

A Platform to Thrive

An Interview with Arianna Huffington, Founder and Chief Executive Officer, Thrive Global

EDITORS' NOTE Arianna Huffington is the founder and CEO of Thrive Global, the founder of The Huffington Post, and the author of 15 books including, most recently, *Thrive: The Third Metric to Redefining Success and Creating a Life of Well-Being, Wisdom, and Wonder* and *The Sleep Revolution: Transforming Your Life, One Night At A Time*. In 2016, she launched Thrive Global, a leading behavior change tech company with the mission of changing the way we work



Arianna Huffington

and live by ending the collective delusion that burnout is the price we must pay for success. She has been named to TIME magazine's list of the world's 100 most influential people and the Forbes Most Powerful Women list. She serves on numerous boards, including Onex and The B Team. Originally from Greece, she moved to England when she was 16 and graduated from Cambridge University with an MA in economics. At 21, she became President of the famed debating society, the Cambridge Union.

ORGANIZATION BRIEF Thrive Global (thriveglobal.com) seeks to go beyond raising awareness to creating something real and tangible that helps individuals, companies and communities improve their well-being and performance and unlock their greatest potential. It is uniquely positioned to sustainably change behavior by reaching people at home, at work and through the technology they already use. Its multi-pronged offering yields a revolutionary approach to ending the epidemic of stress and burnout.

Did you always know that you had an entrepreneurial spirit and desire to build your own business?

Before I started my two companies, I was an author for most of my career which is its own kind of entrepreneurial project. Helping people connect with themselves and have an impact on their lives and their world has always been the animating spirit of my career, whether that was in writing books and speaking, or in building companies to scale this mission.

What was your vision for creating Thrive Global and how do you define its mission?

The mission of Thrive Global is to end the stress and burnout epidemic and help

individuals and corporations unlock their full potential.

The seeds for creating Thrive Global go back to 2007. I'd founded *The Huffington Post* just two years previously. I was working 18 hours a day and we were growing at an incredible pace. Then, at the end of a week-long tour of colleges with my oldest daughter, during which I stayed up late into the nights working, I collapsed and broke my cheekbone on my desk as I went down. The diagnosis was an acute case of burnout,

so I started learning more and more about the connection between well-being, resilience and productivity. I realized that this idea that burnout is the price we have to pay for success is a complete myth.

That led me to write my two books, *Thrive* and *The Sleep Revolution*, and as I went around the world speaking about them, and the issues of stress, burnout and sleep deprivation, I saw how deeply people want to change their lives. So I wanted to go beyond just speaking out and raising awareness – I felt the need to turn this passion into something real and tangible that would begin to help people make real changes in their daily lives, which is why I founded Thrive Global in 2016.

How do you describe your leadership style and what do you see as the keys to effective leadership?

I try to lead by example, which is one of our core values at Thrive – that we model the principles we bring to the companies we work with.

One of the biggest keys to effective leadership is to create an atmosphere in which employees feel empowered to speak up and let managers know when there are challenges of any kind. At Thrive, we call this “compassionate directness,” which is all about empowering employees to give feedback and surface problems in real time. This allows companies to course-correct in a daily way, and also allows employees to grow and reach their true potential.

Thrive is based on the science that when we prioritize our well-being, we're more resilient, more productive, and physically and mentally healthier. It's also important for leaders to serve as role models for this way of working and living. As they say on airplanes, secure your own oxygen mask first before helping others. Leaders need to live and work in a way that can bring out the best, most empathetic part of themselves and that will be a key driver in whether they can bring out the best in those they lead.

How do you define resilience and how has resilience impacted your work?

Resilience is what allows us to adapt not just to any one change or to a new situation, but to the idea of constant change itself. When we're resilient, we don't require the external world around us to be exactly as we want it to be. Resilience comes from creating pathways of connection with our internal strength so we can handle whatever the external world throws our way.

Resilience has deeply impacted my work. My collapse in 2007 came because I'd depleted my stores of resilience. Now I know that when

“Resilience is what allows us to adapt not just to any one change or to a new situation, but to the idea of constant change itself.”

“One of the biggest keys to effective leadership is to create an atmosphere in which employees feel empowered to speak up and let managers know when there are challenges of any kind. At Thrive, we call this ‘compassionate directness,’ which is all about empowering employees to give feedback and surface problems in real time.”

