



Opinion

Kathy Donaghy: There's more to life than living as long as possible

I can't help but think that the obsession with longevity sucks all the joy out of life



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Bryan Johnson, subject of Netflix documentary Don't Die: The Man Who Wants to Live Forever, with his son Talmage

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We all know it's good to take care of ourselves, but if life becomes one endless self-improvement project, then where's the joy?

Picture the scene. It's 7am and Biohack Barbie has been up since 5am, meditating and "touching grass" before a blast in the infrared sauna, followed by a dip in the plunge pool.

She has swallowed 50 supplements (washed down with toxin-free coffee), done her high-intensity interval training session and showered. After breakfast of an egg-white omelette, she decides to save a jaunt to the hyperbaric chamber to support her immune system for later.

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This is just the start of a never-ending schedule of procedures, therapies and principles designed to ensure she lives the healthiest, longest life possible.

I found myself reading about the schedule of one female biohacker as I sat in the hair salon doing my own version of self-improvement, and felt a wave of acute fatigue come over me.

More and more celebrities are sharing their exhausting morning routines, too, the goal of which also seems to be a longer, healthier life.

I'm not dissing it as a goal, but I can't help but think that the obsession with longevity – which biohacking has at its core – sucks all the joy out of life.

The lifestyles of the super-rich and famous are filtering down into the lives of mere mortals who buy into the belief that the elixir of youth and longevity comes in tablet and liquid form or in trying to keep up with bizarre routines.

In reading about these biohackers, I'm left with the distinct impression that there's a very fine line between self-improvement and utter self-absorption.

There's even a term to describe this anxiety-driven, compulsive obsession with living as long as possible.

“Longevity fixation syndrome” was coined by Jan Gerber, the founder and CEO of luxury Swiss health clinic Paracelsus Recovery, who reported a significant increase in patients driven to monitor and control every aspect of their waking life.

Hot on the heels of looksmaxxing – the practice whereby mostly young men strive to achieve what they consider the perfect face or body – comes healthmaxxing, or pushing health trends to the max to benefit your sleep, diet and wellbeing.

Dive into this world and you'll soon discover Bryan Johnson, the poster boy for biohacking and the subject of Netflix documentary *Don't Die: The Man Who Wants to Live Forever*.

But lift the lid on this obsession with living forever and it all gets plain creepy. There are devotees of cryonics who believe technology will conquer not just disease and ageing but death itself, and so they commit to having their bodies frozen when they die, confident in the knowledge they will be reanimated in the future.

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Brendan Kelly

Professor of psychiatry at Trinity College, Dublin

Like all things in life, balance seems to be the key ingredient here, but there's also a clue in the word “self” in self-care. Each of us knows what's innately good for us. It might be a blast of a night out with friends to blow away the cobwebs or a weekend spent doing nothing but watching our favourite old movies while eating ice cream alone.

There is, to my mind, the sense that a factory-line model of healing and preserving with various types of snake oils somehow misses the point that each of us is an individual.

Brendan Kelly, professor of psychiatry at Trinity College, Dublin, says many aspects of so-called biohacking are sensible enough. Exercising regularly, sleeping well, eating a balanced diet, reducing alcohol, managing stress and maintaining social connections are all associated with better health and longer life.

“The psychological question is, what happens when health itself becomes a full-time occupation?” he says. “Increasingly, we see people tracking every aspect of their lives: sleep scores, heart rates, step counts, glucose levels, recovery metrics, supplements and elaborate morning routines.

“While these practices can be motivating for some, there is also a risk that life becomes an endless improvement project rather than something to be experienced and enjoyed.”

Life, he points out, is not a self-improvement project, and it has long been recognised that people can become preoccupied with control.

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“There is a paradox here,” says Prof Kelly. “If we become so focused on extending life that we spend all our time monitoring it, we may lose sight of the reasons we wanted a longer life in the first place. A long life is valuable because it contains relationships, experiences, pleasures, purpose and meaning. These are not things that can be measured on an app.”

Try as they might, the biohackers cannot mitigate the fact that life is a game of chance. How many of us have learned that the best laid plans can fall apart in a heartbeat?

If there's a finishing line in this life, I don't want to walk across it gracefully. I want to dance over it with pure joy after being up all night.

"Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?" asked the poet Mary Oliver. That question reverberates in my head regularly.

If we fill our lives with the people we love, make time to smell the roses and do the things that genuinely fill us up and make our hearts beat faster, surely that is more life-affirming and health-optimising than an endless series of tasks to perform and routines to follow.

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