



GLOBAL WELLNESS
INSTITUTE™

IMMERSION INITIATIVE



THE WELLNESS IMMERSION

DEFINING THE EXPERIENCE AND DELIVERING IT WITH QUALITY

A White Paper aiming to ignite a discussion among wellness stakeholders, program designers, and industry specialists

Submitted by the GWI Immersion Initiative

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AN INVITATION

We invite the Global Wellness Institute members, delegates of the Global Wellness Summit, Wellness Immersion designers, and industry specialists to join us in this conversation as we work to adopt a consistent standard for the Wellness Immersion experience. We hope you will share your thoughts. We will continue to compile your responses, add them to an updated document, and use them to further refine our definition of this term, with the shared goal of offering a reliable and consistent experience to our service providers, participants, marketers, and the media. The aim is that we may foster a shared and accurate understanding of this valuable service and the experience it describes.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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1. THE IMMERSION INITIATIVE

1.1. MEMBERS AND DOCUMENT CONTRIBUTORS

Tracey Vincel, Chair

Co-Founder, KNOSIS Physiotherapy and Wellness, United States

Tracey Vincel is a physical therapist who has dedicated her 22 years of clinical practice to empowering clients to eliminate and prevent pain, integrating ancient and alternative mind/body healing techniques with modern orthopedic therapy and cutting-edge technology. She is passionate about raising our individual and collective wellbeing to build our planet's and humanity's harmonious future. Tracey is the chair of the Global Wellness Institute Immersion Initiative and works internationally to support the creation of transformative wellness immersive experiences. She is the founder of KNOSIS Physiotherapy and Wellness located at 7 West 22nd street in New York City.

Nicolas Ronco, Vice Chair

Founder and CEO, YeloSpa, United States

Until May 2019, Nicolas Ronco was the Founder and CEO of YeloSpa which opened its first location in New York City in 2007. He is currently working on a new wellness-based project that is projected to have a major impact in the industry. YeloSpa was the culmination of Nicolas' extensive travels and experience in his quest to learn how different cultures deal with stress, fatigue and exhaustion and ultimately heal the entire being.

Ulli Lagler Peck

Founder & Owner, The Wellness Agency®, United States

Ulli Lagler Peck is founder and owner of The Wellness Agency®, a business management and marketing agency that provides marketing and business development services for wellness entrepreneurs. Fueled by her passion for healthy, sustainable living and over 25 years international management and marketing experience, Ulli helps wellness entrepreneurs take their ventures to a next level by streamlining their operations, strengthening their online presence, and connecting with their customers through authentic, personal, and educational marketing.

Erin Risius, M.A., LPC

Founder, ENR Wellness Consulting, United States

Erin Risius has 25+ years in the health and wellness industry with seven of those years in executive leadership roles, creating and directing immersion wellness programs. She operates a wellness consulting company that provides virtual and in-person wellness counseling, health coaching, and wellness workshops for individuals and groups in the private, corporate, and community wellness sectors. Using evidence-based practices rooted in kinesiology, mindfulness training, and health psychology, Erin provides a holistic approach to individual consultation and wellness program development.

Debra Duneier

President, EcoChi LLC, United States

Debra Duneier is the President of EcoChi, an architectural interior design firm with a focus on wellness design. Debra is a Feng Shui Master, an accredited LEED® GA, a Certified Eco-Designer and a Graduate Gemologist. Debra's EcoChi® design system is a globally recognized wellness standard. Debra is Vice Chair of the Global Wellness Initiative for Sustainability.

Samantha Lippiatt

The Wellness Travel Expert, Australia

Samantha Lippiatt, co-founder of Australia's first dedicated wellness travel company Health and Fitness Travel and now The Wellness Travel Expert. With an unbridled enthusiasm for travel, health and wellbeing, Samantha's goal is to drive mainstream acceptance of wellness tourism, inspiring travelers globally, to prioritize self-care and preventative healthcare.

Carl Lemieux

Founder and Managing Partner, Mindsmatter, Canada

Carl Lemieux is an executive coach and senior management consultant with over 35 years of experience in strategy, cultural transformation, and leadership development. He helps leaders face ever increasing complex internal and external environments, leveraging psychological well-being, mindfulness, and consciousness as a foundation to healthy performance. Carl is a licensed Workplace Psychologists and psychotherapist. Carl also holds an Executive MBA and is a qualified mindfulness teacher (MBSR).

Jen Cronan Corley

Director of Development, Wellness, WeTravel, United States

Jen heads the Wellness Travel segment of WeTravel, a payment and registration platform for the travel industry. She is responsible for strategic development, including sales & marketing strategy, branding, community-building, and project management. She leads a team that creates and distributes educational content, manages strategic partnerships, interacts with the media, and organizes online and live events.

Dr Shilpa Sreenath

Founder, Flow Psychology, India

Dr Shilpa Sreenath is a Counselling Psychologist with 12 years of experience working in the field of mental health & wellbeing. She is the founder and Clinical Lead of Flow Psychology, a private, pay-by-use, consultation space which delivers psychotherapeutic and wellness mentoring sessions to clients across the world in a modern, non-clinical environment. Over the last 5 years, Shilpa has advocated for and delivered ethical, evidence-based psychological care to adults and adolescents by collaborating with educational institutions, corporate employment assistance services, psychiatric institutions, and fitness-focused companies. Shilpa's identity and professional stance as a Counselling Psychologist is underpinned by three decades of cross-cultural life experiences. This has shaped her understanding of and learning from diverse cultural, historical, socio-economic and religious contexts to the body-mind-soul connect and holistic living.

EDITORS

Constance Costas

Founder, Constance Costas Writing & Editing, United States

Constance Costas is a journalist and book editor who specializes in health, medicine, fitness, and wellness. Her articles have appeared in SELF, SurvivorNet.com, Harper's Bazaar, Fitness, Health, and more. She also collaborates with wellness experts to develop book projects that engage, inform, and inspire.

Dervla Louli

Founder, Compare Retreats, Hong Kong

Dervla Louli is the founder of Compare Retreats, the luxury wellness travel booking portal and online publication described by Forbes as “a bible of the best fitness and wellness retreats the world over.” Her work has been featured in Tatler, Vogue, Billionaire, The Times, and South China Morning Post, and she is a contributor to Vogue Hong Kong. In 2015, she was recognized as a Global Shaper by the World Economic Forum.

Tara Grodjesk

Founder, TARA Spa Therapy, VP Earthlite, Spa and Wellness – Visionary of the Year award winner

Tara Grodjesk has been in the spa and wellness space for over 30 years and helped to evolve the spa industry to be more wellness focused. As a spa industry innovator, Tara has worked with world class resorts designing spa facilities, treatment programs, products and guest experiences that inspire vital wellbeing. She is a certified Holistic Health Educator, Ayurvedic Practitioner, Massage Therapist and Aromatherapist. Tara has facilitated 18 annual women’s retreats for spa industry leaders and is currently facilitating “Grace in Uncertainty” leadership forums. Her retreat programs and guest experience workshops have been featured at Rancho La Puerta, Red Mountain Resort and Spa, and Canyon Ranch.

1.2. THE IMMERSION INITIATIVE: OBJECTIVES

- Propose an industry-standard definition for a Wellness Immersion and bring it mainstream.
- Clarify the best-practices and program elements that yield positive outcomes and lasting benefits.
- Highlight three categories of Wellness Immersions.
- Share stories to motivate and inspire positive transformation.
- Collect evidence to support funding by health insurers, policy makers, and employers.

2. INTRODUCTION

2.1 WHY WELLNESS IMMERSIONS? WHY NOW?

The global wellness economy is a 4.5 trillion-dollar industry and wellness tourism is one of the fastest-growing categories in this market.¹ It is undisputed that creating and sustaining a healthy lifestyle is key for the prevention and treatment of chronic diseases and for laying a foundation of well-being in all aspects of their lives. Each year more people are seeking wellness services that foster wellness lifestyle practices and the integration of their physical and psychological health. Heightened public awareness of the value of mental, emotional, and spiritual balance is creating a desire to address wellness on deeper levels. As a result, personal growth and transformational change are being sought by the mainstream population.

Emerging fields of science are showing us that learning new things and having new experiences can cultivate new neurocircuitry, neurochemistry, and even gene expression. New experiences can lead to new choices and shift behaviors that begin to change our biology.

At a time when the American Psychological Association reports that depression, loneliness, and anxiety may represent a greater public health hazard than obesity or smoking, many are turning to Wellness Immersions (to be defined in this paper) as an aid to their health conditions and support for living a more fulfilling life.

A recent study² observed multidimensional wellness measures after a week-long Wellness Immersion. The conclusion stated that “a one-week residential retreat experience can lead to substantial improvements in multiple dimensions of health and wellbeing, with many improvements being maintained at six weeks.”

While still in its infancy, the current research on Wellness Immersions is pointing toward the efficacy of improving present health conditions and preventing the increase of health issues long term. With this in mind, we, the members of the Wellness Immersion Initiative, have developed this reflection paper in order to define a Wellness Immersion and offer a reference point as we seek to explain and classify the term, and establish industry standards for both providers and participants.

