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Courtesy of Sue Williamson

ILL-EQUIPPED

The Wellness Industry Has No Use for My Cancer Diagnosis

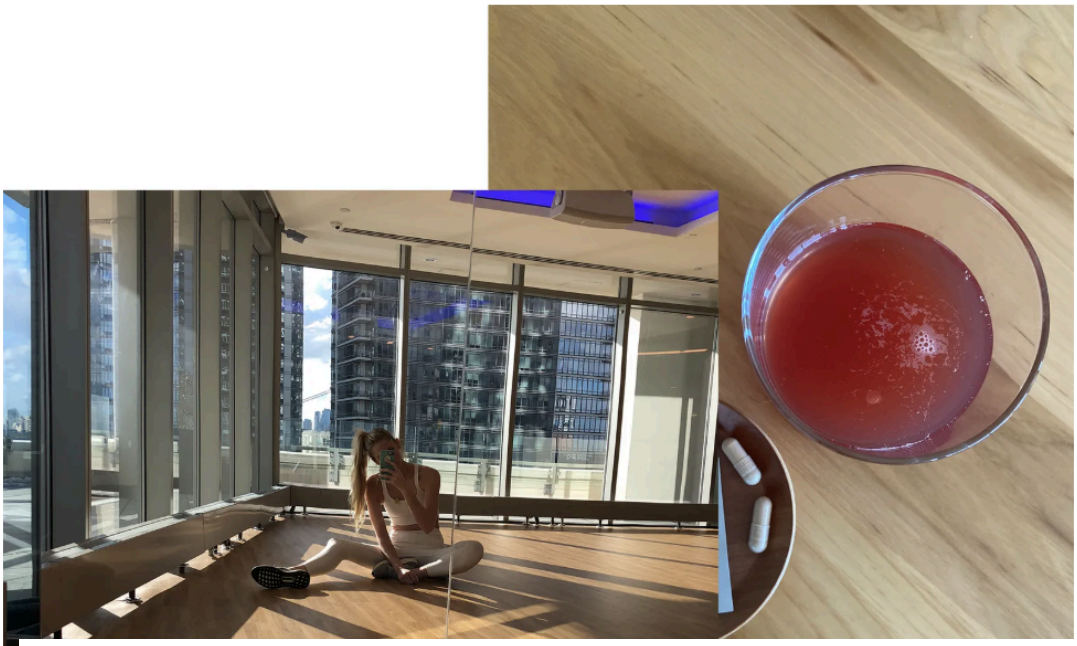
I thought I had found community. Then I got sick.

BY SUE WILLIAMSON
January 23, 2025

A few years ago, I was walking around my neighborhood in L.A. when I crossed paths with another girl taking her own "wellness" walk. (Or at least it had the hallmarks… matching workout set, giant headphones, Erewhon smoothie—you get the idea.) We were around the same age, we had similar muscular builds but I was bald from cancer treatment and she was wearing a graphic sweatshirt with the word "HEALTH!" printed boldly across her chest. "I used to be you!" I wanted to cry out. "Do a self-breast check!"

Just one year before, I often wore that very same "HEALTH!" shirt, back when I thought health was something you could buy and show off. I was working in the wellness industry with a closet full of activewear, an expensive gym membership, and a smartwatch that communicated my body's vital signs. Every product that came out—smoothie powders, skin-care supplements, crystal-infused water bottles—seemed to be targeted at me. I added most of them to my cart. The same was true for the most obscure workout classes. Yes, I did power yoga on an indoor surfboard. I felt happy—and included.

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On social media, wellness has become a form of entertainment and recreation. And it's largely appearance-focused. It's become less about long-term tips to feel better and more like fast fashion trends that come and go with little research and even less follow-through. The misinformation that exists in real life proliferates tenfold online. When I'm not careful, I get caught up in the scroll and suddenly am convinced I need mouth tape to breathe at night.

