



Changemakers Podcast episode 9 transcript – “Thrive With Arianna Huffington”

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Guest Arianna Huffington,
Founder, [Thrive Global](#)

Omar Abbosh [MUSIC]

Hello, my name is Omar Abbosh, and I am the Corporate Vice President of Industry Solutions at Microsoft.

will.i.am And I'm will.i.am, entrepreneur, philanthropist, musician and producer, and my mother's son.

And this is Changemakers.

Omar There are a lot of people around the world driving change that impacts society. In this series, we'll share stories of transformation directly from the leaders themselves who made the change. We'll talk about their obstacles, their triumphs, their learnings, and how technology has accelerated their mission.

Omar So, Will, when was the last time you felt burned out at work?

Will Traveling around the world can really burn you out. So as far as my music work that could really drain you. So I think the last time I felt burned out at work was two weeks ago. Because that's a very demanding physically, mentally, spiritually—musicians, crew, travel crew, travel personnel, the people that are

building the stages—that's a different level of work that people don't really ask of you.

And the solution for that, sometimes people don't come out of it. I've lost, I lost a couple of people because of just a strenuous work schedule and the vices that they lean on to cope.

Omar

Yeah, I mean, it's a serious topic, isn't it? I remember around the financial crisis back in 2008-2009, I just got a new role running an operation and then six days later Lehman Brothers happened. And around the same time, my lovely ex-wife and I fell apart. And we had two very young kids and there was a lot of things piling up one on top of the other. And for sure that didn't feel like a good moment in my life. And when I hear about people feeling pressure from combination of work and home, I try as hard as I possibly can be to be empathetic to that.

Omar

The U S Department of Labor says that one in five Americans struggle from some form of mental illness every year. And the last three years have only heightened stress and anxiety for those trying to balance work with their economic uncertainty. Many have struggled to navigate family and childcare while working from home. And some companies have been forced to adjust as workers suffering from burnout, decide to just leave the workforce altogether. In the last year, it has become clear that prioritizing employee wellbeing and happiness is no longer just a benefit. It's literally a necessity if companies want to stay competitive.

Arianna Huffington knows this, and five years ago she founded Thrive Global, a behavior change technology company dedicated to helping businesses address stress and burnout amongst their employees. She joins us today to discuss the importance of wellness in a world, transitioning back to work.

Welcome Arianna Huffington.

**Arianna
Huffington**

Thank you so much, Omar. And Will, so great to be with both of you.

Will

It's good to see you again, Arianna. I remember when I think I was in, we were in Dubai, the first time that I heard of Thrive. And you told it to me, and it hit me in the heart. Not only in the heart, it hit me in the mind. Because at that point in time, I was—this was before the pandemic—and I was bouncing all around the earth and I've been bouncing around the earth for about 20 years.

And the longest I'm in one place is a week and a half. And I remember you told me about Thrive and the importance of self-care. But I realized that, you know, Thrive is not just about self-care. Thrive Global was borne out of your own personal experience around burnout. And I really connected to that. Can you tell us about your wake-up call? Because your wake-up call is similar to my wake-up call.

Arianna

Yes, absolutely. I love the conversations we've had together because there are no judgments. It's just really about understanding the science behind what we have been ignoring, which is that even before the pandemic, as you said, we're living unsustainable lives.

So my wake-up call came in 2007, two years into building the Huffington Post. I was a divorced mother of two daughters. And I had bought into the collective delusion that in order to be super-founder and supermom, I didn't have the luxury to sleep or to stop or to take care of myself. So I collapsed, hit my head on my desk, broke my cheekbone, and that was the beginning of my both recognizing that our suffering from burnout, but also being a bit of a nerd, studying the phenomenon and recognizing that burnout was a global epidemic.

So I started covering these issues relentlessly at the Huffington Post. But by 2016, I didn't want just to raise awareness – I wanted to help people change behaviors. And that's why I left to launch a behavior change technology company that could help people, through microsteps and stories, change behavior.

