

## The Fasting Method #164 - Hot Topic: Cortisol-Lowering Techniques

**Megan** [00:00:06] Before we get started with today's episode, I would like to quickly read you our podcast disclaimer.

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[00:01:13] All right. And now we'll get started with today's episode.

**Terri** [00:01:19] Welcome back to The Fasting Method podcast. I'm very excited to be here. This is one of your hosts, Dr. Terri Lance, Coach Terri, and I am very fortunate-- I've been saying that a lot lately when I introduce these episodes, but I get to work with some of the most amazing people in this podcast, and in other places. But I'm very fortunate today to have with me Coach Lisa Chance. Lisa, how are you doing today?

**Lisa** [00:01:45] My cortisol is up a little bit, I think, doing this podcast. But, yes, I'm very happy to be here, Terri.

**Terri** [00:01:52] Very good. Well, as Lisa just mentioned, we are here to do an episode about cortisol. And I think this is one of those topics-- Lisa and I were just talking about it before we got started and recognized we could probably do six or seven episodes, just about cortisol. So maybe we'll start a new podcast that's the cortisol podcast. But we have things that we want to go over, share some information with you, share some strategies and different things. And the reason that I wanted to have you on here to do this, Lisa, is because you are very well known in our community for many reasons, but, also, you're highlighted in Megan Ramos's most recent book because you researched and put together a list of cortisol-lowering strategies. So, without any further explanation from me, let's go ahead and jump in. And I know what you just said before we started is, gosh, it's almost hard to know where to start with this topic because there are just so many angles and pieces, but let's start with something really basic. Why is cortisol important for you and I to be talking about? Why would our listeners need to know about cortisol?

**Lisa** [00:03:11] Well, cortisol is essential for life. It actually helps us interpret our world to figure out what's going on. Our bodies respond to cortisol with stress. It regulates our metabolism, it controls our blood sugar levels, it influences our blood pressure, it supports our immune system, and it's crucial for maintaining homeostasis, which makes us able to adapt to our ever-changing world, our ever-changing environment. Especially high cortisol, over time, high cortisol levels, they can lead to weight gain, diabetes, fatigue, difficulty concentrating. And the thing with cortisol-- what happens with cortisol is it promotes gluconeogenesis in the liver, increasing glucose production. And this can lead to higher glucose levels which require more insulin to maintain a normal blood pressure. So, you know, it's an important hormone. I mean, [laughs] you wouldn't be alive without it.

**Terri** [00:04:22] Well, you just touched on something so important and we're gonna unravel a lot of that that you just said throughout this episode. I just was doing a quick search because I wanted to make sure I said it right, and then you just said it, that it is a hormone. So it's one of those things going on in our body. And, like insulin, it's one of those hormones that is absolutely necessary for life, like you said, we don't want to get rid of it, it's not good for us if we don't have it, but having too much of it, too much of the time (just like insulin), causes problems for us. And that's why you've created this list. That's why we're talking about it today. It's really this kind of figuring out how do we help our body have this hormone available to it without over-inundating it with it all the time. So, kind of going back to what you were describing, it affects so many processes in the body. Here, I thought it-- you know, it's just the stress hormone. But what you just described is it influences so many processes and actions in our body.

**Lisa** [00:05:34] Oh yeah. And you might have heard of the term 'cortisol baby', meaning that that little pot belly that you have, right, is often referred to in slang as a cortisol baby because cortisol promotes the accumulation of visceral fat, and, you know, we don't like a visceral fat metabolic-wise. So it contributes to insulin resistance. And it also can affect leptin resistance. So, you know, leptin resistance and insulin resistance go hand in hand, often. You know, we want to be-- what does Gary Taubes say? We want to be exquisitely sensitive to insulin, so we don't want to have an overproduction of that.

