

A PEACEFUL GUT, MIND & BODY

Finding a new you through your gut

Dr Angela Genoni

A peaceful gut, mind & body

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FOREWORD

I studied nutrition back in the early 2000s at University, in the days when obesity was considered purely a calorie excess problem. The solution was, at the time, to restrict calories without much thought to how that restriction impacted the way people perceived their bodies.

Yes, to lose weight we absolutely need to reduce our food intake, but I think we messed it all up in the process. We turned a basic human need with emotions and feelings attached to it into a maths problem. We forgot to help people understand how their body actually works. To give them the love and appreciation for themselves and what their body CAN do instead of what it can't.

We focused on restriction to achieve perfection, and now we have a generation of folks who think badly of themselves every time they look in the mirror. We can't see the wonder in those legs that helped us hike up that mountain last year, the amazement of that stomach that once held babies inside it, or the sun freckles from that relaxing holiday a few weeks ago. We just forgot to stop, appreciate and respect our own bodies.

As a young nutritionist, I was just like everyone else with my views on eating and diets. However, my views started

to change when I did my PhD looking at the impact of longer-term diets on the gut microbiome. I saw some (actually a lot of) people who were really picky about what they ate, to the point where they wouldn't eat out with friends. At the time I only briefly wondered about the healthiness of this "perfection" but in hindsight, it left a lasting impact on me. After my PhD, I worked for a nonprofit organisation that also promoted a very strict diet. Again, the big picture message was always lost in arguing over the fine details. There is more to a diet than just food. It is comfort, it is time with friends, it is relaxation. Whatever it is to you, it is always more than just the actual food. This is also what makes it so tricky when we try to be sensible.

People get very feisty when it comes to "diets"...

We all eat, we all know how food impacts us, so we all have a valid opinion. Social media is full of these opinions. It worked for them (or it appeared to), so it must work for everyone, right? Unfortunately, although our human bodies are super similar, they are also very different at the same time. So, what worked for that influencer might not work for you. Can you prepare the same meals each week as they do? Do you have the same work schedule? Do they have kids to drive around all afternoon like you? There are so many areas where food needs to fit into our lives that it is near on impossible to follow a meal plan or some strict diet without causing you some level of guilt as early as day two or three.

It's your diet, your life, no one else's.

We just need to help you design your food around your life and make it work for you.

I've spent many years studying the complex science of the gut microbiome. I can tell some wonderful things about some of the biochemical pathways that happen in the gut, how we extract bacterial DNA from poop samples and all of the complexities around food, food matrices and food processing. But as I am now older and wiser, I really feel the value for most people is being able to understand all this complex science in a way that is applicable to real life. So, I've taken my Aussie humour, my complex science and my love of being kind and compassionate and put it all together to paint you the big picture, because at the end of the day, that's what really matters. I'm always up for a chat about a scientific paper and perhaps the limitations of the statistics they used, but really, I'm most interested in what that paper means for you and your lifestyle.

This book will give you the guidance to help you appreciate your body for the wonderful things it does for you, to help you understand the power of those little bacterial friends living in your gut and to guide you with small and sustainable changes to get rid of any guilt you might have about going on "another diet". You literally can't fail when you set yourself up for success by starting small.

It is a good idea to digest (throwing puns in already) all of the information here first, then head to the plan in the self-assessment section, where you actually map out the

things that are important to you and your plan for getting yourself there.

This journey then is about a shift in perspective and stacking some small changes together, which might in isolation, seem insignificant, but when combined over two to three months, is suddenly enough to transform your whole life.

In keeping with my views that diets are much more than food, we also delve into the things that can also significantly influence our gut and overall health, such as things like exercise, time in nature and time with friends. Things that those influencers trying to sell you that supplement seem to forget.

Let's start a new generation of people who love and respect their bodies and as a result, find it easy to nurture themselves.

CHAPTER 1

Mirror Mirror on the Wall

You've picked up this book for a reason, right?

