



Larry Dossey, MD, author of *Prayer Is Good Medicine* and *The Extraordinary Healing Power of Ordinary Things*, among other books, has profoundly influenced the recognition in the conventional medical field of the role of mind and spirit in health, notably through his research on prayer and what he terms “nonlocal mind” (mind not confined to the brain and body but spread infinitely throughout space and time). A former editor of *Alternative Therapies in Health and Medicine*, he is executive editor of *Explore: The Journal of Science and Healing*. He was born in 1940 in Groesbeck, Texas.



The Power of the Ordinary

In health care today, we are headed in a narrow direction with our focus on high-tech, very expensive approaches. The simple things in life are regarded as perhaps interesting or occasionally helpful in promoting healing, but irrelevant when ranked against high-tech intervention such as DNA manipulation, drugs, and surgery. In my view, this is putting the cart before the horse. I believe there are simple things in life, which typically go unnoticed, that can contribute enormously to our health and longevity. These things are usually free, cause no side effects, and don't require someone in a white coat to administer them. I call them treasures hidden in plain sight.

In my recent book, *The Extraordinary Healing Power of Ordinary Things*, I discuss fourteen of these treasures in plain sight. Some of them may seem outrageous, such as the value of forgetting or the value of dirt, but that is one of the reasons I included them—the fact that they will catch people's attention and get them to stop and think about what the value of forgetting or the value of dirt might be. Other hidden treasures that have healing power for us are optimism, novelty, mystery, risk, tears, unhappiness, doing nothing, music, plants, bugs, hearing voices, and miracles (the spontaneous occurrences we call miracles). Research reveals profound evidence that these simple treasures are extraordinarily influential in our health and longevity.

The value of some of these treasures is fairly sensational. People might surmise, for example, that the benefit that optimists enjoy over pessimists is a better quality of life, but the benefits go far beyond that. Optimism actually extends your life span. Research has shown that optimists live several years longer than people who do not have an optimistic attitude. One study looked at the difference in longevity of people with diagnosed heart disease depending on whether they were optimistic or pessimistic. Within a year after the

diagnosis, those who were pessimistic had eight times the risk of dying compared to the optimists.

Beyond the Comfort Zone

Compelling research examined the behavior of approximately fifteen thousand American women to determine why some of the women as they got older aged mentally and lost their cognitive skills, while many did not. The researchers were satisfied that some of this had to do with exercise, diet, and weight management, but they were surprised to discover that the women who preserved their mental faculties as they got older were those who engaged in behaviors that were mentally challenging. The behaviors they were able to single out were simple things like working crossword puzzles, reading books, and playing board games. In other words, it seemed to be one of those examples of “use it or lose it.” As they got older, the women who engaged in these mentally challenging exercises had mental faculties far beyond women who did not engage in these activities, all other factors being equal.

These simple mind exercises are the most basic example of the activities we can undertake to help maintain our well-being as we age. Mystery, novelty (new experiences in life), and risk taking have even greater benefits. If we want to take precautions to keep our mental acuity as we get older, these ought to be on the drawing board. Activities or experiences with these traits take us out of habits, ruts, and routines, and stretch us both mentally and emotionally. The activities can be quite simple and don’t have to cost anything. Unfortunately, introducing such challenges on a regular basis is still not in the health strategy of most people. We attend to our blood pressure and cholesterol, avoid smoking, and try to eat a healthful diet, but we fail to attend to the simpler and equally important health and longevity factors of mystery, novelty, and risk taking.

It requires some work and effort to push ourselves beyond our comfort boundary. Learning a new language is one of the ways we can do this. There are abundant other resources around us that can help us create mystery, novelty, and risk in our lives. We have only to be willing to look outside our usual box of experience.

The activity or experience need not be exotic. I recently took up something that I have always had a fascination with but never done: bread baking. The challenge of the new was made more challenging by the extra tricks required to bake bread successfully at the nearly eight thousand feet altitude at which I live. I took some lessons, and it turned into a hugely fulfilling experience.

We can let our imaginations run wild to discover the experiences that will carry us outside our everyday lives. I have seen older people take up things that we associate with young people, like flying kites. Where I live, there is a kite-flying club for older people. It's such a pleasure to see them get outdoors and frolic, laugh, and play as if they are fifty years younger than they are.

Researchers and biological scientists are fascinated by whether it is only humans that seek novelty and risk taking or whether there is evidence of these impulses in other species. Studies have established that we are not the only ones. For example, a strain of rat that researchers of aging have studied demonstrates two subdivisions within the strain. One strain of these rats holds back from running a new maze, whereas the other strain of rats takes on a new maze with gusto and appears to love the challenge of running a new pathway. As it turns out, the rats that rise to the challenge of running a new maze live 50 percent longer than the rats that hold back. That is a cute little affirmation that there is something in the biology of mammals that needs to take on new challenges and benefits in terms of longevity from that experience.

Almost everything in our culture goes against stretching into the new. We want to be comfortable and happy; for most people, being comfortable means staying in the familiar. There are all sorts of sociological, psychological, and cultural incentives to staying where you are, but the opposite is better for your well-being. The benefits of audacious aging come not from being comfortable and staying with what you know, but from exposing yourself to a little discomfort, to that which challenges you, seeking out the treasures hidden in plain sight. There is a phenomenon that occurs with these treasures; that is, they augment each other. For example, most people who introduce novelty into their lives, challenging themselves with new experiences, wind up being more optimistic and fulfilled than people who stay in habits, ruts, and routines.