And, you know, you both recognize the power of stories. Omar, you in the book you wrote and in the way you talk, and Will in your songs, in your conversations, and even in that conversation in Dubai, it was my *story* that moved you. I could have given you tons of data. about burnout in the world, about the human operating system needing downtime. I don't think that would have moved you as much. But my personal story connected you with your personal story.

And the key here is to recognize that taking time to recharge and renew ourselves actually makes us more effective at what we want to do, improves our performance, improves the impact we want to have.

Omar You hinted at it already, but tell our audience a little bit more about the mission you have with Thrive Global.

Arianna So Omar, the mission of Thrive when we launched in 2016 was to end the stress and burnout epidemic.

At the time, you may remember you and I talked, and we had to somehow explain a little bit burnout – why burnout? Now we don't anymore. Burnout, as you said, is now a central discussion, not just in the HR department of companies, but in the C-suite, because C-executives have recognized that if their employees are burned out, it's going to affect every business metric they care about: attrition, retention, productivity, healthcare costs.

And actually Microsoft has done some great research on the power of breaks. That's why in our product, one of my favorite features is "Reset," which is the 60-second breaks to course-correct from stress to move us from the sympathetic to the parasympathetic nervous system. And then to bring those resets wherever people are—on Teams, on Zoom, you know, wherever people are—they can actually be reminded to do the 60-second reset and find themselves more connected with the power in themselves, with that place of strength and peace and resilience.

Omar Everything you said there was perfect Arianna, especially the bit about Teams (laughter).

And I do love the resets. They're super awesome for those people who haven't experienced them. I mean, it's just such a good way to check yourself and give yourself a little tiny breather in the day. But as you said, you were talking about burnout before anyone was talking about burnout. You were doing it before the pandemic, which none of us could predict.

Now we're in like, I think year three of this thing with a lot of people still remote and hybrid work model. We're all still learning how to make that work. What would you say the impact has been amongst their employees?

Arianna Oh, the impact has been, I would say, the second pandemic.

The truth is that we have not really fully experienced the impact. Every survey that comes out is worse than the survey that came out before, around the

mental health of teenagers, especially, especially adolescent girls, their levels of depression and anxiety skyrocketing, the problems with access.

So that's why this is the moment to recognize the connection between our habits, our daily habits, and our health. And Will, I went back and listened to the podcast I did with you back in 2018. And my God, you are so wise, I love you, Will. But you said something that I want to repeat which is, you know, 'people buy a Mercedes and, they've got to get gas and they say, you know, only premium, only premium gas. And only the best oil.'

And then they go get chips, candy bars, and fizzy pop. You know, what are we putting in our bodies?

Will

That's why I burned out two weeks ago, because without proper sleep, people don't realize the intelligence of your gut and your enzymes and your "second brain."

And when you have, you're not sleeping properly, your internals start screaming for, like, it's as if it's making decisions on what it needs for you to consume. So you start craving. "I need some chips. I need some carbs. I need something to keep me because I don't have the ability to sleep." By doing that for two weeks, last month I came back from the road broken.

I then recuperated. And the way I recuperated, I just flushed my body with water. I went on long walks. And it's crazy just by drinking water and going on, walks out in the sun, how it replenishes your energy. But the moment I left on the road again, and two days of non proper sleep, I started craving those carbs. I started craving those sugars.

So I wanted to know, what has your research been done as far as women and men and burnout—how it differentiates?

Arianna

I think the impact is not as much physiological as *how our lives are run*. Women are still the primary caregivers of their children, of elderly parents. And that's why we've seen women leaving the workforce in much larger numbers during the pandemic and post-pandemic, because they had to continue working while being teachers at home and taking care of the family.

And so that's something we need to address both at the policy level, with parental leave and medical leave, et cetera, at the company level, and also with women recognizing at the individual level that putting their own oxygen masks

on first, taking care of themselves, is not self-indulgent, it actually makes us better at everything else we are doing. Everything is interconnected.

