them develop an approach that works for them through the nutrition lifestyle changes in a nice realistic way.

Bruce Moody:

As you're working with people, what's your personal approach toward things like nutrition and wellness?

Jenn Claro:

I find that I tend to take more of I guess what would be considered an anti-diet approach. I think most people assume when they talk to a dietician, they're going to be told what they have to stop doing and take all the joy out of the delicious things in life that we like to enjoy. It can be very surprising when I mention to them that I feel like I do the opposite.

Bruce Moody:

We know what a diet is. Diet is, don't eat that anymore. What's an anti-diet?

Jenn Claro:

I would describe the anti-diet approach as flipping the script. The diet industry is very good at telling us what not to do — all the rules and things to avoid or eliminate. Things that then set us up to feel guilty for eating them if they're on the no-no list. I like to do the opposite. I like to talk about what we should be eating, the things we should be collecting and providing our body that nourishes it, that provides fuel. I think it's a lot more fun to focus on getting enough of the good stuff for our bodies while also figuring out how to enjoy those tasty things in life in a realistic way that also, again, keeps individuals moving forward toward their goals.

Bruce Moody:

What is it that you mean by that? When you say basically how to eat, are you talking about ways that people can approach the manner in which they're eating?

Jenn Claro:

Yeah, I think when we think about how we fuel and nourish our body, there are many factors involved. I've noticed that it tends to be almost like an all-or-nothing approach these days where you're either on a diet or you're not and you're eating everything in sight with reckless abandon. I think pulling in that mindful or intuitive eating mindset where it really just allows us to pause, to slow everything down, to step back and actually remember what we're doing. We're fueling and nourishing our bodies and whether that's for actual fuel and nourishment or because we're in a social setting or it's a special occasion, I think hitting that — I describe it as our invisible pause button — we hit that pause button and take a step back and say, "You know what? I'm about to eat this. What's my game plan?" Slow down, be mindful about it, be intentional about it, and enjoy it. Being able to take that moment to think about what does our body need, what does my body need from me right now? Listening to hunger cues, chewing slowly, savoring those moments and those bites. Being mindful, being present with our eating approach.

Bruce Moody:

This is really interesting and I want to spend a little bit more time on this pause button. It gets into the topic of mindful eating and maybe you could give some more examples, things we can think about because there's stress eating, there's eating because you're hungry. But you're talking about basically allowing these thoughts and then pausing and thinking about what to do about them and how that fits into the larger picture. I think that's what you're talking about, making sure that the things that you're about to eat fit into your overall plan and not just what you really feel like noshing on at the very instant moment.

Jenn Claro:

Yeah, I feel like often we're eating on the go or we're eating in a distracted setting, and again, I think the diet industry has us set up to think about it in such a polarized manner where we're either eating healthy or unhealthy. I think there's ways to use mindful eating or kind of that intuitive eating thought process to slow down. Planning ahead obviously can be helpful, but in the moment hit that pause button and say, "Okay, I'm pulling into a fast food restaurant. What's my game plan or what am I about to do and how can I make the most of it?" Whether it's just packing your own lunch for the day and then actually making time for it during the workday where even if the reality that you have to eat at your desk and work through because you're trying to get through something that has to be done, but still finding a way to be mindful at that time.

Bruce Moody:

I think what we're discussing is somebody who is already in the middle of their plan, they've already figured out what to do, and now they're in the middle of the day and they're figuring out how to make it work for them and the pause button is certainly part of that. Let's go back to someone who's just taking those initial steps.

If a person is thinking about maybe they've already made the decision to take steps to achieve their nutrition goals, where do they begin and what are those first actions that they need to be looking at?

Jenn Claro:

A really good first step is to actually take some time to think about what the goals are and then the reasons behind them. I know it's one of those thought processes to think, start with why. Start about what are my goals and what's the reason behind them? What's going to motivate me? Then I think the main first step is gathering resources, putting together a dream team to support those goals, and moving ahead with those goals. Whether it's resources that are things you can read and access online, whether it's a medical care team, working with your primary care team, or even resources that are more hands-on where maybe you are utilizing getting your exercise plan. All of these things — whatever the goals are — more than likely there are some tools that we can add to our toolbox to help us move forward.

I think nutritionally a lot of people ask, “What’s the easiest, the most low-maintenance thing I can do that I can start right now and move forward with?” I always like to point out that most of us can probably stand to work in some more vegetables. I think that’s a really easy place to start if you’re looking to do nothing else or while you’re assembling your resources and putting tools in your toolbox that gets you set up for your goals, just focusing on increasing vegetables. Thinking of those non-starchy vegetables like broccoli, bell peppers, onions, cauliflower, lettuce, tomato — kind of all those veggie veggies. Just do more of them. If you do nothing else but increase those both in amount and frequency, it can create a pretty impressive shift in your overall eating pattern and it’s actionable.

