

WorkWell

A Deloitte podcast series to empower your well-being



Microsteps to Maximize Mental Health with Arianna Huffington

Jen Fisher (Jen): Hi, WorkWell listeners. I'm really excited to share with you that my book *Work Better Together* will be published this summer. This book is all about how to cultivate strong relationships to maximize well-being and create a more human-centered workplace. It's inspired by conversations with WorkWell guests and feedback from listeners like you so, check it out. It's available for pre-order on Amazon now.

I've been very open about my own burnout story. In fact, it's something that I share frequently because I know the more I talk about it, the more it helps to fight the mental health stigmas in society and especially in the workplace. I'm not the only one who is on the mission to help people understand that actively protecting our mental and emotional well-being is critical to our performance.

This is the WorkWell podcast series. Hi, I'm Jen Fisher, Chief Well-being Officer for Deloitte and I'm so pleased to be here with you today to talk about all things, well-being.

I'm here with Arianna Huffington. Yes, THE Arianna Huffington. She's the founder and CEO of Thrive Global, the founder of the Huffington Post and a best-selling author. In 2016, she launched Thrive Global, a leading behavior change technology company with the mission of changing the way that we work and live by ending the collective delusion that burnout is the price that we must pay for success. She's a well-being champion, sleep advocate, and an inspiration to all. I have known Arianna for the past few years, and I'm truly honored to call her a co-collaborator and a friend.

Arianna, welcome to the show. It's so good to finally have you on.

Arianna Huffington (Arianna): It's so great to be with you. We love all the work we're doing together and look forward to your book and great to talk with you today.

Jen: I want to start with having you share your own personal story of a burnout, because unfortunately it's a story that I think we're hearing far too often. For you and I, in particular, we have similar experiences. I'm hearing it more and more. So, can you tell me about your own story of burnout?

Arianna: My story was in 2007, two years into building the Huffington Post. I was the divorced mother of two daughters, and I had bought into the collective illusion that in order to be a supermom and super founder, you have to burnout and I did. I actually collapsed from exhaustion, sleep deprivation, and in a way after I broke my cheekbone and went through multiple doctors to find out what was wrong with me. In a way looking back, it was an amazing wakeup call that I'm grateful for because I looked at all the science and looked at the data that showed that burnout is actually a global epidemic. I started covering all these issues relentlessly on the Huffington Post, and finally in 2016, I left Huff Post to build Thrive because I wanted to help people go from awareness to action.

Jen: Yeah. You and I, and so many others had to get to the point of burnout before we made changes, before we sought support, went to doctors, changed our lifestyle. Can you talk about what you've learned, why is self-care, and particularly mental health...I know we're talking much more about mental health in the workplace, but why is this still such a stigmatized topic in society and then, especially in the workplace?

Arianna: I think Jen, that we are still living in a culture that glamorizes business and being always on. It goes back a long time to the first industrial revolution when we started revering machines and after that, software. If you think of it, the goal with machines and with software is to minimize downtime, but for the human operating system, downtime is not a bug, it's a feature. Now, there's so much science and so much data that shows us that in fact, human beings do best when we alternate between cycles of peak performance and cycles of recovery, and rest and relaxation and recharging. That actually makes us more productive, more creative, and more empathetic, which is more and more important as we're building more inclusive cultures.

Jen: How do we change that mindset not only for ourselves, but for everybody that we care about, that we work with, that we love?

Arianna: Well, as you know, at Thrive, we believe in what we call "micro-steps", especially after a year, like we've all been through. Asking people to do a complete life overhaul is incredibly hard but asking people to take small incremental steps to build a life that they love, that is incredibly productive but also joyful is very different. We call our micro-steps too small to fail and we believe in breaking down any next action into tiny, tiny steps. There are hundreds of them, as you know Jen, we even have a new book on micro-steps out and these are like continuous real-time stress interventions. What makes me most optimistic is that we have the data now that shows that it takes 60 to 90 seconds to course-correct from stress. While stress is unavoidable, cumulative stress is avoidable and that's really the killer. It's cumulative stress that we are trying to mitigate, and we can do it with the 60 second breaks between Zoom. In the morning when we wake up or before we go to sleep, setting boundaries to our phones, all those things can be done in 60 second pauses where we can breathe more consciously. We can stretch, I know you're an exercise buff, and we can remember what we're grateful for. There are multiple things we can do, and this interrupts the cycle of stress. We literally move from this sympathetic to the parasympathetic nervous system where we can be calmer, more empathetic, and more creative.

Jen: Give me some examples of some micro-steps. I know you said there's literally thousands of them and it pretty much could be anything, but what are some of your top recommendations?

