



DEAN ORNISH:



## Love As Though Your Very Survival Depended On It

I am not aware of any other factor in medicine—not diet, smoking, exercise, stress, genetics, drugs or surgery—that has a greater impact on our quality of life, incidence of illness, or possibility of premature death than love and intimacy. Scientific studies show that people who feel lonely, depressed, and isolated are five times more likely to get sick and to die prematurely compared to those who have a sense of love, connection and community. The need for love and intimacy is a basic human need that's as fundamental as eating, drinking, and sleeping. And we ignore it at our own peril.

For example, one study at Duke University found that five years after an angiogram, half of those who were unmarried and had no confidant had died, compared to only 20% of those who either were married, or were unmarried but had a confidant. If they were married, but not particularly happily married, they still lived longer than people who weren't married. Again, I think it comes down to feeling known. Even in an unhappy marriage, at least the person knows you.

An extended family, a long-term neighborhood, or a church or synagogue used to provide a place where you were seen—and not just the parts of you that were the most likable, but also your darker parts. Those people were there for you, regardless.

Part of the value of a group is the re-creation of that lost sense of community where people feel safe enough to talk about their experiences without fear of abandonment or rejection. At a feeling level, we

**Dean Ornish, M.D., is one of America's best-known medical authorities. His ground-breaking experiments led to the development of diet- and exercise-based therapies that reversed heart disease without drugs or surgery, and earned him international renown, including the covers of news magazines and appearances on many national television shows. He is the author of *Eat More, Weigh Less* (HarperCollins, 1997), *Love and Survival* (HarperCollins, 1998), and several other books. He is the founder and president of the Preventive Medicine Research Institute in Sausalito, ([www.pMRI.org](http://www.pMRI.org)) and Clinical Professor of Medicine at the University of California, San Francisco.**



all want to be happy. We all want to avoid suffering. We struggle with similar life issues. When we talk about our issues it gives other people the courage to open up as well.

Healing is linked to how you react to suffering—be it betrayal, loss or any other aspect of being human. It’s not that we should be without emotional defenses—they serve a function to protect us from pain. But if you have nowhere that feels safe enough to let down those defenses, and you have no one that you trust enough to open up to, then in effect, your walls are always up. If you’ve been hurt or betrayed, there’s a natural fear of opening your heart. Ironically, the same defenses that we think protect us are actually killing us, or making us more likely to get sick and die prematurely. Hopefully, knowing this will give people the courage to begin the process of opening their hearts again.

-§-  
The same defenses that we think protect us are actually killing us.  
-§-

The heart is a pump that needs to be addressed on a physical level, but our hearts are more than just pumps. A true physician is more than just a plumber, technician, or mechanic. We also have an emotional heart, a psychological heart, and a spiritual heart. Our language reflects that understanding. We yearn for our sweethearts, not our sweetpumps. Poets and musicians and artists and writers and mystics throughout the ages have described those who have an open heart or a closed heart, a warm heart or a closed heart, a compassionate heart or an uncaring heart. Love heals. These are metaphors, a reflection of our deeper wisdom, not just figures of speech.

The real epidemic in our culture is not only physical heart disease, but also what I call emotional and spiritual heart disease—that is, the profound feelings of loneliness, isolation, alienation, and depression that are so prevalent in our culture with the breakdown of the social structures that used to provide us with a sense of connection and community. It is, to me, a root of the illness, cynicism, and violence in our society.

The healing power of love and relationships has been documented in an increasing number of well-designed scientific studies involving hundreds of thousands of people throughout the world. When you feel loved, nurtured, cared for, supported, and intimate, you are much more likely to be happier and healthier. You have much lower risk of getting sick and, if you do, a much greater chance of surviving.

You can only be intimate to the degree that you’re willing to open your heart and make yourself emotionally vulnerable to someone else. In my own case, I am in a committed, monogamous relationship with my wife. Our commitment to each other creates a sacred space—sacred meaning the “most special,” a place where we feel increasing

trust and safety with each other. We have that intentionality, that commitment to open our hearts wider and wider as we begin to trust each other more and more. As we do, the level of joy and intimacy and ecstasy is like nothing we ever could have dreamed.

Love promotes survival. Both nurturing and being nurtured are life-affirming. Anything that takes you outside of yourself promotes healing—in profound ways that can be measured—independent of other factors such as diet and exercise. There is a strong scientific basis documenting that these ideas matter—across all ages from infants to the most elderly, in all parts of the world, in all strata of life.

-§-  
Love promotes survival.  
Both nurturing and being nurtured are life-affirming.  
-§-

I’ve had patients say to me, “Having a heart attack was the best thing that ever happened to me.” I would say, “That sounds crazy. What do you mean?” They’d respond, “Because that’s what it took to get my attention—to begin making these changes I probably never would have done otherwise—that have made my life so much more rich, peaceful, joyful and meaningful.”

Part of the value of science is to help raise the level of awareness for people so that they don’t have to suffer as much to gain insight. Awareness is the first step in healing. They don’t have to wait until they get a heart attack to begin taking these ideas seriously and making them part of their lives.

Intimacy is anything that takes you out of the experience of feeling separate and only separate. It can come in many forms. Most people think in terms of romantic intimacy, but intimacy can be between friends or family members, or even with pets. In fact, in one study, people with heart disease who had a dog had four times less sudden cardiac death than those who didn’t have one. Intimacy can also be on a spiritual level, where prayer, meditation, or other spiritual practices can give us the direct experience of feeling like we’re part of something larger that connects us all. In that timeless moment, wherever we go, we find only our own kith and kin in a thousand and one disguises; the Sufi poet Rumi wrote:

There is a community of the spirit.  
Join it, and feel the delight  
of walking in the noisy street...  
Why do you stay in prison  
when the door is so wide open?  
Move outside the tangle of fear-thinking...  
Flow down and down in always  
widening rings of being.