



Essential Alchemy

The Ancient Art of Healing Naturally

Season 1, Episode 26: Parasympathetic State and Environmental Toxins with Joseph Pizzorno, ND

Jodi Cohen: Hi, I'm Jodi Cohen. And I'm super excited to welcome one of my mentors and most favorite individuals, Dr. Joseph Pizzorno. He is a naturopathic physician, educator, researcher, founding president of Bastyr University. He's also the author of several books, including my personal favorite, I think it's the best book on detox that I've ever read, *The Toxic Solution*. And I'm just grateful that you're here to talk about the parasympathetic state and toxins.

So, just kicking it off, can you talk a little bit about how the parasympathetic state puts your body in the place where it can detoxify?

Dr. Pizzorno: Great question. Thank you for the invitation. As you mentioned, I'm a naturopathic doctor. And so, I have this foundational belief that the body has tremendous ability to heal it if we just give it a chance. And a big part of the healing is not only the chemistry of what goes on in the body, but also there is regulatory balancing and timing kinds of things that happen. And so, you need a balance. You need to have that sympathetic system because that plays a big role. We have to have the parasympathetic system as well. Because it plays a big role with the system as well. Because it plays a big role as they play together. And as you all know, it is a process of working and synchronization. So, when we have overstimulation with one system, you have problems typically with the other system.

But there is another part, and that is as you poison the neurological system, you impair its ability to balance and communicate with each other. And while sometimes you may balance the sympathetic more or you may balance the parasympathetic more, the bottom line is if you poison the neurological system, all the balance goes away.

Jodi Cohen: I love that. I want to really land on that. So, what you're saying is that toxins can dysregulate your nervous system and keep you stuck in sympathetic?

Dr. Pizzorno: Yes.

Jodi Cohen: Brilliant.



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Dr. Pizzorno: Now, here's another part about that, everybody knows about the circadian rhythm. And the circadian rhythm is in general, based on our senses, what's going on the world around us. I was asked to write a lecture last year on environmental toxins and circadian rhythm. So, I said, "Well, that's actually pretty interesting." So, I started diving into the research. And realized that we have a circadian rhythm not just the whole body when you are awake and asleep. But every organ of the body has its own circadian rhythm. Every cell in the body has its own circadian rhythm.

So, what's happening is the body is constantly sensing the outside environment to decide, "Oh, well, now we are in the springtime and [inaudible] coming, let's get those inside for us and the fruit." Or in the fall, when now we have to restart storing things. Because amount of sun, less fruit available. Same with detoxification. "I'm smelling something in the environment that is unhealthy for me." Well, I pretty get away from that. I better rev up the detox and such.

So, it turns out there's something called the arrow receptors. And the arrow receptors were first thought to be the centers for exposure to environmental toxins that then tells the body to rev up the detox enzymes. We now realize that those same sensors regulate all these circadian rhythms. So, it went from sensing toxins to the rhythms of the body.

Now, here's a big factor. So, these things are like the nice smell of flowers, which we know that fruit is on its way or a spore of saber tooth tiger. Of course, humans weren't around were saber tooth tigers are, but we get the idea. Something dangerous out there.

Now, we put into our environment all this noise. So, now we're talking to you, you can't hear me right because of this? You couldn't hear me because of all the noise. We've put all this noise in and was messing up our sensory systems by poisoning the sensors in our neurological systems.

So, now we have all these metals and chemicals in the environment that are causing not just direct damage because they poisoned enzymes and damaged tissues, but they poisoned the neurological system. So, now all this synchronization and balance is all being lost.

Jodi Cohen: Oh, my gosh. You say it so beautifully and I love the way you connect the dots. You're totally right. So, it's not just that the toxins are impeding our organs of detoxification. But they're throwing off our cell membranes. Like endocrine disrupting hormones and our sleep cycles. This is amazing. Can you elaborate on that?



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Dr. Pizzorno: Well, okay. So, I was just asked to give a lecture with neurodegeneration. I said, I want to call it neuro-regeneration. I was actually supposed to lecture in Moscow. I was supposed to be actually be in the air right now, flying to Moscow to give that lecture.

