

A Healthy Relationship With Food

Valor Voices Podcast Transcript



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John Bouthillette: Hi, I'm John Bouthillette, a lead instructor with the VALOR Program and host for this edition of VALOR Voices podcast.

I'm joined today by Lieutenant Brandon Post with the Provo, Utah, Police Department. Brandon is one of our instructors on the VALOR team and also a subject expert on the topic of physical wellness. Brandon is a certified physical fitness specialist and a member of the Provo Police Fitness Committee and has taught on the topic of fitness, health, and wellness for 15 years.

How are you doing, Brandon?

Brandon Post: Better than I deserve. How are you doing, John?

John: I'm doing good, thank you.

Brandon, today we're going to talk about dieting, a popular topic all across the country. In order to start this discussion, I think we need to ask the simple question, Why do we need to talk about diet?

Brandon: We always lament that we're not as active as we used to be, and that's causing the obesity epidemic. But there's some data actually that suggests people are more active than they used to be, yet we're still getting fatter, I guess you could say. It comes down to diet. If we want to be at a healthy weight and live a healthy lifestyle, diet becomes important.

John: I know that in our past podcasts on the topic of physical wellness, Brandon, I remembered that we talked about some studies out there that compared the general population to law enforcement officers. The sad part, the data, is that law enforcement officers are fatter, weaker, less flexible, and less energetic. I have to ask this big question when I looked at these studies: Why does law enforcement have that problem?

Brandon: This is where we're getting into some of the really interesting body processes. When an officer goes on duty, we have such an emphasis on officer safety, which we need to have. I mean, we're one of the only occupations where being murdered is an occupational hazard. But when we go on duty, we shift into vigilance, and that's a chemical process. The body releases hormones called epinephrine and cortisol into the system. To talk about the dieting, what becomes important is the cortisol that gets released.

Now, in the moment, if you're going on a DV, or you're going to be in a fight or something like that, your body senses that and releases cortisol into the system. It's a good thing because it's going to release fat and sugar into the bloodstream, and you're going to get the biggest bang for buck in energy from fat and sugar. You need that in any kind of confrontation, obviously. But the problem is, is we're in this vigilance mode for an entire shift, and that's anywhere from 8 to 12 hours, or if you're working a double, even longer, obviously.

We have this constant flow of cortisol into our system, and this roller coaster of massive dumps of cortisol, then going off shift and the bottom of the roller coaster, and then back on shift with a massive dump of cortisol. Doing that year after year just wrecks the body. Because cortisol, it signals the body, your blood sugar's going to go up. Obviously, if you're releasing fat and sugar into your system, you're going to have high blood sugar. It makes your appetite go up, a real negative. It causes muscle to break down.

We're going to talk about metabolism later, but the amount of muscle you carry on your frame, there's a direct relationship between how much muscle you have and your metabolic rate, and we lose muscle, ergo, lose strength and metabolism rates by those cortisol levels.

Then the last is, cortisol signals the body on a cellular level to store as much fat as possible. It's like, for example, if a bear is going to go hibernate, the bear will actually have massive amounts of cortisol released into its system as a signal of part of that need to hibernate.

Meaning, let's say it's a lean year and the bear can't eat a lot of extra to prepare for hibernation; he could eat the exact same amount that he was eating before, yet he's going to put on significantly higher amounts of fat because of the levels of cortisol in his system. And this cortisol is what we have flowing through us, through our entire shifts, every shift we work.

John: Cortisol is not our friend.

Brandon Post: Short-term, yes. Long-term, absolutely not.

John: Okay, great clarification.

Now listen, I will concede, based on the studies, that some of us, and underline some of us, may have some issues with weight or may be overweight. But to be quite honest, Brandon, I hear that a lot of diets just don't work. What do you have to say about that?

Brandon: Well, that's the thing. It's kind of what is the goal of the diet? If the goal of the diet is to lose weight, then actually we don't have a weight-loss problem. We're able to lose weight on these diets, the average person, and even as law enforcement.

