

Ending the Stress and Burnout Epidemic

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, 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 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.*



Arianna Huffington

way they work and live. So I wanted to go beyond just speaking out and raising awareness – I wanted to help people change behaviors and turn awareness into action. It was a call to action I just couldn't ignore, and so I founded Thrive Global, with the mission to end the stress and burnout epidemic.

Will you highlight Thrive Global's behavior change platform and the impact that the platform has made for the companies it works with?

Thrive's behavior change platform includes an integrated suite of products that meet people where they are in the workflow with real-time stress-reducing tools, inspirational storytelling, and science-backed Microsteps that can immediately be incorporated into people's daily lives. We combine our Microsteps with science, storytelling and ancient wisdom to create a whole-human behavior change system that increases engagement by improving physical and mental well-being and resilience.

One of the most effective features of the Thrive platform is Thrive Reset, which helps users prevent cumulative stress by taking breaks of just 60 to 90 seconds. And one of the most powerful uses of Thrive Reset is Thrive for Support Teams, which launched this year and brings our 60-second Reset product directly into the workflow for contact center representatives. Contact centers are one of the most stressful places to work, with high rates of burnout – in a study from Cornell University, 87 percent of contact center agents report high stress and 40 percent turnover each year. Thrive for Support Teams is helping combat contact center stress, stopping burnout in its tracks by pushing a Thrive Reset to agents at the moments during their day when they need it most. We've partnered with contact center leader Genesys to launch Thrive for Genesys, making it simple for Genesys customers to implement Thrive for Support Teams and begin seeing results, both for individual well-being and for business metrics. Since launching eight months ago, we've seen a 98 percent engagement rate with our product, and increases of 10 percent in agent productivity, 15 percent in employee satisfaction, and 20 percent in employee well-being.

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.*

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

The seeds of Thrive Global go back to 2007, when I collapsed from exhaustion and burnout. 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 simply 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 my experience, I saw two things: first, that we're in a growing epidemic of stress and burnout, and second, that people deeply want to change the

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And we hear directly from our customers how transformative Thrive is within their organizations and for their office workers, frontline workers and contact center agents:

- Ellyn Shook, Chief Leadership and Human Resources Officer at Accenture, said that, “Teaming up with Thrive Global is an important step forward in advancing our focus on the whole person – helping our people not only achieve a sense of belonging and purpose, but be physically energized and mentally focused in our hyper-connected digital world.”

- Payal Sahni, Executive Vice President and Chief People Experience Officer at Pfizer, told us that, “Pfizer’s partnership with Thrive has been a great support in our ongoing efforts to provide the tools and resources to help all of our colleagues take care of their physical and mental health. The more knowledge and tools we have, the better able we are to achieve our purpose: Breakthroughs that change patients’ lives.”

- Tracy Layney, Chief Human Resources Officer at Levi’s, says, “We really leaned heavily into our partnership with Thrive around daily mental health exercises. The app, Microsteps, and Reset really help us find ways to take care of ourselves daily in a way that allows for good mental health, even in this time of extreme stress.”

These are only a few examples from the people leaders we work with at some of the world’s largest organizations.

What was the thought process for developing Thriving Families and what is its purpose?

Working parents were under an incredible amount of stress even before the pandemic, and the burdens of maintaining the household have fallen disproportionately on women. The home is the hub for how families are organized, so

the thought process behind Thriving Families, which we created in partnership with Fair Play author Eve Rodsky, was to bring the same systematic thinking and tools to our responsibilities at home as we do at work. The demands on home life now are simply too great and too complicated to wing it, or approach each day in an ad hoc way.

So the purpose of Thriving Families is to reduce stress for families – not just for women, but for everybody. It’s based on the truth that when responsibilities are divided up in a clear, fair, and equitable way, there’s less stress and more harmony in the home. And Thriving Families gives families the tools and strategies to do just that.

Will you highlight some of the areas where lack of sleep affects an individual’s performance?

Let me count the ways! Sleep is the underpinning of every aspect of our well-being. Sleep deprivation affects our physical health by putting us at higher risk of a host of illnesses, like heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, and stroke. With mental health, sleep deprivation is associated with higher rates of depression and anxiety, as well as reduced empathy, emotional intelligence, and ability to focus. In short, there’s virtually no element of performance that’s not impacted by sleep.

What do you feel will be the long-lasting impact of COVID-19 on the way people work?

The stress and burnout epidemic was raging long before anybody had ever heard of COVID-19. The pandemic, as horrible and tragic as it clearly has been, provided a forced pause for people to reflect on what they truly value. More and more people have come to reject the idea that burnout is the price they have

to pay for success. They’re redefining success according to what makes them truly thrive. That has given us a once-in-a-generation opportunity to change how we live and work. Even as people go back to work, the pre-pandemic world of work is not coming back. People have come to see that, while work is an important part of a thriving life, all aspects of life shouldn’t revolve around work. That mindset shift is just beginning.

What interested you in writing the book, *The Sleep Revolution*, and what were the key messages you wanted to convey in the book?

As I went around the world talking about Thrive, I found that the subject that came up the most – by far – was sleep: how difficult it is to get enough, how there are simply not enough hours in the day, how tough it is to wind down, how hard it is to fall asleep and stay asleep, even when we set aside enough time. Since my own transformation into a sleep evangelist, everywhere I go someone will pull me aside and, often in hushed and conspiratorial tones, confess, “I’m just not getting enough sleep. I’m exhausted all the time.” Or, as one young woman told me after a talk in San Francisco, “I don’t remember the last time I wasn’t tired.” By the end of an evening, I’ll have had that same conversation with any number of people. And what everyone wants to know is, “What should I do to get more sleep?”