So, as you might expect, instead, they asked me to give it online. I just finished dictating it online. So, I was looking at what causes neuro-degeneration so that we get the neuroregeneration and almost all is due to environmental toxins. So, with these environmental toxins are doing, I can read you right here. I will just pull the slide. So, the mechanism by which there is damage. First off, it causes microglia over-activation. Why is that important?

Jodi Cohen: Right. The glial cells are the immune cells of the brain.

Dr. Pizzorno: Exactly, the immune cells of the brain. So, they do their job. Their job is, when an infection comes along, the virus gets into the brain, kill that virus. Or the cells in the brain degenerate to remove the damaged cells and bring new ones in. Well, people don't realize that we regenerate one percent of our brain every year. So, the problem with the microglia overactivation is that there's always some collateral damage. So, yeah, kills off the virus. But it releases all these enzymes, oxidative substances, and such to kill of that invading organism. Well, it's going to damage the normal tissues as well. Not much, but it's better than being overrun with infection. So, when you are over-activated, you are causing a lot more damage to the cells, okay? And it's indiscriminate. It kills cells all over the brain.

So, then we have mitochondrial dysfunction, excess information, oxidative stress, misfolded proteins. All these things are aggravated by environmental toxins, by stress, and by lack of sleep. So, here's what is critical. So, when you are sleeping, it's really when you get the parasympathetic support. That then activates the cytochrome P450, the detox enzymes in the brain to break down toxins in the brain. So, when we don't sleep, let the parasympathetic system a chance to function, the detox enzymes don't work at as well. And now you are more susceptible to damage.

Jodi Cohen: That's amazing. And the other thing that I was thinking though when you were talking about this. People don't realize, they think of the immune system as like viruses and bacteria. But toxins also trigger the immune system, which then triggers inflammation. Can you speak to that a little bit?



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Dr. Pizzorno: Yes. So, when we look at the microglia, what are the things that activate it? And let me bring up some of the things that activate it. So, microglia activation, methyl mercury, organophosphate pesticides, polychlorinated biphenyls, phthalate, polytetrafluoroethylene chemicals. What are those things? Non-stick coatings.

Jodi Cohen: Like with spray it on furniture and on airlines? Flame retardants?

Dr. Pizzorno: Yup. Arsenic, cadmium, DDT, lead, mercury, organochlorine pesticides, particulate matter, certainly vehicle exhaust, and solvents. So, we have all these common exposures, constant over rewing microglia which causes damage to the brain.

Jodi Cohen: Wow. The other thing that I love that you really connect so many dots in this book. You really talk about how when detoxification is impaired, it affects all these downstream organs. Like I remember you saying diabetes is actually related to toxicity. And I was wondering if you could speak to that a little bit.

Dr. Pizzorno: Okay. Good one. So, as you know, I've been in medicine for literally half a century. I've been at this for a long time. First, as a researcher. Then as student. And then a practitioner, founder of Bastyr, and now writing several books and six textbooks for doctors. So, I've had a long time looking at these various challenges. And I'm going to kind of go off on a little bit of a tangent here. So, excuse me. But what I'm seeing is that the body has an ability to function. But when we put in toxins, we poison the enzyme system so it can't function properly. So, the more the person has been exposed to toxins, the more the enzymes don't function properly.

And if those enzymes don't function properly, a couple of things happen. Number one is we start damaging the DNA. So, as we get older the DNA becomes more damaged. And then, also our ability to adapt to the toxins by parallel pathways. So, we think about biochemistry as one pathway that kind of one pathway does everything. But in reality, they typically have parallel pathways. So, if that one pathway is not working very well, the body uses the other pathways. It may not be as good, but it may use the other pathways. Well, as we become more and more damaged, our ability to use the parallel pathways become more limited and then we start seeing disease.

And here's the big factor. People don't see the effects of environmental toxins until they get older, until there's enough damage. So, going back to our study, diabetes. When I started this 50 years ago, diabetes affected less than one percent of the population. Now, not only just 10 percent of the population have diabetes, one third population is predicted to get diabetes.



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Dr. Pizzorno: So, what changed? So, first thing I thought was, obviously, consuming way too much sugar. Everybody knows that sugar is bad for you. When you look at the research on sugar consumption and diabetes, there is no correlation. I'm not saying that sugar is good for you. But there is no correlation. So, something else is going on.

