

# Mimi Guarneri, MD

## Nourishing Your Whole Heart



Dr. Guarneri is board-certified in cardiovascular disease, nuclear cardiology, and integrative holistic medicine. She is president of the Academy of Integrative Health and Medicine and a clinical associate professor at the University of California, San Diego. She is also the co-founder and medical director of Guarneri Integrative Health, Inc. at Pacific Pearl La Jolla, where she leads a team of experts in conventional, integrative, and natural medicine. She is the author of *The Heart Speaks* and *108 Pearls to Awaken Your Healing Potential*.

You'll find out what the latest research tells us about how nutrition, exercise, and healthy relationships with yourself, others, and the planet can nourish and protect your physical, emotional, and spiritual heart.

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**Ocean Robbins:** Welcome to the Food Revolution Summit, where we explore how you can heal your body, and your world, with food. This is Ocean Robbins, and I am joined by my dad and colleague, John Robbins, in welcoming our friend and guest, Dr. Mimi Guarneri.

Dr. Guarneri is board-certified in cardiovascular disease, internal medicine, nuclear cardiology, and integrative holistic medicine. She is president of the Academy of Integrative Health and Medicine, serves on the founding board of the American Board Physician Specialties and Integrative Medicine, and is a clinical associate professor at University of California, San Diego.

Dr. Guarneri has been interviewed on countless broadcast shows, including Dr. Oz, NBC Today, and PBS's Full Focus, and To The Contrary. Her work was featured in a two-part PBS documentary, *The New Medicine*. She is author of *The Heart Speaks: A Cardiologist Reveals the Secret Language of Healing*, and also of *108 Pearls to Awaken Your Healing Potential*.<sup>1,2</sup>

So, now, Mimi, we are so grateful for your brilliant work, and so excited for this time with you. And now for the interview, I'm going to hand it over to my dad and colleague, John Robbins.

**John Robbins:** Well, thank you, Ocean, for that introduction, and thank you Mimi for being with us again today.

**Dr. Mimi Guarneri:** Thank you both, it's terrific to be here, thank you.

**John Robbins:** I'm remembering something you told me, and it made a real impact on me. I remember you saying that when you were just, I think, eight years old, your mom died of a sudden heart attack, and I think she was just, like, 40 or so. And then just a decade later your then, maybe, 50 year old dad died of heart disease. Mimi, did these tragic incidents have something to do with your eventual decision to become a cardiologist?

**Dr. Mimi Guarneri:** Well I have to say, absolutely, and when you live through these kinds of events in your life at an early age, you are left with a big impression. And one of the things I learned about cardiovascular disease early on is it really is preventable and we really can save lives. And, so, having lost two critically important lives, both of my parents, it's only logical that that's the direction I went.

## **Learning to Ask Why**

**John Robbins:** Well, you mentioned that most heart disease is preventable. My understanding is that you were at first an interventional cardiologist. You were performing angioplasties and stent procedures, hundreds of them a year. But at some point, Mimi, while you were doing those procedures, did it occur to you to ask why these peoples' arteries were blocked in the first place?

**Dr. Mimi Guarneri:** You know, that's such a great question, because here I'm a highly trained, what's called interventional cardiologist, putting in stents, over 700 a year, as you said, and never asked a

question why. Our goal was to take the acute problem and solve it. And that could be, somebody's having a heart attack, let's open the artery. Somebody has a 90% blockage, and they're having chest pain, let's open the artery. That's our paradigm. It wasn't until many years later I began to ask the why question.

**John Robbins:** Well my understanding is that at some point, you were practicing as an interventional cardiologist, and you undertook the Ornish Program, Dean Ornish's program. And you did so, not just as a cardiologist wanting to learn better how to be with your patients, but as a participant, right alongside your patients. And I remember you telling me that it had quite an effect.

After a lifetime of pepperoni pizza, you became a vegetarian, you began doing yoga, mediating, learning other ways to manage and lessen stress. Mimi, what effect did all this have on your risk factors for heart disease and what effect did it have on your cardiology practice?

**Dr. Mimi Guarneri:** Well it changed everything. And just to put it into perspective, I was at Scripps Clinic at the time, which was the place where the stent was developed, and I was actually working with Richard Schatz who developed the Palmaz-Schatz stent. So I was, sort of, in the heart of it, if you might put it that way.

