

Perfectly Imperfect

A few years ago, Alice Domar '76 was sharing a podium with world-renowned heart surgeon Dr. Mehmet Oz at a symposium on women's health. When Oz commented to Domar, herself a world-renowned health psychologist, that he preferred male patients to female patients, Domar remembers feeling appalled. "My first thought was, how sexist of him," she said.

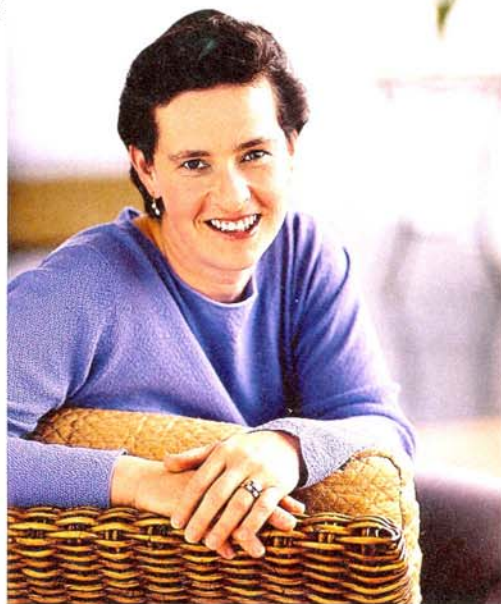
"Then he went on to explain that when he sees a male patient after cardiac surgery, he typically meets with the patient and his wife together. He tells them that the patient needs to eat a lower-calorie, lower-cholesterol diet, and the wife nods and takes notes, and he knows when they go home, she'll make sure her husband follows the doctor's orders. Oz then said that when he tells a female patient the same thing, he knows she's not going to change the way she cooks just because of her own needs. She's going to keep making what her family wants to eat."

Then Domar understood exactly what the surgeon was saying—it's a principle on which she has built a career as a clinician, researcher, consultant, and author. "Women feel too guilty to focus on self-nurturing," she said. "They take care of other people, never themselves."

Domar had always been interested in both mental and physical health, and was unsure whether she should become a physician or a psychologist. When a professor told her about the newly emerging field of health psychology, Domar recognized a perfect match for her skills and interests. She earned her PhD at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York, then moved back to Boston to study with Dr. Herbert Benson at Beth Israel Hospital.

Benson, who developed the technique

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known as the Relaxation Response, was a pioneer in the mind-body connection, researching how control over one's mental health can positively affect physical well-being. At that time, his research was applied primarily to illnesses such as heart disease, cancer, and lupus. A talk Benson gave to a group of ob/gyns at Beth Israel sparked discussion about whether the same principles might work with infertility, and Benson encouraged Domar to pursue this question.

"Instead of doing a traditional study, I asked him if I could just start a group for infertility patients in which we'd use mind-body and Relaxation Response techniques," she said. Benson gave her the green light—and that was the start


of Domar's groundbreaking work in infertility, which has helped patients by adding alternative, mind-body approaches to their infertility treatments.

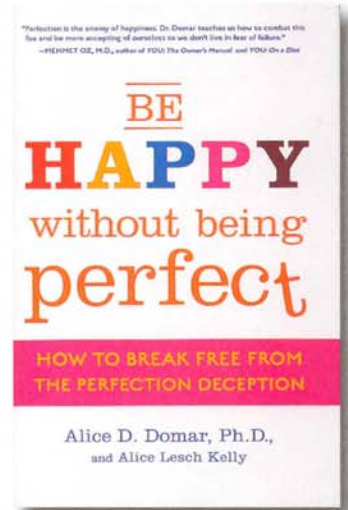
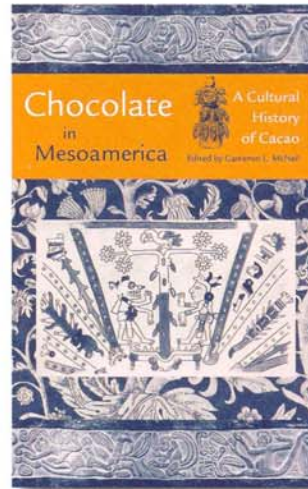
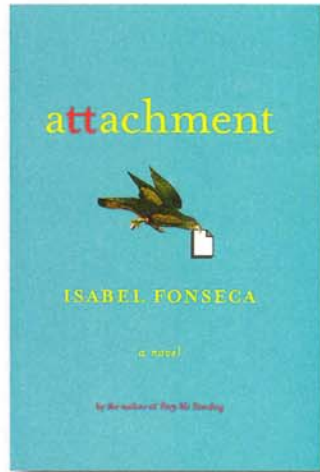
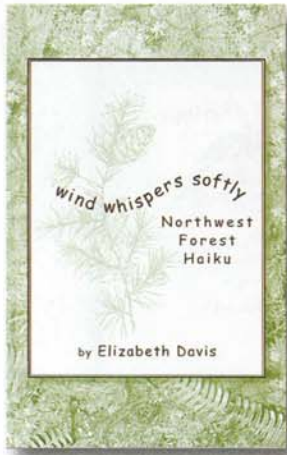
But after several years in that field and publication of her first book—*Healing Mind, Healthy Woman: Using the Mind-Body Connection to Manage Stress and Take Control of Your Life*—Domar began to realize she was tackling a larger issue: women's inability to focus enough on their own well-being. Recognizing that her mind-body methods could help women struggling with stress of all kinds, she wrote her second book: *Self-Nurture: Learning to Care for Yourself As Effectively As you Care for Everyone Else*. Domar also remains focused on her infertility work, and couples trying to conceive frequently consult her third book, *Conquering Infertility*.

