

# Disrupt Yourself Podcast

## EPISODE 297: WILL AHMED

Welcome back to the Disrupt Yourself podcast, where we provide strategies and advice on how to climb the S Curve of Learning in your professional and personal life, disrupting who you are now to slingshot into who you want to be. I'm your host, Whitney Johnson. If you're a long-time listener, you know that this show is all about maximizing your potential. And our guest this week shares that goal. In fact, he's obsessed with it. For Will Ahmed, it's all about the data of health. He's the founder and CEO of Whoop, which makes wearable tech-like fitness bands that track things like heart rate, exercise, sleep, stress levels, and more. It's beloved by pro athletes, CEOs, and me. As you'll hear, his journey as a startup founder is deeply personal and about much more than just business. There is a lot to learn. Enjoy.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, Will, share with us a formative experience, something that shaped who you are.

**Will Ahmed:** It's funny. The first thing that came to mind when you just asked me that was an experience when I was in. Sixth grade, and it's something I think about a lot. I was running in this, captain's race. So, every year my middle school, Green Vale, we had this field day, and the school colors were blue and gold and so the whole school was divided up into the blue color or the gold color and would compete against each other. And then there were two representatives from each side that would run in most called the captain's race, which was the last event of the day, by each grade. And I, of course, was very proud that I was one of the two people for the blue team to run in this captain's race. And it was like a relay race. You run around the track. And so, I'd been thinking about it for quite some time leading up to the race. And it just so happened that right before that race, I learned that this event that was supposed to happen, the 440, which I think at the time was like two laps around the track, which certainly felt like a lot. The captain's race was supposed to be one lap that the runner who was supposed to participate in that had gotten sick.

**Will Ahmed:** And so, all of a sudden, I hear our science teacher, Peter Zaloom, yelling, We're going to need someone from blue to run in the 440. And I, of course, didn't really run that race. And the next race I had was this captain's race. So, I was very focused on that. Zaloom's looking for someone to raise his hand, and of course no one's doing it. And we make eye contact and he kind of lasers in on me and he comes over to me. And he says, Will, you're running this race. And I said, No, no, no, I can't do that. I've got the captain's race right after. I don't want to be tired for it. And he said, Will, without skipping a breath, he said, "Will, 90% of life is just showing up. The rest is what happens when you get there." And I can't actually remember. I mean, I know I ran the race and I know I ran the captain's race, but I can't actually remember the results of those things, which I think is also fitting to the story. But that quote really stuck with me, which was, you know, a lot of life is just showing up.

**Whitney Johnson:** And you were 11 years old. 12 years old.

**Will Ahmed:** Yeah, exactly.

**Whitney Johnson:** All right. So, I want everybody to hold that story and we'll see what kind of tie ins there are as we go throughout the conversation. Fast forward ten, 11 years, and you found a company you're about to graduate from college and you found a company called Whoop. Tell us about how this company came about.

**Will Ahmed:** I had this kernel of an idea around the age of 18 or 19, which was how can you better measure the human body? There should be something that you can wear that would tell you about your health or your performance or your exercise. I was an athlete, and I was someone who used to like to exercise quite a bit. And I was playing squash at Harvard. And I was someone who used to overtrain throughout my career, but especially as a college athlete. And that got me deeply interested in this question of measuring the human body. And I think a lot of entrepreneurs describe their foundation in some sort of eureka terms, like, Oh, I immediately had this idea and I was off to the races. But for me at least, and maybe this was my age and my own insecurity, it really took me years to get comfortable with the concept of starting a company. And so, obviously there is three or four years between this initial idea and founding the business my senior year. And throughout that time, I was really doing the research and the work, if you will, to build the confidence to actually start it. I was taking a lot of classes in the science department at Harvard. I was reading physiology papers. I probably read 500 physiology papers over the course of my time in school. I ended up writing a paper around how to continuously measure the human body, and then I even took classes on, If you have an idea, how do you write a business plan? And so, I wrote a business plan. And then I spent a lot of time trying to meet technical people who I felt like had the engineering background to develop the hardware or the sensing for what I ultimately wanted to do. But I became an entrepreneur really, before I knew what an entrepreneur was. And I and I certainly didn't go into college thinking I was going to start a business.

