

*"In this book, Dr. Barry Rose lays out a simple, common-sense and compassionate approach which anyone concerned with medicine would do well to read."*

- Joel Comm, *New York Times* Best-Selling Author

Our current healthcare system is sick, and the cure is simple: We need to bring compassion back to healthcare. In *The Cutting Edge of Compassion*, board-certified orthopedic surgeon Dr. Barry Rose reflects on how physicians and patients can create the best healing outcomes by appreciating personality differences, addressing fear, being open to Eastern and Western medical philosophies, and working together to address insurance, legal, and pharmaceutical obstacles to optimal care.

Rose presents a compassionate vision for healthcare where health professionals and patients work together to heal. *The Cutting Edge of Compassion* will open your eyes and your heart and reveal that compassionate healthcare is possible when patients and health professionals work together to achieve it.



Dr. Barry Rose is a board-certified orthopedic surgeon and chief of orthopedic surgery and surgical division head for the Alameda division of the Palo Alto Foundation Medical Group, one of the largest multi-specialty groups in California. He resides in San Francisco with his wife Rose.



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DR. BARRY ROSE

THE CUTTING EDGE OF COMPASSION

*"The Cutting Edge of Compassion offers a potent prescription not only for the healing of our health care system but the healing of our society itself"* - NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR RACHEL REMEN

# THE CUTTING EDGE OF COMPASSION

HOW PHYSICIANS, HEALTH PROFESSIONALS,  
AND PATIENTS CAN BUILD HEALING  
RELATIONSHIPS BASED ON TRUST



DR. BARRY ROSE

THE CUTTING EDGE OF COMPASSION

## PRAISE

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"With the recent changes in the American medical system, both doctors and patients are experiencing a degree of frustration. So how can physicians and the people they have committed to treating work through the morass of insurance, ethics, the legal system and basic human decency to create a system which works for everyone? In this book, Dr. Barry Rose lays out a simple, common-sense and compassionate approach which anyone concerned with medicine would do well to read."

- Joel Comm, New York Times Best-Selling Author

"Cutting edge and compassion are not words often used in the same sentence but are desperately needed. Thank you, Barry Rose for writing a dynamic new book that offers innovative thinking, a fresh mindset and solid tools that will positively impact every area of life."

- Marcia Wieder, CEO, Dream University and Founder, The Meaning Institute

THE CUTTING EDGE OF COMPASSION

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*How Physicians, Health Professionals, and Patients Can  
Build Healing Relationships Based on Trust*

BARRY ROSE, M.D.



NEW YORK

## **The Cutting Edge of Compassion**

*How Physicians, Health Professionals, and Patients Can Build  
Healing Relationships Based on Trust*

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Chris Treccani  
[chris@3dogdesign.net](mailto:chris@3dogdesign.net)

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Brittany Bondar

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## INTRODUCTION: IN THE BEGINNING

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*Love and compassion are necessities, not luxuries.  
Without them humanity cannot survive.*

Dalai Lama

My first memorable experience with a physician occurred at the age of five. In the 1950s, before the days of seatbelts and color TV, it wasn't uncommon for children to ride around in cars standing on the seats, enjoying the scenery. One day, my cousin and I were doing just that—standing in the front passenger seat while my aunt was driving. Suddenly, my aunt hit the brakes, trying to avoid a car that had pulled out in front of her. She instinctively stuck out her right arm, trying to protect us from falling forward. Fortunately, she caught my cousin, but her arm wasn't long enough to catch me. Into the dashboard I propelled, catching most of the blow just above my right eye.

My next recollection was lying on a table with a light shining like the sun into my eye, blinding me as I looked up through a red, foggy blur. I kept reaching up to block the light with my hand, until finally my arms were restrained, as the doctor sutured my eyelid. I don't recall any pain, but the fear was so profound that for many years afterwards, and still occasionally to this day, I woke up in a cold sweat, reaching up to block that bright light burning into my dreams.

With an introduction like this, why would I ever choose medicine as a profession? None of my family members had anything to do with medicine or healing the sick. My mother was an Avon lady, wandering from door to door, peddling lipsticks and nail polish (like the mother in the movie *Edward Scissorhands*), and my father was a traveling chemical salesman.

One week, when my father was in town, he took me to the emergency room after I had cut my hand on a broken window. I remember that the wound was burning and gaped open, oozing redness, but the bleeding was easily controlled with direct pressure. I was taken to a small exam room with a movable overhead light, and a nurse proceeded to scrub my hand with brown soapy fluid. Soon afterwards, in walked a doctor with scraggy, curly brown hair, wearing greens and a white coat. He told me that he was going to numb my wound and sew up the laceration. At about that time, my father started to swoon as the blood drained from his face, and a nurse had to escort him to the waiting room before he passed out and hit the floor. I was left alone to face the drama ahead.

