



LEFT
Moments of calm can be found in the heart of Hong Kong's Asaya wellness centre. Photo: Rosewood Hong Kong



STORY MEGAN C HILLS

LUXURY STATE OF MIND

As post-pandemic travel resumes, the world's luxury hotels are turning their attention to the timely issue of guests' mental health

*RAKxa Wellness
and Medical
Retreat in Bangkok.
Photo: RAKxa*





ABOVE
Luxury hotel groups are combining conventional wellness offerings with a focus on mental health. Photo: Getty Images

When most people think of luxury hotels, they conjure up images of decadence: five-star fine dining, Egyptian cotton sheets and candlelit spas. An appointment with a mental health counsellor doesn't immediately spring to mind.

That could be changing though, as luxury hotels put more of a focus on mental health in their wellness offerings. As the world emerges from the pandemic, conversations about our mental well-being have become more prominent, with the World Health Organization revealing the pandemic triggered a 25 per cent increase in anxiety and depression globally.

While many wellness programmes typically swing between tailored sessions at the gym and pampering at the spa, hotels are increasingly making space for more mental health-centric offerings as guests begin to reassess what it is to be really – honestly – well.

"Mental health is an area of concern for billions of people," says Dusadee Tancharoen, managing director of Bangkok's RAKxa Wellness and Medical Retreat, which includes mental health among its core tenets. "We cannot claim to help people become truly well without adding this essential element into our programmes."



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ABOVE
Kit Shum offers art therapy, positive psychology and hypnosis at Asaya. Photo: Rosewood Hong Kong

Tancharoen also talks about the symbiotic nature of physical and mental health, explaining how stress and anxiety “are often the symptoms of hormonal and digestive systems imbalance” – areas which wellness programmes have in the past addressed with on-site nutritionists, rather than with mental health experts.

Other groups have started creating programmes in conjunction with trained counsellors and mental health organisations. Kimpton Hotels announced this February it was providing up to 1,000 free therapy sessions to its guests, thanks to a collaboration with Talkspace, a digital platform that connects licensed therapists with those seeking help for online sessions. Kimpton CEO Mike DeFrino said the company was aiming to provide “more mental health support for our people and guests” moving forwards.

In 2021, Miraval, the Hyatt’s luxury wellness brand, announced a partnership with the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) in response to the pandemic’s “unpredictable, unprecedented events”.

While Miraval and NAMI stopped short of providing professional counselling, its guests

BELOW

The links between physical and mental health are becoming the focus of many hotel wellness offerings, with diets tailored to target both physical and psychological ailments. Photo: iStockphoto



can now unwind with a series of complimentary videos covering everything from guided meditation to ASMR-focused clips to help reduce anxiety.

More locally, Asaya at Rosewood Hong Kong has taken a slightly different approach to mental health support, choosing to expand its presence within general well-being offerings. It’s a particularly prescient mission in the city, where non-profit Mind reports that one in seven residents live with mental health conditions – but 26 per cent of mental health sufferers do not seek professional help.

In the case of the Rosewood’s recent 18-week Asaya x Hybrid 360 programme, mental well-being was one of the core pillars, with a fifth of the sessions dedicated specifically to it, led by visiting practitioners and resident behavioural health expert Kit Shum. ➔



“Kit Shum provides different levels of mental-emotional experiences, ranging from meditation and expressive arts therapy – which helps to unveil deeper issues – to more psychological experiences like hypnosis, cognitive behavioural therapy and positive psychology,” explains Corinna Yap, Asaya’s wellness director.

Through her holistic approach, says Yap, “Kit is able to guide guests from the beginning, with

gentler experiences, then becoming more open to therapy-like treatments.”

In Thailand, at RAKxa’s holistic healing centre RAKxa Jai, a trained therapist is on-hand to provide cognitive behavioural therapy, hypnotherapy and neuro-linguistic programming sessions to guests – combining all three approaches with an offering called Rapid Transformational Therapy to “replace old

ABOVE
Water offers moments of tranquillity amid the bustle of daily life.
Photo: RAKxa



unhelpful beliefs and behaviours” in a luxury retreat setting. Its longer retreat programmes, which include long Covid and de-stressing treatments, can also be tailored for guests who want to include mental health support as a part of their wellness journey.

Yap explained their aim was to create a “neutral and safe space”, while Tancharoen described RAKxa as an environment which “focuses on you completely”, with one of the most crucial aspects of its programmes helping guests “learn the tools they need to take care of themselves at home”.

More than anything, one of the appeals of pursuing a wellness programme or retreat for guests is the complete removal of external forces. A place like Asaya, says Yap, “will take you away from your everyday environment and habits that normally could induce stress, allowing you to take your mind away from distractions and address issues on hand”.

As mental health discussions have become more prevalent in recent years, adding focused support to wellness programmes had become a “fast-moving trend” added Yap, while Tancharoen said hotels needed to adapt to visitors’ desires for wellness travel.

Yap warns guests should do their research

BELOW
Asaya’s behavioural health expert Kit Shum. Photo: Rosewood Hong Kong



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CORINNA YAP

before booking, as not all offerings are the same. She said, “[Guests should look] into whether the services being provided are entry-level only, or is the hotel or brand taking a more authentic and serious approach with certified practitioners or even doctors?”

While Tancharoen said the addition of mental health to wellness services would help groups “stay ahead of the game”, she stressed, “Guests need to unearth the issues completely and get a full diagnostic review to achieve long term results.” +



BELOW
Bangkok’s RAKxa Wellness and Medical Retreat offers a range of therapies to boost both physical and mental health. Photo: RAKxa