**Whitney Johnson:** What about becoming an entrepreneur was so uncomfortable for you?

**Will Ahmed:** It's a great question. I mean, the first piece is the unknown. I think you don't actually know what it means to be an entrepreneur until you go through the process of trying to build something from scratch. That level of unknown can be paralyzing. And I see this for other people who have ideas or things they want to explore, but maybe they're not sure if they should leave their own job today to do it because you don't know how you might build it or how you might sell it or what it exactly looks like. You get, you can get caught and you can get paralyzed. And so, that that in itself, it's not just scary, but it actually creates real friction. Like so much of building a business I think is creating momentum where you feel like, all right, you're taking steps and things are moving forward. And so, when you're stuck, that can be very paralyzing. I think that was first and foremost probably the hardest bit to overcome. That's like and of course I think relates to my age. But I've now been around entrepreneurs of all ages for the past decade. And so, I've come to realize that the insecurity around starting a company exists regardless of whether you're 20 years old or 60 years old.

**Whitney Johnson:** There are two things that come to mind when I hear you say that. The first is that in some ways, becoming an entrepreneur was antithetical to all the work that you were doing because you were so focused on what can I measure? How do I measure this? And being an entrepreneur, as you said, there was so much that was open ended and things that you couldn't obviously or immediately measure. So, it was very much in contrast to the very thing that you were trying to do.

**Will Ahmed:** That's an interesting way to think about it. I think there's truth to that. Some of these things also come back to how you are, how you are raised and thinking about how to start Whoop was very much something that I would have learned from my mother. So, my mother was very analytical, very book smart, studied at really good schools, great writer, voracious reader. Someone who, when I was young, always kind of grinded me, do your homework, like say that that very analytical book, *Smart Mind*. My dad, by contrast, was and is much more street smart. He came to this country when he was 22 years old as an Egyptian immigrant, didn't really speak English that well. He had to kind of run through walls to rise the ranks and finance over time. Someone who was super comfortable is super comfortable with ambiguity. Very charismatic. And my parents are, frankly, quite different, really, on extreme ends. And so, I think the process for trying to understand what it would actually take to start

Whoop was a process where I had adopted a lot of skills from my mother and then the pull the trigger on actually doing it and all the unknown that is associated with that was what I got from my father.

**Whitney Johnson:** What a great combination. And I and I am thinking as the other observation I would say is that you hear a lot of people say, you know, I'm going to become an entrepreneur, kind of like, let's put on a show. And it seems that because you were you had some trepidation around becoming an entrepreneur, You did the work and you said you read 500 academic articles. And so, all of those things that prepared you so that once you did decide, once you're at that spark that you got from your dad, once you did decide you were able to go because you you had prepared.

**Will Ahmed:** I think that's right. And. It's a lesson I've now gotten from working with many of the best athletes in the world. But one of the best ways to overcome nerves is to just be really prepared. This notion of whether it's practice or study or hard work being the mechanism which actually calms you in the moment and you know that you've done everything you've could to be ready for that moment. So, it just is.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, what exactly does Whoop do? We've been talking about it and obviously in the intro people will know what it is if they don't know already. But what does Whoop do?

**Will Ahmed:** Well, Whoop as a company is on a mission to unlock human performance. And we have a real focus on health improvement and providing a 24 seven coach and membership for helping you improve your health. Whoop as a core product is really a very small sensor and wearable device that. There you go, Whitney's got one on. That's awesome. That is continuously measuring your body 24 seven and helping you understand your sleep and your recovery and your exercise and your activity. It's got a variety now of health alerts that will tell you on a certain aspect of your physiology is out of range. It is, I think, quite good at also helping you understand how a variety of lifestyle decisions, behaviors, diets, supplements, etc. actually affect your body. In many ways, Whoop is a product that's designed to help bring health home for you to take control of your body.