As I gritted my teeth, watching the doc fill up the syringe with lidocaine from a little rubber-capped bottle, I

braced for the pain. As he started numbing my wound with small punctures into my open cut, I felt some burning but, surprisingly, no pain. I curiously watched as he sutured my wound with simple stitches, one after another. He was totally absorbed in this process, neatly tying his knots. When he finished, he said, "Well, I'm done—looks like nine stitches." I immediately responded, "No, there's ten." He turned and looked at me, surprised that I actually had been watching while he was absorbed in the task at hand. He counted again and said, "You're right." I beamed, feeling like I had been an active part of my procedure. I was intrigued by the experience, and looking back, it may have been the earliest sign that I thought this medicine thing was something cool. Many years later, another sign would come.

It's a mystery sometimes how people gravitate towards their role in life. What makes someone want to be a doctor, a nurse, an accountant, or an architect? Many times people are guided by their strengths and natural aptitudes. A person who is great with numbers might be led towards the path of being an accountant or a banker, for example. Others seem to just "know" what they are meant to be and discover their passions early in life. Still others have many gifts and talents and may change careers multiple times on their quest to find what satisfies their core interests.

As for me, I know that when I was a sixth grader, sitting in Mr. Miller's science class studying the human body, something within me changed. At the age of twelve, I should have simply been satisfied with focusing on baseball and girls. But I was fascinated with the muscles of the body and the bones of the skeleton. I found myself on a quest for knowledge about this

new medical world. A decade later, when I was applying to medical school, I contacted my beloved sixth-grade teacher Mr. Miller to ask him, with gratitude, to write me a letter of recommendation. And so my journey as a healer began and continues to present day. It's been an extraordinary path that has led me to practice and experience compassionate healing.

I have worked in a number of different practice settings, but to date, the most enjoyable has been my present practice. I am the chief of orthopedics and the surgical division head for the Alameda division of the Palo Alto Medical Foundation headquartered in Palo Alto, California. It is one of the top-ten largest multi-specialty groups in California. Its level of care is exemplary and a model of what is possible in great medical care.

I am not a writer, just a guy from Kansas who became a doctor and then an orthopedic surgeon. However, it's time to share what I've learned along the way. Don't be surprised if I enroll you in my passion.

In this book, I don't offer an evidence-based, authoritative diagnosis of the healthcare system. Instead, I share my stories, because every physician finds his or her own path to medicine. For some, it is a calling, a vocation, even a destiny. For others, it is a legacy; it's in their DNA. In part 1, I share my own story about being called into medicine, and in the telling of my story, I hope other physicians may discover their story, too.

However, my story is part of a bigger story—one that includes physicians, health professionals, and patients. Naturally, taking care of the sick and injured has many challenges. As physicians, our primary job is to find the root cause of an illness or injury and then use all of our tools, as

well as the insights of our patients, to affect positive change. We have to discern what we can change or heal, and what we cannot. I have often wondered if we could come up with a definitive, step-by-step guide for success in our clinical practice as physicians—perhaps like the DSM-V for psychologists. I have often traveled down a treatment path that led to heartache instead of hope, when my efforts did not produce a satisfactory result. Yet, I always learn much from the process.

If healing and helping is an intuitive process that develops with age and experience, then the guidebook is already within us. I believe that coming from a place of integrity and trusting your gut is the best guide for all of us as healers, in any circumstance. Truly understanding our patients and their personality types will help in the process. We also have amazing diagnostic tools, like MRIs, laboratory tests, and scans that complement and test our intuition.

Yet in recent years, both physicians and patients have noticed a shift from trust to suspicion in Western medicine and other healing arts. As we'll see in part 2, I believe the physician/patient relationship is the first step in the healing that needs to take place for improved outcomes.

Healthcare practitioners undergo exhaustive training for years and usually at a sacrifice. But patients also have a responsibility for their own care and well-being. True healing starts with the patient and his or her care provider working together as a team. Mutual respect is important. Everyone—patients, physicians, and other healthcare professionals—needs to appreciate each other's gifts and understand how they can affect care.

The healthcare industry is not just composed of physicians, allied health professionals, and patients, however. Fear, ego, and greed have also entered healthcare through the insurance industry, the legal system, and the pharmaceutical industry. As a surgeon, I definitely love to fix things in need of repair and afterwards get to experience the joy of someone regaining his or her health and mobility in a short period of time. I feel the same way about our healthcare system. I have seen healthcare change significantly since I graduated from medical school in 1979. Back then, just being a doctor granted you great respect. Hospitals catered to us, and patients rarely questioned us. I don't remember out-of-control medication costs or insurance companies in denial about these costs—though I do remember a big fear of being sued, with little tort reform or caps on punitive damages.

