

She Said/She Said Podcast With Laura Cox Kaplan

Episode 269

Guest: Dr. Esther Sternberg, Mind, Body, Stress, And Wellness Expert

Title: "Creating an office space (and a life) that helps you battle stress"

Laura Cox Kaplan ([00:07](#)):

Influence is a powerful but often misunderstood concept. I'm Laura Cox Kaplan. I created, She Said/She Said Podcast to pick up right where influence gurus like Dale Carnegie left off, but with a more direct focus on what influence means for women, how we can deepen our understanding of the concept and how we can use our influence to get more of what we want. Each week we tackle a different dimension related to influence, often with input from incredible guests. We talk about everything from career and life pivots to brand building, entrepreneurship, impact investing, and so much more. Friend, whatever your path, I think you'll find lots to love in this content. Most of all, I'm really glad you're here.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([00:59](#)):

Hey, friend. Welcome to the podcast. We are talking about a topic that impacts every single one of us stress and some of the best ways to deal with it. Today's conversation I think will be very illuminating to you because it's a much more integrated approach to stress management than we often hear, and it specifically looks at how your surroundings and I mean broadly defined, how your surroundings impact your stress and your ability ultimately to thrive. My guest today is the fabulous Dr. Esther Sternberg. She is a pioneer in the field of mind, body, stress and wellness, and specifically how your surroundings impact all of that. She has written extensively on this topic. In fact, she's just published her third book, which is called Well At Work Creating Wellbeing in Any Workplace. I've included a link where you can purchase the book in the show notes for this episode.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([02:06](#)):

It's episode 269. Now, Dr. Sternberg is a rheumatologist by training and she spent 26 years at the National Institutes of Health here in Washington DC before finding her way into this path of integrated medicine. But one of the big turning points for her, which she talks about in our conversation, was a very personal experience that she had, which really created a bit of a light bulb moment for her. Again, we talk about that in the conversation. I think you're going to love this. I have also included a link to her incredibly impressive bio in the show notes as well, so you can read a little bit more about her. Before we jump into the conversation though with Dr. Sternberg, I want to highlight just a few additional topics that we're going to talk about. We talk about the best ways to de-stress your workspace, and while that includes decluttering, it goes well beyond that.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([03:08](#)):

We talk about how you can incorporate the seven different components that are associated with integrated health. We talk about which plants create the greatest de-stressing benefits, and not all plants, surprisingly enough, are created equal. I have a

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beautiful orchid that sits on my desk, and as it turns out, it may not be giving me as much of a benefit as maybe the good old hardy cactus would. And then we talk about the power of finding meaning in what we're doing and how that can have an impact on stress as well. Remember, you will find a link to Dr. Sternberg's bio as well as her latest book, which is called Well at Work that you'll find in the show notes for this episode, episode 269. For now, friend here is my conversation with Dr. Esther Sternberg.

Dr. Esther Sternberg, welcome to She Said/She Said!

Dr. Esther Sternberg ([04:07](#)):

Well, thank you so much. I'm thrilled to be here.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([04:10](#)):

Well, I am really thrilled to have you. I have been looking so forward to this conversation and I want to jump right in because I think folks hear about your work. They clearly have an understanding of the importance of sleep, the importance of nutrition, the importance of movement, all of these things, but your work actually moves us beyond that into a much more integrated way of thinking about this. Let's start the conversation by talking about what you do and why it's different.

Dr. Esther Sternberg ([04:47](#)):

Well, right now I am research director at the Andrew Weill Center for Integrative Health, which that's why what I do is integrative and integrates all what the center has described as the seven domains of integrative health. There are many ways to describe health, what is health. Most people think of health as physical health. You think of health as a noun, but really it's a verb.

