

# Disrupt Yourself Podcast

## EPISODE 299: JENNIFER MOSS

Hi, Whitney here. I'm excited to share an encore episode of the podcast for two reasons. Number one, it's one of our most popular episodes of all time. Number two, this topic is especially relevant this time of year. I'm talking about burnout. Q four It's a double whammy, a crunch time for many businesses combined with mounting holiday stress, fitting it all in so you can actually take that well-deserved break. It's a challenge of its own. There are some who want us to believe we can fix burnout with bubble baths, candles, and vacations, and those are good things. But author Jennifer Moss says that's merely a Band-Aid. The root of burnout is systemic in our companies, communities, families, and the wider world. And the pandemic, it didn't help. It's a new way of thinking about an issue that affects all of us. And she comes with new solutions, too. It's no wonder this episode is so popular. Without further ado, here's episode 238 from October 2021. If you haven't heard this one yet, enjoy.

Welcome 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. Stepping back from who you are now to slingshot into who you want to be. I'm your host, Whitney Johnson.

Stress is everywhere. We can't avoid it. And a healthy amount of stress is so important for personal growth. But if you feel like the world has become more stressful in recent years, you're not alone. There's a lot more media and tech shouting for our attention these days. The line between work and home is completely blurred, and that's not even accounting for a year of global pandemic and increased isolation.

When healthy stress gets out of control, it can lead to burnout, a huge blocker for our S curves. Our guest today is Jennifer Moss, an award-winning journalist, nationally syndicated columnist and author of *The Burnout Epidemic, The Rise of Chronic Stress and How We Can Fix It*.

I talked with Jennifer about what's changing in today's world of work and connectivity. This conversation was incredibly useful. I think you'll agree.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, Jen, tell us about your work and what was your big insight on this topic?

**Jennifer Moss:** Gosh, it's been maybe 12 years now and I've been working in the wellness space, workplace culture, doing consulting for organizations and really at that happiness place, leading them from good to great. And that was awesome. A lot of organizations at the time that was sort of progressive thinking, let's bring in this thinking around improving wellbeing to improve productivity, engagement, et cetera. But what I came to understand is that, you know, when you really look at where most organizations are, most employees are, they're not at neutral even, they're dealing with mental illness. They're dealing with chronic stress. They're dealing with, with burnout and the precursors to burnout. And so that's what really led me to start to invest more of my research in into, into the burnout prevention space. But I think the big insight and what I've been really advocating, I think maybe it's a provocative statement for some is that burnout is not cured with self-care alone. So, it's a part of it. Leaders need to model self-care. Yes, we need to engage in these optimization strategies. But when it really boils down, the root causes of burnout are much more macro. It's at an organizational level and it's a we problem that we have to solve together.

**Whitney Johnson:** It is a very provocative statement. It doesn't get solved with self-care. I love it. You had my attention with that. Two questions for you. Number one is how do you define burnout? So it's one of those terms that we all use and we think, oh yeah, I know what that means, but how are you defining it? Because I think let's let's have what terms we're talking about. And then I would love to know why you got interested in wellness in the first place.

**Jennifer Moss:** This was a frustration for me and a lot of other burnout researchers for a long time and those in this space was how badly defined burnout was and just how nebulous the term was. And I mean, you even thought of burnout as like Judd Nelson, stuck in detention. I mean, it was just it's just has a weird way of morphing. And I think what happened was that it lessened the importance of it. And the thing is, is that burnout is when it actually ends up taking us to the point of burnout. There's catastrophic impacts.

So, when the World Health Organization identified it as a workplace phenomenon, occupational phenomena, workplace stress left unmanaged, identified by these sort of three big signs exhaustion, emotional distance from one's work. So, disengagement and also this level of cynicism. These three big signs when they identified that and actually included it in their international classification of diseases, their IDC 11, that when I think we could all sort of put ourselves around a definition which was very helpful and helpful for those people in that burnout prevention space.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, the number one is the World Health Organization has now classified this as a syndrome. So, it's, it's a real thing. Burnout is now defined as workplace stress that has gone unmanaged, and it manifests through cynicism, exhaustion and disengagement. Is that what you said?

**Jennifer Moss:** That is aptly put. That's exactly it. And why that is so important is that we're putting a stake in the ground. This is an occupational phenomenon. This is workplace stress. This isn't you not balancing your life. This is not the cult of busier. You having FOMO and you can't control it. It isn't just you juggling too many things on the

side or your side hustles. This is work. And when you look at the root causes, that is what and that was sort of defined in that W.H.O. definition to when you look at the root causes of burnout again, much more ties into what is happening within work.

