

*You Are the*

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# PLACEBO

*making your mind matter*

Dr. Joe Dispenza

The best-selling author of *Breaking the Habit of Being Yourself*

**Praise for**  
*You Are the*  
**PLACEBO**

*“You Are the Placebo is the instruction manual for how to produce miracles in your body, with your health, and in your life. It’s simply magnificent. This may be the only prescription you’ll ever require.”*

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six-sensory consultant and *New York Times* best-selling author of *The Answer Is Simple*

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*For my mother,  
Francesca*

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## FOREWORD

Like most of his fans, I look forward to Joe Dispenza's provocative ideas with relish. Combining solid scientific evidence with stimulating insights, Joe stretches the horizons of the possible by extending the boundaries of the known. He takes science more seriously than most scientists, and in this fascinating book, he extrapolates the most recent discoveries in epigenetics, neural plasticity, and psychoneuroimmunology to their logical conclusion.

That conclusion is an exciting one: You, and every other human being, are shaping your brain and body by the thoughts you think, the emotions you feel, the intentions you hold, and the transcendental states you experience. *You Are the Placebo* invites you to harness this knowledge to create a new body and new life for yourself.

This isn't a metaphysical proposition. Joe explains each link in the chain of causality that starts with a thought and ends with a biological fact, such as an increase in the number of stem cells or immunity-conferring protein molecules circulating in your bloodstream.

The book starts with Joe's account of an accident that shattered six of the vertebrae of his spine. Suddenly, in extremis, he was confronted with the necessity of putting into practice what he believed in theory: that our bodies possess an innate intelligence that includes miraculous healing power. The discipline he brought to the process of visualizing his spinal column rebuilding itself is a story of inspiration and determination.

We're all inspired by such stories of spontaneous remission and "miraculous" healing, yet what Joe shows us in this book is that we are all capable of experiencing such healing miracles. Renewal is built into the very fabric of our bodies, and degeneration and disease are the exception, not the norm.

Once we understand how our bodies renew themselves, we can start to harness these physiological processes intentionally, directing the hormones our cells synthesize, the proteins they build, the neurotransmitters they produce, and the neural pathways through which they send signals. Rather than possessing a static anatomy, our bodies are seething with change, moment by moment. Our brains are on the boil, teeming with the creation and destruction of neural connections in every second. Joe teaches us that

we can steer this process with intention, assuming the powerful position of driver of the vehicle, rather than the passive role of passenger.

The discovery that the number of connections in a neural bundle can double with repeat stimulation revolutionized biology in the 1990s. It earned its discoverer, the neuropsychiatrist Eric Kandel, a Nobel Prize. Kandel later found that if we don't use neural connections, they begin to shrink in just three weeks. In this way, we can reshape our brains via the signals we pass through our neural network.

In the same decade that Kandel and others measured neuroplasticity, other scientists discovered that few of our genes are static. The majority of genes (estimates range from 75 to 85 percent) are turned off and on by signals from our environment, including the environment of thoughts, beliefs, and emotions that we cultivate in our brains. One class of these genes, the *immediate early genes* (IEGs), takes only three seconds to reach peak expression. IEGs are often regulatory genes, controlling the expression of hundreds of other genes and thousands of other proteins at remote sites in our bodies. That kind of pervasive and rapid change is a plausible explanation for some of the radical healings you'll read about in these pages.

Joe is one of the few science writers to fully grasp the role of emotion in transformation. Negative emotion may literally be an addiction to high levels of our own stress hormones, like cortisol and adrenaline. Both these stress hormones and relaxation hormones like DHEA and oxytocin have set points, which explains why we feel uncomfortable in our skin when we think thoughts or countenance beliefs that drive our hormonal balance outside of that comfort zone. This idea is at the very frontier of the scientific understanding of addictions and cravings.

By changing your internal state, you can change your external reality. Joe masterfully explains the chain of events that starts with intentions originating in the frontal lobe of your brain and then translating into chemical messengers, called *neuropeptides*, that send signals throughout your body, turning genetic switches on or off. Some of these chemicals, like *oxytocin*, the "cuddle hormone" that's stimulated by touch, are associated with feelings of love and trust. With practice, you can learn to quickly adjust your set points for stress hormones and healing hormones.