Dr. Esther Sternberg ([05:14](#)):

You're constantly working. Your body is constantly working to keep you healthy, and we often don't really think of emotional wellbeing as part of physical health, but it's an essential part of it. So what I do now is take that concept and we can talk more about what are the seven domains of integrative health, but I take that concept into the built environment and especially in my new book, well at work, creating wellbeing in any workspace, I take that into the workspace and how you can create your own workspace wherever you work, to be a both healthy and wellbeing workspace to foster and enhance your physical health and your emotional wellbeing.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([06:01](#)):

Interesting, very interesting. Let's break down those seven dimensions if we could, and I'll have you share with folks what those are.

Dr. Esther Sternberg ([06:11](#)):

Sure. So they start with sleep. You mentioned sleep. It's essential for health, I should say before I describe the seven, really, you can't separate all of them because they all feed into each other, and that's another way of thinking about holistic health or integrative health. But there's sleep resilience, which I can talk about, but it's basically your stress and relaxation response, the environment. So green environments, clean air, we can talk about that a little bit more. Relationships, movement, healthy nutrition, spirituality, and all of them really connect together to keep you healthy, to keep you well.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([07:00](#)):

The one that jumped out at me the most, I mean, many of those we understand intuitively kind of how they fit together, the importance of those, but resilience was one that really jumped out at me, and especially as I read your book and understood a bit more about what you were talking about and why resilience is on that list, talk about what we maybe misunderstand about this concept of resilience and sort of how it fits into these other six.

Dr. Esther Sternberg ([07:31](#)):

So the easiest way to think about resilience is like a rubber band. Think about a fresh new rubber band. When you stretch it and then let go, it bounces back very quickly. If it's played out, if it's an old rubber band, you stretch it and it just kind of hangs there. So resilience is your ability or your body's ability to bounce back to its healthiest self because you're always faced with potential illnesses, with stresses, with viruses, certainly now with lots of viruses, and the ability for your body to fight those exposures and bring you back to your healthiest self, that's resilience

Laura Cox Kaplan ([08:21](#)):

And all these other things sort of feed into this idea of what makes you more resilient. Right? Am

Dr. Esther Sternberg ([08:27](#)):

I getting that right? Yes, exactly. That is exactly it. So yeah, if you have a good night's sleep, if you sleep well, you are more resilient. Your immune system is stronger, you wake up in a better mood, so your moods are better. If you have healthy nutrition, of course, then again, you're stronger, you're more resilient, positive relationships, lots of relationships that help support you, make you more resilient. If you're isolated, if you're lonely, you're likely to be depressed. You don't have that kind of support network. You may be more stressed. All of those help to enhance your resilience, specific aspects of the built environment that can help enhance your resilience. For example, infection are humidification. If your mucus membranes are dried out, if you're sleeping in a dry environment and your mucus membranes are dried out, you're more likely to get sick

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from if you happen to get exposed to a virus. In terms of stress, quiet spaces to meditate to contemplate nature sounds, being in nature all helps reduce your stress response and that enhances your resilience.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([09:53](#)):

Yeah, I know you talk about not all noise is created equal, and while it's important to have a space that you can go to meditate and be spiritual, but sometimes noise of a certain variety is actually a good thing. Maybe talk a little bit about that and also how noise in the environment that you create has an impact, even if it's during the daytime, it can impact you later on as well. Maybe talk a little bit about how those pieces fit together.

Dr. Esther Sternberg ([10:26](#)):

Well, and again, this is a whole chapter in my book on sleep is interestingly, what you do during the day impacts how well you sleep or how poorly you sleep. So noise is certainly one and light. You need to be exposed to full spectrum sunlight from 8:00 AM to 12 noon, or if you wake up earlier, you can start earlier, and that helps you fall asleep faster. It helps you sleep more soundly, and then the next morning when you wake up, you're in a better mood. So same thing with humidity. Again, we think it's because if it's too dry, less than 30% relative humidity or too wet, greater than 60% relative humidity, your stress response is higher, and then you're going to have poorer sleep quality. The whole cycle starts again, I should mention, how do I know this? How do I know the recipe or the prescription for a healthy building? And it actually speaks to a question that you asked me in the email of how did I get to do this work? I know that your audience, you mentioned tends to be at pivot points in their career, and when you mentioned that, I added up the number of pivot points that I had, and it comes out to eight.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([11:49](#)):

Amazing.

