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INTERVIEW SERIES

**How To Go From The Fear Of
Dying... To The Joy Of Living:
An Interview With
Dr. Dean Ornish**



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Expert Interviews On Mind Body & Spirit

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I'm Michael Senoff, founder and CEO of HardToFindSeminars.com.

For the last five years, I've interviewed the world's best business and marketing minds.

And along the way, I've created a successful home-based publishing business all from my two-car garage.

When my first child was born, he was very sick, and it was then that I knew I had to have a business that I could operate from home.

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Michael Senoff

Michael Senoff

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How To Go From The Fear Of Dying... To The Joy Of Living: An Interview With Dr. Dean Ornish

Many people believe they'd be happier if they could just have more of something – more money, more beauty, or more success. But according to Dr. Ornish, prominent doctor and author of *The Spectrum*, those kinds of thoughts usually make us more stressed and unhappy, to the point where even if we got the “more” we wanted, we wouldn't be able to enjoy it.

Fortunately though, Dr. Ornish says stress isn't something that happens to us; it's how we react to what's happening to us. And there are many ways to lengthen our “fuses” and find the love, connection, and community that studies show are key factors to good health and happiness. And in this audio, you'll hear many of those ways.

You'll Also Hear...

- How to personalize a way of eating and living that's right for you
- The optimum foods for good health – what foods help us grow more neurons and which ones will help us feel better
- All about processed foods – are they really as bad as the rap they're given?
- Simple ways to reduce your stress in as little as a minute a day
- Why you might want to think twice before getting bypass surgery or stents to prevent a heart attack – and what you can do instead
- And much more

According to Dr. Ornish, health isn't something we gain; it's something we already have until we disservice it. A few simple lifestyle choices can make a huge difference, like what we eat, how we respond to stress, how much exercise we get, and what kind of love is in our life. And in this audio, you'll hear all about how to improve your quality of life and get back to the joy of living.

Hi this is Kris Costello and I've teamed up with Michael Senoff to bring you the world's best health related interviews. My dad use to tell me that making money is great but being able to spend it in a healthy and vibrant manner makes your financial success that much sweeter. So if you know anyone struggling with their weight, with cancer, diabetes, ADHD, autism, heart disease or other health issues send them over to Michael Senoff's www.HardToFindSeminars.com

Kris: Thanks for joining us today Dr. Ornish. You had a wonderful quote in "Spectrum" you said a quote by Socrates "One word that freezes all from the weight and pain in life and that word is love."

Dr. Ornish: Yes. Well we're often using these very high tech expensive state of the art measures to prove the power of these very low-tech and low cost and often ancient observations like Socrates made. That study after study have shown that people who don't feel a sense of love and connection community are many times more likely to get sick and die prematurely than those who have that. In part because you're more likely to abuse yourself, you're more likely to smoke and overeat and drink too much and work too hard and so on when you don't feel that sense of love and connection community, but even through mechanisms we don't fully understand when people have a sense of love and connection community they're much more likely to avoid getting sick and dying prematurely.

Kris: With reversing disease what are the most important things that people can do to regain their health?

Dr. Ornish: It's a different conception than I was taught in medical school that health is not something you gain health is something you have already until you disserve it in most cases, that our bodies have a remarkable capacity to begin healing themselves and much more quickly than we had once realized if we simply stop doing what's causing the problem in the first place. I studied yoga for many years with a spiritual teacher named Swami Saraswati and people said "What are you a Hindu?" He's say "No, I'm an undo." And that's really a shorthand way of saying that what we try to do is identify what's causing the problem and then helping people to change that. Usually when I lecture I often show a cartoon of doctors busily mopping up the floor around a sink that's overflowing but nobody's turning off the faucet and when we turn off the faucet then we allow healing to occur.