I have been fascinated to discover that risk taking and getting out of the ordinary habits of life actually benefits immunity. Studies out of the University of Tennessee have shown that the immune systems of young men who have been in trouble with legal authorities and who, for example, have shown too much aggressiveness in life, gotten into fights, and wound up in jail, are much more active than the immune systems of their well-behaved counterparts. That fascinates me because it suggests that there is something about risk taking and drifting out of the ordinary, the predictable, and culturally and socially approved habits that benefits the immune system. I am not advocating that people break the law, but I am saying that

moving out of ordinary ways of behaving benefits certain aspects of our physiology.

Unfortunately, my observation of people in my own age group is that, as they get older, they tend to narrow their interests and boundaries, they often become dull and boring, and it is difficult to nudge them. In my travels and lectures at medical schools, I rarely find someone over the age of fifty who is willing to engage the evidence of distance healing and who can openly confront the data surrounding prayer research showing that people do have the ability to make a difference in someone's physiology through their compassion, love, and prayers delivered from afar. This is the most immediate way in which I see people narrowing and staying in their habits, ruts, and routines.

Stepping Off the Conventional Path

Sometimes we don't make a conscious effort to move out of ordinary ways of behaving, but the events of our lives take us there. That is how I moved beyond my comfort boundaries in the field of medicine. I confess that I was relatively conventional. The first major nudge that pushed me in a different direction happened during my last year in university. I was finishing a degree in pharmacy at the University of Texas in Austin and preparing to enter medical school that fall when I came down with what turned out to be acute appendicitis.

Like a dutiful student, I turned myself in at the university health center. I was given an emergency appendectomy, and it was a horrible experience. I did not get to meet the surgeon ahead of time; he simply didn't think it was necessary. I did not get to meet the anesthesiologist; he was simply too busy. I woke up in terrible pain, not knowing what the diagnosis was. I was scared, alone, filled with anxiety, and hurting like crazy. Then something simple transpired. A nurse came by, held my hand, and said, "Larry, don't worry, everything is going to be fine."

It was as if someone had flipped a switch in my brain and body. All the pain went away almost immediately, as did the anxiety and fear. I didn't know what had happened, though I knew it was a profound moment. I didn't know what healing was—that word was not in my vocabulary—but the moment was seared into my memory and has stayed with me ever since. It was a dramatic early episode in learning that very simple things can radically alter our sense of being, our appreciation of pain, and our health.

An appendectomy is regarded as a medical intervention. At that time, the hand-holding and reassurance wouldn't have fallen into that category. But now research is showing that, in fact, these things are medical interventions. I don't care whether people call it the placebo response or bedside manner—those are just words—but there is something profound that happens in the body during such moments as I experienced, and much of my work since has been to unravel these kinds of phenomena.

I recall when biofeedback burst upon the scene in the late 1960s. For the first time, we had evidence that achieving a certain mental posture or thought could make a meter move on a gadget that measured your skin temperature or blood pressure. Biofeedback enabled me to finally resolve the terrible migraine headaches from which I had suffered since grade school. None of my medical training had shown me how to do that. My profound biofeedback experience gave me insight into the power of the mind to change something physical.

It's interesting to look back and see where we've come from. I was so impressed with the power of this particular therapy that I formed one of the first biofeedback laboratories in the state of Texas in the early 1970s. The reaction from my colleagues was mixed horror. Actually, many people at the time thought that biofeedback and using your mind in these ways was just a little short of satanic. We've come a long way since then. Today, nobody raises an eyebrow over things like meditation and relaxation, but that wasn't the case a mere thirty years ago.

Yes, You Can Change

After the publication of my book on the power of the ordinary to heal, I discussed at medical schools and hospitals around the country the value of optimism. I constantly encountered the objection that there was no need to discuss this because people are the way they are by birth; you're either born an optimist or a pessimist, the argument went, and you can't change that. There is strong evidence refuting that belief.

One of the leading researchers in this area is Dr. Martin Seligman, a past president of the American Psychological Association. He introduced the concept of "learned optimism." For fifteen years or so, Dr. Seligman has conducted research with young children, college students, and adults showing that, by using certain psychological techniques, one can shift one's outlook from profound pessimism to optimism. In addition, the research reveals that as people go through

these training programs, their physiology changes, with improvements in immunity and reduction in stress hormone levels.

The old complaint that we are by nature predisposed and therefore stuck with our optimism or pessimism doesn't hold up anymore. The outlook for anyone who wishes to change is quite good. The method that Dr. Seligman recommends has to do with "cognitive restructuring," which is a systematic way of shifting your reactions to certain things that have happened in your life. This may sound mysterious, but it really isn't; almost anyone can master it. So people can change—that's the good news.

It is important to cognitive restructuring to choose your friends carefully because pessimism is catching. If you surround yourself with optimists, however, you're likely to catch optimism instead of pessimism. Reading about how people maintained an optimistic sense during some of the darkest times in the twentieth century or at other hard periods in human history also helps foster optimism.

We are so blessed in this country. Most of us are well fed, clothed, and sheltered. Most of us have comforts that the great monarchs throughout history never even envisioned. Somehow, all of this isn't enough to prompt optimism. That baffles me. We have forgotten how to focus on our blessings. To remember, it helps to back up and look at the big picture. When we consider the rest of the world, we realize the advantages we have. Travel, especially in the Third World, also helps restore perspective, as does volunteering in a soup kitchen or doing work for Habitat for Humanity or other community organization. Seeing how hard some people have it makes it more difficult to be pessimistic about our privileged lives.

I've written several books on the virtues of compassion, love, and prayer in helping people get well. One of the models of consciousness that I've evolved over the years, along with quite a number of other researchers, has been this idea of nonlocal mind, nonlocal consciousness, which implies that some aspect of who we are is infinite in space and time. If you reason through the implications, you come out with a model of consciousness that says that at some point, at some level of consciousness, we are immortal. If the certainty of immortality isn't enough to arouse a little optimism, I don't know what it will take!

