



# HAPPINESS RULES

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BEAT  
BURNOUT



EMBRACE  
HAPPINESS



BECOME  
A BETTER  
ENTREPRENEUR

MANUEL ASTRUC, M.D.

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HAPPINESS RULES

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FOR MY TWIN



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# INTRODUCTION

*“When we are no longer able to change a situation...we are challenged to change ourselves.”*

—VIKTOR FRANKL, *MAN’S SEARCH FOR MEANING*

In September 2008, I hit rock bottom. This wasn’t my first time falling so low—I’d also spent time down there when facing alcoholism and depression—however, I’d never felt *this* exhausted, desperate, and bitter. As far as I could tell, life was intolerably difficult, and it was never going to get better. I had financial commitments I felt I could never meet; I was worn out and couldn’t take a break; I was struggling to keep afloat; and I saw no way out of my predicament. In that moment, I saw no potential for a better future, let alone relief from my suffering. My situation felt so hopeless, I even contemplated suicide.

It wasn’t drugs or alcohol that led to this moment of despair; it was, in a way, success. I had worked myself so hard and provided myself with so few resources to recover that life had simply become too much for me. I was suffering from burnout, and I didn’t see any way out of it.

Because I had put everything into my work, I had isolated myself from those who cared for me. My second wife and I were separated. My relationships with my kids—all six of them—were strained. I saw no way to amend my behavior and repair any of those relationships. Quite the opposite, in fact. All I could see in those relationships at the time were obligations that trapped me in a cycle of overworking. I carried with me from childhood a deep conviction that my role must be the provider, fulfilling all my family's financial needs. Six kids and two ex-wives led to a lot of bills. I had alimony and child support to pay. My older children were heading to college, and I'd either have to find the funds to cover their education or face the humiliation of letting them down when they needed me most. And that was before I spent a cent on myself.

The only solution I could imagine was to work more. After all, that had always been my solution to everything. I was a hard worker by nature, and I'd built up a very successful psychiatric practice through that industriousness. It was a point of pride for me that I could outwork anybody. For years, I'd regularly put in fourteen-hour days at the office, six days a week. But how many more hours could I realistically work? And what was I going to do now that I could barely get out of bed to go to the office, let alone put in a long shift?

I simply couldn't step back from my responsibilities. Not only did I have huge bills to pay, my work was important. I had responsibilities to my patients. I couldn't justify days off or ducking out of the office early. Who else could handle my responsibilities? Who would sit in those therapy sessions or write prescriptions? If I turned my attention away, the whole practice could crumble.

In my despair, I could still recognize the irony of my situation. I'd turned off every other aspect of my life, and now the one thing I put everything into, the one thing I felt I could do as well as anyone in the world—my work—was draining me of my final remaining resources and leaving me feeling weary and resigned. Worse, I'd seen this coming for years. I knew eventually there would be a day of reckoning. But I'd been so worn into the grooves of my workaholism, I'd slammed right into the wall I knew was just around the corner. Because of that failure to change course, I now felt stuck going through the motions, no matter how exhausted I became. Where once my work had invigorated me, it now felt like an endless trudge on a treadmill. And I could feel my legs giving out under me.

Like an exhausted runner, I could no longer keep up my stride. I was slipping. Because I was so burned out, I began to fear that I would lose the ability to work at the highest level of psychiatry. Instead of providing insight into the lives of my patients, my lack of focus left me less sharp. When I did focus, it was always the small number of patients who weren't getting better as fast as I wanted.

How long until my pessimism affected the treatment I offered my patients? How long could I keep this up with no end in sight?

I was trapped. I needed rest, but I needed money. Because I needed money, I had to work. If I kept working, I knew I would eventually hit a breaking point and face even more severe consequences. But what choice did I have left? As far as I could tell, all I could do was work as hard as I could for

as long as I could and hope my health held out long enough for my kids to grow up and take care of themselves.

In that moment, I had to almost marvel at the cruel twist my life had taken. I had overcome depression and alcoholism only to see my darkest moment brought on by what I did best: working hard and succeeding at it.