On the spiritual level people think that happiness is something that you get, if only I had more this or that or less of that then I'd be happy, you know, more money, more power, more beauty, more

accomplishments, whatever it happens to be and the more they believe that generally the more stress and the more unhappy they feel. Until they get it they feel stress if somebody else gets it and they don't they feel even worse, and even if they get it's very seductive because it makes you think that you're happy and it's well-being came from getting this thing that you thought you needed but it's never enough. It's like well now what? One patient said "I can't even enjoy the view from the mountain I've climbed I'm already looking over to the next one or so what, big deal, it doesn't really provide that lasting sense of meaning and happiness." Even the yoga and meditation techniques that we include in the back of "*The Spectrum*" there's a DVD that my wife Ann has created she's I think the best yoga teacher in the country right now, I'm obviously a little bit bias, but even before we had that kind of relationship I was saying that about her and meditation and yoga don't bring you a sense of peace and well being. What they help you do is to stop disturbing, at least temporarily, what's there all the time.

And that may sound like a semantic distinction but it's a very powerful profound one because if we think that happiness is something that we have to get or health is something we have to get then it's always like "What am I lacking and how can I get it" but if we say "Well wait a minute that's our nature to be happy until we disturb it" that's a very empowering realization, not to blame but to empower to say "Oh if it's me I can do something about that, I can react in different ways, I maybe looking in the wrong places." And so seen from this perspective the suffering that many people are experiencing the world without in any way trying to minimize it can be a very powerful wakeup call to help us reexamine what really matters and what may not matter as much as we once thought.

It's so easy to be gleam and say to somebody who's suffering "Oh, you know, chuck it up, be happy and then the proper response is a nice Hawaiian punch to me but without in any way trying to minimize anyone suffering. I know from my own experience there're much greater degrees of freedom than I had once realized about how I interact with the world. That stress is not just what happens to you it's how you react to what's happening to you. In the study of Telomeres that I mentioned earlier Dr. Elizabeth Blackburn who discovered telomerase will probably win a Noble Prize for her discovery and we collaborated on the study showing that lifestyle changes increase telomerase. She had done an earlier study four years ago with Elissa Epel where she found that when she looked at women who were under chronic emotional stress because they were taking care of kids with birth defects or autism, you know, some really awful things that the more the

women felt stressed and the longer they reported feeling stress the lower their telomerase and the shorter their telomeres meaning they would live a shorter lifespan and all other things being equal.

But it wasn't an objective measure of stress it was the women's perception of it that really determined whether or not it affected them. And it wasn't necessarily a function of how bad somebody else might think their circumstances were. It's to some degree, you know, if you're in a concentration camp that's going to be a lot more stressful than having lunch at Starbucks, but even in a concentration camp Viktor Frankl wrote in a book called "*Man's Search for Meaning*" that not everybody survives and that the people that survive generally reacted to these dire circumstances in ways where they found a sense of purpose and meaning that enabled them to cope with it. And so what I'm learning in my own life and much less dire circumstances is that I have a much greater degree of choice than I had once realized that I don't necessarily have to react in the same ways. One of the nice things about practicing yoga meditation on a regular basis is that even without having to think about it we react in different ways. People say things like, you know, I use to have this short fuse and I'd explode easily and now my fuse is longer. In other words, things are the same I'm in the same job, the same family, the same environment but I'm not reacting the same. And it's not like people have to tell themselves not to react their fuse is longer. And everybody's experienced the opposite, you know, when you're really tired and raggedy and rundown the day-to-day small aggravations can often be enormously stressful.

So we have a lot more choice in this than we had once realized. But even on an intellectual cognitive level we have a lot more choice. My wife and I have been teaching our eight-year-old son Lucas about this, you know, to say just because something happens to you doesn't mean it necessarily need to get all upset about it or stressed out or cry or whatever it happens to be. We can honor and validate that experience but to say, you know, that's a legitimate experience but it's not a fun experience and we have more choice than we realize and we can make something positive out of it and it's a lot more enjoyable to be able to react in those kinds of ways. Somebody might be laid off in this economy and that might be an awful thing and it is an awful thing. And then without in any way trying to say "Hey, what a great thing it is you got laid off" or "Hey, what a great thing you got cancer." Just say "Okay, well we don't look for suffering but there it is now what do we do with it?" And to say "Okay, well maybe I'm being guided by an unseen hand as one way to contextualize or maybe there's

another way to look at this. Maybe there's an opportunity to do what I really wanted to do in my life and I was afraid to quit my job and now I have an opportunity to really do what my real passion is." And, you know, those kinds of things without in anyway trying to minimize or make wrong or change someone else's experience to say "Look, you know, as my teacher use to tell me if you want to keep banging your head against the wall keep doing it, don't blame the wall." But they are more healthy and there are more joyful ways of living in the world than ones that may have become habitual, plus if you told me 30 years ago when I was depressed and suicidal that this is what I'd be doing now I would have thought you were nuts and maybe part of the mystery of life is that we don't necessarily know.

