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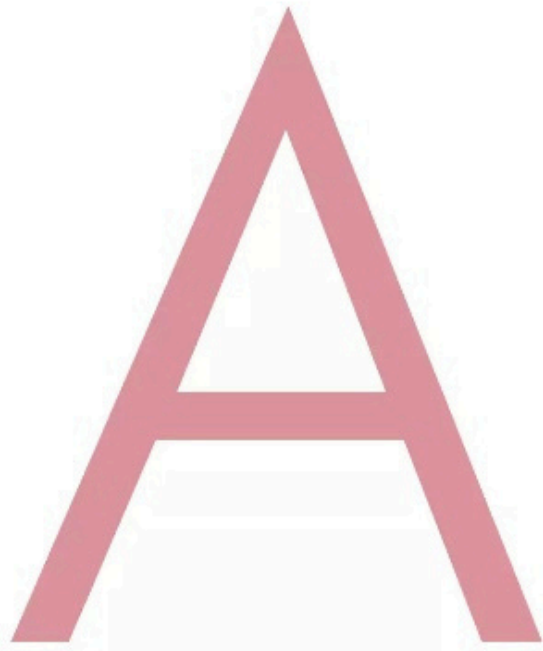
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Are we the 'worried well' generation?

WHO ISN'T A LITTLE ABSORBED BY THEIR WELLBEING THESE DAYS? AMY ABRAHAMS INVESTIGATES WHETHER THE EXTRA SCRUTINY IS A FORCE FOR GOOD OR TIPPING US INTO HEALTH ANXIETY



s I pull the elastic strap around my head, I recall that analogy about putting on your own oxygen mask before you help others and I think, yes, this is what I'm doing. Literally, because I am about to inhale pure oxygen in a highly pressurised container – but metaphorically, too, because I'm doing something to improve my personal health and wellbeing, and that feels empowering. I hear a soft suction sound then a thud as the clinician bolts the door. As the air pressure increases, it feels like I'm on a plane, although the capsule I'm sitting in – with curved interior walls lined with silver and two pairs of seats facing each other – resembles something more likely to launch into space. Not that I'm going anywhere; I'm staying put for 45 minutes in a hyperbaric oxygen chamber in the new HUM2N longevity clinic in London. Why am I here? Good question. I'm not ill, but I'm sure I could feel better – and I'm prepared to give everything a go. My family often roll their eyes at

my health endeavours – the research I'll share on our group chat or the strange powders and pills I'll pop – but I know I'm not alone in my proactivity. The Global Wellness Institute puts the worldwide wellness market at \$5.6 trillion – that's a lot of people spending a lot of money in the pursuit of health. Maybe this includes you. Maybe we've passed each other in the supplement aisle, studying the adaptogens. Or stood next to each other at the gym, strength training our way to midlife muscle. Maybe you've booked in to see a menopause specialist, or have a dermatologist you're always recommending to friends. Perhaps you're one of the 130,000 people who have signed up to the personalised nutrition programme Zoe and worn its yellow glucose monitor on your arm with pride. We've been told to take our health seriously – so that's what we're doing. But perhaps you've been called one of the 'worried well', too, when really, who isn't a little bit worried about their wellbeing these days?

**'GOOGLING
IS NOT THE
ANSWER. IT
WILL DRIVE
ANXIETY'**

Blessed but stressed

'Worried well' is not a new phrase – coined in the 1970s, it's often referred by clinicians to patients inappropriately or disproportionately using health services. According to a 2020 article in the *British Journal Of General Practice*, it can 'range from someone with a concerning symptom that turns out to be nothing, to someone with severe health anxiety'. I ask Dr Mohammed Enayat what he thinks of the 'worried well'. As the founder of HUM2N, as well as an NHS GP in the London borough of Lewisham, he sees patients across the board. He feels the term 'worried well' used in a clinical sense is 'dismissive' and leaves the patient feeling 'seen, but not heard'. Interestingly, he also thinks it creates a false sense of security. 'It's saying: "Oh, you're well, and there's nothing to be worried about."' Whereas he believes that by looking functionally at the body and testing biomarkers – the biological measures that can reveal features of disease – you can find imbalances. He cites brain fog, water retention, stubborn weight gain, low mood, shaky resilience and sleep disturbances as some of the symptoms often slotted into the 'worried well' category. 'But those symptoms are very real to the patient. And with personalised medicine, you can look for what may be causing those symptoms and treat them,' he says. HUM2N calls itself a longevity clinic,

