


# Total Health: Deborah Gilboa of AskDoctorG.com On How We Can Optimize Our Mental, Physical, Emotional, & Spiritual Wellbeing

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**Tell your doctor the truth.** I can't tell you the number of times a patient has said something because they didn't want to be a burden, or were embarrassed, or thought I'd be angry with them... The most helpful thing you can do is tell your doctor the whole truth. The truths you don't want to tell anyone about how you feel, what you're worried about, what got you there. If you get judgment or anger from your doctor for that, you need a new doctor. This isn't like pretending you did your homework to get a better grade. Our job is to help you with what is, and make it more the way you want it to be.

*Many ancient traditions around the world believe 'wellbeing' or 'bienestar' is a state of harmony within ourselves and our world, where we are in balance mentally, physically, emotionally and spiritually.*

*As a part of our series about "How We Can Cultivate Our Mental, Physical, Emotional, & Spiritual Wellbeing", I had the pleasure of interviewing Deborah Gilboa, MD.*

*, Deborah Gilboa, MD, aka "Dr. G" works with families, organizations, and businesses to identify the mindset and strategies to turn stress to an advantage by rewiring their attitudes and beliefs and create resilience through personal accountability and a completely different approach to adversity. Seen regularly on TODAY, Good Morning America and The Doctors, Dr. G is also featured in the Washington Post, The New York Times and countless other digital and print outlets. She resides in Pittsburgh with her four boys, where she is a board-certified family physician at an urban Federally Qualified Health Center, a Clinical Associate Professor at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine, and is fluent in American Sign Language.*

**Thank you so much for joining us in this interview series! Before we dive into the main focus of our interview, our readers would love to "get to know you" a bit better. Can you tell us a bit about your childhood backstory?**

Born in the Bronx to first generation American parents, we lived just blocks from our whole extended Russian family and very close to the public school where my mom taught. Like most kids, I thought my experience was what everyone had — lots of people in tiny apartments, with food and music and opinions everywhere all the time. When I finished first grade we started a slow journey west to Illinois, living in several places in the Midwest before settling in the suburbs north of Chicago. In direct contrast to those first years, as an only child with parents who both worked 60+ hours a week, I spent a lot of time reading, finding my own adventures and solving my own problems.

**What or who inspired you to pursue a career in helping others? We'd love to hear the story.**

From my very first Water Safety class, age 9 at day camp, I recognized how great it feels to know enough to be useful to someone in need. I pursued a steady stream of lifeguarding, first aid and CPR classes throughout my teenage years, and spent a great deal of time

volunteering after college as an EMT. The feeling of being part of a team of people who work together in stressful, important situations drew me to consider leveling up to paramedic. Fortunately (I guess!), a good paramedic friend told me straight out that he thought I'd be a terrible medic. "You're always looking for ways to go around the system, change protocols, do things differently. You better just go be a doctor." Since I was working full time at The Second City Improv Theatre at the time — with a great salary and actual benefits and work I enjoyed — this did not seem to be a reasonable path to follow. He'd planted the idea, though, and it wouldn't go away. Eventually I called Northwestern University's Medical School Admissions Office, just to see...

"I'm thinking of applying to medical school. What's required?" I asked the person who answered the phone (in these pre-internet days). "A Bachelor's Degree," she said, in a bored voice. "In what, though?" I asked, thinking she'd of course say Biology, or Science, or *something* applicable. Her answer? "College!"

Well, I totally had one of those! I gave my notice, finished the season at Second City, and went back to school for one year's worth of science classes (and sign language interpreter training, but that's another story...). One year later, after promising to direct the med student show, I was in!

That opportunity to be one of the "helpers," someone you can count on when you're hurt or sick or just scared, turned out to be the most satisfying professional experience of my life.

