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Is Biohacking a Load of Baloney?

Dan Matthews · Wednesday, October 31st, 2018

This doesn't sound that unreasonable, does it? Tech CEO and biohacker [Serge Faguet](#) wants the following:

“Good mood, confidence, focus, energy, willpower, stress resilience, brainpower, calm, health, longevity, removal of social anxieties/inhibitions. All the time. With minimal investment of time and minimal risk.”

To achieve these results, Faguet runs himself through a gamut of supplements and prescriptions, as well as a strict regimen of exercise, mental strength training, nutrition, and “sleep hygiene.” Among the supplements are some questionable things like “life extension mix capsules” — just a bunch of vitamins crammed together in an expensive package and delivered in their least bioavailable form — and omega-3 capsules — new [research](#) reveals that omega-3 supplements don't actually aid heart-health or achieve any of their purported benefits.

What Faguet may be getting wrong is the “minimal investment of time and minimal risk” part. He's spent about \$200,000, which for most people isn't a “minimal investment,” and he's pumping himself full of prescriptions and supplements that could hurt him in the long run. He'll need to keep spending plenty to maintain the lifestyle. Faguet seems to be searching for a magical, get-rich-quick type of approach to health. As his biometrics show, Faguet has achieved positive results. But an epidemiologist who goes by the handle “Gid M-K” [puts it this way](#):

“Adding expensive supplements and liver-damaging prescription medications to your basic health advice is both dangerous and pointless, because you'll probably get the exact same results with the basic health advice itself.”

Faguet is like many techie biohackers, many of whom infest Silicon Valley and spend their money trying to preserve themselves instead of using it to help offset the harmful effects of the gentrification they're causing.

Biohacking is certainly a modern trend, but it has its roots in the basic human urge to improve existence through a variety of external remedies. In Southeast Asia and other tropical regions, farmers and manual laborers have traditionally chewed the leaves of the [kratom plant](#), or made tea

from them, to increase productivity, reduce fatigue, and improve overall wellness. Kratom is related to coffee, so for those of us who swear by coffee and it's life-giving goodness, that makes sense.

There are a lot of supplements that can help people perform better in one way or another. A [study](#) showed that, compared with a placebo, ancient peat and apple extracts improve athletic performance. For thousands of years, people have been eating [capsicum chile peppers](#) fresh or dried — their instinct led them to understand what we know now, which is that the capsaicin chemical in peppers helps you feel better — it's anti-inflammatory, can help prevent ulcers and cancer, possesses powerful antioxidants, and is great for heart health.

Ancient and not-so-ancient cultures also took a variety of [performance-enhancing substances](#) that sound wacky to us now. A runner named Thomas Hicks mixed strychnine, a poison, with brandy and egg whites to win gold in the 1904 Olympics — then he went straight to the hospital. Ancient Egyptian athletes boiled Abyssinian asses' hooves in oil and added rose hips to taste. Cyclists in the 1870s soaked sugar cubes in ether. A physiologist in the 1800s injected himself with guinea pig sperm. The ancient Aztecs ate human hearts, and the [Greeks chewed on raw animal testicles](#).

So is biohacking really that insane if people have been doing this stuff for ages? When it comes to human wellness and even enhancement, scientists would rather defer to all the [new healthcare tech](#) they've been working on, including telehealth wearables and apps, which can tell you when to take your FDA-approved prescriptions, and genomics, which could potentially isolate genes and allow doctors to select for the good genes and get rid of the bad. Through genomics and the gene-editing tool CRISPR, scientists are on the verge of being able to biohack our genes, which is kind of a scary thought, especially if you've seen *Gattaca*.

Biohacking resides in the gray area somewhere between pseudoscience (think anything Gwyneth Paltrow has ever promoted with “Goop”), placebos — which actually work in a [surprising number of cases](#) — and bonafide science.

Serge Faguet is completely right to believe exercise, mental wellness, sleep, and good nutrition will help him live a longer life. But the prescriptions and supplements he's taking turn him into a walking human experiment. And he's completely wrong about one thing. In an innocuous sort of way, Faguet includes an image of a robot in his [blog post](#); beneath it are the words “We are (complex) robots. Robots can be tuned and improved.”

Many biohackers are programmers and tech evangelists who may agree. If humans are robots, how are we capable of irrational thinking and actions that go against our wellbeing and our neighbors' wellbeing? How are we capable of empathy? Where do desire and abstraction come from if we're just robots responding in complex ways to stimuli?

Clearly, biohackers like Faguet won't produce anything that resembles art — unless a fine-tuned, biohacked human body can be a work of art. Can someone be a work of art and a complex robot at the same time? That's a topic for another post.

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