And that's why if you have a point solution, even if it's the best point solution in the world, we are wearing our aura rings to track our sleep or a meditation app, or measuring your steps, it misses the point. If it's not connected to every other aspect of living our daily lives, exactly as Will said: if you're sleep deprived, your body physiologically, it was going to crave junk. And you may think you have the best willpower and discipline in the world. Forget it. You are going to lose.

So sleep is connected to what we eat, movement is connected to what we eat, and how well we sleep. Our addiction to our phones is connected to whether we can get a good night's sleep or not, because—

Will

Ok, I'm cutting it off (laughter).

Arianna

Because what happens is that we take all the little breaks we have, and we spend them basically brainlessly scrolling. And again, Will, you said something else amazing in our podcast, which was that, you know, you have 15 minutes free – what are people going to do now? The majority of people are going to aimlessly scroll, go to social media, feel bad about themselves because they looked at somebody's highlight reel of their lives, and they're not in Barbados in the perfect body in this great bikini.

So what we've said that I love, is 15 minutes is a building block of time you could be building your future. You could either be resting and recharging so that you are more creative and more able to deal whatever challenges you are facing, or you could allow your brain to come up with what you want to build, what you want to create.

So our addiction to our phones is absolutely central to the changes that we want to see. And, Omar, what is great is that you have recognized, even though you are a part of a huge technology company, that technology is amazing, it's been a great gift to be able to be where we are without it, but now this is the time to be able to set boundaries so that we can really get the best of technology and the best of our humanity.

And that's really going to be how we can build the best future.

Omar

Thank you, Arianna, and you're right – I do work in a big technology company and I think we think all the time about how we make sure we use the technology for good purposes in the world, and are mindful of the side effects that, as you know, any technology can have side effects. And so cars, you can have a car crash. And we want to make sure that we're very mindful of how we do things for human beings and people.

And I love Will your 15-minute building block of the future. I'm going to definitely feed that to my kids. That's a very valuable one.

Arianna

That's really, for me, the great moment we're in. The silver lining of the pandemic is that this is a once in a generation opportunity to stop pretending that the way we've been working and living, whatever we've been doing to realize we'll be more effective, more productive, if we actually make sure that we prioritize around wellbeing, by sleeping and by what we put in our bodies, our little breaks, et cetera.

Will

So what type of technologies at Thrive Global can be used to fight burnout?

Arianna

So the first thing is that our platform to fight burnout is designed to meet you where you are and to embed wellbeing in the workflow. That is so important because as you said, Will, we may have the idea that wellbeing is something we can do during our mental health day, or having a weeklong Caribbean vacation. But then I come back and if wellbeing microsteps, stories are not embedded in the workflow, within 48 hours, as you said, you can be burnt out again.

So we bring microsteps, stories, challenges, resets, within teams, in the app, on the web—wherever you are—so that we are constantly reminded that we have that place of strength, wisdom, and connection. We just need to take 60 seconds to connect with it.

Will

But people are burned out at the same time as productivity may level and even increased in some companies. Like, how do you address that?

Arianna

Well, the question that we need to ask ourselves is, is that sustainable? And sustainability has been a big part of the conversation. I think we need to connect personnel burnout and caring for the planet. Because if you're burnt out, you are operating on survivor. You're in a fight or flight mode. You are trying to get through the day. It's the way you are describing yourself: You don't know where you are. You know, don't tell me about the melting icebergs. Don't tell me about the disappearing polar bears. You know, I'm just trying to get through the day.

Will

Yeah. So you don't have the, any other capacity to address any other issues because your issue is stuck on your limitations based on your burnout.

Arianna

Exactly.

Will

There's no more storage on your iPhone to take another picture. And so you take your data from your phone and you put it on the hard drive to clear it. If you do that for your phone, how do you do that for yourself?

Arianna

Exactly. You can't do it for yourself if you are operating on survival mode.

Will

Got it.

Arianna

That's the point we need to realize. It's not just planetary sustainability, it is actually every major crisis where we are trying to solve, you know, whether it's the racial reckoning or, social injustice, or growing inequalities, we don't have the bandwidth to address big challenges.