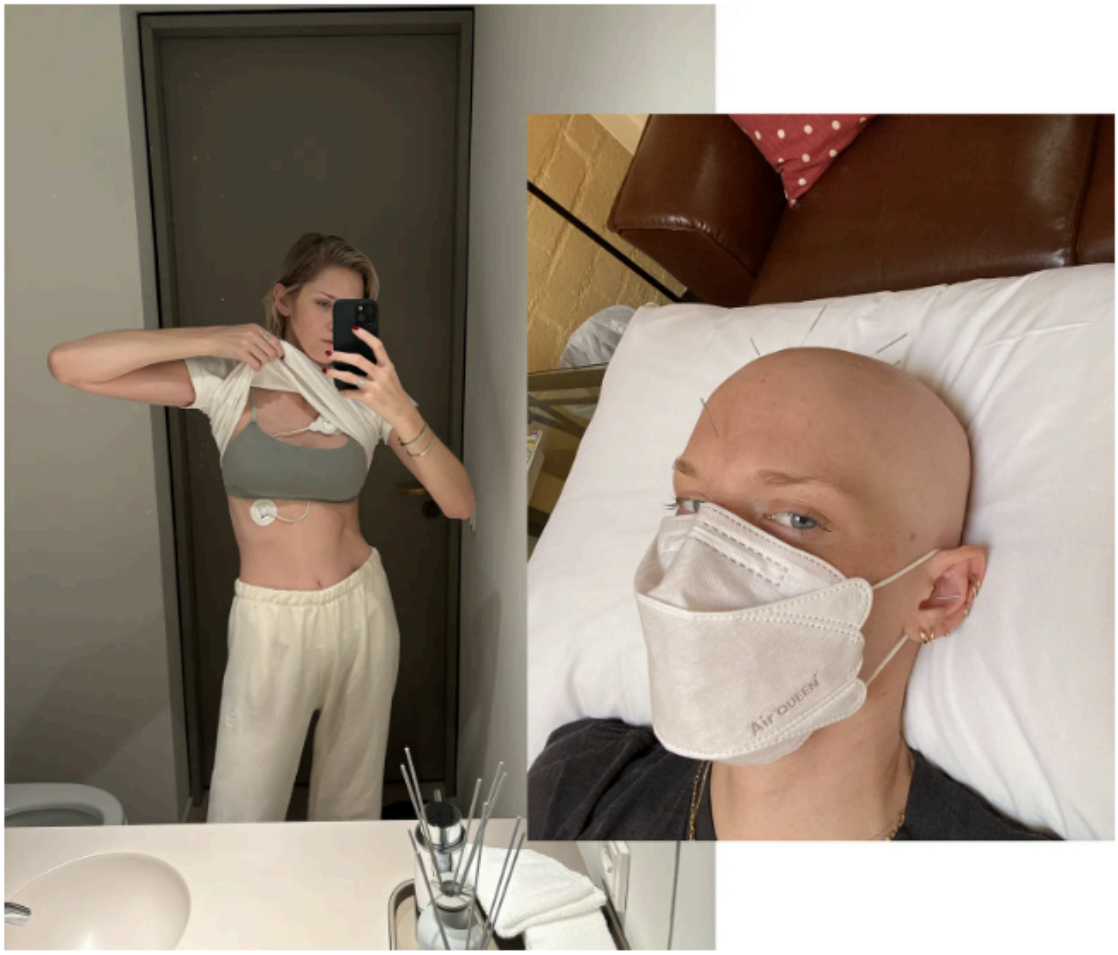
People living with chronic illness are primed for social media marketing. "I've tried close to everything and most of it has had a neutral effect on my health— usually at a steep price or time commitment," says Stephanie Downes, VP of Growth at The Infatuation, who is currently in remission from Crohn's disease and colitis. "I'm not anti any of it—everyone should do what makes them feel their best. But, to me, the wellness industry feels like it is for people who are generally healthy, say a 7 or 8 out of 10, who want to be a 9 or 10. Any supplement or concierge-type medicine I've tried hasn't impacted me and my healing journey as much as I would have liked it to."

