



Dr. Michael Finkelstein, MD

About 15 years ago, when I was working 16-hour days as the medical director of a large hospital, my oldest son was having difficulty getting along with other kids. At the time, I was immersed in the “quick fix” world of modern medicine; so when my then-wife suggested we get our son evaluated by a psychiatrist friend, to find out what was “wrong,” I was familiar with the logic and acquiesced, even though I was troubled by the slippery slope that potentially lay ahead.

On our way to the appointment, I felt sick to my stomach from anxiety. Interestingly, I wasn’t nervous about my son’s condition; rather, I was nervous about the psychiatrist’s response to it. What would he prescribe?

*I knew the potential chain reaction of consequences of heading down the conventional medical path, and I did not want to subject my son to its pitfalls.*

Fortunately, my friend came through by using his heart instead of his prescription pad—a great relief. Still, when he sat me down, he offered something I could never have expected coming from the world of conventional medicine: wisdom and insight that changed my life forever.

*“Your son doesn’t need me,” he said.  
“He needs his father.”*

# How Slow Medicine Upgraded My Life

**Pow.** Right in the kisser.

You see, I too was a practicing conventional medicine doctor, but apparently when it came to my own family, I was frightened of the very medicine I administered to others. This understanding led to a pivotal *a-ha* moment. Suddenly it was clear to me that the American healthcare system was broken and that I needed to stop being a cog in its wheel.

Properly trained at elite medical institutions, I was well-versed in and a believer of the reductionist model of healthcare: Identify the problems and prescribe the solutions, which for the most part came in neat packages, mostly pill bottles—the contents produced in sterile facilities in Europe, Asia, and South America. These pills, of course, were the better of two alternatives, the other being to go into a procedure room, get sedated with psychoactive substances that numbed the senses, and remove the problem outright.

We all know how it works, but really, it doesn’t work, at least not for the overwhelming majority of our chronic conditions. In my own medical practice, over the course of 15 years before my son’s difficulties, I had a gnawing sense that something was wrong. Unfamiliar with any medical alternatives, however, and psychologically conditioned by conventional medical culture, I dismissed my misgivings.

In the interest of properly caring for my son, however, I embarked on a program to get my life in order—rearranging my schedule, taking better care of myself, and spending quality time with my son, and otherwise resetting my priorities. Not only did I come to enjoy my life more, but true to my friend’s word, the restoration of my relationship with my son had a positive domino effect that organically resolved my son’s trouble at school.

*His “symptoms,” in other words, were effectively addressed not through site-specific treatment, such as mind-altering medication, but rather, through an indirect yet powerful measure: nourishment of his heart and soul.*

Meanwhile, in the interest of bringing my soul and my work into alignment, looking for medical solutions that I would offer my own family as well as my patients, I began studying Eastern philosophies of living, along with a wide spectrum of alternative healing modalities. A few years into this journey, I enrolled in Andrew Weil, MD's rigorous two-year program in integrative medicine, at the University of Arizona, and ultimately, I left the world of quick fixes in the dust and whole-heartedly embraced what I came to call "Slow Medicine."

*Slow Medicine is to the healthcare industry  
what Slow Food is to the restaurant industry.*

Against the backdrop of our assembly-line model of medical care, in which we receive cookie-cutter prescriptions for complex health matters, Slow Medicine provides the necessary time and asks the relevant questions for optimizing general wellness and healing chronic illness. In the Slow Medicine paradigm, we are recognized as the supreme authorities on our own bodies, and doctors serve as our guides—helping us navigate the maze of conventional, complementary, and alternative medicine options. In some cases, we may need to schedule a surgery. In other cases, we may need to cultivate loving relationships. In still other cases, we may need to engage in artistic self-expression—through dancing, painting, writing, or playing a musical instrument.

In our fast-paced world, we often look for quick-fix solutions to our health challenges, not realizing that these "solutions" in fact may contribute to our problems. Most health challenges are the result of an imbalance in our bodies and lives, and most quick-fix solutions actually exacerbate these imbalances. If, instead, we take a Slow Medicine approach—identifying the root cause of our health challenges, then creating a thoughtful, step-by-step, and long-term response to it—we effectively bring ourselves back into balance. In doing so, we not only can resolve our primary complaints, but we also can benefit elsewhere in our lives, often in unexpected ways.

The sophisticated effectiveness of Slow Medicine is summarized by this simple nursery school song: *The knee bone is connected to the thigh bone; the thigh bone is connected to the hip bone...* If we are chronically sick, tired, or depressed, we need an examination that includes, but goes beyond, the exact location of our symptoms. Everything is inter-dependent—muscles and nerves, bodies and minds, people and planet. Each connecting thread has a domino effect on the other. Toxins in our neighborhood, for example, might cause liver damage, leading to chronic illness that makes us unable to get out of the house or work—leaving us isolated, broke, and as a result, severely depressed. In this scenario, the quick-fix of anti-depressants will overlook the root of, and therefore solution for, our depression.