The notion that you can heal yourself by simply translating thought into emotion might sound astounding at first. Not even Joe expected the results

he began to observe in participants attending his workshops when they fully applied these ideas: spontaneous remission of tumors, wheelchair-bound patients walking, and migraines disappearing. With the openhearted delight and open-minded experimentation of a child at play, Joe began to push the envelope, wondering just how fast radical healing might occur if people applied the body's placebo effect with complete conviction. Hence, the title *You Are the Placebo* reflects the fact that it's your own thoughts, emotions, and beliefs that are generating chains of physiological events in your body.

At times, you will feel uncomfortable reading this book. But read on. That discomfort is just your old self, protesting the inevitability of transformative change, and your hormonal set points being disturbed. Joe reassures us that those feelings of discomfort may simply be the biological sensation of the dissolution of the old self.

Most of us won't have the time or inclination to understand these complex biological processes. Here's where this book provides a great service. Joe digs deep into the science behind these changes to present them in an understandable and digestible way. He does the heavy lifting behind the scenes in order to present elegant and simple explanations. Using analogies and case histories, he demonstrates exactly how we can apply these discoveries in our daily lives and illustrates the dramatic breakthroughs in health experienced by those who take them seriously.

A new generation of researchers has coined a term for the practice Joe outlines: *self-directed neuroplasticity* (or *SDN*). The idea behind the term is that we direct the formation of new neural pathways and the destruction of old ones through the quality of the experiences we cultivate. I believe that SDN will become one of the most potent concepts in personal transformation and neurobiology for the coming generation, and this book will be at the forefront of that movement.

In the meditation exercises in [Part II](#) of this book, metaphysics moves into concrete manifestation. You can do these meditations yourself easily, experiencing firsthand the expanded possibilities of being your own placebo. The goal here is to change your beliefs and perceptions about your life at a biological level so that you are, in essence, loving a new future into concrete material existence.

So embark on this enchanted journey that will expand your horizons of the possible and challenge you to embrace a radically higher level of healing and functioning. You have nothing to lose by throwing yourself

enthusiastically into the process and dumping the thoughts, feelings, and biological set points that have limited your past. Believe in your ability to realize your highest potential and take inspired action, and you will become the placebo that creates a happy and healthy future for yourself and for our planet.

— **Dawson Church, Ph.D.**  
Author of *The Genie in Your Genes*

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# PREFACE

## Waking Up

I never planned on doing any of this. The work I'm currently involved in as a speaker, author, and researcher sort of found me. In order for some of us to wake up, we sometimes need a wake-up call. In 1986, I got the call. On a beautiful Southern California day in April, I had the privilege of being run over by an SUV in a Palm Springs triathlon. That moment changed my life and started me on this whole journey. I was 23 at the time, with a relatively new chiropractic practice in La Jolla, California, and I'd trained hard for this triathlon for months.

I had finished the swimming segment and was in the biking portion of the race when it happened. I was coming up to a tricky turn where I knew we'd be merging with traffic. A police officer, with his back to the oncoming cars, waved me on to turn right and follow the course. Since I was fully exerting myself and focused on the race, I never took my eyes off of him. As I passed two cyclists on that particular corner, a red four-wheel-drive Bronco going about 55 miles an hour slammed into my bike from behind. The next thing I knew, I was catapulted up into the air; then I landed squarely on my backside. Because of the speed of the vehicle and the slow reflexes of the elderly woman driving the Bronco, the SUV kept coming toward me, and I was soon reunited with its bumper. I quickly grabbed the bumper in order to avoid being run over and to stop my body from passing between metal and asphalt. So I was dragged down the road a bit before the driver realized what was happening. When she finally did abruptly stop, I tumbled out of control for about 20 yards.

I can still remember the sound of the bikes whizzing by and the horrified screams and profanities of the riders passing me—not knowing whether they should stop and help or continue the race. As I lay there, all I could do was surrender.

I would soon discover that I had broken six vertebrae: I had compression fractures in thoracic 8, 9, 10, 11, and 12 and lumbar 1 (ranging from my shoulder blades to my kidneys). The vertebrae are stacked like individual

blocks in the spine, and when I hit the ground with that kind of force, they collapsed and compressed from the impact. The eighth thoracic vertebra, the top segment that I broke, was more than 60 percent collapsed, and the circular arch that contained and protected the spinal cord was broken and pushed together in a pretzel-like shape. When a vertebra compresses and fractures, the bone has to go somewhere. In my case, a large volume of shattered fragments went back toward my spinal cord. It was definitely not a good picture.