**Terri** [00:06:22] And, again, you just pointed out something so important. All of these hormones are absolutely necessary. So, again, folks, don't try to get rid of it. [laughs] Don't ask for how do I have all of my cortisol drained from my body. Not good! But that they really affect each other, that having too much insulin, too much at a time, creating insulin resistance, also affects our leptin sensitivity. A lot of people in our community, and a lot of our listeners know, from what we always share, that insulin resistance makes us hungrier, more often, leads to more cravings. And leptin, for those of you who haven't kind of dove into that section yet, leptin is what gives our body the signal that says, "Oh, you've got enough fuel. We don't need any more food right now." So if we're leptin resistant and insulin resistant, we're hungry all the time and there's nothing turning off the hunger, and then we've got this other piece in here, this cortisol, which is affecting our leptin sensitivity, contributing to how we develop insulin resistance. It's like the trifecta of bad guys. Like, you know, I've talked before about the three amigos. This is like the three-- I don't even know what we would call them, but when they're not working well for us, they're causing problems.

**Lisa** [00:07:49] And when you use eating or comfort foods to comfort or calm yourself (like a lot of people do with, you know, carbs), that actually creates a habit loop. You and I have talked about habit loops a lot. So we get the stress, we create a habit loop by going round and round - "Okay, well, I just-- where's the nearest pound cake that's going to calm me down?" And then you start getting actually stuck into certain foods, specific foods that you use to get yourself calmed down, which I'm not advising. I'm advising these other 39 ways to lower your cortisol.

**Terri** [00:08:25] That does not make the list anywhere does it? [laughter]

**Lisa** [00:08:28] No! [laughs] As much as I'd love to see it. "Where's the nearest pound cake?" was not on the list.

**Terri** [00:08:35] Yeah. But, you know what, it's kind of funny, Lisa, I feel like sometimes when-- and I don't know if you've experienced this, but when I've been researching something about stress, about things, you know, that I tend to talk a lot about, most resources that I look at will always have on their list 'eat something'. I thought, "Oh no! I can't put that on our list."

**Lisa** [00:08:59] Right. Growing up in California, earthquake country, they tell you, you know, one of the best things you can do after an earthquake is to, you know, pop a can of beer or pop a piece of candy in your mouth, and it's like, NO! [laughter] Do some yoga, do some deep breathing, do a little bit of tapping, something like that instead.

**Terri** [00:09:20] But, you know, you highlight a really important point for, I think, all of us to understand how we've developed some of these patterns. It did work. It did work to eat a cupcake and you felt less stressed. It did lower your cortisol.

**Lisa** [00:09:35] Short term.

**Terri** [00:09:37] That's right - short term, but it just compounded all of the other negative effects. But this is partly why learning about it as you're sharing it today is so important because, otherwise, we will be misled that, "Having a bag of potato chips lowers my cortisol. I don't know why I shouldn't do that every time." Breathing exercises works, and it's never going to get you in trouble. It's never going to cause a metabolic issue. It's never going to cause downstream negative effect. And that's what I really want people to hear. You have probably learned some strategies already, but are they helping you long term or are they only helping in the moment and leading to more complications down the road?

**Lisa** [00:10:29] And the thing that got me was, recently, they've been revamping some of the pre-op procedures for people, and they're having them increase their carbs, because, you know, they did like a \$5 million study where they found that carbs soothe people. I'm like, "You could have given me \$1 million, and I would have told you that. [laughs] You didn't need to do a \$5 million study." But I've had a couple of people, a couple of clients that say, "They want me to drink Gatorade before my procedure," even though traditionally we are nothing-by-mouth before surgery. They're doing this to calm people's cortisol, their stress response. It's like there's so many better ways to get your stress down before an invasive procedure like that than having processed carbs or sugary-- especially like Gatorade. Are you kidding me? It's just mind blowing.

**Terri** [00:11:27] Yeah, it's just like mainlining sugar. And many of you have heard many recent episodes with Lisa and Dr. Fung, so you're probably familiar with Lisa, but, Lisa, your background as a nurse, I think, makes it even more logical that you hear about these kinds of things. You're up on these kind of things, like, what is the medical field encouraging that's actually complicated with all of this knowledge that you have. So I'm curious, to back up a little bit for everyone, why did you create this list of 39 cortisol-lowering strategies?