So when I was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2021, I turned to the wellness industry to help me cope. But as I started treatment and sought relief from my side effects, like body aches and fatigue, I quickly realized "wellness" doesn't always accommodate illness. Suddenly, I felt too hard to tackle. Or maybe the Pilates instructors and massage therapists and sound bath practitioners were simply afraid to take on a client who was not in fact already "well." In becoming ill, I had become a liability. "Wellness" is for girls wearing sweatshirts that say "HEALTH," not for me.

In becoming ill, I had become a liability.

When I was "healthy," I could try anything; now that I was sick and actually needed solutions, there were few available to me. And as I became more serious about my health, I saw how unhealthy the wellness world can be. My doctors vetoed vitamins suggested to me by "wellness experts" on the Internet and laughed at my trendy dance workouts. ("That's not good for anyone's back," my rehabilitation doctor said after my mastectomy surgery, shaking his head. "Just lift weights and take walks.") My hydration powders were full of sugar, and the energy bars and oatmeal packs that I thought were nutritious were highly processed. My activewear was made of plastic and contained toxic PFAS that can end up in our sweat.

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"When I was 'healthy,' I could try anything; now that I was sick and actually needed solutions, there were few available to me." Courtesy of Sue Williamson

Most Americans are exposed to thousands of ads per day. In this country, these ads include pharmaceutical drugs, supplements, beauty products, and food. They're shown without hierarchy—and in some cases regulation. Compare this to the fact that 40% of Americans say they delay (or decline) seeing a doctor because of high financial costs, and it's safe to say we're likely to receive more "wellness" marketing than medical advice. Add influencers and social media "experts" to that equation and it's no wonder the commoditized version of wellness has taken the cultural lead, leaving health practices to appear lo-fi—and ineffective.

According to the American Health Association, half of Americans live with at least one chronic disease, yet wellness marketing often focuses on optimizing health rather than achieving it. "They're targeting healthy people who want to be healthier," says Amber Lesse, owner of Amber Los Angeles, a holistic hair salon, who was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2021. Lesse notes some of the language used in the wellness industry, like "longevity" can exclude those going through an illness. "When you're not necessarily 'healthy,' you can prioritize self-care practices as much as you'd like, but your life is forever changed. I move slower than I used to. I don't have as much time to dedicate towards those practices because they actually require a lot more of me now."

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This is a sentiment I hear again and again from people living with illness. "My personal wellbeing is marked by my chronic disease," says Erika A., an art gallery director who was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis at 23. "Despite being in considerable pain, I pursued wellness with the same ambition I applied to my career. Both pursuits have simply exhausted me, if I am being honest. I went into debt trying to cure my disease and optimize my health, and I really overdid it. Now I would say the only things that work for me are consistent sleep, whole foods, western medicine in the form of biologic immunosuppressants, and the most sensible self-care there is: moderation and self-compassion." But it's hard to commodify self-compassion.

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I panicked one day when I saw an ad from the supplement company Solaray that read "Food is not enough." My doctors had told me to eliminate most vitamins, and to get all of my nutrients from food instead. I visited Solaray's website and discovered the tagline refers to research showing that most Americans are not getting enough vital nutrients like calcium, vitamin D, iron, and folate. However, many of the studies they reference speak more to the imbalance of the American diet and the foods people eat, rather than a lack of nutrients in healthy foods.

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Health is nuanced, and that message gets lost in today's headline-happy world. Complex topics are reduced to rage-baiting headlines, then content creators make short clips that paraphrase them. The result can be a misleading game of telephone. And when you're living through an illness—and will do anything to feel better or get healthier—you're vulnerable to the advice that so many strangers are more than happy to give you online. The Internet empowers people to feel entitled to dole out medical guidance but, as Lesse points out, a one-size-fits-all approach rarely works for anyone. "One supplement that *might* be good for you might not be good for somebody else," she says. "I think back to a lot of the supplements I was taking before I was diagnosed and I probably should've been speaking with [a doctor] about that." [*Allure* recommends consulting with your doctor before taking any supplements.]