¹ <https://globalwellnessinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Global-Wellness-Economy-Bubble-Chart-2019.pdf>

² <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5312624/>

2.2 WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Over the past decade, the term Wellness Immersion has proliferated in our field. Today, as its use becomes commonplace, we hear Wellness Immersion describing everything from day spas to ashrams. Ideally, the operators of these environments — which include integrated health resorts, medical spas, and wellness retreat centers — share a keen understanding of the necessary elements of a Wellness Immersion and strive to facilitate transformative change in their clients.

In the absence of a clear definition set forth by our industry, individual operators and new properties looking to implement a Wellness Immersion have nowhere to seek an industry-wide definition along with guidelines and inspiration. As the term enters the conversation among providers, clients, marketers, and the media, we find it necessary to protect the integrity of the Wellness Immersion experience for the benefit of our colleagues within the industry and, as importantly, the participants, patients, and clients we serve.

2.3 PROTECTING INTEGRITY

Without a clear definition the term Wellness Immersion could become diluted through casual use. Imagine a participant seeking an immersive experience only to arrive at a hotel or resort and discover a fitness center with the option to book an “immersive massage”? Our goal is to differentiate experiences such as:

- A vacation resort where spa amenities and cursory wellness services are available.
- An “anything-goes” spa experience, where the guest may choose to opt into healthy behaviors but does not receive specific, goal-oriented guidance, supervision, or education from the host-wellness venue.
- A mixed group with various goals, where the participants may be surrounded by vacationers who are not on-site for a wellness experience.

We are powerless to say what something is not, until we collectively agree on what, specifically, it is.

3. THE WELLNESS IMMERSION: A WORKING DEFINITION

We have developed the following working definition for Wellness Immersion:

What is it?

A Wellness Immersion is an experience designed to create space to reconnect to one's sense of mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual wholeness. The experience involves separation from routine life with the intention to invite a positive transformation.

What can it do?

It inspires a commitment to conscious growth and provides us with the tools and motivation needed to fully integrate this transformational experience into our lives and sustain its benefits into our everyday being.

4. SUPPORTING DEFINITIONS

4. 1 WELLNESS

The Global Wellness Institute (GWI) defines wellness as the active pursuit of activities, choices, and lifestyles that lead to a state of holistic health.

There are two important aspects to this definition. First, wellness is not a passive or static state, but rather an “active pursuit” associated with intentions, choices, and actions as we work toward an optimal state of wellbeing. Second, wellness is linked to holistic health — that is, it extends beyond physical health and incorporates multiple dimensions (see diagram below) that work in harmony.

Finally, wellness is an individual pursuit — we have self-responsibility for our own choices, behaviors, and lifestyles, readiness for change, and personal intentions for the Wellness Immersion experience — but it is also significantly influenced by our physical, social, and cultural environment.

Wellness is Multidimensional

Wellness is about more than just physical health. Most models of wellness include at least six dimensions.



Physical: Nourishing a healthy body through exercise, nutrition, sleep, etc.

Mental: Engaging the world through learning, problem-solving, creativity, etc.

Emotional: Being aware of, accepting and expressing our feelings, and understanding the feelings of others.

Spiritual: Searching for meaning and higher purpose in human existence.

Social: Connecting and engaging with others and our communities in meaningful ways.

Environmental: Fostering positive interrelationships between planetary health and human actions, choices, and wellbeing.

Wellness vs. Wellbeing: What’s the Difference?

The terms “wellness” and “wellbeing” are often used interchangeably. The GWI defines wellness as an active pursuit, the practice of healthy behaviors; while wellbeing is used to describe a positive state of being. This distinction is subtle but relevant: wellness is the action; wellbeing is the result of that action.

Wellness	Well-being & Happiness
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Multidimensional, dynamic, subjective, and personal• Subject to historical and cultural differences and contexts	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Relates to intention, action, activities.• Has a prominent physical dimension.• Consumers associate it with healthy lifestyles, choices, and market offerings.• Common usage in business/private industry context (e.g., wellness sector).• Useful concept for measuring industry size and discussing business opportunities (e.g., wellness economy).	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Perception of a state of being.• Has a prominent mental/emotional dimension.• Citizens associate it with feelings of satisfaction and sense of fulfillment.• Common usage in policy/government context (e.g., well-being budgeting).• Useful for measuring individual/citizen welfare (e.g., <i>Global Happiness Index</i>) and for organizing policies and interventions.

Source: Global Wellness Institute

4.2 IMMERSION

A thesaurus gives many synonyms for the word “immersion” including “involvement”, “engagement”, “absorption”, “preoccupation”, and even “obsession”.

An “immersion” provides the opportunity to focus exclusively on one topic — in this case wellness — removed from everyday responsibilities. This could also apply to learning a new language or absorbing an unfamiliar culture. In each case, it's about stepping outside of the familiar and focusing intently on learning and experiencing a new way of being.

EXPERT INSIGHT: How the term “immersion” entered the spa vocabulary

In the early 1990s, when ISPA and Spafinder were founded, the terminology that emerged to distinguish between places people visited for a spa experience (“destination spa”), versus places where health and wellness pursuits were part of a larger possibilities (“resort spa”).

“A destination spa is a total immersion spa experience. The term “immersion” helped people picture being submerged in health and wellness practices and being away from the temptations found in their home situation or at other resort settings. A key aspect of the destination spa was that everyone was there for the spa experience and that the food in particular was healthy food exclusively.

Using the term ‘destination spa’ got confusing when people in the travel world used the term ‘destination’ more broadly. For example, when referring to the topic of ‘destination weddings.’

Therefore, these days, it might be better to use the term ‘immersion’ to describe the opportunity to fully focus on one’s health and wellbeing and allow ‘immersion’ to also describe a focused program at a resort setting, or even a day spa experience.”

Susie Ellis — Chairman and CEO of the Global Wellness Institute, Co-Founder, Chair and CEO of the Global Wellness Summit

5. CHANNELS OF WELLNESS IMMERSIONS

5.1 PHYSICAL WELLNESS IMMERSIONS

It has been suggested that people attending retreats do so for many reasons, including indulgence, escape and relaxation, improved physical health and appearance, transcendence, and re-establishment of their self-esteem.³

We note that Wellness Immersions can fall into specific categories, such as:

- Medically Supervised Therapeutic Immersions
- Integrated Health and Wellness Immersions
- Dedicated Retreat Immersions

See Appendix A for description and examples.

5.2 VIRTUAL WELLNESS IMMERSIONS

The Covid-19 pandemic saw the rise in demand for virtual physical, spiritual, and emotional activities including wellness retreats. A number of wellness resorts used their social media platforms and websites to offer information, virtual classes, online consultations and live-streamed wellness classes to support new and existing clients. Chiva-Som offered complimentary wellness consultations with expert practitioners, Ananda in the Himalayas streamed live yoga classes from their property, and Six Senses launched a wellness information portal on their site. Escape Haven in Bali went one step further launching an online wellness VIP coaching retreat that included yoga flow, energizing workouts and nutritional sessions, with healthy recipe tutorials streamed live with downloadable worksheets. Participants also had access to wellness experts on topics such as mental health and stress management.

We believe that in the future virtual retreats will become an additional added value product that wellness resorts can provide to customers who cannot physically visit the resort, making wellness even more accessible at home.

³ <https://www.liebertpub.com/doi/full/10.1089/acm.2016.0268#B7>

6. KEY ELEMENTS OF A WELLNESS IMMERSION

To support our working definition, we have identified five key elements of a Wellness Immersion:

Intention

Where does the property and the guest find alignment in shared goals?

- Space and time to reconnect
- An active and intentional exploration of the multidimensional aspects of wellness
- Participant's desired outcomes

Setting

How does the setting create a safe space that enables the change process?

- Nurturing the space to nurture the spirit within
- Access to nature
- Bringing the outdoors, indoors
- Supportive and visually pleasing architectural design and surrounding
- Energetic, esoteric, historically and culturally informed, purposeful design
- Sustainable design and management practices

Program

What does a Wellness Immersion look like, from intake to departure?

- Wellness Immersion as a continuum
- Evidence-based research
- Personal guidance
- Brand and audience alignment
- Venue guidelines and policies
- Post immersion follow up

Connection

How does connection and a sense of community support the Wellness Immersion?

- Participants deepen their connection to Self and self-care
- Participants (or groups of participants) engage with staff members
- Participants build community among each other
- Participants may engage with the local community

Outcome

What are the benefits of a Wellness Immersion?

- Cultivating presence and awareness
- Improvement in knowledge of physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health practices
- Expansion of one's sense of self
- Improvement in health, objectively measured through biomarkers
- Sustainable behavior change

We explore each of the five key elements of a Wellness Immersion in greater detail on the following pages.