## **FEELING THE BURN**

This is what burnout—truly burning out—looks like. Burnout is defined by the World Health Organization as an occupational syndrome, a response to a life that is out of order. It manifests in those who constantly and consistently put work before everything else. And it causes intense disruption to your life, your work, and your health.

Burnout isn't just a sense of tiredness or a lack of enjoyment in your work. It's a dark room that feels like it has no exits. From once being the hardest worker in the office, you can feel your effort slipping away during even the most important projects. From being the most creative or decisive thinker on your team, you can feel like there are no solutions left. From being the person to get things done, you can feel like the bottleneck holding progress back. From being an innovator and trailblazer, you can feel like you are a slave to your responsibilities. From having the golden touch, you can feel like you've lost your touch completely.

But this doesn't describe *you*, right? Of course not. You're too driven, too successful, too critical to your business to ever suffer from burnout, right? Burnout is a weakness. It happens

to other people, not world-beating entrepreneurs who have everything going their way. Sure, you feel so tired that lying in bed has become the best part of your day, and you feel like there is no way to change that. And sure, your once indomitable enthusiasm for your work and your life has begun to curdle into cynicism and bitterness. But this is all just part of what you have to do to play at this level, right?

*...Right?*

That's what we entrepreneurs tell ourselves. We assume burnout is reserved for people who truly lack options—those who are stuck in positions that don't offer any financial or personal freedom. It's for those with tough, no-excuse bosses, not the boss themselves. It's for employees who never have the option to do something else, not the well-off business owner who could find alternative employment with the snap of a finger.

We want to believe that burnout doesn't happen to people like us. It seems almost pathetic to complain about stress and melancholy when we get to make all the critical choices for our company, set our own rules and our own schedules, and pursue our dreams.

Yet for all the perks that come with entrepreneurship, our circumstances do not make us exempt from burnout, but candidates for it. In fact, as entrepreneurs, our roles check all four boxes for the pressures that push a person into burnout:

- Highly demanding work
- A low level of perceived control
- High risk associated with the job

- And a low level of perceived reward

Anyone can—and many do—face these pressures, but entrepreneurs are lucky enough to face them all constantly.

There's no doubt that your work is highly demanding and that the consequences for doing your job poorly are significant. The problems you face are never easy to solve, and if you don't solve those problems, the cost is high. You might lose major clients or have to let employees go. At worst, the whole business might come crashing down.

And once you do overcome those problems, your reward for success is bigger problems. You get bigger clients, more employees, and a larger enterprise that could all fall apart.

Check, check, and check.

But wait. How can an entrepreneur who runs their own business lack control or feel like they aren't being rewarded? Surely if anyone has control over their work, it's entrepreneurs. And isn't the big paycheck and the name on the door of the biggest office in the building enough reward?

In a sense, this is true. If anyone has control over their work, it's the head of the company. And the head of the company almost always cashes the biggest paycheck. However, as you know, this is a simplistic view of your position. After all, no one truly has control over a business. You may be able to call the big shots in your office, but you can't control supply chain issues, key employees leaving, recessions, restrictions set by the board, a new competitor rising up to take a big chunk

of the market, or new technologies, government policies, or culture shifts that put pressure on your bottom line.

These are the problems that keep entrepreneurs up at night. And you have no control over any of them.

As my friend Kevin Christie says, there's a big difference between being the one signing the front of the check and being the one signing the back of it.

At the same time, after a certain point, that paycheck you're also signing on the back stops feeling like a reward, and the sense of achievement you used to feel can be subsumed in the problems of today—in the struggle to achieve the same level of scale you did previously or to keep up with expectations set by investors. Once your life adjusts to your level of success, you stop feeling that jolt of joy that used to keep you going. This is called “hedonic adaptation.” And once that jolt is gone, all that's left is the grind of those tough days at work.

Consider the circumstances around the burnout of a client of mine, Joe. Joe runs a very successful business that is reliant on digital ads. He's managed his business very well, but none of that previous success felt like much of a reward when he faced a new crisis. Apple's new iPhone operating system allowed users to block the use of their data.

