

# **LIVING IN THE CULT OF TECHNOLOGY: WELLBEING IN THE DIGITAL AGE**

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# I was born

into one of the world's most notorious religious cults. I finally escaped when I was 22, but there are a few patterns that I see replicated in many workplaces and family systems today. If someone in the cult I grew up in was physically ill, perhaps had doubts about the way we did things or was mentally distressed, it was very clearly a *them* problem and would elicit prayers, isolation, cruel punishments or even excommunication. It was their fault—no responsibility was taken by the environment, relentless belief systems, ever-changing rules and intense working practices that could drive someone to be experiencing said distress. The system was never at fault. However, paradoxically, when something went well (a big win, a new donor, a new disciple or other such proofs of concept) all credit was taken by the collective, their way of life was validated and leadership were seen as doing the right thing, leading well and inspiring appropriate action.

In the space of digital wellbeing I am seeing the same dynamic.

If you are burnt out, addicted, overwhelmed, depressed, comparing is impacting your self-worth, you're broke, gambling, or feeling more anxious or less able to focus, society will instruct you on your responsibility to have better willpower, to create better boundaries and criticize you for simply being a weaker human who hasn't handled modern progress in the way it was intended.

But the system is set up against us and wants to see us give away our focus—by which I mean, mainlining information and distraction and capturing our attention so that we can be sold to.

## IS DIGITAL DETOX THE SOLUTION?

Due to the extremes of digital overwhelm, we must turn our minds to resets, rehabs, or digital detoxes. Are these the solution? While of course some of us can self-impose a digital detox, this can feel like it's for the privileged few. We have businesses to run, children to keep track of, and life to be on top of.

According to Johann Hari, the best-selling author of *Stolen Focus: Why You Can't Pay Attention* (2023):

***Digital detox is not the solution (to our tech addictions) for the same reason that wearing a gas mask for two days a week outside isn't the answer to pollution. It might ... keep at an individual level, certain effects at bay—but it's not sustainable and it doesn't address the systemic issues.***

A digital detox may not solve systemic issues but if you've ever tried one before it can act as a glorious reset. A reminder that there is a whole world out there if we just look up long enough to really take it in.

If we're going to influence real change, however, we must influence the system. This can feel totally out of reach, though—how in the world do we impact a billion-dollar machine, how do we just keep our focus and stay sane alongside consumer marketing and attention competition? It's important that we are alert to the system at play and practise a little self-compassion as we all experiment with evolving our boundaries, our knowledge, and cultures to enable us to ensure technology helps us become better rather than worse versions of ourselves.



'Come on,' said a friend to me recently when learning I was embarking on this topic, 'if we can't even manage the pull of notifications, how in the world are we going to manage the pace of change brought by AI?' Totally fair, I thought.

The world of technology isn't slowing down. Rather than attack the machine or blame the individual, making it an us-vs-them problem, it might be useful for us to embrace an explorer's mindset. Rather than taking sides in the argument and placing full blame in either camp, we could instead embrace open discussion, the sharing of honest experiences and acknowledging that none of us has been here before. This is a brave new world and while there are always haters when something new shows up, those who thrive are those who are adaptable, willing to hold the paradox of healthy and unhealthy and collaborate on making the digital world safer for our children's developing brains as well as evolving us into a new world of work fuelled by connection and structures to help us focus.

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## WELLBEING HACKS: SELLING SOLUTIONS TO MAN-MADE PROBLEMS

I am all for progress and the endless benefits we could list about how tech has been used for good in all corners of the world and yet we're all figuring out what the new normal is and, importantly, how our wellbeing and brain chemistry are impacted. One of the worrying things is how mass information is informing our belief systems, and most of it is influenced by consumer marketing—those smart people sitting around scheming for ways to influence the consumer (you, me and our children) and convince us we need their products to make us happy.

We deem this normal, swimming in a pool of acquiring more things, more stuff, more experiences, more self-help, more wellbeing hacks and more tools to help us manage the world we're in. We use more drastic tools to manage the symptoms that are stacking in this mental health crisis, hardly questioning the environments that brought us here.

Yes, I did in fact add acquiring more wellbeing hacks to that list because in a world of information overload we're even being sold that more wellbeing tools will give us the satisfaction we crave. We feel we're doing wellbeing wrong if we haven't ticked off our list of hacks such as cold ice plunges, workouts, meditation, gratitude practice, journals, connection, intention, manifestation, productivity hacks.

I am definitely for all of these things in their own time and if they suit you and the phase of life you're in, but there's an additional point. It seems like a lot of these hacks are solving problems created by the systems around us and perpetuating this need to use our devices to consume hacks to support our focus and wellbeing.

All of these tools can have benefits, but sometimes we need to question the environments we're in that are making us feel like somehow we're doing wellbeing wrong even when inundated with millions of simple hacks. It perpetuates the idea that our symptoms are our fault while assuming that everyone else is somehow getting it right, making us hide in the shame and blame of getting it wrong.

I've had people tell me there are no dangers in our relationship to devices because tech companies have created many tools for managing notifications, alerts, productivity time, etc. And sure, there may now be tools to help us manage things but first, why are these tools being created? Because on the whole we are seeing evidence of damage being done when these things are not managed so tools are popping up to show that responsibility is being taken even though, according to the Ledger of Harms (Center for Humane Technology, 2021), many tech leaders won't allow their own children time on devices due to their inside knowledge of the addictive and debilitating effects on children's brains.

## **STRESS AND MISINFORMATION**

And then there's stress and how it impacts our ability to think in any kind of rational way and do the things that seem so simple on paper. (It's not technology's fault, just have a better work-life balance and set boundaries for yourself! Be disciplined!)