Working in our current medical paradigm, even the best-intentioned doctors are unable to do more than scratch the surface of a health challenge. Limited to offering just 15 minutes

per patient per visit, doctors often miss the root of, and therefore solution for, chronic illness—depression or otherwise.

In my own practice, I not only offer anywhere between 90 minutes and two and a half hours for the initial visit, but I always ask this question at the outset of our work together:

*What will you do with your life, once your  
health is restored?*

Usually the question takes my patients aback. Not only do people not expect a medical doctor to inquire about such matters, but most people have given little, if any, thought to the answer. Yet the answer to this question is typically the lynchpin for our ability to get and stay healthy.

As many of us are beginning to understand, health is not just the absence of disease, but rather, a state of wellness. Sadly, despite this realization, the more-more-more drive of our materialistic lifestyles—more money, more status, more *stuff*—is slowly killing us, from a combination of stress, isolation, and emptiness. When we slow down, live our lives with passion, meaning and purpose, and cultivate harmonious relationships with those who are important to us, we bring ourselves into greater alignment on every level—body, mind, heart, and soul. This alignment in turn enhances our sense of overall wellness, shifting us from the sympathetic nervous system's fight-or-flight response to the parasympathetic nervous system's healing response.

To this end, most of my patients have experienced symptom relief not from exercising this many times a day or ingesting that particular supplement, but rather, as a byproduct of whatever conscious steps they have taken to return to a state of genuine fulfillment, that place where they feel truly alive. They have done some combination of spending time in nature, playing a musical instrument, mending a broken relationship, volunteering at a homeless shelter or otherwise honoring, deepening, and celebrating their lives.

There are, of course, many external triggers for illness, such as environmental toxins or injuries that lead to a chain reaction of difficulties. In many cases, however, the root of a health challenge is related to an emotional or spiritual component. When this component is taken into consideration as part of a comprehensive treatment plan, people experience better outcomes.

The proverbial struggle with weight, for example, is typically aggravated by emotional eating, yet the most common "remedy" for it is dieting—which, in fact, is often counterproductive. The shame, guilt, and self-recrimination of dieting only exacerbate the root emotions—creating a vicious cycle of feeling bad, then eating to feel better. Fixating on calories, exercise, or specific foods entirely misses the point of why we overeat to begin with, and therefore is doomed to fail in sustainably transforming our habits. Instead, we need to identify why we are overeating: *What void in our lives are we seeking to fill, and what steps can we take to actually fill it?*

To achieve and sustain good health, no matter what the ailment, we need perspective. We need to zoom our lens on the area calling for attention, pan our lens to take in the big picture, then use our intelligence and intuition to connect the dots in-between. We need to become aware of each area of our lives and explore how to optimize our wellness in those areas—by eating nutrient-dense foods, spending time by the ocean, becoming a foster parent, traveling abroad, finding a loving partner, or whatever else helps us create a harmonious life that is filled with passion and purpose.

*The whole reason we want to be healthy, after all, is to lead a fulfilling and meaningful life.*

By figuring out how to do so right now, in whatever modified forms may be required at this time, we can achieve the state of wellness we seek, without unnecessary deprivation and pointless sacrifice. Instead of dieting, we can increase our intake of whole, unprocessed foods that are both healthy and delicious, and we can celebrate our meals with flowers, music, and good company. Instead of exercising on a treadmill at the local gym, we can enjoy moving our bodies through hiking in the woods, practicing tai chi on the beach, or dancing at a night club. These changes are all about living, which is the point of being well.

Getting healthy does not need to be a chore; rather, it can be an adventure. By getting creative about how to expand into the life we have right now, and by truly savoring this life—physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually—we chart new paths to wellness that leave us feeling better on every level. And *that* is what health is all about.



*Michael Finkelstein, MD, FACP, ABIHM, aka The Slow Medicine Doctor, has been featured in top media outlets including The New York Times, CNN, and Real Simple; is the author of the ground-breaking book Slow Medicine, endorsed by notables including Mehmet Oz, MD, Tonya Lewis Lee, and Andrew Weil, MD; and is a Huffington Post blogger on the topic of Slow Medicine.*

*Dr. Finkelstein was trained at premier institutes for both conventional and integrative medicine including The University of Pennsylvania, where he received both his Bachelor of Arts (BA) and Medical Degree (MD); and The University of Arizona College of Medicine, where Dr. Finkelstein completed an Associate Fellowship in Integrative Medicine, studying directly with integrative medicine pioneer Andrew Weil, MD. Drawing from this diverse medical expertise, Dr. Finkelstein, along with his partner Robin Queen, established SunRaven: The Home of Slow Medicine, 10 years ago. For more information visit [slowmedicinedoctor.com](http://slowmedicinedoctor.com).*

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