**Lisa** [00:12:07] This actually started in one of your rooms. Years ago, I don't remember if it was healthy habits, healthy emotions, or healthy mindset, but my first list was like 'The Top Ten Ways to Lower Your Cortisol'. And so Nadia, for the longest time, thought that you wrote the list. And I love to research things, so I started researching. I wanted to see research-backed articles that showed where they had tested your cortisol to see if your cortisol went down after you did, you know, yoga, right? And, lo and behold, I kept researching and researching and researching. Some people would send me in

suggestions, and it was kind of funny because some of times it was just already on the list, and I'm like, "Well, they didn't read the list," but, every once in a while, they'd sent me one that I was fascinated by. I know somebody sent 'watching a fire', you know, like in a fireplace or a campfire. And I searched and searched and searched for that because I find that soothing too. And then I thought, "Well, maybe not to the pyromaniacs." Maybe that's why they never did a study on it, I don't know. [laughs] But, yes, anything like that that gets you into like a meditative state like that.

**Terri [00:13:30]** It's kind of funny the way we talk about a lot of things in our community, that one person's-- you know, it's kind of like that one person's art is another person's junk, but one person's ideal approach fails miserably for someone else. I think watching a fire would be very cortisol-lowering for me, very calming, except that I'm very paranoid about those little sparks that fly out. I am so afraid that I'm going to catch on fire, or someone around me, their shirt's going to catch on fire, or whatever. So I probably don't get all of the cortisol lowering because, at the same time, I've got the cortisol pump on.

**Lisa [00:14:10]** Yeah, it's interesting because, like, one of the things that came up on the list was gardening, light gardening. And I'm sure they're talking about the people who like gardening, because, if you don't like gardening and you don't like getting dirt under your nails, that might not be the thing for you to do. But, yet, you know, they are showing, especially with older people, when you have the time to cultivate that hobby-- which hobby is also on there, too, having a hobby that you enjoy. Gardening is very good for older people because you move more and you bend more, you keep your flexibility up, keep your strength up, keep your mind engaged. So many of these things involve mindfulness, that you are focused and engaged in that activity. You know, and there's almost a flow that takes. That is going to lower your cortisol.

**Terri [00:15:07]** Absolutely. It's funny you mentioned that part because I was thinking of-- I don't remember which book it was, whether it was Kelly McGonigal or one of the other books that I have talked about in our community about stress, but one of the things they did research with older folks living in like a retirement center or something is having something that they're taking care of. It adds a sense of purpose too. So gardening, again, you're outside, likely, might be indoor, but, like you said, you're bending, you're moving, you're focused, it's relaxing, it's not fast paced.

**Lisa [00:15:42]** It's rewarding when you see the flower bloom. You know, my aunt used to always say that to me. She said, "Lisa, water your plants. They'll thank you for it in flowers." [laughs] And I'm like, like, "Oh, okay."

**Terri [00:15:57]** That's great. So I'm curious-- so you created the list, after we started with a conversation that led you to add to this by doing a lot of research. And I think that's really important too. Some of us might find something that feels relaxing to us, so it doesn't mean you can't do those things. But what you put together is this list of actually, validated through research-- again, that doesn't mean other ones aren't. Like, I might say brewing coffee is cortisol relaxing for me because of the way I do it and taking the steps. It doesn't mean that that's not, it just might mean that they haven't done a study yet that can validate that my cortisol levels are going down. And, unfortunately, cortisol, like insulin, is one of those things we can't really measure at home. We don't have a cortometer that measures our cortisol in the moment like we can with glucose.

[00:16:56] So, Lisa, I'm curious, if you wanted to maybe share with us, what are some of the ones off this list that you find useful? What are some, maybe, that Community members or clients have given you feedback about?

**Lisa** [00:17:13] Well, I do a gratitude list every night, even if it's just three quick things. I really find that that helps, you know, it really helps the parasympathetic state. That whole reframing (you're very good at reframing, you're much better at reframing than I am), that cognitive reframing, it encourages positive reframing, gratitude does, especially writing three quick things down from your day. And that has been shown scientifically. When you perceive your stress lowering, your cortisol will lower. It changes those neural pathways too. And that's important. So that leads to more positive thought patterns over time. So it reduces the cortisol over time because you're doing it. It's interesting.

