the art of
thriving
online

a workbook

creative exercises to help you
stay **grounded** + feel **joy**
in the world of **social media**

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INTRODUCTION

A New Way toward Digital Wellness

I wish I could just quit social media.

This is a sentence I hear often in my practice as an art therapist. It makes sense to me that so many of us grapple with our relationships with our phones—social media is entwined with countless aspects of our daily lives—but it is not designed with our psychological well-being in mind. Digital platforms, including social media, news channels, search engines, and e-commerce apps, are designed to capitalize on our vulnerability.

Social media changes how we focus and where we direct our attention. It asks us to be reachable at all times, blurring the lines between work and home. It asks us to perform a lifestyle instead of inhabiting our lives. Social media suspends us in a perpetual state of urgency that doesn't dissolve when our phones are turned off—if they ever get turned off. It pressures us to keep up with every news story, every conflict, every controversy, every status update, every notification. It fortifies divisions and distorts truth. The sheer volume of information we're inundated with every day is enough to make anyone feel unwell.

Being on social media can leave us feeling overwhelmed, anxious, lonely, numb, enraged, and unworthy. So, why do we stay online?

When my clients explain what stops them from quitting social media once and for all, I hear them share all kinds of valid, thoughtful reasons, such as . . .

These are not small needs. Social media has the power to make us feel unwell, *and* it is also a very real source of connection, conversation, and community.

Our digital lives are meaningful, but they are also complicated, posing daily threats to our sense of self and belonging. Holding the paradox of the danger and the usefulness of social media, how do we care for our mental health? How do we stay connected to each other while feeling a sense of awareness, choice, and even joy? How might we advocate for a digital future driven by equity and care? What would it mean to stay online *and* create a conscious relationship with social media?

The answer begins with the word *create*. Through creativity, we can rethink and re-create the ways we live in the online social realm. Creativity is the quality that helps us imagine different futures, and with creativity, reflection, and awareness, we can find innovative ways to preserve the goodness and usefulness of our time online—not just for ourselves, but for the collective.

Wellness Is a Wounded Word

Today, when I search #wellness on social media, the results are dominated by green smoothies; spas; supplements; and thin, white bodies. The ways we understand wellness have been shaped by the ways we communicate. Since social media centers images and videos, currently, we conceptualize wellness through the lens of what can be shown rather than what can be felt. Wellness has become a ubiquitous buzzword that gestures vaguely toward a narrow definition of health and status.

It's challenging to untangle what wellness actually feels like when we encounter incessant digital messaging about who we should be, what we should look like, and how we should live. This messaging can leave us wondering, *What is wrong with me? If I am doing all the things—taking the bath, drinking the tea, doing the journaling, reposting the affirmations, embarking on the digital detox—shouldn't I feel better?*

This approach doesn't look upstream to the sources of our suffering. It doesn't factor in aspects of our lives that can't simply be overridden with routines and willpower. These factors might be personal, like chronic illness, neurodivergence, or traumatic experiences. They might also be systemic, like racism, capitalism, colonialism, homophobia, or ableism. Addressing and confronting the complex web of personal barriers and systems of oppression *is*

the work of wellness. This inner work and systemic work are harder to document and display online.

The digital wellness industry would also have us believe that thriving is a solitary journey. Our culture loves to tell the story of an individual who persisted alone against adversity. Online, healing becomes a performance of personal ascension and achievement. The problem with this type of self-care and self-help rhetoric is that it begins and ends with the self. It doesn't connect us to others who share in our experience. It doesn't motivate or mobilize us toward changing the status quo.

Here are the ways I understand wellness and the values behind this workbook:

› Wellness is **relational**. It is built when we tend to our relationships with others by both seeking and offering support.
› Wellness is about **liberation** for all, not just a privileged few. Mental health is a political conversation.
› Wellness is supported by **creativity**. Making things is a way of experiencing our agency, our truth, and our humanity.

Now you get to decide what wellness feels like for you. This workbook is about creating a definition that includes the unique contexts of your life.