I prioritize my well-being, and take time to unplug and recharge, I'm much more resilient to deal with the constant and inevitable challenges that come from running a rapidly expanding business.

What do you see as the importance of resilience in addressing the global crises facing the world today?

If we're going to solve the multiple crises facing the world today, resilience is going to have to be at the heart of the effort. Wherever we look around the world right now, we see leaders – in politics, in business, in media – making terrible decisions. What they're lacking is not IQ, but wisdom. Yes, data is very important. But ultimately wisdom, judgment, insight, creativity and innovation are needed to address a crisis. When leaders think they have to make a show of working 24/7, they're not going to be resilient, and they're not going to be able to see the icebergs looming around the corner. When they're depleted, they're not going to be able to come up with novel solutions or collaborate effectively with others.

What is the role of mental health and self-care in resilience?

Mental health, self-care and resilience all go hand in hand. Prioritizing our mental health and taking care of ourselves is how we tap into our resilience. We all have that place of strength and wisdom and resilience inside of us and when we step out of the storm and operate from the calm eye of the hurricane, we replenish our stores of resilience. When we're recharged and engaged, we're not at the mercy of our survival instincts, and the creative rather than reactive

parts of our minds can come to the surface. When we're connected with ourselves, we have the resources to act out of a sense of empathy and connect and collaborate with others.

When we're in a state of stress or in fight-or-flight mode, we're looking for short-term fixes. Prioritizing mental health is a tool for the long term.

What can people do to better secure their mental health, stamina, and physical well-being as they face so much stress and multiple crises?

We're obviously in a time of profound uncertainty right now, and uncertainty causes stress. This can make people feel helpless because there's so much about their external world they can't control. That's why it's all the more important to take charge of what we can control and prioritize our own well-being. Creating boundaries between home and work was challenging even before they became the same place for so many people. So as challenging as it is, it's important to put up those boundaries, even if they have to change each day. One of our cultural values at Thrive, which has been even more important for our team this year, has been to declare an end to your day. That starts with prioritizing what absolutely has to get done and then being comfortable – in fact, embracing – incompleteness. That allows you to declare an end to your day and get the time you need to start tomorrow recharged. Also, one of our cultural values is Thrive Time. It's based on the recognition that, of course, getting results and meeting deadlines often requires putting in extra time and going the extra mile. Thrive

Time is what allows us to sustain that. It means taking time off to recover and recharge after you've met the deadline, shipped the product or worked over the weekend. It could be a few hours, a morning, a whole day or even more.

Another of our Microsteps – which are small, science-backed habits you can immediately incorporate into your life – is to charge your phone outside your bedroom at night. Our phones are repositories of our anxieties and fears, especially in times of crisis and constant news updates. Disconnecting will help you sleep better, recharge, and replenish your mental and physical stamina.

Another is to set a news cut-off time at the end of the day. Of course, being informed can help us feel more prepared in times of crisis, but setting some healthy limits to our media consumption can also help us get a restorative night's sleep, which in turn helps us put stressful news into perspective.

As a business leader, how are you able to build a resilient culture within your organization?

We strongly encourage our team to live our principles. We don't expect team members to always be on, or respond to texts or e-mails after hours or on weekends. With people working remotely and in different time zones during the pandemic, schedules have been more fluid. But with our culture of compassionate directness, we've been able to maintain a workplace, even now a virtual one, in which people feel free to surface and share whatever challenges they might be facing, whether that's a sick loved one or the challenges of online school.

Do you feel that resilience is something a person is born with or can it be taught?

Resilience is definitely not an inborn trait that people either have or don't have. We all have the capacity for resilience, and our stores of resilience can be constantly replenished. So the ways we can tap into our resilience and nurture it can definitely be taught.

How has your personal resilience helped to drive your work?

Since we launched in 2016, Thrive Global has been in a state of almost constant hyper-growth. That brings with it daily changes and challenges, but also the joy of staying connected to our purpose and the impact we are having on the lives of the people we work with. And tapping into my joy helps me tap into my resilience. ●

“We all have the capacity for resilience, and our stores of resilience can be constantly replenished.”