I know many physicians, healers, holistic practitioners following Eastern philosophies, and patients alike who have voiced their desire for a change in medicine and a better way to heal. Together, we can figure out the best way for all of us to get well. Yes, there are many obstacles to overcome, considering our intractable legal, insurance, and pharmaceutical systems, but together, I feel we can make transformations that afford us better, happier, and healthier lives. Trust is paramount.

So in this book, I hope to lead us all—patients and healers of all kinds—away from fear, ego, and greed and toward a place of trust and compassion in healthcare. Being in a state of stress and fear knocks down our immune system and keeps all of us from healing. I want to share with you steps physicians and other healthcare practitioners need to take, followed by suggestions for patients to engage in for their healing and,

finally, what the system needs to do to take us from fear to compassion, trust, and healing.

At the end, I hope we will have a vision for what compassionate healthcare can be and how we can all work together to make this happen. I hope I can sign you up to take on this challenge with me. I can't do it alone, but we certainly can do it together. I hope that when you read my thoughts, not only will you have a better understanding of who each of us are, but also what all of us truly need. It's time for us to make changes to our healthcare system that will afford us the best possible life to enjoy in the short time that we live on this planet.

## PART ONE

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### Called to Care

*My mission in life is not merely to survive, but to thrive; and to do so with some passion, some compassion, some humor, and some style.*

Maya Angelou

## 1. THE RESPONSIBILITY

---

*When you inherit a broken family, you can't throw it away and get a new one. What you can do is find people and situations that provide for you what your family cannot.*

Iyanla Vanzant

When an adolescent gets thrown into the deep end, with water over his head, he either sinks or swims. At least, that's what it felt like when I was faced, time after time, with the responsibility of keeping my family together. Growing up with an alcoholic parent had profound effects on all of us.

I'm not sure when I first realized my mom had a drinking problem. She was always sweet and loving and extremely close with her mother. My father traveled as a salesman and was gone from Monday through Friday, so my mom's emotional support came from my grandmother. My grandmother was always in our home and vice versa. When I was thirteen, my grandmother was diagnosed with leukemia. She had been tired

for months, and once diagnosed, she dwindled quickly and died three months later. My mom was devastated. Her best friend was gone, and my father could not provide the support she needed. This loss was too much for my mom to endure. My mom, the bright, sweet, high school valedictorian, needed to escape on a daily basis. So she dove into a bottle, and I took it upon myself to try to keep her from drowning. This sense of family responsibility at an early age would eventually evolve into my journey toward becoming a healer.

Every day at around four o'clock, my mother would start to drink. She drank openly at first, but later, as my father chided her, she became more secretive. Yet the results were always the same. She did her best to get dinner on the table for my brother and me, and then she would fade to black. She wandered around, out of it, and then would pass out on the bed, usually before my little brother and I would go to sleep. At first, I was filled with fear over what to do. That unsettling, gut-wrenching feeling I got when my mother would slur her words and could barely communicate became commonplace. I can remember times when I couldn't arouse her and worried she was dead. I had to console my brother's tears as he watched her stupor. My dad was on the road, so I was the only one in charge. I inherited the role of parental caretaker long before my time, but somebody had to do it. It was hard for a thirteen-year-old. The drama became the norm.

In the morning, my mom was apologetic and filled with guilt on a regular basis. She would become overly attentive to us and smothered us with loving gestures. She would cook us French toast and sausage for breakfast to try to make up for the night before.

At some point, she admitted she had a problem. But my "responsible" dad, who traveled to produce an income for his family, left the responsibility of taking care of his wife to his teenage son. I was supposed to mark the liquor bottles for him while he was traveling. When he came home on the weekends, he would check those bottles. If the alcohol level had dropped below the mark from the week before, all hell would break loose. He would then beat her up emotionally when he inevitably discovered she'd been drinking. He would yell and scream at her and my "scapegoat" brother, further escalating the drama. I was spared because I was the "family pleaser," a well-established role in a typical alcoholic family. I doubt if my father ever understood that it wasn't an appropriate role for me.

I can still remember many times when my dad would yell at my mother while taking his belt off in response to my smart-ass brother. We suffered through meals where my mom would silently serve us after one of my dad's outbursts, and my brother and I would eat with our heads down, afraid to look up. The shame was often overwhelming.

