Health

People Explain How Wellness Ended Up Making Them Sick

By Sasha Borissenko April 20, 2017, 8:47pm

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If you've ever—even once in your life—opened up Instagram, you'll be across the wellness trend. You'll know all about those hashtag-heavy 13-day juice cleanses, complete with unironic use of every single fruit emoji, and you'll find it hard to resist the notion that wellness makes sense. This is because we're at the wellness acceptance stage. Wellness gramming and blogging is so ubiquitous that jokes about it feel tired. Those faux hippies from Byron Bay have won… while creating a trillion dollar industry in the process.

But is it all health and good times? Not for Camilla*, a model and stylist based in Sydney. A social media-endorsed 10-day wellness retreat seemed like a positive antidote to her lifestyle of non-stop partying. It wasn't an easy adjustment: Consuming water, detox juices, and psyllium husks made her so hungry that she tells me she stole a contraband banana on day four.

Juices are one thing, but it was having to complete the required self-administered coffee enemas that really stuck out. Here's how that would play out: Camilla would lie on her back and insert a hose up her bottom while holding up the bag. Once the liquid had emptied into her body, she'd rush to the toilet, which had a strainer-type apparatus affixed, so she could "quite literally go through shit just to figure out what was coming out of my body." Fun!

Camilla went on a food binge when she got home and has since vowed to never buy into 'wellness' again. "Everything tasted like the first time I'd ever eaten it. And as for my body? I looked like a was dying. It was pretty gross," she explains.

For Sarah*, the philosophy around wellness functioned as a convenient way to disguise her eating disorder.

She'd gone on her first diet as a teenager and grew addicted to calorie counting and obsessing over the food pyramid. Surprise, surprise—that sense of control was only fed by the "clean eating" mentality of only eating the most nutrient-rich, sugar-free foods.

"I can't remember the point where I slipped into anorexia, as it felt like a natural progression. I felt that I was doing the best thing for my health by cutting calories and working towards lower and lower targets," she says. "Losing weight to shape up eventually becomes an afterthought in the obsessive and exhausting fog that engulfs your brain."

Every day became about counting calories, and finding ways to both hide food and suppress her appetite. She stopped socialising to avoid situations involving food and having dropped 15 kilograms in six months, people started noticing.

"My skin was grey and my face had sunken in. In my head though, I was the pinnacle of health and could always improve." Despite seeking help early on, it took six years of work and constant relapses to control the illness, which still plagues Sarah on occasion.

"I often look back and can't believe that for years of my life, I tortured myself and my body. It all started with wanting to be 'healthy' and quickly spiralled out of control into a mental illness that I still never feel free of. I may not restrict anymore or binge and purge, but I am definitely not free of the thoughts of inadequacy or the desire to control my eating," she says.

She notes that social media hasn't helped her heal, as the promotion of clean eating masks what she says she sees as an entirely dysfunctional relationship with food.

While eating disorders are at an extreme end of the spectrum, doctors tend to caution against the wellness trend for a number of reasons. GP Sophie Lee Johnston thinks that clean eating is as much of a fad as anything else, with no scientific backing. She is of the mindset that wellness as a trend is quite odd and disturbing, because there's always something to gain by the people pushing it.

"Apples are more of a superfood than goji berries, yet you never hear so-called experts telling you that," she says. "The same goes for the gluten-free phenomenon. Gluten is just a protein made up of two other proteins: gliadin and glutenin. They are only 'bad' for you if you have Coeliac disease, and some people do seem to have an intolerance to it but I, and others, suspect it might actually be an intolerance to wheat."

95 percent of diets aren't successful for long-term weight loss, according to Johnston. The diet industry is designed to be financially sustainable, convincing consumers that it's their fault that they fail rather than the fact that the diet itself might not work. Short term weight loss is deemed a 'success', long term weight gain a 'failure'. The result? Simply go back on a diet.

Then there are the people who profit off wellness, typically through sponsored content posts on Instagram. Scarlet* is a digital strategist at an advertising agency which specialises in social media content around wellness. A brand or product will approach her, she'll develop a creative idea, and find influencers to promote the product.

"There's this heavily curated, articulated obsession with self, the 'your life sucks but if you live like me, you can have it all' rhetoric," she says. "I often see these before and after photographs where I think, 'That girl looked all good before, and now she's unattainably fit because she's doing 300 burpees per day'."

While her seemingly authentic lifestyle of an influencer might be lucrative—Scarlet has negotiated $8,000 deals for an influencer to promote a product in four Instagram posts—it also seems exhausting. These people have to keep their audience captive—an audience who check their phones up to 157 times per day—so it's a question of constantly bettering one's self, and differentiating themselves in the market.

"Sure the digital age has really democratised the market, but it's the byproduct of these exploding fads, and onto what is a vulnerable market, that's the worry," she says.

Sydney-based Ally Garrott is a writer and performer, with much of her work revolving around themes of body positivity. She says if squats make you feel strong and in shape that's terrific—but doing squats isn't a moral requirement for existing in year 2017.

Although people should feel free to change their looks, she also worries about people in positions of power encouraging more vulnerable people to restrict what they eat. Particularly when following a regime is often held up as being really virtuous—whether it's clean eating or eliminating foods in the pursuit of health.

Rather, as health and wellness is on-trend, it's strange to her that this can be so easily commodified with posts of turmeric lattes and raw tacos.

"What health means is so personal. For me, it's engaging in exercise that feels good but also keeping on top of my mental health. I don't see people Instagramming pictures of important health tasks like getting a mole check or going to the physio. Instead, it's pictures of Buddha bowls or downward dogs—and they're directly related to the virtue of dieting and making your body smaller."

Of course, many wellness bloggers will defend themselves—or say that they're different to those preying upon the vulnerable. Dani Stevens, who has a following of 116K on Instagram, refutes claims that her approach to food is a fad diet.

"I just eat fresh, what I want, when I want—as long as it's the colours of the rainbow." The mum of four says that if she can shed over 90kgs combined weight over her four pregnancies, you too can see the results.

'Transformation Tuesdays' is not fad dieting. Instead her programme is about eating whole foods that are living.

"I don't eat anything dead and poisonous or toxic for my body or my young family. Life is a seed, plant it, and it will grow and give you the right nutrients your body needs and deserves." There's a disclosure on her website advising that she's an everyday mum living life and this is her personal journey: "I'm not a nutritionist or personal trainer and always advise my readers to check with their doctor before commencing any of my challenges or anything I'm doing, which may impact their lifestyle in any way."

Instead Dani says her mantra is that her followers should love what they do every day – "a happy place makes you healthy." Happiness, for Dani, is a natural drug.

*Names changed on request

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