Dr. Esther Sternberg ([11:52](#)):

So I started off as a family practitioner. I was in practice in Montreal for two years, and then I went back and trained as a rheumatologist. So that's pivot one. So my plan was to be a clinical rheumatologist, go back to that practice and continue with rheumatology. But in the last year of my fellowship training, I fell into a research career, which I won't go into because there's too much, not enough time really, but it was because of a single patient that I saw, and I realized that nobody had the answer and I had to figure it out. And so that switched me from clinical practice to a research career, which started off as basic research, then clinical translational research. So if you count those, those are

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another couple of transition points. And I then got involved in tracking an epidemic that occurred across the United States related to an impure food supplement back in 1989.

Dr. Esther Sternberg ([12:57](#)):

So you could call that an epidemic sleuth. How did I go from all of that to studying the impact of the physical environment of the work environment on wellbeing, so place and wellbeing. And again, it was a single question that a colleague, I was at the National Institutes of Health doing my research and a colleague at another federal agency at the US General Services Administration, Kevin Cher, who was then director of research for the GSA, asked me to help him measure the impact of the built office environments that he was overseeing on health, wellbeing and productivity. Ultimately, the GSA is the agency of the federal government that builds and operates and maintains all non-military federal buildings, 374 million square feet of office space for over a million office workers. And Kevin wanted to create spaces where his workers would be happy, healthy, and productive. And so that started us on this path of using wearable devices.

Dr. Esther Sternberg ([14:07](#)):

This was 23 years ago, back in 2000. Yeah, wearable devices, health devices to measure the impact of the built office environments where federal workers were working back in those days. It wasn't a watch or a ring or a chest, more tiny little puck. It was the size of this coffee cup here, a bigger, it's a coffee mug and with wires hanging off and glued to your chest. And we had the workers wear these for two and a half days. We also wore them to see how it would feel. Two and a half days was about as much as you could handle.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([14:46](#)):

You were measuring stress, you were measuring, we were

Dr. Esther Sternberg ([14:48](#)):

Measuring stress. We were measuring stress. Two methods. One, we collected saliva and measured the stress hormone, cortisol and the other, we use these wearable devices, which use the same technology fundamentally as the little ones that we use. I'm wearing this ring, I think maybe

Laura Cox Kaplan ([15:05](#)):

Too.

Dr. Esther Sternberg ([15:06](#)):

You too. Yeah.

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Laura Cox Kaplan ([15:07](#)):

And I've got a watch.

Dr. Esther Sternberg ([15:08](#)):

I've got, yeah, that's all you've got everything. Oh, watch that. Oh, wow.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([15:12](#)):

It's a belt and suspenders approach to measurement, I think.

Dr. Esther Sternberg ([15:17](#)):

Well, I'm only wearing the ring, but so they all track the stress response by measuring your heartbeats

Dr. Esther Sternberg ([15:26](#)):

And how variable the heartbeat is, and then they use mathematical models to translate that into stress and relaxation response. And they also measure your posture, so movement, and they also use mathematical models to translate that into sleep quality. So we were able to do that with these ancient devices. And to my huge surprise, we measured about 70 office workers in a building in Denver that was being retrofitted. And it started out with six foot highwall cubicles. It was dark, it was musty, there was poor airflow, there was loud mechanical noise, no views to the outside, no natural light. And the space was retrofitted to be an open office design with lots of natural light, circadian light and views to the outside and spaces to gather and places to move, lower mechanical noise, good airflow. And I don't know why I was surprised, but I was surprised that the people in the old space were significantly more stressed by these physiological measures than the people in the new space.

