



UCLA psychiatrist and TV host Dr. Reef Karim isn't your typical "white coat and stethoscope" kind of doctor. Recently named one of the world's sexiest men in People magazine, Karim has harnessed his knowledge of both Eastern philosophy, Western medicine and popular culture to carve a special niche for himself. "I knew I could do the most good by bridging the gap between academic medicine and pop culture," he says. "It's a risk I took, and it was very scary. All my colleagues thought I was crazy."

The gamble paid off. Karim currently hosts Court TV's House of Clues, a show where psychological and forensic evidence is used to profile personalities and celebrities in their homes. He is an expert on VH1's new sex-and-relationships show, The Love Lounge, and hosted MTV/KROQ's Loveline.

Something of a renaissance man, Dr. Reef also has a budding career in the film industry – he served as medical advisor for Thirteen and Laurel Canyon, starred in the Indo-American hit Flavors, and acted in Laurel Canyon and the upcoming film Lords of Dogtown.

We grabbed a quick session with this real-life Doc Hollywood and asked his advice on how to make ourselves better people in 2005.

Why is it that so many people find January a depressing month?

Holidays are a time of family and togetherness, so if you don't have a family or the relationships you want, it's spotlighted. People think, "I'm on my own, I don't have what I want, I'm not the person I thought I was, I'm not as far along in life as I thought I would be."

How can we motivate ourselves to find success?

Many people simply react to the world. The world does something positive or negative to them, and they react to it and they keep moving through their lives that way. People who are proactive about the experiences they generate are generally much more fulfilled. It is important to figure out why you are in your current career. A lot of people are surprised when they think about it – it was their parent's choice, or for the money, or to get fame. I advise people to find out why they are in their profession, and what value it gives them as an individual. Not what you do for the company, but what your work does for you.

You're a couples' relationship therapist in addition to being a psychiatrist and addiction specialist. What are the most common problems couples come to you with?

The most common thing I see is the wanting to be right over wanting to be loved. A couple may have some kind of surface issue, like "You left the towel on the floor," or "You didn't call me at 3 p.m." But it taps into a bigger issue, which is "I don't think you respect me. I don't think you love me. I feel controlled by you." It is hard to discuss the deeper issues, and a lot of people will instead just go back and forth, fighting about the surface issue, about who wants to be right.

You deal with chemical and behavioral addictions. Why is it that some of us have addictive personalities and others don't?

It used to be thought that addiction was purely a disease of will: "You're a weak person, that's why you have an addiction. You have a problem with your ability to say no." But it is actually a biological problem linked to an individual's brain chemistry. There is legitimately a brain vulnerability. There's an area of your brain called the "reward circuit pathway", and a neurotransmitter called dopamine runs through it. The way that dopamine is shot through that area tends to be different in people who are vulnerable to addictions or have addictions. So if someone who is vulnerable takes a drug, it will activate that area pretty significantly. You might be someone who is totally set up to be a heroin addict, but if you never take an opiate drug in your life you'll never know.

You also work with young people with drug addictions. What kinds of drugs are young people doing today?

I've seen more cocaine use among kids than I did previously. Ecstasy is still around. Salvia divinorum is a mild herbal hallucinogen from Mexico which some kids use. It is legal, and you can get it on Melrose. When you talk to kids about drugs, if you say, "Pot is bad, ecstasy is bad, GHB is bad," they are not going to listen to you, especially if you come in with a white coat and a doctorly way about you. But if you're honest and answer their questions, they're more likely to listen to you. I get asked, "Don't you want to do any drugs?" and I answer honestly. Would I love to get the euphoria associated with doing a drug, that wonderful feeling? Yeah! But once that feeling's gone you're left with a change in your reward pathway, a new vulnerability you didn't have before, some type of effect on your body, needing to get that drug or not being able to have fun unless you get that drug. To me, it's not worth it because I've got so many things I want to do, and I don't want to be interrupted either physically or mentally.

Do you think that people's dependency on mood enhancers and anti-depressants like Zoloft and Prozac has spiraled out of control?

This is a hot issue. Some psychiatrists have become purely psychopharmacologists – they just see patients to give them meds. Instead of seeing them for an hour or 45 minutes, it's more like 15. The medications, for the most part, are totally fine, and they are effective, but I don't want to give somebody something they are going to take for the rest of their life or for a year if they don't have to.

And finally, what is your recipe for achieving personal happiness?

Knowing and being comfortable with how you are – something I don't see that often in people. And when you are not truly comfortable with your flaws and your strengths as a person, there will be a cap on how happy and fulfilled in life you can be. The first thing I would do is start keeping a journal or make an emotional inventory. Take time every day to understand why it is you have the emotions that you have: what things really bug you and why; what kinds of things really make you happy and why. It's all about getting an understanding of what makes you you. Second, extend that into the core people you hang out with – your family, good friends, your spouse, your kids. Life is all about friends and family, and by gaining a better understanding of them you'll have a better understanding of your role in your little social community. Third, find out what you can do to help your fellow man or woman. One absolute recipe for happiness is the act of helping or giving to others. There is nothing better than knowing you did something for someone else, and it wasn't all about you.