AN EXCLUSIVE LOOK AT...
Oprah’s New Farm!
How She’s Growing Healthier—and You Can Too!

Bob Greene’s #1 Secret to Eating Smarter and Leaner

28 Fresh Ideas for a Happier, Stronger You

The Surprising Path to Joy: Just Take This One Simple Step, pg. 13
The Power of the Placebo

The science behind the body's surprising ability to heal itself.

Q: How does this happen?
A: When you're given a medicine—placebo or not—that you believe will help treat whatever is ailing you, your body's relaxation response can naturally turn on. You may think, I'm doing something to help. My needs are being tended. These positive thoughts can set off the release of healing hormones and neurotransmitters—such as dopamine, nitric oxide, and endorphins—into your bloodstream. The effects of these chemicals can be powerful: Nitric oxide can increase blood flow to your organs, for instance, and endorphins can act like nature's morphine, dulling pain.

Q: Can negative thoughts have the opposite effect?
A: Yes. In some cases, negative thinking is the cause of the "nocebo effect"—in which patients feel worse after learning that a treatment may have negative side effects. In fact, in one study, asthmatics who inhaled a harmless solution that they had been told contained irritating allergens started wheezing. What's more, the researchers found that the subjects' bronchi actually constricted as a result. Our body's natural self-repair systems can't work properly if we're chronically stressed or pessimistic. They're more effective when the relaxation response is dominant.

Q: Besides positive thinking, what else helps the healing process?
A: You need a healthcare provider who can give you the time you deserve—not someone who's trying to see 40 patients in seven-minute visits. I used to be that kind of doctor, but hurrying through appointments doesn't put people at ease. Research suggests that nurturing care, specifically from those in the white coats, can have its own kind of placebo effect. The more face time a person gets with attentive, concerned doctors, the more likely that a placebo will work.

Q: Is it possible to harness the power of the placebo without a pill?
A: One of the most important questions I ask patients with chronic conditions is, what does your body need in order to heal? I hear all sorts of things, from "I need to fix my toxic marriage or leave" to "I need to quit my job." One woman said, "I need to move to my vacation home in Santa Fe. Whenever I go there, my symptoms disappear." I'm not saying medical care isn't necessary, but when you have a chronic condition, you owe it to yourself to do everything you can to activate your body's natural self-healing systems. Finding whatever it is that puts you in a state of neurologic relaxation can be just as important as going to the doctor.