6.1 INTENTION

EXPERT INSIGHT: How to set intention

“The starting point for a Wellness Immersion is setting an intention such as: ‘I want to feel better’, ‘I am open to change’, or ‘I will take responsibility for my own wellbeing.’ Intentions set into motion a process for this change to occur. The moment we set the intention is the moment in which we stimulate our body and mind’s innate capacity to bring itself back into balance.

Whether it comes from pain and disease and/or from a longing to know oneself more deeply, setting the intention begins the journey of new experiences. New experiences can lead to new choices and behaviors that transform our bodies and minds.

A Wellness Immersion invites us to go beyond reading about wellness or listening as others tell us ‘how to be well’ and to experience the feeling of wholeness as our true nature. The beauty of the experience is that it transforms us so that we grow our original intention and keep going!”

Tracey Vincel — Founder of KNOSIS Physiotherapy & Wellness, Chair of the Immersion Initiative

Through immersion, participants go beyond the analytical and cognitive understanding of wellness to achieve their own state of embodied wellbeing. When participants find the joy in positive behavior change, the immersion can deliver a transformational experience.

This requires an intentional alignment between the participant and the host to design and participate in an experience that supports reconnection to one’s sense of mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual wholeness.

6.1.1 Space and Time to Reconnect

The negative psychological, social, and cultural impact of our technology and fast-paced lives is real. We are becoming more and more disconnected from ourselves, from others, and from our planet. A Wellness Immersion provides time away from our to-do lists, our smartphones, and the constant chatter of social media, advertisements, politics, and other stressors.

Participants pause in their “doing” and find the space and time to be still and witness their innermost being. Here, they reconnect their multidimensional selves and realize their wholeness. In the presence of nature, they listen to the ocean waves, feel the warmth of sunlight and cool breezes on their skin, smell the rainstorm that soaked the earth, and watch the sun rise and fall while reflecting on their lives.

The innermost being offers a field of infinite potential. As we create this space, we expand our consciousness and find alignment with the vibratory field of the open heart, which provides the space for us to unify all that we see, do, and feel. As participants gain access to their own infinite potential, they transcend the state of mere survival and may enter a higher state of creativity and inner peace.

6.1.2 Active and Intentional Exploration of the Multidimensional Aspect of Wellness

The Wellness Immersion is an active and intentional exploration of the multidimensional aspects of wellness: mind, emotions, body, and spirit. This begins even before the immersion experience with specific intention-setting and journaling. The participant is asked to reflect on what is working and not working in their lives. Which attitudes, habits, and thought patterns are creating their behavior? The host venue is a crucible for transformation, meeting the participants where they are, embracing their intention, and designing an experience that will facilitate growth and behavior change.

The Wellness Immersion is for those who are open to new possibilities and dedicated to evolving themselves. It is also for those who may have consistently made unhealthy choices and find themselves in a health crisis or stuck in survival mode and lacking creativity and a zest for life. Participants seeking a Wellness Immersion bring the intention for change. They want to learn new skills and experience a new way of being in the world. There is a sense of letting go of the old and bringing in new feelings of clarity of mind, emotional equanimity, vibrant body, and spiritual awakening. In order to change, we must always come to a new understanding of self and the world around us, so that we can embrace new knowledge and experiences. The immersion reveals that we don't have to settle for our present reality, we can create a new one, whenever we choose to.

6.1.3 Participant's Desired Outcomes

The participant and host can be oriented toward well-defined outcomes either through a very specific goal (such as lowering blood pressure, losing weight, or improving one's gut health), or a more broadly defined outcomes (such as expanding one's sense of self or optimizing one's wellbeing through learning mindfulness techniques.)

Even before the immersion begins, the intake program may include assessment of biomarkers, collaboration on realistic goal setting, and evaluating a program's focus to find alignment with one's purpose and intent.

“By exploring our inner landscape, we also explore the Universe. By healing ourselves, we help to heal the world.”

Dr. Barbara Ann Brennan — Human Energy Field Healer, Therapist, Scientist

6.2 SETTING

6.2.1 Nurturing the Space to Nurture the Spirit Within

Every space has a life of its own and impacts us as we go about our lives. Our actions, energy, and thoughts, as well as our physical and spiritual wellbeing are all profoundly influenced by our surroundings. The architecture, interior design, color palette, textures, patterns, light, furnishings, and placement of each item impact our senses from moment to moment and shape how we feel about ourselves and others. This heightened understanding of how our spaces affect us both consciously and unconsciously is a powerful tool if implemented authentically, and artfully, to enhance the immersion experience. Wellness Immersions aim to create a safe environment for the mind, body, and spirit. The sheltered environment of a Wellness Immersion acts as the incubator for transformation, where participants can unleash their incredible potential and can more readily imagine living deeper, healthier, and more meaningful lives.

6.2.2 Access to Nature

Forest bathing expert Dr. Qing Li's research⁴ on the topic has proven that nature brings about a substantial biomedical physical and mental transformation. In Eastern philosophy and other cultures from around the world, it is believed that life and the natural world are inseparable from one another. In his book *Biophilia*, Edward O. Wilson popularized the idea that humans possess an intimate tendency to seek connections with nature and other life forms⁵. Incorporating nature within healing environments can help establish a semblance of familiarity and evoke feelings of relaxation. Participants exploring Wellness Immersions have also noted that "spending time in nature" is a top priority⁶. This is no surprise when taking into consideration that environmental psychologists believe that the basis for many of our aesthetic preferences is held within our genetic code.

6.2.3. Bringing the Outdoors, Indoors

Immersive venue design creates the ultimate participant experience when views of nature are maximized both outdoors and indoors. In addition, biophilic interior design is an effective way to improve the physical, mental, and spiritual wellbeing of the participants, as well as the staff. Access to nature has a distinct and positive impact on the immersion experience. Conscious venue-design choices that emphasize nature and sunlight also enhance the guest experience by supporting mood and energy. Studies also show that our brain reacts in a similar way whether we are immersed in nature or viewing a representation of nature through forms such as art, photography, sculpture, and virtual reality. Designing with these principles in mind broadens the opportunities for a variety of immersion settings.

“We shape our buildings; thereafter they shape us.”

Winston Churchill — Former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom

⁴ Qing Li, *Forest Bathing: How Trees can Help You Find Health and Happiness*, Penguin Random House, 2018

⁵ Edward O Wilson, *Biophilia*, Harvard University Press, 1984.

⁶ Dak Kopec, *Environmental Psychology for Design*, Fairchild, 2012

6.2.4 Supportive and Visually-Pleasing Architectural Design and Surroundings

In today's new period of neuroarchitecture, Winston Churchill would be grateful to discover that the architectural world is paying close attention to the neuroscientists and psychologists that have provided an abundance of evidence that back up his words and beliefs. Research on the effects of buildings and cities on our mood⁷ and wellbeing points out that human beings subconsciously recognize the geometry, fractals and the arrangement of our built environments and their interiors, as well as how they relate to nature and the world at large. The focus of many architects and designers is often to create a recognizable, signature-built environment — a brand that is easily recognizable as their work. Another driving force has been to create something new and exciting that has never been done before. All of this supersedes the importance of the human experience and the interaction between spaces and wellbeing. Immersive venues must provide a built environment that offers a physically, emotionally, and spiritually safe haven.

When planning new venues, the site should be chosen with an awareness of the intrusion of noise and light from neighboring resorts. These intrusions can disturb the sense of peace and safety that guests should feel during an immersion. Private spaces that offer emotional safety (from dressing rooms to private areas for meditation and reflection) allow guests to completely relax and open up for healing and transformation.

The energy of the site and surrounding areas should also be evaluated. Past events can impact the energy of a space, and the flow of positive energy can be greatly improved using feng shui, biophilia, environmental psychology, sacred geometry, gemology, sustainability, and other ancient wisdoms.

Mindful design will focus especially on front-facing facilities, such as guest rooms, pools, gyms, and yoga pavilions. The architecture and design should support the harmonious flow of events as guests move between buildings on a larger property. Here, well-designed pathways and signage contribute to a positive guest experience.

It's important to additionally consider the alignment of the site design with the program itself: Would a shamanic retreat be as effective in an urban contemporary space? The venue and setting should support the immersion format.

⁷ <https://www.nature.com/articles/474429a>

6.2.5 Energetic, Esoteric, Historically and Culturally Informed, Purposeful Design

Every building site, built environment, and space has a life of its own. Each has its own topography, history, energetic life force, and earth formation, buried deep within it. It also has a body, bones, and memory.

Feng shui is among other ancient design practices and cultures that takes into consideration the surrounding aspects of nature, mathematical calculations that appeal to our subconscious, and the cosmos. Purposely designing a space so that it has an uplifting and life-enhancing effect on participants attending an immersive experience is imperative. The energies of heaven, humanity, and earth must be gently manipulated so that all three interact cohesively.

At the end of the experience, the participant can choose to embody the whole experience, and therefore bring it home to continue the wellness journey. This is the ultimate goal. Balancing these principles and incorporating them with nature, beauty, and sustainability will strongly influence the ability to deliver a truly immersive experience with lasting impact.