It may be a delusion but it's a very functional delusion and that everything that's happening to me is for the best. It's nice to be able to see it in real time and it's always easier to see it in retrospect but, you know, if I can see it as it's happening or at least remind myself of that it gives me more degrees of freedom and how I interact with things rather than woe is me which doesn't really take me anymore except to really an unhappy place. Stress affects all of our systems. When you're depressed your immune system is depressed your heart is more likely to get clogged up, it's more likely to beat irregularly it lowers the threshold for sudden cardiac death in virtually every way we can measure. Stress, again defining it as these chronic destructive way of relating to the world, you know, that stress is like tuning a violin you need a certain amount of tension on the string to play music and if it's too much then the string breaks if it's not enough then not much happens. So these techniques of stretching and breathing and meditation and yoga as well as a more spiritual approaches of algorism and compassion and love and forgiveness can help free us from a lot of the stress and suffering so that we can often be in the same job, as I mentioned earlier, but reactive in very different ways and the paradox is we can often accomplish even more without getting the stress in the process. There's an old Zen proverb "*Before enlightenment chop wood carry water after enlightenment chop wood carry water.*" Your actions may remain the same but the intentionality behind it is very different.

Kris: Also at the Senate Hearings you talked a lot about food and how that affects health. Can you talk a little bit about that?

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Dr. Ornish: There were four of us that testified before the Senate Committee on Health Reform and President Obama has made Health Reform one of his priorities, which I'm really thrilled about, I've been consulting with members of his Health Reform Team for the last seven or eight months and Senator Harkin and Senator Mikulski are two of the senators that have been put in charge of the most important parts of Health Reform. Senator Harkin has been put in charge of Health Reform with respect to wellness and prevention and public health and Senator Mikulski on the payment issues and it's wonderful because they totally get it. And so usually when I've testified before the Senate or the House, you know, you get five minutes and then they ask a couple of questions and that's it. And we got into a dialogue that went on for several hours which is available on the web now. And part of what I talked about was the importance that these lifestyle choices that we make, including what we eat, play an important role. And since Senator Harkin is also the Head of the Agriculture Committee we talked about trying to change some of the perverse incentives where it becomes cheaper to eat junk food than eat healthy food.

You know the diets that we found that can reverse all these illnesses that we talked about earlier that formed the healthiest end of the spectrum in my new book called "*The Spectrum*" are predominately fruits and vegetables and whole grains and legumes and sir products until recently those have been the cheapest way to eat. It's like a third world diet and yet it actually becomes cheaper in our country to eat junk food because of the agricultural subsidies and the perverse incentives that make it easier to eat a lot of fat and salt and sugar than to eat fruits and vegetables. And one of the things that Senator Harkin said that I love is that he was able to put \$1 billion dollars, a billion with a 'b', in the Farm Bill on the Agriculture Bill to provide fruits and vegetables for kids in school, many of whom had never tasted what a fresh orange is like even though that may be hard for many people to believe, and they love it. They were concerned oh, they wouldn't eat it, there'd be so much waste or trash or they'd be throwing it, and they just loved it. And then when you eat a healthy meal in school it increases your academic performance, it reduces your absenteeism from getting sick, it shows you what good foods they really taste good. There are a lot of these false choices, you know, is it fun for me or is it good for me, to say "Wait it can be both." And kids get their taste preferences when they're young so if they find that these foods taste good instead of trying to scare into changing or manipulate them into change and say well, you know, what's sustainable is pleasure and joy and freedom and fun and by giving people and

disclose this experience it not only transforms them but then they go home and it helps transform their families as well.

Kris: And how does Senator Harkin walk that tightrope?

Dr. Ornish: Well now that he's the Chair of the Committee and now that he's been put in charge of Health Reform with respect to prevention and wellness and public health on the Senate side he's got the power to actually implement things that he's been talking about doing for more than a decade. And more power to him he's a real visionary and he and Mikulski did extraordinary work and I was just really pleased that he's in a position now that he can actually make these things happen.

