

(S4,E1) Neoliberal Nightmares: the Wellness Industry and Social Isolation

Hello friends! Long time no speak... We're back and it's all totally fine and normal! Did I take an unexpected, unplanned and entirely-too-long break because my mental health took a spectacular nosedive last year? Maybe. Did I wake up every week and say to myself "I'm going to relaunch the podcast this week!" before staring into the void for 8 hours and achieving literally nothing? Also maybe. Is it concerning to me that while I was like 90% normal for most of the lockdowns, the second I had to interact with the world, I become a ghost of my former self inhabiting a barely animate meat sack? Look, don't worry about it. The point is, I'm here now. I'm fine. My brain is extremely normal and consuming pop culture content in a normal and healthy way.

So, housekeeping at the top – we're going to test a couple of things this year. We're sticking with the fortnightly episode structure to keep me and Wesley both sane. We might also trial some format stuff – I'll tell you more about it once I work out what it is. Or I'll pretend I never said this and we'll keep shit exactly the same and if you ask me about it I'll deny everything.

Anyway, I was looking in our company

portal for some mandatory training about not clicking phishing links the other day, and I was blasted with a series of sessions about mindfulness and resilience. I don't know if you've ever had to sit through a corporate session on mindfulness and resilience, but due to the various industries I've worked in I have been to hundreds. And every time I go I have never been closer to ruining someone's day by forcing them to watch me jam a ballpoint into my jugular.

I go to the job so I have money for therapy so I am resilient enough to continue attending the job so I can pay for the therapy to become more resilient, and so on. But it got me thinking about the ever-present threat of having someone who works in human resources think they're qualified to tell you about achieving holistic wellness. The industry that's sprung up around something that should ultimately have nothing to do with your job is a nightmare and also omnipresent. So we're gonna talk about the history of wellness, why your boss loves it and how social media is making it even more perverted.

I'm Alex. This is Pop Culture Boner – the podcast edition – and today, I'm thinking about the wellness industrial complex.

So, something about the sudden prominence of 'wellness' as a term has always felt a little bit off to me. It was like it appeared suddenly, and just as quickly as it arrived, it was embedded everywhere from my friendships to the TV I was watching to my job. I think it felt especially jarring to me because I grew up in the 90s and early 00s. I was 19 when Kate Moss gave the interview that popularised the quote "Nothing tastes as good as skinny feels". There was just like 10- year period where I couldn't really buy pants, lest their low rise cut mean that my entire mons was out in public. I have a very clear memory of coverage of some socialite who very openly talked about how she really only smoked cigarettes and drank diet coke. It wasn't even that it was framed positively, per se. It was simply published without question alongside photos of these women looking exceedingly glamorous. All of these things were fine, even if they were destroying your body or making you uncomfortable, because you were very beautiful and that was good.

And I remember there being this slow decline in the acceptability of that kind of reporting, but in a way where it didn't feel like it went away. It felt like as that type of coverage was retracting, wellness culture was filling the void left behind. Until suddenly, it was all that was left and people who had been making it through the day on chain smoking, a no fat latte and an egg white omelette were suddenly doing yoga, taking up vegetarianism and talking about the importance of getting up at the crack of dawn to watch the sun rise as a daily ritual central to their goal setting and achievement.

That last part is key. Obviously, the type of disordered eating that centres on fuelling yourself entirely on caffeine is goal oriented, but it was never fashionable to talk about the goal. It was important to appear effortlessly engaged with the coffee-cigarettes-and-cocaine diet as an afterthought to your beautiful thinness, and not a means of achieving thinness as the goal. Wellness culture loves goal-setting, and it loves you to show off the habits that allow you to hit that goal.

I think this is why wellness was able to embed itself in every level of life so successfully. Coffee, cigarettes and cocaine are not for the weak of heart, lung or bank balance. But jogging? Vegetables? Journalling? Those are do-able, virtuous even. And they're scalable beyond the professionally beautiful – tech billionaires, investment bankers and advertising overlords can all get on board with wellness and they can push it downstream to schmucks who toil away underneath them.

Now, obviously, I'm saying all this with a pretty hefty level of disdain. It's not that I hate jogging, vegetables, or journalling... well... vegetables or journalling anyway. But I am wary of wellness. So let's have a little poke around for why, shall we?

EventhoughI'velaidthesceneforwellness being a relatively recent phenomenon, the term was actually coined in a 1959 essay called What high level wellness means by Dr Halbert L. Dunn, a Canadian medical practitioner and biostatistician. To him, being 'well' wasn't simply about not being sick – good health, he said, was a passive state. Wellness,

in contrast, was dynamic, where an individual was striving toward a higher potential of functioning. He called this 'high level wellness', which he defined as "an integrated method of functioning which is oriented toward maximising the potential of which the individual is capable, within the environment where he is functioning." Wellness for Dunn was not simply about the physical – you weren't treating a specific illness, or even just getting ripped and becoming the perfect physical specimen. It is a fully integrated system that takes into account the mind, body and spirit.