Arianna: We love, for example, starting meetings at Thrive and we recommend with the customers we work with, to start their meetings with a 60 second reset. One of the team members literally plays the reset guide, our app allows you to create your own reset guide. I don't know if you've done it Jen, where you bring together things that bring you joy, for you it could be your dog, Fiona; It could be people you love, landscapes you love, quotes you love, music you love, and a breathing pacer. In 60 seconds, you move into a different part of your brain and different part of your heart, where you remember what you love about your life as opposed to what stresses you about your life and we're all dealing with both. Also, we recommend doing that because it brings the team more closely together. If I don't know you very well, and I see things that are intimate in your own life, I feel closer to you and we feel closer to each other because this is a human moment.

Jen: Yeah, absolutely. You've written a lot and spoken a lot about Corporate America, but just generally that we're facing a major mental health crisis. I think you talked about it as kind of the pandemic before the pandemic and I think the COVID pandemic that we're living through has accelerated worker burnout. Can you talk a little bit about the mental health crisis that we were facing before the COVID pandemic and what you have seen? What you think we need to do even as we start to move past the COVID pandemic that we're in?

Arianna: Jen you're right, first of all, this is a crisis that predates the pandemic. It has been exacerbated by the pandemic, but the pandemic is also a catalyst for changes. This conversation, that you have been a pioneer in bringing to the Deloitte Workplace and to other workplaces, is now pretty mainstream. It's part of conversations in the C-suite, on boards that really what has changed because the physical and mental well-being of employees now is no longer nice to have, it's essential. It's very connected to the bottom line.

Jen: I agree with you. There's a lot of conversation about it, which is very, very positive because before we weren't really talking about it that much. What are some specific actions that leaders can take when it comes to supporting the mental health of their workforce?

Arianna: Two things, one is modeling this behavior, being willing to be vulnerable, being willing to talk about any challenges they're facing, what they're doing, and also offering to their employees continued support. The 60 second breaks that I mentioned are very important in the same way, of course, that offering a telehealth and one-on-one counseling is important. We need to address both mental health symptoms like depression and anxiety, but also stress triggers before they become symptoms. That's where leaders can make a big difference, by making the mental health conversation a part of everyday conversations; looking at it, what we call a thrive, "going upstream" and looking at prevention as well as dealing with symptoms.

Jen: What about for organizations who have had their employees or their workforce working primarily from home? As we start to re-enter the world and society, in the workplace we aren't going back to what it was. I've read that you said, we shouldn't want to go back there

because there were a lot of things that were wrong. What about re-entry anxiety? In some respects, even though the way we're working right now isn't ideal, we've gotten used to it. We've adapted because people are resilient, and now we're going to go into something that is yet again new and uncertain in a lot of ways and so, how do we deal with that?

Arianna: Well, first of all, we're going to go to a hybrid world. There's going to be a lot more people working remote or people working some days remote, some days from the office. Every company is deciding how to approach the new world, but definitely it's going to be a hybrid world. I think what we should be focusing on is the fact that this hybrid world requires hybrid skills. As you know Jen, we're talking a lot about rescaling, upscaling, and a lot of these rescaling conversations focus on professional skills. I think the human skills of empathy, team building, collaboration is more important than ever, especially as people are going to be working some remote, some from the office. It's much harder to build teams to collaborate if people are not connected with deeper human values and human attributes.

Jen: When you talk about human skills and building these human skills, are there micro-steps associated with that?

Arianna: Absolutely. So, the first thing is being able to connect with ourselves. There are micro-steps that have to do with getting enough sleep, moving, remembering what we're grateful for, and all these micro-steps help us be more connected with ourselves. When we are connected to this center of peace, strength, wisdom, resilience, from that place, it's much easier to be empathetic and to connect with others. It's much harder, as I know for myself, to connect with others when I'm running on empty and I move into a fight or flight mode. I move into survival mode, I just want to try and get things done, and I have much less bandwidth to build my best self.

Jen: Yeah, I think we've all had that experience.

Arianna: Yes. When we talk about creating diverse and inclusive cultures, the truth is that it's very hard to create those if we just look at the numbers. We also need to look at people's hearts and how are they showing up at work? How are they part of creating these cultures of belonging? Another thing that we find critical that we work a lot with companies, and also, I have a lot of examples in our book, is around what we call "compassionate directness". When we are able to express frustrations, disappointments, grievances, it's much easier to get through them. When we don't express them, instead backchannel them, we create a kind of toxic work environment. It's much harder in that place to cultivate these qualities of empathy and collaboration.

Jen: Yeah, absolutely. A lot of passive-aggressive behavior.

Arianna: I know, the worst, is it?