**Whitney Johnson:** One of the things that you talk about measuring is the HRV. And for the uninitiated, what is the HRV?

**Will Ahmed:** You want the nerdy answer or the simple answer?

**Whitney Johnson:** Start with the nerdy answer. And then if we need you to, you can go to the simple answer.

**Will Ahmed:** All right. So, heart rate variability is the time between successive beats of your heart, also known as HRV, and if your heart's beating at 60 beats per minute, it's not necessarily beating every second. So, it might be beating at 1.2 seconds and then 0.8 seconds to 0.7 seconds and then 1.3 seconds. And it turns out that that variability in time between successive beats of the heart is a good thing. It's counterintuitive. And the reason for this is that your heart rate variability is this lens into your autonomic nervous system. So, your autonomic nervous system consists of sympathetic and parasympathetic activity. Sympathetic is activation. So, that's heart rate up, blood pressure up, respiration up. When you're stressed or exercising, you're going to probably be sympathetic, dominant. When you inhale, your heart rate goes up. That sympathetic. Parasympathetic is all the opposite. So, heart rate down, blood pressure down, respiration down. It's what helps you fall asleep. It's what helps you relax when you exhale. That's parasympathetic. And it turns out you want for every sympathetic to have a parasympathetic response. And that's a sign that your body is balanced in tuned, relaxed, peaking. You choose your positive healthy adjective. By measuring heart rate variability 24/7, which is one of the core innovations Whoop brought to market and measuring it as accurately as an electrocardiogram. We're able to understand how restored your body is, how ready your body is, and we therefore can baseline you day over day, night over night, and give you a sense every morning for the status of your body. What we like to call recovery, which is a user-friendly score from 0 to 100% red, yellow, green. Now, a lot of the magic underlying that colorful recovery score every morning is heart rate variability.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, that was the nerdy answer and that was pretty clear. Do you want to give a very simple answer for a fifth grader now?

**Will Ahmed:** Heart rate variability is the best measurement for understanding how prepared your body is.

**Whitney Johnson:** Is there any correlation between HRV trending up and emotional regulation or stress management over time?

**Will Ahmed:** Absolutely. I mean, the interesting thing about heart rate variability is and your body in general is how connected physical and emotional stress are. If you've been on Whoop for a while, you'll know that you could have had a great night eating, or you could have had a great day exercising. And yet you got in a fight with your partner right before bed and you woke up the next day with a low recovery. You know that if you're thinking about work or you're thinking about something that's bothering you, that actually in turn will decrease your heart rate variability. On the flip side, you look at breathing techniques, meditation, a general sense of calm. These are all things that increase your heart rate variability, breathing in particular. And we could spend a while talking about breathing, but if you manage the right forms of breathwork, you can create what's called autonomic control. So, depending on how you're breathing, you can actually change your heart rate variability because again, inhale, right, that's sympathetic, exhales parasympathetic. So, if you are very intentional about how you choose to inhale, inhale and exhale, you can change your HRV throughout the day. And what people don't realize is they actually are changing their HRV throughout the day by breathing, but inadvertently. You'll notice, for example, someone who's glued to their cell phone and reading something stressful, will, all of a sudden not be breathing the same way they were if their phone was in their pocket, and they were looking out into the distance. And that in itself will decrease their heart rate variability in that moment and potentially for longer periods. So, these are both subtle ways, but also broader phenomenons.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, I was listening to your podcast, and you have a go to breathing exercise. Could you do it for us right now? I think it was like two short breaths and one long breath.

**Will Ahmed:** There's a few different things that I do from breathing. But one phenomenon which is quite interesting, which is a great way to reduce stress almost instantaneously, is you do a really long inhale and then you do a quick little inhale at the top. So, you're effectively doing two inhales and then you exhale for as long as you can.

