

OPINION

Why sauna is gaining steam

ALAN JALASJAA

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Enjoying the benefits of a temporary sauna hut on the ice of Lac Des Mille Lacs, Ontario.

DAVID JACKSON/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Alan Jalasjaa is the Canadian representative of Sauna from Finland, and the host of the podcast [Kivia: The Spirit of Sauna](#).

David Beckham. Gordon Ramsay. Gwyneth Paltrow. Justin Bieber. These days, everywhere you turn, you hear celebrities touting the health benefits of sauna.

Medical professionals are as well – including Peter Attia, a physician and author of the New York Times bestselling book *Outlive: The Science and Art of Longevity*.

When it comes to sauna and increased longevity, Dr. Attia says, “The burden of evidence is so strong, it’s becoming hard to ignore. ... When you look at the largest published series on this, you see a benefit in all-cause mortality – a relative risk reduction of 40 per cent and an absolute risk reduction of 18 per cent. Those are ridiculous numbers.”

It makes sense that those numbers are turning heads. As a Canadian of Finnish descent, I grew up with sauna (a term we use less as a noun and more as a reference to the activity or experience). My summers were spent at my grandparents’ cottage in the Kawarthas, where sauna was a family affair.

Now, as a self-described “sauna evangelist,” a sauna builder and the host of a podcast dedicated exclusively to sauna, I’m thrilled to see so many people discovering the wonders of sauna for the first time.

But I am concerned that some of the new converts are getting into it for the wrong reasons – i.e., focusing too much on the long-term health benefits and missing the bigger picture.

I’ll tell you why.

First, there is so much more to sauna than just the health benefits.

In Finland and other Nordic countries, people have been using sauna for thousands of years – long before the advent of modern medicine. It’s likely that the Finns always understood the health benefits of sauna without requiring medical studies to confirm it.

But would Finns still sauna if there weren’t any health benefits? Absolutely.

The reality is that Finns were – and still are – far more focused on the social, cultural, spiritual and meditative benefits of sauna.

Finns understand that sauna provides a special kind of solace from the demands of daily life, and a particular type of shared space – a place where barriers are broken down, and new and old relationships are nurtured.

In fact, a sauna is a place where conversations and connections are born that may not occur anywhere else.

For an example, look no further than the Sundance Festival award-winning documentary *Smoke Sauna Sisterhood*, which was also the Estonian entry for the Best International Feature Film at this year's Oscars. The film documents a group of women who regularly gather in a traditional Estonian smoke sauna, sharing, as the filmmakers note, “their innermost secrets and intimate experiences. ... Cleansing their bodies and baring their souls, they embrace the healing power of sisterhood.”

It's important not to focus solely on the stats indicating the long-term health benefits of sauna. After all, research tells us that abstract, future-looking prognoses are a terrible motivator for self-care activities such as diet, exercise and sleeping. Why would sauna be any different?

Michelle Segar, an award-winning behavioural science researcher, has spent the past three decades studying how to help people adopt exercise and self-care in ways that can be sustained.

Though it seems counterintuitive, Dr. Segar and others have found that people whose goals are long-term – such as weight loss, better health or avoiding disease – tend to spend the least amount of time exercising. This is true even for older adults, a study of 335 men and women ages 60 to 95 showed (i.e., those for whom the benefits aren't as long-term or intangible). Rather, immediate rewards that enhance daily life – more energy, a better mood, less

stress and more opportunity to connect with friends and family – offer far more motivation.

When people are motivated by medical studies, they're generally clutching at something intangible – the promise of a potentially longer and/or healthier life. But how would you really know if sauna use was adding years to your life or had increased the quality of your life as you age? This approach is like squirrelling your money away for a rainy day that never comes. What about living in the present?

When it comes to sauna, there are so many tangible benefits that give you an immediate payoff in the here and now. Sauna use gives you a significant release of dopamine (a neurotransmitter) and beta-endorphin (a neuropeptide hormone), both of which instantly make you feel good and improve your energy, mood and pain tolerance.

After a sauna session, most people report sleeping like a baby, having less anxiety and stress, and having a greater sense of well-being than they did before.

There's also the communing with nature that happens when using an outdoor sauna – especially if there's a nearby body of water to plunge into between sessions – and the sense of community around enjoying some postsauna beverages and snacks.

Then there's the theory that sauna just makes people happier over all. Case in point: Finland has been named the happiest country in the world for seven straight years by the World Happiness Report. There are also three million saunas in Finland for 5.5 million people.

Coincidence? I think not. (Okay, maybe having a really good social-safety net helps, too, but still.)

The point is: There are so many short-term benefits to sauna use, and studies show that those short-term perks are what keep us coming back for more, thus

enabling us to enjoy all those long-term health benefits that sauna provides in the end.

Still need convincing? Then my suggestion is to find a Finn or someone who grew up with sauna and ask them to take you for a session. And if you can't find someone to take you, give me a call.

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