Jen: So, let's kind of go back to talking about mental health and caring for our own mental health and micro-steps and the conversations that is being had. What about an employee or an individual, just in general, that is struggling with their mental health and just continues to struggle, perhaps needs to seek professional help or do something different? What would you tell that person?

Arianna: Well, I think it's great that more and more companies offer support, telemedicine, real professional counseling. That is key. Also, if they are willing to write about their experience, it gives cultural permission to others to know that they can ask for help. As you said from your own experience Jen, it's very hard sometimes to be willing to be vulnerable, to ask for help, to not see that as a reflection on yourself. To start with this level of self-compassion, that is essential for self-care. So, we think it's both seeking help and being able to find help within their resources available in the workplace. Also, taking the micro-steps around daily behaviors that will make the changes sustainable because you know how you can get better and then go back to the old ways. We all have this tendency to regress and you know, you're a cancer survivor and I have a lot of friends who are cancer survivors who when they went into remission, they felt this incredible sense of renewal of new beginning. "I'm going to do things differently" and then value what really matters to me more, prioritize things that matter, all those decisions we make. Six months later, they were back to where they had been before. So, that's why it requires building these daily habits that are very small, that are not difficult to build into our days so that we can actually cultivate these habits in a way that make our new life sustainable.

Jen: Yeah, I certainly relate to that as a cancer survivor.

Arianna: Yeah, I should ask you actually. Did you regress or were you able to change?

Jen: It's interesting and I think that I actually wrote a piece for thrive about this, that exact experience, because when I was going through my cancer treatment, I was very diligent about my boundaries. It didn't matter who wanted to meet with me or have a call with me, I wasn't available if I was doing something to take care of my health and well-being, that was what came first. Coming out of the treatment, I told myself that I was going to sustain those boundaries, that they were really healthy, that I was going to block time on my calendar, that I was going to do things differently. I started putting blocks of time in my calendar and it was at the same time every day. What I started to notice was that when somebody would send me a message and asked for time with me, I would know what those blocks on my calendar were and I would negotiate in my head, "Well, I have 30 minutes blocked. If I give Ariana 15, then I'm still going to have 15". I would start negotiating those boundaries away. It wasn't the other person that was pushing my boundaries, it was me giving it away. I started to realize, like "Hey! hold on a minute. This is my responsibility to hold these boundaries", so I did. I recognized it and I course corrected.

Arianna: Oh my God! I love that. I think that's amazing.

Jen: That's the interesting thing when we talk about boundaries, I know I've heard you talk about this. Most of the time when we feel like somebody else isn't respecting our boundaries, it's because we haven't actually expressed or told that person what our boundaries or what our needs are. We can't blame others until we look at ourselves and say, "Oh wait! The reason they're not respecting my boundaries is because I'm not respecting my boundaries". That's exactly what happened to me.

Arianna: Yeah, absolutely. Also, we are finding that very often, even let's say if you are in a workplace that totally respects your boundaries, you have a manager that respects your boundaries, a lot of us find it very hard to stay off email or not to be drawn back into

handling things late at night or finding ourselves falling into the rabbit holes of social media or binge watching Netflix late into the night. We need to realize there is a lot that has to be done within workplaces to create boundaries for employees, but there is a lot that we also need to do ourselves by supporting these new rituals. That's why I believe in rituals that help us adopt new habits and see how much more creative we are.

Jen: Yeah, absolutely. I think the first time I read about "doom-scrolling" was something that you wrote and then you wrote about "hope-scrolling", which I like much better (laughs).

Arianna: I love it.

Jen: Let's talk a little bit about the role of emotions in the workplace, psychological safety and creating an environment where people can have these courageous conversations; to speak what is on their mind in terms of what's bothering them or speak up and ask for what they need. So, how can we, as colleagues and as leaders, go about making sure that we are creating those environments for our people?

Arianna: Well, you know Jen, I feel one area that is underused in companies is onboarding. I feel onboarding is a great and incredible opportunity to instill these cultural values. Everybody who is just joining a company wants to do well, wants to belong, and so we have launched what we call the "entry interview". We should actually bring it to Deloitte. We find so much success with it, because the first question is, what is important to you outside of work? And how can we support you? We had a mother who said, what's important to me is to take my daughter to school at 7:00 in the morning. That's an important thing for her manager to know. There may be times when she may need her at 7:00 in the morning, but nobody ever minds what they have to do occasionally. It's what you have to do every day, and particularly women, we find have a hard time speaking up about these things. They're afraid they're going to be on the mommy track or seen as not serious about their work, and yet, it's so easy to make these small changes that make any employee feel really valued, really supported. When you take care of yourself and the things that matter to you, you're also so much better at work.

