

Everything starts with posture: Interview with Mirjana Prokic, founder of hangAIR

Maddyness speaks to Mirjana Prokic about leaving a high-powered but impossibly stressful marketing job to become a healthtech entrepreneur, the Alexander Technique, and helping healthcare professionals suffering from pain and burnout.

hangAIR provides smart incliners – complete with an integrated wellness app – to tackle mental strain, respiratory problems, back pain and trouble sleeping. In this interview, we hear about how Mirjana, the startup’s founder, found conventional solutions to be lacking when she experienced personal health trouble. Mirjana outlines how perfecting her posture changed her life, and explains why swimming remains her meditation.

[Maddyness] Tell us what your startup does and how it came about in your own words. Did you have expertise and

experience in the field you chose?

[Mirjana] Almost three years ago, I hit the wall after over a decade working as a global marketing lead for a topnotch company. My life was a solid cycle of work stress, constant jetlag, lower back pain, and sleep deprivation.

Despite eating a healthy diet, doing yoga regularly, and staying fit swimming and working out at the gym, I came to a screeching halt. It was time to reset my life. I started to look at how and why I was suffering and the more I discovered about sleep, relaxation, and anatomy, the more the idea for hangAIR developed. So I remortgaged my flat to raise cash two years ago and embarked on life as a health tech entrepreneur.

[See hangAIR on NOTWICS connecting people](#)

How does bad posture affect people in the long-term? Can it really lead to respiratory problems?

Early on in my journey I called on friends across the medical spectrum, doctors and scientists, as well as in the health sector to ask their advice and thoughts and ideas on mental stress, burnout, anxiety, respiratory problems, back pain and sleep deprivation.

My research showed over three billion people around the world suffer from respiratory problems sparked by a wide range of diseases such as COVID-19, COPD and cystic fibrosis and other problems such as sleep apnea, back pain, sleep deprivation, mental stress and anxiety, and sports-related ailments.

The science is that bad posture and other related habits really impact their mental fitness, productivity, wellbeing, sleep, and breathing.

How did the Alexander Technique influence hangAIR's development?

The aligning processes offered by the Alexander Technique helps people to feel better through better posture and movement.

Everything starts with a posture. The moment we wake up, how we position our body when we want to get up, reach out for something, when we want to sit down, the way we hold our bodies in the water when we swim, etc. - the posture impacts the outcome.

It's the same with rest. If we hold our bodies correctly in a good alignment it is more likely that we will get the best outcomes from rest. And specifically, the Alexander Technique's Monkey Position is something that we do from a young age - when we're toddlers trying to reach something on the ground. We bend our knees slightly, align our back, neck and head in order to protect ourselves from injury. I am a big fan of the Alexander Technique and am using its methods in my regular swimming.

However, few people in our always-on world have the time, or opportunity, to fully leverage Alexander Technique teachings. So we are pioneering the transfer of body alignment from the Monkey Position into hangAIR for better release and relief of back and neck strain.

Do you envisage this being used in medical establishments? Is it a substitute for medical treatment, part of it, or something to assist it?

Absolutely - hangAIR is an ideal solution for use in medical establishments. COVID-19 has highlighted the potential benefits of hangAIR in a medical environment, where healthcare workers suffer significant burnout due to high stress and long working hours with limited rest breaks.

The consequences can be devastating from both a patient's health perspective as well as for the medical facility with error-related litigation costing the NHS around £1.3B annually, according to studies. And let's not forget that more than 1 billion people in the world suffer from respiratory conditions and the ones with cystic fibrosis, COPD, sleep apnea and COVID-19 could benefit from hangAIR massively due to the prone position that hangAIR offers.

What is the function of the integrated wellness app?

The pioneering app we have developed to run together with hangAIR enables users to understand and correct postural and other related habits that impact their mental fitness, productivity, wellbeing, sleep and breathing.

In addition we have integrated bio-sensors into the hangAIR incliner to collect and measure heart, breathing and other physiological data that gives users personalised and actionable insights about their sleep, energy and stress levels via an imbedded LCD screen (later on a VR device once they get slimmer and simpler) and audio-speakers, which deliver audio-visual stimulation to induce relaxation, sleep and reduce stress.

The simplest way to explain hangAIR is to compare it with Peloton - what Peloton has done for fitness activation, where all energy boosting buttons are switched on, hangAIR will do for fitness recovery.

How is the wellness landscape changing, particularly in light of COVID-19?

The pandemic is remaking the wellness business (currently worth an estimated \$4.5T in the US), because it is helping to fuel the rise of telemedicine, at-home fitness and digital therapies, and redefining consumers' definition of health and wellbeing. There's little doubt that health has now become a key focus for consumers readjusting to a 'new normal.'

Months of social distancing is changing how consumers approach fitness and overall wellness - and the change may be permanent. The WSL Strategic Retail 2019 study 'How America Shops' revealed that 73% of the US population was engaged in some aspect of living well, from healthier eating and meditation to stress reduction and fitness - with many people beginning to dabble in

proactive and preventative health and wellness practices.

What have been your biggest professional challenges during lockdown? (and have there been unexpected rays of sunshine?)

We started raising funds literally the week before the first lockdown which wasn't the best time. As everyone was panicking, I kept my faith and all my instincts were telling me that it's going to be alright and that we are needed now more than ever. So I reached out to friends and some angel investors in my immediate circle, and in addition to my own funds, we managed to raise enough funding to keep us going with the MVP development despite the odds.

Perhaps even more encouraging, we also potentially won our first customer with a letter of intent for a preliminary order of 505 units from the government of Saudi Arabia. We've agreed an exciting partnership with [Synctuition](#), the world's first meditation app with 3D sound that goes far beyond meditative relaxation to provide an immersive mind-travel experience.

Manufacturing and distribution facilities have also been arranged with a company in Norfolk, Virginia, in the USA, and we are forging ahead with achieving B Corp status for hangAIR to signal our commitment to meeting the highest standards of verified social and environmental performance, public transparency, and legal accountability in ways that balance profit and purpose.

We managed to make the most of what initially seemed to be a huge challenge with a risk to put the business on hold, and even reached a few critical milestones.

Do you have any advice for future founders?

Before everything else, you have to believe in yourself and develop an overarching commitment to make the idea happen no matter what. You are either all in, or not at all. Be patient and have trust when things may not go the way you imagined.

Be prepared for unexpected winds to throw you around, and be a master of adjusting the sails as that's the only thing that you have in your control. Basically: adjust!

And finally, a more personal question. What's your daily routine at the moment – and what are the rules you're living by to get you through COVID-19?

I was already working in a similar way before COVID-19. My goal is to manage to disconnect from my thoughts at least once a day. And people who meditate know how hard it is to achieve that, but how important clarity in decision making is for our wellbeing.

I do it though swimming. That connection with the water and focusing only on the stroke and the breathing is priceless. I swim butterfly stroke so there is not much room for any thought but the stroke and the breathing!

I also learned the impact of a 20 minute nap from my mum. I cannot wait to have hangAIR in my house as I do feel excessive sitting on my lower back quite badly.

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