# Wellness Is Finally Admitting It Got the Last Decade Wrong

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# The end of optimization culture…

The Global Wellness Institute had a press event on Tuesday to release their new **Global Wellness Summit's *Future of Wellness 2026*** trends report and something unexpected happened: the wellness industry began publicly questioning the advice it spent the last decade selling.

I should say up front that I don't like the word *wellness*. To me, it signals the commodification of health rather than true human well-being. But at this year's event, wellness felt different. There was noticeably less obsession with perfect routines, extreme optimization, and how far the human body can be pushed, tracked, measured, and engineered into compliance.

Instead, there was a shared acknowledgement (almost a collective exhale) that much of the last decade of wellness (and longevity) advice has missed the mark.

For years, wellness promised that if you just had the right data, the right protocol, the right discipline, the right products, you could outsmart biology. Entire wellness empires have been built on that idea. But what struck me most about the event this year was a rare admission that this framework comes with a real human cost.

The report puts it plainly: "**We're living through a paradox: Never before has wellbeing been so measurable—and never before has it felt so psychologically demanding."**

That single sentence explains why so many people have done everything "right" and still feel exhausted, anxious, or behind. Measurement promised clarity. Instead, it often delivered pressure.

Our bodies aren't machines waiting for better software. We're people longing for

connection, vitality, and meaningful lives.

During the event, a different definition of health and wellness began to take shape. Women's bodies are finally being treated as central rather than niche. Strength is being reframed as agency, not aesthetics. There were serious conversations about how our homes, environments, and care systems can shape healthspan. About how nervous systems matter. About how joy, pleasure, and social connection aren't indulgences. They're stabilizing forces.

What's emerging finally is a smarter, more integrated, more whole-human version of wellness. (I might even start using that word again.)

# The 10 Trends from the 2026 Global Wellness Report

The 2026 trends signal a move away from hyper-optimization and toward a more human, more integrated definition of longevity, one that asks us to work with our bodies, our communities, our systems, to design lives that reduce friction instead of demanding endless self-control. To measure less, sense more, and remember that we're in this together.

## 1. Longevity Was Built for Men. Women Are Rewriting the Rules.

The report makes a blunt point: the longevity market was built around male biology, and women were expected to adapt. For decades, even advanced longevity protocols were extrapolated from male data, despite clear evidence that women age differently. The first trend in the *Future of Wellness 2026* report titled, "*Women Get Their Own Lane in Longevity*," posits that "the ovary is command-central for women's health,

and its decline dramatically accelerates system-wide aging and chronic conditions in women," helping explain why women live longer but spend 25 percent more years in poor health.

At the conference, Dr. Robin Berzin reframed the shift: "Women are less interested in a competition to see who can get to 121, and more interested in living their healthiest, happiest, strongest life now." The new paradigm prioritizes earlier diagnostics, hormone literacy, and strength as infrastructure. To make that correction actionable, Dr. Robin Berzin was explicit about what women should actually track earlier and more seriously. She named three markers that matter long before symptoms appear:

**A. Full-body DEXA scan:** Not weight, body composition. Berzin urged women to "throw away the scale" and focus instead on lean muscle, bone density, and visceral fat, which she described as highly inflammatory and tightly linked to heart disease, dementia, and bone loss.

**B. Fasting insulin:** "This is an early signal," she said. Berzin looks for fasting insulin below 5, noting that values over 10 indicate metabolic trouble. "Our metabolic health is our aging velocity."

**C. Estrogen, tracked over time.** Berzin was unequivocal: Test, test, test. "We've had this message out there, you don't need to test your hormones, just look at symptoms. Well, that doesn't make any sense," she says. Estrogen is "one of our top longevity drugs," she says, and understanding a woman's estrogen curve, not just symptoms, is critical to protecting brain, bone, and heart health. This is a wholesale reframe: women's longevity as its own science, not a subset of men's.

## 2. The Over-Optimization Era Is Collapsing

For years, wellness equated progress with more data, tighter control, and higher standards. The second trend in the report, titled "*The Over-Optimization Backlash,*" names why that framework is starting to collapse. As trends researcher Jessica Smith

explained, “We can measure health more precisely than ever, and yet it’s never felt so psychologically demanding.” Health, she noted, has shifted from something we sense to “something we perform correctly.” What began as empowerment has slid into self-surveillance.

The human cost is no longer theoretical. Smith cited a 2024 study showing that 61 percent of people feel pressure to appear well, while 45 percent report wellbeing burnout, which is exhaustion driven not by illness, but by the expectation to continually optimize routines and behavior. Research shows sleep wearables can actually undermine intuition, with users experiencing anxiety after low scores even when they initially felt rested, a phenomenon now clinically recognized as **orthosomnia**.