**None of us can achieve success without some help along the way. Was there a particular person who you feel gave you the most help or encouragement to be who you are today? Can you share a story about that?**

Hands down, the person whose belief in me has pushed me through the obstacles is my Dad. Art Goldberg grew up in a time when men worked outside the home, and women did everything else. He may have never given much thought to women's rights — despite coming of age in the '60's — until the day he was handed a daughter. My earliest memories are of my Dad encouraging me to challenge the status quo. In a doctor's office for a Saturday morning appointment when I wasn't even 5 years old, I told him I might like to be a nurse one day. "Why not a doctor?" he asked. When I told him girls couldn't be doctors, he told me they absolutely could. "Just because you haven't seen it doesn't mean you can't make it true." He went to bat (almost literally) for me with our town when I wanted to play on the baseball team, but it was only for boys. He sat in the auditorium at our synagogue and supported me while I argued to be the first bat mitzvah on a Saturday morning (it was a big deal, and only for boys). My Dad would not do anything for me, because he thought it more important to teach me that I could do anything for myself.

**Can you share the funniest or most interesting mistake that occurred to you in the course of pursuing your passion? What lesson or take away did you learn from that?**

In 2011, when I started this online journey, I didn't know much at all about being online. I sat with a friend who was "on twitter" and she gave me a primer in getting started with social media. "You need a handle, a personal brand," she declared. And went on to explain the importance of getting this right because I would have to live with it forever. It had to be unique, memorable, easy to spell, clearly associated with me, specific but not so niche that I couldn't ever pivot or shift my message. I agonized over this choice, looked for handles on all the social media platforms (of the day) to make sure I could be recognizable and remembered on each of them. I tried out how it would sound, the credibility and the comfort... and after (too) much debate I finally settled on Ask Doctor G. I spent (too much) money on the website, I created profiles and avatars and spent countless hours engaging and building and growing so that people would reach out and ask me their questions. I wrote mission statements and created content and let people know in every way I could think of that they should ask me their questions about resilience; leading teams or individuals to greater resilience, educating, coaching or raising kids to be resilient, finding resilience in oneself. And finally the questions started rolling in!

And they were all about dead people.

All about autopsies and forensic reports and cold cases that people wanted me to reopen.

It turns out that "Dr. G" was — some fifteen years previously — a famous forensic pathologist with a TV show that would investigate suspicious deaths and help regular people get answers about their potentially murdered loved ones. But *that* Dr. G retired and I was apparently one of a dozen people on earth who had never heard of her, I didn't realize that my brand would bring all those folks out.

It was too late to change course, and I really didn't want to — my patients have always called me Dr. G and I want to answer questions so it seemed like the right fit — so I answered each autopsy request as kindly as I could and just kept doing my own work.

It's been almost ten years and I get dozens of questions a week. And usually one a month or so from someone hoping I'll exhume their loved one's remains for a second opinion!

**Can you share your favorite "Life Lesson Quote"? Why does that resonate with you so much?**

**"Never accept a "No" from someone who doesn't have the power to give you a "Yes."** Ever since I discovered that the work I'm most passionately driven to do is to build the resilience of generations of people, I've been in uncharted territory. Doctors aren't taught to create cultural change. Women aren't encouraged to argue with the status quo. Moms aren't supposed to travel the world and go on TV and challenge beliefs we have as a society. And yet all of that is what I was determined to do. I'm not afraid of hearing "no" but — coming from a background in improvisational theatre — I didn't know what to do with it. That word is felt so final to me, like a closed, locked door. This lesson made me realize that a closed door

only matters if it's truly the only way to get where I'm trying to go. Rarely is that the case. Further, it reinforced for me the knowledge that most people think in the short term, about how to make their own life the simplest. Most people fear change of any kind. That being the case, it's not surprising that groundbreakers hear "no" a lot — and usually it's from someone taking on the role of decision-maker, or trying to shorten their own to do list by failing to pass your idea along. Taking the time to find the actual decision-maker makes that "no" less likely because that's a person whose problem I can solve. And when I can't, I look for another door.

**What are some of the most interesting or exciting projects you are working on now?  
How do you think that might help people?**

As a child of the Sesame Street generation, it's probably no surprise that I have a half a dozen projects in the works about which I'm super excited! In no particular order...