No user data, no targeted ads. No targeted ads, no business for my client.

It was a decision he had no part in, and one he could do nothing to reverse. It's no wonder he found it harder to find the

energy to go into the office or to even say hello to those he saw in the hallway. This lack of control combined with the demanding nature of his work and the consequences for failing to meet this crisis left him feeling short-tempered, irritable, and dejected.

He also struggled to make those snap decisions that used to come so easily. Like a batter who has lost his confidence, starts overthinking his swing, and suddenly faces strikeout after strikeout, every decision Joe made, he second-guessed. Even when he tried not to think about it, he overthought it. He lost that gut instinct that had served him so well.

Joe was more successful than the vast majority of people, but due to the nature of his work, the stress he had accumulated up to that point made it difficult for him to face this new crisis. Instead of pivoting to a new strategy, the crisis left him feeling like a failure—and feeling like there was no way out.

It wasn't the crisis that overwhelmed him; it was years of demands, responsibilities, and struggling for control. By the time Facebook changed its policy, he was ripe for burnout. This just pushed him over that edge.

## **THE ENGINE FOR SUCCESS**

Remember what it used to feel like going into the office? You lived to get to work every day. The challenges you faced were energizing, and you always seemed to find a solution almost effortlessly. In fact, a whole day could pass in the blink of an eye because you were so focused on the tasks at hand. On those days, it seemed as if you never put a foot wrong. And

at the end of the day, when you came home exhausted and satisfied by your efforts, you felt, in a word, happy.

We often assume that it was the success that made us happy, but psychological studies have shown we have that backwards. In one metastudy that appeared in the *Psychological Bulletin* in 2005, Sonja Lyubomirsky, Laura King, and Ed Diener found that it is the happiness that makes us successful—across many areas of life. When we're happy, we are energetic. We're more willing to take on challenges and try new things. We feel creative and want to express ourselves. We're outgoing, and we have large reserves of patience and diligence to confront any troubles that might arise.

So while you might assume that your recent struggles at work are the reason you've felt less happy, it's likely the situation is the reverse. Your life was out of balance, which drained you of happiness and left you struggling in the office.

This distinction is important because, far too often, hard-nosed entrepreneurs are dismissive of the idea of happiness. They see themselves almost as ascetics, willing to forego things like happiness and contentment for the sake of success. They'll sacrifice almost anything to see their dreams achieved. This effort is often admirable, but dismissing happiness as inconsequential can affect the business they care so much for. If a lack of happiness in life leads to a lack of focus in the office, the business suffers with the entrepreneur.

Put another way, happiness is your engine for success. It provides the power you need to push your business forward. You'd never leave your engine in such disrepair that you'd risk

a breakdown on the highway, yet that's precisely how you left your emotional and motivational engine. So if you want to get back to how it used to be in the office, it's time to start making some repairs.

### **RETURNING TO HAPPINESS**

On that day in September, I sat in the dark, looking at a photo of my twin sister, Magdalena. She had died only a month before after a long struggle with brain cancer. Hers was an especially tragic story. The disease had struck her when she had just gotten her life on track. She had gone from work that she was good at—as a controller at a hedge fund run by our brother Rafael—to a job at the University of Richmond, where she was truly happy. She had four beautiful, young children, and thanks to the benefits at her new job, she would be able to send them all to college.



She was looking forward to a long life, raising the kids she loved and working at a job she loved.

When she got her diagnosis, she was several months short of receiving her benefits.

Still, through the worry, the disappointment, the sadness, the pain, and the fear, she managed to remain happy. There's no other word for it. Whenever we would talk, I could hear her smiling through the phone.

At first, there was optimism. "I'm going to beat this. It's going to be okay."

Even as the likeliness of a cure began to fade, she remained positive and upbeat. "It's not so bad. I get to be home with my kids."

In the last couple months, when she was really struggling, she still maintained her humor. When our brother Rafael visited her near the end, she burst out laughing, "I can't even get out of bed. Isn't this ridiculous?"