Kris: Dr. Oz mentioned also that in Costa Rica you have a four times better chance of living to 100 than if you live in the US. So why is that?

Dr. Ornish: Well because we're learning that just putting a lot of money into something doesn't necessarily buy health. We're Number 1 in the world in the amount of money we spend on healthcare, which Senator Harkin actually called Sick Care which is true, disease care it's not really healthcare and as a result even though we're Number 1 in how much we spend we're like 37th or so in what they really show. And in my testimony I use the example of angioplasties and bypass surgery, how do we treat heart disease, that's normally how we do it. If we say "Let's take an evidence based approach the evidence shows that from randomized trials, not in the new AIDS journal, but the New England Journal of Medicine and Journal of the American Medical Association and other first tier peer review science journals the randomized trial shows that unless you're in the middle of having a heart attack, which 95% of the people who get angioplasties and stints are not, that they don't prolong your life, they don't even prevent heart attack.

And the same is then true for bypass surgery and we spent \$60 billion dollars on angioplasties, \$44 billion on bypass surgery, that's over \$100 billion dollars for approaches that are dangerous, invasive, expensive and largely ineffective. They do reduce angina chest pain but we found we can reduce angina by over 90% in just a few weeks and provide changing lifestyle more than you can get with surgery. And so the incentives are perverse there as well. As Senator Harkin said they'll pay the \$10,000 to amputate your diabetic foot but not a few hundred dollars to teach you how to eat better and to take care of your foot to prevent that from happening in the first place. So if we have 45 million Americans who don't

have health insurance, which is rapidly rising as people lose their jobs and with their insurance that goes along with it, there's an opportunity to say "If we really want to make healthcare available to everyone if we just put them in a system and do bypasses and angioplasties and so on then cost are going to go up exponentially at a time when we can't afford it. So we have to ration and raise taxes or let the deficit go up none of them are very good. But if we can teach people these simple approaches that we've now trained over 50 hospitals on how to do and we finally after 14 years got Medicare to pay for it we can now change the model, the paradigm, to make it truly healthcare rather than just disease care.

Kris: And Dr. Ornish for our listeners, what are those simple procedures?

Dr. Ornish: Well they're the ones that I describe in my new book "*The Spectrum*" they're what we eat, how we respond to stress, whether or not we smoke, how much exercise we get and the quality involved in intimacy in our lives. And so what I've done in my new book is I've categorized foods from the most healthful to the least helpful along the spectrum, hence it's name, because part of what we learn is what really enables people to make sustainable choices is the sense of feeling free and in control and the whole concept of a diet is based on feeling restricted and what you can't have and what you must do and that's not sustainable. Will power and patient compliance are just creepy words to me because even more than being healthy most people want to feel free and in control and as soon as somebody says "Eat this and don't eat that and do this and don't do that" you want to do the opposite. It goes back to don't eat the apple and that didn't work and that was God talking. So what we do is to say "Look there are no good foods or bad foods but some foods are clearly healthier than others." And if you indulge yourself one day it doesn't mean you cheated or you're a bad person or all these moralistic terms that people like to use it just means eat healthier the next because what matters most is your overall way of eating and living. And so in fact studies have shown that people who overall eat the healthiest are the ones that allow themselves some indulgences because life is to be enjoyed.

And so if you're trying to reverse a chronic disease like reverse heart disease that's a pound of cure you want to move as close to the healthy end of the spectrum as you can because we found in all of our studies the more people change the better they got, whether it was heart disease or diabetes or high blood pressure or prostate or breast cancer or whatever, the more you change the better you get, but how much you change and how quickly is really a function of what you're trying to accomplish. So if you're trying to reverse a

serious illness you might want to eat mostly on the healthiest end of the spectrum. If you're just trying to lose a few pounds or get your cholesterol down find out where you are on the spectrum and then move a little overall in the healthier direction if that's enough to accomplish your goals, to lose the weight or get your cholesterol down or your blood pressure that's great, if not then go further. And so it's possible to personalize and customize a way of eating and living that's just right for you based on your own needs and preferences.

Kris: What do you do for your own health?