While his original essay was eventually expanded into a book in 1961, Dunn's idea was more of a sleeper hit than an overnight success. It was mostly associated with the New Age movement and a burgeoning interest in alternative medicine, until it was introduced to Americans on a national scale in a 1979 60 Minutes interview with the founder of the Marin County Wellness Resource Centre, Dr John W. Travis. Travis spoke about 'wellness' as something that lived alongside traditional medicine to act as a preventative measure down the line for patients who were engaged with and attuned to their own health and wellbeing.

In the segment Dan Rather talks to people who have struggled to find relief for chronic conditions that have eluded traditional medicine – like a high-powered executive with chronic headaches who has been told they're caused by stress. He goes to the Wellness Resource Centre and they do some biofeedback or something, work on some stress relievers. Badabing, badaboom. The headaches have reduced

significantly. Now you might be thinking, as I was, "Well, yeah. If you start taking a regular hour every couple of days to sit with your eyes closed in a room, you'll probably feel less stressed overall." This isn't an inherently evil thing. Understanding that there are things about our health that are connected is probably kind of good. Paying attention to the way you're feeling so you can understand changes, also probably fine. And if someone needs a prompt like a regular appointment to spend time away from their desk, then I have some strong feelings about why we shouldn't be structuring work that way, but I'm not going to begrudge a man who couldn't conceive of sitting quietly for an hour by himself, seeking out someone to endorse that for him. The concerning part to me, and the thing I see in this report that sets us up for the wellness hellscape to come, is the discussion of 'self-care'. In this segment, medical professionals taking classes on understanding self-care and wellness passionately endorse taking responsibility for your own health, only using what fits and becoming your own guru. And that type of rhetoric might raise your eyebrows a little, but if you're like me, you might not have been immediately able to put your finger on why in the context of an otherwise very reasonably framed video segment about supplementing traditional medicine with sometimes sitting in a comfy chair with your eyes closed.

We've come a long way from 1979, and wellness is now a \$3.7 trillion industry. So how can something that is supposed to just be about your relationship with yourself and your body be worth so much money? See, the thing that has enabled

'wellness' to become such a popular concept in our late-stage capitalist vortex is that it is focussed exclusively on the self. Feeling a bit crappy when you wake up in the morning? You could make changes to your diet. Trouble falling asleep at night? You could be running more. Feeling bad that your peers are more successful than you? Change your mindset brother – get up at 5am and start grinding. Write those goals down, visualise and hustle, baby, hustle! Wellness here doesn't just mean that you kind of know what your body is up to. It means you are physically beautiful, wealthy, fulfilled and, most importantly, morally righteous.

This is hyper-individualism, in which you are the cause of and solution to all your own problems. And because the ultimate moral good of these things is reinforced by the people around you getting healthy, wealthy and beautiful by journalling and drinking green smoothies, it inherently lends itself to consumerism. Entire industries can spring up around selling you exactly the right green smoothie to start your day off. Or the perfect journal for you to organise your visions and strive toward your dream life. You too could be a virtuous and well-balanced person if, as our friends in the 60 Minutes clip suggest, you took responsibility for your own health and became your own guru. And if you're still feeling unwell, unbalanced or in pain, maybe a new yoga mat will help. Better grip.

It's actually not even the first time we've done this as a species. Daniela Blei has an article from 2017 exploring the German 'life reform' movement that kicked off in the late 19th Century. It was basically the same thing as wellness,

except the industry that sprang up around it was like... spas where you could do leatherwork in the sunshine, be naked in nature and take ice baths, because the Victorians were always on some freak shit like that. Anyway... my point is – if you can make people feel self-conscious enough, they can almost always be guilted into buying stuff.

This exclusive inward focus is also great for people like your employer because it shifts the responsibility for your environment back on to you. People who have achieved 'wellness' are productive and productive people are successful and happy. It doesn't matter that you're being paid \$7.00 an hour and have been for a decade, because Mega Corp actually got Rebecca from HR to read *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* and she's got 8 slides on how to be proactive. So, if you're not feeling healthy or wealthy or beautiful, that's actually a you problem and you could be working harder on it. It's catnip for corporations.

There are obviously a lot of problems with riding out the hyper-individualistic nature of this brand of wellness to its logical conclusion. If health, success and beauty are all righteous things that can be achieved simply by working hard enough and doing the right things, then by extension your own moral failings can include everything from being poor to getting cancer. You just aren't trying hard enough to not be poor and have cancer. Have you tried journalling? What about getting up at 5am? All the world's richest and presumably healthiest people get up before 5am. You're just wasting time buddy.


