

[Culture](#)



To extend his own longevity, Bryan Johnson adheres to a plan that includes gene therapy, swallowing about fifty pills a day, regular blood tests, light therapies and wearables that monitor various vital signs. (Netflix)



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Bryan Johnson avoids alcohol, smoking, sweets and processed food. His daily workouts include a combination of strength training, cardio and mobility exercises. Reasonable enough – but his wellness practices go much further. Johnson's not just

interested in prolonging his life; he hopes to evade death completely.

The basis for the Netflix documentary "[Don't Die: The Man Who Wants to Live Forever](#)" might sound like a joke, but it is quite serious. As a "tech bro," Johnson uses an algorithm to determine which supplements and routines will extend his longevity and prevent the seemingly unpreventable. His training plan for this includes gene therapy, swallowing about fifty pills a day, regular blood tests, light therapies and wearables that monitor various vital signs.

For Johnson, self-optimization functions as a replacement for religion. Once active in the Mormon church, Johnson had a faith crisis; workaholism, a rocky marriage and other challenges contributed to a reevaluation of his entire belief system. Johnson's solution was to leave his mind to tend to his body. The body – the care and keeping of it – gave him another, less bleak place to go.

To achieve everlasting life, Johnson's religious replacement mirrors some of the Christian religion. His self-optimizing lifestyle is filled with ritual, sacrifice and even the shedding of blood: Johnson regularly receives a blood plasma transfusion from his youthful, vibrant son.

Self-optimization might be Johnson's plea for salvation, but he has credited his religious upbringing with giving him the determination to adhere to this lifestyle. Discipline is a high value held in Christian diet culture, which sells the narrative that the physical body is an outward sign of an inward spiritual reality: willpower is considered a virtue that indicates one's obedience to God. While Johnson's lifestyle of self-optimization may personally function as a religious replacement, and may shock or even offend other Christians, his practices aren't too far out of line with what is preached in many churches.

If Johnson's focus on taming the body to achieve immortality reads masculine, Hannah Neeleman – the tradwife influencer whose empire is known as Ballerina Farm – is the feminine flipside.

A Mormon cattle rancher who makes from-scratch meals and chooses unmedicated childbirths (seemingly with ease: last January, she competed in the Mrs. World pageant just 12 days after giving birth to her eighth child), Neeleman's presentation is softer than Johnson's. But Neeleman participates in a similar quest for bodily control. She, too, is an athlete, a former Juilliard Ballerina who still regularly practices dance and competes in pageants on the world stage.

Optimizing the body does not just allow for a reprieve from existential angst; it also takes a person's focus off the outside world. One can see this in Johnson's loneliness and Neeleman's out-of-touch rhetoric, which implies that her lifestyle is available to anyone.

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Follow Neeleman on social media, and you'll find a proliferation of videos of her heavily pregnant, lifting weights in their family's home gym, doing lunges outdoors in the middle of snowstorms or cold plunging in streams on her property. She sells a protein powder that combines her "ingredient-conscious upbringing" with her husband's dedication to "strength training and muscle building."

Johnson and Neeleman share similar religious backgrounds and have credited their upbringing with their ability to adhere to such physical discipline. But these individuals (and the growing number of optimizing influencers like them) have a drive that far surpasses the Christian virtue of temperance.

If all of life is theological, and if the body matters to God, then the way a person treats their body is indicative of what a person believes about God – especially when a person identifies as religious or as having a religious background.

Christianity is an embodied religion. The God-man came to earth in the flesh. Here, he ate and drank, some said with abandon (Luke 7:34). He napped during storms at sea (Mark 4:38). In grief, he wept (John 11:35). Apparently, he wasn't much to look at (Isaiah 53:2). And, at the age of 33, he died young.

Jesus wasn't much of a self-optimizer. Sure, his body was a temple, the epitome of one, but – at least based upon biblical accounts – he didn't seem to be hypervigilant about controlling it.

Johnson and Neeleman, on the other hand, demonstrate consuming and obsessive attempts for control. They, and others like them, seem to have swallowed a restrict-binge theology: pleasure-denial now yields ultimate reward later. These two optimizers have, by most measures, everything. And the way they have secured everything has been by saying "no" to a particular thing: their bodies. In a world of abundance, the ultimate power move is demonstrating the ability to abstain – and that is precisely what these two cultural figures are doing.

Living in these extremes is, of course, a distraction, as anyone who has ever restricted food or drink and then binged later will know. Johnson admits as much: he turned to optimization to escape the torments of his mind. But optimizing the body does not just allow for a reprieve from existential angst; it also takes a person's focus off the outside world. One can see this in Johnson's loneliness and Neeleman's out-of-touch rhetoric, which implies that her lifestyle is available to anyone.

Neeleman and Johnson push the limits of the human body. Not to empower the poor or heal the sick; not to save the lost or bring hope to the hopeless. Their pursuits are not others-focused at all but myopic and self-centered. They optimize their bodies for one overarching purpose: to gain power. When someone is too busy optimizing their own body, they lack the time and energy to see the needs of the bodies of others.

This preoccupation of self is not the inevitable inheritance of the Christian religion. It's not what Jesus gave us. Jesus gave us the path of radical love that allows us to be present here, attending to the banal but blessed callings we have on earth right now, right in these imperfect and mortal bodies.

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