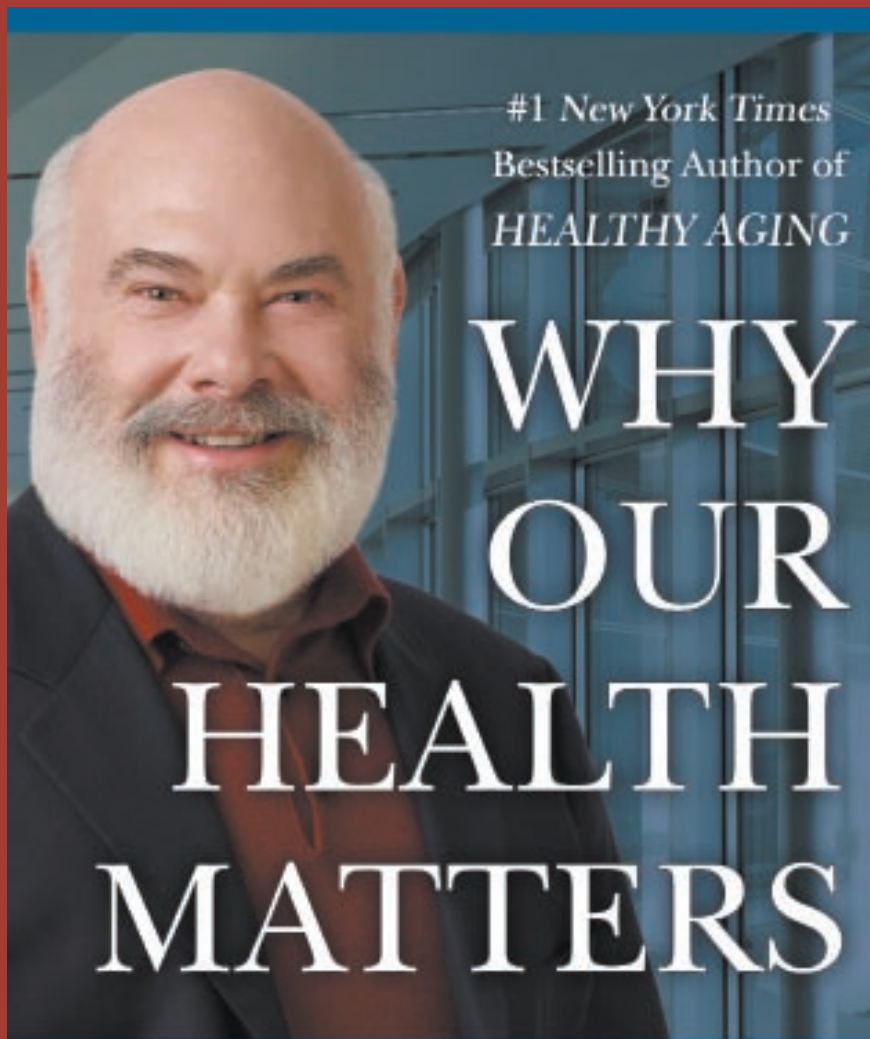


An Interview with Dr. Andrew Weil

by Karen Rider, MA



Integrative medicine is the nation's best hope for raising the quality and lowering the cost of health care," Andrew Weil, M.D explained to the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions at a hearing titled "Integrative Care: A Pathway to a Healthier Nation". Dr. Weil is a world-renowned pioneer in the field of integrative medicine who has twice appeared on the cover of TIME magazine.

Combining a Harvard education and a lifetime of practicing natural and preventive medicine, Dr. Weil is the founder and director of the Arizona Center for Integrative Medicine (AzCIM) at the University of Arizona in Tucson. He is an internationally recognized expert for his views on healthy lifestyle, his philosophy of healthy aging, and his critique of the future of medicine and health care. For the past 30 years, Weil has devoted himself to developing, practicing, and teaching others about the principles of integrative medicine. Weil has an inexhaustible network that supports his mission to provide valuable information and insight on how to incorporate conventional and complementary medicine practices in one's life to optimize the body's natural healing power.

A prolific author, Dr. Weil is a columnist for Prevention magazine, offers health tips at drweilblog.com and is the editorial director of drweil.com, a leading web resource for healthy living based on the philosophy of integrative medicine. Approximately 10 million copies of Dr. Weil's books—including five consecutive New York Times bestsellers—have sold, including *Spontaneous Healing*, *8 Weeks to Optimum Health*, *Eating Well for Optimum Health*, *The Healthy Kitchen*, and *Healthy Aging*.

In our interview, Weil shares his definition of health, describes personal health responsibility and calls for change in medical education. He talks about the future of integrative medicine for a nation in the midst of a health crisis. His latest book, *Why Our Health Matters: A Vision of Medicine That Can Transform Our Future* (Hudson Street Press, 2009) illuminates how we have let healthcare in America become overpriced and ineffective - and what we can all do to fix it.

Karen:

We hear that Integrative Medicine is the way of the future. Is there agreement among holistic practitioners as to what this looks like? What's your vision for IM America?

Dr. Weil:

Our current system of healthcare in the United States is ineffective at promoting the health of its citizens, far too expensive, and unsustainable. The healthcare "debate" has focused primarily on insurance reform, but discussion on the content of optimal healthcare has yet to begin in earnest. Many experts have weighed in, but I believe that integrative medicine, with its emphasis on disease prevention and health promotion, is the only practical way to transform our healthcare system.

I define integrative medicine as healing oriented medicine that takes account of the whole person (body, mind and spirit), including all aspects of diet and lifestyle. It emphasizes the therapeutic relationship between patient and healthcare practitioner, and makes use of all appropriate therapies, both conventional and alternative.

