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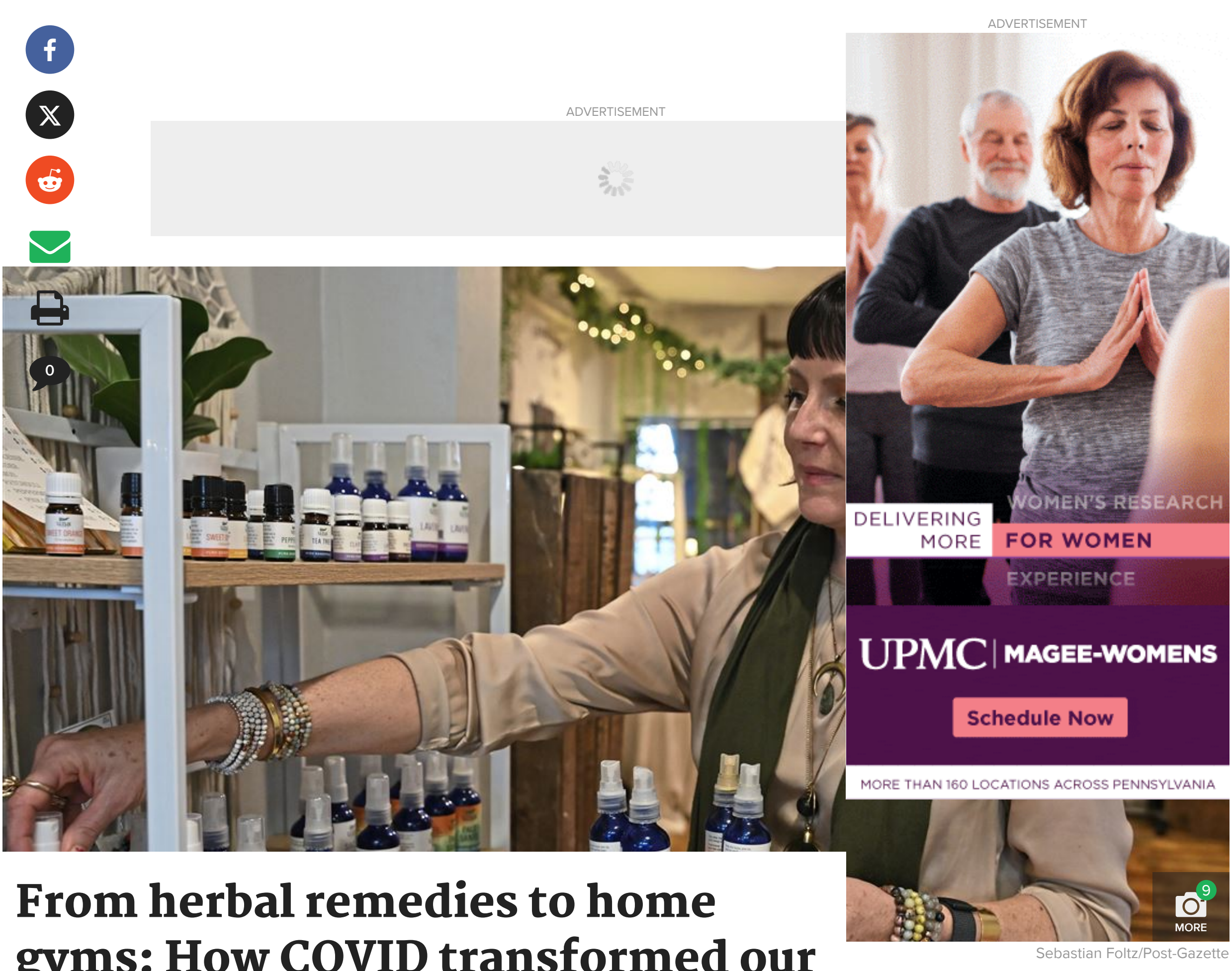

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From herbal remedies to home gyms: How COVID transformed our ideas of self health

The pandemic transformed the way we think about and tend to our personal well-being — with some habits sticking, others designated to history

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When the world shut down during the COVID-19 pandemic, so did our access to many of the traditional ways we cared for ourselves. Gyms, salons, spas and even playgrounds were suddenly off-limits.

In their place, a wave of holistic, natural and self-care practices surged as people searched for ways to stay healthy, reduce anxiety and regain a sense of control from the comfort of their homes.