And I opened the door to the cardiac cath lab one day and standing outside the door was Dean Ornish, who I had no clue who he was, I had never met him. And he said, "I'd like you to do a research study." And I thought for sure it would be a new stent, or a new device, because that's what I did. I published many papers on devices. And he said, "I want you to study yoga, and medi-, (laughs) and vegetarian-

**John Robbins:** (Laughs)

**Dr. Mimi Guarneri:** -diet." And I just looked at him, like, I thought this guy's nuts. And, as luck would have it, I decided to do the research study. And we took our absolute sickest patients, people who couldn't have bypass, people who were given their go home and get your affairs in order, which is something I do not like when doctors do that. And we took all those people and we put them through the lifestyle change program.

But before I can teach it and be the medical director of it, I had to learn something about this. So I decided to draw my own blood, and I had a cholesterol level that was over 300.

**John Robbins:** Oh.

## What Western Medicine Fails to Address

**Dr. Mimi Guarneri:** For those who aren't familiar with those numbers, you know, that's really high, and it goes along with my family history of heart disease. And in one week I became a vegetarian. I just said, "That's it, I'm changing everything," and I started to do yoga and meditation. I did everything I was

encouraging the patients to do. And the reality is, I never looked back. I began to realize that acute care is what Western medicine does well. You know, people who are having a heart attack, a stroke, get hit with a car, you need a major medical center to get you out of that trouble right now.

Where we are terrible in Western medicine is in preventing disease and creating health. And so I began to ask that question you started with. What is causing the problem in the first place? And that has been my quest for the last 20 odd years.

**John Robbins:** Well during those 20 years, 20 odd and beautiful ones I think, you've been researching and practicing a holistic and integrative approach to health, and you've been guiding your patients to their optimal healing potential, which is not what you were first taught in medical, so it's not what prevails in Western medicine as a rule. But I'm sure that during this time you have witnessed, and you've supported profound healings in your patients, and I'm sure you've continually learned from your patients. Mimi, can you tell us about a patient that comes to mind, whose journey stands out for you as particularly moving or significant in some way?

**Dr. Mimi Guarneri:** Well, thank you for that question. And I just want to add one little piece to the last question, which is my cholesterol was over 300, remember, and I became a vegetarian, and transformed the way I responded to stress and tension through yoga and meditation, which, by the way, stress effects cholesterol of course, and my cholesterol came down to 100. It dropped-

**John Robbins:** Wow.

**Dr. Mimi Guarneri:** -over 200 points, and that is the power of a vegetarian diet, and it's also the power of learning to transform your stress response, and lifestyle change. So, that to me became the most powerful medicine. And I thought if I can do it, I can teach my patients how to do this.

And I have so many (laughs) wonderful stories. One that comes to mind immediately is a man who was told, you know, there's nothing else we can do for you, go and get your affairs in order. And you have to remember this is in the 1990s. And we tried to not call it vegetarian diet, we called it plant-based diet, because we were afraid that if we said vegetarian in the '90s right up front, these people who had been eating meat and potatoes their whole life would say, "Oh, no," you know, "I'm not gonna do that."

So we disguised all our terms. We called yoga and meditation stress management, and so on. And, this one gentleman came in and we said we want to do research and you're going to be in this study for a year. And I'll never forget what he said. He said, "If you think I'm gonna be alive a year from now," he said, "I'll eat and do anything you tell me." And he went on for another 15 years. And I have patient after patient that fits that kind of story.

**John Robbins:** So Western medicine issues a prognosis that's highly pessimistic. The belief is that this patient or these patients... that there's nothing more Western medicine can do for them. And so they're told to go home and I think, when you say put your affairs in order, it's, kind of, a euphemism for die, and yet they get better, and they (laughs) live a lot more years. Healthy ones, I imagine.

**Dr. Mimi Guarneri:** It became so profound to me, because it wasn't just one patient, it was patient after patient. And what I saw was people, yes, of course, they'd lose weight, they'd get more energy, they'd sleep better, they started to talk about things that were really important to them. We used to joke and we'd say, "We open our heart not with bypass but with love," right? With compassion, with empathy, that's how we open our heart now.