Dr. Esther Sternberg ([16:35](#)):

And when they went home at night, their stress response was also higher, and while they slept, their stress response was higher. So we carried that study forward to state-of-the-art, new wearable devices in four federal buildings starting in 2013. We're still analyzing some of the data, and we found, we linked the stress levels, the stress response, relaxation response, posture, sleep quality movement to up to 11 different environmental attributes in these office spaces in four federal buildings. And we found the same thing. Again, we found that the people who moved more during the day were less stressed at night when they went home or less stressed during the night when they slept and had better sleep quality. And we also measured many different aspects of the environment, like you mentioned, sound, humidity, temperature, humidity, office layout, and we're able to really get a recipe or a prescription for a healthy building in really quite narrow ranges. So that's why I know that if the humidity is less than 30%,

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your stress response is 25% higher than if it's within the comfort range. Same if it's greater than 60%. That's really, really important because if you're a building designer, building operator, it costs more to dehumidify a space or to humidify a space.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([18:11](#)):

But

Dr. Esther Sternberg ([18:11](#)):

We also know that when it's too dry, you're more prone to more frequent and more severe viral infections. So probably because the mucus membranes dry out. So it's that level of granularity of knowing exactly how to design and operate your spaces to keep you healthy, and also to help you stay emotionally well. So how do you solve that if it costs a lot to dehumidify or humidifier, local humidifiers, it's a very simple thing. Same thing with temperature. Individual preferences vary. Some people will prefer it cooler, some people will prefer it hotter. Everybody knows about thermostat wars and office buildings traditionally were one size fits all and one size fits, no one in fact. So again, there's a huge industry now looking at local ways to provide thermal comfort. One simple one is office chairs that have heaters or coolers in them. You have your cars seats that have that, so why not do it in the office chair? So it's opening up a whole new set of industries to create individualized healthy wellbeing office spaces.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([19:35](#)):

That's amazing. I mean that is, there's so many different layers to all of that. It's so interesting. So for the individual person who's listening, she's listening, and I'd love for you to give her advice on things to keep in mind as she's setting up her own space. Maybe she does have control over her office, maybe she doesn't. But what are some of the suggestions beyond heated chair having a humidifier, maybe even a desk fan, what else should she do? And talk about too, the role of clutter. We've had a couple of declutters who've joined me on the podcast, but maybe talk about the role of clutter and your space and how that affects your focus and sort of the stress focus connection, if you will.

Dr. Esther Sternberg ([20:24](#)):

In the book and well at work, I say start with a window.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([20:29](#)):

So

Dr. Esther Sternberg ([20:29](#)):

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If you can place your desk to face a window, then you'll get the morning light. That's so important for healthy sleep, for positive moods, you have the issue of if there's too much glare, that's stressful. So there are high tech ways of solving it. There's smart glass that will reduce the glare, but that's not something most people can put in their own space. But you can certainly have blinds or shades. Another reason a window is good, an operable window is for fresh air.

Dr. Esther Sternberg ([21:02](#)):

So again, if you're in an office building, you may not be able to do that. So you might have to put a fan by your desk to blow away that carbon dioxide that builds up. So one of the things we found in our studies with the GSA is that as we breathe, as we exhale, your exhaling carbon dioxide in a bubble that stays around your face. So if that carbon dioxide bubble accumulates to a certain level, you'll feel low, you'll feel tired. It's your cognitive performance begins to fail. You make more errors, you can't think clearly. So put a fan, and we found that with a local fan by the desk, then that blows away all that carbon dioxide. So that's a good thing. If you don't do that, you can get up and walk.

