

Psychedelics and Psychosomatic Medicine:

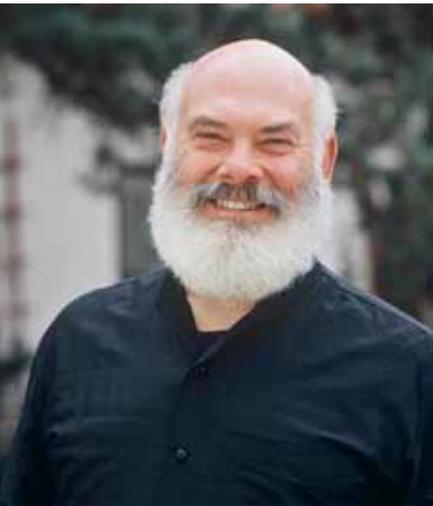
An Interview with Andrew Weil, M.D.

By David Jay Brown

Andrew Weil, M.D., is an internationally recognized expert on integrative medicine, which combines the best therapies of conventional and alternative medicine. Dr. Weil's lifelong study of medicinal herbs, mind-body interactions, and alternative medicine has made him one of the world's most trusted authorities on unconventional medical treatments. Dr. Weil's sensible, interdisciplinary medical perspective strikes a strong chord in many people. His recent books are all *New York Times* bestsellers and he has appeared on the cover of *Time Magazine* twice, in 1997 and again in 2005. *USA Today* said, "Clearly, Dr. Weil has hit a medical nerve," and *The New York Times Magazine* said, "Dr Weil has arguably become America's best-known doctor."

Dr. Weil delivered a talk entitled "The Future of Psychedelic and Medical Marijuana Research," at the April 2010 MAPS Conference in San Jose, California, and he has long been interested in the medical potential of psychedelics. This talk is available for viewing on the MAPS web site.

To follow are excerpts from an interview that I did with Dr. Weil about mind-body medicine and psychedelics. The complete interview appears in my book *Mavericks of Medicine* (Smart Publications, 2007).



Andrew Weil, M.D.

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David: What role do you see the mind and consciousness playing in the health of the body?

Dr. Weil: I think it's huge. This is an area that I've been interested in, I think, since I was a teenager—long before I went to medical school—and a lot of my early work was with altered states of consciousness and psychoactive drugs. I reported a lot of things that I saw about how physiology changed drastically with changes in consciousness. I just reviewed a paper from Japan; one of the authors is a doctor I know. This is a group of people looking at how emotional states affect the genome. They have shown, for example, that laughter can actually affect gene expression in patients with Type 2 diabetes. Now that's really interesting stuff, and I think that this is the type of research that is generally not looked at here. I think that our mental states—our states of consciousness—have a profound influence on our bodies, and even our genes. And I think they have a lot to do with how we age.

David: What role do you think that spirituality plays in health?

Dr. Weil: Again, I think, large, but it's hard to define spirituality. For me, I make a very sharp distinction between spirituality and religion. Religion is really about institutions, and for me spirituality is about the nonphysical, and how to access that and incorporate it into life. In *Eight Weeks to Optimum Health* I gave a lot of suggestions in each week about things that people can do to improve or raise spiritual energy, and they are things that at first many people might not associate with spirituality. But they were recommendations like having fresh flowers in your living space and listening to pieces of music that elevate your mood. Some of the other suggestions included spending more time with people in whose company you feel more optimistic and better, and spending time in nature. I think that I would put all of these in the realm of spiritual health.

David: When I interviewed Larry Dossey he told me about research that showed evidence for the health benefits of remote healing. What do you think of the studies done with remote healing that show health benefits from prayer?

Dr. Weil: I don't know what to make of them. I think that's really frontier stuff, fringy stuff, and I'm certainly open to those possibilities. I'm willing to believe anything, but then I really want to see evidence for it. And I think that the evidence that has been collected so far for these effects, at least in the experiments where people don't know that these interventions are being done, that that's such a challenge to the conventional model, that there really has to be very solid evidence for it. I'm open-minded, but unconvinced at the moment.

David: How have psychedelics effected your perspective on medicine, and what sort of therapeutic potential do you think that they have?

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Dr. Weil: I think they've been a very profound influence. I used them a lot when I was younger. I think that they made me very much aware, first of all, of the profound influence of consciousness on health. I have published and described one of the experiences that I had that was very dramatic, and this was seized upon by some networks that put it all out there. This was that I had become cured of a lifelong cat allergy. If a cat touched me I would get hives. If a cat licked me I would get hives and my eyes would swell. So I always avoided them.

Then, one day when I was twenty-eight, I took LSD with some friends. It was a perfect day. I was in a wonderful state of mind, feeling totally relaxed and at one with everything, and a cat jumped into my lap. My immediate reaction was to be defensive, and then I instantly

thought, well, here I'm in this state, why don't I try to pet the cat. So I petted the cat and I had no allergic reaction. I spent a lot of time with it, and I've never had an allergic reaction to a cat since.

So, to me, that's an example of a potential of those drugs, and if they were legally available I think that I would use them as teaching tools to show people that you can change chronic patterns of illness, because even if you aren't cured of an illness the psychedelic may show you that it's possible. Another experience that I've written about with psychedelics is when I was learning yoga, and had a lot of difficulty with some positions. The one I had the most trouble with was "the plow," where you lie on your back and try to touch your toes behind your head. I could get to about a foot of the floor and I had horrible pain in my neck. I had worked at this for weeks and made no progress. I was on the point of giving up, just thinking I was too old. I was twenty-eight then. I thought I was too old, that my body was too stiff.

Again, an experience with a psychedelic, where I felt completely happy and elastic, showed me otherwise. I noticed that my body felt very free. So I tried that posture, and I thought I had around a foot left to go when my feet touched the floor and there was no pain. I kept raising and lowering them, and it was just delightful. The next day when I tried to do it I could get to a foot within the floor and I had horrible pain in my neck—but there was difference. I now knew that it was possible, and I think that's a model for how these drugs can work.

Psychedelics can show you possibilities. They don't give you information about how to maintain the experiences, and if you try to rely on the drug for the experience the drug stops working after a time. But, in this case, just having seen that it was possible, I was motivated to keep working at it, and in a few weeks I was able to do it. I don't think I would have pursued that if I hadn't seen the possibility. So I think they're potentially tremendous teaching tools about mind-body interactions and states of consciousness. •