I have patients to this day, John, that still come to me in my practice that participated in these programs 10, 15 years ago, and they are still going strong. I just have to say that the research is out there, not just Ornish. Even a study called INTERHEART for example, 52 countries, first heart attack could be prevented through lifestyle change in 92% of people.<sup>3</sup> There is no drug that can do that, and yet we continue to go to this ill to the pill model of medicine. I won't even call it health care, because it's really not about health. It's disease care.

## **It's the Food, Not the Diet**

**John Robbins:** Now, you've mentioned a couple of times, a vegetarian diet. And I've been struck by the fact that vegetarians and vegans have lower rates of heart disease, of cancer, of diabetes, of dementia, and many other illnesses.<sup>4-8</sup> But there are some vegetarians who eat a lot of bagels, and pretzels, and white rice and crackers, and cookies, and cakes, and candies. These are all vegan foods, mostly.

Mimi, when you encounter a patient who is that type of a vegetarian, or that type of a vegan, what is it that you want them to know?

**Dr. Mimi Guarneri:** Well, the first thing we want to know, the first thing I could talk to with any patient is to look at something as simple as the difference, what happens to your body when you eat sugar? What happens to your body when you eat simple carbohydrates? How can we start to move you from foods that bring up your blood sugar, bring up your insulin level, drop you down, make you feel tired, how can we shift you to...

My favorite foods on the planet are vegetables, right? So how can we get you into that vegetable world and how can we start to get you to make some simple things like lentil soups, and put some beans on a salad. I really start to walk them, meal by meal, through a program so that they can understand that they can make these substitutions. They don't have to have pasta and cheese, right, which a lot of people, "Oh, that's, hey, that's vegetarian."

That they have to understand the difference, the impact that food has. That food is information. That food, when it breaks down, it's going to have a huge impact on your cells and the gears that get turned, in terms of your Krebs cycle and so on, your ability to produce energy, your ability to think clearly. And once I start to explain to people how they can make substitutions, make changes, they get it, right? They just, a lot of people just don't know.



## What the Healthiest Foods Have in Common

**John Robbins:** Well, fortunately, more and more people are learning, these days. And that's one of the reasons we do this work, of course.

I've always been struck by how very often the same food choices that are healthiest for us personally, they give us the strongest immune system, the least susceptibility to heart disease, to cancer, and so forth, are also very often the same food choices that are better for the planet.

They cause the least destruction to the ecosystem. They require the least amount of land and water and energy for their production. And by eating organically and lower on the food chain, we're exposing ourselves to fewer toxins, we're also contributing to an agricultural system that doesn't depend on poisons, and we're doing our bodies a favor.

Mimi, are the same food choices that are better for the planet and better for our bodies, that can do so much to prevent and even reverse heart disease, are they also preventive against cancer?

**Dr. Mimi Guarneri:** They are preventative against heart disease, they're good for the brain, and they're preventative against cancer. I mean, if nothing else, we know that cancer loves sugar, by and large, right? So, for those of us who practice integrative holistic medicine, we really push, or encourage I should say, all of our patients to get off the sugar and simple carbs to not spike up their insulin. We encourage people to use food functionally. We know, for example, fiber lowers cholesterol.<sup>9</sup> Fiber lowers blood sugar. Fiber decreases colon cancer risk. Lycopene in tomatoes and prostate cancer.<sup>10</sup> Food is medicine. We use that as a saying, but it's real.

And unfortunately, and I have to just, this may seem a little political, (laughs) but we always have to say, in integrative medicine, we say, "What's the underlying cause of the problem?" You know, I always approach everything like a tree, and I say, "Well, if the tree is sick, do we just cut off branches or do we look at the soil? Do we look at the environment the sick tree is in?" And the same is true for people, right? What kind of environment? What are they putting into their body? Are they sleeping? How do they respond to stress and tension? All of these things. Going to the underlying cause.

And when I think about this, it's what we subsidize with our money, with our taxpayer dollars. What are we subsidizing? Are we subsidizing, you know, monoculture farms that make corn which ends up as high-fructose corn syrup in everything? Are we subsidizing an agricultural industry with CAFOs to make cheap meat? Or are we subsidizing organic farmers to make fruits and vegetables and legumes and so on. And I think we know the answer to that. And that's where, I believe, if we don't get to root cause, it's really hard to turn this around. So we have to keep pushing for legislation that changes this.