You look at obesity, a powerful correlation with obesity. If you look at a woman who is morbidly obese, she has an 85 times high risk of getting diabetes. As a matter of fact, probably already has diabetes, just hasn't been diagnosed. And for men, who are morbidly obese, 45 times increased risk. So, they probably had diabetes, just were not diagnosed.

Okay, so let's ignore the morbidly obese and just look at the obese people, 10, 20 times more risk of diabetes. The strongest conventional risk factor for diabetes is obesity. Now, let's look at those obese people and compare those with the top 20 percent of biological environmental toxins with those with the bottom 20 percent biological environment toxins. The ones with the bottom 20 percent of biological toxin load, don't have increased risk for diabetes. They say, again, everybody knows, the strongest risk factor for diabetes is obesity. If that fat is not full of toxins, you don't get increased diabetes.

Jodi Cohen: Don't we kind of form fat to protect our organs and the rest of our body from toxins? Like when we can't detoxify?

Dr. Pizzorno: That's an interesting hypothesis. And some people have indeed hypothesized that one reason why people get more fat when they have higher levels of toxins is the bodies efforts to dilute the toxins from the most damaging. So, researchers are actually calling these toxins diabetigans and obesitigans. Because they induce obesity and they induce diabetes.

Jodi Cohen: That is amazing. It's an amazing correlation. And also, I mean, one thing that I really love about your book and what I've kind of see toxins as activating the immune system and then activating systemic inflammation. I have noticed that when I can help people detoxify and move the toxins out of their body, that seems to be the cure all. The parasympathetic state is part of it. But can you talk about how to get people healthy? Where do you start? And what have you found to be the most successful with your patient population?



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Dr. Pizzorno: Great, and thanks for asking that question. That's why I wrote that book, *The Toxin Solution*. And by the way, I also wrote a book for doctors called, *Clinical Environmental Medicine*. Where I and one of my colleagues put that much more technical version of *The Toxin Solution*. So, I teach people in, *The Toxin Solution*, number one, don't go onto a detox program until your body is ready to get rid of toxins. Because a lot of detox programs, cause your tissues to release the toxins through your organs of elimination, which the naturopaths call the emunctories. The organs of elimination aren't functioning properly, you can make yourself sicker.

Jodi Cohen: I'm hailing to you. That's exactly. Yes, huge.

Dr. Pizzorno: Okay. So, I tell people, first of all, there's no point going to a detox program until you stop letting toxins in your body. So, I say to people, here is a two week period in which we really focus on decreasing these toxins coming into your body. Now, when we think about toxins, there is kind of two classes. Not metals versus chemicals. But rather persistent versus nonpersistent. So, non-persistent means that where the chemical is being exposed to or metal, we were exposed to something like that or similar as you evolve as a species. Therefore, we have good process if we get rid of them. So, we get rid of these toxins, measured in hours or days. So, stop exposure, they go away, no big deal.

Then we have the persistent toxins. That means they are typically manmade molecules, typically halogenated molecules, where we put chlorine, fluorine, or iodine onto a molecule to make it have certain characteristics, like the nonstick or kill insects, the neurological system, what do they want to do. It makes them almost impossible to detoxify. Because humans have trouble removing halogens. These are chlorine, fluorine, bromine, and things like that. We have a lot of trouble removing those. You can't break down a compound with the halogens. They are very hard to get rid of.

So, there's a two-week period of time, everybody will feel better because they've decreased their exposure to the non-persistent and things start improving right away. It's going to take a long time to get rid of these persistent toxins because even in normal circumstances, it takes weeks to years to get them out of the body. Like PCBs, polychlorinated bisphenol. Half-lives of two to 25 years.

Jodi Cohen: And metals?



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Dr. Pizzorno: So, metals, arsenic, we get rid of quick, two to four days. Mercury is a lot slower, like two to three months. Lead, months to years.

Jodi Cohen: And aluminum?

Dr. Pizzorno: Aluminum, pretty quick. Cadmium really bad. Once it gets into the kidneys it sticks there. Half life is 16 years. So, you don't want any toxins. But you really have to avoid the persistent toxins because, once again, you can't get rid of them.

So, two weeks to avoid them and people will start feeling better. They spent two weeks cleaning up the gut. People have really toxic gut. Because too much of the wrong bacteria in the gut, because of antibiotics, things of this nature and, diet, which promotes growth of unhealthy bacteria.