The problem is, is sustained weight loss. There's data on this that's just fascinating because it shows that somebody could go on a diet, they'll lose X number of pounds of fat, and within one year, 70 percent of the people who've been on a diet will have regained all of that weight.

If you extend it out to two years, that number jumps to 85 percent. If you extend it out three years, it's 95 percent—meaning that every 20 people who go on a diet, one manages to lose weight and keep it off.

But then even worse, if you continue to monitor that as these people put the fat back on that they dieted off, somewhere between a third and two-thirds of those people will actually gain more fat than when they started the diet in the first place.

John: Interesting. When we're talking about diets not working, we're actually talking about why diets don't work for specific people, so can we get into that? Why doesn't every diet work for every person? Why don't diets work like that?

Brandon: Well, I got to apologize—we're going to just go into a few numbers here to try and talk about this, but it just basically breaks down to calories in, versus calories out. It's simple math, in that if you want to lose weight you have to create a caloric deficit—just basically meaning that you have to burn more calories than you consume.

Just do an example to make it easy. Let's say we've got somebody—this person's overweight—they want to go on a diet and lose body fat, and currently they're consuming, on average, about 3,000 calories a day.

Let's say they're not gaining, they're not losing weight, they're sustaining at 3,000 but they don't like where they're at. They decide they want to lose weight. The average person will do a calorie cut. This person cuts their calories from 3,000 to 2,000, so now they've created a daily caloric deficit of 1,000 calories.

Now, in each pound of fat, there's 3,500 calories. If it's just simple math, this person's got a caloric deficit of 1,000 calories every day, so he should be losing about a pound of fat every three and a half days. It's just simple math.

John: Sounds simple.

Brandon: Yeah, but unfortunately it doesn't work that way. Our body is an amazing robust organism, and it's got all these built-in defense mechanisms. Just like a simple analogy, you're driving a little gas guzzler. Well, if you stop putting gas into it, it's just going to stop running.

Well, our bodies are different. If we've got our metabolism up really high, meaning we can eat a lot of calories and not gain or lose fat, we can take in a lot and it takes a lot of calories to keep us going. But if we stop putting fuel in our bodies, or we stop eating, we're restricting calories and the body actually has the ability to become really efficient with the calories that it's burning. It's called metabolic adaptation. It's a defense mechanism.

The body will interpret that big cut in calories as a controlled form of starvation and it tries to protect itself, so the metabolism will actually adjust from that 3,000 that it was at to make 2,000 the new norm.

So you'll lose weight, you do a drastic cut like that, you will lose weight for a time. However, that time is finite, usually only a matter of weeks, and then metabolic adaptation occurs and you're no longer losing weight. You're at that 2,000 calories, and that is your new norm.

John: Your body is going to adjust.

Brandon: Yes, it does.

Then the body adjusts, now you're down to 2,000 calories and you're not losing weight anymore. You got two options and neither of them are great.

You can either continue to cut calories and increase cardiovascular exercise in an attempt to continue to lose weight, or the average person that doesn't understand how metabolism works, you just get frustrated. You're not losing any more weight, you're hungry because you're not eating as much as you used to, and you get frustrated and you go off the diet and you go back to your 3,000 calories.

Well the problem is, before you could eat 3,000 calories and not gain any weight, but now your metabolism's adjusted to that 2,000 calories, and you go back to the 3,000, simple math. What do you think happens there?

John: Oh yeah, it goes the wrong way, and the rubber band breaks. Bounces back the other way, yep.

Brandon: Absolutely. Rapid fat gain. Then the yo-yo-ing comes in, where you gain the fat back rapidly, and you get frustrated and you're like, "Okay, I'm going to try again. I'll do better this time, and I'm going to go on my diet. I'm going to cut

these calories." You cut the calories again, metabolic adaptation occurs again, and it's a yo-yo and it repeats the process.

The problem exacerbates here, though, because the body is . . . It's just like if you're lifting weights or you're sprinting a mile, it hurts a lot, your body can't do it; but it becomes more efficient at doing it the more you make it do it. The body will adapt.