In 2001, Domar accepted a staff position at an infertility center called Boston IVE. Five years later, executives there approached her with the idea of opening a new complementary care center for women—one that offered acupuncture, nutrition, yoga, and psychological counseling to help a wide range of health issues. She agreed to take it on, but balked when they wanted to name the facility after her.

"My first response was to say, 'I'm too young and I'm too alive to have a health center named after me,'" Domar recalled. Then one of the senior partners suggested that it would honor her parents. Since she credits her parents with the life skills and personal qualities that have governed her career—her late mother was a social worker from whom she learned empathy and her father an economist who taught her to apply analytical skills—she acceded, and the Domar Center for Mind/Body Health opened in 2006.

Though her career is dedicated to teaching women to take care of themselves, Domar admits that her own life can be as complex as anyone's, and she too gets stressed. She is now the author of a fourth book, *Be Happy Without Being Perfect: How to Break Free from the Perfection Deception* (see page 13). And she is working on a fifth with Dr. Susan Love, *How To Be Pretty Healthy*. She is director of the Domar Center, an assistant professor at Harvard Medical School, a clinician, the director of four research projects, a wife, and the mother of two daughters, ages seven and twelve.

The gratitude of thousands of patients and others who have benefited from her books, talks, and support groups suggests that the world of women's health is a better place for all of Domar's efforts. But she's not so sure her work is done. "Have I achieved my goal of making women mentally and physically healthier?" she asked. "I don't know yet." 



Wind Whispers Softly: Northwest Forest Haiku

Elizabeth Davis (Jane E. Davis '54)

Davis takes readers along on her frequent walks through South Whidbey State Park in Whidbey Island, Washington, with poetry as her able guide. Though Davis has written poetry for years, she was drawn to haiku in particular about six years ago, seduced in part by its simplicity. The result is *Wind Whispers Softly*, her homage to the natural beauty of the Pacific Northwest.

Foamflower

*Flecks of ocean foam
Give this plant its name; how odd—
It lives in deep woods.*

Roots

*Dark octopus roots
Creeping across forest floor
Hold up a giant.*

Attachment

Isabel Fonseca '79
Knopf, 2008

For Jean, a forty-something American, and Mark, a suave British advertising executive, life on a remote Indian Ocean island is bliss. That is until Jean inadvertently reads an email intended for Mark. Drawn by the provocative text, she poses as her husband and begins a raunchy online exchange with the "other woman." The email provides the catalyst for Jean's descent from a comfortable twenty-three-year marriage into an abyss of uncertainty. Despite writing a health column in an English woman's journal, Jean comes up short in knowing how to help herself. Throw in a free-spirited, college-age daughter in London, an ailing parent in New York, and an erotic encounter with one of Mark's young assistants and you have all the elements for a delightfully vicious and bitter tale of midlife.

Chocolate in Mesoamerica: A Cultural History of Cacao

Cameron L. McNeil '87
University Press of Florida, 2006

This collection of works by twenty experts in the field of Mesoamerican and pre-Columbian studies focuses on *Theobroma cacao*—the plant behind the chocolate we crave. By gathering such a wide range of experts, McNeil provides a thorough examination of cacao, from botanical, historical, ritualistic, political, and economical perspectives. She takes readers from the Amazon to Mexico to discover cacao's rich and royal story. McNeil, who was awarded the 2008 Mary W. Klinger Book Award by the Society for Economic Botany for *Chocolate in Mesoamerica*, is assistant professor at Queens College (City University of New York).

Be Happy Without Being Perfect: How to Break Free from the Perfection Deception

Alice D. Domar '76 and
Alice Lesch Kelly
Crown Publishers, 2008

Paralyzed by the pursuit of perfection? Overwhelmed by unrealistic goals and an overt obsession for detail? Nearly everyone seeks perfection in some aspect of daily life, but for many women, the drive to be perfect in all domains leads to anxiety, stress, and depression, according to Dr. Domar, executive director of the Domar Center for Mind/Body Health and assistant professor of obstetrics/gynecology and reproductive biology at Harvard Medical School. She shares case studies of her own patients and outlines techniques to help readers balance busy lives by setting realistic goals and expectations. (See an alumnae/i profile of Dr. Domar on page 12.)

CA Bookshelf

by Martha Kennedy, *Library Director*