Jodi Cohen: And cleaning up the gut, that way the toxins, you know, they go from the cell to the lymph to the blood to the liver to the gallbladder to the gut. And if the gut isn't clean, then they get reabsorbed.

Dr. Pizzorno: Yes. Very well said. We have a lot of bacteria in the gut. And the healthy bacteria produce good kinds of molecules that we like, B vitamins. Whereas the bad bacteria produce all these toxic chemicals like [inaudible]. They are also known as cadaverine and putrescine. So, all these chemicals being produced in the gut. The blood goes from the gut directly to the liver before it goes into circulation. Because there is so much garbage and stuff come from your gut.

Jodi Cohen: Right, right. So, if you don't eliminate the toxins, they circulate back to the liver. And the liver has even more work to do.

Dr. Pizzorno: Right. Keep the liver with toxins from the gut that are not necessary. So, let's clean up the gut. Now, we stop overloading the liver. Now, let's clean up the liver. We spend two weeks cleaning up the liver. And then, we spend two weeks cleaning up the kidneys. Because now, not only do we have a toxic gut, now we have an overloaded liver, we also have damaged kidneys now. We are seeing people having kidney failure. We didn't see this 50 years ago. Now, all this kidney failure happening. So, you have to clean all these things up. Now, our order of eliminations are all functioning properly, we can now go into detox.



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Jodi Cohen: Right and I think people don't realize, like going to the bathroom regularly, having low back pain. They don't even know that certain things are kidney symptoms. They just think they are getting old or liver symptoms. Can you speak a little bit to how they would know? Like, "Oh gosh, maybe my kidneys need some more support. My liver needs more support."

Dr. Pizzorno: One of the challenges with the failing of our detox systems is that early on there are no symptoms. You might feel as, "Oh, I'm not as energetic as I used to be. But you know, I'm growing old, that is normal. Oh, I'm getting more infections now. Oh, my kids are going to school."

Jodi Cohen: My wounds aren't healing quickly. I have varicose veins.

Dr. Pizzorno: Right, right. So, a lot of things people accept as normal signs of aging are in reality progressive damage to the body, much of which is unnecessary. I'm really fortunate, you saw the story in my book. I'm really fortunate to have grown up where I knew my great-grandfather. So, we had a picture of four generations of my family. My great-grandfather, grandfather, father, myself. And I got to watch what happened to my family over time. And it gave me kind of, some people may think, a skewed perspective. But I think it's a real perspective.

My great-grandfather lived to age 95. He had no apparent disease. He never saw a doctor in his life. At age 95, he said to the family at one of our get togethers, you know, Italian Catholics, tons and tons of cousins. When he died, I think he had 27 great-grandchildren, something like that. It was a huge number.

Jodi Cohen: Wow.

Dr. Pizzorno: Anyway, one year after he outlived his wife by five years, he said to the family at one of our get togethers he said, "You know, I've had a really good life. I think I'm done. I just want to say bye to everybody." So, he just went to bed. And a week later he was dead.

Jodi Cohen: My grandfather died at 96 in a very similar fashion. The only thing that went was his eyesight. And he gardened every day. He did yoga. Same thing. I remember Willard Scott every day, there was someone else that turned 100. You don't really see that anymore.



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Dr. Pizzorno: No. Not without a lot of disease. So, he had no disease. He lived independently. Nobody was taking care of him. He wasn't in a nursing home. You know, they might say, well maybe he was having a little depression or dementia because he was old. I'm a bright guy and at age 10, I used to play the Battalion Strategy Card game. And he beat me all the time because his brain was working so well. It's like, that is the way to do it. Your body works as well as it should until the very end. And then, you are done. That's how I want to go.

So, we now accept progressive disease as normal. While it is normal, it's not necessary. So, my great-grandfather lived with no disease whatsoever. But as my grandfather and especially my dad adopted the unhealthy American lifestyle. They got more disease. They didn't live as long. And later in life, they had to be taken care of by other people.

My dear dad, whom I love a lot, by 83 was having mental dysfunction. And by 88 when he died had pretty significant dementia. He is the first person of every one of my forbearers, to actually show mental deterioration as he got older.