So, what led me to really focus in on this, I think, and why I care so much about it is that even just in my own experience as a startup founder, a female sort of founder and in that role where I really felt like, you know, I love what I do, why am I burning out? And as a leader, I realized I was not modeling really good behavior for my team. I was saying, You know, I'm going to take on all these things that I can because I'm so excited by all of this stuff in my work. But then my team somehow ended up having to resource a lot of these things that I was excited about, or I thought would be good for the business. I realized that it was a real drain on my family for me to be not being able to be home for dinner or traveling all the time or disconnected from them, going into the office and being exhausted all day long. And that's why I started to really get that the leadership and the role inside the organization. My employees couldn't say, No, Jen, we can't do that. Or, you know, I, I need to have more resources over there. I mean, delicately, maybe they could have asked me because we had a pretty good trust and our team, but that's not typical.

And then I started to ask around other tech founders and employees in technology, which is one of the big areas where are sectors that find a lot of burned-out employees. And I realized how pervasive it was. So, I was burning out. I was burning out my team because I was burning out. And then I got to a point where I hit a wall. And I actually had to take time away because I was sick. I was not well and I was really suffering in those relationships that are foundational. So, it's a personal relationship with it, but it's also just seeing it over and over in the work. And so, what put those two things together, and it became sort of a mission for me to address it. As a customer, you know? And also, you know, the president of the company, right? So, I had to I had to really make some shifts and some changes there.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah, the phrase that comes to mind is physician heal thyself, right?

**Jennifer Moss:** Absolutely. And we're, we're not great at it. You know, and leaders are particularly bad individual contributors, ones that only are their own boss. We see this just in small business and startup life, too, but executives are prone to it because they are the ones that have this sort of invisible boss and they need to be stepping outside themselves more kind of going into that overarching role to say, Are you modeling because employees like in anything else, why women need to see mentorship and tech. They can't be what they can't see. And the same goes for healthy, you know, well-adjusted, well, cultures. If it's not lead in all these different directions, it's not going to happen.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah, it's something interesting that you said is that if you've got a lot of people on your team that are burned out, it may be possible that you yourself are burned out, possibly, and that you are creating the conditions where their burnout is happening. That's a bit sobering, I think, for me to listen to because I'm my own boss as well, and so I can work whenever I want to work. And as I'm listening to you, I'm thinking, you know, are there things that I am doing that are potentially contributing to people on my team feeling burned out? And I'll think, Well, no, everybody's good, but you don't actually know that, right? You don't know it until they tell you that they're not.

**Jennifer Moss:** It's so true. It's one of the things that I really started to institute. We were really great at asking companies to measure their employees and make database decisions, but we needed to get really good too at asking those same questions. And it became, you know, where we found it was living in the small data, you know, the weekly check ins and asking just what were the highs and lows of this week? What can I do for you to make next week better? I mean, those simple places. We also have found that anonymous feedback is so helpful. You know, even having this sort of five-question burnout status check for people that they can answer every couple of weeks and see where people are ebbing and flowing in a way that, that we can try to stop things before they actually get too bad.

All of that is really important because we need that direct manager feedback loop that's so important. We need to talk about non-work-related issues because that's actually where we get to read between the lines of what people are really dealing with, especially now because a lot of our stress is happening externally and it's sort of jumbled into our day in our work and our life. And then also that there has to be a way for us to just be allowing people to share in a

way that doesn't make them fear stigma. And then when we do that, we get, I think, to the root of it and then we can deal with what are the things that people are really feeling? What is their root cause of their burnout because it differs from one person to the next?

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah. Can you just talk at a very high level? You know, you said at the very outset, it's not just about self-care that there are upstream causes of burnout in the workplace. What are one or two systemic reasons for burnout?

**Jennifer Moss:** Well, one of them, and we've seen this before the pandemic is overwork, legacy of overwork, unsustainable workloads. That was the biggest contributor to burnout before the pandemic. There was one stat that the World Health Organization actually shared along with the ILO, and what they found was that overwork contributes to the deaths of two point eight million people globally per annum year. So again, big problem, we're seeing that in Japan, where we look at the Hiroyoshi death by overwork. We're seeing this in China, where there are people in the tech industry that are working sort of nine hours a day, six days a week. So, it's pervasive. And we see that here in North America, for sure, especially in health care and tech and finance and teaching where we're just, you know, feeling like we need to work so many more hours to hit those goals. And then this year, when we added about 30 percent more hours to our workday and it was really high in North America, in U.S., it was about three hours more per day that we added. Italy saw four to five more hours per day of work, which totally unsustainable, so the overwork increase this year. So that's contributing to burnout.

