

WHOLE BODY UPGRADE

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A Centered Wellness Approach to
Restoring Your Health and Vitality



By
Rebecca Shisler Marshall, PhD

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“A helpful and timely book for anyone who has struggled with wellness and hasn’t received support from the traditional medical community...Rebecca compassionately inspires us to look at wellness differently by combining ancient and modern techniques to support and empower women in the journey of wellness. “

Sarah Bamford Seidelmann MD, author of “Swimming with Elephants: My Unexpected Pilgrimage from Physician to Healer”

How many of us have struggled while trying to get to the root of physical or emotional situations, only to feel the solution is incomplete? Rebecca Shisler Marshall’s framework of five wellness bodies finally fills in the gaps, and offers us practices that we can sustain in real life. Rebecca has lived them.

Amy Hallberg, Author of Tiny Altars: A Midlife Revival, Founder of Courageous Wordsmith, amyhallberg.com

Disclaimer

This book details my personal experiences with and opinions about wellness, health, and vitality. Please note that I don't make any guarantees about the results of the information applied from Whole Body Upgrade. I share educational and informational resources that are intended to help you succeed in your wellness. This should not be construed as medical advice, as I am not a physician, nor a nutritionist. Ultimately, you need to know that your ultimate success or failure will be the result of your own efforts, your particular situation, and innumerable other circumstances beyond my knowledge and control.

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Section I

Getting Started

Chapter 1

**It's not your fault
(it's not you, it's them)**



“It sucks getting old, doesn’t it?” she said. The table erupted in laughter while simultaneously lifting their wine glasses in a toast of commiseration. The women were bemoaning the fact they couldn’t sleep and that they didn’t feel well. They complained about how worry, even over tiny things, would keep them up at night—that the mind would keep coming up with items for the to-do list, or they’d wake up in the middle of the night with a long list of problems. Every woman at the table, without exception, felt the same way. As I sat there watching the scene, it struck me as to how common this is. I totally understood what they were saying, because these things had been problems for me most of my life. The interesting part of this scene was that the women there just accepted these trials as part of being an aging woman. Many of them didn’t feel well, they were unsatisfied with their health, and (quite frankly) with their lives. The underlying message was, “It sucks getting older,

this is the way it is, and we might as well just get used to it,” while compensating with alcohol as a sleep and stress aid, and coffee to counteract the morning sleepiness. This is true of other aspects of being a woman, as well: premenstrual syndrome, hot flashes, emotional waves, slower recovery from exercise. It’s all part of a common message that women receive: This is just part of the crappy hand we’ve been dealt as women and there is nothing we can do about it.

It’s not just my friends who believe it, it’s reinforced in the medical field, as well. When I went to my doctor complaining of weight gain despite my clean diet and regular exercise routine, she and her nurse were mostly dismissive. “Yep,” she said, “that’s getting old!” Women are given this message over and over again, from doctors, family, and the media.

It isn’t just women in their 40s—clients that come to me of various ages, including 20-something students I teach at the university, all complaining of not having enough energy and feeling depleted and lethargic. They don’t feel well, and then blame it on the circumstance. It could be the job, friends, romantic relationships, money, school...the list goes on and on. Many of my clients say when they feel stressed, they have a glass of wine (or three!) at night, and when they wake up exhausted in the morning, jumpstart the day with caffeine (usually some fancy drink from a coffee shop, often loaded with sugar). It’s become part of the culture. Wine is “mommy’s medicine,” and coffee is how things get done.

Many of my clients come to me because they don’t feel well, and they’ve seen multiple doctors who can’t quite put a finger on why they don’t have energy and have developed one

or more of these now-ubiquitous chronic health problems, such as polycystic ovarian syndrome, autoimmune disorders, and migraines; such was the case with Ashley. When we started working together, she was constantly falling asleep after eating and couldn't seem to stay focused. As you can imagine, these symptoms were affecting her work and family life, as she had teenagers at home and she owned her own business. She felt that there was something wrong with her, and her self-confidence dwindled, as did her motivation to get her work out into the world.

Another example is Brittany, who was struggling with chronic elbow pain and had been to doctor after doctor, hoping for an answer. She was tired all the time, had difficulty finding time for self-care activities, and was in the habit of grabbing whatever food was readily available as she rushed out the door to work. She also had a child who needed a lot of academic support, and working and taking care of her family depleted her of her precious little remaining energy. After trying a variety of therapies and drugs, the doctor told her the next step was surgery to help with her chronic elbow pain, which in her mind, was the last resort.