You might be having some gut issues. Or maybe you are just sick of feeling confused because you are just not sure what is going on with that bloating? Or you're sick of dieting and trying completely wacky and unsustainable things?

In case you haven't already guessed, I absolutely love what I do. The more I talk to people about the need to shift perspective and focus on the positive and learn about the gut, the more determined I am to talk to more people!

I genuinely want to help you love, respect and nurture your body. And this starts with knowing it a little better. So, some of this book might seem a little bit like high school human biology, but as adults who eat a lot of food every day, this information is kind of important, so as you read this bit, try and appreciate the wonder of it all.

The details of digestion are hugely complex and I still stop and say "wow" often when I delve into new things about how specialised some of our cells are and how they behave in certain circumstances. Although we know much

about the human body, there is also much still to learn. This is a part of why I take the food approach and generally don't recommend supplements (we will get into this later).

Knowing your body a little better is one step, but before we start on this, I want you to think about what you said to yourself the last time you looked in the mirror.

Was it: "oh man, I really need to start dieting again, I'm outta control right now", or "I hate my thighs being so fat" or "why aren't the scales down today, I'm so crap at diets"

OR

"I'm so grateful these arms are strong enough to carry my toddler around all day", or "these legs mean I can walk to work and save the train/fuel money today", or "this tummy had a baby in it only a few months/years ago. Wow"

Think about the feeling you get when you read the first lot of thoughts vs the second.

There is a massive difference in the effect on your mood and the rest of your day from just this one self-narrative. The second celebrates yourself; it encourages you to be kinder to yourself because damn, you are amazing. Whereas the first one almost always puts you in a bad mood before you even get out the door for the morning.

So, what are three things you are grateful that your body CAN do or has done recently?

Write these down and put them on your bathroom mirror or anywhere where you talk down to yourself. You might need to say them repeatedly (saying them out loud is even better) for a few weeks, but slowly and surely, the benefits will start to sink into your subconscious. Then before you know it, you might start thinking, wow... I carried a 20kg two-year-old all day yesterday. How awesome am I?

Sometimes these self-defeating thoughts came from somewhere; they came from someone in our past telling us we were fat, we weren't loved if we didn't fit into that dress or we just didn't get appreciated or loved enough for who we were inside at the time. If you are finding you are replaying these scenarios or memories out in your head too much, it might be worth reminding yourself that most of the time, these comments reflect insecurity in the person saying them. They come from a place where they don't know about nutrition, about how the body works, or about how much more wholesome life is when we don't focus on the superficial. It is almost always saying more about them than it is about you.

You can find your confidence again, and it starts with loving your body properly so that the desire to nurture it comes back.

CHAPTER 2

We Got Diets all Wrong

I'm writing this book around the wrong way on purpose. If you've picked up the book because you've been suffering from gut issues, then thinking about these next two chapters **BEFORE** you focus on your diet, will put you in a much better place to be successful, than focusing on diet alone.

Science tells us that diet is the biggest contributor to gut microbiome composition, but lifestyle and environment are important too, and in fact psychologically, I think they can make or break your diet and overall gut success.

If your mindset is not right or you're doing a diet with anxiety about everything you are eating, then it makes sense that it might not have much impact in terms of fixing your gut. The gut-brain axis knows you're still stressed about everything and keeps things in this stressed-out state of having a difficult gut.

You already know when your gut reacts to stressful situations; this is the gut and the brain talking to one another. So, if we do all this great work on our diet, but are still stressed out, or even worse, we get so anxious about what we are

eating, then, of course, it cancels the benefits of the better diet out anyway. Compared to neighbouring residents with similar diets, Tibetan monks who practise deep meditation, have much greater gut microbiome diversity (a good thing) and lower cholesterol levels (1). Although this was only a small study, it highlights the sheer power of our mind and the control it can have over our total health journey.

Over the past year, I've read a lot of books on the power of thinking, and many of these have been quite transformative for me personally. Although I never started reading these for any gut reason, they've certainly highlighted the power of something science does not fully understand yet.

