

A holistic viewpoint could elevate us all

As COVID-19 continues to dominate the headlines, our Sandy Jayaraj takes the opportunity to look at how a change in consumer behaviour and a holistic view of wellbeing can have a wide-ranging benefit.

Temps de lecture : minute

15 June 2020

Much in the same way SARS changed the behaviour of many in Southeast Asia in the early 2000s, it's possible the current outbreak forces more people to think about their own everyday actions in a broader context. Washing hands more frequently, getting more quality sleep and looking after yourself mentally are all changes individuals can adopt which can lift society's well being as a whole.

In his seminal 1859 work, *On the Origin of Species*, Charles Darwin asked: "How have all those exquisite adaptations... to the conditions of life, and of one distinct organic being to another being, been perfected?"

It would have been inconceivable to the average 19th-century person living in London to imagine such a change in the "conditions of life" as the advent of the smartphone. Humans have become dependent on them, with Statista estimating there are 3.5B users globally. That's more than 45% of the world's population. A 2018 study found the average person looks at their smartphone for more than 20% of their waking hours.

With such focus on smartphones, humans needed to adapt, but I don't think Darwin could have envisaged the form this adaption could take. An acceptance of eye strain, an acceptance of upper back and neck pain and

a clear acceptance that hygiene plays second fiddle to getting one's daily phone fix.

A study by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine found one in six phones in the UK were contaminated with faecal matter. People buy lottery tickets with significantly lower odds than that.

The COVID-19 outbreak has brought the importance of basic hygiene to the fore with numerous publications and forums providing advice to help protect us, both individually and as a herd, from bacteria, viruses and other pathogens. Physical distancing has undoubtedly helped too.

This can, however, be extended far beyond the emergence of one disease and just washing hands or basic physical hygiene. Encouraging behavioural changes that improve human wellbeing can have broad-reaching benefits.

Traditional health care, and particularly drug development, has been typically focused on treatment rather than prevention while also being allopathic (focus on specific ailments), rather than holistic, in nature.

A broader focus on wellbeing, however, is starting to emerge. For example, in recent years our understanding of the importance of gut flora and the gut-brain axis to overall wellbeing has increased dramatically. Giulia Ender's best-selling book *Gut: the inside story of our body's most underrated organ* gives a comprehensive introduction.

Sleep is another area that has been the focus of an increasing amount of academic and clinical work. Professor Colin Espie from the Nuffield Department of Clinical Neuroscience at the University of Oxford is one of the world's foremost sleep disorder clinicians with a focus on behavioural therapy. A budding supplements industry has also aimed at improving the overall quality of sleep in the hope of bolstering wellbeing. Numerous studies have made the link between insufficient high-quality sleep and

obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular disease and immune function.

Mental fitness has also been a common wellbeing focus. Elite athletes have seen benefits of this for a long time, with many even prioritising it above physical prowess. It was commonly accepted that George Foreman was physically more impressive than Mohammad Ali in the build-up to the Rumble in the Jungle. Ali was even a 4-1 underdog. However, it was arguably Ali's mental fitness that enabled him to record a famous victory.

More recently, the importance of mental fitness to overall wellbeing and performance has been recognised for the general population with several mindfulness apps emerging to encourage us to take time out. Fika a UK based startup is on a mission to mainstream mental fitness by bringing emotional education to students around the world. It is easy to see how this could be translated to the corporate world.

Taken together, all of these behavioural changes could have far-reaching implications, both economically and socially.

Behavioural change is hard. It is not, however, impossible. It can be made through facilitation and example-setting. For instance, positioning hand sanitisers on reception desks and observing their use as convention soon develops a habit.

During the 2002 SARS outbreak in Asia, the wearing of face masks by those feeling unwell went far to slowing down the spread of the infection. That habit continues now and has been helpful during the outbreak of COVID-19.

Legislation, of course, is another route. I remember as a child travelling up to the Lake District on holiday with my parents, my aunt and uncle and my cousins. No one was wearing a seatbelt and three of us were in the boot. Post the introduction of laws making seat belt wearing compulsory in the front seats in 1983 and then in the back in 1991, it now

feels distinctly odd not to be wearing one in a car.

If the base level of overall population health rises, pharmaceutical firms could see large drug market segments reduce in size or even disappear. I like to think of this as an opportunity to clear bandwidth for innovation in targeting the more elusive pathogens.

If we get the basics right, the overall benefits to society and the individual are clear and Mr Darwin could rest easy in his grave knowing that a better adaptation has been made.

Sandy Jayaraj is Chief Operating Officer at Curation, an emerging and peripheral risk monitoring service, where he leverages 18 years of experience at Morgan Stanley and 7 years at PwC to help marry the strategic vision with the day-to-day operations at Curation.



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