It is for you. It is for all of us.

A New Narrative about Wellness on Social Media

In 2011, two-thirds of Syria's internet access was shut down without notice, in response to mounting unrest at the beginning of a civil war.[1] Following censorship efforts, the United Nations declared access to the internet a basic human right. Their report emphasized how internet access "contributes to the discovery of the truth and progress of society as a whole."[2] Some countries have built this human right into legislation. In 2009, Finland mandated that citizens are entitled to internet connection with a speed of at least one megabit per second.

Though this workbook focuses on social media, virtually every aspect of our lives is touched by the internet. Being online isn't just about our social lives; it's crucial to how we interface with the world around us.

The challenge is that these tools enabling freedom of opinion and expression are not built upon those same virtues. Algorithms create unseen architectures that influence how we communicate, how we shop, how we receive news, how

we vote, and how we perceive what is true. To speak technically, an algorithm is a set of encoded rules enabling technology to automate decisions about what is shared. Algorithms use artificial intelligence to perform tasks that, in the past, would have required human intelligence, like moderating content. They also employ machine learning to sort and analyze data about your online behavior and the behavior of your contacts. They also make predictions about the types of content you are most likely to engage with. Algorithms are programmed to analyze personal data to refine their strategies.

Your newsfeed is a bespoke domain—customized to captivate, provoke, nudge, and continually monitor your actions to craft an increasingly irresistible user experience.
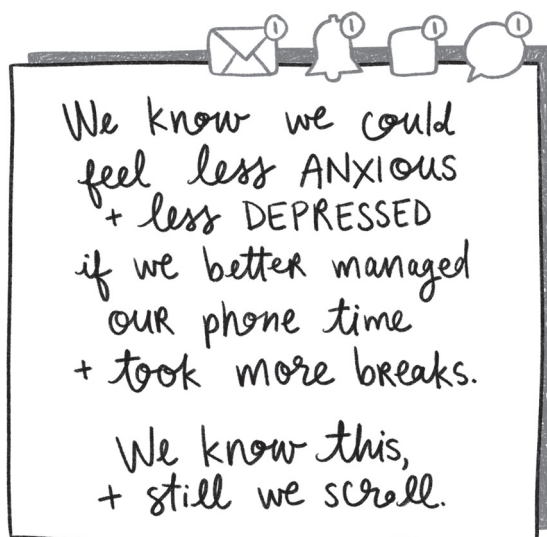
Thriving online isn't just about trying to spend less time scrolling. It is about maintaining your mental health when you choose to sign on by becoming aware of the invisible influences shaping your thoughts and feelings.

Most self-help books agree that leaving or drastically limiting social media is the clearest road to well-being. They offer strategies for reducing screen time and make compelling arguments for deleting your profiles altogether.

I agreed with these strategies until the pandemic. Before 2020, I had drawn a line between my "real life" and the time I spent online. I once did this literally

by taping a red boundary on the floor of my studio apartment between my bedroom and my kitchen, promising myself that I wouldn't stare at a screen in the part of my home that was meant for resting. (This worked for less than a week.)

During the first cycles of pandemic isolation, I noticed that social media felt different than it had before. With my family far away, I relied on technology to remain tethered in my relationships. Zoom rooms became my classrooms, dance floors, community halls, and art studios. Digital communities became my safest sources of belonging. I no longer had the option to practice art therapy in person, and social media opened possibilities for working online. Of course, this expanded usefulness wasn't first discovered as we sheltered in place in the early months of 2020. The accessibility and connective potential of the internet has long been utilized by people for whom the world is less than welcoming. For decades, those experiencing isolation due to factors like chronic illness, prejudice, or displacement have stewarded vibrant online communities. But for many people, the pandemic changed the role social media plays in our lives; it became a vital space that actually supported our wellness.

The advice to simply quit or detox from social media underestimates the role these tools now play in many of our lives. The ability to even consider leaving takes a certain amount of social and financial leverage. By this, I mean it is easier to choose a path of limiting social media use if you have certain privileges.