And then another big one we saw is the lack of community. So, the loneliness and isolation piece, which I'm seeing is this sort of another epidemic that's on the rise is this issue around connection. And of course, when you're only connecting virtually, we're replacing relationships versus augmenting relationships with technology. It's a problem. Millennials and Gen Zs are particularly at risk because they're more likely to live alone. They also have less agency inside of their roles. They have golden handcuffs with their student loans, so there's indebted servitude. And then they also feel like they have to take on more for their coworkers that are juggling parenting and some of these other things. So, they are really at risk of burnout as well.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, in the United States or North America, we're working three more hours a day in Italy, four or five more hours a day. And you also mentioned something about hyperarousal because we are on screens. Can you just talk about that? Because that really, that hit me between the eyes. Speaking of being on Zoom calls, so just talk about that briefly, because it's very intriguing.

**Jennifer Moss:** Well, I love this research that came out of the Stanford Media Lab and really assessed specifically Zoom fatigue looked at that video conferencing platform specifically, but I'm sure that it can be laid over to other videoconferencing platforms. But what the Stanford professor analyzed is that when we are actually looking at each other this close up in real life, the only other place that we would have that kind of level of closeness would be whether we were either mating with that person or fighting that person. We would never be close up to just people like that. I mean, that makes us feel uncomfortable in real life. But this is our day-to-day state and because that's not what we're used to. We're in a hyper-aroused state all day long. The subconscious state of feeling sort of heightened, either, you know, emotionally from a sexual standpoint or feeling like we want to get into fisticuffs with someone which is really not healthy, especially when it's your coworkers.

And then we also are just seeing this from the fact that we're on so much. We're forcing ourselves to look at our own face all day long, which is not been good, you know, for a lot of reasons, this sort of, you know, macro or sort of microeconomic trickle-down effect has been more people are spending money on fixing up their faces with plastic surgery and botox is increased. And sort of these really strange sort of impacts these trickle-down impacts. And so, all of this is just making us feel exhausted by the end of the day because hyper aroused states all day long plus feeling like you're checking yourself out constantly in the mirror. None of that is good for our mental health and well-being.

**Whitney Johnson:** Oh, it's fascinating. Does burnout apply to everybody?

**Jennifer Moss:** It can, yes. I mean, some people have a different level of tolerance for chronic stress. We've seen that there almost, you know, when you look at military professionals, those in war zones, the normalization for doctors and nurses and those on the front lines, they do create a bit of a disassociation, which is not necessarily

helpful in the long term because we're seeing that impact people's health down the road. But they have a different level of tolerance for it. But not everyone feels that way.

I mean, I wrote about this story of Lorna Breen, who was a physician in the front lines in New York in those early days where no one knew what was going on with COVID, and she was this person that was a real advocate for burnout, she had written academic papers on it. And she got sick with COVID and came back too soon and she ended up taking her life because she was, it was so catastrophically impactful on her. And so you think these people that do have all of the capacity to manage it, they're the ones that are talking about it, they're writing about it. They're physicians who have been in the front lines as an E.R. physician for decades. They can even be prone to it. So everyone sort of has a threshold. And for some, it's longer. For some it's shorter.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah. Hmm. Interesting. I love in the book, you have this quote. "The professions with a legacy of burnout are attracting personalities more at risk of burnout."

**Jennifer Moss:** We see that consistently in health care as an example, technology, any sort of finance really high performing individuals that are competitive. They are, they have personalities that are more likely to experience perfectionism. And so, there's a difference between perfectionists' strivings and perfectionist concerns, right where we want to strive to hit goals. And that's OK. But if we don't hit them, it doesn't mean that that we overgeneralize that we're terrible at our job or we're bad at what we do.

But what we've seen this last year, people that are normally high performing people are feeling exhausted and fatigued and distracted and demotivated because of just this brain fog and this chronic fight or flight feeling and this macro stress of the pandemic, they're not hitting those goals and they feel just so much negative self-talk about not being able to be that high performing person. We have a hard time letting that go, but industries that are tend to be production focused that have this expectation of perfection, that where there's very little room for error, where there is almost a cultural hazing, when you first start med school, even, for example, this expectation that it is about how many hours you can work until you fall down, that's considered a success metric. Those are the kind of things that we've institutionalized and they're driving a certain type of person there that is more likely going to end up being burned out and then they're recruiting and trying to push those people or pull those people into those industries. So it's a recipe for, for chronic burnout and catastrophic results.