Jodi Cohen: Right. And in fairness to the listeners, I feel like there are a lot of people who think they are doing everything right. They are eating a super healthy diet. And they just don't even realize that the toxins that are kind of in their environment. And so, detoxification has become- I take binders every night before I go to bed. I'm constantly proactively detoxifying because I know if I don't, it's going to kind of build and overwhelm me.

Dr. Pizzorno: Yes, yes. A lot of the disease associated with toxins, don't show up until people are about 45 to 50. And when do we start seeing disease in people? Around 45 to 50.

Jodi Cohen: Right. And they just label it as old age. So, what you're basically saying is kind of like the iceberg builds up before you ever see it above the surface. All these young, healthy children don't realize that they're building toxins that are accumulating in their system until their system can't handle it anymore.

Dr. Pizzorno: Yes. And remember, we're seeing now diseases of old age, chronic diseases showing up in children. What's going wrong? I mean, I'm starting to think our society is breaking down into two categories of people. Those who believe everything is fine, normal to get disease. And even though I'm eating terrible foods and not taking care of my lifestyle. Go to the doctor and the doctor gives me a drug. Not realizing that all the drug is doing is turning off the symptoms of the person's body breaking. It doesn't really fix anything.



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Dr. Pizzorno: Versus those who are saying, "You know, my health is in my hands. Am I going to put good nutrients in my body and avoid toxins? Or am I going to go the other way and let myself break down?" So, more people are saying, "I'm going to take care of myself."

Jodi Cohen: Yes.

Dr. Pizzorno: People say, "It's in my family. I'm genetically bred to get disease." Only 15 percent of disease is due to genetics. And even that 15 percent, we now know so much about biochemistry. You can mitigate some of that too with appropriate nutritional therapy.

Jodi Cohen: Right. And I want to go back to something you said in the beginning that a lot of these toxins are turning off our ability to access the parasympathetic state. But if we can find ways to override it, like gargling, essential oils, yoga, deep breathing, all of these things that are turning on the parasympathetic state, circadian rhythms, making sure we're getting good sleep, it's almost like our autonomic nervous system is things that go on autonomically without us thinking about it. But now, we need to be much more conscious and kind of make sure we are steering the ship in the right direction.

Dr. Pizzorno: Yes, yes. Don't depend on people or forces outside yourself for your health. It has to be in your own hands, every choice you make.

Jodi Cohen: I mean, you are sharp as a tack. What are some of your personal daily rituals that you do to support detoxification and keep yourself healthy?

Dr. Pizzorno: Well, thank you. That's a bigger point. And my wife and I become really, really extreme about this. And I think that we benefit from it. So, I'll go through and kind of hit the high points. Not everything, but the high points. So, number one is we do not buy food unless it's organically grown. And I'd say we're probably about 90 percent organic. Not all the way because some things still aren't available and we're not willing to give them up. But we are 90 percent organic.

We're now growing as much of our own food as we can. So, I have a garden with a dozen blueberries, three apple trees, two cherry trees, two plum trees, five raspberries. I mean, I can go on and on and on. Vegetables and things like that. So, we are growing as much of our own food as we can. Number one is food.



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Dr. Pizzorno: Number two is the water supply. So, in our house, we have a carbon block filter with a precipitator on the line coming from the outside into our house. So, all water in our house, whether it is shower, whether it's in the kitchen sinks, it's all been filtered, a really important factor.

The second thing we have done is, we have forced air heating. So, we put into a very sophisticated filter. I recommend at least a MERV 8 filter. That's the rating for the filter. We have a MERV 16 filter. What means is that on every pass through a filter, 99 percent of all the garbage is removed on one pass. So, by the time it has gone through several passes, we've cleaned up our air supply quite dramatically. We have someone come in to help with house cleaning every couple of weeks and even she has noted that we have less dust just because we are cleaning up so much.

The next thing we do is in our kitchen, there is no longer any plastic storage whatsoever. It is all glass storage. There are no nonstick pans. Yes, when you cook your food, it sticks more.

Jodi Cohen: Just so people know, what kind of pan do you get? What do you recommend?