[00:18:04] The other one that I really like-- you know, of course I love magnesium. Magnesium-- you know me, I love it. Magnesium, magnesium, magnesium. [laughs] I can't tell you what wonderful things I saw magnesium do when I was a nurse in the ICU.

[00:18:19] But the thing I've been getting into lately is-- well, not even lately. Let's say I'm diving deeper lately because I've been doing tapping for a long time - Emotional Freedom Technique - but right now I'm working on my certification for Emotional Freedom Technique. That takes a year, and I'm learning so many things about it. I'm really enjoying that and finding out how to do it in the moment, in the moment that you're stressed. Because, yes, I would love to sit down, get my Zafu zen pillow out and do my meditation right then. That's one reason why walking has always been so good for me, because I do my mindful meditation, walking meditation, like with the labyrinth (that's on the list too) because you're in nature and you're walking and you're-- the whole neural pathway of beginning and resolution of the labyrinth is important. But with tapping I'm finding that I can do it in the moment, whereas, with meditation-- I don't have to sit down and find a quiet place, I can tap, and I have. It's got to be a joke with the Community mentors because, whenever there was a stressful situation in one of our large Community groups, they would send me a message, "Are you tapping?" because I would be tapping under the table. You know, just something simple, like, I like to tap on all four fingers, I like a count of four. Especially like I would cover Coach Nadia's classes, right, and I-- women's hormones are not my forte. I'm cardiovascular. You know, I'm diabetes, right? And so you could see it on my CGM. Schoom - my blood sugar just spiked, every morning before 6 a.m. covering for Nadia. And it was so funny because somebody asked me something that I was, "Um," you know, I didn't feel that confident giving the answer to. And I'd get a message, a private message, "Are you tapping?" [laughs] It used to just make me laugh. And of course, laughter is one of the ways, too, that can bring you out of that cortisol spike, right? So, yeah, I'm really into tapping, and I used to tap "I am e-nough, I am e-nough." It was just the right cadence for my fingers. Because, you know, people would come in and they'd see me, and not Nadia, and, you know, 20 of them would leave. And I'd be like, okay, blow to your ego man. That's just like-- you just keep tapping under the table, Lisa! [laughs]

**Terri** [00:20:50] There you go. You know, you're highlighting something that I think is really valuable about the strategies that you put in the list. Some of them are things that you wouldn't be doing all day, but you would do in that moment in a stress response.

**Lisa** [00:21:08] For instance, one of the simple ones to do is to sit up straight. When you sit up straight-- and then you have an opportunity to breathe-- but when you sit up straight, that takes the stress off of your kidneys, and your adrenals are right on top of your kidneys. So that's a very simple thing to do. You know, sit up straight in your chair. And the

thing is is a lot of people think, "Oh, well, you know, I go to yoga three times a week, so I've got this stress under control." No, you need to do something to lower your cortisol several times throughout the day, not just two or three times a week.

**Terri** [00:21:47] I was just going to say not just a couple times a week. So this idea that some of them are things we're going to do in the moment, like you said, I can do tapping in the moment, whereas meditation, I'm not necessarily going to be able to address a certain stressor with that. But so many of the strategies you talk about are things that people might already be doing. Like, one of them on the list is taking a Pilates class, and I just happened to have recently started taking Pilates. I'm going tomorrow morning. So, hey, at least two times a week, I'm adding to my cortisol lowering. And again, it's not like it's just going to lower it at that moment, but it's going to help me manage my cortisol overall. Going to acupuncture - again, I can't just-- you know, I get stressed, I go to acupuncture, right now. [laughs] I don't do self-acupuncture. But that is certainly something that I have used before. So I love that your list has things that you can do kind of as an immediate remedy to help bring the level down right now, but also things, you know, like gardening, and doing tai chi, and yoga, and interacting with your pet, like, so many great things.

[00:23:07] But there's one that you and I talked about as we got started today that I think is really important, not only as a cortisol-lowering strategy but just acknowledging the value of this for our overall health and wellness. And that is social connection, having a positive relationship. Do you want to say anything about that one Lisa?