Stephanie was completely drained from working full-time in a high-pressure job while completing a master's degree. Her stress levels were already high when she started her PhD program, then the fatigue and migraines appeared, as did a new diagnosis of schizophrenia. She tried many different approaches, but wound up even more exhausted and depleted, without a clue as to what her next step should be.

Hilary was depressed and exhausted. She didn't have the energy to keep up with her two kids or clean her house, let alone figure out what her purpose in life was. Working part-time took all of her energy before she picked up her children from school. She'd tried starting her own business and writing a book, but with so much of her energy expended on her family, she had little left to do anything else. After trying several times, she finally gave up her business, along with her writing dreams.

Do these women sound familiar? Perhaps they remind you of your family, friends, or even yourself. These examples are not isolated cases, they are common. It seems like every time a new client comes to me, her story follows the same pattern. It's become a cultural phenomenon. Stress and fatigue seem like simple enough problems, yet they have a huge detrimental influence on so many women. This silent epidemic not only impacts women's quality of life, it's also taking a toll on American productivity.

Overall, health is on the decline in our culture, with a focus on fixing the disease processes instead of preventing the problems in the first place. There are more people diagnosed with autoimmune disorders, there is an epidemic of diabetes (Zimmet, 2017) and obesity, and in the past two years, our life expectancy has decreased (Kochanek, Murphy, Xu, and Arias, 2017). These preventable health challenges have become so common that we now think of them as normal and even inevitable, instead of seeing them as warning signs. This is also true of female-specific disorders such as endometriosis, polycystic ovarian syndrome, and Hashimoto's, yet we rarely question why there has been such a dramatic rise in incidences

of these health issues. Further, mental health issues now dominate our society, with college campuses noting the sharp increase in college students who seek help because they don't have the skills to deal with life stressors. These issues are part of a bigger problem: a habit of treating sickness instead of promoting wellness.

This rise in disease and other health challenges is one that is partially driven by the current western medical system. The medical system sends a message, loud and clear, that there is something wrong with women; we are broken and there is nothing we can do about it. We can change neither being women nor the fact that we're aging, so we're given a pill to keep us quiet. Feeling sad? Here's an antidepressant. Does the antidepressant keep you up all night? Here's a sleeping pill. The cycle is brutal, and it is accepted without question. The system tells us there is something wrong with what we are feeling, but it does not identify the root cause of the problem.

The roots of this problem lie not only in the medical system, but culturally in our social system, as well. The United States is a fast food nation, always looking for the quick and easy way, rarely thinking about long-term implications. Our society is engineered to make us look for that one magic solution that will fix everything, usually popping a pill. We are looking for one thing to "fix us" because of an underlying assumption that there is something wrong with us. The system sets up the fallacy that there is one answer, one program, one modality to solve our problems. We go to a therapist or to counseling to help us address our mental problems, or to the doctor to fix our physical problems. What is missing in the medical system is a holistic

approach fueled by an underlying belief that every aspect of who we are is connected. We are not composed of separate systems that have no influence on one another. The grief of losing your father six months ago isn't taken into account when you visit the cardiologist. The stress that you're under financially isn't factored into your physician's visit. Many health care practitioners don't ask about other aspects of our lives, or if they do, there isn't an answer as to how to integrate that information into treatment. One advance in society is around physical exercise, with many scientific studies supporting movement for physical and mental health. Many physicians accept and promote that movement is good for the body and have a basic understanding about the value of exercise and proper nutrition. However, typically these doctors aren't taught the details of proper nutrition in medical training, or if they are, they are not taught the depth and level of knowledge needed to truly understand the influence of nutrition on physical, mental, and emotional health and apply it to treatment. Our medical system simply isn't adequate to meeting the needs that we currently have for health and wellness.