Yet my role sometimes had positive results. When the family was in total disorder, I stepped in. In all the chaos, I would sometimes make everyone sit down to have a family meeting. My dad couldn't turn on me because I was his little scout and carried out his requests. At the same time, my mother and brother depended on me for their caretaking and emotional support. At age sixteen, I was keeping the family together. What power I had as a teenager! My life was like James Taylor's song "Fire and Rain." My father was the fire, and I was the rain that put it out. Sadly, we kept up the appearance of

a normal family to both our extended family and our friends, following an unspoken rule never to talk about what happened at home behind closed doors.

When I turned seventeen, I worked for my dad in his own chemical company. He and his partner had developed allergies to the toxic chemicals, so he had me mixing them. Just as before, he didn't consider that perhaps it wasn't good for me to be exposed to the toxicity either. That kind of disconnect was typical. It has taken me decades finally to let go of trying to squelch the uncontrollable energy force that my father represents. My mother, much later in her sobriety, tried to bring him back to a place of normalcy. I'm afraid the stress she dealt with as well as her strong family history of cancer, cost her dearly and added to her early demise, helping to bring on and accelerate her cancer. To this day, I finally feel I have a handle on how to deal with his crazymaking behavior.

Yet in his own way, I feel my father did the best job he could. The only thing I have power over is my own energy, and I can choose to stay positive and avoid the negative, which helps restore my soul and my sanity. I had to learn how to balance my life as a result of my imposed responsibility, and learn I did. Through my upbringing, I learned some great life lessons, even though many times I was burned from the fire.

That said, unhealthy caretaking creates emotional baggage that can become too much to bear alone. For a brief time during my medical training, I lived with my brother as he finished graduate school. He was in the middle of dealing with his revelation of being gay and presenting it to my family and the world around him. The combination of clinics, my mother's

alcoholism, my father's abdication of his responsibility, and my brother's issues with substance abuse and sexuality became too much to handle.

My brother came home one day and, after searching the apartment, found me curled up in the fetal position inside a dark bedroom closet, barely responsive. To this day, I truly don't remember it. Apparently I had completely separated from reality as some kind of escape mechanism. Looking back, I believe it was the beginning of my process of separating from unhealthy caretaking and focusing my energy on situations I could affect positively.

I can still remember seeing a therapist, decades ago, about the effects my family's alcoholism had on me and how to cope with all the guilt and codependence. I was astounded at how I fit the typical role of "family pleaser" in my family unit. I have a much greater understanding now than I did then about the genetic predisposition to conditions like alcoholism and cystic fibrosis. My mother and her brother, as well as their parents, were all dependent on alcohol. Of the four sons my mother and her brother had between them, I was the only one without the gene for alcoholism or drug dependency—yet I have a son with similar issues.

The role of the health professional most certainly involves taking care of others. It requires compassion and empathy. It also requires a sense of responsibility and integrity to do whatever is needed to assist in someone's care. We have a huge job when directing the care of others. We are the experts, and if we don't do our job well, the patient will suffer the most. Our skill in this role develops with time and experience. It

also has to do with one's inherent nature. The caring I feel for others comes from a place of very positive energy and love. Occasionally, the role of caretaker is bestowed upon you as a result of necessity at an early age, as it was for me. Although it was initially unpleasant and inappropriate, it propelled me toward a life's mission for caring that exists to this day. My caretaking role began with my mother, father, and brother, and as time went on, it extended to my children and ultimately to my patients. I hope that my sense of responsibility for caretaking has been refined and channeled to a more appropriate and less codependent role. My early experiences, although at times very painful, strengthened me and have allowed me to rise to meet some difficult challenges, both in medicine and in life.

Ultimately, caregivers need to have compassion for themselves before they can be truly compassionate with their patients. If you are a physician, I invite you to remember your journey to healing and the sacrifices you have made along the way. Rediscovering your primary motivation for becoming a healer in the first place is the best way to stay on the path of integrity and compassion when helping those you care for.

## 2. THE INFLUENCE

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*To be kind is more important than to be right. Many times what people need is not a brilliant mind that speaks but a special heart that listens. And it is compassion that makes a special heart move to the pain of others. Be a compassionate and loving human being.*

Rishika Jain

I have often wondered what it is that draws one to the world of healing. Is it a fix-it mentality or an aura of pure caring? Does it come from a place of ego, power, and control? Maybe it includes all these motivations, at least in part. Many times we can identify someone or something that has influenced and motivated us to pursue a specific career choice.

In tenth grade, I became friends with Rick, who after high school and college went on to Harvard Law and became a powerful East Coast, Manhattan attorney. His girlfriend Sherri was sweet, kind, beautiful, and a brainiac. As the typical adolescent male, with hormones surging in the bloodstream, Rick couldn't stay away from this beauty Sherri. If I hung out