Dr. Esther Sternberg ([22:01](#)):

Getting up and walking around is good because movement helps reduce your stress response. So the more you move during the day, the less stressed you are in the evening and the better you sleep at night. And so it's this sort of circle of all these things you can do. You mentioned you have a plant. I have a plant. I don't think you can see my plant. There it is. Biophilia love of plants is something that all humans have. And by putting plants around you, you can help reduce that stress response. Plants also clean the air. They clean the air of carbon dioxide. If you choose not to put plants indoors, you can go outdoors and walk around in nature. If you have that luxury.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([22:52](#)):

Are all plants created equal as you think about things that you can put in your space that have that effect? I have a small orchid here. Does that do as much as a green plant? I like it because it's pretty. But is are all plants created equal, I guess is the

Dr. Esther Sternberg ([23:11](#)):

Question? Well, one of the books I referenced in my book, in my chapter on biophilia is a book that lists the 50 plants that are good can clean the air. Interesting. And I describe in the book, one of my colleagues, an architect who is heading the Health and built environment section at the College of Architecture Planning and Landscape Architecture here at the University of Arizona. So his name is Altoff engineer. He is an architect even though his name is Engineer

Laura Cox Kaplan ([23:45](#)):

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Amazing.

Dr. Esther Sternberg ([23:46](#)):

He did a study with another colleague, aha Ida, and a student who wanted to ask exactly that question, are all plants created equal? And so I describe in the book the study that they did, but the bottom line is they found no, not all plants are created equal. And one of them that was particularly effective in clearing the air of carbon dioxide was a cactus. So

Laura Cox Kaplan ([24:14](#)):

That's shocking. I

Dr. Esther Sternberg ([24:15](#)):

Mean,

Laura Cox Kaplan ([24:16](#)):

I don't think people would necessarily think about that.

Dr. Esther Sternberg ([24:18](#)):

No, no, no. But you can have a variety of plants. And again, I list all that in the book, but there are also studies of the numbers of plants that you should have in a space to enhance your wellbeing, to clear the air, to enhance your health. So there's a lot of work on that on what we call biophilia. You asked earlier if artwork is effective.

Dr. Esther Sternberg ([24:45](#)):

So images of nature are quite effective. And actually for another pivot in my career was I did a PBS television special where I was the kind of the Guinea pig asking what is it in the environment that helped me heal. And I underwent brain imaging study looking at different pictures while I was in the scanner, either smoke stacks, belching or nature, nature scenes. And when I was looking at nature scenes, that part of my brain that's rich in endorphins lit up. And I thought that was really cool. I guess I like looking at nature scenes, but I'm not the only one. It's true across all cultures, ages, genders, races, ethnic groups, you name it, everyone, when they look at a nature scene, that part of the brain that's rich in endorphins, feel good molecules, anti-pain molecules, lights up.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([25:49](#)):

So interesting. Let's talk about, I mentioned clutter before in my 14 part question. Apologies about that. I'm excited to talk to you. Let's talk about clutter and sort of how that affects your brain, your focus.

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Dr. Esther Sternberg ([26:05](#)):

So the brain is a difference detector. It's designed to pick up changes in the environment

Laura Cox Kaplan ([26:14](#)):

Because

Dr. Esther Sternberg ([26:15](#)):

It's lifesaving. So think of a mouse in the field. If the mouse didn't notice a sudden change in sound, a sudden movement in the distance, it would get eaten by the first cat that came along. So we're all tuned to suddenly startle. It's called the startle response when something changes in the environment, and this goes to sound, you mentioned the question about different kinds of sound as well. So it's what you see or what you hear, what you feel, what you touch. Anything that is a sudden change will trigger your stress response, not necessarily hugely, but enough to get you out of focus. So if you're surrounded by clutter, and I don't know that anybody's done this scientific research, but I can hypothesize that if you're surrounded by clutter and there's a whole lot of stuff going on around you visually, it's going to be harder for your brain to stay focused because there's always something that's going to distract it. And the same thing goes for sound. One of the things we found with the GSA well-Built for Wellbeing study is that surprisingly, when it's too quiet, your stress response is higher. We all know that when it's noisy, when it's very loud, that triggers your stress response. It's also damaging to the ear. But when it's too quiet, we found that people's stress response was also elevated.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([28:00](#)):

So interesting.

