Dr. Oz Preys on Gullible Americans in His Modern-Day Medicine Show

By Alex Berezow, PhD — January 10, 2019

Why are charlatans like Dr. Oz so popular? As of 2014, America's Quack had promoted no fewer than 16 different weight loss miracles [2]. (Who knows how many he's peddled by now?!)

Obviously, his advice isn't working. People are fat and getting fatter.

Dr. Oz isn't a new phenomenon. In the mid-19th Century, traveling medicine shows became all the rage. As described by the website Legends of America [3], medicine shows were like "a small traveling circus, complete with vaudeville-style entertainment" and various "magic tricks." Of course, they also had something to sell, usually an elixir that would solve a variety of medical problems.

Today, we may laugh at how gullible we once were. But have we really changed? Dr. Oz, who remains popular despite offering "medical" advice with little to no basis in scientific fact [4], is the modern-day equivalent of the traveling medicine show. What explains the centuries-long persistence of snake oil salesmen in America?

America the Gullible?

Rich Karlgaard, the publisher of Forbes magazine, offers a clue. In 2010, he penned an article [5] about how gullibility is the "dark side of American optimism." Some of his reasoning is a bit suspect (such as the speculation that Americans are genetically predisposed to being optimistic due to the self-selecting nature of immigration). But he hits upon an important point: There is a fine line between optimism and gullibility.

Why are Americans so gullible? In my opinion, it is the result of three things: (1) Our belief in quick
fixes to complex problems; (2) our desire to exert complete control over our lives; and (3) widespread scientific illiteracy. All three of these "ingredients" are necessary to explain the enduring popularity of bogus health claims. Let's explore each of these in a bit more detail.

**Our belief in quick fixes to complex problems** crops up absolutely everywhere in American life. Do you want your baby to be smart? She needs the right toy. Do you want to be healthy? Drink açai juice. Do you want to be an expert in something? Read a Wikipedia article.

In reality, the biggest challenges in life require dedication, not quick fixes. If you want your baby to be smart, spend time reading to her and helping her with homework when she enters school. If you want to be healthy, you need to exercise and have a moderate, balanced diet. If you want to be an expert in something, you need to read several books, or perhaps go back to school.

**Our desire to exert complete control over our lives** makes us even more gullible than we otherwise might be. We seem to believe that we can extend our lives by years, maybe even decades, if we follow a certain health regimen. In reality, we have far less control over our lives than we would like to admit. We didn't choose our parents. We didn't choose our genetics. And we didn't choose to be born as Americans. Yet, all three of those factors has an enormous impact on our health.

Yes, you can help prolong your life by engaging in healthy behaviors (and avoiding unhealthy ones, like smoking). But even if you do everything right, you can still **die of cancer due to bad luck** [6].

**Widespread scientific illiteracy**, of course, makes all of the above possible. Most Americans leave high school or college without a basic understanding of biology, chemistry, or nutrition, so it's no wonder that we can be fooled by late-night infomercials.

If we want to have a smarter society, there is no quick and easy fix. We can't just throw money at science education and expect to produce a savvier generation. We need a fundamental cultural change, one that rewards patience and persistence, reveres (but does not blindly trust) expertise, and encourages some skepticism to balance our optimism.

---

**COPYRIGHT © 1978-2016 BY THE AMERICAN COUNCIL ON SCIENCE AND HEALTH**

---

**Source URL:** https://www.acsh.org/news/2019/01/10/dr-oz-preys-gullible-americans-his-modern-day-medicine-show-13721

**Links**

[1] https://www.storyblocks.com/stock-image/mallard-duck-by-the-river-on-beautiful-summer-day-hpcl0vfo7ozj6guvs17

[2] https://www.realclearscience.com/blog/2014/01/dr_oz_has_featured_no_less_than_16_weight_loss_miracles_why_is_there_still_an_obesity_epidemic.html

