



PRACTICE POINTS

The desired state

In pursuit of wellness, is there a dark side? **BY DONALD QUINN DILLON, RMT**

In CBC’s frontburner episode *Wellness Culture’s Link to COVID Denialism*,¹ journalist Jayme Poisson reported an online directory promoting services to unvaccinated citizens. She noted a significant proportion of the businesses were related to “wellness” practices. Guest and author Matthew Remski reflected the list of businesses spanned “from quasi-materialist ostensibly evidence-based practices such as acupuncture and TCM (traditional Chinese medicine) to completely magical practices of channeling, crystal healing and gong baths.”

Resolute “anti-vaxxers” feature large in contemporary news coverage during the COVID-19 pandemic, protesting vaccine mandates and increasingly acting out: in front of hospitals, on airplanes, in retail outlets, the nation’s capital, and of course social media. They are frequently characterized as denouncing the function and credibility of institutions that govern and inform societies, such as government and news media, and alternatively may turn to counter-culture and conspiracy sources to frame their perceptions. What’s the connection with wellness practices?

Remski explained people drawn to the wellness marketplace may view themselves as “awakened,” impervious to disease with consumption of the right vitamin supplements, health elixirs or alternative methods. Wellness applications are frequently exclusive and customized, so a uniform substance, at a uniform dose for everyone (like a vaccine) would be rejected by someone fervently ideological to a wellness worldview. A yoga instructor himself, Remski concludes that while not every individual or commercial enterprise espousing wellness aspirations will share these counter-culture views, there are powerful marketing forces poised to cash in on those who are vulnerable.

A state of well-being – something wellness practices promise – is widely desirable. Research Professor of Psychology and Psychiatry, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Richard Davidson states: “I think that discoveries in modern medical science, neuroscience, bio-behavioral science, have helped us understand more of the details of how well-being is embodied. When we think about well-being, it is not simply an ephemeral psychological state or condition, but very much



intertwined, with all the organ systems in our body in ways that have demonstrable consequences for our physical health. The opportunity to cultivate well-being is not simply an opportunity to cultivate these subjective qualities, but it can potentially have a profound effect on our physical health, as well.”²

While most massage therapists might espouse the physical, mental and positive psychosocial benefits for a state of well-being, it might serve these public-facing health professionals to reflect: “Does the pursuit of wellness have a dark side?”

If you are skeptical of the commercial pitch of many wellness proponents, it’s understandable. Anecdotally, the market appears rife with grifters pushing their artifice, looking to cash in on our subconscious fears of illness, inadequacy, unattractiveness, impotence or failure.

Timothy Caulfield, professor in the Faculty of Law, School of Public Health at the University of Alberta regularly features on the CBC when the subject is “complementary or alternative medicine.” Caulfield cites the “elaborate theatre” in the application of these methods and is skeptical of wellness practices not backed by sound evidence. Elaborate theatre and ritual, unsubstantiated claims, distrust of established journalists and health authorities, exclusive offers, customized remedies, delivered by charismatic evangelists looking to convert prospective believers to the fold...does this sound like the makings of a cult?

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In her book *Cultish*, Amanda Montell exposes the correlation between cult language, cultish behaviours (like love-bombing and gaslighting) and the fitness and wellness industry. Whether using MLM (multi-level marketing) to sell health products, SoulCycle's self-affirming clichés provoking class participants, or purchasing high-priced Lululemon wear for your yoga class, these brands wrap the promise of a noble, spiritual-like, affluent (and implied exclusivity) wellness-focused lifestyle delivered to you when you open your wallet wide. "Perfect wellness is possible with purchase of this brand," Montell says in the interview "Being Sold a Better You During COVID-19."³

Montell is careful to admit that, while the wellness ethos promotes positive effects, be careful if you increasingly find your identity and resources tied to serving the brand. Montell shares cults (and religions) hold the promise of fulfilling four essential needs: purpose, meaning, community and ritual. Montell asserts as society secularizes and people move from religious practices towards materialism, individualism and consumerism, people inherently pine to fill these essential human needs. Athletic, seemingly self-actualized instructors leading fitness classes, or charismatic television health-promoting gurus can deliver a "pastoral experience" as they usher individuals towards a promised land of problems solved and anxieties vanquished.