The prevalence of Internet "experts" can lead to some uncomfortable conversations. "In the last few years I have really noticed the rise in a narrative about autoimmune diseases in particular—that they affect women significantly more because women bear the weight of care, trauma, selflessness etc.," shares Erika. "My boss sent me a clip of [Canadian doctor and trauma expert] Gabor Mate speaking about this, and now I can tell she thinks my disease is a result of past traumas and burdens in my life. The narrative that something happened to me or I did something to cause the disease is wrong, and wholly unhelpful for me personally."



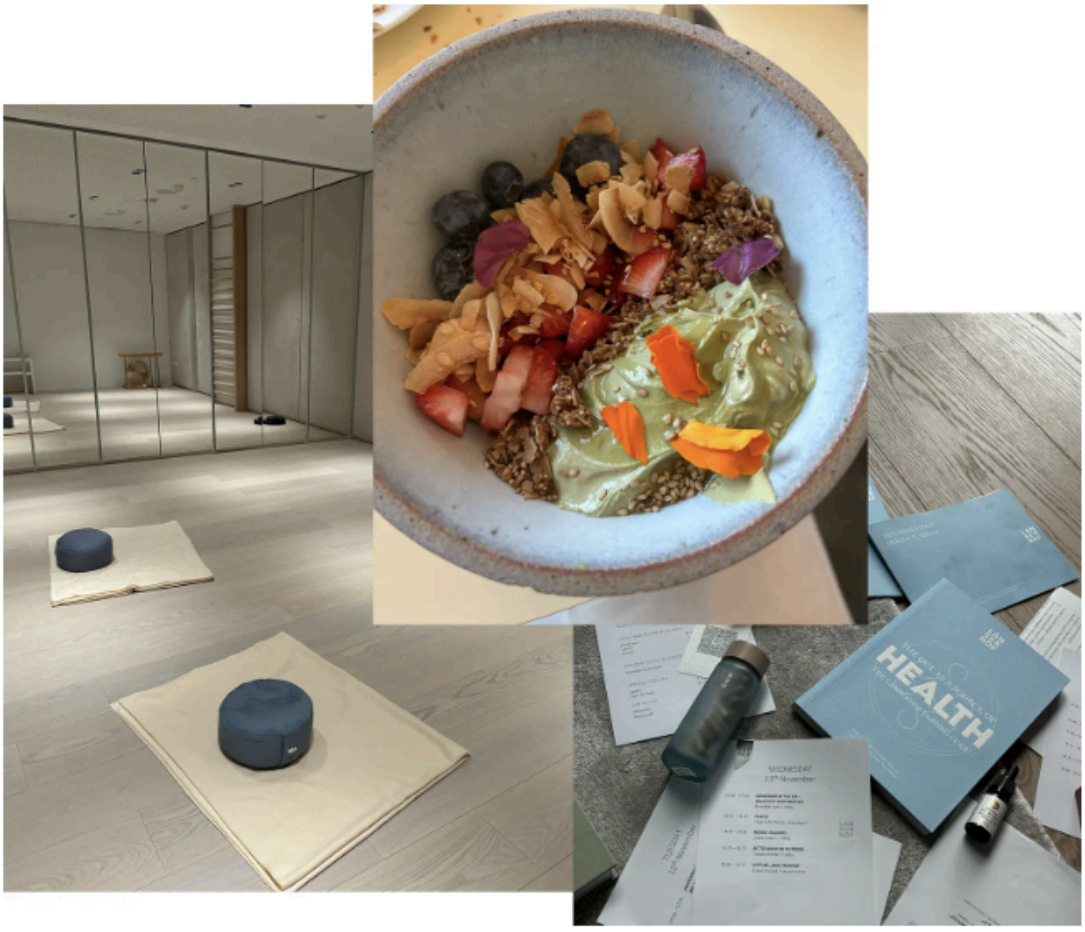
Post-diagnosis, the author keeps things simple: daily exercise, good sleep (without mouth tape or sleep apps), and a diet of mostly whole foods. Courtesy of Sue Williamson