The backlash is against pressure without payoff. As Smith put it: “Optimization can look perfect, but still feel hollow.” The fastest-growing wellness spaces now prioritize presence, connection, and nervous system safety over constant measurement. The takeaway: longevity is about learning to work with our bodies as best we can.

## 3. The Nervous System Is the New Wellness Frontier

One system modern life most consistently overwhelms is our nervous system. The third trend in the report, titled “*The Rise of Neurowellness*,” positions neuro-wellness as a turning point because it targets regulation at the level that governs sleep, digestion, immunity, hormones, and recovery. As trend author Heidi Moon explained, neuro-wellness is “not about mental health or brain health. It’s about whole-body health through the regulation of the nervous system”

What’s changed is visibility. “Wearables have made stress visible to everyone,” Moon said. When people see measurable signs of strain, like low heart-rate variability,

fragmented sleep, poor recovery scores, they're more likely to seek interventions that improve regulation rather than push harder. But visibility isn't a solution. That's why sleep has become, in her words, "the gateway drug to neurowellness," and why the fastest growth is happening in both "hard-care" tools (FDA-approved vagus nerve stimulators, EEG sleep devices) and "soft-care" approaches (breathwork, somatic practices) being reframed as nervous system medicine with measurable effects.

## 4. Fragrance Is Entering the Longevity Conversation

In a wellness culture long dominated by metrics, fragrance is reasserting the value of what can't be quantified. The fourth trend in the report, titled "*Fragrance Layering*," describes fragrance as "re-emerging as a deeply personal and cultural language," rooted in identity, memory, and emotional expression rather than performance. At the event, trend author Olivia Houghton framed fragrance layering as an act of agency in an increasingly algorithmic world: a way to curate how you feel over how you present yourself.

Layering allows scent to shift with context, mood, and environment throughout the day, much like clothing. The report links its rise to a desire for self-authored identity in a world both fractured and homogenized by algorithms. Fragrance offers something powerful: a sensory input that shapes experience without demanding optimization. The future welcomes creative expression through combination.

## 5. Disaster Readiness Is the New Preventative Care

"Wellness" has always evolved to meet the anxieties of the moment: fitness culture addressing disease prevention in the '80s, mindfulness countering burnout in the 2000s. The fifth trend in the report, titled "*Ready Is the New Well*," authors Cecilia Gere and Skylar Hubler explained, the next decade will be defined by "everyday resilience, where having a disaster plan becomes just as essential as having a workout

plan.” Climate disasters are now part of our new normal, and even people who haven’t experienced one firsthand live with the fear that it could happen next.

The response spans physical readiness (homes shifting to climate-adaptive design) and community interdependence (grassroots groups training neighbors in evacuation), to mental resilience (addressing climate anxiety in the mental health space). The goal isn’t prepper panic, it’s realism through proactive, accessible solutions.

Taking a moment here to remind us all that readiness isn’t just about responding to what’s already here, it’s about reducing what’s coming. The same mindset that builds personal resilience (small, consistent actions; community over individualism; long-term thinking) is exactly what climate mitigation demands. Supporting clean energy policy, rethinking consumption patterns, and investing in regenerative systems aren’t separate from wellness, they’re an extension of it. Taking care of the future is taking care of yourself.

## 6. Skin Longevity Is Replacing Age Erasure

“At first, as a bit of a jaded beauty journalist, I thought skin longevity was three beauty marketing terms in a trench coat,” trend author Claire McCormack admitted at the event. “In researching this trend, speaking to scientists, doctors, entrepreneurs, I bought in.” The difference: anti-aging says “this is happening on my face, I do not like it, please fix it.” Skin longevity says: Skin is the largest organ, how do I keep it healthy longer? The sixth trend in the report, titled “*Skin Longevity Redefines Beauty*,” says that skin longevity asks how to change the mechanisms of aging at the cellular level, making skin function in a more sustainable way.

L’Oréal researcher Patrick Holmberg grounded the shift in biology: “Skin is our largest organ, our first line of defense, and the mirror of what’s going on inside. It’s a

biomarker of healthspan.” The company has 15 years of research and 40 scientific publications on skin longevity. Their Cell BioPrint diagnostic takes five minutes to assess how an individual’s skin will age. Holmberg’s prediction: “You go into Quest Diagnostics and get a blood panel for skin longevity so you can get an ultra ultra personalized skincare routine.”

