

## Dynamic Reflections on Unlearning Wellness

### **Background**

As I have transitioned from a largely positivist undergraduate degree in health and exercise sciences; have begun a more critical master's degree with a focus on youth suicide prevention and health equity in particular; received recent diagnoses of polycystic ovary syndrome (infertility) and mitral valve prolapse (heart disease); grappled increasingly with my whiteness and associated privileges; become a loud anti-capitalist; and engaged with the works of hooks (2000, 2004), Belcourt (2018, 2020), Róisín (2022), and many more, I have been challenged to **unlearn wellness**. With this stretch of prose, I move through sporadic reflections on my unlearning. I come to such reflections as a cis, queer, white woman who, even though did not always realize it, has always been an uninvited settler – mostly on Treaty 7 lands of Tsuut'ina Nation and more recently on unceded lands of Syilx Okanagan Nation. The following writing mosaics my interactions with a non-exhaustive list of scholars/artists/creators/activists (such as those aforementioned) and their invaluable outputs; the incredible professors, supervisors, and classmates I am surrounded by; the people I meet on the bus/street/in the library, and the trees, skies, and lakes I move through. As I learn, unlearn, and reflect, I do not wish to (nor deludedly think I will) arrive at some totally unique, publishable, and proliferative epiphany on fostering wellness for all. I do not seek to reinvent the various wheels built by collectivist, anti-capitalist, and non-Westernized cultures and communities across time. I simply wish to roll alongside them, shifting my gaze, reorienting my body, and unravelling myself - and my conceptualizations of wellness - with each rotation.

## Reflections

### *i. Shifting gaze*

My undergraduate conceptualizations of wellness developed synaptically, snapping from lectures and lab manuals to pencils pressed to paper in a surveilled gymnasium. I learned to draw wellness from A to B (letters extracted and abstracted from a much larger alphabet), whereby **A** symbolizes one's personal beliefs, choices, and behaviours, and **B** symbolizes how said person feels, how their physical body tends to function. I was taught that everyone can be well – all it takes are individual-level actions like, *\*inhale\**, refraining from drinking and smoking, getting a standing desk at work, engaging in 150 minutes of moderate-vigorous aerobic exercise and 2-3 sessions of strength training per week, eating a balanced diet, and defaulting to the unquestionable expertise of physiotherapists, psychologists, researchers, and physicians along the way. *\*exhale\**

As I progressively learn, see, and feel how embedded we (as people) are in interlocking and imbalanced systems and structures of power (e.g., settler colonialism, neoliberal capitalism, ableism, etc.), however, I sense my individual-focused undergraduate degree edging towards frivolity. What, I now wonder, is the point in convincing someone to exercise more when they cannot afford to take time off from work, let alone purchase a gym pass? To assume that a person can and should participate in any given health behaviour is to assume that they have the relevant time, resources, and power to do so. Discussing wellness without deeply and continuously addressing the inequitable ways in which time, resources, and power are distributed, then, sends the message that health and exercise science is not interested in cultivating wellness for everyone. Rather, it seems interested in levelling-up wellness for those who already have access to it (via access to sufficient time, resources, power, and privilege).

I have further realized that localizing wellness to individual bodies and behaviours is problematic in the ways that it causes us to lose sight of the larger systems and structures of power to which individuals are anchored, of the entangled pathways through which their wellness is contoured. Dominant approaches to youth suicide prevention, for instance, funnel resources, efforts, and attention down streamlined avenues of surveillance (e.g., screening for risk factors), biomedicine (e.g., pharmaceutical treatments), and personal responsibility (e.g. building good coping skills) (Gill & Orad, 2018; Orr, 2010 White, 2017). These approaches shift gaze *towards* a pathologized, isolated individual and *away* from more upstream and contextual factors, such as income inequality (Stack, 2021) and structural racism (Alvarez et al., 2022), that research names as more influential to suicidality (Ansloos & Petlier, 2022; White, 2017). This narrow, one-way line of sight is problematic in two key ways. Firstly, when kept in the shadows, systems and structures of power (e.g. neoliberal capitalism) remain unquestioned and thereby free to function in naturalized and often invisibilized ways, perpetuating various harms as they do so (Morgensen, 2011). Secondly, when focusing solely on the individual, imagined solutions to various health and social problems become constrained, simultaneously constraining the effectiveness of their impacts. We see this boundedness as a wealth of individual-level prevention research and efforts are advanced, yet youth continue to die by suicide at stable and often increasing rates (Shahram et al., 2021). If we were to perceive suicide not simply as the result of mental illnesses, chemical imbalances, or risky behaviours, but rather “as a kind of politically charged reaction to a world that makes living at the intersections of social loci untenable” (Belcourt, 2020, p. 139), what reimagined directions, efforts, and promising solutions might result?

In “Close to the Knives,” Wojnarowicz (1991; as cited in Róisín, 2022) says:

Most people tend to [...] feel quite safe from any terrible event or problem such as homelessness or AIDs or nonexistent medical care or rampant crime or hunger or unemployment or racism or sexism simply because they go to sleep every night in a house or apartment or dormitory whose clean rooms or smooth walls or regular structures of repeated daily routines provide them with a feeling of safety that never gets intruded upon by the events outside. (p. 515; p. 101).