The picture I held that day reflected her untamable joyful attitude. In it, she was smiling ear to ear, wearing a wig because she was going through chemo. Looking at that photo, I realized that I owed it to her not to give up and submit to burnout. Her brave positivity in the face of far more serious circumstances than I could imagine gave me the courage to demand more from myself.

Something had to change. And her example would lead the way.

I made a commitment then and there to make that change. From that day, I started making slow, uncertain progress back from burnout. Through many false starts and unexpected cul-de-sacs, I brought together the inspiration of my sister, my decades of training and experience in psychiatry, the tools I'd acquired in Alcoholics Anonymous, the wisdom of classical thinkers, and the advice of the best life coaches. Eventually, reviewing my progress and failures, I was able to assemble a system that could bring me back to the happiness Magdalena had exemplified.

The result was the Happiness Rules. These rules allowed me—and will allow you—to take small, positive steps toward a healthier, more optimistic, and happier life. Through these rules, I regained my energy and the motivation to work. I stopped entertaining negative thoughts and started putting my health first on my list of priorities. I began to live intentionally and make mindful choices about what I needed and wanted from life. I recovered the ability to concentrate, and I saw new paths that could lead me out of my desperate situation.

As I progressed through these rules, I found out I wasn't trapped in a life without happiness and without opportunities. I found a new path, one that provided me with a new sense of success and a new drive to achieve. And through these rules, I found I could create a life that could flourish through any circumstances.

## **RESTARTING YOUR ENGINE**

None of this is to say that the Happiness Rules solved every

problem in my life. I still needed to find a way to make more money to cover my responsibilities. I still had numerous relationships to repair with family and friends. And while my love for psychiatry would return in time, it would never again be the center of my life as it had. I would soon discover there were other avenues I would need to explore if I wanted to feel like I was truly flourishing.

The same will prove true for you. The Happiness Rules won't fix your strained relationships or put extra money in your pocket, and they won't provide you with some brilliant, innovative solution to the problems in your office or your personal life.

In these pages, you will not find any treatment for physical or mental illnesses—this is not a way to treat depression or any other psychological condition. However, if you are feeling exhausted, bitter, detached from work, or seeing a lack of effectiveness in your work—or if you are feeling a lack of purpose, a sense of stagnation, or emotionally numb—the Happiness Rules can provide you with a consistent, healthier state of mind no matter what issues you are facing.

The tools in this book help alleviate burnout and provide a structure that will ensure it doesn't return again. If you follow the advice ahead, you can restart that engine that has driven you to success and maintain it in a way that is healthier for you, your business, and those you care about.

From feeling so hopeless at the prospect of continuing working that I contemplated suicide, these days, I'm so happy at work I've decided that I never want to stop working. I have

the energy to not just get through the day but to expand my business. And I still have enough time and energy left over to work on those family relationships while strengthening my ties to the community.

I feel a greater sense of freedom in my actions because I am able to make positive choices in how I invest my time and effort. And I have organized my life to maintain that energy and freedom going forward. I still have my share struggles in work and in life, but my internal experience is so different that those struggles no longer have the ability to burn me.

Joe experienced a similar turn around. Once we started working through the Happiness Rules, he made a remarkable recovery to his former energy and optimism. He's now developed a solution to overcome the setback after Apple changed its policies, and he's thriving in his work once more.

This can be your future as well. No matter how hopeless your situation feels or how worn out you are, there is a way back to your previous sense of happiness and all the success it brought you.

But before you can follow the rules that lead you back, you have to first acknowledge where you are—and that you have a problem. You have to accept that you are facing burnout. That it isn't a weakness. That you're allowed to struggle. And that the consequences of ignoring this situation can be serious.

Only then can we commit to change and make our way back onto the path of happiness.