**Whitney Johnson:** All right, so, let's do it. Let's do it.

**Will Ahmed:** Okay, Ready? So, you're going to go. (Deep breath in followed by long exhale)

**Whitney Johnson:** And that will affect it. Oh, you're still going.

**Will Ahmed:** Yeah. The idea is.

**Whitney Johnson:** Everybody, Will went way longer than I did.

**Will Ahmed:** Well, you can train yourself to go even longer.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah.

**Will Ahmed:** But the reason that's powerful is you're exhaling for much longer than you're inhaling. And as a consequence, you're, you're being parasympathetic dominant, which relaxes your body.

**Whitney Johnson:** There was a great quote from *Wired*, and I'm going to read it and then I'd love to have you comment. So, they said.

"Whoop was designed to provide actionable feedback, Ahmed explains, which is what sets it apart from other wearable technologies on the market. Every week and month, Whoop provides feedback on how to improve the user's health and lifestyle habits. If you've been on Whoop for over six months, you're getting more sleep. You've got a lower resting heart rate; you've got higher heart rate variability that's meaningful improvement."

**Whitney Johnson:** Have you found that to be true across your data set that, over the course of six months, your data people have seen improvement.

**Will Ahmed:** It's actually the core way that we think about product performance and efficacy. The notion that if you are on Whoop, you're changing your behavior and improving your health. It's a very measurable phenomenon that I just described as well by wearable devices. Although interestingly, wearable devices don't often talk about it, which makes me think a lot of wearable devices don't change your behavior and don't improve your health. So, for Whoop, that's really the core value proposition. And as you just read, the product is increasing how long people sleep for, it's decreasing their resting heart rates, which is obviously a physiological improvement, increasing their heart rate variability, which we just spent a while talking about. And then we also see this is this is a little bit more specific to different populations, but we also tend to see alcohol reductions, decreases in things like smoking or other negative behaviors. We'll see increases in certain supplements or bedtimes, so earlier bedtimes. So, these are all behavioral things that are also, I think, quite, quite positive.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, here are some of the things that have changed for me, as a consequence. I have been focused on getting more sleep. I've actually changed my travel schedule because I noticed that I didn't recover as quickly when I travel.

**Will Ahmed:** How did you change it?

**Whitney Johnson:** I've changed it in the sense that if I know I need to be on the road for two weeks instead of coming home and you're I might decide to stay somewhere for two extra days. My kids aren't young anymore. So, I'll stay two extra days instead of. So, for example, later this month I need to go to out to the West Coast. I live on the East Coast. I could have traveled home from the West Coast back to the East Coast for two days, but instead I decided to stay on the West Coast before I go to my next West Coast engagement because I knew, that it's, I now know how hard it is on my body. By doing that cross-country travel. So, that's one behavior that's changed. I've also seen that my HRV, I'm paying attention to it. I think it, as we talked about, is definitely an indicator of how well I'm managing stress. And it's gone up because I'm doing things like yoga to help manage the stress. And I got a weighted blanket.

**Will Ahmed:** Oh, a little sleep hack.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah. Yeah.

**Will Ahmed:** So, I'm so glad you're getting value out of Whoop, and we're very lucky to have you on it.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah. So, that's why I was wondering if you saw this across the board. But it sounds like because you're making that claim and you are so data analytics oriented, you feel very comfortable making that statement that people's recovery rates, their health will improve as a consequence of wearing this technology.

**Will Ahmed:** That's right.

**Whitney Johnson:** I'd love for you, Will, to share a success story. So, we're talking about my individual success story. But you have some pretty compelling stories that I have seen in the marketplace, and I would love for you to share one that really illustrates the power of Whoop.