1. I'm working with the Tepper School of Business at Carnegie Mellon University to create and validate an assessment tool for Organizational Resilience in business. We're determined to help companies measure their resilience, define strategies to improve that resilience, and then demonstrate the quantitative difference resilience makes in sales, retention and professional satisfaction.
2. I've been invited to submit my next TED talk for presentation. It's my honor and privilege to demonstrate (in twelve minutes!) the three myths we have about stress and resilience as a society and how we can actually use stress to build resilience and strengthen mental health — in ourselves and in others.
3. Speaking of building our own resilience, I'm finishing up and publishing my first ever Adventure Guide! From Wrecked to Resilient: The Adventure Guide for Handling More Stress and Feeling it Less! This hybrid content and work book will give exercises to build the skills that make us more resilient.
4. I was lucky to co-create a new limited series YouTube show on managing mental distress. It's called We Got You and it's a TV talk show style experience, with guest interviews, to normalize, discuss and offer strategies to combat issues like overwhelm, fear, isolation.
5. My speaking calendar for Q1 and Q2 of 2021 is filling up! The most impactful way to strengthen a company's or a community's resilience is to get them talking about it in an action-focused way. I'm grateful for all the opportunities to work in depth with organizations who want to overhaul the vocabulary and the strategies they use to build mental health.
6. As a member of the US AntiDoping Agency's TrueSport Advisory Board, I'm working this winter with other experts on youth athletics and Olympics preparation. I get to focus on resilience, and how the training these young athletes have can equip them for a life of challenge leading to achievement.

**OK, thank you for all of that. Let's now shift to the core focus of our interview. In my writing, I talk about cultivating wellbeing habits in our lives, in order to be strong, vibrant and powerful co-creators of a better society. What we create is a reflection of how we think and feel. When we get back to a state of wellbeing and begin to create from that place, the outside world will reflect this state of wellbeing. Let's dive deeper into this together. Based on your experience, can you share with our readers three good habits that can lead to optimum mental wellbeing? Please share a story or example for each.**

1. When I decided I wanted to be able to run a mile, I had to start by running, even though I kind of hate running. Because it's physical strain that builds physical fitness. Well, if I want to be able to handle what life throws at me and protect my mental health, then it turns out I have to stop avoiding stress! Because that's what will strengthen me. In the same way that I'm not ready to run a marathon — and if I tried I could get really hurt! — this doesn't mean that I can handle all the stress all the time. I need to look at the stress I'm facing and figure out what is going to make me stronger, and where I need help to manage it. Taking this approach, of seeing where I can use my stress, helps me to stop trying to avoid every pressure and rather train up, so what feels stressful today won't feel nearly as stressful the next time I face it.
2. All change is uncomfortable. Even change you dream about and work towards. I spent 4 years putting my work out into the world, dreaming and pushing towards a national platform. I tried every (ethical) way I could think of to get national media attention, and one day I got the call — inviting me to be on Good Morning America the very next day, as an expert to discuss a new internet game kids were playing! In hours I was on a flight to New York, I couldn't believe the speed, the hotel, the fancy new Lincoln Towne Car that showed up to drive me (5 blocks) to the studio at 6am the next morning. Hair, makeup, producer meeting... and I'm suddenly standing backstage waiting for my entrance onto the set for the live show in the 8am hour. Five million viewers, the opportunity of a lifetime and all I could think about was how uncomfortable I was! My shoes pinched, my neck was so tense, I was filled with fear and distrust and when the production assistant asked me to follow him onto set I thought — nope. Not going. I've never seen them bring a guest onto GMA at gunpoint, so they really can't make me go. Only forty-five years of experience managing my own fears and discomforts convinced me to follow him out there, for what turned out to be the most fun two and half minutes of my professional life to that point. You've got to learn your positive coping mechanisms because they are what protect your mental health in times of change!

3. My mom, of blessed memory, used to say “If you’re still breathing, you’ve got options. You may not like any of them, but you’ve got them. So pick one.” The only way through stress is resilience. The only way to better mental health is action. But when we get stuck in discomfort, it’s pretty normal to pretend we don’t have any options and just let life happen to us. The problem there is that life doesn’t care too much about us, so we tend to get run over in the process. In the midst of difficulty, remembering that you can choose what you do, how you react, when you ask for help, all serve to move us forward. A great deal of mental health is remembering to control what is actually within your control.