Omar

So Arianna, Thrive Global introduced a new product suite last year. What services are in there, and which companies are currently using the system and what have you learned from what the data is coming out of the system so far?

Arianna

So one thing that I'm excited about is that we are addressing three personas and we are working with you at Microsoft, with Walmart, with Salesforce, with Levi's, CVS, et cetera.

But we are addressing these three personas, not just people like us here who have been privileged to be able to work from home during the pandemic, but frontline workers, who had to be in retail stores or factories, and didn't have that opportunity to go home and work from home, and also call center workers.

So let me start with call center workers because I love when you can come up with a very simple idea. And it can be game changing. So this reset that we mentioned, the 60-second reset, we have now integrated into Genesis, which is a cloud software company, into their product. So now all the companies that they work with can bring reset to their call center operators, where, as you know, attrition is double what it is in any other profession. Stress is doubled because they are dealing with constantly stressed out customers. And so the employer can choose what the trigger is. It could be, the call has been longer than 20 minutes, or it's been escalated to the manager, and then you are fed a Thrive call. Or if you are in front of a dashboard, a video that thanks you for the work you've been doing for AT&T or Walmart, and says, now take 60 seconds for yourself. To take conscious breaths, to remember what you're grateful for, to get up and stretch, and their results have been amazing.

Tony Bates, who's the CEO of Genesis, has written a book called *Empathy In Action*, and it really is empathy in action. By caring for your employees and reducing the stress levels, you improve customer success. Because they're less stressed, they are able to give better service. And it's so simple. It's 60 second breaks in the course of the shift.

So I love simple ideas that immediately you think, "wow, why haven't we done that before?"

Omar

That's a fantastic one. And I really love the fact that you are going, particularly after call center agents. That is indeed a stressful role where people are yelling at them all day long about service or whatever it might be. So it's a great one.

Arianna And then with frontline workers, generally like in our work with Walmart and whoever, is what I find so moving is that we are dealing with a lot of minimum wage workers, many of whom are overweight or dealing with hypertension, and simply by bringing challenges to them, we bring in these 21-day challenges that they pick one of the six journeys, sleep, food movement, et cetera, to improve, we see these amazing results. We see reversal of diabetes. Reduction of hypertension. Simply by them doing differently, basic daily actions.

Will I have another question, Arianna. Can an app with notifications add stress? Can it cause the opposite effect?

Arianna Yeah, I have turned off all notifications in my phone.

Will Me too.

Arianna All of them. Because as you said, notifications don't know what matters. Maybe Microsoft is going to come up with a plan where we can have—

Will You remember that conversation?

Arianna Of course! I remember every conversation we have.

Omar This is feeling like an extremely circular podcast, I'm trying to work out what's going on here. Like who's telling who's story?

Arianna

At the end of the podcast, we need to put links to the conversation that Will and I had in Davos. I even have a picture here. We looked so cool in our super—here it is, look—in the snow. You were wearing this lovely little hat.

And I remember you saying, because, you know, “because I sleep and because I eat well, my memory is really great.” Okay. So remember that too. What you eat and how much you sleep is not just for your body, it's for your brain.

But anyway, you said that you've turned off all notifications until Microsoft comes up with a brilliant AI that can only feed you notifications that matter.

Will

Yeah, I said, I want to check my phone. I don't want my phone to check me. And the notification is just like this bombardment of, I have you in check, instead of like, uh, I think it's time to check my phone. Let me see what I've missed in these past 30 minutes that I've been away from it, or an hour that I've been away from them.

Arianna

And you know, I think again, to go back to storytelling, which I know is so important to all of us. And people who listen to Will, who admire him, and listen to your story and what you've done, and the changes in your life, are more likely to bring these changes into their lives. Self-care is not just massages and relaxing. Giving back, having a sense of purpose, being part of something larger than yourself. And that's why giving is so central to taking care of ourselves and prioritizing what matters.