**John Robbins:** We need to subsidize the foods that make us healthy, not the ones that make us sick, and make it easier for people and more affordable for people and more convenient for people to eat healthfully and make good choices.

## How to Spot Micronutrients

**John Robbins:** I'm thinking about choices and when I'm shopping, I will look for intense colors. I will look for purple grapes and dark greens, and I'll look for vegetables that are dark green, like kale and spinach and collards and broccoli.

And I'll relish the colors, deep red beets, or green or yellow squash, or purple sweet potatoes, or the deep orange color of yams. And of course I love the colorful fruits. Strawberries, blackberries, and blueberries, and raspberries, and I find these deep, rich colors in fruits and vegetables, they're beautiful and they're attractive, but they're more than that. They're also signs that a fruit or a vegetable is high in natural phytonutrients. Mimi, why is it that getting plenty of phytonutrients in our diets is so important for our health and wellbeing?

**Dr. Mimi Guarneri:** So what is not taught to people is that every chemical process in the human body, for our cells to produce energy, for our mitochondria which is the energy producer of the cell, requires micronutrients. And those micronutrients may look like magnesium, manganese, molybdenum, copper, zinc, vitamin D, iron. I mean, the list goes on and on. So when we eat, those phytonutrients get transformed into energy. That's how we have to think about that.

Seeds, for example, a seed can build an entire tree, can grow into a tree, so imagine the potential of something as simple as seeds. Now, when we think about all the minerals, we have to think about getting in our proper allocation of healthy fats like nuts and nut butters. So every process in our body requires these nutrients. It's fundamental to life.

## How to Find a Doctor Who Aligns With You

**John Robbins:** Well, Western medicine is, as we were mentioning before, almost entirely about treating or managing disease after it occurs. Prevention may be given some lip service but, the lack of nutritional education in medical schools is just a scandal to me.<sup>11</sup> And, and it of course determines a lot of what doctors know and have been trained to do. Mimi, what advice do you have for our listeners, who are learning about the power of food, who want to put the power of food into practice, but who are dealing with doctors who may actually know next to nothing about this?

**Dr. Mimi Guarneri:** Well, I have to tell you, the service you're providing with your programs is educating people more, (laughs) honestly, than any clinician. But for those that do want to find a clinician that can speak their language, they need to look at the Academy of Integrative Health and Medicine and click on Find A Clinician In My Area. They need to look at the Institute of Functional Medicine, click on Find A Clinician In My Area. So we have, now, a lot of people, a lot of clinicians, that are trained in this arena, and we will have more and more.

So this is like anything else, right? If the consumer buys organic, we see more organic popping up all



over the place. So if we use our power to pick those things that make a difference to us, including our clinicians, eventually Western medicine's going to look around and say, "Hey, maybe we're missing something there. Maybe we need to be more proactive and transform the way we're educating our clinicians."

And I always focus on doctors because I'm a doctor, but the reality is I can do both. You know, I could teach someone to eat vegetarian, vegan, or I can give them Lipitor to lower their cholesterol. And sometimes we do it all. So that's why I really think if we don't transform the way nurses, doctors, and so on are trained, again, we're not getting to the root cause.

## **The True Most Prized Possessions**

**John Robbins:** I'm remembering something you said in one of our other, earlier interviews — I had the opportunity to interview you before — and I was really struck by something you said then. I had asked you something about what were your most prized possessions, and I'll never forget what you, what you said. You said that your most prized possessions are your relationships, your health, and your spiritual life. And I loved that answer, Mimi. Can you tell us why you answered that way?

**Dr. Mimi Guarneri:** With my spiritual life, I feel that it is what gets me through the hard times, right? So, my spiritual practice, which consists of meditation, chanting, consists of spiritual singing, really is the glue that holds me together when things are stressful. And it helps me to put things into perspective.

The relationship piece goes back to what you said when we first started speaking. I realized what's really important in life when you lose people in your life, at any point but especially when you're very young. You realize that those are what's most important, is the people you love and the people you're connected to. That's everything.

And the other piece that's really important to me is service. I really believe that as human beings, we are here to make the world a better place. And we have so much need, we have this great opportunity. Only humans can give, only humans can serve, only humans can be there for other humans, and it's such an amazing opportunity. And so that's what I've come to value.