## 7. Why Joy Is Being Reclassified as Health

“For a long time, wellness was assumed to be black and white, something solitary, disciplined, often restrictive. Today it’s being rewritten in full color,” author Megan Whitby said at the event. Grief raves. Scream clubs. Sober morning dance parties. These aren’t fringe phenomena, they’re a global response to economic stress, social fragmentation, and digital overload. Strong social bonds are among the strongest predictors of longevity, while loneliness is now recognized as a global health crisis.

These gatherings prioritize connection over perfection, participation over performance, according to the seventh trend in the report, titled “*The Festivalization of Wellness*.” The key insight: joy that isn’t fleeting. It’s “sustainable joy, pleasure without the hangover, connection without the comedown.” For example, research shows group singing synchronizes heart rates and dance can be more effective against depression than CBT or common antidepressants. Singing and dancing aren’t “clubbing activities tied to youth, indulgence, and alcohol.” They are expressions of our shared humanity. Joy isn’t indulgence. It’s a stabilizing force.

## 8. Women’s Sports Are Rewriting Women’s Fitness

Women’s sports are reshaping how women relate to fitness, aging, and power. According to data cited in the eighth trend in the report, titled “*Women & Sports: The Revolution Continues*,” women’s sports generated $1.88 billion globally in 2024 and are projected to reach $2.35 billion in 2025, signaling a durable cultural shift. As trend

author Amy Shoenthal put it, “It’s really about shifting from smaller to stronger.”

Fitness is moving away from solitary, aestheticized gym routines toward empowering, social, and competitive sport, changing not just how women train, but how they relate to strength itself. Strength is being reframed as independence insurance, something that supports mobility, resilience, and participation across decades. Muscle and bone are no longer about how women look. They’re about what women can do, and how long they can keep doing it.

## 9. Microplastics Are a Threat to Healthspan

Microplastics have crossed a threshold from environmental issue to human health threat, according to the ninth trend, titled “*Tackling Microplastics as a Human Health Issue*.” At the event, Dr. Gerry Bodica underscored why: microplastics have been detected throughout the human body, including the brain, heart, lungs, and reproductive systems, and can cross the blood-brain barrier. He described it as “*a species-wide threat to longevity and health span.*”

The report makes clear, “the microplastics threat is not theoretical.” What distinguishes this moment from past wellness detox trends is scale. Microplastics exposure is systemic, embedded in food, air, water, textiles, and buildings. The report points toward a shift from symbolic cleansing to structural response: exposure reduction, material innovation, and cautious medical research. Longevity, in this framing, becomes less about personal purity and more about collective prevention.

## 10. Your Home May Matter More Than Your Supplements

Longevity is leaving clinics and retreats and entering daily life. As the tenth trend titled “*Longevity Residences*” makes clear, lasting health gains don’t come from one-off interventions but from environments that support people consistently over time.

Trend author Jane Kitchen put it plainly: “Ultimately, where we live shapes how we sleep, how we move, how we eat, how we connect, and how we age.”

A healthy home needs light, clean air, clean climate control, walkable neighborhoods… The new trend of “longevity residences” integrates preventive medicine, diagnostics, circadian lighting, clean air and water, and ongoing care directly into homes and communities. Kitchen emphasized that real change doesn’t happen “on vacation.” It happens “on a Tuesday, in your kitchen, in your bedroom, in the place that you live.” By reducing friction, these spaces turn healthy behavior into infrastructure, making the home itself a powerful tool for extending healthspan.

# A Smarter Definition of Wellness

Wellness allows you to regulate, recover, and experience joy over time. And it’s a collective responsibility that we can all share.

Modern wellness recognizes that:

- **Regulation matters** because health emerges when the nervous system can shift between effort and recovery, not when it is held in permanent “on” mode.
- **Environments shape biology** and our homes, communities, workplaces, and social structures determine how we sleep, move, eat, connect, and age.
- **Capacity,** strength, mobility, metabolic health, and cognitive resilience are for agency, not aesthetics.
- **Joy and connection are biological needs** because social belonging, pleasure, and emotional expression stabilize physiology.
- **Health is relational, not isolated** because our bodies do not operate independently of culture, stress, climate, systems, or care access.

- **Longevity is lived daily** because real gains happen in ordinary life, “on Tuesdays, in kitchens,” in bedrooms, neighborhoods, and routines that reduce friction rather than demand heroics.

Across all ten trends, the through-line is unmistakable. Modern wellness rejects a decade of advice that equated effort with outcome. Longevity is no longer about optimizing the self. It’s about building lives, systems, and spaces that make being well possible.

The trends report this year encourages us to stop fighting an invisible clock and start designing lives we can actually sustain and enjoy over time.

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