Can you get your needs for connection and care met through your in-person relationships alone? Do you live in a place where building a like-minded, in-person community is easy? Does face-to-face interaction feel safe and comfortable to you? Could you financially support yourself without the networking and advertising tools built into social media? Do you have an offline platform large enough to sustain the work you do? Does your work require keeping up with the news cycle, current research, or pop culture? Are digital spaces your most accessible sources of fun and entertainment?

Our lives are entwined with social media for so many reasons. We may choose to use social media because it is the safest, easiest, or most sustainable way to meet our basic needs—and a sense of belonging *is* a basic need. Having all our social and financial needs met offline is a type of privilege not everyone has access to. Many of us are not positioned to thrive without the tools social media offers us.

I am not saying social media can—or should—replace our in-person relationships. The conversation has become more nuanced than the binary belief that social media is plainly bad for us. "Just quit" is no longer helpful advice when our lives are so entrenched with digital tools. We are ready for a new narrative—one that tells the truth about why we use social media, how it impacts us, and who benefits from our screen time. We need a narrative that honors the value we find both online and offline.

My Positionality

I'm writing this workbook from the perspective of a person with many privileged intersections of identity. My life and worldview have been shaped by the unearned advantages of being a white, cis settler. My hope is that by including the voices of writers, therapists, artists, and thinkers with different lived experiences from my own, this workbook will speak widely to those exploring what it means to care for their mental health online.

Most important, I do not have all the answers. Though my writing is informed by my work and training as a psychotherapist and art therapist, I don't believe there is a single intervention or perspective to address this problem. In my fifteen years of using social media, I've tried dozens of strategies for controlling my screen time. These days, I am less interested in discovering the mythical *one thing* that works. Claiming to have definitive answers is a good way to sell hope (and books), but similar to diets and pyramid schemes, those who don't find "success" will wonder if something is deeply wrong with them. Instead of pursuing certainty, I feel devoted to being with the question of why screens are so captivating, how they impact my sense of wellness in the world, and how to build a relationship with social media that I don't need to escape.

Instead of telling you exactly what to do or how I permanently fixed my relationship with social media (I haven't! My screen time was up 23 percent last week!), this is a space for you to find your own answers and author your own definition of wellness—online and offline. Your authentic expressions and reflections will be far more valuable than any prescriptive strategy I could assume would work for you. This workbook is designed to help you guide yourself.

This Isn't the End-All Solution

This workbook will *not* help you:

› fix yourself—you're not broken!
› promise a "perfect" or one-size-fits-all digital detox
› tell you the right answers

This Is a Starting Point for a New Relationship

This workbook will help you:

› carve out space in your life to reflect on your relationship with social media
› learn to use art materials to explore and express emotions
› think critically about your digital habits
› learn about the ways technology impacts your mental health and relationships
› explore the political and economic motivations shaping social media
› unpack systemic barriers to personal and collective wellness
› author an authentic definition of well-being online

How to Use This Workbook

This workbook is organized into chapters that explore:

1. Attention
2. Productivity + Urgency
3. Privacy + Performance
4. Comparison + Worthiness
5. Fear + Anger + Disinformation
6. Place + Body + Belonging

At the end of this workbook, you will write your own Gentle Manifesto. This is not another to-do list or a shiny, new self-care regimen, but rather a chance to create a personal philosophy of time well spent. This workbook will help you gather your insights from each chapter and craft a personal statement of what online wellness feels like for you.

In Each Chapter, You Will Find

STORIES + RESEARCH:

We'll explore how art, psychology, history, and digital culture relate to mental health. We'll also hear from the artists, writers, and researchers who are shaping these conversations.

CREATIVE INVITATIONS:

This workbook will invite you to scribble, cut, rearrange, draw, doodle, fill in the blanks, and much more. I use the word *invitation* for creative prompts because it offers choice. There are no requirements in the book except to make it work for you! If you would like to try creating in a way that is different from my instructions, that's amazing! Follow your intuition and express yourself in any way that feels right for you.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

Journaling questions will help you dive deeper into understanding your relationship with social media and the meaning behind your creative expressions. Use the space in this workbook to write and reflect. There are no wrong answers here!