As a speech-language pathologist for more than 20 years, I've been involved in some form of the medical system since graduate school. The system focuses on one part of the person (in speech pathology, on speech, language, cognition, or swallowing) or the physician has an area of specialization (cardiology, neurology, urology, etc). While there are benefits from specializing in one particular area, what is lost is a holistic perspective. During training, medical and health professionals haven't been given information about how the other parts of the physical system impact health and disease processes. For

example, nutrition isn't something that is taught to speech-language pathologists—how it might influence the body, our ability to remember, and even our emotions. The same is true in other medical professions. The training is intense and specific, and doesn't include a broader picture of health and wellness. The medical system is geared towards “fixing” problems with pharmaceuticals or therapy. In some cases, this happens unintentionally, with well-meaning doctors who may just not have the training or the education to know otherwise. However, some of this inability to support health in the system is by design. Pharmaceutical companies, for one, profit from the illness model, and have representatives who provide free drug samples and a variety of incentives to doctors to promote their products. The doctor is then more likely to prescribe the medications or give the samples to their clients. The pharmaceutical company does not profit from preventative health and wellness. Whether intentionally or unintentionally, the result is that we as a society become disempowered and disconnected from opportunities to truly support our health and wellness.

While the medical system isn't geared toward supporting health, neither is our industrialized food system. Many big corporations and companies create food that barely qualifies as such, so-called “food-like substances,” as Michael Pollan (*In Defence of Food*, 2009) calls them. Being disconnected from our food disempowers us further. Industrialized food production focuses on what tastes good so the consumer will purchase more. This leads to an overreliance on fat and sugar, which are present in heavy doses in the majority of processed food. Just as there are intentional challenges in the medical

field, the same is true in food production. Many companies purposefully provide misleading labeling, hype biased nutrition studies funded by the organizations seeking to push their products, and fund political lobbying for government programs to actually push unhealthy foods on us, all based on profit. This makes it difficult as consumers struggle to know what to believe and what not to believe. It's hard to know what to do when you're being misled, especially when it's on purpose. Companies also project messages such as "treat yourself" (or some variation of give yourself a reward), which plays on the self-care movement that is currently en vogue. The message is clear: You have a tough life, it's been a hard day, and you deserve something good like an overindulgent dessert, a super-sweet coffee, or high-fat meal. Don't get me wrong, I'm all about nourishing yourself; it's the conflation of self-care with unhealthy indulgence that makes this a problem. What many people don't realize is that eating something that tastes good, but isn't good for you, at best is not actually self-care (and at worst is a form of self-harm) and only serves the company that produces the food, as well as the disease model of healthcare.

Let's look at sports drinks as an example of how well-intentioned consumers are led to make unhealthy choices. A new drink is developed to help with hydration. It looks cool and blue. A celebrity athlete appears in the commercials and consumes the beverage at his/her own games. But the drink contains artificial food dyes, along with three times the daily allowance of sugar. Still, kids and adults alike see the marketing and want and desire to be like everyone else. Lacking education about nutrition (and with plenty of ways to manipulate food labeling so we don't know what we're consuming), they choose

to drink the blue drink full of chemicals. It's hip! It's fun! And it's "necessary" for proper hydration. The large dose of sugar spikes the consumer's insulin and ultimately changes the taste receptors in their mouths, decreases production of critical brain chemical BDNF (Brain Derived Neurotrophic Factor), causing problems with memory and insulin resistance, and increases inflammation, leading to further damage to the body. Often, I see young children—6-, 7-, 8-year-old kids—on athletic teams whose parents are buying these hydration drinks (often two to three per week, and for some children, it's an everyday occurrence), while telling their kids to drink them so they don't get dehydrated. The companies that manufacture the drinks don't actually care about your health or the health of your children; profit is what they care about. Meanwhile, obesity and diabetes are epidemic in the US and we scratch our heads as to why.

Unfortunately, that's what corporate choices usually boil down to: money. You've probably never seen an ad for kale because there's no such thing as "Big Kale." No one's (yet) reached billionaire status from running a sustainable organic farm. Taking something inexpensive like sugar and making food that tastes good, that has a highly addictive quality, but has little nutritional value, does make money. Plus, it's easy—grab it and go—and our culture loves easy.

An overarching issue and one of the most significant impacts of our reliance on fast, processed food is systemic or chronic *inflammation*, which is essentially the body's way of activating the immune system to fight off something that is causing it harm. We see acute inflammation after a cut or

twisted ankle—the redness and swelling that occurs is an obvious way to observe the immune system healing an injury. Inflammation can be localized (only your ankle becomes red and swollen, not your whole body) or systemic. Chronic inflammation is a cellular reaction to injury that continues far past the acute state. This is the type of inflammation that results from eating foods such as sugar, meat, dairy, and wheat. The system is continually inundated with food that causes free radicals, which are unstable atoms that damage the cells and can cause premature aging and disease processes. If you light a fire and keep throwing sticks on it, the fire won't go out, it will grow. The more fuel you add, the higher the fire goes. Eating inflammatory foods is like adding fuel to the fire. The constant intake of such foods leads to whole-body inflammation, which in turn leads to a variety of health challenges. In fact, systemic inflammation is believed to be at the root of common health conditions (Kotas and Medzhitov, 2015) including type 2 diabetes, depression, chronic pain, arthritis, auto-immune disorders, heart disease, and cognitive decline (including dementia). Many of these health challenges lead individuals back to the western medical system, where again, due to a lack of understanding of the power of food on health and wellness, the problem spirals.