I really learned about service through my work in India. I go to India almost every year and have been active in a lot of service programs in southern India. And I learned the difference, quite frankly, between happiness and joy. I remember my spiritual teacher said, "What's the difference?" And I really had to think about it. And I realized joy is that beauty we feel when we're serving, when we see someone's face lighten up, whether it's a child getting a present, or a woman getting a new sari, or someone getting the help, the medical help that they need, that that's what you take with you forever. Everything else is transient.

**John Robbins:** As a physician, have you ever had a patient tell you that they would happily give up their wealth if they could get back their health?

**Dr. Mimi Guarneri:** Over and over and over again. And we always say our health is our greatest wealth. And when very wealthy people get ill, they get the best medical care that money could buy, but their private jet, their yachts, their 30,000-square-foot homes, I see it all the time in my practice, is nothing if you don't have your health.

## Healing Power of Human Connection

**John Robbins:** You mentioned a moment ago, the relationship piece, the importance of our connection with others, and our service to others and for others. Mortality rates in the US now, for all causes of death and not just for heart disease, are consistently higher for divorced, for single, and for widowed people of both sexes and all races. Mimi, what does that tell you?

**Dr. Mimi Guarneri:** Well, for me, the research is very clear. Loneliness and not being alone, but loneliness is worse than smoking 15 cigarettes a day, worse than drinking excess alcohol, even worse than being obese in terms of risk. We live in a world that's become very siloed. Years ago, we'd have whole families together. Like I love that you and Ocean are working together. Years ago, it would be grandparents in the house, parents, children. It would be a community of people, and we would be connected to the people in our community.

When I grew up, I knew everyone in the neighborhood, they knew me. The door was always open to a neighbor's home and we have lost this. And I think this is one of the big breakdowns in our culture right now. And when we talk about communities like Blue Zone communities, for example, and you start to look at what these communities have in common. What they have in common is community, connection. And we have become way too siloed in my opinion.

**John Robbins:** I agree, and we need each other, we need to connect in meaningful ways. And in ways that speak to our hearts about the value that we have in each other, the treasures we have in each other. We have kind of learned in our culture, I think, to love things and use people. And I often think, well, how would it be if instead we just used things and loved people.

Most of us are conditioned to view as scientifically valid, only that which can be measured in a laboratory or in a test tube. And something is fuzzy or a femoral as human relationships can seem touchy-feely, hardly the stuff that sounds science. But I'm thinking of research that was done at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland and the researchers there studied almost 10,000 married men with no prior history of angina, which of course is chest pain that can indicate heart disease.<sup>12</sup>

The researchers found that those men who had high levels of risk factors, known risk factors, such as elevated cholesterol, high blood pressure, diabetes, and EKG abnormalities were more than 20 times

as likely to develop angina during the next five years. That's amazing. And it speaks to the importance of monitoring and handling those risk factors.

But what I found even more amazing in the same study was that they found that those men who answered yes to the simple question, "Does your wife show you her love?" had substantially less angina even when they had high levels of all of the risk factors that we just mentioned. Mimi, as a cardiologist, what do you make of findings like these?

**Dr. Mimi Guarneri:** Well, let's think about this. I mean, if you feel loved and you feel supported and you feel like you're not alone in this world, that's gonna have a huge impact on your stress hormones. Your stress hormones, adrenaline, noradrenaline, cortisol, aldosterone, they raise your blood pressure, they constrict your arteries, make your arteries tight. They put weight on your midline. They make your heartbeat go up. I mean, they do every possible thing that is bad for the heart.

**John Robbins:** Do we now have sophisticated, careful, compelling research that confirms the healing powers of friendship and love and positive connections and relationships?

**Dr. Mimi Guarneri:** We do. And there are reams of data. There's some very interesting studies that look at telomeres and telomerase enzymes. These are the enzymes of aging. It's a part of the DNA, the shorter your telomere, the older you are, right? So your biological age will be older. And what the research shows for example is that people who have suffered racial bias, people that really feel that racism, for example, and racial bias and hatred has impacted their lives, have shorter telomeres.<sup>13</sup> That to me is amazing. On a positive note, the same research done by Elizabeth Blackburn, the woman who won the Nobel Prize for her research, shows that transforming our lives, for example, to mindfulness-based stress reduction, MBSR, can improve the length of the telomere.<sup>14</sup> So we're finally starting to understand through the language of science and we can measure things now that we've never been able to measure before.