**Whitney Johnson:** I'd like to shift gears for just a moment. We have an S curve of learning™ that we use to help people track their perception of where they are in their growth. You've got the launch point where you're starting something new. You move into the sweet spot where you feel like figuring it out, but I don't have it all figured out, so it's quite fun and exhilarating. And then you've got the master where you feel like you know what you're doing, but you're slightly bored. And I was wondering, is burnout how it can manifest different depending on where you are on your S curve? If you're at the launch point of doing something new versus in mastery around a topic or domain expertise.

**Jennifer Moss:** It's indicative of what we've gone through in the last 20 months. I think of people that had mastery and maybe they were feeling a bit bored. March 15th happens. They pivot instantly into a whole new way of learning and technology, and I think for some, that was exciting learning. But for a lot of people, it made them feel decreased self-efficacy and that really played a role in our burnout. So that point, though, I think where people are starting to feel like I can do this, this feels good. I've got a good set of skills now that I've developed that does feel like we're moving into a place where we're going to see less burnout, where it's less always on learning that can be exhausting. Yes, it can be exhilarating when you get to a point where you feel like you've got it. But we also find out that boredom and I would have read this in the book *The Boredom Piece*. The lack of novelty can be a real predictor of burnout. And that's why this idea of job crafting and being able to sort of choose with agency how you hit your goals, where we're being sort of monitored all the time is not healthy, but really, when you are able to sort of move and shift and do things differently, so you can add excitement and learning in a job where you have mastery, that's that's kind of continues that cycle of being in that sweet spot in the curve. And I think that we're, we're not there because, right now for many of us, because we're just under-resourced, we're just on Zoom too much, of bored of just constantly communicating in the same way. We've we miss the way that we used to talk with each other and connect and those things that keep us in the sweet spot. But I do see us feeling way further along than in that March 15th. I

don't even know how to use the teams filter. All of a sudden I'm a potato and can't turn myself off of it. We're not at that pain point still, which is good.

**Whitney Johnson:** In your book, you talk about one of the systemic causes of burnout is values mismatch. And so, you know, at the launch point, my guess is that you're trying to figure this out and like you said, it's learn, learn, learn, learn. And so that can lead to burnout if it's too much. But it is interesting hearing you say once you get to the the mastery phase, you can also have a values mismatch because you're no longer learning and so the the burnout can hit there as well. So that's quite interesting.

**Jennifer Moss:** Yeah, I really appreciate that Yale, Harvard joint study around job crafting and just how, the idea that we can't have environments of boredom or else will lose really high performing talented people that have a lot of wisdom and a lot of knowledge to share. And when you have this, the importance of sort of continuing education and learning and creating these creative cultures, which I highly promote where we are always sort of learning about each other, remaining curious, practicing curiosity inside of our organizations, we decrease that lack of novelty. So our brains continue to be inspired and fueled by passion in our work

**Whitney Johnson:** For people who are listening to this, and they're saying to themselves, OK, I want to measure how burned out my organization is or not. I know that there's a survey that people can do, but are there any obvious tells for someone to say, "Op! Yeah, we might have a problem here," anything that comes to mind?

**Jennifer Moss:** I love that you ask that question, because, yes, there's ways we just talked about ways that we can survey and get into the gray area, et cetera, et cetera. But one of the things I've really noticed is that we misdiagnose performance issues or performance problems or someone that we need to maybe get onto a path because we think they're disengaged or less productive. We're, we're seeing them way too far downstream. We haven't really identified that the likelihood of that person that we spend a bunch of money on attracting and retaining and training. We're really passionate and excited about their jobs and did a really great job. All of a sudden is just a bad performer. It's likely that they're dealing with burnout and chronic stress, which makes us make mistakes, which makes us have increased absenteeism and presenteeism, which makes us feel irritable. And we don't get along with coworkers in the same way. Or maybe we're sharp, we're withdrawn.

We see that as, oh, you just identify that in the wrong way. And what we need to be doing is making sure that there's ways for us to be able to say, okay, this person is changing their behaviors. They're not that same high-performing person as they once were. So how do we make sure that they have access to the tools that will help them to be dealing with the root causes of these performance problems?

