

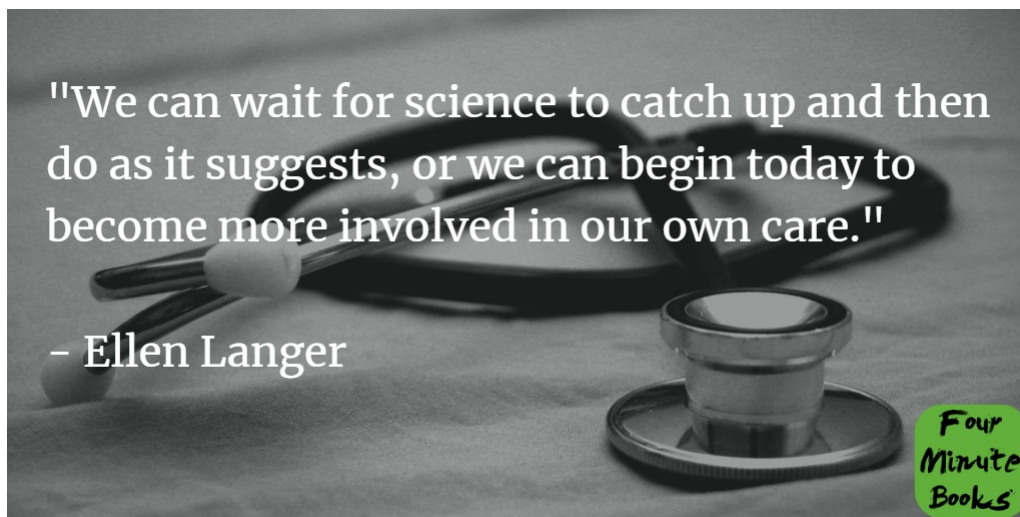
Counterclockwise Summary

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1-Sentence-Summary: *Counterclockwise* is a critical look at the current approach to health and healthcare, with a particular focus on how we can improve it when we shift from being mindless to mindful.

Read in: 4 minutes

Favorite quote from the author:



Don't let the quote above mislead you. The author of *Counterclockwise* doesn't dismiss science as a way to learn about health. She is an academic. And I'd say that she is a remarkable one precisely because she recognizes the limitations of medical science today.

Her work is about looking for ways to surpass what seems impossible in the medical field. She calls it *the psychology of possibility*: finding out what's *possible* in the realm of health, rather than what is universally true. The latter is, according to Langer, not feasible for humans to attain anyway.

Langer's flagship counterclockwise study provided an astonishing insight into what's imaginable in reversing the physiological effects of aging. In the experiment, researchers invited a group of 80-year-old men to a "time travel retreat." For seven days, they lived in a setting emulating the world from 20 years before. The men spoke about past events as if they were happening in the present.

As a result, they came out of the experiment with significantly improved memory, vision, physical strength, and other measures that are commonly believed to irreversibly decline with age. The study became a springboard to Langer's further research on mindful health, which she sums up in *Counterclockwise: Mindful Health and the Power of Possibility*.

Here are 3 lessons I've learned about what's *possible*, rather than *true*:

1. We shouldn't fully trust doctors with our health diagnoses and treatments.
2. The words we use when describing our health matter, a lot.
3. Mindful health is about being sensitive to variability.

Ready to become in charge of your own health? Let's do it!

Lesson 1: There are good reasons to question expert diagnoses and health advice.

It is not the intention of this book to prevent you from seeing your doctor. There are times when we require expert medical intervention. But submitting yourself to the prescribed treatment shouldn't be synonymous with giving up the responsibility for your own health.

The reason for this is simple: your body is yours alone, which means that only you have access to first-hand information about your health. A doctor does her best to formulate a diagnosis and treatment plan based on what she knows. But you should keep in mind that what she sees is by no means complete.

A health diagnosis is an attempt to define a patient's general condition, symptoms, and potential to get better. While these variables are infinitely personal and complex, a label like bronchitis originates from a statistical average. This means that a part of your condition is not included under that designation.

Langer argues that, because of the imperfection of the medical system, we should each take charge of our own health. It starts with recognizing that the doctor can't possibly have all the relevant information. She bases her work on probabilities, rather than certainties.

Acknowledging this may lead you to ask additional questions, share information about your condition that you were not asked to share, or consulting another doctor to cross-check the diagnosis. All of this can contribute to more personalized – and therefore better – healthcare.

Lesson 2: The language we use impacts our reality – including our health.

It is not a new concept that as much as societies create language, the language shapes the people in turn. Langer shows that this idea is profoundly important for our health.

Consider the difference in the way we talk about cancer and a cold. In the medical world, it is common to say that a patient after successful cancer treatment is in “remission.” This is almost akin to saying that we are waiting for cancer to return. If it does, we see it as “the same” cancer that was there before the treatment.

When we catch a cold, however, we assume that it is separate from the last time we had it. A cold is never “in remission,” it simply gets cured. If we have it again, we treat the illness as a “new” one.

Langer argues that the language we use to talk about health and disease matters a whole lot. **According to the study she did on cancer survivors, there is a strong correlation between whether a patient sees herself as “cured” or “in remission” and her overall well-being.**

Other than verbal language, the symbols we surround ourselves with are important, too. One example is doctors wearing uniforms around patients, which, according to Langer, may have a negative influence on the treatment. How so?

Formal uniforms reinforce the roles of a patient and a doctor, which encourages the two to act mindlessly, as if according to a script. This thoughtlessness seems to be the link between virtually all the problems described by Langer.

Lesson 3: Being mindful about our health can save us a lot of trouble.

Ellen Langer once said that “*virtually all the world's ills boil down to mindlessness.*” Her message in *Counterclockwise* is that we can always improve our health by being more mindful.

However, it is not exactly the kind of mindfulness that you read about in meditation tutorials and spiritual books. **The core of mindful health is paying attention to variability.** This means that rather than treating our condition in binary terms like healthy or ill, we see our physical state as a complex continuum of many codependent variables that change over time.

For someone diagnosed with depression, this may mean noticing that they do not always feel equally depressed. There may even be moments when they feel happy. For a person with diabetes who struggles to control blood sugar levels, it can be useful to detect subtle changes in their energy levels, which tell them whether their sugar went high or low. There is always new information about our health that we can access simply by becoming more sensitive to how our moment-to-moment experience varies.

Ultimately, the approach of mindful health is about paying attention to our mind and body continuously. This way, we can realize that we are falling out of balance *before* we get into serious health trouble.

Counterclockwise Review

Counterclockwise transforms what you believed was impossible into possible. As I read through the studies showing what factors influence our health that we are not even aware of, I felt shocked and empowered at the same time. Shocked, because some of it sounded like magic. Empowered, because I realized that I have much more agency over my health than I ever thought.

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Who would I recommend the Counterclockwise summary to?

The 33-year old with a chronic illness who looks for ways to help himself beyond his current treatment plan, the 68-year old wondering how to deal with the first symptoms of ageing, and anyone who wants to have more control over their health.