So it’s clear that if we’re going to truly thrive, we have to begin with sleep. It’s the gateway through which a life of well-being must travel. From the moment we’re born until the moment we die, we’re in a relationship with sleep. So I wrote *The Sleep Revolution* to examine this ancient, essential, and mysterious phenomenon from all angles, and to explore the ways we can use sleep to help us be more present and regain control over our out-of-kilter lives.

Where did you develop your passion for helping people find fulfillment and well-being in their work and their lives?

The through-line to all my books, and everything I’ve done in my life, is about helping people connect and engage. The way I’ve always wanted to help people connect and engage is through storytelling, or, in the case of my books on Maria Callas and Pablo Picasso, showing how that’s done through music and art.

HuffPost was a version of that, and so is Thrive Global – it’s about using science and storytelling to help people connect and engage – with their jobs, with their friends and family, with their talent and potential, and with themselves.

What are your views on the notion of quiet quitting which has been receiving a great deal of attention?

The term means different things to different people. For some, it simply means quitting on hustle culture, which is a good thing. But for many others, it means just going through the motions, accepting a lack of engagement, joy, and purpose in our work.

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Yes, we shouldn’t be defined by our work. But at the same time, if work is at least eight hours of our day, are we saying these are hours we’re willing to simply go through the motions, with the inevitable boredom that’s bound to ensue? Work can give us meaning and purpose. It’s part of a thriving life. We should absolutely reject “hustle culture” and burnout – I believe this so strongly I founded a company with that as its mission. But rejecting burnout doesn’t mean rejecting the possibility of finding joy in our work, loving our work.

The idea that burnout and quiet quitting are our only options is clearly a false choice. There’s a third alternative – being engaged in our work without burning out and sacrificing our health and happiness. And that’s what Thrive is all about.

What advice do you offer to women who may be feeling like they are unable to juggle work and family?

My advice is, first, to prioritize your own well-being. It’s like what they say on airplanes: put your own oxygen mask on first before helping others. As someone who was a working mother myself, I know this isn’t always easy. But when we prioritize our own well-being, not only are we better at our jobs, we’re more effective in all that we have to do outside our jobs.

Next, I would say to not listen to what I call the obnoxious roommate living in our heads – that voice that feeds on putting us down and strengthening our insecurities and doubts. We all live with that voice, but the

times it comes out the most are when we’re tired, stressed and run down. That’s when we’re most likely to doubt ourselves and react emotionally, and when our perceptions are at their shakiest.

So one of the ways to silence that voice is to take care of ourselves, which creates a more robust inner immune system that prevents that voice from breaking through and wreaking havoc.

Thrive Global is addressing a challenge that requires a long-term focus and commitment. How do you measure success for Thrive Global’s efforts?

One way that’s tangible at Thrive is just to look at our growth. When the pandemic hit, the themes at the heart of our mission became among the most urgent workplace issues of our time. What we’re seeing with the companies we work with is an urgency around employee well-being. They know that it’s essential to the long-term success of the company, but they want the tools to move from awareness to action.

We’re also starting to see real data from those tools. One of them is Pulse check, which is the entry point to Thrive’s platform. It’s a daily question for employees that prompts a moment of reflection about their personal well-being or about work, delivered via the platforms they’re already using, like Slack or Microsoft Teams, and offering them personalized, in-the-moment Microsteps and content recommendations. Since we launched Pulse check in April, we’ve had over 1 million of these conversations with employees in 73 countries around the world.

We’ve also seen a 6x increase in users taking advantage of the Thrive platform since launching Pulse check. And this engagement with the Thrive platform has clear results on business metrics. Employees have seen:

- 76 percent increase in productivity
- 102 percent increase in engagement
- 104 percent increase in burnout prevention
- 233 percent increase in stress management

Will you discuss Thrive Global’s commitment to building a diverse and inclusive workforce?

At Thrive we’re committed not just to building a diverse and inclusive team, but helping other companies do the same. That’s why we’ve just launched Thriving Belonging, co-hosted by Thrive’s Chief Training Officer, Joey Hubbard. The program is based on two fundamental truths. First, that it’s up to all of us to create more inclusive workplaces. And second, that we’re all going to make mistakes – so creating a culture of belonging means that we have to give people space to learn from their mistakes and grow. Other themes in Thriving Belonging include what it means to be an ally, how leaders can be first responders for their people’s mental health, and Microsteps for examining unconscious bias, strengthening psychological safety, being an ally and more.

What do you feel are the keys to effective leadership and how do you describe your management style?

Leaders need to be role models for well-being, which both serves as a foundation for their own decision-making and their ability to listen and connect with their team, and it gives others the permission to do the same. Too many leaders still buy into the misguided notion that urgent or chaotic times require them to be in constant motion and always on, or that they somehow have to match the frenetic pace of the moment. In fact, the opposite is true. The best way to lead a company forward is by looking inward, because it’s judgment that we need from leaders in times of uncertainty, not just stamina.

At Thrive, one of our core values, which is important both for leaders and team members, is Compassionate Directness. It’s about empowering employees to speak up, give feedback, disagree, and surface problems in real time – with compassion, empathy and understanding.

Thrive Global has achieved strong results since its founding. Are you able to enjoy the process and take moments to celebrate what Thrive Global has accomplished?

Yes, and in fact, joy and celebrating success are essential ingredients of behavior change. For me, taking time to appreciate the impact we’re having is a source of great joy. It’s why Joy is one of our cultural values. At each of our weekly team meetings, we build in time to celebrate our wins, share our gratitude, and highlight stories of people we’re helping. It’s one way we embed well-being – and joy – into our own workflow. Because if we’re going to truly have an impact as a company, it has to start with us. ●