**Do you have a specific type of meditation practice that you have found helpful? We’d love to hear about it.**

I’m dreadful at meditation. Can’t stand yoga. Have always thought “mindfulness” was for other people. For the simple reason that they all involve my least favorite circumstance: doing one thing at a time, and doing it slooowwwly. Until my twelve year old asked me a few months ago if we could “just take five minutes.” I didn’t understand what he meant, so he explained. “Can we just be for five minutes? Together, on the couch, not doing anything?” I try to have very good reasons to say no to my kids, and I couldn’t think of one so I agreed. That five minutes, in which my youngest kept up eye contact and the occasional murmured word of thanks or encouragement to both of us, turned into what can only be described as a mutual mediation practice. Just don’t tell me that, because I don’t like meditation!

**Thank you for that. Can you share three good habits that can lead to optimum physical wellbeing? Please share a story or example for each.**

1. My mother-in-law (of blessed memory) used to say about house repairs, “When things stop working... we adapt.” That may seem like the best quick answer in your home, but it’s not a good lifelong strategy for your body! Small pains or mild illnesses are often fine to ignore for a short time, the body can heal a lot of things on its own. However, don’t accept deterioration as necessary! If something hurts and it’s not getting better, take action! Don’t assume there’s nothing to be done, or that you’d have to make a change you don’t want to make — see your doctor and THEN decide what changes you are or aren’t willing to make.
2. You’d be shocked by how many people don’t know some basic information about themselves. Please keep a list of the medicines you take — and also why you take them. Write down major things that happen in your health, like surgery, or a big illness or injury, and what happened. Most folks believe that doctors have some database where we keep and share all this information in order to take the best care of you — and I wish we did but we don’t yet have such a thing. We are counting on you to be your best advocate.



3. I can't tell you the number of times a patient has said something because they didn't want to be a burden, or were embarrassed, or thought I'd be angry with them... The most helpful thing you can do is tell your doctor the whole truth. The truths you don't want to tell anyone about how you feel, what you're worried about, what got you there. If you get judgment or anger from your doctor for that, you need a new doctor. This isn't like pretending you did your homework to get a better grade. Our job is to help you with what is, and make it more the way you want it to be.

**Do you have any particular thoughts about healthy eating? We all know that it's important to eat more vegetables, eat less sugar, etc. But while we know it intellectually, it's often difficult to put it into practice and make it a part of our daily habits. In your opinion what are some great ways to begin to integrate it into our lives?**

Our relationships with food are some of the most complex in our lives. We need it to live, but wrong moves and can kills us. We need it, talk about it, share it, but also dread it, fear it, and are ashamed of it. If it were a boyfriend, all your friends would say "You don't need a relationship like THAT!" But we can't quit it... Our body will do whatever it needs to do to get food. It makes us increasingly uncomfortable when we need to eat, first with hunger pangs, then a headache, irritability, stomach discomfort, dizziness, all kinds of things. We eat to manage or avoid that discomfort.

We also eat to manage or avoid all kinds of other discomforts. I'm all for eating food you like, that tastes great. Most of the damaging calories come when it's not food hunger we're trying to manage. The best way I know to begin to eat in a way that serves your body and your mind best, is to first figure out what discomfort you're trying to manage and, for all the *other* discomforts, try some other positive coping mechanisms (things that make you feel good but don't damage you in any way) before trying food.

**Can you share three good habits that can lead to optimum emotional wellbeing? Please share a story or example for each.**

Years ago I walked in to see a patient in her mid-fifties, a college-educated, fairly affluent, white woman with progressive Multiple Sclerosis. She was dependent on her motorized wheel chair, using a toggle at her chin to move it because she couldn't control her arms or legs enough to do so, was fed by others and needed a diaper at all times, "How are you today?" I asked her. "Great!" she replied! "The roses are coming up by my front door, my grandbaby turned one this weekend and we had such a nice party... I'm going to the First Fridays concert in the park later this week."