and as well as the hyperbaric oxygen chamber – said to improve the growth of blood vessels, fight infection and reverse the hallmarks of ageing – it offers treatments including cryotherapy and IV therapy, plus lab tests to create a personalised health profile. This type of clinic might once have seemed like science fiction to cynics, but a shift towards preventative medicine has pushed demand, with more than 60% of UK consumers surveyed by consulting firm McKinsey considering it 'very' or 'extremely' important to purchase products or services that help with healthy ageing and longevity.

Meanwhile, the Global Wellness Institute deemed longevity one of its key wellness trends for 2024, noting that, 'The speed at which longevity has seized the biotech, health and wellness spaces in the last year is staggering. No mere "trend", it's the new industry pillar.'

When I step out of the chamber, I'm told I might feel tired, but I feel noticeably energetic. Perhaps it's the hefty dose of oxygen or perhaps it's because there was a flatscreen TV in there and I just enjoyed an episode of *Catastrophe*; having a desk full of deadlines and two young children, I can't remember the last time I got a break like this in the middle of the day. As I bounce home, I fantasise about how rejuvenated I'd feel if I had this treatment regularly – if only I had a spare £175 a pop for the privilege.

Doing it for themselves

Countless research shows that women are more proactive about their health than men, and a 2015 Finnish study found that women seek out more health-related information, make more purchases with their health in mind and also share more informal health-related information with family, friends and colleagues than men.

But there is a flipside to this. A study of more than 100,000 people for the Government's Women's Health Strategy for England found that four out of five respondents reported instances when they were not listened to by healthcare professionals and had symptoms dismissed by their GPs. Additionally, women felt they had to persistently advocate for themselves to secure a diagnosis, often over multiple visits, months and years. Case in point: endometriosis, where women can wait up to nine years for a diagnosis.

'A lot of women's proactivity around their health stems from a sense that we have to be our own doctors, or at least to "prove ourselves" by putting in the work before we go to see our GPs,' says Sarah Graham, author of *Rebel Bodies: A Guide To The Gender Health Gap Revolution*. 'What I see time and time again is women feeling dismissed or fobbed off by their healthcare professionals. This often stems from early experiences of problematic periods – severe pain, heavy bleeding or extreme PMS symptoms – or things such as contraceptive side-effects. I think having those symptoms dismissed as normal, or not a big deal, from a young age can have a huge impact on women's faith in the system to adequately care for them.'

It's little surprise the same study found women's top sources for health information were family and friends, followed by Google and blogs. It is this sharing of information and the need for alternatives beyond the brick wall of mainstream medicine and 10-minute GP appointments that has led many women to take matters into their own hands, fuelling the wellness boom, with entrepreneurs such as Gwyneth Paltrow building a \$250 million business in the process. Paltrow has been derided for her 'woo-woo approach' to wellness but, increasingly, she's regarded as a trailblazer. 'There's nothing that we talk about that's actually that wacky,' said Paltrow during a 2022 interview on CBS. 'We would talk about something and the internet would freak out, and six months later, two years later, it would be widely adopted.'

'So often, women are damned if they do and damned if they don't – lazy and irresponsible if they're not proactive about their health; elitist or hypochondriacs if they are,' says Graham. 'I certainly think medicine needs to lose some of its snobbery and dismissiveness around the wellness industry, and instead really examine why these products and services might appeal to women and what kinds of needs they're meeting that aren't being met by traditional healthcare.'