Also, I think paying attention to hydration. I think that’s one thing that we might either be on or off with. Just making sure that you’re paying attention to your water intake and finding the right amount that feels like it works for you without pushing past what feels comfortable. I think two actionables: veggies and hydration and then assembling your team of resources.

Bruce Moody:

Then life happens. You have the plan and it’s an awesome plan and you stick with it and you’re really good, but we all get into those situations — and they’re just too many to number — but you get into situations and a lot of it is stress. How do you manage these stressful situations in a way that keeps you from falling back on unhealthy habits?

Jenn Claro:

I can’t speak enough about the value of a team approach here with the mindset that you’re not in it alone. Yes, life happens, stress happens, but if it’s something that you notice becomes a barrier, you think, “Oh, check out this stressor I wasn’t expecting.” Being able to bring it back to your team, whether it’s working with a dietician, health coach or behavioral health consultant or even family and friend support. Having that team approach to be able to work through those stressors in a healthy way. Stress eating is very common. Having some non-food-based stress relief strategies and outlets can be really helpful, especially for those that know that stress eating is definitely a route they might go during those stressful times. That’s where figuring out some game plans ahead of time when stress feels like it’s... I mean, is it ever absent? But when it feels like it’s under control, having a game plan for those times where it decides to pick up a little bit or those unexpected curve balls that could come along the way.

In my experience working with individuals, I like to have a game plan and then I like to have a backup plan. Having that backup plan to say, “Okay, you’re cruising along, things are moving well, our checkpoints are working. But what happens if you make an unexpected road trip and you’re on the road and you didn’t get a chance to pack the cooler we talked about? You’re going to end up probably cruising through a drive-thru, so what’s the plan for that?”

Some of those tips would be like pre-loading a healthier fast food order in an app for some of our more common fast food locations so that as you’re pulling through the

drive-thru and you smell the deliciousness wafting through the window, you can say, “Nope, you know what? It’s okay. I already have my order loaded. I’m just going to add it from my favorites and just stick it in my order and purchase it.” You’ve already done that thought process before the temptation of the moment presents itself.

Bruce Moody:

Now we’re all set for stress, but again, let’s go back to the beginning when we’re creating this plan. Part of this really includes us looking at ourselves and looking at what we’re capable of doing. For each of us, we’re going to have barriers here and there, whatever they might be, physical limitations that make exercise difficult, maybe smoking. Are there specific resources to help people overcome these types of limitations?

Jenn Claro:

Yeah, of course. I think the depth of resources we have available within the military network is unlike any other. I think the barriers and limitations that impact our health and wellness are unique — I guess to our situation — that different things can come up along the way, too. Approaching our limitations and barriers with a sense of optimization rather than perfection, really focusing on doing what we can do and what our bodies are able to do to the fullest. In the example of physical activity with physical limitations, someone may not be able to go out and do high-intensity, high-impact workouts anymore but they can do walking, or maybe some low-impact or swimming. Then working with, whether it’s physical therapy or some personal training, or even the Armed Forces Wellness Center resources, could help optimize physical activity or the outcomes working around those limitations in a safe and effective way.

Bruce Moody:

In listening to you talk about these various limitations and the work-arounds, of course, it just points to the fact that you work with a lot of people. You work with people every day, you’re helping them to create strategies for achieving their goals. Can you talk about the work that you’ve done with people and examples of the experiences that you have with people who are coming to you with goals?

Jenn Claro:

Yeah. Well, I’ve noticed a common theme that by the time patients come to me, they have often been working on their goals for a while and it often has resulted in some frustration or wondering almost what they’re doing wrong when maybe they just didn’t have the right tools. I like to start fresh with a nice blank canvas and say, “Okay, we’re going to start with this blank canvas and redesign strategies that work,” for them as an individual. I think one common example that comes up is someone is skipping breakfast and they’re working out extra hard in the morning. Whether they’re tracking calories or not — usually that would be a common strategy — to try to force a calorie deficit and work out really hard. Sometimes that doesn’t yield the results people are looking for or the results don’t last once they have any shift from that approach.

In particular, the one example I'm thinking of is we redistributed how this person was fueling their body. They were super active in the morning with a really intense 60-minute workout, but with no fuel in the tank, and then wondering why they were crashing in the afternoon or having the "feed me button" being pressed at some point in the afternoon or evening because there was just an imbalance of fuel. It was working against their ability to optimize their workout results, but also creating that cycle of over-hunger or overeating later in the day. We had them visit the Armed Forces Wellness Center. They had a metabolic test done, gave us an accurate calorie target to aim for that would help support their weight loss goals. I describe it as it gives us a calorie target that tells us they're in a calorie deficit without being in a nutrition deficit or that feeling of starving. With that collaboration, we were able to figure out how to take the calories they should be aiming for and redistribute them to fuel those morning workouts. We had plugged in some workout fuel and breakfast for recovery fuel and just sort of recalibrated their day, and it was a game changer. They felt better all around. They made more progress because they were able to be more consistent because it was realistic, and they got to eat and it just yielded great results for them.