Dr. Esther Sternberg ([28:02](#)):

And again, I think it's because the brain is a difference detector. When it's really, really quiet, you can hear a pin drop and that'll startle you when it's about 45 decibels, that seems to be the optimal level for your stress response. And interestingly, 45 decibels is the level of bird song. So I wonder whether that's why we like to hear bird song. It's a calming level of sound. Which brings me to another point. If I could just add that is nature sounds are calming. If you have trouble falling asleep, you can download all kinds of nature sounds and listen to them. I like hearing rain on the roof. You can hear bird song, you can hear the wind, you can hear here, ocean waves. There was an interesting study showing that babies in intensive care unit, the premature babies fall asleep better quickly, more quickly to white noise. And there's reports showing that babies fall asleep more quickly to the sound of a vacuum cleaner. So if you prefer not to vacuum in the middle of the night, you can actually download the sound of a vacuum cleaner on your smartphone.

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Laura Cox Kaplan ([29:25](#)):

That is fascinating. Maybe differentiate between, because I know there's a big difference between when you can hear someone talking, and so voices versus sound, even if they're set at about the same level, are not created equal. Talk about the difference there.

Dr. Esther Sternberg ([29:42](#)):

Well, for sure, if you can understand the words, that is going to be much more distracting, it will distract. Whereas if you can't understand the words, it blends into white noise.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([29:57](#)):

So

Dr. Esther Sternberg ([29:57](#)):

Think about people who like to work in a coffee shop. There's a lot of noise going on, but it's all blended into the background of white noise and white noise masks a distracting noise. So they talk about white noise, pink noise, nature sounds. And again, in the book I talk about how those different kinds of sounds can affect the stress response and can either distract or keep you focused.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([30:25](#)):

Yeah, so interesting. I'd love for you to talk for a second, and you sort of alluded to this a moment ago, but you had a personal health issue that ultimately really enabled you to dive into this research in a much more personal way. Maybe talk about that particular pivot a bit

Dr. Esther Sternberg ([30:46](#)):

More. Yes. So I was a rheumatologist, an arthritis doc, studying the role of the brain stress response in arthritis. And I had discovered that the brain stress center is important in susceptibility to arthritis in rats. And if you can prove that in rats, then the idea that the mind body connection is real, that stress can make you sick, that believing can make you well, is more believable to the scientific community. And in fact, that's why I wrote my first book. The balance within it was really the science of the mind body connection, which was not believed by the conventional scientists, researchers, physicians back when I was studying this in the 1980s. But more and more work has shown, and now it's well established that chronic stress can make you sick, can make you more susceptible to more frequent and more severe viral infections, poorer vaccine take rate.

Dr. Esther Sternberg ([31:48](#)):

How important is that nowadays? Speeding of cancer growth, speeding of chromosomal aging and slowing of wound healing. So there's a huge literature now, but back then there was a lot of skepticism about this. So in 1989, I discovered that the Brain's Stress center is important and susceptibility to inflammatory arthritis. And then I went through a period of extreme stress myself. My mother was dying of breast cancer. I was a long distance caregiver. I was going through a lot of stress at work. I had discovered, or I was instrumental in proving that the third largest petrochemical company in Japan caused this epidemic of impure food supplement in the United States. I became a target of this company. It was really a stressful time in my life,

Dr. Esther Sternberg ([32:40](#)):

And I developed inflammatory arthritis. How ironic. So I did not fully understand or appreciate what I had discovered in rats the role of the stress response in arthritis until it happened to me. And then the flip side of it, I didn't fully appreciate how, I didn't even know what integrative health was back then, but how what you do can actually help you heal or make you more sick. So I had moved into a new house, which was like three weeks after my mother died, and that's another big stressor moving. I was sitting on the deck outside working on my computer to what was to become my first book, but I didn't really consider myself an author at the time. And my neighbors who were Greek rang the doorbell and they brought Greek food, siki res, aka, and introduced themselves and said, are you a writer?