**Whitney Johnson:** So one of the things you're saying is in addition to the surveys, it's that it's just watching behavior. If people who have been performing in an exceptional and maybe not even exceptional way, but have been high performers and they stop being high performers, I tend to have the hypothesis that they feel like they're not growing. And you're saying that that could be possible. But the other thing that could be possible is that they are burned out. And so if people start to underperform, this is one possible diagnosis.

**Jennifer Moss:** Absolutely. And you know, a lot of my previous research and a lot of the work that I did was really based in the concept of neuroplasticity and neuro-, you know, the neurosciences research because it's so amazing how the brain and organizations are very similar, right? And how they wired their culture, how you wire your environment. But what I have come to understand is that this chronic stress that we're under, we've been using the surge capacity know this kind of emergent state for 20 months, and you really only should be using your surge capacity for, you know, for an emergency, you know, a tornado or hurricane or something that's happening. We're supposed to use that and then be able to get to recovery. But because we're in this chronic state of emergency, what's happening is our limbic system, which really is that place of fight or flight is always on.

And what that contributes to is this brain fog, which makes it hard for us to make decisions. It makes us less motivated. It makes us feel like doing the dishwasher is the hardest task on the planet sometimes. I mean, it's these simple things and then high performers say, "Well, why can I do that? Why can't I just do these simple tasks?" And then there's, there's just this continuation in the cycle of you feeling demotivated. And so that is going to play into your capacity in the workplace, your capacity to do your job. And without labeling it, you just continue to feel like

you're not good at what you do, which makes you disengage. It makes you withdraw. And so that's where we see just this evolution of burnout show up in performance. And yet we almost in this state right now have to accept that we might not be able to hit the same goals and expectations that we use to be able to quite easily.

**Whitney Johnson:** Let's talk about one or two tips for two different situations. One is that you are a manager and you do have some that sense of self-efficacy. There's an agentic portion to it, the autonomy. What are some things that you can do as a manager to help mitigate? And you've kind of danced around this, but I want to get really tactical for a moment. As a manager, you can do to mitigate burnout for the people on your team?

**Jennifer Moss:** One of the most critical things that managers can do is have consistency of checking in and developing trust. We found that organizations that had high trust with their employees had are doing really well. They fared well during the pandemic and that means that those employees would trust that they would try something and maybe wasn't great. They would try again and they'd have lots of conversations. It needs to be consistent and we need to create this openness in conversations around mental health. So that's accepted because people are leaving in droves, not because of pay, but because of how their employees handled their needs during the pandemic. And so. That consistency of these check ins, and I mentioned them before, three simple questions ask how ups and downs of the week, but also what can I do for you to make next week easier and then collaborative planning and support among teams.

I really strongly reduce having, I'd like to suggest as reducing individual metrics, having managers create collaborative goals. We in production focus environments, we really push these, these individual metrics. But what we found is burnout is greatly reduced by having collaborative goals. I also really strongly believe in focusing on depth of relationships versus breadth of relationships, so employers and managers need to get better at really fostering relationships with people where it's just one or two solid close relationships.

The reason why Gallup Q 12 includes do you have a best friend at work is because one close friend can be the difference in reducing burnout by 41 percent. I mean, that's a significant way to reduce burnout. So when we have our team building events don't make it about everyone trying to move chairs and see each other and create more connections among these large groups. Make sure that that person that maybe you don't see very often you're reinforcing time, which is that one relationship. Those types of ways of creating a network effect will really help. And then finally, really making psychological safety important. So that means giving people a chance to speak up in meetings, giving a chance for people to wear the Black Hat, who might not feel comfortable taking the opposing argument inside of these environments make it, construct that so that people can all get a chance to be able to be seen and heard. Making sure that one person isn't dominating conversations all the time. These are just small sort of tactical ways where we can make micro changes, where we really do change the environment, the walls of the culture in our workplaces.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, I'm going to recap because I want to make sure I heard you, heard you correctly. So, number one and you've said this twice, and I'm glad that you said it twice because it's that important is to do that check in. How are you doing? What can I do to support you? And just having that conversation, and here's the thing that I think is hard about this, Jen, is that, as you said, certain professions attract people who are perfectionists and I'm raising my hand. And if you're a perfectionist, you tend to be more task-oriented, not people-oriented. So, this idea of checking in with someone, you listen to it, you go, Yeah, yeah, yeah, I gotcha. But how many times do I get on a call with someone and I go straight to the task? I mean, it's a real challenge. I think it's a challenge for me, and I suspect it's a challenge for many people listening. So that's the first thing you said. The second thing you said was this idea of collaborating around goals, which I think is actually fascinating because if you look at motivating people, you know that in general, people are motivated by what's in it for me. And yet culture is about the broader goal. And so, what you're saying is a slight shift in that right now, given what's going on, we need to lean in a little bit more to collaborative goals in order for people to be connected.