PART I

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WHY WE NEED  
NEW RULES





# THE COST OF BURNOUT

*“How did you go bankrupt?” Bill asked. ‘Two ways,’ Mike said. ‘Gradually, then suddenly.’”*

— ERNEST HEMINGWAY, *THE SUN ALSO RISES*

A psychiatric patient of mine, whom I’ll call Jacob here to protect his privacy, was a landscape architect who designed beautiful outdoor areas for some of the richest and most famous people in the country. Jacob absolutely loved his job. It allowed him to express his creativity, earn a fantastic income, and hang out with the most glamorous people on the planet. His name was mentioned in elite circles as the person to speak to if someone wanted to create one of those properties you see in the magazines.

He had the kind of career and lifestyle that everyone wants. He had the house and the car and the family that people would give anything for. He had it all.

And it was making him sick.

His work was, by nature, high pressure. The deadlines were aggressive and non-negotiable, and the expectations of his high-paying clientele were overwhelming. He worked for people who demanded the best service, and he had to deliver every single day. At the same time, he had friction with his business partner. They no longer saw eye-to-eye on the direction the company should take. There were flare-ups at the office and tensions in their every interaction, and it all required energy that Jacob couldn't spare.

For years, he pushed on. He would wake up tired and still find a way to get into the office and get the work done. He stopped enjoying the parties and all the hobnobbing that had once seemed so appealing, but he kept socializing all the same.

Slowly, though, the burnout he was trying to overcome through willpower began having an effect on his work and his health. He couldn't concentrate or make those crucial decisions that had once made him the best in his industry. At the same time, he spiraled from exhausted and disillusioned to depressed and anxious.

"I didn't love what I was doing anymore," he later told me. "I was trapped. I couldn't walk away from the money. I couldn't walk away from the praise. But I couldn't do this anymore."

Jacob had let his burnout rage for so long, he had very limited options left. His mental health was so low, continuing to work would put him at risk of serious consequences. The relationship with his partner was broken beyond the point of repair. Ultimately, he had little choice but to leave the work he had loved. He and his wife decided to live on her salary.

They downsized, sold the house and the cars that everyone envied, and started over.

He had to walk away from it all—simply because he'd tried to tough his way through the early warning signs instead of listening to what his body and mind were telling him.

### **THIS ISN'T GOING TO GO AWAY**

Jacob was an extreme case. Usually, mindful attention to burnout can allow individuals to return to their happier, healthier, and more productive selves without abandoning their work. That's only possible, however, if the person suffering from burnout recognizes that they can't will the burnout away—or ignore it, or work even harder now so they can take time off later.

This is a particularly difficult lesson for entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurs are, by nature, fixers. And we're often very stubborn fixers at that. We see it as our job to dig in and repair whatever isn't working in our businesses in order to reach optimum effectiveness. Under normal circumstances, this serves us well. Normally, the problems we face at work require a well-thought-out strategy and a lot of effort and determination to execute. Whether it's the work of peppering everyone up or finding that one great idea that will salvage a product launch, it's a matter of rising to the occasion and working through that solution. Our do-it-yourself-at-all-costs motivation to find and carry out solutions is the hammer we use on every nail that pops up in our business.

However, burnout isn't a nail. It isn't a standard problem that

we can fix by concentrating on it and executing a strategy. Unlike other problems, we can't work through burnout while we ignore our underlying stress and exhaustion. That only makes it worse.

We have to look at burnout like an underlying injury to our body and mind. On episode 180 of the Tim Ferriss podcast, he interviewed a successful gymnastics coach named Coach Sommer. At one point in the interview, Tim started talking about a time he tweaked his wrist at home. After a few weeks, while traveling overseas, he was so desperate for a good workout, he went to the gym and re-aggravated his injury. Instead of stopping, he decided to push through the pain.

"I'm finishing this workout," he recounted.

Coach Sommer answered bluntly, "I thought you were smart."

That may seem a bit brusque, but the point was extremely important. Tim's way of dealing with an injured wrist was to ignore the pain and lean into finishing the workout no matter what. To an entrepreneur, that makes sense. We do that all the time; it's part of that special mix of qualities that lead to our success. When others would quit, we keep at it. This may give us a leg up in business, but it can come at a cost. In reality, when you have an injury, the last thing you want to do is push through the pain. The pain is your body telling you to stop and attend to the issue. Ignoring your body and forcing your way through the pain only leads to further injury.