As if I were in a bad dream gone rogue, I woke up the next morning with a host of neurological symptoms, including several different types of pain; varying degrees of numbness, tingling, and some loss of feeling in my legs; and some sobering difficulties in controlling my movements.

So after I had all the blood tests, x-rays, CAT scans, and MRIs at the hospital, the orthopedic surgeon showed me the results and somberly delivered the news: In order to contain the bone fragments that were now on my spinal cord, I needed surgery to implant a Harrington rod. That would mean cutting out the back parts of the vertebrae from two to three segments above and below the fractures and then screwing and clamping two 12-inch stainless-steel rods along both sides of my spinal column. Then they'd scrape some fragments off my hip bone and paste them over the rods. It would be major surgery, but it would mean I'd at least have a chance to walk again. Even so, I knew I'd probably still be somewhat disabled, and I'd have to live with chronic pain for the rest of my life. Needless to say, I didn't like that option.

But if I chose not to have the surgery, paralysis seemed certain. The best neurologist in the Palm Springs area, who concurred with the first surgeon's opinion, told me that he knew of no other patient in the United States in my condition who had refused it. The impact of the accident had compressed my T-8 vertebra into a wedge shape that would prevent my spine from being able to bear the weight of my body if I were to stand up: My backbone would collapse, pushing those shattered bits of the vertebra deep into my spinal cord, causing instant paralysis from my chest down. That was hardly an attractive option either.

I was transferred to a hospital in La Jolla, closer to my home, where I received two additional opinions, including one from the leading orthopedic surgeon in Southern California. Not surprisingly, both doctors agreed that I should have the Harrington rod surgery. It was a pretty consistent prognosis:

have the surgery or be paralyzed, never to walk again. If I had been the medical professional making the recommendation, I'd have said the same thing: It was the safest option. But it wasn't the option I chose for myself.

Maybe I was just young and bold at that time in my life, but I decided against the medical model and the expert recommendations. I believe that there's an intelligence, an invisible consciousness, within each of us that's the giver of life. It supports, maintains, protects, and heals us every moment. It creates almost 100 trillion specialized cells (starting from only 2), it keeps our hearts beating hundreds of thousands of times per day, and it can organize hundreds of thousands of chemical reactions in a single cell in every second—among many other amazing functions. I reasoned at the time that if this intelligence was real and if it willfully, mindfully, and lovingly demonstrated such amazing abilities, maybe I could take my attention off my external world and begin to go within and connect with it—developing a relationship with it.

But while I intellectually understood that the body often has the capacity to heal itself, now I had to apply every bit of philosophy that I knew in order to take that knowledge to the next level and beyond, to create a true experience with healing. And since I wasn't going anywhere and I wasn't doing anything except lying facedown, I decided on two things. First, every day I would put all of my conscious attention on this intelligence within me and give it a plan, a template, a vision, with very specific orders, and then I would surrender my healing to this greater mind that has unlimited power, allowing it to do the healing for me. And second, I wouldn't let any thought slip by my awareness that I didn't want to experience. Sounds easy, right?

### *A Radical Decision*

Against the advice of my medical team, I left the hospital in an ambulance that brought me to the home of two close friends, where I stayed for the next three months to focus on my healing. I was on a mission. I decided that I would begin every day reconstructing my spine, vertebra by vertebra, and I would show this consciousness, if it was paying attention to my efforts, what I wanted. I knew that it would demand my absolute presence . . . that is, for me to be present in the moment—not thinking about or regretting my past, worrying about the future, obsessing about the conditions in my external life, or focusing on my pain or symptoms. Just as

in any relationship we have with anybody, we all know when someone is present or not with us, right? Because consciousness is awareness, awareness is paying attention, and paying attention is being present and noticing, this consciousness would be aware of when I was present and when I wasn't. I would have to be totally present when I interacted with this mind; my presence would have to match its presence, my will would have to match its will, and my mind would have to match its mind.

So for two hours twice a day, I went within and began creating a picture of my intended result: a totally healed spine. Of course, I became aware of how unconscious and unfocused I was. It's ironic. I realized back then that when crisis or trauma occurs, we spend too much of our attention and energy thinking about what we *don't* want instead of what we *do* want. During those first several weeks, I was guilty of this tendency on what seemed like a moment-to-moment basis.