Just a few patients later that same morning, I walked in to see another woman, also in her mid-fifties, college-educated, financially comfortable, and her only medical issue was some occasional low back pain. "How are you today?" I asked her. "Terrible," she said. "My family

doesn't understand about my back, they don't think when they make plans if I will be able to participate. My work doesn't accommodate me, no one considers my burdens!" She was standing and walking and sitting without any apparent difficulty, so I asked "Have you been having pain?" "No!" she replied, surprised, "But I could!"

That day I understood the fundamental issue of resilience. Resilience is not the ability to "bounce back." Resilience is the set of skills we need to experience difficulty — or really any change — and come through it MORE the person we want to be.

In my personal and professional experience, [emotional wellbeing](#) feeds one's resilience and resilience feeds emotional wellbeing. Even better, we don't need to be "born resilient" because resilience isn't a character trait, it's a series of actions. So I focus on building the skills that make me more resilient in order to strengthen and ensure my emotional wellbeing.

1. The first resilience skill is to widen and deepen your network of connections to others. You don't have to become more of an extrovert (we're not always so great at building true connections either), you do need to listen and talk to the people you know and respect, and to try to find some more folks that fall in that category.
2. This resilience skill looks like saying yes when you mean yes, saying no when you mean no, and figuring out what really is your fault/responsibility/circus and what is not. Knowing the difference between what you can do and what you need to do will help you match your reality to your priorities. This can be as grand as leaving a job, or as simple as instituting a rule that no one can ask you a question while you're in the bathroom. I tried this one at my house and it's been life-changing.
3. We have a knee-jerk reaction to change, and that is to reject it. That's because our brains are wired to protect us, to focus on holding onto the status quo and make sure our basic needs are met. Change feels like it puts those needs at risk. But change is also the only way to get more of what we want! So allowing for the possibility that change could be good, and giving your own immediate "no way" reaction some grace, can really help you feel better. For example, when someone you live with suggests a change in schedule or dinner plans or moving the furniture and you feel yourself start to argue, take a minute. Let them know "my first reaction is no way, let me figure out why." That lets you give yourself some empathy and compassion, and still leaves the possibility that you can be open to this change!

**Do you have any particular thoughts about the power of smiling to improve emotional wellbeing? We'd love to hear it.**

One really uncomfortable truth I've noted as an adult is that what we do is often more important in the world than how we feel. When we act right on a regular basis, then we gather people to us who care deeply about how we feel. But when we behave in ways that hurt or disrespect, people very quickly stop caring about our feelings. That lesson — what

you do is even more important than how you feel — does have a silver lining. That silver lining is in the good that often comes to our feelings when we do the right thing. The impact of doing the right thing, over time, often makes us feel better.

Smiling is a great example of this lesson. Smiling is an action of lifting the cheeks in order to lift the soul. Smiling only with your lips doesn't change much. Engaging all of your cheek muscles to smile actually increases the release of serotonin and dopamine in the brain — the chemicals that make us actually feel happier.

**Finally, can you share three good habits that can lead to optimum spiritual wellbeing? Please share a story or example for each.**

Faith is another resilience skill. Resilience does not require faith in any particular religion or construct, but is aided when a person feels a part of something greater than themselves. This can mean faith in community, or in a company, in a country or in a unified purpose. Faith is, for me, about a connection to a greater “Why?” and a release from the obligation to have all the answers.

1. This is a spiritual habit that comes directly from my Jewish roots. We're told that we are not obligated to finish the work of fixing everything wrong in the world, but we're not allowed to stop working on it so long as we are able. The spiritual practice of asking “What's broken here and how can I help?” draws hopefulness and action from me even in times of overwhelm. This knowledge that I only need to be one part of the answer — but that I can be part of the answer anytime I choose — strengthens me.
2. It's free, it's easy (or gets easier with practice), it never goes out of style... There is nothing more spiritual for me than letting my “why's” — the people in my heart — know how much they matter to me. I write a letter to each of my boys each year on (or near) their birthdays. I write notes to my partner, I leave post its, I send voice messages, I say “I love you” as many times a day to as many people as I do because it is my prayer. It is my way of saying “I want good things for you and I'm here for you.”
3. Find your reasons for getting through hard things, for trying one more time, for being resilient when you don't want to be. Thinking, talking, writing about your purpose can give you strength when you need it. For me, my purpose is to make the world a more open, hopeful place for my kids. I'd endure just about anything to work towards that goal.