Dr. Ornish: I do the things I suggest other people to do all the things we've been talking about. I eat mostly healthy food. I indulge myself sometimes like I encourage other people to do. I work out. I spend as much time with my wife and my son as I can. I do at least a little meditation and yoga every day. Part of what we've learned is that the consistency is even more important than the duration. Sometimes I don't have time to do an hour a day so I'll say "Well do I have a minute", you know, because I have to admit if I don't have a minute to meditate and I have to say my life is so out of balance something's really wrong here so I'll usually find the time to do the minute and if I do the minute chances are I'll do more than that anyway because it's getting started is always the challenge. But even a minute has value because if you meditate for a minute it subconsciously carries through to the rest of the day. It's a little like if you hear a song on the radio and then you find yourself it later it's the consistency that's so important and that's what we recommend.

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Kris: For our listeners out there, you know, I know a lot of them don't understand what healthy food is they can pick up a copy of your book "*The Spectrum*" and check that out but can you kind of just go over what are the optimum foods for health?

Dr. Ornish: Not only just what you exclude from your diet that's harmful but also what you include that's beneficial. There are hundreds of thousands of beneficial substances in certain foods that have any cancer, any heart disease, any aging properties, but more importantly some of these foods – I mean blueberries for example, and even chocolate and tea have substances that actually make you grow new brain neurons, you can actually grow some new brain neurons in a few months that your brain gets measurably bigger that would sound impossible just a few years ago and it's

parts of your brain that you want to get bigger. You're hipper campus it controls memory your frontal cortex processes information and so on. And so when people realize that the fruits and vegetables and whole grains and legumes and soy products are rich in these substances that really are protective and make us feel good and improve the quality of our lives then it becomes a different context for making these choices from fear of dying to joy of living which is really what makes it sustainable. It comes out of your own experience, not because some book or doctor told you, but because oh what we do is to help people connect the dots between what they do and how they feel.

When I do this, when I eat this way, when I live this way, I feel good, when I do this I feel bad, maybe I'll do more of this and less of that, and then it makes it more sustainable because there's no point in giving up something that you enjoy unless you get something back that's better and quickly. And because these mechanisms are so dynamic when you follow the kinds of recommendations that I talk about in "*The Spectrum*" your brain hits more blood, you think more clearly, you have more energy, you grow more brain cells as we talked about a moment ago. Your skin gets more blood so you don't age as quickly, you know, you don't wrinkle, you have more of a healthy glow, your sexual organs get more blood flow in the same way Viagra works. And for many people these are choices worth making. You know fear of dying is not a good motivator because we all know we're going to die it's just a question of when and it's too scary to think that something bad might happen to you so people tend not to think about those things so they don't.

The joy of living is a very powerful motivator and when people make these changes – I mean one of the most effective anti-smoking ads was Christy Turlington the super model has a wonderful Web site called www.smokingisugly.com because her father died of lung cancer and she got so tired of people looking like, you know, the glamorous model smoking like in sexy and cool and beautiful, nicotine causes your arteries to constrict which is why in your heart it can cause a heart attack as it reduces blood to your heart or in your brain it can cause a stroke but in your skin it makes your little arteries and your face constrict which cause you to wrinkle faster and get that kind of grey pallor, and also it constricts the arteries to your sexual organs half of the guys who smoke are impotent. So instead of making it sexy and beautiful it really makes you ugly and impotent. How fun is that?

And so by helping people really connect the dots to what they do and how they look and how they feel we find that these are ways of creating sustainable changes in lifestyle that people can really stick with as oppose to a diet that get on them and you get off. And you say to people “Well why do you smoke or overeat or drink too much or work too hard or abuse yourself, your behavior seem so maladaptive to me” and they’d say “Dean you don’t get it these are very adaptive because they help us get thorough the day.” They say “I’ve got 20 friends in this pack of cigarettes and they’re always there for me and nobody else is” you’re going to take away my 20 friends, what are you going to give me? Or they use food to fill the void or alcohol to numb the pain or they work too hard or they watch too much TV here or too many video games. There’s lots of ways of numbing or killing or distracting ourselves from pain or literally or figuratively bypassing it. But as we talked about at the beginning of this interview the pain is there for a reason it’s to say “Hey, listen up, pay attention you’re not doing something that’s in your best interest.” And then when we can use that experience of suffering as a doorway for transforming our lives”, as Rachel Remen says “Our wounds are or windows or opportunities to really transform, then people sometimes look back on the suffering as a blessing in disguise because it got their attention that enabled them to make these changes that have made their lives so much more joyful and meaningful.”