**John Robbins:** If having a loving spouse or a partner or meaningful relationships with others can make so much positive difference to the health of our hearts, I wonder sometimes if the opposite might also be true. And I remember Andy Wyle telling me once of a patient of his who had severe chronic hypertension. So even while taking drugs to lower his blood pressure, it remained dangerously high.

And this man's relationship with his wife must have been pretty bad, because the day she filed for divorce, his blood pressure suddenly normalized. It suddenly dropped to a healthy level and it stayed there for years after that without drugs.

**Dr. Mimi Guarneri:** It's a stress response, right?

## **Toxic Stress, Grief, and the Heart**

**John Robbins:** Yeah. So does this imply that being stuck in a toxic relationship creates a level of stress that can have real and measurable health consequences?

**Dr. Mimi Guarneri:** It absolutely applies. And, it's very interesting for women, a toxic relationship even has a higher mortality rate than for men. For some reason, just being married, even if they're unhappy, men seem to do better, women on the other hand do not. We always... which I've always found fascinating, when you really dig into the research. And I'll tell you one of the quick stories about my patient Al.

Al, at least every other week, was in the emergency room with congestive heart failure. And I could not figure out why for the likes of me, I was a young physician at the time. And finally his wife looked at me and she said, "Dr. Guarneri, do you think it has something to do with the fact that this happens every time Al watches a movie about World War II?" and I had to stop for a second. This man was a prisoner of war.

**John Robbins:** Oh.

**Dr. Mimi Guarneri:** And here he's watching these movies, which increase your blood pressure, increase your heart rate. And he was landing in the hospital and I kid you not the minute he, his wife and I put two and two together, we had that a-ha moment. After that, we would joke because she said he only gets to watch the Disney Channel or whatever equivalent at the time. And he never ended up having a hospitalization again.

So it's the same exact response. Andy's patient, it was prolonged hypertension living in a toxic, stressful environment. And then you also have acute stress, watching a bad movie, listening to something bad on the news. Whatever it is, has a profound effect on... It's like having a tiger chasing after you. We talk about the fight, flight reaction. It's like having that tiger chase after you, your body just gets flooded with hormones that make you sick.

**John Robbins:** I think our emotions are part of us, part of our health in ways that Western medicine, as a rule, hasn't fully acknowledged. Although you are a definite and blessed exception to that. I don't think the word grief has ever been written as the cause of a death on a death certificate, but I actually think it's possible to die of a broken heart. What do you think, Mimi?

**Dr. Mimi Guarneri:** Oh we see it. We see it all the time. And there is research that shows, after one spouse dies, you'll see the second spouse, even with no significant medical conditions, die within the six month period. Everyone in medicine recognizes this, but it was not until recently that the term broken heart syndrome or Takotsubo cardiomyopathy was coined to really be in the cardiology literature showing someone who had a profound, stressful event coming into the emergency room,

heart muscle so weak that it looks like they need a heart transplant and that's broken heart syndrome in the cardiology literature now.<sup>15</sup>

## **Love and Companionship Heal**

So this is very, very real. And I have had to sit with many children of my patients. A typical scenario would be, I take care of the husband and the wife dies, and within four months or six months, dad is remarried and the children don't understand it. I've had to sit with these kids on multiple occasions and explain that dad needs companionship. Dad has been married his entire life. He needs that connection. And for many people, men in particular, that helps them get through the trauma of the loss of a spouse.

**John Robbins:** It helps them feel better, more alive, more connected to someone who-

**Dr. Mimi Guarneri:** Not alone.

**John Robbins:** Yeah, not alone, not alone. There are so many people today who feel alone, who are alone, who don't have meaningful connections. Even though they know they would like to have more of them. In one of your books, I remember you writing of a cardiologist who would ride to the hospital in the ambulance with his patients and would ask them to talk about the things in their lives that they loved the most. And he would see their heart rate and their blood pressure fall sometimes dramatically. And in fact, none of his patients ever had a cardiac arrest in the ambulance when he did this. Mimi, why do you think this was so helpful?

**Dr. Mimi Guarneri:** Imagine a different scenario. You're having a heart attack. You know, just hearing those words is terrifying. It elicits a huge stress response, which raises blood pressure, causes the arteries to constrict even more, makes the platelets even more sticky, more prone to block the artery. I mean, the list goes on and on of what a stress reaction can do.