In Dan Ariely's book *Misbelief: What Makes Rational People Believe Irrational Things* (2023) he highlights how 'Stressful conditions tax our cognitive bandwidth, reducing our ability to think clearly and exercise executive control. Stress also hurts our ability to make rational long-term decisions that require delayed gratification.'

Stress is not the enemy of course—good stress can help us fuel our potential and thereby enhance wellbeing. However, these days I’m seeing people so stuck in survival mode that we are in states of extreme stress, impeding our ability to think in ways that could help boost our wellbeing. When I do talks and ask people how they invest in themselves they’re likely to list all the classic ways to improve focus and productivity (sleep, exercise, nutrition, doing something they love, etc); however when we’re in unhealthy stress, we’re more likely to turn to the unhealthy coping mechanisms rather than the good ones.

We’ll reach for the sugar, yell at someone who doesn’t deserve it, experience road rage, gamble, drink, watch countless hours of TV and on and on that list could go, including slipping right into what consumer marketing had in mind all the time—becoming susceptible to emotionally manipulative advertising with stress impeding our ability to make rational decisions, thereby buying more.

It’s imperative that each of us takes ownership over our resilience, our thinking, and evolving our wellbeing practices to sit alongside this rapid change while also collectively questioning the systems around us.

## GROUPTHINK

Why can't we just do something about the systems around us so we can collectively manage our wellbeing and focus, you might ask? Something that plays a part in our systems and structures is how we collude to keep things the same. We all do it; even in healthy environments we're likely to experience groupthink.

Groupthink is about thinking or making decisions as a group, resulting typically in unchallenged, poor-quality decision making—it's a phenomenon that occurs when a group of individuals reach a consensus without critical reasoning or evaluation of the consequences or alternatives. It's based on a common desire not to upset the balance of the group.

Why does this matter to the topic of digital wellbeing? Well, I think we're colluding on making everything individualistic, hyping up the benefits of tech and not effectively challenging each other in our workplaces, relationships, and homes when we feel that connection or productivity is lost.

Take meeting culture in a post-covid world, for example. My team and I work with hundreds of organizations globally and if we talk to people individually, they will echo the inefficiencies of meeting culture by saying things like:

***Meetings are just put in my diary out of core hours due to time zones or senior leadership availability, not considering my workload.***

***I'm in meetings all day, which means I end up doing my actual work outside of hours.***



***I sit in so many meetings that feel pointless. My energy just crashes and I feel no motivation for my work as I'm not even included in the meeting.***

You get the point. Collectively everyone just seems to accept that this is the way it is and nobody wants to rock the boat or be seen as difficult or risk their jobs. It seems to me that many workplaces are colluding with practices that are grossly inefficient and leading to overwhelm, absence and burnout and yet nobody is doing anything to change this approach—just layering on resources or outsourcing wellbeing hacks, which doesn't get to the root issue. The fact that we no longer need to be in person to hold meetings, that we can meet digitally on our devices, only makes the problem more pervasive.

The reason I bring up groupthink is to further wake us up to our own part in the system of behaviors that keep us stuck and to begin to provide some solutions. We struggle with loneliness, digital overwhelm and unhealthy types of stress at work and yet so few of us are truly questioning the way we're doing things, instead frozen in information overload and emotional marketing, feeling too small to create any real difference. Instead we just accept things the way they are. And so, our circles of influence become just like our algorithms—repeating back to us what's just easier for us to do or watch.

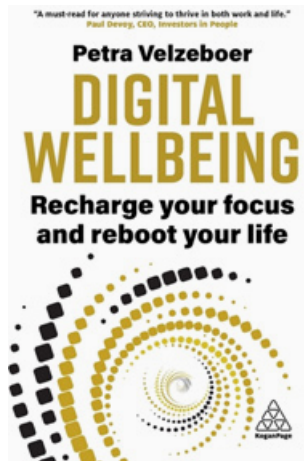
We are in uncharted territory, and AI is escalating us into unknown places that will radically change the skills needed to thrive, so it's imperative that each of us takes ownership over our resilience, our thinking, and evolving our wellbeing practices to sit alongside this rapid change while also collectively questioning the systems around us.

Just like with any tool, the technology itself doesn't seem to be the problem—it's of course how humans use it and to what end. But we're too often focusing on individual symptoms rather than taking collective responsibility. When we focus on selling solutions for symptoms such as low mood, anxiety, tech addiction or burnout, we are keeping the problem in the lap of the overwhelmed individual, missing the point of a society that is perpetuating a state of dis-ease.

We're right to be nervous and certainly it's important that we educate ourselves, protect our children, and back organizations like the Center for Humane Technology, who are trying to ensure these things are developed with safety in mind. But living in a state of perpetual fear and stress is also terrible for our immune system so it's not useful to be sitting in fear, especially about things that are not in our control. So it's crucial that we don't spiral into overwhelm, obsessing about the digital vortex and going down a rabbit hole of clickbait to help us make sense of things. **We must strike the balance between awareness and focusing on what's in our control, prioritizing habits that can support us to stay creative and focus on what matters most in our world.** 📖



# Info



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Petra Velzeboer is a renowned mental health expert, speaker and CEO of PVL, a mental health consultancy. She has an MSc in Psychodynamics of Human Development and is a qualified ORSC & CTI Certified Coach. She is also an Advisor Board Member at Make A Difference Summits.

She is uniquely positioned to highlight the importance of wellbeing at work, as she draws upon her professional and personal experiences. Petra Velzeboer overcame a traumatic childhood to become a counsellor for vulnerable young people before campaigning for improved mental health services. She is based in London, UK.



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This document was created on February 26, 2025 and is based on the best information available at that time.

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