Kris: I know Dr. Hyman mentioned that process foods have some of the same additive properties as heroin and cocaine.

Dr. Ornish: Well, you know, they’re addictive to the extent that they meet an unmet need and their real unmet need in our culture is the sense for connection and community. It’s a basic human need that so often goes unfulfilled and if you can meet an unmet need in business you can create a multi-billion dollar business even if you don’t do it all that well. I mean look at the chat rooms in AOL when they first started created a multi-billion dollar business which the Web 2.0 is now based on, you know, Facebook and MySpace and so on. I mean there are a lot of people that have got 1000 Facebook friends, you know, they’re not your most intimate friends but even just that sense of community can create a multi-billion dollar business. It’s, again, just these short little ways of saying “Hey I want to feel connected to someone else.” Starbucks, you know, it’s like come on in, hang out here, we’ve got high speed internet access and soft couches and nice lighting and good things to eat and drink, you know, so that’s really the unmet human need. And so if we can approach that more intentionally and say “Okay it’s addictive to the extent that yeah if I’m going to use food to fill

that void – one person said, you know, fat coats my nerves and numbs the pain.

So instead of saying “Okay, let’s get rid of all the fat in our diet to say how can we address so that the underlining issue more directly. How can we turn off a faucet around the sink that’s overflowing? How can we use these approaches to quiet down our mind and body to experience more of a sense of peace and joy? How can we learn to have more compassion and love and algorism in our life as a way of spending time with the people that matter to us? And part of the value of science as I mentioned earlier is to raise the awareness of what really matters in our lives. And as we understand how much these things matter then we begin to realize that the time that we spend with our friends and families isn’t just a luxury that we do after we’ve done all the important stuff it is the important stuff. And so we can then say “Oh gosh, you know, being home in time for dinner and spending it with my friends and family isn’t just something that I do when I’ve got time for it I need to make time for it it’s as important as anything else that I’m doing and perhaps even more so.”

And then when we work on that level then we find that people are much more likely to make and maintain lifestyle choices that are life enhancing than ones in self-destructive. If we only focus on the behavior it doesn’t work that well. If we just give people information that’s important but not usually sufficient if it were nobody would smoke, it’s on every pack of cigarette. We have to work at a deeper level and then we can tell people use the experience of their suffering in whatever form it comes as a doorway for transforming their lives rather than just as some kind of thing to be endured. Does that make sense?

Kris: It does. I want to get back to a little about just the issues of food and our culture and I know one of the things that Dr. Will said was “If he had to sum up health advice in one line” he said that “The single most important thing that one could do for good health is to stop eating refine, processed and manufactured foods”, now do you agree with this?

Dr. Ornish: Well I don’t really totally agree with that because, you know, some foods that are manufactured are quite good for you and I’ve been consulting with some of the big food companies to get them to make healthier foods. And so if when you go into McDonald’s, for example and you see this fruit and walnut salad which fruit, it’s apple slices, fresh apples, you know, mandarin oranges, walnuts and several different kinds of lettuce and grapes, you know, that’s a

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good thing. For many people it's an alternative to eating foods that are a lot less healthy for you. And so one of the reasons that I did that is I learned that in a lot of lower sales economic areas in parts of the city they don't have grocery stores there but they have McDonald's. And so I figured okay if we can put some healthier foods there maybe that's a good thing and McDonald's is now the biggest purchaser of apples in the world because of that one salad, I mean that's the scale that they work on, but there's a lot of junk food out there too no doubt. And so, yes, ideally if we can all eat locally grown sustainable organic produce clearly that's the best way to eat, but I wouldn't say that all process foods are bad for you, a lot of them are but some of them aren't. And so it really becomes a question of how can we find the right balance between what's optimal and what's going to be practical for people.

Kris: Thank you Dr. Ornish for talking with us today.

That's the end of our interview and I hope you've enjoyed it. For more great health related interviews go to Michael Senoff's www.HardToFindSeminars.com.