Well, it's the same thing on this end. The more you do this yo-yo dieting, the more you do this extreme cutting, the body adapts to it and it's no longer going to lose weight as fast as it did because it's used to the process, and the metabolic adaptation occurs more quickly because the body's used to doing this. It's becoming more adaptive to what you're doing to it.

John: The yo-yo, it creates a problem.

Brandon: Yes, absolutely.

John: Then all of a sudden, that creates a problem with the diet in general, because you have negative results.

Brandon: Oh yeah. You think of diet in a very negative way. It creates a very negative relationship with food, because now we begin to associate food with guilt or negativity rather than food as fuel, and, as we all know, could be quite enjoyable at times.

John: You have to fuel the body—that's the bottom line.

Brandon: Absolutely.

John: That being said, can you give me some ideas what's the right way to diet?

Brandon: We want to encourage a positive relationship with food and diet, first off, and to think of diet not as this gimmick that's just going to be a resolution to get us quickly to whatever weight we want to be, but a diet as this is how I consume, this is my lifestyle.

Start small. The biggest mistake we make with anything fitness related is we do too much, too soon. Small incremental changes that become habits, that's the result of real fitness over time. But in the beginning, just start simple. Just cut things like high-calorie soda, energy drinks out of the diet; substitute those with water. Try to increase lean foods like chicken, turkey and green vegetables. They're going to be very dense in nutrition but not very dense in calories.

Eat less of really high-calorie foods. You don't have to go cold turkey, but just eat less of high-calorie foods like burgers, shakes, things like that. Which, just for an example, I'm not going to say which chain it is, but I've got a burger chain here close by that I love. I love their bacon cheeseburger. But I know if I go and I

get the bacon cheeseburger with a regular fries and a shake, I'm pounding almost 2,900 calories in that meal; that's significant.

John: That's a diet killer.

Brandon: Yes. You're not exercising 2,900 calories off anytime soon.

John: No.

Brandon: But if I change that out and go with my regular dinner, which is a chicken breast, a cup of white rice, and a cup of green beans, that's like 600–700 calories. I mean, there's a chasm between the two of those. And even though it's only 600 or 700 calories, I'm getting far better nutrients than I am from the burger, shake, and fries.

John: Interesting, because I know that we've talked about, and a lot of times I've heard it in your class, you encourage that positive relationship with food. But what you're talking is about having a positive relationship with good food. So it's not making friends with the bacon cheeseburger, it's finding the adaptation that works best for you, correct?

Brandon: Correct. Then, you know what? A bacon cheeseburger once in a while, that's not a terrible thing. It's not going to kill you, it's not going to ruin all the goals you have. But when I go to that place and grab the bacon cheeseburger, I'm not doing the fries or the shake. Even if I'm going to be real extreme and I will do the shake, my wife and I will order a small shake and we'll share it so we can get the taste. But 2,900 calories in one sitting, that's just too much.

John: It's way too much. Also, and we talked about this before, dieting is good, but we can enhance that diet with cardiovascular and strength-training exercise, correct?

Brandon: Absolutely, absolutely. And then like anything, with any changes you're making in your life, you need to ask yourself, Can I sustain this lifestyle? And if the answer is “no,” whatever you're on, it's going to fail. It's got to be something that you feel good about, that you can sustain.

John: So not a temporary fix, a long-term fix.

Brandon: Correct.

John: Being healthy, even outside of work in our law enforcement professions, but being healthy at home as well, correct?

Brandon: Oh, yes. Yes.

John: I think that's a big answer to what we're trying to discuss and trying to get across to the people listening today, that it is kind of a commitment. It's not a

temporary fix. In order to gain the system, you have to do some life changes, positive life changes and that has that effect on your entire career.

Brandon: Absolutely, it has a huge impact on your quality of life, your mood and longevity. I don't know about you, but I plan on draining the Utah retirement system dry for every penny I can, for as long as I can.

John: That is a noble cause, Brandon. I understand that.

Brandon, that kind of concludes our discussion today about diet. I also remind everybody, don't forget to visit the VALOR website for additional information about this topic as well.

That's it for today. I appreciate everybody who was listening and look forward to having another podcast with Brandon in the future. Have a good day, Brandon.

Brandon: Thank you.

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