When a wellness-focused program, teacher, student, practitioner, community member, or researcher does not venture - deeply and consistently - to address and deconstruct the imbalanced power systems in which the wellness of individuals is deeply embedded, they build themselves into “clean rooms” with “smooth walls.” What reductions in suffering, and improvements in wellness for all can possibly occur within the space of one room, especially when the forces that most impactfully shape and limit wellness are obscured from view, beyond the walls?

*ii. Reorienting body*

Shifting my gaze away from wellness as localized to individuals and towards wellness as embedded in and shaped by various systems and structures of power, has served as a precursor to finding new directions to orient my body (AKA the capsule of my thinking, my actions, my research, and my general ways of being in the world). Here, I seek to illustrate my unlearning process of finding/being shown new points of focus, and then slowly but actively moving towards them. Before I describe such orientations, however, I am compelled to acknowledge the unabashed critique I have thus far released onto individual-level approaches to wellness. “Either/or” thinking (e.g. the idea that either individual-level solutions, or systems-level solutions, but not both, are an answer to suffering) does not offer an effective path towards

wellness for all (and is actually a characteristic of white supremacy culture; Okun, 2022). As such, I would like to make clear that I view individual-level practices of wellness (e.g. being active) as important, particularly as they help people cope with and within violent contexts and systems, and are made increasingly accessible to all. Ultimately, though, I follow the lead of prolific writers and activists (e.g., Murphy, 2018; Róisín, 2022; White, 2017) to argue that true wellness for all requires that these individual practices be woven throughout larger, organized, and collective struggles to break down unjust systems, rather than whispers of the latter being tacked onto the former (as is so frequently practiced, such as in the curriculum of my undergraduate degree).

Firstly, and perhaps most counterintuitively, I have been slowly orienting my research away from wellness, and towards illness. This movement is ushered along by my growing understanding of the ways in which our conceptualizations of wellness are broadly and deeply governed by a series of dominant and strategic discourses. Framing wellness through rhetoric of “self-improvement,” “personal goals,” and “self-care,” for instance, conveys neoliberal capitalist values of individualism, driving people towards consumption (e.g. of over-glorified food products, workout classes, etc.), towards their jobs (where they acquire capital to purchase products), and away from community (wherein which they might find slower, less arduous, and more anti-capitalistic ways to experience wellness and contentment) (Gill & Orad, 2018). Or, to offer an even more blatant example of how understandings of wellness are constructed by power forces, think of the quietly capitalist way we so often view one’s ability to work productively as a direct indicator of their wellness (Woke Scientist, 2022). Are discourses and associated understandings of illness shaped by power structures in a similar way? Woolf (1926) argues that there is “a childish outspokenness in illness; things are said, truths blurted out, which the

cautious respectability of health conceals” (p. 36). A person’s wellness does not always offer useful data – this wellness could be perceived according to one’s ability to go to work, for instance. Or, it could be attributed to an inequitably large share of power, resources, and privilege which allow the person in question to thrive within tough systems. Illness, on the other hand, could be argued to offer more information, more transparency. In the case of youth suicidality, for instance, especially as it is concentrated disproportionately among queer and racialized youth (Barker et al., 2017; Government of Canada, 2016; Craig et al., 2015), illness and suffering suggest that the context/systems in which many young people exist are failing, harmful, and often unliveable.

Following the notion that capitalism does NOT offer pathways towards genuine, equitable experiences of wellness, I wish to personally explore wellness by further orienting myself away from markets and consumption, and towards stillness in the natural environment, whenever and wherever possible. Doing this feels anti-capitalist, especially as I pause to tilt my head back, let the sun kiss my forehead, and remind myself that productivity is not the cornerstone of my worth and my purpose. Cultivating a strong and slow relationship with nature is certainly not a new idea, and is often inextricable from certain Indigenous worldviews (e.g., Little Bear, 2000). As a white settler who has been sadly but surely conditioned by colonial capitalist values of the Canadian project, however, establishing this relationship feels new (or at least renewed). I have been seeing a similar surge in this inclination towards stillness and nature, and away from “the grind” and hustle culture, made evident through a particular subset of memes (e.g., Fig. 1). I am left wondering whether the circulation of such memes offers an opportunity to disrupt the dominant discourses that adhere wellness to capitalism.

## **Conclusion**

The creation of this rambling reflection offered me time and space to question dominant, individual-level approaches to wellness that are shaped by systems and structures of power, yet keep these systems and structures of power in the shadows. As I hopelessly seek to find a common thread from which to tie a summative knot, I instead think repeatedly of the moments of affinity I've experienced at transit townhalls, climate strikes, and protests against RBC's investments in the CGL pipeline, all led by students in my graduate program. I think of the warmth we shared when a classmate shared a photo of a singular rose to depict her feelings of isolation on campus, and fellow classmates responded by planting tulips around it. I think of the reprieve I've felt from two years of intermittent depression and suicidal thoughts. I think of the way my heart palpitations have decreased. I think of how the wellness of one is intricately and inextricably tied to that of others, and I feel myself unravel.

## Appendix



Figure 1. “Stop glamorizing the grind” meme (Owe, 2022).



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