**Jennifer Moss:** And we need to look at where we're at. You're right, I think you lay that out perfectly. We're in a pandemic. It is not business as usual. This could potentially be endemic. So how do we look at being more sustainable? And one of them is that relationships which were lacking in that disconnection is really predicting high levels of burnout. How do we make it still competitive in that we want to be able to hit those revenue objectives, sales and those measurements still really matter, and we want to grow all of those other reasons why you should do

it. But there's ways and what we found is that in what you see in the research is that we can actually exceed goals and exceed the metrics that we're looking for if we're doing it in a shared way. So, it changes the way that we think about it. But if everyone still winning in the end, you know, you're still getting the sort of feedback that you want or the financial rewards that you want, then everyone wins anyways. And then you're also reducing burnout.

**Whitney Johnson:** Right, okay. And then just really quickly, the depth of relationship of people having someone at work that they feel very close to and then giving people an opportunity, creating this safety to speak up. And if you said, as you said, sometimes you're going to have to orchestrate it because some people aren't naturally comfortable speaking up.

So much of what we do is our, our mind game. And Bob Proctor, one of my mentors who we've had on this podcast, has said. And I mean, he wasn't the first person to say this, but if you want to build wealth, don't talk about getting out of debt, talk about building wealth. And so, one of the questions I have for you where right now it is your job to evangelize for burnout as an epidemic. What do you do, so that this doesn't start to get in your head and you find yourself burned out? So, because you need to do this, you need to be with sick people all day long. But what are you doing mentally to make sure that you stay well?

**Jennifer Moss:** I love that question, and I think I've had a personal experience with it, so I know the impacts and they're not, they're not great. You really do feel when you get there, after you've been ignoring the signs for so long that you have to look back and think, Wow, I've created some damage for my own health and in my life. So, I think that helps. But I do really try to walk the walk because at that time I was a happiness expert burning out, and there was so much irony around that for me to think that's just not how I want to live. I need to take the lessons and be intentional.

**Whitney Johnson:** Wait, wait, wait. You got to tell us. Give us a little bit more. You're alluding to it too much. So, what happened? You were a happiness expert. You don't need to go into depth. But what happened at a high level?

**Jennifer Moss:** Happiness expert running a tech company that's actually trying to deliver solutions, taking data and really out there as an expert helping organizations to be thinking about having strategies. And meanwhile, feeling depressed, miserable, not eating, working 60 hours a week, on every single board. Because I felt like as a woman in tech, I'm supposed to now take on these roles of influence. We were trying to just raise funds all the time, and we were dealing with all of this economic stress in our own family. My husband and I were co-founders, and we had nothing to say to each other anymore. And it became about the dream and the goal, and we were so married to it. We stopped really seeing what the reason why we started this whole thing, and it required us to take a major break, step back, I left the company and I actually took six months and didn't do anything. I had to really get healthy and go to therapy and had cognitive behavioral therapy, which helped it mentorship and peer support that allowed me to figure out what went wrong. I regrouped with my family and that is, what it, what happens. When you look at the trajectory of burnout, it's like little things happen. And when you go dip and then you go back to the point you dip again. But there's a point around 18 months or two years of that state where you hit a wall and it takes six months to two years to rebound. So, we don't want to get people to that point. So that's really that's helped me identify how to I think it adds richness to the book the passion that you know that I have for it.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, I want to hear what you do now to stay healthy. But I think, you know, you've had the dark night of the soul, and there's this wonderful quote, and I'm going to paraphrase it. But I quoted it in my very first book. It was Robert Bly and Marion Woodman, and they said, "When you have to go into purgatory or Hades, the longer you're there, the stronger the voice." And so, one of the things I think is so powerful in listening to you speak is that by going into that dark night of the soul going into that purgatory, it gave you. Yes, you've got the research, but now you've got the moral authority to talk about what you talk about.