My partners at AzCIM and I are working to ensure that doctors of the future will recognize their primary role to be supporting the optimal functioning of their patients' innate healing systems, not the management of disease. They will do this by focusing on the individual nature of patients, appropriately using inexpensive and non-invasive means like diet and lifestyle changes first to both prevent and treat the root causes of disease, resorting to invasive and drug therapies to treat illness and suppress symptoms only when absolutely necessary.

Karen:

Many integrative physicians are not able to accept insurance, as they can't adhere to seeing 'x' number of patients per hour. They tend to spend much more time with each patient. What can we, 'the average, holistic minded citizens,' do to educate our lawmakers and insurance companies that we need broader access to the services provided by all forms of integrative physicians?

Dr. Weil:

In the future, the time necessary to support the healing relationship between patient and any licensed practitioner will be honored and reimbursed accordingly, but we will each be asked to accept greater responsibility for our own health. To get to that place more quickly, patients and practitioners need to work together and call for the opportunity to discuss with representatives of the insurance industry and our elected officials the looming healthcare crisis. Whether these discussions take place in community forums, think tanks, or seminars they will ultimately contribute to taking back our health. In "Why Our Health Matters", I list a number of actions each of us can take to promote the change we need in our healthcare system.

Karen:

In many parts of the country, conventional physicians remain closed-minded towards natural health care. How do we change attitudes, such as these?

Dr. Weil:

Physician perspectives towards healthcare are largely

formed during medical school, internship and residency training, where disease is well defined but health is not. As a starting point, no future doctor should leave training without a working definition of health. I define health as a positive state of wholeness, balance and resilience that allows us to move through our environments without being injured by all the things out there with the potential to cause us harm. Practicing physicians should likewise be armed with this definition of health.

In addition, there needs to be greater emphasis placed on training in and personal time allotted for the personal health and wellbeing of people entering the healing arts. When a practitioner can easily define what good health means for themselves, and actively participates in dietary and lifestyle measures to help optimize their own health, they can more authentically offer appropriate recommendations to their patients. My partners at AzCIM and I have developed a model integrative medicine curriculum that meets these needs and that is now being used at medical centers across the nation.

Karen:

There are many changes needed in our healthcare system that will take years to initiate and implement entirely. What do you feel will create the largest impact in the interim?

Dr. Weil:

A shift in perceived responsibility of the individual and the role of the healthcare practitioner is mandatory. Each of us needs to understand that it is our own responsibility, and not that of our doctors or the healthcare system, to support our innate healing capacity. Our doctors can help facilitate the optimal functioning of our healing systems, first and foremost through the creation of a healing relationship with us, and then by recommending healthy diet and lifestyle measures and a blend of carefully considered conventional and alternative therapies to help us stay well. The ultimate responsibility for staying healthy, however, rests with us as individuals.

Karen:

Since you wrote "Healthy Aging: A Lifelong Guide to Your Physical and Spiritual Well-being", what would you add to your chapter on Thoughts, Emotions, Attitude? What new research do you see happening in this area?

Dr. Weil:

When I wrote "Healthy Aging," troubles were on the horizon but the Great Recession had yet to begin. Now our country is beset with rising unemployment, war continues, and recent natural disasters have shaken us to the core; but the central tenets of my second chapter on the mind still hold true.

Our habitual ways of thinking color how we see not only the world but ourselves as well. All too often our thinking is negative, which promotes a sense of being out of control, belief that we are unworthy or unlovable and rampant fear, anxiety and depression. Negative patterns of thought, however, can be changed for the better. Optimism can be learned; a positive framing of circumstances can defeat fear and encourage productive action. Some useful techniques for improving our thought processes include meditation, laughter, yoga and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy. I anticipate that during these chal-

lenging times researchers will further explore the benefits of mind / body therapies, and that health benefits beyond those already accepted will be identified.

Karen:

Is there a place for intuition in the educational system? What are some ways we can inform people about, and teach them how to tap this amazing resource within each of us?

Dr. Weil:

Many people believe that intuition is a “gift” that you either have or don’t. I disagree. Intuition is an important aid in self-healing, as well as an invaluable part of the healer’s art (albeit one that conventional medicine doctors typically distrust in favor of elaborate and expensive testing), and it can be taught. Just as there is the potential for learned optimism one can learn to be more intuitive, to trust your “gut” instincts. While intuition originates in the unconscious mind, many of the same techniques used to elicit optimism are applicable: meditation, breathing exercises and yoga can quiet the mind enough to both dispel negative thoughts and open us up to images from the unconscious.

Karen:

With all that you do, I wonder how you keep up with yourself! What is your favorite self-care practice?

Dr. Weil:

I am fortunate to be engaged in fulfilling and important works, and I take good care of myself so I can continue these efforts. There are many self-care practices that I enjoy, but my favorite is breath work. Simple breathing exercises help me to stay calm, upbeat, and energized. You can find sample breathing exercises on my web site (<http://www.drweil.com/drw/u/ART02039/the-art-and-science-of-breathing.html>).

Karen:

What’s next?

Dr. Weil:

I will continue writing, advocating and teaching. I am developing more True Food restaurants. True Food Kitchen (TFK) features dishes that adhere to the principles of the anti-inflammatory diet. TFK brings together delicious flavors, healthy nutrients, environmental awareness and an inviting atmosphere to create an unforgettable dining experience.

Dr. Weil was interviewed by Karen M. Rider, M.A., a freelance writer who covers stories and subjects that educate, enlighten and entertain. She also writes fiction that explores human and spiritual potential. She may be reached at 860-638-8140 or at karenm-rider@comcast.net.