So how can massage therapists cultivate and encourage their patrons to actualize well-being, yet be careful not to subscribe to misinformation? How can they avoid indoctrination by commercial enterprises pimping their brand to capitalize on profit motives? How can practitioners dynamically reflect on their own beliefs and biases, critically examine claims of wellness products/services, all the while satisfying their own inherent need for purpose, meaning, community and ritual?

Therein lies the rub. I observe the infrastructure of our current professional milieu – practitioners working often in isolation, few opportunities to gather, engage and evolve ideas – is not conducive to the kind of dialogue and debate so essential to our collective advance. We must push for a professional culture that nourishes engagement. Critical thinking, thoughtful experimentation and collective engagement are essential before any wellness endorsement can be made.

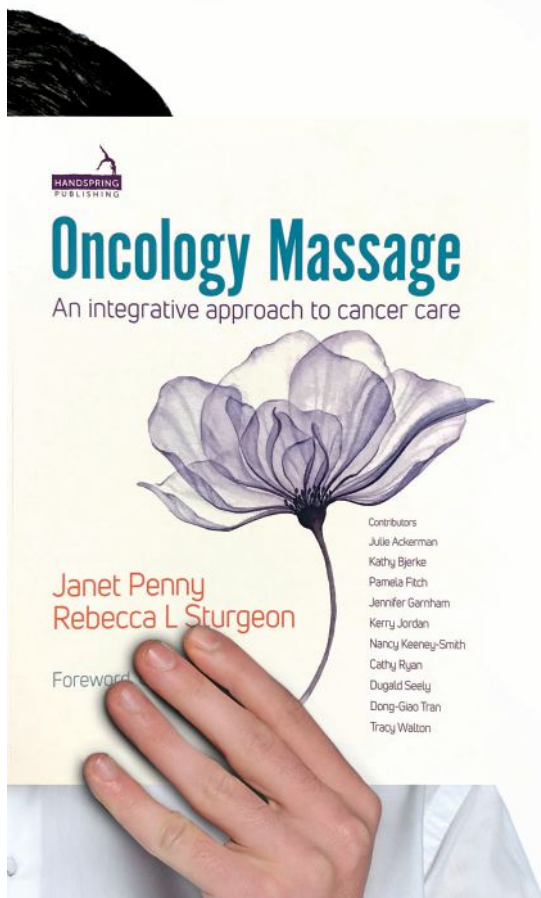
Well-being is a desired state for human beings. Let's stay on the illuminated side.

REFERENCES

¹<https://www.cbc.ca/listen/cbc-podcasts/209-front-burner/episode/15869975-wellness-cultures-link-to-covid-denialism>

²<https://onbeing.org/programs/vivek-murthy-and-richard-davidson-the-future-of-well-being/#transcript>

³*Bad with Money*, with Gaby Dunn. Jun 3, 2020 <https://bit.ly/36t3SpK>



ONCOLOGY MASSAGE: AN INTEGRATIVE APPROACH TO CANCER CARE

In *Oncology Massage* – a integrative approach to cancer care the authors have created a textbook which will provide both experienced and inexperienced therapists with a resource to expand their knowledge and understanding of working with people with cancer. Cancer occurrence and survivorship are now so common that every massage therapist will at some time work with clients who have been through cancer treatment. The short and long-term effects of biomedical cancer treatment require massage therapy adaptations to pressure, site, position and duration to provide safe and effective treatments. Informed massage therapists can support the body to promote overall wellness as well as identify the underlying secondary effects of cancer treatment that contribute to physical dysfunction.

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