**Lisa** [00:23:29] This is something I've been telling my clients to do, and in the large groups too, the Community members to do is, especially if they're wearing a CGM, I'm like, "Don't just look at what food is doing to you on the CGM. Look at all of Nadia's five pillars. How well did you sleep? Right? All of that stuff. Are you sick? Etc." I had somebody say the other day that she had to go to her partner's party, business party, and she said there were several people there that she did not like. And I said, "Well, what was your blood sugar doing?" And she went, "I didn't think of that." And I've been telling people, "Take a look-- one of the things on the list is healthy relationships. All right? Maintain healthy relationships. See what your blood sugar is doing when you're around somebody that you know loves you unconditionally and is non-judgmental. Mine goes down. I go down like 30 points. And when I'm around somebody that I don't necessarily like, my blood sugar goes up. [laughs] I'm also one of those people-pleasing person, so if I think the other person doesn't like me, my blood sugar goes up too. I have no idea if they do or not, but I just am thinking that. So it's interesting. See what happens if you're in a healthy, supportive relationship.

[00:24:58] I often put a meme up behind me when I do the groups. And I have one of my favorite ones, which is, "We're all just walking each other home," by Ram Dass. And it's true. In this community, it's so true. The Community members have helped me, as well as the coaches. And that's the way I feel about these large groups that I'm in. You know, sometimes I'm struggling, definitely, and I find what I needed to hear from somebody else in these rooms. And that's the way I look at it. We really are all just walking each other home. And at TFM, I feel that I'm among my people. And so I know that I'm around people that are going to light my path and not darken it, and that's important to me.

**Terri** [00:25:47] Absolutely. I think, Lisa, it's one of those things that maybe a lot of us kind of easily overlook is the importance of social connection. Isolation. You know, think about during Covid, people's health factors declined, people's mental health factors declined. And it wasn't just because of a virus, it was because of the severe change in people's

ability to feel connected with one another. And, you know, we probably all saw on social media musicians doing concerts out of their living room. I mean, how many times did I watch Mary Chapin Carpenter singing from her dining room? It was great. We need those social connections. And not having social connection, being isolated, not having healthy connections, we increase our risk of many health concerns and just overall health outcomes. So that one, I think, probably would make every list, not just the cortisol-lowering list, but every list of something that we should keep kind of in the front of our mind about how do we help ourselves, how do we support ourselves, keeping those social connections.

[00:27:05] The other thing I was thinking (you touched on this at some point, and so it reminded me to come back to this one) is sleep. Sleep and getting a regular sleep schedule is one of the items on your list. And again, I know, based on how life goes for people, that's complicated, but it's so important. And so when people think, "Oh my gosh, I don't know what else I could do to manage my stress," I'm getting all worked up even just imitating it, "I can't do anything else." Well, one thing you can do is work on your sleep schedule. Again, it's not just do you do that thing in the moment to get rid of stress, but are you setting your body up well to deal with stressful events? And sleep is a huge one there.

**Lisa** [00:27:53] I tried a little experiment, because one of the things on the list is avoiding blue light at night, and I've done this several times in different ways. The most recent was not tapping my phone to see what time it was when I had to get up to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night. And I always am very cynical, "Ah, that's not gonna work." And I tried it and I slept so much better, I got up less frequently. And I know that wearing those blue-blocking glasses at night helps me so much, or turning off my phone or my gadgets. I sleep better. Do I want to do that? No! I want to [unintelligible] but I've made a game of it because I always want to know what time it is. You know, having worked night shift as a nurse, I'm sleep obsessed, right? And so I want to know how many hours left I have of sleep and all this kind of stuff. So instead, I kind of turned it around and said, "All right, you don't need to know what time it is. You know what time it is, you get up at the same time every night. You don't need to know, but let's see if you're right when you wake up in the morning and see if that time is what you thought it was," and of course it was, you know, "But let's check later, when you wake up. Don't check now." And just little things like that that have really improved my sleep. So I kind of gamified it, right? You know, I had to do something. [laughs]

**Terri** [00:29:14] Nice. Yeah. That's great. I was excited when I saw that blue-light blocking was one of your strategies because this has been something I've been doing for years. I started following some biohackers many years ago before I feel like it was even cool. One of the things they talked about was blue light and I became kind of obsessed with it, so I was really excited. And it helped me to see, wow, she gave 39 things, and I'm doing, whoa, 16 of them regularly and three sometimes, or whatever.