**Do you have any particular thoughts about how being “in nature” can help us to cultivate overall wellbeing?**

Nature offers insight and oversight. Insight into where we find peace — for me that's on the water — or joy or discomfort or struggle. Insight into who we are and what our challenges and strengths are. Insight helps us appreciate ourselves and work to be more the people we want to be in the world. That sense of place, purpose and peace has always drawn me to get

onto the water when I'm in turmoil. Whether it's a kayak, or canoe or a jet ski... and I wouldn't say no to a yacht! Nature offers also oversight, the ability to understand our place in a larger picture — to see what impact we have and what impacts us in turn. Oversight to help us see the vast diversity that surrounds us, and to honor and value diversity. Oversight to give us the perspective we need to know which struggles are true, and which we bring upon ourselves for no great purpose.

**Ok, we are nearly done. You are a person of great influence. If you could inspire a movement that would bring the most amount of good for the greatest number of people, what would that be? You never know what your idea can trigger.**

**“BUILD resilience!”**

We have three myths we believe in our society that stop us from building the skills that make us more resilient. We believe that stress is a poison to be avoided at all costs. We believe that resilience is a character trait, that only luck determines how much stress you can “handle.” We believe that the only way to grow resilience is to endure adversity.

None of these things are true. Resilience is the ability to navigate change and use the stress of that to become more the person we want to be. Resilience is a group of skills that can be taught, can be learned, and grow through intentional action.

We need a culture shift in our approach to stress and the support and opportunities we give for each person to build their resilience!

**We are very blessed that some of the biggest names in Business, VC funding, Sports, and Entertainment read this column. Is there a person in the world, or in the US, whom you would love to have a private breakfast or lunch with, and why? He or she might just see this, especially if we both tag them :-)**

In the early 1990's, Oprah Winfrey had a guest on her show that suggested women should put themselves on their own list of priorities. The audience's negative reaction to that idea sparked in Oprah the desire to change our culture's view of the roles of women, our treatment of ourselves, and the need for this new idea: “Self care.”

In the early 1990's, if I asked a friend who was parenting, helping her aging parents and also working what she was doing for self-care she'd have looked at me like I was crazy. By the early 2000's, that changed. Self-care became an acceptable, even laudable goal for women and now has also spread into our conversation for men.

I'd like to talk to the person at the Oprah Women's Network responsible for helping Oprah make that shift! Of course I'd be thrilled to speak with Oprah but — in the interest of her self-care and the millions of people who'd like to speak with her — I'm actively looking for the

person on her staff who really gets the arc of this change and can help me understand how to make this happen.

### **How can our readers further follow your work online?**

I hope you'll find me at AskDoctorG.com. If you want to dive straight into strengthening your resilience, I hope you'll go to the link in my bio and watch my two minute video to understand how change affects us and how you can use it to be more the person you want to be!

**Thank you for these really excellent insights, and we greatly appreciate the time you spent with this. We wish you continued success.**

*About the interviewer: Sonia is a Canadian-Ukrainian lawyer, entrepreneur and heart-centered warrior who's spent more than 15 years working in human rights, international law, business, economic development, community empowerment and her own personal journey into herself. Sonia has spent the past 7 years living and working with indigenous nations around the world, as a facilitator, partner, shaman apprentice and friend, gaining a deep understanding of both ancient systems and modern ways, and our interconnection with all life. She is a certified kundalini yoga practitioner, avid adventurer and explorer of the natural world. Sonia speaks world-wide on topics related to meaningful collaboration, life economies, the power of partnerships and the benefits of informed, empowered and engaged communities. "It is time for us to take back our human story and co-create a new vision for a world that is in harmony with ourselves, each other, the Earth and all beings," says Molodecky. Her book, A New Human Story: A Co-Creator's Guide to Living our True Potential. launches December 2020. You can learn more about Sonia, her book and her podcast at and follow her at or*