6.2.6 Sustainable Design and Management Practices

A host venue is responsible for delivering a setting that encourages one to immerse themselves safely into a journey of self-discovery. At its best, the venue should be conscientious in providing a space that does no harm to people and the planet. Ideally, they would operate their business so that it will be regenerative for participants, the local community, and the world at large. The buildings and facilities should be designed thoughtfully and in keeping with the natural surroundings, and native plantings should be used in landscape design, so less maintenance and less water is needed. Planning should also include keeping groundwater safe by avoiding chemical weed killers, fertilizers, or pesticides which could pose a health hazard to employees, guests, and the community. Environmental advocacy organization, The Sierra Club, reiterates this notion, stating: “There are many reasons to not treat our lawn or garden with pesticides (including weed killers). A little bit of determination and changing our expectations can go a long way to reducing or eliminating outdoor pesticide use.”

A host venue should thoughtfully consume energy and water, and the setting should be monitored for light and sound pollution. Filtered air systems and maintenance provide fresh, mold-free and toxicity-free air quality. Single-use plastics are eliminated and replaced with biodegradable or reusable materials. Clean drinking water is provided through filtration systems or purchased and packaged for individual consumption. Healthy menus are created that feature organic food procured locally, seasonably, and whole whenever possible. Art is procured from local artists that inspire, adding culture and authenticity to the design while sustaining the local economy.

The “interior bones” (walls, floors, and ceilings) are covered with materials, paints, glues and finishes that are environmentally friendly and low in toxins, with little or no off-gassing. Purposeful design means that furnishings and products are evaluated for sustainability and eco-friendly certifications. All wood materials will be sourced from managed forests.

EXPERT INSIGHT: Design supports immersion benefits

“Immersive experiences require optimal interiors with a design approach that combines science, sustainability, evidence-based wellness studies, and spiritual design philosophies rooted in ancient and modern cultures. For new venues, a purposeful design consultant should conduct a comprehensive site assessment and collaborate with the design team to optimize the long-term success of the project. Finally, the consultant should develop an authentic design narrative, using text and images to convey the site’s history and conscious design choices. When these stories are shared with guests, the power of the work becomes even more impactful.”

Debra Duneier — President and Founder of Design Consultancy EcoChi, Author of EcoChi: Designing the Human Experience, New York

6.3 PROGRAM

Wellness Immersions are carefully curated to offer a more serious approach to wellness. For a duration that could last from 30 min to months, the participant is removed from the obligations of their own daily life and immersed in a new way of experiencing their own wellbeing.

6.3.1 Wellness Immersion as a Continuum

Designing an impactful and sustainable transformation experience goes beyond the immersion itself. Ideally, participants arrive with an “already there” mindset, where curiosity and possibly transformation has already begun. This may include having watched preparatory videos, reading relevant supportive documentation, or completing assessment questionnaires and setting intentions and goals.

The experience extends beyond the boundaries of the stay. A Wellness Immersion considers the participant’s experience at booking and continuing through travel and airport transfers, on and off-site activities, intake counseling, orientation, out-take, and re-entry at home. During this time, participants receive a blend of inspiration, education, guidance, and practical tools to empower them to make healthy decisions and create positive and sustainable behavior changes (see Appendix B for example of Wellness Immersion Continuum.)

EXPERT INSIGHT: Designing transformative experiences

“To have the foresight to design a transformative experience beyond the time and space of the actual immersion makes the difference in curating a transformation-by-choice instead of by chance.”

Carl Lemieux — Managing Partner, Mindspace, Canada

6.3.2 Evidence-Based Research

The program design is based on evidence-based research⁸ in wellness, functional and integrative medicine, health psychology, neuroscience, and human development. For example, proper nourishment, a good night's sleep, exercise, meditation, and daily practices for reducing stress while enhancing joy, purpose and creativity have all been shown to be foundational in reducing inflammation, boosting immunity, preventing disease, and enhancing physical and mental wellness.

The program design can draw on neuroplasticity research, which has shown the importance of stressing and challenging ourselves outside of our comfort zone to promote growth and resilience. Equally important is getting enough rest and nourishment⁹.

The deliberate and active maintenance of this perpetual back-and-forth state of balance between optimal stress and restorative rest is key for driving positive neuroplastic change.

Neuroplasticity depends on experience – a Wellness Immersion is the ideal setting to engage in these experiences that provide sensory, emotional, and intellectual awakening.

“We can’t solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them.”

Albert Einstein — Physicist

6.3.3 Customized Nutrition, Treatment, and Activity Program

Wellness Immersions are all-inclusive experiences with customized nutrition, wellness treatments, therapies, consultations, and activities. Participants are provided the opportunity to focus exclusively on eating, moving, and engaging in activities that are health supportive — removed from everyday responsibilities, cravings, and temptations.

Nutrition plays a key role in improving physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional wellbeing. Many immersion programs strive to detoxify the body by eliminating toxins and certain substances such as alcohol, refined sugar, processed food, and red meat.

⁸ <https://globalwellnessinstitute.org/industry-research/>

⁹ <https://globalwellnessinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/GWI-MWI-WhitePaper2018.pdf>

Immersion programs include consultations, treatments, activities, and wellness therapies that support transformational growth. They can be pre-set or customized after the initial arrival consultation. The intention is to allow the participant to experience what it is like to eat and behave in ways that give them a feeling of wellbeing. Knowing it is possible to feel this well can bring about a transformation and inspire sustainable change.

6.3.4 Personal Guidance

Starting with the reservation process, continuing before arrival and during intake, personal guidance is one of the most important elements of a Wellness Immersion. A customized program aligned with a participant's goals and needs sets the immersion experience apart from a wellness retreat (where groups may participate in the same program) or a wellness vacation (a leisure stay at a resort offering spa and fitness amenities).

One-on-one guidance includes a conversation with the participant prior to their arrival to discuss intention, expectations, and goals. At intake, a guided consultation will evaluate the participant's goals and, where appropriate, measure health biomarkers such as weight, cholesterol levels, blood pressure, movement, and flexibility. These biomarkers can be re-evaluated during an out-take session at the end of the stay. An orientation session and personalized health counseling during the stay can support the participant's progress. Additional consulting, after the participant returns home, may also be an additional option.

The guidance by the host venue, practitioner, or teacher holds space to help the participant find their own truth, connection, and inner-knowing through embodied practices.

6.3.5 Brand and Audience Alignment

The venue, the program, and its purpose are clearly aligned: The participant understands what is being offered and why they are participating. To support this purpose, the program and staff are trained to deliver a consistent message across all points of participant's contact, from classes, to meals, to spa services. Throughout the venue, everyone is working together to create a consistent experience.

Staff members should be well-trained and credentialed in their area of expertise, such as a registered dietician instead of a certified nutritionist. While participants might visit a venue known for its high-quality programs, what tends to make them return often is the venue's staff or a practitioner that helped them go deeper into the experience and reach a new level of heightened perception and wellbeing.

In addition, the program aligns with the audience — meeting participants where they are and adapting to their specific needs, motivation levels, and the solutions they are seeking. Yoga, meditation, and certain bodywork disciplines will need to be adjusted according to the participant's experience level and physical fitness.

This requires an experienced practitioner who can provide modifications in a session or class or provide a clearly marked schedule designating classes for certain skill levels, such as beginner, intermediate, and advanced. Staff members should be attuned to participants' readiness and ability to explore a new practice and engage deeper into an experience. Each level requires a different approach to education and training.

6.3.6 Venue Guidelines and Policies

The host venue establishes clear expectations to support healthy behaviors and secure boundaries among participants. There are, for example, policies against smoking on the venue and guidelines restricting cell phone and device usage, noise, alcohol consumption, outside food and beverages, and even mandatory attendance at group events. Consider late-entry policies for fitness classes or lectures; and cancellation policies — not only for the stay itself — but for group excursions, consultations, or spa services. When people know what is expected of them, they rise to the occasion.

6.3.7 Post Immersion Follow Up

Information and communication technology offers a multitude of possibilities for tailored, personal support even after the participant returns to one's home setting. This process of adjusting the design and content of follow-up care needs and preferences of participants, post-stay, is a relevant stepping stone toward extending the immersion experience in order to bring about sustainable behavioral change.

Through technology, practitioners can facilitate and monitor the guest's management of, and application of, learned self-care tools into daily life. However, to reach the full potential of blended care, more insight is needed into what suits whom and how operationalization through technology can be optimized.

6.4 CONNECTION

Feeling connected to oneself, to others and to community are all significant components of optimal wellbeing. The wellness immersion host can serve a much-needed role in facilitating intra- and interpersonal connection as well as fostering a close-knit community among fellow guests and staff. Thus, we define connection on multiple levels.