**Will Ahmed:** It's a good question. We had one not too long ago during COVID, which was an interesting leadership experience for me, but also, I think speaks to the power of continuously measuring your body. In January of 2020, we got tipped off that there was a virus spreading around the world. And January of 2020, if you just go back in time, was actually a little bit early to know that information. We had a board member whose name's Ed Baker, who was a terrific growth expert. He worked at both Uber and Facebook overseeing growth. And the reason that's important background information is he was an expert in R-naught. Right, which is this idea of how fast something grows how you know, if you start with 1000 people, how fast is it going to grow at certain R-naughts. And he said just looking at the numbers in very simple terms like this was going to cover this this virus, COVID 19, was going to be everywhere. And that was a pretty interesting phenomenon to learn. Now, at the time 2019, 2020, I think the market typically thought of Whoop as a fitness first product like we were. We were probably known a little bit more for fitness terms, in part because our origins were working with the best athletes in the world. Okay, that's fine. But I also knew that so much of what measures is just your core health. And I got fascinated by this idea of if a

virus is really going to spread around the world and we have members who live around the world, we should try to investigate what data that that reveals about your body and what we might be able to learn about this virus.

**Will Ahmed:** So, we started building COVID 19, tracking into the Whoop app. And in March of 2020, we released COVID 19 tracking. And by the end of March, we had 2,000 people on Whoop report testing positive for COVID 19. So again, if you go back in time, most people think of the pandemic, at least in the United States, is beginning like around the second or third week of March. And right around the point that most people were waking up to the notion that this was going to be a pandemic or a problem. We actually already had a massive data set on it, which is a pretty interesting head start to have. And we partnered with CQU. We partnered with Cleveland Clinic. We started doing research on what this data might reveal. And we found a smoking gun in terms of predicting COVID 19. And the smoking gun was respiratory rate, which up until that point was a statistic that Whoop had measured, but it was a very boring statistic. And one theme in wearable technology, or at least for Whoop, is that you shouldn't show people a bunch of numbers that aren't relevant. You have to be very careful about how many things you reveal to a user because you want to create some notion of focus or importance.

**Will Ahmed:** Anyway, as a consequence, we weren't even showing respiratory rate to our members, but it turned out for the people that got COVID 19 versus the people that were just generally sick or the people who are healthy. We saw the following. So, everyone who was sick on Whoop, whether COVID 19 or otherwise, typically has a very elevated resting heart rate, has a very decreased heart rate variability. Their sleep is disrupted. All of those things kind of look alike, whether you have the cold, the flu or COVID, versus being healthy. The fascinating thing, though, is the people who had COVID 19 versus people who had the flu or just were generally sick had these massive spikes in their respiratory rate. So, respiratory rate is the number of breaths you have in a minute. And typically, it's a very flat statistic, does not change. So, if you have a respiratory rate of 15.0 breaths per minute, almost every single day, it's going to be at 15.0 or 15.1, maybe 14.9. Like it really doesn't change. Yet when you get COVID 19, we saw these huge spikes and it jumped off the page. Whitney, it wasn't like, you know, you go from 15.1 to 15.3, it was 15.0 to 19, right after having it be flat for a year and a half. And at the time that we discovered this, this would have been around May of 2020.

**Will Ahmed:** We were also cognizant of the fact that and I was especially we didn't want to be opportunistic during a global we didn't want to seem opportunistic during a global pandemic. Like could we actually have found this thing that was this obvious or this likely to predict COVID? And of course, the research institutions that we worked with found that in about 80% of cases there was this enormous respiratory rate spike. So, we didn't immediately put in the sort of COVID 19 alerts into the app. But what we did do is we started talking about this research and we talked about it with experts and doctors, and we put it on the podcast, we wrote about it. We obviously had published research, and then we let our members do the rest. And your original question was, was around a success. We had this very powerful moment in June of 2020 when the PGA Tour was the first golf tour to really sport to come back in the world in the middle of COVID. And the second tournament, they were figuring out all kinds of different COVID protocols, but their COVID protocol was essentially, you get tested on a Tuesday, and if you're negative, you can play that week. And Nick Watney, who's a professional golfer who also had happened to be on Whoop for a year, tested negative on a Tuesday, but woke up on a Thursday with a 1% recovery on Whoop and this massive respiratory rate spike.