Now, you go back to your ambulance ride, where someone is talking about things that they love, things that make them feel happy, make them laugh, experiences in their life which were wonderful, and it has a totally different response. It's the opposite of the stress response. And that's why those people do so well. And this is why we teach in our practice, we teach people to use affirmations. I'm a big proponent of the "I am" affirmations, I teach my patients.

I am healthy. I am whole, you know. And in mindfulness we teach, if something happens, I acknowledge it. Okay? And so it is. It's just what it is right now. So much of our suffering, so much of the suffering that people have is when something happens and they try to resist it. They try to justify, "Why did this happen to me?", or, you know, "Why didn't I see this coming?", or whatever it is. So, really, it's no surprise to me that when those people were in the ambulance, hearing wonderful things that reminded them of great times in their life, it had a profound effect on their autonomic nervous system.

## Animals as Healers

**John Robbins:** For some people, when they think about the things in their lives that they're grateful for, the connections in their lives that matter really, it includes animals, it includes their pets. And, I'm remembering a study that was done at the University of Pennsylvania.

The researchers there found an unmistakable association between pet ownership and extended survival in patients hospitalized with coronary heart disease.<sup>16</sup> Those patients, they found, who had pets at home were far more likely to survive even after accounting for differences in the extent of heart damage and other medical problems. Mimi, I think you once... correct me if I'm wrong, but I believe you once wrote a prescription for a patient consisting of three words: a small dog. Why did you do that, if you did, and how did that work out for your patient, if that was, in fact, the case?

**Dr. Mimi Guarneri:** You're right. I wrote about this woman in *The Heart Speaks*, my first book.<sup>1</sup> She was so depressed. And, nothing was working, psychologists, psychiatrists, medications. Honestly, nothing was working for this woman. And, she had coronary disease, she had had a bypass. And, one day, in my office, it was just a point of inspiration, where I wrote that prescription for a dog.

And, she got the dog and she named the dog Shadow. And, the dog changed her life because now she was walking the dog, which was good for her heart, she was meeting other people who had dogs, she would go to the dog park, she'd make new friends, and she had a companion that was unconditional love. Animals are unconditional love. And, unfortunately, most humans can't give unconditional love. And, an animal is a reason to live. Animals are powerful medicine.

**John Robbins:** They are, and I'm remembering a study that discovered some of that power, more or less, by accident. It was the cardiac arrhythmia suppression trial. It was a double-blind, randomized, controlled study that was conducted by the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute. The researchers were studying the effects of two drugs on men who had had heart attacks who are now experiencing arrhythmias, irregular heartbeats. And, paradoxically, they found that the drugs caused an increase in cardiac deaths.<sup>17</sup>

But, at the same time, almost by accident, they found that those patients who had dogs at home were, in fact, only a sixth as likely to die during the study as those who didn't have dogs. Now, if the drugs, rather than the dogs, have been found to cause a sixfold decrease in deaths, I'm sure those drugs would be prescribed for every heart attack patient in the country with an irregular heartbeat and I'm sure the drug companies would be spending huge amounts of money telling us how great those drugs are. But, it wasn't the drugs that decreased death, it was the dogs.

**Dr. Mimi Guarneri:** Exactly, exactly. It's the same thing with meditation. Transcendental meditation has been shown to have a 48% reduction in heart attack, stroke, and sudden death in people with high blood pressure.<sup>18</sup> Could you imagine a drug that can say 48% reduction in heart attack, stroke,



and sudden death? Everybody would be on that drug, so everybody should be doing TM, everybody should have a dog, everyone should be vegan or vegetarian.

## Changing Medical Practices and Perspectives

**Dr. Mimi Guarneri:** The research is there. Our problem is we're not translating the science into practice, right? If a clinician is not trained in a particular area, even when the science comes out, they don't translate it into practice because it's not something they're comfortable with. I remember when we did the chelation study years ago at Scripps. And we showed that, for people with diabetes, there was a statistically significant benefit from chelation therapy. Even my cardiology colleagues, randomized, controlled trial, did not want to accept the results.

**John Robbins:** Because, they hadn't been taught it in medical school, therefore... I remember a doctor telling me once that if food was medicine, he would've learned about it in medical school and therefore he hadn't. And so, it wasn't.