Dr. Esther Sternberg ([33:45](#)):

And I said, I don't know. Why do you ask? And they said, well, we've always wanted a writer to stay at our cottage in Crete. So I said, I'm a writer. And I went with them to Crete, and I had this aha moment in the middle of this. It was only about 10 days or two weeks that I was there, but I was swimming in the ocean every day. I was climbing the hill above the village where there was the ruins of a temple to ascap, the Greek God of healing. And on top of that, a Byzantine church ruins. And on top of that, a tiny little Greek chapel with the candles and the icons, and I'd sit there, hours would go by. I was looking at the beautiful blue Mediterranean and the white stucco buildings and the fuchsia bogan flia and listening to the sounds of the sheep and the goats and the ocean and the wind.

Dr. Esther Sternberg ([34:43](#)):

And I didn't know I was meditating. I had no idea. But time went by. I was eating a healthy Mediterranean diet. I was surrounded by my friends and by their friends in the village and all the grandmothers who shared with me their stories of arthritis and their wonderful food. And I was moving a lot more during the day. I was sleeping better. And I suddenly realized that if I continued on the path that I had been when I was in Washington of eating hamburgers and french fries for lunch every day, being sedentary,

sleeping poorly, and not having this kind of support network, I would continue to get sicker. And if I did what I was doing in Greece, I would continue to get better. And in fact, when I got back and I saw my doctor, I was supposed to go back into the NIH for an early arthritis protocol and get a liver biopsy and more knee biopsies. And the doctor said, well, she's so much better. She doesn't need to go into hospital.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([35:50](#)):

And

Dr. Esther Sternberg ([35:50](#)):

It wasn't a miracle cure, it's that I was engaging in all seven domains of integrative health. And that really brought it home to me, what you do in your environment and how your environment can help you heal. Because if you don't have an environment that encourages movement, sleep spaces for contemplation or relaxation support from family and friends, healthy nutrition and sort of the nature natural environment, you can't really engage in these healthy behaviors. It's all of a piece.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([36:31](#)):

Yeah. Yeah. So interesting. I assume that not every single day of your life necessarily has to, you have to check the box of all seven things, or how do you

Dr. Esther Sternberg ([36:45](#)):

Structure

Laura Cox Kaplan ([36:46](#)):

Your existence so that you're doing enough of those seven things to really have this integrated benefit?

Dr. Esther Sternberg ([36:55](#)):

Well, yeah. I mean, if you're a couch potato now and you're eating french fries and hamburgers and so on, don't feel guilty. First of all, you're not a bad person, but it may feel daunting or it would be daunting to all of a sudden try to do all seven really hard. And so you need to ask yourself, which of these one things can I change? What will help me get there? And you don't have to. So let's talk about movement. You don't have to go to the gym or get on the treadmill and exercise for 90% VO two max and break a sweat. 30 minutes of walking a day is enough. I have the luxury to live in Tucson, Arizona where I can swim practically the whole year round and I swim 25 minutes a day when I can. I can't do it every day, but the days that I can't, I swim 10 minutes and 10 minutes is better than no minutes. If I can't swim that particular day, I try to get on the recumbent

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bike, do things or just walk. And then light lighting actually is probably the easiest thing that you can do. Exposure to circadian light, that brights full spectrum sunlight.

Dr. Esther Sternberg ([38:22](#)):

Again, because I'm in Tucson, I can have breakfast outside practically every day of the year. And that gets me started with exposure to this full spectrum. If you don't have that luxury, you can purchase light boxes on the internet that give you that full spectrum sunlight and you don't look straight at them, but you're exposed to that light in the morning. You shouldn't do that in the evening. And that's one of the issues with screens, with computer screens and your smartphone. They give off a bluish light, which is going to keep you awake if you're exposed to that bluish light for 40 minutes in the evening. It's as alerting as a cup of coffee. So you can just be careful about your light exposure. Those are simple things you can do. Again, simple things you can do to be in nature. Make sure you go for a walk in a nature space. And that speaks to not only bringing nature into your office space or your workspace, but it's really at the level of urban design where more and more cities are intentionally putting in micro parks, small parks. And I talk about this in the book as well.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([39:47](#)):

Yeah. So we have come out of this terrible pandemic for the most part. Let's talk a bit for just a minute about what we learned from that.