The same is true of burnout. Burnout is your mind and body telling you to change what you're doing, not lean further into

it. Ignoring the symptoms of burnout only makes the injury worse. Not only will we feel increasingly more exhausted, we will also lose the ability to think our way out of the situation. Our ever-increasing stress leads to poor judgment, a loss of introspection, and a weakened ability to make the best choices to relieve that stress. We develop tunnel vision in which all we do is work, and as far as we can conceive in that moment, there's no possibility to escape that tunnel. That sense of being trapped makes us bitter. We start to feel hopeless.

We enter a downward spiral, and the force pulling us down increases the further we fall. The further we fall, the more impossible it feels to find a means of escape.

This is the situation Jacob found himself in. By the time he came to me, he was so burned out by his circumstances, his once-world-class insight and creativity had been enfeebled to the point he could no longer be effective in his work. He could barely make it through a workday, yet his tunnel vision left him seeing no other options but to stubbornly march on.

The same was true of my own burnout experience. When I was spiraling into that dark moment in September 2008, there were many potential solutions available to me to relieve the big stressors on my life. I needed money, but I could have started another business. I could have focused on maximizing my investments or sold some assets. I could have negotiated with my ex-wives over alimony in order to cover some of the upcoming college expenses I would face. I could have brought in junior partners and taken a cut of their profits as we increased our client numbers. I could have hired an

administrator to organize my schedule better to get the most value from my time.

But by then, I'd lost the ability to problem solve on that level. I was stuck in a pattern of overworking, but I couldn't see any way to change my circumstances. That tunnel vision closed out all of my remaining options. The only choice I felt I had was to keep going, even though I knew it wasn't sustainable. And that choice was only leading one direction: further down.

### **THE BURNOUT CONTINUUM**

It may be that your experience of burnout doesn't compare to what you've read about Jacob or me. You aren't mulling over quitting your business or suicide. Perhaps you're just a little tired and frustrated with work. So what does all this dramatic talk of permanent injury and potential depression have to do with you?

Potentially, everything, if nothing changes. Burnout is on a continuum. In the early stages, you are still near your baseline, which is your emotional equilibrium. On most days and in most ways, you function normally, with a normal amount of energy, normal amount of creativity and focus, and normal levels of effectiveness. Some days are harder—in which you feel extremely tired, short-tempered, and not functioning at your highest level—but you can usually push through. You might still find that the majority of your days you'd count yourself relatively happy.

As your burnout shifts farther down the continuum, though, you grow more exhausted and more cynical, and that tunnel vision

begins to creep in. You notice yourself snapping at employees, clients, friends, and family for the slightest provocation—and you seem to lack the energy to correct this. Slowly, you start more days feeling exhausted, and you end more days looking for ways to check out of your responsibilities, whether that entails leaving the office early or simply putting on Netflix from the moment you get home to the moment you go to bed. From having big dreams for yourself, your family, and your company, you may slowly become more pessimistic and myopic—life is all about work, and work is an unending challenge.

These shifts can be more subtle as well. You may see a shift toward pessimism in every area of your life as you fall under the sway of negative feelings of the moment instead of finding the reserves to maintain your energy and optimism. You may focus more on the things you don't have control over instead of those you can solve. You may externalize more problems and look for something or someone out there to blame for the change in your perspective. Suddenly, a bad meeting can't be brushed off so easily. It becomes a day-ruiner. A client call that doesn't result in a new sale gets mulled over for hours. A whole weekend can disappear under the cloud of a slight dip in profits.

Life comes with problems, and all of these are normal feelings. However, as you slide down the burnout continuum, these normal feelings begin to dominate your life. Where once you would have rebounded quickly and focused on how to fix these problems, now you simply dwell on the problem itself and how helpless you feel before it. Eventually, those good happy days become rare enough to feel like holidays. You cherish them precisely because they are so infrequent.

Unfortunately, that's only half the continuum. Once you are sliding down in this spiral, you're accelerating right toward those dramatic stories that seem so exaggerated right now. In fact, those events are far closer than they may seem at the moment.