In the middle of my meditations on creating the life I wanted with a fully healed spine, I would all of a sudden become aware that I'd been unconsciously thinking about what the surgeons had told me a few weeks prior: that I would probably never walk again. I would be in the midst of inwardly reconstructing my spine, and the next thing I knew I was stressing over whether I should sell my chiropractic practice. While I was step-by-step mentally rehearsing walking again, I would catch myself imagining what it would be like to live the rest of my life sitting in a wheelchair—you get the idea.

So every time I lost my attention and my mind wandered to any extraneous thoughts, I would start from the beginning and do the whole scheme of imagery over again. It was tedious, frustrating, and, quite frankly, one of the most difficult things I'd ever done. But I reasoned that the final picture that I wanted the observer in me to notice had to be clear, unpoluted, and uninterrupted. In order for this intelligence to accomplish what I hoped—what I *knew*—it was capable of doing, from start to finish I had to stay conscious and not go unconscious.

Finally, after six weeks of battling with myself and making the effort to be present with this consciousness, I was able to make it through my inward reconstruction process without having to stop and start over from the beginning. I remember the day I did it for the first time: It was like hitting a tennis ball on the sweet spot. There was something *right* about it. It clicked. I clicked. And I felt complete, satisfied, and whole. For the first time, I was

truly relaxed and present—in mind and body. There was no mental chatter, no analyzing, no thinking, no obsessing, no trying; something lifted, and a kind of peace and silence prevailed. It was as if I no longer cared about all of the things I should have been worried about in my past and future.

And that realization solidified the journey for me, because right around that time, as I was creating this vision of what I wanted, reconstructing my vertebrae, it started to get easier every day. Most important, I started to notice some pretty significant physiological changes. It was in that moment that I began to correlate what I was doing inside of me to create this change with what was taking place outside of me—in my body. The instant I made that correlation, I paid greater attention to what I was doing and did it with more conviction; and I did it again and again. As a result, I kept doing it with a level of joy and inspiration instead of such a dreadful, compromised effort. And all of a sudden, what had originally taken me two or three hours to accomplish in one session, I was able to do in a shorter period.

Now, I had quite a bit of time on my hands. So I started to think about what it would be like to see a sunset again from the water's edge or eat lunch with my friends at a table in a restaurant, and I thought about how I would never take any of that for granted. In detail, I imagined taking a shower and feeling the water on my face and body, or simply sitting up while using the toilet or taking a walk on the beach in San Diego, the wind blowing on my face. These were some things that I had never fully appreciated before the accident, but now they had meaning—and I took my time to emotionally embrace them until I felt as if I were already there.

I didn't know what I was doing at the time, but now I do: I was actually starting to think about all these future potentials that existed in the quantum field, and then I was emotionally embracing each of them. And as I selected that intentional future and married it with the elevated emotion of what it would be like to be there in that future, in the present moment my body began to believe it was actually *in* that future experience. As my ability to observe my desired destiny got sharper and sharper, my cells began to reorganize themselves. I began to signal new genes in new ways, and then my body *really* started getting better faster.

What I was learning is one of the main principles of quantum physics: that mind and matter are not separate elements, that our conscious and unconscious thoughts and feelings are the very blueprints that control our destiny. The persistence, conviction, and focus to manifest any potential

future lies within the human mind and within the mind of the infinite potentials in the quantum field. Both of these minds must work together in order to bring about any future reality that potentially already exists. I realized that in that way, we are all divine creators, independent of race, gender, culture, social status, education, religious beliefs, or even past mistakes. I felt really blessed for the first time in my life.

I made other key decisions about my healing as well. I set up a whole regimen (described in detail in *Evolve Your Brain*) that included diet, visits from friends who practiced energy healing, and an elaborate rehabilitation program. But nothing was more important to me during that time than getting in touch with that intelligence within me and, through it, using my mind to heal my body.

At nine and a half weeks after the accident, I got up and walked back into my life—without having any body cast or any surgeries. I had reached full recovery. I started seeing patients again at 10 weeks and was back to training and lifting weights again, while continuing my rehabilitation, at 12 weeks. And now, almost 30 years after the accident, I can honestly say that I've hardly ever had back pain since.