The following 3 channels for connection are often experienced within the same program:

6.4.1 Self-Connection

Wellness Immersions provide the opportunity for changing pace, unwinding and slowing down to allow the mind space for self-reflection and tuning in to one's physical, psychological, and spiritual needs. The opportunity to deepen one's self-connection through intentional self-care and stillness can provide the foundation necessary for renewal and restoration. No matter one's other peripheral modes of support, the process of personal change and self-renewal is, at its core, a solo journey inward. Immersive and holistic activities in an environment that encourages mindfulness, self-awareness and authentic reflection can enable one to connect more deeply to what it means to thrive, rather than just survive in life. In 2021, after more than a year of "pandemic stress" and disruption of normal routines, the maladaptive coping strategies that may have been used to get through such challenging times can increasingly be replaced with practices that restore wellbeing in body and mind. Wellness Immersions provide this opportunity for a reclamation or reset of much-needed self-care.

6.4.2 Social Connection

Social connection and engagement are *crucial* for optimal health and longevity. Research shows that loneliness and social isolation rank above other well-known health risk factors, such as smoking, obesity, and cardiovascular disease for predicting early mortality¹⁰. In 2020, the impact of the pandemic shined a much-needed light on this fundamental need. Yet, prior to the pandemic, chronic loneliness was already being recognized as a public health issue in many countries. In 2018, the United States Cigna Loneliness Index revealed that 46% of Americans suffered from chronic loneliness compared to 20% in the 1980s¹¹.

¹⁰ <https://journals.plos.org/plosmedicine/article?id=10.1371/journal.pmed.1000316>

¹¹ https://www.multivu.com/players/English/8294451-cigna-us-loneliness-survey/docs/IndexReport_1524069371598-173525450.pdf

That same year, the United Kingdom announced it was designating its first Minister of Loneliness¹² to address the nine million citizens who reported suffering from chronic loneliness. In addition, a population survey in Germany¹³ revealed that the majority of its citizens felt that chronic loneliness had become a major issue in their country. The global pandemic has only added fuel to this fire due to social distancing mandates that were required for ensuring our physical health and safety.

As we emerge from the social distancing mandate there is a palpable, urgent need to heal the physical and psychological harm that for many was caused by a long-term isolative existence. In early 2021, Japan joined the UK in designating its first Minister of Loneliness to tackle the country's highest suicide rate in over eleven years¹⁴. The road to healing and recovery requires social connection, engagement and support through community, and a Wellness Immersion often provides these components. In fact, social support formed during a Wellness Immersion is often a key driver of transformational, sustainable change. A recent meta-analysis on the impact of social relationships on health revealed that connection and positive social interactions are most strongly correlated to wellbeing.¹⁵ No matter what we are facing in life, we *need* each other for our very survival.

Social connection experienced within a Wellness Immersion can occur on multiples levels:

Participant + Staff Members: The participant receives personal guidance and support from professionally trained staff providers. Groups of participants also receive collective guidance and support from staff.

Participant + Participant: Participants are encouraged to organically build community among each one another, for providing ongoing support, and staff actively fosters this spirit of community. The host supports this beyond the stay with private social media groups or alumni portals that encourage sustained connection.

Participant + Local Community: The host facilitates participant interaction with the local community, either through guest speakers, off-site tours and classes, such as regional cooking or gardening demonstrations, or community volunteer opportunities.

¹² <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-launches-governments-first-loneliness-strategy>

¹³ <https://www.thelocal.de/20180323/two-thirds-of-germans-think-the-country-has-a-major-loneliness-problem/>

¹⁴ <https://www.dw.com/en/japan-minister-of-loneliness-tackles-mental-health-crisis/a-57311880>

¹⁵ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/20943583>

6.4.3 Community Connection

Wellness immersions often provide a safe and intimate community where transformation can occur through positive connection with others. Group experiences like communal dining, recreational outings, workshops and lectures, dancing, chanting, singing, gathering around a fire, participating in social service, group counseling, and group fitness classes all contribute greatly to a positive immersion experience and community connection.

As people seek a higher purpose in their lives, the immersion community helps to provide one. In addition, as participants receive support from others, they will also find themselves offering support to others. By serving others, even by offering words of encouragement, we support our own healing and growth. For someone seeking purpose, engagement with-community through the give and take of support can represent a step toward wholeness. As bonds form and strengthen within the Wellness Immersion community, people feel less alone, more understood, and accepted. And when the invisible emotional “weight” of loneliness and community disconnect is lifted, profound healing can occur in body and mind.

The venue may also support their local community through programs like health education outreach, scholarships, donations, or volunteer support of local schools, non-profit organizations, houses of worship, and/or disaster relief, when warranted. As a community business, the venue practices respect and support of its employees and makes business decisions that reflect a conscious attitude of stewardship toward the surrounding community.

Whether hosted by a for-profit or non-profit venue, a Wellness Immersion is often designed and developed through the passion and mission of the venue founders, owners, or managers for helping others to optimize their health and wellbeing. Therefore, providing wellness-program access to those who wouldn’t normally be able to participate in an immersion program due to cost, time availability, or physical limitations broadens the reach of the program’s mission.

Program scholarships, along with online tutorials and webinars, and free or low-cost classes, allow a broader range of accessibility to the program’s offerings and aligns with the program’s mission of helping others.

Local tours, guest speakers, visits to farmers markets or local historic sites, or classes showcasing local cooking, dance or spiritual practices provide further opportunities to engage and connect participants with the local community and culture. These events connect the host with their wider community and form the touchpoints to fostering a deeper sense of belonging and connection.

EXPERT INSIGHT: Psychological counseling, a piece of the wellness puzzle

“People often come to immersion wellness programs to let go of survival-mode behaviors and to learn how to prioritize better self-care. Psychological support can help guests as they navigate the emotions that are often revealed when they reconnect with a deeper awareness and sense of wellbeing. Life transitions, depression, anxiety, grief, caretaking others, and loneliness are common contributors to why people have become disconnected from their own needs. Helping program participants to understand their sources of motivation and obstacles, along with their readiness for change, are key for piecing together the wellness puzzle.

A licensed professional experienced in wellness counseling can offer participants a safe space to explore this often uncharted territory. When a person feels less alone in their suffering, they become more connected to others and themselves.”

Erin Risius — M.A., LPC, Founder, ENR Wellness Consulting, United States

6.5 OUTCOMES

Wellness Immersions offer an opportunity to step out of our day-to-day and see our lives from a fresh vantage point. From there, we can overcome roadblocks and replace unproductive habits that don't support us. A Wellness Immersion can help participants adopt a new perspective. The immersive nature of the experience creates the space and support to empower participants to reclaim an active role in their own wellbeing.

As human beings, we possess the power to consciously evolve. We are designed for renewal in body and mind. Through positive choices, we can prevent disease, slow the aging process, and expand our sense of wellbeing.

We have identified five primary outcomes and expectations of a Wellness Immersion:

6.5.1 Cultivating Presence and Awareness

Even in these challenging times where our mind is pulled in many directions and where reactive patterns are increasingly conditioned, we all have the potential to cultivate presence and mindful awareness of our true nature. A Wellness Immersion has the potential to help participants develop this awareness by observing thoughts and their impact, understanding emotions, and becoming sensitive to signals from the body and mind while learning how to interpret them. This heightened awareness inspires one to replace old and conditioned habits with healthy choices.

Awareness is the greatest agent for change. One of the most profound outcomes of a Wellness Immersion is a shift in perspective that one is their thoughts, emotions, and reactions to realizing that actually they are the awareness, the conscious presence that witnesses those states.

6.5.2 Improvement in Knowledge of Health Practices

A well-curated Wellness Immersion has the potential to impart experiential knowledge of physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual wellness practices. Through guided instruction, participants can gain clear awareness of specific tools, practices, and behaviors to employ at home after the program ends.

Here are a few examples of potential wellness practices that an immersive wellness experience can provide as outcomes:

Movement: When experiencing aerobic and strength training, yoga flow, dance, tai chi, and walking in nature, we tune into the physical body. Often, participants who consider themselves “unable” to exercise due to physical limitations discover new forms of movement that they can enjoy and, in turn, find an embodied practice which they can take into their everyday life.

Nutrition: Learning to enjoy, source, and prepare healthy, organic, and local food¹⁶ that supports mental, emotional, and physical health.

Sleep: Learning the health benefits of sleep and how to create habits and rituals while using tools, such as circadian rhythms, sleep meditations and pillows, that support better sleep. For example, at the Pritikin Longevity Center in Miami, Florida, the Sleep Services Program can help you identify and diagnose deficits or problems with sleep that you may be experiencing¹⁷.

¹⁶ <https://rancholapuerta.com/the-ranch/la-cocina-que-canta/>

¹⁷ <https://www.pritikin.com/sleep-apnea-and-your-health>

Mindfulness: Learning and practicing how to purposely bring attention to experiences occurring in the present moment without judgment. This offers participants a greater sense of control of both themselves and relationships.

Meditation: Learning practices of focusing the mind on a particular object, thought, or activity – to train attention and awareness, and achieve a mentally clear, emotionally calm, and spiritually aligned state¹⁸.

Creating Space: Identifying form and ego and taking a pause from a hectic life of “doing” can give rise to small moments of clarity and a shift in perspective.