Jen: Absolutely, better in all aspects of your life, and I talk about that frequently. I mean, it impacts, in particular, how we show up and treat one another, not just the work that we're doing, but how we behave with one another. We've talked about environments that are toxic. When you have people that aren't taking care of themselves, the chance of it being a toxic environment is pretty high.

Arianna: Very high.

Jen: So, if you could go back, this is one of those questions (laughs), if you could go back to your younger self prior to your burnout, what's one piece of advice you would give yourself?

Arianna: I actually went through my garage while I've been here in my home in LA and found a lot of old journals I had been writing through my life. I saw how many unnecessary worries I had, Jen, through the years, and I would sort of shout to my younger self to stop

worrying and to realize that life is a dance between making it happen and letting it happen. Definitely in my life, I've always had an action bias, as my daughters will tell you, like there's a problem, I'll fix it. At sometimes is great, but there are also times when we need to learn more about what the problem is, understand more, bring other people in to support us. Also, there are moments when life comes up with amazing opportunities and solutions that we maybe would never have thought of. I mean, some of the best things in my life happened because I was open to them, not because I made them happen. I do think life is a dance and when we realize that, it takes a big burden off us.

Jen: Yeah, absolutely, and you and I have talked about being "worriers" or "ruminators" (laughs). I think I learned the strategy, the micro-step for from you is to set aside time to worry.

Arianna: Yeah, a lot of women especially, we have this false perfectionism. When we make mistakes, and who doesn't, we tend to basically look at ourselves in a way that exaggerates all our self-doubts, our impostor syndrome, our self-judgments, and that's so debilitating and so draining. I call this voice "the obnoxious roommate living in my head," and learning to deal with that voice is key.

Jen: Yeah, I like that. "The obnoxious roommate living in my head", I have one of those too and sometimes she's really loud (laughs).

Arianna: You know what? We can reduce the volume, and now I really find, Jen, that my obnoxious roommate only makes guest appearances.

Jen: That's great. I love that. So, we talked about your advice to your younger self. Looking into the future, what do you think workplaces are going to look like when it comes to the future of work and well-being and mental health?

Arianna: Well, I think we are entering an amazing phase where these mental health conversations are mainstream. Where we see mental health, emotional health as key components of performance and business metrics. That is key, that is a huge shift. I mean the things you've been working on for years are now becoming mainstream. We are still swimming in a culture where many people are captives of that delusion, that burnout is the only way to succeed, but that's always the case when there are big social shifts. You have the trailblazers and you have the laggards, and we see both, but the shift has happened. Obviously, we need to make sure it deepens and grows, but that's one of the silver linings of the pandemic.

Jen: So, one last question for you Arianna. There's so much wisdom packed into this conversation. How do you personally manage your mental and emotional well-being on a daily basis? What are your go-to things?

Arianna: Well, my number one go-to thing is sleep. I believe sleep is foundational for our physical immunity and our emotional and mental health. I prioritize getting 8 hours of sleep, which is what I need, and that requires a pretty sacred transition to sleep, turning off my phone, charging it outside my bedroom, and having a hot bath or shower to wash away the day, only reading physical books in bed. I am a big believer of each one of us building our

own transition, even if you start with five minutes. Mine is 30 minutes now, but don't worry about that, start wherever you can. That slowing down of our brain makes it possible to sleep more deeply, not to wake up in the middle of the night and not be able to go to sleep, which often happens because our brain wakes us up. Waking up recharged, and this is such a great thing, to be able to start our day excited about what we're doing. I mean, you and I have talked about how blessed we are to be doing things we love and when I'm exhausted and sleep deprived, it's hard to connect with that feeling of joy and gratitude.

Jen: Yeah. If you only take one thing away from this podcast, take away get more sleep (laughs). Well, Arianna, thank you so much for joining us today. Like I said, this conversation was full of wisdom, as I knew it would be, and it is such a pleasure to have you on the show.

Arianna: Thank you so much Jen. I loved being on your show and love our work together. Thank you.

Jen: I'm so grateful Arianna could be with us today to talk about her personal story and well-being. Thank you to our producers and our listeners. You can find the WorkWell podcast series on deloitte.com or you can visit various podcatchers using the keyword "WorkWell," all one word, to hear more and if you like the show, don't forget to subscribe so you get all of our future episodes. If you have a topic you'd like to hear on the WorkWell podcast series or maybe a story you would like to share, please reach out to me on LinkedIn, my profile is under the name "Jen Fisher," or on Twitter "@jenfish23." We're always open to your recommendations and feedback. And of course, if you like what you hear, please share, post, and like this podcast. Thank you and be well.

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