With the rise of social platforms like Instagram or Tik Tok, the most harmful version of these ideas are also finding an easier footing because people are having to perform their righteousness daily. Our insatiable quest for content has turned every idiot with a camera phone into a self-styled wellness guru. And truly they are some of the dumbest creatures imaginable. Or they're teenagers. There's that tweet that goes around every so often that's like "Every day I spend online I run the risk of being exposed to a 14-year old's opinion." The slight addendum to this is that every day I spend online I run the risk of being exposed to a 14-year old's opinion on how I could be happier and healthier. Get of our here! Talk to me when your frontal lobe is fully developed, and you can vote!

Anyway, children's opinions aside, I'll give you what I think is the most concerning example of this recent trend so you can be both alert and alarmed. Now, I do not have Tik Tok – as a sort of mid-range millennial, it's one of the first social media platforms that I didn't immediately pick up and attempt to learn. I've resisted because I'm frankly a little scared of the way the algorithm works. I let Tik Tok videos rise up to me through other social platforms, like a content-based survival of the fittest and/ or weirdest. There are some things that persistently battle their way to me through the algorithmic recommendation. Among the inexplicable pushing of teen mum or Jesus content (sometimes both of them together – every day I thank Jesus for the arrival of baby Mackennezleigh, with two n's and z), I started noticing videos of people who were "cutting out toxic people" to "focus on themselves".

These videos usually featured text in the vein of "POV: You cut off all your friends and focus on building yourself up" followed by a montage of cash, cars, and gym progress selfies.

And at first, because I am a person who understands nuance and the complexities of interpersonal relationships, I thought, "Hey, maybe this is just an especially inarticulate way of expressing that they've put up some boundaries with people who may actively be causing them harm in their lives and now they're thriving." Which was unusually optimistic of me. I temporarily put aside the "every idiot has a camera and an opinion" principle, and it was to my own detriment, because as it turned out, these people meant that they had cut off every person in their life for being "toxic" and now they were super productive and therefore thriving. As Laura Pitcher points out for Dazed, the logical conclusion of a society that characterises a hyper-individualistic self-obsession as somehow being the key to well-being and success, will inevitably end up treating friendships as transactional.

I'm hoping that I don't have to explain to anyone who listens to this podcast how insane that is but like... don't cut everyone you know out of your life. According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, social isolation and loneliness are linked with all the poor health outcomes that this particular wellness trend is insisting you can avoid by cutting people off – mental illness, development of dementia, poor sleep, high blood pressure and poorer immune function. But beyond that, social isolation also just sucks and feels bad. You need



to know what it's like to have your friend hug you. You need to know what it's like to feel your friend's head tip onto your shoulder while you watch a movie and get a little whiff of their shampoo and know, confidently, that it is their shampoo. You need know what it is to catch their eye and burst into the kind of laughter that makes you think you might never breathe again, but it would be ok because at least you would die happy. Human beings are social creatures. We need intimacy to live. You shouldn't be sacrificing that just so you can achieve abs and a sense of moral superiority before you inevitably die.

Despite all the cynicism I've had going for the last 20 minutes, when health and wellness fads come tearing through, I really do try to reserve my judgment. It's hard out here, and sometimes dumping mushroom powder in your coffee or buying a \$90 journal that has "You got this" embossed on the front is the thing that will feel most helpful for you. Like I said at the top of the podcast – I'm mentally ill. Sometimes I love to simply buy a soothing face cream that will solve all of my problems. I get it. But I do want you to remember that the most powerful thing for a lot of people who are struggling is actually as simple support from their friends, neighbours and community. Our friend, Halbert L. Dunn actually listed 'fellowship' as a one of the core tenants of high-level wellness, citing it as a necessary component of harmonising the mind and the body.

And we can really lose that if we give in to the pushing of the hyper-individualistic wellness gift that's rewarded on social platforms. Which is why, for the low, low cost of \$15.99

a month, I'll be selling subscriptions of my "Fellowship platform". With the "Fellowship platform" you'll get access to the 18 secrets that will transform you into the most healthy, wealthy version of yourself... [music fades up and my voice fades down cutting the sales pitch off]

Welp, that was my little deep dive on wellness. Thanks for sticking with us while we got back on track. Remember how I mentioned format changes at the top of the episode? This might be one of them, because in all my research for this episode I've gotten real deep into how the isolationism urged on by wellness grifts pushes people further down the conspiracy pipeline. And frankly, I'm hooked. So consider this the intro to a two-partner on wellness, I guess. And if you've got a herbal supplement you'd like to sell me to improve my mind body and soul, talk to me about it next time you see me at the pub! Peace!



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