**Will Ahmed:** And he had read all of our research and he went back down to the doctors and said, look, I've got this elevated respiratory rate which has been shown to be predictive of COVID 19. I think I need to get tested again. And the doctor said, no, you're cleared to play. Don't worry about that. Anyway, he twisted their arm and got another test, and sure enough, it tested positive, and he was able to drop out of the tournament and of course, protect other members of the tour. And the PGA Tour learned of that, and within 24 hours, Jay Monahan, the commissioner, and the rest of the team said, we need to put a Whoop on every not just every player, but every player, caddie, media member who's going to be in this traveling bubble. And so, from there, you know, the rest is history. But we were traveling from event to event, making sure every player had their Whoop and a bunch of other sports leagues followed with similar implementations. It was a fascinating experience from beginning to end of managing Whoop during COVID, not just as an organization, but managing Whoop, the product, and how we want to approach the virus. And a lot of it comes back to the origins of the company, which were you lead with the research, lead with the hard work, and then use that as your platform.

**Whitney Johnson:** Will, how did you feel when you realized just how effective this technology could be?

**Will Ahmed:** You both feel enormously proud and excited by the potential. And frankly, I think I've felt that way for many years. But you also feel at least I feel like almost a sense of burden, that it's not more adopted or more used or like when I just look at our health care system in the United States and I look at so many of the problems that this country experienced going through COVID. When I look at so many of the issues that are related to mental health and obesity, I do feel that wearable technology and in particular Whoop can play a big role in helping solve some of those problems. Because I mostly believe if you can give an individual data and coaching that helps them understand their bodies, they can become a much healthier, happier person. And so, there is something of a burden that I feel which is like this needs to be adopted by more people faster.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, you feel motivated to evangelize?

**Will Ahmed:** Certainly motivated. Yeah, absolutely.

**Whitney Johnson:** You have shared that at one point Whoop was two days from going out of business. What was the ROI on having that experience?

**Will Ahmed:** Whoop, I think as far as startups go, it was a company that required a lot of capital to build the technology. We've built everything from scratch. In a very competitive market, and it took us a while to have the appropriate business model and revenue to keep up with that R&D investment. So as a consequence, Whoop struggled for years with managing capital. And I would say we almost ran out of money a number of times. But yes, there was a particular moment in time where we had two days of cash and certainly would have missed payroll and filed for bankruptcy. And frankly, it wasn't just that singular moment, but it was probably an 18-month period leading up to that where we never had more than, I would say, three months of runway, which is a fairly insane feeling of stress to manage an organization under if you have three months or less of runway. Runway being like how many months of cash you have. If you have three months or less of runway, you really want to address that. And somehow through a series of angel investments and existing investors chipping in, like we just kept getting enough capital to keep kind of moving along. But it was so painful and so stressful. And I really felt the weight of the world on my shoulders because I also believed so much in what we were developing.

**Will Ahmed:** And I was so I was so terrified of losing all the technology, but also losing money from people that had bet on me and believed in me. And so, I just felt this enormous responsibility. And I think that. The ROI of that is a few things. I mean, one, it did make me feel having come out the other side and now Whoop is quite, quite a good success on paper, at least for all of our investors. Coming out the other side, it sort of puts in perspective any form of challenge. Right? Like, running out of money and losing everything is sort of the pretty high on the on the list of what can go wrong for a company. So, if you can overcome that one, it can put a lot in perspective. But the other piece is that, you know, it's taught me the incredible importance of being able to manage my own stress levels and my own psyche in building this business. And I think that in many cases, outliers' success requires overcoming a level of stress that would break most people. So, you need to find a way to be able to handle it. It's not just that you need to be able to take on that level of stress, but you also then need to be able to handle it.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, the ROI is you've said you can now say to yourself, if I went through that, then I and came out on the other side, I can go through anything. And it sounds like you started to do some things differently from a behavioral standpoint in order to be able to shoulder the responsibility that you have. Are there one or two things that you started to do differently as a consequence that have allowed you to now carry this weight that you have?