**Jennifer Moss:** Well, that's such a beautiful statement, I mean, beautiful quote, it really is, so, you know, it's connecting to me because that is exactly it. It was, there was a lot of shame. There was a lot of guilt of how I got there, how I lost sight of what really I cared about lust, who I was as a human inside of that endeavor. And when you go through that and you come out and you realize it makes you care about something differently, you're different. One of the first goals that we had, it was actually my husband who was a pro athlete and became acutely paralyzed. And out of that, I mean, he's he's fine now. But out of that moment, we learned about post-traumatic growth. And



so, I really do, I do see the rebound. Even when you're in it, sometimes it's hard to see. But I do see now and reflecting back that there were so many intentional lessons that came from that that has drawn me to the topic now, and it's made me be very careful about boundaries. I talk about work life boundaries now and not balance or integration. It's just like, where are the boundaries? And you have to establish them and you do that by priority setting. And no, like, no part of my day doesn't make my family the priority.

**Jennifer Moss:** So, it makes you just like, categorize decisions, you know, should I take that work? How much is it? I'm excited by it because I'm very excitable about these projects and I want to expand and talk and do all these things. But what am I actually capable of doing as one person?

And if it means that I'm going to not be able to have the time that I, that is required to be a good mother, you know, a loving wife, loving myself, then those things stop being as exciting. And that's really helped me. I've also decided to bring in people. I was very bad at delegating before, and now I have a trusted team. I rely on them. I have to make decisions for me. That's really important and I don't do things that I'm really bad at that also really, you know, helps, which is a privilege and a luxury. I have to say, when you have your own business, you can make those decisions. But it is about giving trust to other people. And all of those things have really, really helped me to be able to write a book about burnout. You know, in the middle of a global pandemic.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, you've got some practices that have allowed you to say, All right, I'm writing on this topic. I want to make sure that when I'm talking about burnout, you know, a hundred times a day, I'm not actually making myself burned out. And you're saying, you delegate, you have boundaries. Is there any sort of mental game something that you say to yourself, something that you do that's going on internally so that all of these, these practices or behaviors are possible?

**Jennifer Moss:** Well, I think it's important to address that I still have lots of moments where I'm really tired.

**Whitney Johnson:** Of course you do! Of course you do.

**Jennifer Moss:** Yeah. And I do put myself at risk and I have to pull back and recognize. So, you know, my natural inclination is to, to push myself. And so, it does take a lot of effort. And there are times where I've said, I've said out loud, I am really feeling this. I'm really tired. There were times when I was trying to home school the kids and I'm not great at that. I realized, you know, just my own lack of ability to homeschool that. And I was trying to write this book, and there was points for maybe about two or three weeks. I couldn't even find words. And that was really hard. It was really demoralizing and I was worried. And I think that like, we all are still going to go through it. It's just catching. I catch myself, I recognize when I've gone too far, I start putting in barriers.

So, I do these like really little tactical things where I don't take any sort of, I try not to, I take no sort of events, speaking events on Mondays. I try to just make it about catching up. I make sure that I have buffers between each podcast or interview or talk that I'm doing. So, I create good segments of time between each, so I take that space. I make sure that I have a sleep, a bedtime app that won't let me check my phone past 10 o'clock at night, and it stays asleep until 7:00 in the morning. I have to go through all of these barriers to get through to my phone so I can protect myself from myself. I really practice that. I take a lot more time to regroup. I take vacation time, I take time off, and I really good at modeling that for the team. So, summers, I make sure that it's less that we put into our calendars. We've shutdowns over. Christmas, we make sure that we have just a lot of flexibility and people don't need to work to certain hours, they just work to goals. And I think that's what's really changed the dynamic of my team now.

**Whitney Johnson:** Oh, that's so good. One of the benefits of talking about what you do is you've got to eat your own cooking, right? So, you're like, I have to go on a vacation because I tell all my clients to go on a vacation. I have to not speak on Monday. I have to take a break before my interviews because I tell my clients not to. And I'm saying this jokingly, but there is a gift in that right?

**Jennifer Moss:** There is. There's a gift to, there's a gift to researching just how to prevent burnout and there's a gift of researching, you know, I do this radio column on Wednesdays, and it's really about just well-being. It's not about burnout prevention. And you know, it's one of those things that I won't give up because every week I research a

topic that has to do with thinking about how we can be more well and healthier and happier and high-performing. And it makes me feel good, just the curiosity piece. It's something that drives me to learn things that aren't just focused in the, in the illness, but more in the how can we actually think about being well. And so those are the kind of things. Yeah, you have to absorb yourself in it in a way that's both learning and yeah, you have to live it in some ways. But then you also have to like want to advocate for the good.

**Whitney Johnson:** You've said that when people say empathy is a soft skill, that you find that incredibly off-putting something along those lines. Tell us why.