Omar

Totally. So Arianna, tell us a final story for the CEOs out there. How important is it for their companies to address burnout, and what keeps you continuing to be motivated on this?

Arianna

So I feel this is an extraordinary time and an extraordinary once in a generation opportunity to redefine what CEOs care about, and to recognize that, one, addressing burnout is not just the benefit or a warm and fuzzy thing you do for your employees, but mission critical to the success of the business.

Then you create a thriving culture, and culture is truly a company's immune system. If your culture is toxic, it's going to affect everything else. We have way too many examples, most of them on Showtime at the moment, or on HBO, whether it's Uber, or WeWork, or Theranos, you know, we've seen what happens

when there is a toxic culture where people are burnt out, when they are burnt out, they're the worst versions of themselves.

So we have this incredible opportunity where we recognize that the culture you build, and the cultural permission you bring to your employees to take care of themselves, actually creates a sustainably productive and successful business.

And what keeps me going is the impact we're having in people's lives. When I read a story, like the story of the woman who won the financial award of the Thrive Challenge at Walmart, whose job is to be to stock shelves from 8:00 PM to 8:00 AM, and the fact that she was able, through these microsteps, to lose 34 pounds, to be healthier, to be happier, that fills my heart so much. In the same way that the impact we can have on CEOs who had bought into the collective delusion that they didn't have the luxury to invest in their own wellbeing, and by changing what they're doing, they're actually affecting their whole culture.

That touches my heart and makes me kind of want to get up in the morning after a good eight hours of sleep, which is what I need to be fully recharged, and ready to face whatever challenges the day brings. Because in our jobs, in everybody's job, in life, there are constant challenges, but the way we address that makes all the difference.

Omar

That's a perfect, perfect place to wrap. We really appreciate you being with us.

Arianna

Thank you so much, Omar. So great to be with you. Will, so great to be with you again.

Will

Good to see you too, Arianna.

Omar

So, Will, what did you think of Arianna's story and the mission of Thrive Global?

Will

I've been inspired by Arianna before she had Thrive, just being Arianna Huffington and building Huffington Post. And then when she told me about, you know, the importance of rest, the importance of, you know, confronting burnout before you burn out and practicing, I didn't really understand it until I was truly burnt out one day. And, up until that time, I couldn't understand, you know, what she was sharing with me, the perspective.

And then after I got burned out, I understood exactly the importance of rest, the importance of, you know, mindfulness on what you consume and making sure you're hydrated and you know, certain little practices like stretching certain little practices, like taking a 60-second or six-minute or an hour break to recharge throughout your busy day.

So yeah, I'm a fan of Thrive Global and Arianna.

Omar

What I love about Arianna is actually, as you said, I mean the whole burnout topic, when we first heard about it, I was like, yeah, that's like someone else's issue. And we *were* all brought up to work in a kind of a macho culture of like, you know, you just take the hits and if you sleep four hours a night, you're good.

I think what Arianna is doing alongside, you mentioned like these folks building these Headspace or whatever apps, I mean, they're all making it part of the popular culture that we all think this is normal to spend time on this stuff. And I think that's great. Like, the world needs it.

And when it comes to companies, in the world of remote work, I don't think that companies generally have malicious ideas. But what happens is people say, the distance between the bed and the office was like five yards. And so work just spilled over into people's personal life. So even companies who are only focused on making money, understand that they can't be successful in that, unless they have great people. It's actually, if you don't treat your people great, they leave.

And so at a place like Microsoft, I think actually the company really, really does take it seriously, all of these topics that we've spoken about. The company put its money where its mouth is, whether it's building products like Viva, which is all about employee experience. Or whether it's things we do internally, like giving people the gift of time, which is essentially where we stop having internal meetings on a Friday a month, or the Microsoft Giving campaign, which is something that we do internally to help people give back to the communities that they're in.

So there's a lot of things companies can do, but there's always, it's a journey—there's loads more for all of us to do on it.

Anyhow, thanks so much. Can't wait to see you next time.

Will

See you next time. Always a pleasure.

[MUSIC]