Food isn't the only way that inflammation occurs in the body. Stressors such as societal expectations contribute to this pre-disease state. Culturally, we're taught to work hard, never give up, push and strive, and "Just do it." While there's nothing inherently bad about achievement, our society values productivity over health. This constant orientation towards producing, coupled with sleep deprivation, creates a chronic

state of stress. While a small amount of stress (the fight-or-flight reaction of the sympathetic nervous system) is helpful, a constant state of stress is not. When the fight-or-flight state becomes the norm, fueled by sugar and caffeine, the brain and the body become accustomed to this constant surge of stress hormones, including cortisol. As more cortisol is released, a cascade of events impacts the body. More insulin is released, fat is stored around the midsection, and high amounts of adrenaline are released. Instead of running from tigers and then recovering as we did in previous eras, we walk around worried about the job, the kids, friends, family, politics, or even the color of our couch. The body slips into a state of chronic stress, depleting resources, decreasing immunity, and building fat reserves.

Our medical, food, and social structures are heavily invested in staying exactly the way they are, and the concepts they engender are deeply ingrained in most people in our culture. I'm frequently angered by how these systems work against the basic premise of health. While yes, it's horrendous that these systems are not structured to support health, wellness, and wellbeing, it's important not to get stuck here, becoming despondent because the problem feels too overwhelming to try to change it—the system or our relationship to it. It's easy to fall into a victim mentality, believing that nothing can be done and that we just have to deal with what is currently available. That's where my work and this book come in—to show you that health problems and an accompanying array of prescriptions are not inevitable. That you don't have to be a victim. The good and the bad news here are basically the same: It's up to you. You have both the challenge and the opportunity to empower

yourself and make different choices; to start seeing the world with a new perspective. You can become your own authority. And while the idea of becoming that inner authority can seem overwhelming, what comes with it is the reclaiming of a great deal of power that most of us have either lost or never felt we had. You don't have to wait for the system to change; you can change. You don't have to ask for your power back; you can take it.

There is a potential for change, right here, right now, through small sustainable steps you can take in your own life. Often, overwhelm blocks us from making the change we want to make in our lives. Clients come to me thinking they are going to go from not exercising at all to exercising 60 minutes a day, five days a week. That's a huge jump; so big that typically it leads to them not exercising at all. That's why, year after year, people drop their new year's resolutions within the first few weeks. Real, sustainable change occurs as a series of small steps, over time, that together add up to big changes.

Many clients come to me thinking that the problem is with their willpower or "making themselves" eat better, meditate, or move their body. That also isn't the case. Willpower alone won't get you there. Anytime you try to force yourself to do anything, you're either going to feel overwhelmed or resistant, neither of which is helpful. Creating and maintaining a gentle focus on your core desires (such as having energy to play with your children, or feeling alive and exhilarated when you get out of bed in the morning) are the main drivers of change, and will serve you long after your willpower runs out. This is what loving, compassionate, sustainable health looks like.

Most of us at some point struggle with worthiness. Am I worth the effort? Let's answer that right now: YES. Taking care of yourself is worth your time and attention. Feeling better is worth your time and attention. *You* are worth your time and attention. Imagine waking up and being excited about the day ahead, or coming home after work and wanting to play a game with your children, or easily preparing a healthy meal (and knowing what's actually healthy). The women I mentioned before all took the time and attention to make change. They each experienced moments of overwhelm, but that didn't stop them because they'd done the powerful work of shifting their mindset, and once that happened, things began to feel easier and new possibilities began to unfold before them. *Change is possible*. And it's probably more simple than you think.