[00:29:45] So, Lisa, I know that, in our community, a lot of our conversation is obviously about fasting, but also about eating, and food as medicine, and things. So I'm curious, as far as cortisol-lowering or cortisol-spiking, are there any food or food items that we should be thinking about?

**Lisa** [00:30:07] There's several on the list, but one of the things I really like, and I hear lots of good comments from people in the Community, are the omega-3 fatty acids and probiotics. You know, we've got salmon and sardines and whatnot that are on the fat-fast list, so that sets us up too. So the omega-3 fatty acids, they are essential fats that play a

crucial role in our brain functioning, and in inflammation reduction, and in our overall health. And they are very good at keeping our cortisol down within check. So I would highly recommend that too, that you check into getting, you know, your omega-3s in the right balance.

**Terri** [00:30:53] Which is so fascinating because, of course, everything you say leads to like four other things that we talk a lot about in the Community. But a lot of this then, around those fatty acids, is around the right balance, whereas, I don't know, 40 years ago or so, we all started to learn that we were supposed to be eating all of these omega-6s, and all of the fats that we were cooking in, and supposed to be adding to our food, were these PUFAs and these polyunsaturated fatty acids. And so, again, those actually are not effective the way you just described of the omega-3s, that we need the right balance. And unfortunately, with the way a lot of our processed food is created, and a lot of our fats that we're taught to use to make things tasty and to cook things in, actually put us in the wrong balance between the omega-3s and the omega-6s. So I think that's another important piece for people to be looking at. Not only are you getting enough of the omega-3s, but are you getting too many omega-6s?

**Lisa** [00:31:56] And the omega-6s are in a lot of our processed foods. So that's the issue. Get those processed foods down.

**Terri** [00:32:04] That's right.

**Lisa** [00:32:05] Real food, real signals. Fake food, fake signals. Just keep that in mind.

**Terri** [00:32:11] Isn't it funny that we could choose a topic like cortisol and it still comes back to these whole-food strategies and things. Like, those of you who are in our community, those of you who come to these meetings, and those of you who listen to us here, of course, you hear the repeat of these themes because it all ties back in together.

**Lisa** [00:32:31] Yeah, Nadia's five pillars are very strong. You know, they're all about the insulin. It's interesting. It's lifestyle change, right?

**Terri** [00:32:40] Absolutely. Well, I'm going to keep working on my list of 39 things and see how many of them I can get into my regular routine so that I don't get a cortisol baby, and can keep working on all these health reasons why it's so important to keep cortisol lower and better managed. Lisa, I wanted to thank you for being here with me today. It's always good to get to talk with you and always good to get to hear the knowledge that you share and the insights that you have. So thank you so much for being willing to join me in this today.

**Lisa** [00:33:12] Sure, we'll come back next year and explain why hydration is so important to keep your cortisol down. I could go on and on. [laughter] So thanks, Terri. It's always a pleasure working with you, always a pleasure to talk to you. Thank you.

**Terri** [00:33:27] Thank you. All right, everyone, if this was helpful for you today, if you heard some little gems in here that were helpful to you and you think might be helpful to someone else, please don't hesitate to share this episode with your friends, family, colleagues, whomever. Maybe it would make those people that you don't really like at that party not raise your glucose so much if you shared this with them. [laughs] You can make new connections. But seriously, we appreciate when people give us feedback. We appreciate when people share our episodes because it helps us get into more people's



lives. And one of our big goals here is to help as many people as we can and to really spread this message. So please give us some feedback, share this, and help us out here to get these messages out.

[00:34:14] And I will be back again soon with another guest. And Lisa will be back again soon with an episode with Dr. Fung. So keep listening and we will see you soon. Take good care, everybody. Bye.