6.5.3 Expansion of One’s Sense of Self

One of the outcomes of a Wellness Immersion is the expansion of one’s sense of self, waking up, and realizing one’s connection to their spirit and the unity of all things. This is an important concept to understand in our context of the Wellness Immersion because participants may report “a sensation, feeling, or understanding” that puts the participants in a state of bliss, ecstasy, or oneness that is difficult to describe if it has not been felt before. The outcome of that experience may be akin to feeling deeply reassured about the “why” of our existence.

This expanded sense of self is the cornerstone of many spiritual traditions and “although they differ in many details, the common view is based on a mystical experience – on a direct nonintellectual experience of reality. The essence of this experience is the awareness of the unity and mutual interrelation of all things and events, the experience of all phenomena in the world as a manifestation of a basic oneness. All things are seen as interdependent and inseparable parts of this cosmic whole as different manifestations of the same ultimate reality. In ordinary life, we are not aware of this unity of all things but divide the world into separate objects and events.”¹⁹

A Wellness Immersion – particularly one that readjusts the mind by centering and quieting through meditation or mental equilibrium – may assist the participant in becoming conscious of the absolute oneness of the universe.

The feeling has been described by Wellness Immersion participants as moving from a sense that we are alone in a universe that is physical – to a feeling that we are never alone, and the universe is alive, conscious, intelligent, and compassionate. An inner wisdom awakens that goes beyond the five senses. The expanded sense of self can be glimpsed for a moment or last for a lifetime.

¹⁸ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/29316909>

¹⁹ Fritjof Capra, *The Tao of Physics: An Exploration of Parallels Between Modern Physics and Eastern Mysticism*, Shambhala

Participants who have had this experience say that the feeling profoundly changes their perception of reality – as they return to their everyday lives, they begin to trust intuitions, and hunches and subtle feelings become important to them. They sense things about themselves, other people, and the situations in which they find themselves that cannot be justified based on the information that the five senses can provide. The physical world and all the things that happen in it serves their learning. They realize that the intention behind an action determines its effects; every intention affects both them and others.

A well-curated Wellness Immersion may give one the opportunity to explore the self and possibly arrive at a state of centeredness where inner and outer realities are connected. The larger frame of reference of this multi-sensory feeling allows one's personality to experience the energy of its soul – the positive purposeful force at the core of one's being.

“Nothing other than the experience itself has motivated me to keep going.”

Professor Gerry Bodeker — public health academic and clinical psychologist, describing his own meditation practice of 47 years

6.5.4 Improvements in Health, Objectively Measured through Biomarkers

Biomarkers are biological measures of a biological state. By definition, a biomarker is "a characteristic that is objectively measured and evaluated as an indicator of normal biological processes, pathogenic processes, or pharmacological responses to a therapeutic intervention."²⁰

Biomarkers are the measures used to perform a clinical assessment such as blood pressure or cholesterol level. They are used to monitor and predict health states in individuals or across populations so that appropriate therapeutic intervention can be planned. Biomarkers may be used alone or in combination to assess the health or disease state of an individual.

A discussion of biomarkers can also include epigenetics, changes to the DNA made by everyday experiences. The stronger the experience, the more marks are likely to be imprinted on a personal epigenome.

²⁰ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biomarker>

Wellness Immersions often measure a participant's health biomarkers as part of the intake process and again on departure to identify objective change. The biomarkers collected may depend on the category of Wellness Immersion: Medically Supervised Therapeutic Immersion, Integrated Health and Wellness Immersion, and Dedicated Retreat Immersion.

Some examples of health biomarkers include: height; weight; abdominal girth; blood pressure; markers for organ reserve and inflammation; markers of aging (telomerase); gene expression; heart rate variability; imaging studies such as MRI and PET scans; toxicity testing of hair, blood, urine, gut and skin microbiome; sleep quality and architecture; cognitive function, including memory and executive function; quality of life; scores for health symptoms; and psychological measures of depression, anxiety, self-efficacy, to name a few.

A well-curated Wellness Immersion has the potential to move health biomarkers in the direction of multidimensional wellbeing.

6.5.5 Sustainable Behavior Change

A transformational Wellness Immersion presupposes a change in behavior of the attending participant.

For anyone designing an immersive experience with the intent to improve wellbeing, in time it becomes critical to understand the underlying resistances to change, the best practices to induce the behavioral change process and the strategies to unleash the discretionary effort that allows one to maintain their motivation to reach a higher version of themselves sustainably.

In “Do Wellness Tourists Get Well? An Observational Study of Multiple Dimensions of Health and Well-Being After a Week-Long Retreat”²¹, a focus was placed on encouraging a change in behavior through regular habit-forming activities and an emphasis on establishing a regular circadian routine and sleep pattern. The retreat also offered many opportunities to foster a connection with nature and enhance social connections with like-minded people while avoiding news, electronic media, and the use of digital technology. Staff also strived to maintain a culture of wellbeing throughout the experience, and trained health professionals were on hand to address any health issues that arose.

The author's conclusion was that retreat experiences can lead to substantial improvements in multiple dimensions of health and wellbeing that are maintained for six weeks.

²¹ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5312624/>

EXPERT INSIGHT: The Retreat Experience

"Our research on health outcomes after retreat experiences found that people emerged lighter, slimmer and more relaxed, happy and confident after an immersive retreat experience. The finding of reduced health symptoms after 6 weeks further suggests that immersive retreats help participants make positive adjustments to their lives and cope better with ongoing health issues when they return to their regular routines."

Marc Cohen — Professor, Realise WorldWide Wellness

Further research, that includes objective biomarkers and economic measures in different populations is required to determine the mechanisms of these effects and assess the value and relevance of retreat experiences to clinicians and health insurers.

Behavior change and adult learning research have pointed to many influences in the transformational process including cognitive and emotional sources of thoughts and feelings that may prompt anxiety and cause defensive reactions. An individual's previous experiences can create patterns of response that are repeated throughout life and can become dysfunctional.

The journal article "Creating Transformational Executive Education Programs"²² points to four major challenges in program design:

1. Selecting participants (**Intention**)
2. Identifying the focal issue on which participants need to work and the educational implications for faculty, facilitators, and coaches (**Program**)
3. The creation of a safe transitional space that enables the change process (**Setting**)
4. Using the group dynamic to foster transformation and to arrive at the internalization of the change process (**Community**)

Each of these challenges has been addressed in Section 6. Key Elements of A Wellness Immersion, but, like running a marathon, the hard work is done throughout the journey, after the Wellness Immersion, when the excitement of the starting block has faded.

²² <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40214463>

To truly embrace the goal of transformation, new behaviors need to be repeated countless times with a perceived benefit in order to bring about sustainable behavior change. The experience must be matched with strong emotional feedback in order to disrupt the hardwiring in our brains. We therefore need to work as much on giving information and meaning to the new path to wellbeing as on allowing space for experimentation.

We also know the environment and social context can shape behavior. We often learn best when we exchange with people who share our realities. The physical environment, a well-orchestrated client experience, and pre and post-immersive experience planning and support systems, all help shape new behaviors, beyond pure willpower.

THE ROAD AHEAD

Wellness Immersions have come a long way, from the first pioneers such as Rancho La Puerta in Mexico and Canyon Ranch in the US to more recent openings such as Atmantan in India or Joali Being in the Maldives. Wellness Immersions define the *raison d'être* of bigger, well-known resorts such as Miraval by Hyatt, US, and lesser-known boutique wellness hotels such as Hotel Post Bezau in Austria.

What they all have in common is that they continue to evolve. Change is the only constant in our lives and Wellness Immersions are no exception. New research becomes available every day and wellness professionals all over the world are working relentlessly to use this data to improve and elevate the immersive experiences they are offering to their customers and guests.

We will continue to follow the development of Wellness Immersions, in particular with regards to virtual immersions and the importance of connection. Will we have to choose between one or the other or will we be able one day to bridge the gap between virtual reality and real-life connection? This remains to be seen.

Please stay tuned for further updates of this White Paper in the years to come. If you have any feedback, comments, or suggestions, please get in touch with us at tvincl@knosiswellness.com. We are grateful for your support.

October 2021

GWI Immersion Initiative

7. APPENDICES

A. CATEGORIES OF WELLNESS IMMERSIONS

A.1 Medically Supervised Therapeutic Immersion

Key features:

- Medical staff within in-house team
- Pre-visit evaluation and/or thorough evaluation at the beginning and end of stay
- Physical/medical exams and medical supervision (such as monitoring blood pressure and blood sugar) are provided on site by in-house medical team
- Based on results of initial exam/evaluation, personal recommendations are provided for treatments, services, nutrition, etc.
- High level of individualized treatments, programs, and services
- Wide range of complementing programs and services are provided, including outdoor activities, yoga, meditation, educational lectures
- Nutrition plans and/or a specific, healthy diet are an important part of the program
- Typical length of stay: seven to ten days plus
- Individual arrival and departure dates

Best for:

- Guests whose issue or health challenge requires medical supervision and who desire a high level of personal customization of treatments and programs
- Treatment of health and wellness issues, such as diabetes, hypertension, cardiovascular disease, digestive health, burn out, stress management, smoking cessation, weight management, etc.