### *Research Begins in Earnest*

But that wasn't the end of this adventure. Not surprisingly, I couldn't go back into my life as my same self. I was changed in many ways. I'd been initiated into a reality that no one I knew could really understand. I couldn't relate with a lot of my friends, and I certainly couldn't return to the same life. The things that were once so important to me really no longer mattered. And I started asking big questions like "Who am I?"; "What is the meaning of this life?"; "What am I doing here?"; "What's my purpose?"; and "What or who is God?" I left San Diego within a short time and moved to the Pacific Northwest, eventually opening a chiropractic clinic near Olympia, Washington. But at first, I pretty much retreated from the world and studied spirituality.

In time, I also became very interested in spontaneous remissions: when people healed from a serious disease or condition deemed terminal or permanent, without traditional medical interventions like surgery or drugs. On those long, lonely nights during my recovery when I couldn't sleep, I had made a deal with that consciousness that if I were ever able to walk

again, I'd spend the rest of my life investigating and researching the mind-body connection and the concept of mind over matter. And that's pretty much what I've been doing in the nearly three decades since then.

I traveled to several different countries, seeking out many people who had been diagnosed with illnesses and treated conventionally or nonconventionally, either staying the same or getting worse until, all of a sudden, they got better. I started interviewing these people to discover what their experiences had in common so I could understand and document what had made them improve, because I had a passion to marry science with spirituality. What I found was that each of these miraculous cases relied on a strong element of mind.

The scientist in me started getting very itchy, becoming even more inquisitive. I became re-involved in attending university classes and studying the latest research in neuroscience, and I advanced my postgraduate training in brain imaging, neuroplasticity, epigenetics, and psychoneuroimmunology. And I figured, now that I knew what these people had done to get better and now that I knew all about the science of changing your mind (or at least I *thought* I did), I should be able to reproduce it—in both sick people and people who are well who want to make changes to support not only their health, but also their relationships, careers, families, and lives in general.

I was then invited to be one of the 14 scientists and researchers featured in the 2004 documentary film *What the Bleep Do We Know!?* and that movie became an overnight sensation. *What the Bleep Do We Know!?* invited people to question the nature of reality and then try it out in their lives to see if their observation mattered or, perhaps more accurately put, if their observation *became* matter. People around the world were talking about the film and the concepts it espoused. In the wake of that, my first book, *Evolve Your Brain: The Science of Changing Your Mind*, was published in 2007. After *Evolve Your Brain* had been out for a while, people started to ask me, “How do you *do* it? How do you change, and how do you create the life you want?” It soon became the most common question people asked me.

So I assembled a team and started teaching workshops across the United States and internationally on how the brain is wired and how you can reprogram your thinking using neurophysiological principles. At first, these workshops were mostly just a sharing of information. But people wanted

more, so I added meditations to synergize and complement the information, giving participants practical steps to making changes in their minds and bodies, and, as a result, changes in their lives as well. After I taught my introductory workshops in different parts of the world, people would then ask me, “What’s next?” So I began teaching another level to the introductory workshop. After that was completed, more folks asked if I could teach another level, a more advanced workshop. This continued in most of the places where I presented.

I kept thinking that I was done, that I’d taught all I could teach, but people kept asking for more, so I’d learn more myself and then refine the presentations and meditations. A momentum developed, and I was getting good feedback; people were able to eliminate some of their self-destructive habits and lead happier lives. Even though up to this point, my associates and I had seen only small changes—nothing really significant—people loved the information and wanted to continue the practice. So I kept going where I was invited. I figured that when the time came that they stopped inviting me, I’d know I was done with this work.

About a year and a half after our first workshop, my team and I started receiving several e-mails from our participants commenting on positive changes they were experiencing from doing the meditations on a consistent basis. A flood of change began to manifest in people’s lives, and they were overjoyed. The feedback we received over the next year caught my attention and that of my staff as well. Our participants began reporting not only subjective changes in their physical health, but also improvements in objective measurements from their medical tests. Sometimes the tests would even come back totally normal! These people were able to reproduce the exact physical, mental, and emotional changes that I studied, observed, and ultimately wrote about in *Evolve Your Brain*.

This was incredibly exciting for me to witness, because I knew that anything that is repeatable verges on becoming a scientific law. It seemed as though many folks were sending us e-mails starting with the same verbiage: “You’re not going to believe this . . .” And those changes were now more than coincidence.

Then a little later that year, during each of two events in Seattle, some amazing things began to happen. At the first event, a woman with multiple sclerosis (MS), who was using a walker when she arrived, was walking unassisted by the time the workshop was over. At the second Seattle event