Bruce Moody:

Jenn, I want to continue this conversation from a different perspective and that being money. A lot of people say that you're going to eat healthy, great, but it's expensive. From your point of view, do you have any tips on how people can eat well but on a budget?

Jenn Claro:

Yeah, I definitely have heard that. I think in some ways there's definitely a reality to it, and then I think some things are kind of myth-based too, where we think we can't eat healthy unless we spend a ton of money doing it. That's definitely another conversation. We have to be able to take the plan we're working on and then find ways to make it financially efficient, too. Definitely working with a dietician and even the Armed Forces Wellness Centers that have great classes and health coaching that can help customize as well.

Some of the strategies that come up during our sessions would be actually planning meals and shopping lists. Even shopping online using an app. I know the commissary, they have their CLICK2GO program that has recipes built in and allows you to add the ingredients right to the cart without having to think about it or browse for them yourself. Sometimes people find that using apps shopping online for groceries can help because we're not browsing the aisles and grabbing those impulse purchases. Planning meals and creating shopping lists, whether it is using something like the commissaries CLICK2GO app or some of the other apps that are out there that you can purchase groceries from, that can be definitely helpful to plan ahead.

Using some practical, again, actionable recommendations would be using frozen foods to balance some of the fresh perishable items that might be a little bit more expensive. An example might be fresh veggies. You might choose to buy just enough fresh veggies

to get you through the first few days of the week, then utilize the frozen veggies to help provide veggies for the rest of the week. That way you know you're going to get through the fresh veggies you spent that money on — and they tend to run a little bit more expensive for the fresh — and then you've got the frozen veggies for the rest of the week without seeing too many rotten vegetables wasting away in the produce drawer of the fridge.

Also, plant-based sources of protein tend to cost less than meats. So working those in a few times per week can also help offset some grocery budget money. It doesn't have to be to exclusion. Some of these examples might be using nuts and seeds, beans, edamame, tofu, and it could be replacing a meat with a plant-based protein, or it could be utilizing both to help that meat go a little further. One of the examples I like to give is, let's say you're doing taco night for the family. If you have a pound of ground turkey and you make that into taco meat, that's not going to last as long or go as far, or feed as many portions as if you had ground turkey and then you added a can of black beans to that and made tacos out of that. Now all of a sudden that one pound of ground turkey expands and you're going to get a lot more taco servings out of that. Just something like that can definitely help offset and be budget-friendly.

Bruce Moody:

We've covered a lot of ground. I'm so glad to have you with us today. We've got a bunch of links in the program notes, and I feel like we could just have you back and riff on so many ideas. Just a quick idea I like to tell people is that for those of you who love those bottles of creamy salad dressings, you can totally enjoy taking some yogurt and putting in a squeeze of lemon and some olive oil, a little bit of salt, and then any of your favorite spices, and then just enjoy it at the volumes that you like and it's all good.

Jenn Claro:

Sounds refreshing. Yes, that sounds delicious.

Bruce Moody:

Yeah, it is. No guilt. No guilt. Anyway, we could riff on ideas another time, I'd love to do that. Love to have you back. Just to wrap things up, can you just give an emotional endorsement to people to get them going to make 2024 the year for them? I'll just leave you to that.

Jenn Claro:

Oh, wow. I probably could talk for hours on this. I think it's really looking at what's important to you, what your goals are, and figuring out where you want to go for the year and realizing that it's not always linear. I think we set out with goals and we think that we follow the goals and the checkpoints, and it's going to be a one-way path, but realizing that things come up and giving yourself some grace to realize that more times than not, goal setting and progress and achievement is a process. It's something that we have to approach with that consistency in mind that it's about doing the little things and being consistent with them day in, day out, week to week so that we're doing those

little things and having them add up and yield great results in the end. It's just starting where you are, figuring out where you want to go, and then assemble a team and a game plan to get you there.

Bruce Moody:

Well, Jenn, thank you so much for joining us today.

Jenn Claro:

Yeah, it's my pleasure.

Bruce Moody:

Jenn Claro. She is a dietician at the Andrew Rader U.S. Army Health Clinic, which is at Joint Base Meyer-Henderson Hall, which is just down the road from the Pentagon. Great to have you with us today.

Jenn Claro:

I appreciate it. Thank you.

Bruce Moody:

You're welcome.

Want to remind everybody that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department. We always like to hear from you. We have a link in the program notes. You can send us a question, a comment, maybe an idea for a future episode for 2024. Be sure to subscribe to this podcast wherever you listen to your podcasts because we cover a wide range of topics to help military families navigate military life. I'm Bruce Moody. Thank you for listening. Take care. Bye-bye.