Challenging your thinking about your thinking might just be one of the most powerful things you do during or after this book. The way you talk to yourself matters.

The way you think about food matters.

The way you think about nourishing yourself matters.

Coming from a place of restricting yourself or feeling guilt for anything food-related is never going to be successful in the long term.

The great dieting experiment of the last couple of decades has been a complete flop. We know that at least one-third of people who went on any sort of diet regained most of the weight they lost within plus more within 5 years of stopping their diet (2). Aside from the health risks of regaining the weight you lost, it doesn't make you feel good, when you did all that work but didn't or weren't able to maintain it, does it?

There are several problems with the way we've done diets in the last two decades:

1. We tell people they aren't good enough as they are and base their progress on superficial outcomes.
2. The restriction that comes with any sort of diet or meal plan, has a very negative impact on our mindset and self-talk.
3. We haven't helped people understand the why behind it all so that they can care about their bodies on the inside.
4. We make too many changes with clients all at once, which is unsustainable once the initial motivation wears off. For some of us, we can sustain the motivation until we've lost a good amount of weight, for others, this might only last a week or two.

Telling yourself you can't eat something because you're dieting, places your mindset squarely in the case of restriction, deprivation or missing out. You might be dieting to lose weight, which further compounds this, because we're only focused on the superficial goal of looking a certain way. So, when we look in the mirror, all we have in our mind are the negative thoughts about how much more we need to lose, how unhappy we are with our body right now or how much do we need to restrict ourselves today, it's mostly negative and completely unhelpful for the long term. Because when we can't stick with this type of unrealistic plan, we get further down on ourselves.

See the negative cycle here?

If you want to break free of the diet industry and actually focus on getting properly healthy, we've got to work on the mindset stuff first. The diet is kind of secondary.

Have a think about why you chose this book. Are you struggling with a gut issue? Are you sick of dieting and saw this might offer something different? Or was it some other reason?

What is your major goal for your health for the next 12 months? Your goal should not have ANYTHING to do with how you look. Focus in on something incredibly positive and empowering, so that when you achieve it, you can look back and go "wow, I am smashing it", this was the year for me!

Your goal might be to learn to run 5km and do it without stopping,

To be able to walk up the stairs at work without puffing,

To get fit enough to go hiking in Peru,

To get strong enough to lift x kg at the gym,

To get strong enough to do a pull-up,

You get the idea here. Do you see how much more positive this is than telling yourself you have to lose something?

If you have a goal and you really want to achieve it, and it is such a positive thing for your life, there is a much better chance you'll get to achieving it – AND sustaining it, than if you wrote something like, "I want to lose 10kg".

So, write down your goal/s that you want to achieve for your health for the coming year. Make them achievable but massively positive.

Having positive goals instead of restrictive or negative ones is also a lot more fun. Diets are more than food, so let's remember that. Some of the longest-living cultures on earth, yes, they have awesome diets, but they also live very traditionally in terms of their family and social structures. They prepare food together, they eat together and some partake in afternoon siestas (3,4). Research often hones in on the diet aspect, but we really can't overlook the reduction in stress that comes from this type of lifestyle.

Western societies are very individualist, we are focused on achieving things for ourselves, and our success is often judged as such. This actually places a lot of stress on us because not only do we feel like we have to achieve things and be kicking goals all the time for our work/career, but we are also expected to cook five-star meals and work out, all while juggling running a house. Sound familiar?

We can't change the society in which we live super easily, (I am trying here, ok?!), but we can change the way we think about it. We can change how we manage it. Being aware of these pressures and knowing they are real, that they are valid, and that they often get in the way of healthy lifestyles is the most important and biggest first step to managing them better in your own household.

Now the next step on this journey is getting you there. We need to give you the confidence to step off the diet wagon and learn to listen to your body again. The goal is to get enough balance back to feel at peace with the why behind what we want to achieve and be confident with our strategy to get there.