**Dr. Mimi Guarneri:** Exactly, right. So, if it's not part of my paradigm, it must not be important. And, part of that, too, is you have to have a pretty big ego to practice medicine because really, you're dealing with people's lives. So, if something comes up that you don't know anything about, you have two choices, you have to say, "Okay, I don't know about this, I'm gonna find out. And then, I'll make a decision about it," or you say, "Well, I didn't learn it in medical school and therefore it must not be true." And, of course, we know that that's the wrong way to go.

**John Robbins:** I'm remembering that you ended one of your books by telling the story of an elderly man named Stu. He was a former jazz musician, I think. And, he had come to your office scheduled to have some procedure to repair a forearm tendon, I believe. And, at the time of his appointment with you, his middle finger was just dangling. It was unable to strain. But, given his age, he was quite elderly, and the multiple medical problems he was experiencing, you weren't at all happy with the idea of him undergoing anesthesia and surgery. Can you tell us what happened to this guy and why you told this story as the finale to your book?

**Dr. Mimi Guarneri:** I remember this like it was yesterday. He called in and he wanted a surgical clearance.

And, as a cardiologist, I have to give my permission basically to say surgery is safe. It was his ring finger on the right hand. And, yes, it was just dangling. And, he said, "I have to have this surgery." And, I have done a fair amount of training in healing touch and I'm certified in healing touch. And, I thought, "Okay. Well, let me do a healing touch treatment for you."

And so, for the next whatever amount of time it was, 15 or 20 minutes, I did a healing touch. I think, more importantly, I sent him love, now when I think about it, and healing intention, and put him in a sacred space for healing. And, I was actually quite surprised when he called me, or if I called him, I

forget which way it went. And, he said, "Surgery's canceled." I said, "Well, what do you mean surgery's canceled?" And, he said, "After I went home, my hand was healed."

I just, sort of, smiled and thought, "Well, that's great," never took it personally. It's not about me. And, maybe it is about the technique and maybe his hand was meant to heal. But, it was such a powerful message about the work we do as clinicians, that we can bring about healing in so many different ways that go beyond what we learned in medical school.

We could call it anything we want, including the body's innate ability to heal, we joke about this thing we call placebo. And, placebo just means pleasing and the placebo effect is extremely real. And so, now, I always see my office as a sacred space. And, it's a space where people come in for hope, that's what people come to seek doctors for, for hope.

And, in that sacred space, what can you bring? Do you bring, "Oh, you're having a heart attack panic," or do you bring calmness, do you bring healing intention, do you bring love, do you bring kindness, do you bring compassion? Not everybody is easy. We all have people in our lives who are challenges. And, sometimes, we just have to stop, and take a breath, and remember this person is hurting and this person needs love.

Whatever it is, love is always the answer and love is always the greatest healer.

**John Robbins:** Well, Mimi, you are an extraordinary human being and an extraordinary doctor. I've seen a study, it's often been cited, that found that doctors, on average, interrupt patients after 18 seconds, of them beginning to talk, but you have truly learned the healing art of listening, listening deeply to your patients, to their hearts, to your own heart, to life itself, and also helping people to understand what their own hearts are telling them.

I think if we are ever going to have a medical system that upholds the health of the human heart in all of its wondrous dimensions, it will be thanks to you and to others like you. It's really been a pleasure for me to have this conversation with you. And, Mimi, on behalf of Ocean, and myself, and of everyone involved in the Food Revolution, and of everyone who eats, I thank you for your wonderful, wonderful work and your beautiful heart. And, of course, I thank you for being with us today.

**Dr. Mimi Guarneri:** And, thank you so much for having me. And, your whole amazing team, Ocean and everyone, and your work, to transform people's health and the health of the planet, I'm grateful. Thank you.

**Ocean Robbins:** We've been sharing such a heartwarming conversation with Dr. Mimi Guarneri, President of the Academy of Integrative Health and Medicine and author of *The Heart Speaks*.<sup>1</sup> Mimi, your work combines brilliant, intellectual understanding with deep love and connection to the whole person. We are so grateful for your kind, loving, wise leadership, and for your partnership in the Food Revolution.

**Dr. Mimi Guarneri:** Thank you so much.

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