**Will Ahmed:** Yeah. And I think some of them really began before that period. Otherwise, I don't know that I would have gotten through it through it. One was like learning a lot about breathing and in particular meditating. I meditate every morning for 22 minutes, which is enormously helpful. I think during that period I was doing it twice a day because I felt like I was under so much stress. But that but that gets back to my point is you want to have these tools to cope with stress. And they're different for different people. For me, it tends to be breathing. It tends to be exercise, tends to be sleep. Some form of gratitude, especially if it's connected to a partner or a close friend of yours or a family member. So, those are things that make stress much more manageable.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, you talked about how your mission is to unlock human performance, which is from a physical standpoint. So, how do you unlock performance or potential with the people that work for you?

**Will Ahmed:** It's one of the most important things to really think about, I think, in building a company, because the advantage that smaller companies have, or startups have over big companies is the way that you can work closely with members of your team and the way you can shape careers for members of your team that that are quite broad. When you join a big company, yes, there's a certain level of financial security and certainty associated with it. But inevitably, because you're in a big company, you have to be in some form of a box. Like, this is the area that you get to play in and don't go outside that box. Whereas in a startup, a huge advantage that we have is we can hire people and then give them more and more responsibility because there's more white space. That's the nature of creating something from scratch. And so, a huge thing I think about is how do we bring people into Whoop and give them more and more responsibility and try to empower them more and more. Another related phenomenon is this tension between control and speed. Big organizations tend to have a lot of measures in place for control, especially top-down control.

**Will Ahmed:** You can think of control as what's the degree to which a manager or even a CEO dictated the decision or made the decision. Right. And you can think of speed is just sort of how fast anything is occurring in an organization. I realized early on in the company's growth that speed could be a differentiator not just for the company, but also for the way that people felt in their work. Because when you have less control and you have more speed, what you're actually doing as well as you're pushing more and more decisions down throughout the organization, and when you have more and more individuals making decisions, they in turn feel a greater sense of responsibility and a greater sense of empowerment. You have to figure out the right infrastructure to do that. You obviously have to have really great people who you trust to do that, and you need everyone marching to the same mission or vision. But within that, that sort of those guardrails, you can all of a sudden create a company that is much faster moving than your average company and is an environment in which people really feel like their careers are growing.

**Whitney Johnson:** Can you give an example where you've said to yourself, I want to go faster? I recognize right now there's something I need to let go of. I need to have a little bit less control in order for us to go faster. Does something come to mind?

**Will Ahmed:** Yeah, the funny one. I don't know if it's funny, but in the early days of the company, I was adamant that I needed to interview every person that we hired. And I did that probably up until somewhere between Whoop having 60 and 100 full time people. So, you can imagine there was a lot of final round interviews that I was doing. And the reason I told myself that was a good idea was the people that we put in this organization are really the most important thing that the that the company develops. And therefore, I need to make sure every person is the right cultural fit. The problem with that is, one, it can slow the organization down, as we just discussed. And two, it may also make certain managers feel like you don't trust them to hire the right people. So, that's something I don't do anymore. I don't know that I would go back in time and change like how soon I made that move or that transition because I am happy with where the company is today. And I think if you go back and change anything, who knows where or where it is today? But that's sort of an interesting that's an interesting trade off. Everyone has to evaluate.