COVID-19
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COVID transformed the way we think about and tend to our personal well-being — with some habits sticking, others designated to history. As people returned to their pre-pandemic lives, some practices quietly faded, while others grew into mainstream movements that continue to shape the way we think about health, stress management and self care.

At Una Biologicals in Lawrenceville, owner Jessica Graves remembers a huge surge of interest in several of its products, including an all-natural hand sanitizer, herbal teas, eucalyptus vapor rub and essential oil products.

Roberta Burkhart
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"People were trying to figure out ways to keep the germs out of their house, and then also for ways to boost their immune system," she said.

Graves also saw a wave of interest in people wanting to try their hand at concocting things themselves. "What we really saw was a jump in people — particularly because they were home — wanting to make their own products."

With plenty of ingredients stockpiled, Una started home delivering both its finished products and a variety of herbs, oils and other ingredients to newly health-conscious people with time on their hands.

"They realized that essential oils have a lot of antimicrobial, antibacterial, antiviral properties, and there were recipes readily available on the internet. And we were offering ideas and recipes for people as well for what they could make at home."

While at her store "we love our herbs," Graves said, "the knowledge and interest around, particularly elderberry at the time, really jumped with COVID." Two herbal tea blends, Flu Fighter and Immunity Ginger, became incredibly popular and remain so today.

The pandemic significantly increased the demand for immunity-boosting supplements, according to a 2023 report by Future Markets Insight, Inc. Elderberry supplement sales increased by approximately 169%, ringing up more than $265 million in U.S. sales over a period of 50 weeks ending in Nov. 2020, per the report. It projected the gain in popularity of elderberry supplements "is likely to stick around even post-pandemic due to changed consumer behavior towards health supplements."

Another popular Una Biologicals product during COVID was Bandits, a clove, lemon and eucalyptus essential oil blend that is "highly antibacterial, highly antimicrobial, antiviral," that is similar to the trademarked Thieves oil, which, as the story goes, was used by highwaymen in the 14th and 15th centuries. The knaves wore masks soaked in the antibacterial oils to prevent themselves from falling ill while ransacking the homes and bodies of bubonic plague victims.

Hanna Webster
Long COVID has impacted about 1M in Pa. But what do we know about it?

"What we really saw was a jump in people — particularly because they were home — wanting to make their own products," says Una Biologicals owner Jessica Graves, holding essential oil sprays.
(Sebastian Foltz/Post-Gazette)

Homebody gains

In addition to tinctures, teas and balms, many people started to take a harder look at how they were caring for their bodies physically, said Ken Wunderlin, regional manager of G&G Fitness Equipment, with locations in Cranberry, McMurray and Monroeville.

Arguably the most well-known fitness craze of the early COVID days were Peloton bikes — stationary exercise bicycles equipped with a touchscreen and streaming live and on-demand fitness classes, allowing users to participate in interactive workouts from home.

The bikes came with a hefty price tag — they were selling for up to $2,500 apiece, not including the $39 monthly subscription to online classes, plus additional costs for accessories such as shoes, weights and mats.

Soon, other companies copied the bikes and online classes and Peloton's market domination began to wane, Wunderlin said.

According to the Associated Press, Peloton, which became a public company in 2019, saw its stock price sink to its lowest on record in 2024 following its pandemic hot streak.

Peloton never got a "super strong foothold, the bikes weren't rated highly and the idea was replicable by other companies at a lower cost," Wunderlin said. But what did happen was that more people became interested in working out at home for the health benefits.

In 2019, about 7% of consumers used live-streamed workouts. During COVID-19, this increased to over 80%, according to a study by MindBody, a wellness technology platform. In another report, by the World Economic Forum, the downloading of fitness apps surged by 50% during the first half of 2020.

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted many yoga studios to pivot to online classes as well; per a yoga market projection by Grand View Research, that realm will see continued growth in the coming years. Innovations like virtual reality and augmented reality are also emerging as ways to enhance the yoga experience, enabling people to practice at home.

"COVID definitely drove home the point of health," including the understanding of what 'high risk' meant, Wunderlin said. "I do think that a lot of people thought to themselves, 'OK, I want to be healthier so things like [COVID] may not affect me quite so much as someone who lives a less healthy lifestyle.'"