Purpose of visit:

To treat target health issues under the guidance of medical staff, become more resilient, give up unhealthy habits, implement healthy habits in a sustainable way, focus on specific results.

Examples of properties and experiences:

- Pritikin Longevity Center and Hippocrates Institute help guests recover from cardiac events or to treat diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and obesity. They educate guests about healthy lifestyles and medical supervision is an important element of their program. Medicare coverage is accepted at Pritikin Longevity Center.

- Palace Merano and Lanserhof emphasize gut health as an important element of overall health and wellbeing. A special diet is an essential part of their program.
- In addition to offering integrative wellness programs, Sha Wellness Clinic and Buergenstock Waldhotel have medical clinics on-site that offer medical services and medically supervised programs for guests.
- Amanpuri recently partnered with another resort, Thanyapura, to create an integrated medical wellness center that provides medical services to their resort guests.
- Canyon Ranch provides personalized medical care with a highest level of customization and individualized treatment plans.

A.2 Integrated Health and Wellness Immersion

Key features:

- Medically trained staff, such as nurses, physical therapists, or wellness counselors on team
- Thorough wellness/integrative health evaluation is usually provided at the beginning of a stay
- Prior to arrival, there might be a conversation with a wellness concierge
- Based on results of evaluation, recommendation for programs and services are provided
- Wide range of programs and services address a variety of conditions and wellness dimensions, such as stress relief, sleep, rejuvenation, detox, fitness, deep relaxation, mindfulness, mental and emotional wellness, spiritual wellness, and personal growth
- Healthy meals are standard and comprehensive and individualized nutritional plans are very often part of the program
- Sometimes additional experts are available during certain times of the year (visiting practitioner program)
- Typical length of stay: five to ten days plus

Best for:

- Guests who desire a healthy break
- Guests who are looking to improve their overall health, which includes improvement of their physical health under guidance of a health counselor but without strictly medical supervision
- Guests who are looking to improve their wellbeing on all levels (physical, emotional, mental, spiritual)

Purpose of visit:

To improve wellbeing on all levels (physical, emotional, mental, spiritual), de-stress, reconnect with life purpose, become whole again.

Examples of properties and experiences:

- Aman Resort (China, Japan, Thailand), <https://www.aman.com/wellness>
- Chiva Som (Phuket), <http://www.chivasom.com>
- The Farm at San Benito (Philippines), <https://www.thefarmatsanbenito.com>
- Ananda in the Himalayas (India), <https://www.anandaspa.com>
- Rancho La Puerta (Mexico), <http://www.rancholapuerta.com>
- Miraval (US), <https://www.miravalresorts.com>
- Body Holiday (Saint Lucia), <https://www.thebodyholiday.com>
- Atmantan (India), <https://www.atmantan.com>
- Vana (India), <http://www.vana.co.in>
- Shukavati (Bali/Indonesia), <https://www.sukhavatibali.com>
- Gwinganna Lifestyle Retreat, <https://www.gwinganna.com>
- Kamalaya (Thailand), <https://www.kamalaya.com>

A.3 Dedicated Retreat Immersion

Key features:

- Program focuses on a specific health or wellness topic
- Retreats can be offered by health and wellness resorts/destination spas, holistic learning centers or by individual health and wellness professionals who take their group to a venue of their choice (venues range from simple cabin-style accommodations to upscale resorts)
- When hosted by health and wellness resorts or destination spas, retreats are either facilitated by guest teachers or by in-house experts
- Holistic learning centers usually bring in guest teachers for facilitation of these retreats but sometimes members of their permanent staff lead retreats
- Medically trained or special wellness teams are not always on site (depends on property)
- Evaluations at beginning and end of stay are not always part of the retreat (sometimes available as an optional add-on)
- Retreat cuisine is healthy but does not necessarily provide individualized nutrition plans or special diets (such as detox, heart healthy, and meat free)

Best for:

- Guests who are looking to address a specific health, wellbeing or lifestyle issue
- Guests who want to deepen or expand a certain wellness practice

Purpose of visit:

Restore, relax, revitalize, engage in a specific wellness practice, and/or learn something new.

Examples of properties and experiences:

- The Pearl Laguna, Ranch at Malibu, and Aro Ha are examples of properties that offer dedicated retreat immersions in an “open group” setting, such as weeklong immersions with a fixed arrival and departure date (usually Saturday or Sunday). Weeklong programs include outdoor activities, healthy meals, yoga and meditation. The group stays mostly together during the week but participants may opt in or out of certain activities.
- Skyterra Wellness, Hilton Head Health and Structure House are examples of properties that offer purpose-driven, results-oriented immersions in addition to their ongoing integrated wellness immersions. Examples of their dedicated retreat immersions include three to seven day long specialty programs that focus on very specific topics of weight loss (such as emotional eating), life transitions (such as grief, divorce) or other health and wellness themes.
- Fairmont Chateau Lake Louise, Red Mountain Resort, The Lodge at Woodloch, Blackberry Farm and Champneys are examples of properties that offer seasonal retreats or a number of retreats throughout the year in addition to their regular hotel/resort/integrative wellness property operations.
- Esalen, Omega Institute, Kripalu, 1440 Multiversity, Hollyhock, and Blue Spirit are examples of holistic learning centers that offer dedicated retreat immersions, most of them with a focus on personal or spiritual wellness.

B. 4 QUICK REFERENCE IMMERSION TYPES

DIFFERENTIATORS	MEDICALLY SUPERVISED IMMERSION	INTEGRATED HEALTH & WELLNESS IMMERSION	DEDICATED RETREAT IMMERSION
Best for	Addressing a broad range of health and wellness issues that require medical guidance, such as diabetes, hypertension, cardiovascular disease, digestive health, burn out, stress management, smoking cessation, weight management, etc.	Wide range of programs and services address overall health issues, such as stress relief, sleep, rejuvenation, detox, fitness, deep relaxation, mindfulness, mental & emotional wellness, spiritual wellness, personal growth, etc.	Achieving specific outcomes i.e. reconnecting with oneself, nature or to be guided by a specific teacher or practitioner.
Purpose of visit	Medical Guidance	Holistic Health	Specific purpose
Typical length of stay	7 - 10+ days	5 - 7+ days	3 - 7+ days
FEATURES	MEDICALLY SUPERVISED IMMERSION	INTEGRATED HEALTH & WELLNESS IMMERSION	DEDICATED RETREAT IMMERSION
Medical staff on team	Y	P	N
Medically trained staff or wellness counselors on site		Y	P
Pre/Post wellness/ integrative health evaluation	Y	P	P
Physical/medical exams	Y	N	N

FEATURES (CONTINUED)	MEDICALLY SUPERVISED IMMERSION	INTEGRATED HEALTH & WELLNESS IMMERSION	DEDICATED RETREAT IMMERSION
Address specific health issue	Y	P	N
Address overall health/wellness issue	Y	Y	P
Individual program	Y	Y	N
Set program or theme	P	P	Y
Complementary services available	Y	Y	P
Educational classes	Y	Y	P
Nutritional plan/guidance	Y	Y	P
Individual arrival & departure dates	Y	Y	N
Set dates	N	P	P
Group program	P	P	Y

Y – YES

P – POTENTIALLY

N – NO

C. FURTHER LEARNING ON THE IMMERSION CONTINUUM

While discussing Wellness Immersion, it is important to note that a person's transformational process does not end once the experience ends. As stated by Mindspace Managing Partner Carl Lemieux, "the immersive experience is a critical step of a journey, but real and sustainable change occurs in time as new patterns and behaviors take root".

Lemieux, along with several thought leaders such as Ken Wilber, Robert Kegan, James O. Prochaska, and Malcolm Dunn, support the concept of change as a transformational process and point to a number of internal and external parameters, individual and collective criteria as well as specific time requirements that facilitate sustainable behavior change.

A number of models have been developed for creating systems, environments, and collectives that effectively guide individuals through the transformational process of change and make new behavior patterns "stick". Adapting them to the setting of an immersive experience (as described in this reflection document) is not always feasible since many immersive experiences are curated by single retreat leaders or small wellness teams.

Keeping the phases of a transformational process in mind and designing an immersion as part of a journey rather than a single, stand-alone event, will deepen the experience of an immersion and amplify its impact.

The four phases of a transformational process as defined by Professor Malcolm Dunn are outlined below. These were developed for his leadership wellness programs that incorporate the transcendent wisdom only available through immersions.

Exploration (3 weeks): The reflection and readiness of an individual to address a situation that they want, need, or feel the desire to change, and setting of an intention to manifest this change.

Immersion (3 – 5 days): The actual experience at the wellness venue that enables a new set or rest; shifting minds, unlearning limiting behaviors, experiencing the difference (what good feels like) and then deepening the original intent.

Adaptation (3 months): This is the experimenting in the real world with changes to systems, environments, collectives, through activities that support "practicing" the new behavior. This can then create a collective ecosystem for learning and adapting. The ripple effect helps others diminish the fear of failure by providing a nourishing, encouraging, and motivating community.