**Whitney Johnson:** What do you love most about your work?

**Will Ahmed:** The people and the product. I mean, the people who work at Whoop are exceptionally brilliant across a ton of different and truly unique verticals. So, I'll be in a meeting with a group of hardware engineers and then quickly go to a meeting with a bunch of people developing apparel and accessories. And then next thing I know, I'm in a meeting with the talent team that's discussing recruiting or the marketing team that's showing off a new video for how we're going to promote something. Those are all very different types of people too and have very different skill sets. So, the fact they get to work with these people that are all better than me at their thing is really rewarding and exhilarating. And then the product because it's a product that is truly changing people's lives. We get messages every single day from our Whoop members and everything ranging from this product changed my life to we've now gotten a bunch of this product. It saved my life, like I haven't if I hadn't noticed this thing and then gone and seen my doctor, I would be dead. Like, thank you. Like, we've gotten those messages. So, it's a deeply rewarding product to work on.

**Whitney Johnson:** One of the questions I ask at the end of every coaching session and at the end of every podcast is what was useful to you in this conversation. It may be something that you said, but probably more likely something that you thought or a connection that you made.

**Will Ahmed:** It's something I know subconsciously, but I don't I don't say out loud. Which is the unique ability I think I have to be able to go from looking at something very analytically to just running through a wall. Which, of course, is from my parents upbringing.

**Whitney Johnson:** I want to tie back to your story that you told the very beginning, and then I'll give you a chance to share any final thoughts. Your teacher, Peter Zaloom, how he taught you the importance of showing up. And I think that. The reflection for me is hearing the story about when you only had two days left of cash. But I think that's only one sort of hyperbolic moment, which is that you learned at a very young age. And I think probably also because your father was an immigrant, the importance of showing up. And so, I want to just call that out and as a theme for your life of you will show up no matter what. Any final thoughts?

**Will Ahmed:** That's a great reflection. And I think showing up is also kind of underrated in this in this day and age. It used to be before that you would make a plan and then there would be no way to cancel or back out. You know what I mean? You had, you kind of had to go, otherwise someone might think you got hit by a car. Right. Whereas today with, you know, 25 different forms of messaging, communication up to the second, it's very easy, I think, to be flaky. And so, I'm always amazed how just show up as a mindset and something that I repeat to myself enables serendipity and unlocks performance.

**Whitney Johnson:** Will Ahmed, thank you for showing up today.

**Will Ahmed:** Thank you, Whitney.

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What a fantastic conversation. Two big takeaways. Number one, it's time to start thinking about health with real data. Will makes such a compelling case for measurement. What you measure matters, especially when it affects behavior, not just your own habits, but the wider world, too. As Will explained, his product was measuring respiratory data, which came in pretty handy in March of 2020. Data about breathing allowed them to see the pandemic emerging, even as health care pros were just getting a handle on it. It was a breakthrough that Will and his team are very proud of. But he also expressed frustration and a sense of burden. Imagine how much we could fix in this world if we put our technology to better use.

Number two. There is nothing like startup life to put your problems in perspective. Will's tale of entrepreneurship is harrowing. Whoop needed a lot of capital to build the tech. There's just no way to bootstrap this kind of R&D. As you heard, there were times when the company had a runway of three months or less. Once there were only two days of payroll left in the bank. This kind of work is not for the faint of heart. But Will says it's taught him a lot and put everything in perspective. He said, If we can overcome this, we can overcome anything. It taught him how to manage his own stress with a focus on meditation and mindfulness. These challenges strengthen us and give us the confidence that entrepreneurs need to go for the moonshots that strike fear in the rest of us.

For more on ways that health tracking can transform lives, check out [episode 230](#) with Chris Dancy, the world's most connected man. And for more on changing the language of business to serve a greater good, listen to legendary 49ers quarterback Steve Young, [episode 289](#), on how he approaches every transaction with love. Thank you again to Will for being our guest. Thank you to you for listening. Thank you to our producer and engineer, Matt

Silverman. Audio editor Whitney Jobe, production assistant Stephanie Brummel, and production coordinator Nicole Pellegrino.

I'm Whitney Johnson.

And this is Disrupt yourself.