## **THE POTENTIAL END**

Injuries left untreated can become more severe over time. If you're a football fan, you undoubtedly have opinions about the NFL concussion policies. These policies have developed out of a growing body of evidence that multiple concussions sustained over a long period of time do significant damage to the brain. A player can "shake it off" once or twice and seem to be fine, but over time, those repeated injuries can become a condition called Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy—which can cause memory loss, depression, dementia, and suicidality, among other things.

Burnout progresses in the same way. On its own, it is not serious enough to be considered a psychological disease. Instead, it's a prodrome, closer to a set of symptoms that can become disease over time. Left untreated, though, that prodrome can mature into disease, and if it does, the consequences are dire. Like Jacob, unattended burnout can turn into an anxiety disorder and or a major depressive disorder. Essentially, burnout can so overwhelm your system that your ability to function can be compromised to the point you require serious professional help. We're talking therapy and psychotropic medication. At its worst, burnout can eventually lead to such a profound sense of hopelessness that it can result in death by suicide.

This is only the psychological component. The end point

for unattended burnout can also affect your physical health. Chronic stress can cause all sorts of medical problems, including high blood pressure, heart conditions, and an increased risk of stroke.

Outside your immediate health, burnout can cause massive disruption to your personal life. At home, you may find you have nothing left to give to your relationships. You become emotionally distant. Over time, this emotional exhaustion can lead to divorce and estrangement from friends and your children.

Sometimes, as in Jacob's case, burnout can even lead to the inability to do the one thing you do best in the world: your work. Because you can't function at your highest level anymore, your business may struggle or even collapse. You may alienate your best clients and employees. From being the world's best boss, you can find that no one wants to work with you anymore.

In the end, then, allowing yourself to slide down the burnout continuum can result in losing everything you care about. Burnout can take your family and friends, your business, and your health. If you aren't facing these serious circumstances yet, that's wonderful. There's still time to prevent the worst from happening. But you have to start making the necessary changes now, so that you can get back to happiness and avoid paying a terrible price for delay.

## **THE BEGINNING CONNECTS TO THE END**

I started going to Alcoholics Anonymous (AA for short) about

twenty-five years ago. At that point, I'd been dancing around the fact that I had an alcohol problem for quite some time. Whenever my then-wife, Marlana, confronted me about my drinking, I always responded with the traditional excuses.

"I'm not drinking that much."

"I'm just stressed from work."

"This is how I unwind."

Finally, she put her foot down. It was her and the kids or the beer. I agreed to stop drinking cold turkey from that moment on. I made it two whole days without a drink. Then I snuck a beer. Strange as it may be to read this, I was actually immensely proud of myself. I had only had one beer. I stopped after one. See? No drinking problem here!

It was only when I repeated this in my head that I realized how pathetic it sounded. Worse than that, I started to see how my thinking was bordering on the delusional. I had promised my wife I wouldn't drink. She had said my drinking could end our marriage. And I was proud that I'd only betrayed her trust a little bit and snuck one beer. That's how powerful my justifications had become.

That's when I knew I had a problem.

It had been hard to come to terms with my alcoholism partly because I wasn't an alcoholic like you see in the movies. I wasn't getting kicked out of bars at closing time or selling my stuff to buy a bottle of booze. I was successful. I went to work

every day and met all my obligations. Until that night, I had never hidden my drinking. I'd done it in front of everyone, and most of the people I knew never said a word about it.

This wasn't just a personal problem. AA has historically also found it difficult to help people see how the early stages of alcoholism that can be rationalized away lead directly to the late-stage alcoholism we can all recognize. The natural instinct most people have when they first go to an AA meeting is to listen for ways in which everyone else in the room is different from them. What they want to hear is that these people are alcoholics but *they* just enjoy having a drink sometimes. Everyone else has a problem; they're doing just fine. "I am not like *them*."