There also isn't a clear definition of what wellness is in today's world. It's everything and everywhere—and it's nothing at all. "Before I was diagnosed with M.S., I thought of wellness as the spa," says Erica Lieurke, the founder of the Monarch Los Angeles hair salon, who was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 2017. Lieurke used to particularly enjoy a sauna session as part of her self-care, but M.S. is triggered by heat so she can't visit them anymore. "I feel excluded from spas in general now," she says. "I can't do massages because the left side of my body is numb. Even acupuncture isn't pleasurable for me because I have so much neuropathy."

People experiencing illness can have limited options for health reasons, but they're also denied services that they want and need. I've experienced this firsthand: My surgeon recommended lymphatic drainage to help reduce swelling from my lymph node removal—and provided me with a doctors' note for the massage therapist—but the moment I mentioned my diagnosis, I was rejected by three spas: "No, we can't treat you." "No, you can't use our products." "No, our service isn't for you." I left confused.

Lesse experienced a similar situation when her doctor suggested she get a massage to relieve stress. She booked an appointment and noted her diagnosis on the intake form, but when she settled into the treatment room her therapist informed her she couldn't stay. "I was like, 'Wait, what? My back is in pain and I'm so stressed out. I just want to relax,'" she says. "I explained that my doctor gave me approval to get a massage, but the therapist told me that she couldn't do it because she didn't want to spread my cancer. I left crying and cried probably more than I did my entire treatment period. I felt so unseen and disrespected and just misunderstood." There is no scientific evidence that massage spreads cancer, and many oncologists recommend massages to help patients relax. Still, cancer patients regularly report being turned away.

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On a recent visit to Lanserhof, in Sylt, Germany, no one turned the author away based on her medical history: "For the first time since diagnosis, I felt like I could safely indulge in wellness practices designed just for my needs." Courtesy of Sue Williamson

So, what's the solution? People I talk to with an illness mostly don't want to be ignored. We need to hold wellness companies accountable for bending studies into taglines to sell products and making the fine print virtually illegible. And we should expect them to include us in the fun stuff, too. "I'd like to see treatments for people who are actually sick," says Lieucke. "Something other than a sauna or a scrub [which can be irritating or triggering for people facing certain illnesses]. Like, I would pay to go lie on something fuzzy or filled with salt water, something sensory."

There are some options for those with medical issues to safely receive care. The non-profit Wellness for Cancer has helped train therapists at hundreds of spas to provide inclusive care to patients. Some resorts have hired nutritionists to educate them on illness-related dietary restrictions. I recently visited the wellness clinic Lanserhof, in Sylt, Germany on a press trip, for help managing symptoms like brain fog and physical pain. They have both medical doctors and holistic practitioners on staff, so no one batted an eye or turned me away based on my medical history. For the first time since diagnosis, I felt like I could safely indulge in extra wellness practices designed just for my needs. I danced in a cryo chamber, received an IV infusion that didn't interfere with my other medications, and had the best lymphatic drainage in my life. Best of all, I felt normal. Like I could participate in the fun, recreational side of wellness again. (And my brain fog and shoulder pain started to ease.)

But for my everyday "wellness," I keep things simple: daily exercise, good sleep (without mouth tape or sleep apps), and a diet of mostly whole foods. I take wellness marketing with a grain of salt (actually, more like a teaspoonful). I no longer let people tell me what to put in my body (unless that person is a trusted expert like a medical doctor or certified practitioner). And even after traveling 16 hours and spending a week on an idyllic island, I would say that the best wellness offerings, while not the most glamorous, are free.