ART THERAPIST TIPS:

I'll pop in once in a while to share a fact or insight from the perspective of art psychotherapy.

HACKS THAT HELP:

I've crowdsourced a few tips and tricks. These are practical strategies that some people find helpful for managing their relationships with technology.

HARVEST EXERCISES:

There is a lot to explore and absorb in this workbook. With that in mind, here are some of the key exercise elements that will repeat as chapter-ending

creative invitations. In the final chapter of the workbook, you'll use these harvest exercises to inform your Gentle Manifesto.

› **Questions:** To help you gather more meaning from your art and writing, the harvest sections open with key questions. It's not about what you should take away, but what you might continue to ponder in order to deepen your reflections.
› **Playlist:** Music is a powerful way to connect with your emotions. You'll make a playlist based on the themes that arise in each chapter.
› **Find the Gift:** Allow your effort to reward you! You'll distill your reflections by imagining the gift, wisdom, or advice you'd like to carry forward with you. These gifts will come together in the Gentle Manifesto when you throw yourself a party.
› **Quilt Square:** You'll color in a quilt square to represent your takeaways in each chapter. By the time you reach the end of this workbook, you will have created six squares to cut and paste into a quilt as a way of "sewing together" your experience.

Other Things to Consider

YOU GET TO CHOOSE YOUR SPEED AND RHYTHM:

As a person with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), I often start projects with a lot of energy and then work on them sporadically over a long period of time. (My craft-supply inventory can attest to this!) Perhaps it would feel right to carve out time on Saturday mornings to work through each chapter. Perhaps you keep this workbook in your backpack to use on your morning commute. Perhaps you reach for this workbook once every few months and skip some invitations entirely. What would it feel like to give yourself permission to work through these pages at whatever pace and rhythm feels natural? What would it feel like to release the pressure to "do it right"? You have my enthusiastic, neurodivergent permission to half-ass it.

YOU GET TO CHOOSE HOW YOU CREATE:

If you find that certain topics, activities, or ways of expressing aren't comfortable or possible for you right now, then adapt this workbook to work for you. If typing is more accessible than handwriting, use a computer or phone

for journaling activities. If speaking is more accessible than writing, explore prompts in a conversation with a trusted friend or a voice memo to yourself. It's always an option to pause or skip invitations.

YOU GET TO CHOOSE WHAT YOU CREATE WITH:

You can complete the invitations in this book with simple art materials like felt pens, pencils, or crayons. But if you feel called to use a different material, have at it! Grab some glitter! Cut up a magazine and glue in pictures! Build up thick layers of paint! All expressions are welcome.

YOU GET TO CHOOSE WHO YOU SHARE YOUR CREATIONS WITH:

It might feel good to share your experience of working through this workbook with others. It might also feel good to keep it completely to yourself. You may change your mind from page to page! Art can be personal and vulnerable. If you're a person who likes to share your self-discovery journeys on social media, pay attention to how you may censor yourself when you anticipate posting your process. Know that you can choose who gets to see and hear your expressions.

Gentle Accountability

I have a hard time sustaining momentum alone. If you'd like to create accountability around this process, try working through this workbook in a group. This is a great way to take your explorations off the page and into your life and community. At the back of this book, you will find a book-club guide with suggestions for fun ways to organize meetings and explore these topics with other people.

Soft Work

Each chapter of this workbook ends with a quilt square.

I used to think about the internet in metaphors like webs and nets—things that organize, tangle, and offer an almost-invisible utility. But these days, when I think about social media's evolving role in my life and the culture at large, I think about making a quilt.

Quilting involves choosing shapes and textures, finding ways to make them fit, and joining them together. Quilting takes time and is often done in community; it's soft work that culminates in an object of comfort, warmth, and legacy.