Before the pandemic, most of G&G's home gym sales were to people pursuing a muscular physique, Wunderlin said. Now, the predominant customer base for home gyms has shifted to those who are focused on maintaining their quality of health, he said.

"That idea of 'I can continue to lift up my grandkids or carry heavy groceries. ... I can reduce the pain involved with arthritis, if I continue to move myself and strength train, I bounce back faster from surgeries, if I'm physically strong as well as cardiovascularly strong,' is where most people are looking for their benefits," he said.

Charles Lockwood, owner of Mobile Physio based out of Mt. Lebanon, said the pandemic opened people's eyes to just how many treatments traditionally done in clinics or doctors' offices could be easily — and effectively — handled at home.

Lockwood provides in-home physical therapy, bringing equipment like treatment tables and weights directly to his clients. During COVID, Lockwood worked in a hospital setting but the demand for at-home services prompted his move to all-mobile therapy, he said.

"There are plenty of people who liked to go to the clinic, but a lot really enjoy the convenience" of in-home treatment. They don't need to worry about finding a ride to the office and they save time by having the therapist come to them, Lockwood said.

Mind matters

The lockdown also drove home the need for mental self-care practices for many.

In the first year of the pandemic, the global prevalence of anxiety and depression increased by a massive 25%, according to a scientific brief released in 2022 by the World Health Organization (WHO).

"We can all remember so much fear and uncertainty about how you caught COVID, what the outcomes were if you did, how to mitigate its effects if you did," said Blake Gibson, an assistant professor of adult, child and adolescent psychiatry at WVU Rockefeller Neuroscience Institute's department of behavioral medicine and psychiatry.

Gibson, who lives in Pittsburgh and now sees all of his patients virtually, credits the fear and uncertainty during the pandemic for helping to drive people to seek mind-body health via untraditional methods.

"Holistic practices were interesting to people because there was so much that could not be controlled," he said. "People were looking for things that they could do that would be health promoting or disease mitigating."

Supply chain constraints and demand for certain products — "everything from echinacea to vitamin C" — created space for interest in alternative pathways to health, including "mind/body practices, more contemplative practices, more yoga."

"Those kinds of things weren't in shortage. You could learn a meditative practice and you didn't need a certain ingredient list for that," Gibson said. "I think if there was ever a silver lining to lockdown, it's that families that were together in a functional way could spend more time outdoors, and maybe some individuals rediscovered the importance of that."

Noshene Ranjbar, one of Gibson's mentors from his studies at the University of Arizona's Andrew Weil Center for Integrative Medicine, found that the surge of telehealth and online mental health and self-care groups opened up a new world of care for those who, pre-pandemic, were loath to attend in-person sessions and appointments.

"So I think this is the other gift of the pandemic: It allowed people to be able to find spaces that before the pandemic they couldn't find," said Ranjbar, director of the Integrative Psychiatry Program at UA's College of Medicine in Tucson.

One of the ways that Ranjbar saw that unfold was via eight-week mind-body skills groups hosted by the Center for Mind Body Medicine, a nonprofit organization based in Washington, D.C. The program brought small groups of people together online to learn "self-care skills, how to deal with your stress, how to ground your body, your senses and not get hooked into" the anxieties of the pandemic, she said. Participants joined from across the country and from varied backgrounds; some were even lonely COVID patients barred from having visitors as they recuperated in their hospital beds.

In addition, the program trained facilitators who would lead the groups in learning evidence-based techniques, including "various forms of mindfulness, guided imagery, different types of meditation, movement of the body, music, use of crayons and just creative expression to get your feelings out."

Online connection became a mental health lifeline to many who struggled with isolation and depression during the pandemic, said both Gibson and Ranjbar.

"I mean everything about COVID was an example to me of how our lives can turn upside down in just a moment and how creative human innovative capacities to learn from nature and do things that we're not used to can be life affirming and help us survive," Ranjbar said.

The lockdown and its many obstacles really challenged people's "consumerist materialist culture," said Gibson. "You couldn't get things for a while. ... So, what are you going to do? Are you going to make a garden? You're going to have a sourdough starter? You're going to spend time with your loved ones? It's interesting how it shone the spotlight on: 'How do we want to live?'"

And that trend has not faded, he said.

"That seems to be a continuing question: Not just what are we living, but how do we want to do it? My wife calls it 'healing at home.' And I think that's such a wonderful term."

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