

# Smash the Wellness Industry

Why are so many smart women falling for its harmful, pseudoscientific claims?

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**By Jessica Knoll**

Ms. Knoll is a novelist.

A few months ago, I had lunch with the writer behind one of my favorite movies of the year, the agent who made the deal and the producer who packaged the project. I wanted to hear all about the process and perhaps find an opportunity to collaborate. When the server came to take our order, I flashed to that scene in “Romy and Michele’s High School Reunion” when Mira Sorvino walks into a diner in a striped skirt suit and asks the waitress, “Do you have some sort of businesswomen’s special?”

Had there been any sort of businesswomen’s special that day, our group probably couldn’t have ordered it. Someone was slogging through the Whole30 program, someone had eliminated dairy, and someone else was simply trying to be “good” after a “bad” weekend. The producer said it didn’t matter how “good” she was. She had lost the baby weight and though she may look tolerable in clothes, under the Spanx her stomach was a horror show. The writer said she had so much cellulite on her thighs she looked diseased. I gazed around the restaurant, longingly, wondering what the men eating cheeseburgers were talking about.

At one time, I too would gleefully have torn myself apart. I despised my body, and my devotion to changing it amounted to years of unpaid labor, starting with a bout of bulimia in high school. In preparation for my wedding, I worked out twice

a day on 800 calories. From there I moved on to counting macros, replacing rice with cauliflower pellets, 13-day cleanses, intermittent fasting and an elimination diet that barred sugar, dairy and nightshades like potatoes.

Every new regimen ended in the same violent binge. I'd wait for my husband to go to bed so that I could obliterate the pantry without him asking, "Are you O.K.?" For the next few days, I would throw myself on the altar of "clean eating," only to start the cycle all over again.

I had paid a lot of money to see a dietitian once before, in New York. When I told her that I loved food, that I'd always had a big appetite, she had nodded sympathetically, as if I had a tough road ahead of me. "The thing is," she said with a grimace, "you're a small person and you don't need a lot of food."

The new dietitian had a different take. "What a gift," she said, appreciatively, "to love food. It's one of the greatest pleasures in life. Can you think of your appetite as a gift?" It took me a moment to wrap my head around such a radical suggestion. Then I began to cry.

Two years into my work with her, I feel lighter than I ever have. Food is a part of my life — a fun part — but it no longer tastes irresistible, the way it did when I told myself I couldn't have it. My body looks as it always has when I'm not restricting or bingeing. I'm not "good" one day so that I can be "bad" another, which I once foolishly celebrated as balance.

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Occasionally, when I'm stressed, I comfort myself with food, and my dietitian assures me that's an acceptable kind of hunger too. Emotional eating is a coping mechanism. We're told it is an unhealthy habit, one we must break, but that's another wellness lie. It is not vodka in our morning coffee. My binges stopped once I stopped judging myself for wanting to eat the foods "wellness" vilified, sometimes for reasons other than physical hunger.

I no longer define food as whole or clean or sinful or a cheat. It has no moral value. Neither should my weight, though I'm still trying to separate my worth from my appearance. They are two necklaces that have gotten tangled over the course of my 35 years, their thin metal chains tied up in thin metal knots. Eventually, I will pry them apart.

Most days, I feel good in my skin. That said, I am probably never going to love my body, and that's O.K. I think loving our bodies is not only an unrealistic goal in our appearance-obsessed society but also a limiting one. No one is telling men that they need to love their bodies to live full and meaningful lives. We don't need to love our bodies to respect them.

In 2019, I want to propose a new kind of test. Women, can two or more of us get together without mentioning our bodies and diets? It would be a small act of resistance and a kindness to ourselves.

When men sit down to a business lunch, they don't waste it pointing out every flaw on their bodies. They discuss ideas, strategies, their plans to take up more space than they already do. Let's lunch like that. Who's eating with me?

Jessica Knoll is the author of the novels "Luckiest Girl Alive" and "The Favorite Sister."

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