Research by Dr. Dean Ornish and colleagues showed that the more steps you take toward health, the more likely you're to see results. In other words, the amount of action you take is reflected in your results. As I mentioned previously, this is not about willpower or "powering through" to get to a finish line. Please leave that notion at your high-powered corporate job along with your hot pink power suit. This is about commitment to what you want and who you want to be, while learning gentle, firm, self-compassionate discipline. It's about loving yourself. For me, it was about knowing that I wanted to feel better, and that meant doing something that felt like swimming upstream. It was looking at my health in a way that wasn't modeled for me by my family or society. It was shifting the perspective from looking outward for answers to focusing on personal accountability. It was learning to trust myself. The fact that traditional medical physicians typically have limited training in

nutrition and the benefits of physical and emotional wellness is an opportunity—it invites you to step into the role of being your own advocate, which is the most powerful role you can serve for yourself.

This can be challenging work. Changing what you think or have been taught to believe by those around you and by yourself involves confronting deep conditioning:

Doctors have all the answers.

Getting old is hard.

Life is about getting old, sick, and dying.

Often these beliefs are passed down from generation to generation without questioning whether they are true. Even when evidence is presented against these beliefs, we tend to hold on to them (sometimes even more firmly). Confronting these core beliefs can cause great upheaval and change, within and around you, on every level—*mental, energetic, emotional, physical, and spiritual*. We get accustomed to a certain set point, and when offered the possibility to change, resistance naturally occurs. The inner rebel arises (Don't tell me what to eat!), or the inner child (It's too hard!). When these show up, it takes steady courage (and often a coach or buddy) to help move you through the rough spots.

My experience is that many people know they need to change, but just haven't reached the point where they are *ready* to change. This is not just something where you can make a few quick fixes and big things will shift. (I know, it's a bummer). This is a life-changing transformation, so you have to be ready for your life to change.

I'll say it again: **You have to be ready.** You have to be ready to do the work and be frustrated, and yes even wonder if this is the right path for you. Perhaps you're thinking, "I have the book in my hands, I must be ready, right?" Think of this as your first assignment—an opportunity to check in with yourself and listen to that quiet inner wisdom.

Clients come to me wanting help, wanting to feel better, and hoping for some piece that will provide relief. They know there is something not quite right, and that there is a different way to be in the world. And yet, those same people who come to me hoping to feel better, who are desperate for change, still may not be truly ready to take the steps to change their lives. For some, it is resistance to the transformation of becoming someone new, or the potential of letting go of old patterns and beliefs. You have to be ready to show up fully for yourself and whatever you may learn about yourself and the world around you.

"Showing up" can look lots of different ways. Some people start with cutting back to one cup of coffee. Others clean out the food pantry completely and never look back. Neither is better. Being ready looks different for different people. The next "right" step is the sustainable one. It's about checking in with yourself and asking if you're ready to focus on yourself. Take a moment now to pause and listen to your inner voice. This is one of the key actions that allows my clients to shift—learning to listen to their inner wisdom.

Let's say you're ready. The steps you take may be relatively simple, but that doesn't mean they will be easy, so you must

commit. You've got to be willing to show up for yourself and step into a space that allows change to occur.

Before we go any further, I'd like you to go through these five questions and answer as honestly as you can:

-
1. Why do I want to change?
 2. Am I ready to be a different person?
 3. Am I ready to let go of old conditioning?
 4. Am I ready to step into the full expression of myself?
 5. Am I ready to change?
-

If the answer was NO to any of the above, that's totally fine. I've put down books and found them again when the time was right. If you have some hesitancy, then I suggest you pause here and come back another time. If your answers were YES, then congratulations! You're committing to YOU. Remember this moment. Remember your *why*.

As you embark on this new path of health, I want to make one last thing clear. If I were there with you, I'd take you squarely by the shoulders and look you in the eyes with all the love and compassion I have and say this: It's not your fault. Let me say that again. **It's not your fault.** As this chapter has outlined there are complex reasons behind all of the health challenges women are dealing with, and for 99% of them, it's not their fault. You read that right: It's them, not you. The perfect storm of healthcare, food industrialization, societal oppression, and more have led to this place. This book is for all of the women who have been told they have to keep living a life

of fatigue and dissatisfaction. It's for everyone who has gotten the message that there is something wrong with them and who has felt or been told that it's somehow their fault (even though it's also supposedly not something they can change).

When you know you're ready, you can finally step away from the story of fault and blame and start forward on the journey of true health. I'm on a mission to help you move into a place of wellness—to allow your life to get even better than you *ever imagined*. This book is to help you live the life you were meant to live; one of energy, vitality, and joy. Here's to a new way of being. Let's get started!