Health, mind and body books

Review

The Wellness Syndrome by Carl Cederström & André Spicer – exploitation with a smiley face

People who fail to look after their bodies are now demonised as lazy, feeble or weak-willed

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The idea of "wellness" in our age is surely missing something. To achieve wellness, a person must eat correctly (to the point of faddist superfood obsession or orthorexia), get plenty of sleep (perhaps using wrist-borne sleep-tracking gadgetry), exercise regularly (if using a bicycle, please make sure it is stationary and indoors), and have the right socially sanctioned desires for professional advancement and consumer objects.

This hegemonic idea of wellness has, however, zero intellectual substance. Once upon a time, people who spoke Latin used to say "*mens sana in corpore sano*", which meant at least that a healthy mind was as important as a healthy body, and sometimes that the whole point of having a healthy body was to have a healthy mind. But we live in the age, instead, of the official promotion of "mindfulness", the aim of which is to calm the mind to a state of bovine acceptance, where nary a thought will trouble it. The modern idea of wellness is opposed to deep thinking. Instead it encourages us all to become happily stupid athletes of capitalist productivity.

Carl Cederström and André Spicer's brilliantly sardonic anatomy of this "wellness syndrome" concentrates on the ways in which the pressure to be well operates as a moralising command and obliterates political engagement. The body, for adherents of wellness, becomes the only "truth system", and the withdrawal into it leads to "passive nihilism". If we are all obsessed with being well individually, the book warns, we will not be well together.

Is wellness really such an onerous imposition? It is, the authors point out, for the increasing number of American students required to sign "wellness contracts" with their university, according to one of which the youngster promises to "maintain an alcohol- and drug-free lifestyle". And the rules of corporate wellness are now extending, too, from banning smoking in the workplace to banning smokers altogether, even if they only ever light up at home. Meanwhile, offices provide treadmill desks and companies employ "chief happiness officers", so as to paint exploitation with a smiley face.

Moreover, wellness constitutes extra emotional labour for members of the precariat on zero-hours contracts. Discussing workers in Amazon warehouses, the authors observe: "Although they are in a precarious situation, they are required to hide these feelings and project a confident, upbeat, employable self." And what about adherents of the "quantified self" movement, who use gadgets and apps to track not only their sleep but their every footstep, and so forth? It is easy to dismiss this as technologically enabled narcissism, but the authors offer a more sympathetic and troubling diagnosis: perhaps such people have just "given up on their personal project, and have willingly handed over their bodies to the larger cause of productivity".

"Our concern," the authors explain in general, "is how wellness has become an

ideology." And this is particularly revealing in "the prevailing attitudes towards those who fail to look after their bodies. These people are demonised as lazy, feeble or weak-willed. They are seen as obscene deviants, unlawfully and unabashedly enjoying what every sensible person should resist." The common answer in our day is all too revealing: the poor and degenerate don't deserve decent housing or a basic income; they just need to be taught how to cook.

Indeed, the authors point out, the ideology of wellness shares with the controversial movement in psychology called "positive thinking" the twin assumptions that: a) you can be whatever you want to be; and therefore b) if anything bad happens to you, it's no one's fault but your own. In this way, the apparent optimism of the public encouragement to "wellness" hides a brutal, libertarian lack of compassion. No wonder that, as the authors remind us, incoming prime minister David Cameron was so keen to apply positive psychology to the task of measuring the country's happiness. But, our troublemaking authors want to know, "Where does our preoccupation with our own wellness leave the rest of the population, who have an acute shortage of organic smoothies, diet apps and yoga instructors?"

Ought we not to be concerned, too, that the idea of "self-indulgence" has lost its moral sting? (What is a dedication to wellness but an indulgence of the self?) But one might also wonder, by the end of this book, what rhetorical resources are left for a positive conception of wellness. After all, the term "welfare" now, thanks to the dishonest machinations of Conservatives and the rightwing press, mainly just means "benefits", supposedly claimed fraudulently, though of course the majority of this country's welfare budget goes on pensions. Meanwhile, the term "wellbeing" has the virtue of a more philosophical flavour, but the concomitant drawback of vagueness.

Perhaps we don't need a new word, but just a new attitude. You might want to say, after all, that even if we are not all thoroughly brainwashed by the wellness syndrome, it is still universal to find oneself seduced by some aspect of the wellness project - say, wanting to get better at one thing or another - and particularly if we define "wellness" as encompassing also our intellectual powers or our behaviour towards others. It is true, too, that when someone asks how we are and we are inclined to give a positive reply, we can sincerely say "I'm very well, thanks". These authors would no doubt agree that there is nothing wrong with being well or wanting to be well. But, as their deeply humane and persuasive book shows, being told to be well is a different matter entirely. A society where wellness is obligatory is a sick one.

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