

Wellness as Tyranny: The Cult of Toxic Happiness

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Theme: [History](#)

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Be happy. Think of your wellness. Across organisations, private and public entities, government bodies and social clubs, the cult of contrived happiness abounds with ritualistic, clotting repetition. In such cases, the forced grin, the pressured smile, the affected giggle, have become part of a project of puppeteering, manipulation and manufacture. Critics of such approaches are ostracised, treated as leprous reminders of reality.

The cult of orchestrated happiness is intended to veil, covering the moonscape scars and lingering mutilations of life. The forced smile, as it has so often been, repels reality. It is also intended as a transferral of responsibility for problems one complains about to the complainant. To be happy by design is to excuse defects and injustice, casually skipping over larger imperfections.

“Toxic positivity,” [writes](#) Mita Mallick, “is the idea that no matter how bad or stressful a situation, no matter how difficult the circumstances are, you can change your outcome simply by being positive and thinking positively.”

Mallick goes on to suggest that when toxic positivity, as a practice, makes its unwelcome appearance, “we put the responsibility on individuals to endure and persevere in toxic, dysfunctional and broken structures and systems.” Negative views are shunned, seen as unhelpful and disruptive. Their holders, in turn, are encouraged to feel shame, guilt and cherish immaturity.

The nature of such forced happiness has become industrialised and marketed. Rina Raphael, who has studied the wellness industry, notes its effects on certain groups as well. Women, [she argues](#), are being sedated “with consumerist self-care”. Stress can be banished as an act of faith and salvation, dispelled through yoga classes or taking soothing bubble baths. The actual culprit – the issue of overwork, for instance – can be ignored. Even more critically, forget the collective dimension at play, which the wellness market reduces to a matter of individual action and choice.

Tim Lott also [reminds us](#) that this has roots in a specific understanding of economic organisation. He takes the prod to capitalism, where happiness is aim and object, involving shopping, playing, exercising, granting funds to charity and such. Companies ensure that workplaces include gimmicks, distractions, and treats in the name of building the resilience of their worker bees: the workplace, for instance, modelled on a nightclub, with open bars and zones of mandatory tranquillity. The workplace, monitored by such creepily absurd commissars as the “funsultants”, have become a domain for the wellness police, agents of what the late Barbara Ehrenreich called the “epidemic of wellness”.

Ehrenreich, in her snappy book *Natural Causes*, offered a mischievous critique of such an epidemic in the context of postponing death. “You can think of death bitterly or with

resignation ... and take every possible measure to postpone it.” On the other hand, “you can think of life as an interruption of an eternity of personal nonexistence, and seize it as a brief opportunity to observe and interact with the living, ever-surprising world around us.” Sober words of philosophical sting which, sadly, have done little to arrest the growth of the wellness industry.

Toxic happiness, the cult of happiness, has become an imperative of iron clad worth. Carl Cederström and André Spicer [note](#) in *The Wellness Syndrome* that even the most mundane tasks of the day must be seen as acts of improvement and wellness. “When we engage in boring activities, such as washing up at home, we should think of them as improving our mindfulness. Even baking a loaf of bread is now recast as a way of nurturing our wellbeing.”

The cult of forced happiness acts as a conscious program to defang and dilute opposition, maligning critics who refuse to join the fascists of the grin, the authoritarians of the forced smiled. It stiffens the sinews of groupthink and discourages naysayers who wish to challenge organisational behaviour or correct errors. Whistleblowers worried about reporting corporate malfeasance or criminality in government organisations find themselves hounded and scolded for not being loyal in patriotic silence. They should have tasted wellness and its therapeutic properties. To be unhappy, it follows, is to be critical and dangerously free.

Wellness as a principle of organisational behaviour has also become a rigid legal component. Employers remind their employees that they must take time off, rush off on annual leave and ensure that the organisation does not labour under “liabilities” that will cut into budgets and raise questions about the quality of the workplace. Most cringingly of all, many employers insist that the public holiday becomes the perfect point at which to take that leave.

Unhappiness has become the hunted enemy, and stomped upon. The time has come for a constructive sense of informed unhappiness to take over, the sulky, the gravely sullen and the profoundly introspective to have their time in necessary bleakness. Wellness industry, begone!

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