Dr. Esther Sternberg ([39:59](#)):

Well, we became more aware. Everybody became more aware during the pandemic of how the built environment transmits disease and viral infection and how important ventilation is filtration and so on. But what's really important to remember is whether you get sick from a virus and how sick you get, depends on three things. The dose of exposure, that is how much virus you're exposed to, the duration of exposure, how long are you exposed to it and your own resilience. And you can mitigate or reduce the dose and duration of exposure by masking, distancing, good ventilation, fresh air, turnover, filtration. But it's through these seven domains of integrative health that you can enhance your resilience and be the strongest you when and if you are exposed to that virus.

Dr. Esther Sternberg ([40:56](#)):

That's really the point that I'm making in the book, that we need to think beyond ventilation. The other point that I would like to make, and again, it's not so much post covid, but it's because of all the horrific events that are happening in the world today. If you can make your workspace, your sanctuary to give you a place of respite, of peace away from all this horrific news in the world, that will go a long way to make you more resilient, to improve your wellbeing and do your little bit in whatever domain your work

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is, you are doing something positive that can help counterbalance the horrible and horrific events that are happening.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([41:49](#)):

Oh, I love that you just said that. That is so incredibly important, and it really goes to that underlying challenge that we have of mental health and people feeling just really, really despondent. So thank you for saying that.

Dr. Esther Sternberg ([42:04](#)):

You're welcome. I think that people feel despondent because you feel helpless.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([42:10](#)):

You

Dr. Esther Sternberg ([42:10](#)):

Feel helpless in the face. Well, when Covid started, people felt helpless. What can you do? And in the book, I tell the story of my daughter who is a design professional, and she had a student who was designing a chair in her class, and the student broke down in tears at the beginning of Covid and said, "how can I be doing this? It's such a frivolous thing when everybody around is dying." And my daughter said, "well, it's not frivolous because by designing a chair that's comfortable and keeps people healthy and happy, you're really helping them to work to do their best work." And that flipped the switch for the student, and she was then so happy and knew that what she was doing could make a difference. And I think that's the case for everything. Again, if you feel helpless and you feel what you're doing doesn't have meaning, you'll be more depressed. But if you can find meaning in what you're doing, so what you're doing, Laura, you're spreading the word about how to be healthy, how important is that? So thank you.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([43:20](#)):

Well, thank you for being here. I really appreciate you being part of She Said/She Said, I know folks are going to love this conversation. I loved this conversation. It's really lovely to meet you, Esther.

Dr. Esther Sternberg ([43:30](#)):

Thank you. It's been a pleasure.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([43:32](#)):

The book is called "Well At Work, creating Wellbeing in Any Workspace." This is her latest book, but I strongly urge folks to also pick up the other two books. I'm going to include links in the show notes to all three books, as well as a link to Dr. Sternberg's bio

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where you can learn a little bit more about her. Esther, thank you so much. I really appreciate it.

Dr. Esther Sternberg ([43:56](#)):

Thank you so much.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([44:00](#)):

Hey, friend, thanks so much for joining me today for episode 269 with the amazing Dr. Esther Sternberg. I would love to know what you thought of the conversation and also hear about anything that may have surprised you or anything that you might consider incorporating more of in your daily or weekly life. I would love to hear, and if you enjoyed and got some personal benefit from the conversation, which I hope you did, I would also love a nice review from you. You can share your thoughts from wherever you're listening, and I would be so grateful if you would do so. You can also send me an email: info@shesaid.media. Until next week, friend, you take care. And remember, She Said/ She Said Podcast is a weekly production of She Said/She Said Media.

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