

Self Help & Wellness Culture

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Self help

A self-help book is one that is written with the intention to instruct its readers on solving personal problems. The books take their name from *Self-Help*, an 1859 best-seller by Samuel Smiles, but are also known and classified under “self-improvement”, a term that is a modernized version of self-help. Self-help books moved from a niche position to being a postmodern cultural phenomenon in the late twentieth century

1. *Think and Grow Rich* — ~80 million
 2. *The Alchemist* — ~65 million
 3. *You Can Heal Your Life* — ~50 million
 4. *Rich Dad Poor Dad* — ~26 million
 5. *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* — ~25 million
 6. *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff... and It's All Small Stuff* — ~25 million
 7. *Who Moved My Cheese?* — ~23 million
 8. *The Celestine Prophecy* — ~23 million
 9. *The Secret* — ~20 million
 10. *The Power of Positive Thinking* — ~20 million
- Out of the 80 million people who bought *Think and Grow Rich*, how many do you think thought and grew rich?

According to book sales figures from PublishDrive, sales of self-help books more than doubled from 2022 to 2023. Cookbook sales grew by 75 percent during that time, and sales for books focused on enhancing one’s body, mind, and spirit jumped 63 percent.

Do you think self-help books are helpful? Let’s consider the pro’s and cons.

Upside of self-help

1. Accessible Personal Growth

- Readers can explore self-improvement without needing therapy or formal coaching.
- Recent scientific works can be communicated to the general public.

2. Empowerment & Motivation

3. Diverse Perspectives

- The range of topics — from financial freedom to emotional intelligence — allows readers to find advice tailored to their situations.
- Culturally specific or niche voices (e.g., trauma recovery, ADHD management, burnout) have grown in recent years.

4. Low Barrier to Entry

- People can start their self-development journey privately, at their own pace, without stigma or judgment.

5. Catalyst for Change

- Even a single useful idea can lead to meaningful change

Cons of Self-Help Books & Industry

1. Oversimplification

- Many books reduce complex psychological, social, or structural issues to simple “mindset” solutions.
- This can lead to victim-blaming (“you’re unhappy because you’re not thinking positively enough”).
- Or worse, ‘this book works and if it didn’t work for you then it is because you didn’t follow the advice correctly’.

2. Lack of Scientific Evidence

- Some advice is untested, pseudoscientific, or anecdotal.
- Readers may adopt practices that are ineffective or even harmful (e.g., suppressing emotions, toxic positivity).

3. Commercialization & Exploitation

- The industry thrives on perpetual dissatisfaction — often implying you’re never “enough.”
- Authors and influencers may prioritize sales over genuine impact, promoting endless consumption of new “fixes.”
- May target people with mental issues

4. One-Size-Fits-All Approach

- What works for one person may fail for another, yet many books imply universal solutions.
- Cultural, economic, or mental health contexts are often ignored.

5. Superficial or Short-Term Effects

- Readers may feel a temporary motivational high that fades without concrete behavior change.
- “Reading about change” can replace actually *doing* the work

6. May actually inhibit self reflection & critical thinking

- Many readers absorb advice uncritically, treating authors as authority figures or “gurus.”
- Promotes overreliance on external authority.
- The answers are out there somewhere else. Sort of like people’s search for the magic bullet.

5. Simplifies Deep Psychological Work

- Genuine self-reflection requires discomfort, ambiguity, and self-confrontation — but many self-help books promise quick clarity and instant transformation, which can prevent readers from engaging in deeper introspection over a long period of time.

Let's discuss

1. Why do you think this genre has become so popular in modern society?
2. Do self-help books genuinely help people improve their lives, or do they mostly create the illusion of progress? For this exercise, don’t say ‘it depends’. Just take a side and fight for it.
3. How can readers distinguish between evidence-based self-help and pseudo-scientific advice?
4. When faced with mental or emotional distress, what alternative approaches to healing or support might be more effective than relying on self-help literature?

I have another bone to pick with modern society.

Wellness Culture as a Status Flex

In recent years, **wellness culture** — encompassing self-care, mindfulness, fitness, nutrition, and “mental health awareness” — has shifted from a personal pursuit to a powerful **marker of social identity and privilege**. What began as a genuine movement toward holistic health has, in many ways, become a **performance of well-being**, where looking *balanced, disciplined, and mindful* signals status as much as actually being healthy.

You might be a wellness flexer if...

1. You post a photo of your green smoothie with the caption “*just nourishing my body*”

2. You—unprompted—talk incessantly about your wellness routine.
3. You announce your “digital detox”... on social media.
4. You post your Apple Watch stats or sleep score
5. You own more than 3 self-help books and promote them to others.

The Theory of the Leisure Class

In his 1899 work *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, Thorstein Veblen introduced the idea of “**conspicuous consumption**”—the practice of displaying wealth or status through visible consumption of luxury goods and activities. He argued that people use their lifestyle choices not just for utility, but to **signal social position**.

Wellness culture today often mirrors this same logic. Instead of displaying material wealth through jewels or carriages, many people now display “**cultural capital**” through wellness habits—clean eating, mindfulness, boutique fitness, and minimalist aesthetics. These acts signal not just health, but **time, money, discipline, and moral worth**—modern equivalents of Veblen’s “leisure” indicators.

In essence, the **wellness flex** has become the new **status symbol**:

“I am calm, balanced, and healthy—because I have the resources and freedom to be.”

Wellness is no longer just about health—it’s about *presentation*. Social media platforms, especially Instagram and TikTok, have turned self-care into a **visual lifestyle brand**: green smoothies, yoga retreats, minimalist interiors, and “that girl” morning routines.

Wellness as a Consumer Identity

- The wellness industry now represents a **multibillion-dollar market**, selling everything from supplements to luxury meditation apps.
- Health has become **commodified**: instead of inner balance, people purchase products that *symbolize* wellness—organic foods, skincare routines, and fitness tech.
- This shifts wellness from a mindset to a **consumption-based identity**, where the ability to buy “healthy” or “natural” products signals success.
- The modern wellness elite displays spiritual calm and “self-work” as evidence of superiority.

The Privilege Gap

- True wellness requires **time, money, and access**—things not equally distributed.

- Many influencers and brands frame wellness as universally attainable. As a result, wellness becomes **a moral measure**: those who can't achieve it may be seen as lazy or "unmotivated," reinforcing class and social divides.

Performance Over Authenticity**

- Online, self-care and wellness often function as **status performances** — curated proof that one is thriving, calm, and in control.
- This performance can paradoxically **increase anxiety**, as people feel pressure to appear well rather than to *be* well.
- The irony is that wellness, meant to reduce stress, becomes another form of competition and self-surveillance.

5. From Healing to Hierarchy

- In essence, wellness culture has drifted from *healing* toward *hierarchy*. Practices that once emphasized inner peace or balance now often serve to **signal sophistication and success**.
- This transformation mirrors the broader self-help industry's flaws: when personal growth becomes a trend, it risks **reproducing the very insecurities it claims to solve**.

Let's discuss!

1. What roles do social status and identity play in shaping how people participate in wellness culture?
2. How might ideas from Thorstein Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class* help us understand modern approaches to health, mindfulness, and self-care?
3. In what ways can self-help and wellness practices both support and complicate genuine self-reflection?
4. How does social media influence the ways people express or experience wellness?
5. What factors determine who has access to wellness practices, and how might that affect the meanings people attach to them?
6. What might distinguish authentic expressions of wellness from those that are more performative or commercialized?