The instinct is to exclude themselves from the label of alcoholic and the dark path that word suggests that they are on. This is part of the reason it's so hard to get people to go to a meeting in the first place. People don't want to face that kind of problem. It often takes some sort of external pressure to compel an alcoholic to attend their first meeting. Someone in their lives insists they go, as Marlana did with me, or some legal enforcement demands they attend. Once they're at the meeting, all they want to do is find some proof that they don't need it.

AA has countered this instinct to rationalize away alcoholism by tying those early-stage signs of a problem to the late-stage issues we all know. They have studied this extensively, and what they have done is create a system that emphasizes that most alcoholics have very similar early experiences. There was a test or a job interview or an important event to attend

and instead of studying, preparing, or getting some rest, the alcoholic went to a party to drink—to just have one...that turned into six. There was a social event, and while everyone else had a couple drinks, the alcoholic got drunk.

When they face some consequences for their drinking, alcoholics come up with excuses. The test wasn't important. They didn't want that job anyway. The cop shouldn't have pulled them over in the first place; they were driving fine. And so what if they drank more than everyone else? They were just having a good time or blowing off steam.

As the problems—and the consequences—get worse, alcoholics develop coping mechanisms. They only drink when they eat or set a limit on the number of drinks they allow themselves on a night out. Or they only drink beer instead of spirits because they can usually stay relatively sober.

That's why AA centers this shared narrative at their meetings, so everyone who is there for the first time can see that wherever they are on the alcoholic continuum, they are certainly on it somewhere. In order to be effective, AA has to encourage people to identify with the other people in the room and recognize, "I'm just like them." As this reality sets in, a paradigm shift occurs, and denial clears away. Given the time and the conditions, an alcoholic who sneaks one beer when he promised not to drink at all can end up like those who will sell their coat in a blizzard for a bottle of cheap whiskey.

The same process has to occur with burnout. We have to come to terms with the fact that the mild symptoms of early burnout lead directly to the dark consequences of ignoring it. The

amount of suffering that you can endure through burnout is comparable to alcoholism. And like alcoholism, it isn't something you have to suffer.

Famously, the first step in the Twelve-Step Program developed by AA is to admit there's a problem. That step has to come first because we can't address an issue until we face the seriousness of that issue. If you're in a car and the brakes go out at the stoplight, you don't keep driving that car just because you survived. You get that car towed and get new brakes. We need to trigger that same response with burnout. When we start seeing warning signs for burnout, we can't dismiss them. We can't ignore them. We can't fight them. We have to address the problem as soon as possible.

In alcoholism, the lines are clear. If you continue to drink in the face of negative consequences, you have a problem. There's a clear prognosis. The disease is progressive, so if you don't deal with it, things will get worse. But burnout isn't so different. If you continue to push yourself and work harder in the face of increasing exhaustion, fraying relationships, and a growing sense of pessimism and dissatisfaction, there's a problem.

And the sooner you deal with it, the more likely you will be able to avoid the scenario Jacob faced. The first time your spouse says you are no longer emotionally available enough for the family or the first day you really can't get up and go into work, that's the time to address your burnout. The first time you blow up at an employee for a minimal mistake or feel a deep sense of hopelessness, that's when you should look to make a change.

I know that isn't an easy step to take. Like alcoholism, it's hard to face a problem when society tells you that it's okay. Everyone drinks! You're just having a good time! You only live one life! And society is telling you as an entrepreneur that working yourself to the bone is admirable, even exemplary.

But if you want to regain your happiness and restart the engine that drove you to success, you're going to have to recognize that society is wrong.

### THE GIST

For those too busy to read through the entire book and for those coming back to these chapters for a quick review, these “gists” will give you the main points to take away from each chapter.

Here, we looked at the nature of burnout. There is a continuum of burnout. Ignoring early, mild signs—such as exhaustion, feeling detached or negative about work, or losing effectiveness at work—will lead to these issues getting worse.

There's an inclination to find ways to deny that this is happening. As they point out in AA, many will seek evidence that they are “not like them” instead of the evidence that this is happening. That is, they look for differences instead of the significant similarities.

We have to face the truth about burnout. Over time, burnout spreads to affect not just work but the rest of your life, from family and friends to health.