Integration (3 – 6 months): "Living" the new behavior at an unconscious competent with ongoing support through technology, coaching, peer groups, and networks.

D. SHORTLIST OF PROPERTIES MENTIONED ON PREVIOUS PAGES

Hotels, Resorts, Destination Spas:

- Ananda in the Himalayas (India), <https://www.anandaspa.com>
- Aman Resorts (Thailand), <https://www.aman.com/wellness>
- Amanpuri (Thailand), <https://www.aman.com/resorts/amanpuri>
- Aro Ha (New Zealand), <http://aro-ha.com>
- Atmantan (India), <https://www.atmantan.com>
- Blackberry Farm (US), <http://www.blackberryfarm.com>
- Body Holiday (St. Lucia), <http://bodyholiday.com>
- Bürgenstock Waldhotel (Switzerland), <https://buergenstock-waldhotel.ch/en>
- Canyon Ranch (US), <https://www.canyonranch.com>
- Champneys (UK), <https://www.champneys.com/retreats>
- Chiva Som (Thailand), <https://www.chivasom.com>
- Escape Haven (Indonesia), <https://escapehaven.com>
- Fairmont Chateau Lake Louise (Canada), <https://www.lakelouisewellness.com>
- Gwinganna Lifestyle Retreat (Australia), <https://www.gwinganna.com>
- Hilton Head Health (US), <https://www.hhhealth.com>
- Hippocrates Institute (US), www.hippocratesinst.com
- Hotel Post Bezau (Austria), <https://www.hotelpostbezau.com>
- Joali Being (Maldives), <https://www.joalibeing.com>
- Kamalaya (Thailand), <https://www.kamalaya.com>
- Lanser Hof (Germany, Austria), <http://www.lanserhof.com>
- Miraval (US), <https://www.miravalresorts.com>
- Palace Merano (Italy), <https://www.palace.it/en>
- Pearl Laguna (US), <http://thepearllaguna.com>
- Pritikin Longevity Center (US), <https://www.pritikin.com>
- Ranch at Malibu (US), <https://theranchmalibu.com>
- Rancho La Puerta (Mexico), <https://www.rancholapuerta.com>
- Red Mountain Resort (US), <https://www.redmountainresort.com>
- Sha Wellness Clinique (Spain), <https://shawellnessclinic.com/en/clinic-area>
- Six Senses (Thailand), <http://www.sixsenses.com>
- Skyterra Wellness (US), <https://www.skyterrawellness.com>
- Structure House (US), <https://www.structurehouse.com>
- Thanyapura (Thailand), <https://www.thanyapura.com/health/medical-centre>

- The Farm at San Benito (Philippines), <https://www.thefarmatsanbenito.com>
- The Lodge at Woodloch (US), <https://www.thelodgeatwoodloch.com>
- Shukavati (Indonesia), <https://www.sukhavatibali.com>
- Vana (India), <http://www.vana.co.in>

Holistic Learning Centers:

- 1440 Multiversity (US), <https://1440.org>
- Blue Spirit (Costa Rica), <https://bluespiritcostarica.com>
- Esalen (US), <https://www.esalen.org>
- Hollyhock (Canada), <https://hollyhock.ca>
- Kripalu (US), <https://kripalu.org/>
- Omega (US), <https://www.eomega.org>

E. FURTHER READING

Articles, Studies, Reports

- **The Health Impact of Residential Retreats** – Dhevaksha Naidoo, Adrian Shembri, Marc Cohen
<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1186/s12906-017-2078-4>
- **Vacation or therapy? Exploring the demographics, motivations and experiences of health retreat guests in different locations around the world** – Dhevaksha Naidoo, Adrian Shembri, Marc Cohen
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S2212958819304604?via%3Dihub>
- **Do Wellness Tourists Get Well?** – Marc Cohen, Fiona Elliott, Liza Oates, et al
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5312624/#B12/>
- **The Ideal Self as the Driver of Intentional Self** – Richard e Boyatzis, Kleio Akrivou
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/242203714_The_ideal_self_as_the_driver_of_intentional_change
- **Wellness Tourists: In Search of Transformation** – Cornelia Voigt, Graham Brown, Gary Howat
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/242023593_Wellness_tourists_In_search_of_transformation
- **A Conceptual Model of Wellness Destination Characteristics That Contribute to**

Psychological Well-Being – Karen Irene Thal, Simon Hudson

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1096348017704498>

- **An Explanatory Examination of the Wellness Tourist Experience using Netnography** – Alana K. Dillette, Alecia C. Douglas, Carey Andrzejewski
<https://scholarworks.umass.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1277&context=ttra>
- **Can Newly Acquired Healthy Behaviors Persist?** – Ray M Merrill, Steven G Aldana, Roger L Greenlaw
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2248778/>
- **Self-Compassion and Body Dissatisfaction in Women: A Randomized Controlled Trial of a Brief Meditation Intervention** – Ellen R. Albertson, Kristin D. Neff, Karen E. Dill-Shackleford
<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12671-014-0277-3>
- **Effects of mindfulness meditation training on anticipatory alpha modulation in primary somatosensory cortex** – Catherine E. Kerr, Stephanie R. Jones, Qian Wan, et al
<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/21501665/>
- **Randomized Controlled Trial of Mindfulness Meditation for Generalized Anxiety Disorder: Effects on Anxiety and Stress Reactivity** – Elizabeth A. Hoge, Eric Bui, MD, Luana Marue et al
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3772979/>
- **Beyond Behavioral intentions: Planning Mediates Between Intentions and Physical Activity** – Urte Scholz, Benjamin Schüz, Jochen Ziegelmann et al
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/6283947_Beyond_behavioural_intentions_Planning_mediates_between_intentions_and_physical_activity
- **Evidence Based Design for Healthcare Facilities** – Cynthia McCullough, editor
<https://docs.google.com/viewerng/viewer?url=https://trello-attachments.s3.amazonaws.com/5e8b548b6e55208a07420539/5eaae5437b1ec75580f6dd97/20db84ecf83690d446a6bf515fc0fc62/73586537.pdf>
- **Effects of Interior Design on Wellness** – Roger s Ulrich
<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/10123973/>
- **Design for subjective well-being in interior architecture** – Ann Petermans, Anna Pohlmeier
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/267631889_Design_for_subjective_well-being_in_interior_architecture

- **Visual Landscapes and Psychological Wellbeing** – Roger S Ulrich
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/254315158_Visual_Landscapes_and_Psychologica_I_Well-Being
- **Social Relationships and Health** – Debra Umberson, Jennifer Karas Montez
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3150158/>
- **Lifestyle Medicine** – Balazs Bodai, MD, Therese E Nakata, William T Wong et al
<http://www.thepermanentejournal.org/issues/2018/6536-lifestyle-medicine.html>
- **Antidepressant foods: An Evidence-based nutrient profiling system for depression** – Laura R LaChance, Drew Ramsey
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/327777882_Antidepressant_foods_An_evidence-based_nutrient_profiling_system_for_depression
- **Food and Mood: Eating Plants to Fight the Blues** – Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine
<https://www.pcrm.org/good-nutrition/food-and-mood>
- **A Mediterranean-style Dietary Intervention Supplemented with Fish Oil Improves Diet Quality and Mental Health in People With Depression** – Natalie Parletta, Dorota Zarnowiecki, Jihyun Cho, et al
<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/29215971/>
- **Does Changing Behavioral Intentions Engender Behavior Change? A Meta-Analysis of the Experimental Evidence** – Webb, T & Sheeran, P Psychological Bulletin, 132(2), 249 – 268
https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/fb59/bc130ba009194610c16a2beb172bd218e70c.pdf?_ga=2.142109498.968053218.1599088034-2112455806.1599088034
- **Changes in Spirituality and Well-Being in a Retreat Program for Cardiac Patients** – James E Kennedy, R Anne Abbot, Beth Rosenberg
<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/12126175/>

Books and Journals:

- Paul Bell, Environmental Psychology 5th Edition, Psychology Press, 2005
- Janine Benyus. Biomimicry: Innovation Inspired by Nature, 2002
- Linda Buzzell, Craig Chalquist, Forward by David W. Orr, Ecotherapy: Healing with Nature In Mind, 2013
- Dak Kopec, Environmental Psychology for Design, Fairchild, 2012

- John Oscar Lieben, Sacred Geometry for Artists, Dreamers, and Philosophers: Secrets of Harmonic Creation, Inner Traditions Bear and Company, 2018
- Juliet Pegrum, The Vastu Vidya Handbook: The Indian Feng Shui, Three Rivers Press, 2005
- Theodore Roszak, Mary E. Gomes, Allen D. Kanner, Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth, Healing the Mind, Sierra Club Books, 1995
- Esther M. Sternberg M.D, Healing Spaces: The Science of Place and Well-Being, Harvard University Press, 2009
- John Weeks, Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine, Mary Ann Liebert, 1995
- Edward O. Wilson, Biophilia, Harvard University Press, 1984