Dr. Pizzorno: We tend to prefer the ones that are stainless steel but have either a copper bottom on the bottom or two layers of stainless steel, something that conducts the heat better. The stainless steel does not conduct heat very well compared to copper or aluminum. But pans get dirty, you have to clean them more. You have to let them soak, okay? So, no plastic containers. No non-stick or almost no non-stick.

And then, my wife also makes up a cleaning solution. So, we don't bring any of these synthetic cleaning solutions. She just gets a quarter of water, puts in a pint of white vinegar, and then a few drops of essential oil. She likes lavender, especially for cleaning.

Jodi Cohen: That's what I use too. I like lemon.

Dr. Pizzorno: Okay, great. That works well. And I guess the final thing is our health and beauty aids. So, we get healthy and beauty aids that don't have phthalates in them, don't have lead in them, don't have all these things that poison our bodies.



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Jodi Cohen: Right, right. Because we know some essential oils, things that we put on our skin gets into our system in 20 minutes. And so, that can be good things that we want to get in. And some toxins that we don't.

Dr. Pizzorno: Yes. So, those are ways to try to avoid as much as possible. And then, we do everything we can to facilitate our body's ability to detoxify. So, we take a couple of supplements for that purpose. Once in Acetylcysteine or NAC for short. That increases the production of glutathione. That plays a huge role in detoxification. We also take dietary fiber supplements. Even though we are primarily vegetarian, we eat fish occasionally. We have not had meat for 50 years. We try to get as much fiber as possible. And we try to sauna regularly. I recommend people sauna at least once a week. I'm not good about that as I would like to. But you just need to sweat. It doesn't matter, just sweat.

Jodi Cohen: Because your skin is your biggest organ and if you can push toxins out through your skin, it lightens the load on the kidneys on the liver.

Dr. Pizzorno: Absolutely. Not only does the sweating get rid of toxins. But it's amazing, there are many toxins that go out through the skin that don't show up in the blood or urine. Because the body has so much trouble getting rid of just sequesters them down out of the way to keep them from causing too much damage. But when you're sweating, there is an open-mechanism to get rid of them.

Jodi Cohen: I've never heard that before. That's great.

Dr. Pizzorno: Yeah. Look at the research to Stephen Jenius of Edmonton, Alberta. Very smart guy. So, he takes some people, measures the levels of toxins in the blood, levels of toxins in the urine, and sweats them. Collects the sweat and sees what is in it. He finds all this stuff in the sweat which is not in the blood or urine. It is fascinating.

Jodi Cohen: And for people that are listening, how often? So, you go in the sauna at least once a week, 20 minutes, longer?

Dr. Pizzorno: You want to be heavily sweating for at least 20 minutes. The optimal window is between 20 to 40 minutes.

Jodi Cohen: Okay.



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Dr. Pizzorno: And there are tons of research on looking at saunas and looking at things that all cause mortality. I was intrigued by the research to compare people who sauna-ed four or more times a week compared to people one sauna week. We are not even using a non-sauna control group. We are using one sauna a week as a control group. 30 percent reduction in all cause mortality. 50 percent reduction in cardiovascular events, cardiovascular deaths, decrease in dementia. All these things are happening from the sweating. So, it is very effective at getting toxins out. The toxins are actually damaging us, right now.

Jodi Cohen: That is super helpful. Great tip. Anything else before we wrap? Any other tips that you want to pass on? Any supplements?

Dr. Pizzorno: I could talk for hours on all the things we should be doing. But I think the more important point is the body has tremendous ability to heal if you just give it a chance. That means, get into people the nutrients that they need. Because some people need more nutrients than others because there is some variability. And get out the toxins, particularly those that are most damaging to an individual. People have a wide range of toxicity based on their genetics.

Jodi Cohen: Right, right. And once you kind of get all of the things that are confusing the immune system and the body out, then it can function more optimally.

Dr. Pizzorno: Yes.

Jodi Cohen: Okay, great. Well, how can people find? Obviously, they can get your book, The Toxic Solution. If they want to learn more, where should they go?

Dr. Pizzorno: Well, my website is DrPizzorno.com. This is a good reminder, I need to update it.

Jodi Cohen: Okay, great.

Dr. Pizzorno: I've been so busy writing, lecturing, and such, I forgot to do my own website.

Jodi Cohen: Well, thank you so much. This was super helpful. I really appreciate it.

Dr. Pizzorno: Happy to be helpful.