**Jennifer Moss:** It really does bug me, it is extremely off-putting to me here. You're right, and I share that in the book. It just bugs me so much because when you look up soft in the dictionary and I write this in the book, you know you, you have this definition of soft margarine, you know, and I think of empathy as being an extremely challenging cognitive skill to develop. It's one of the hardest social, emotional intelligence skills to build. You have to get inside people's experiences, which is extremely difficult. You have to work on it all the time. You have to constantly put others before yourself. You have to actively listen to what other people's needs are. You need to remove bias and prejudice when you're developing all of your strategy. It's hard, hard work. It's worth it, but it's hard work. So, this idea that it's soft just diminishes how challenging it is. And those organizations that actually build human-centered, empathetic leadership and leaders, they've done a lot of work to get there, and it hasn't been an easy task.

**Whitney Johnson:** I have a really bad joke. It's not soft like margarine. It's as if you want it to be as smooth as butter, right?

**Jennifer Moss:** Yes, love that! That is exactly it. That is exactly it. I love that. I'm totally stealing that. I have to give you five cents every time I steal.

**Whitney Johnson:** Please, please do. All right. So, if you need to have a conversation with your boss about your own burnout and not because your boss is a bad boss, but just maybe they're just not aware. Give us a script, Jen.

**Jennifer Moss:** Well, you and I both know that there's lots of good bosses, but there's also a lot of not-so-great bosses. Unfortunately, a big part of that is just that we move managers into people leadership roles because that's how you promote people. But they're not really great at people leadership. That's another conversation that we should have. But really, it is. It is just that when you are still inside the system that we are currently in. I would love to see burnout completely eradicated overnight, but that's not going to happen. We have a lot of work to do. And you could have a boss that's not really in tune or that compassionate and or they are part of the system that's creating this legacy of overwork. So, I really want to instruct people to think about this as how do I have this conversation in the most non-emotional way? How do I have this conversation where it's about facts? And so, I really try to promote the fact-based conversation, and that requires some homework on your end documentation for a couple of weeks, really jotting down throughout the day. How often are you moving priority needs out of the way to work on urgent needs? And how often are those urgent needs? Can you prioritize them? What do you think is the number one urgent need that comes in? Is it from the client? Is it from internal stakeholders? Is it from your boss? Who are all these people asking you to move things around for you? And then go through that through the course of the week and see how often that's shifting. And then you sort of think about what you think your priorities are.

And then you set a meeting with your boss and say, You know what? I know that this has been really hairy through the pandemic. We haven't had a lot of time to just talk about what I'm working on and what I'm considering our priorities versus urgent, and I want you to take a check of making sure that we're aligned. It's really fact-based. You go in and have that conversation with your manager and they can see, okay, well, I would have considered that like number one priority when you maybe put that downgraded to three or four. This is where you should be downgrading that thing you're working on to focus on your priority needs. So, it's just aligning each other.

It's also giving your manager per view and transparency into your workload so they can actually see that you are working on these things that they may not even know you're working on. They might be totally misaligned on what they think you imagine your priority is. So, it just reduces these inefficiencies that come with better communication,

and you can come to that without saying, I'm exhausted, I'm burned out. It's really just let's tackle workload as the first priority. And then because that is usually the biggest, biggest predictor of burnout.

**Whitney Johnson:** It's a backdoor way to get to the conversation of saying, OK, let's look at the workload, because then if the priorities are misaligned, then you're, you're in this place of unmanaged stress in the workplace, which can lead to exhaustion, which can lead to discouragement because you feel like you can't get everything done and therefore, you're disengaged. And if your boss isn't getting it, then you start to get cynical. But it's a way to have a conversation with your manager without shaming them so that they can actually hear what you're saying. Plus, you sound strategic in the process.

**Jennifer Moss:** That's exactly it. And so, it's my way of being able to allow you to voice what you're going through without it being a conversation where you are fearing stigma. If you have a boss, that's really awesome and you can talk about those things with them, then that's great. You want to be able to leverage a person that is human-centered and you know that, you know, if there's trust in that relationship. And so those conversations aren't as hard. But for those people who don't have that dynamic or those that lack agency or younger professionals just starting out in their job, this is a way to have those conversations in a way that isn't again putting that person on defense. You're still working within the system that we're in, unfortunately. I'd like to see that change, but right now, this is how you can, and we've seen this reduce inefficiencies by 20 to 26 percent. And that's if you look at adding 30 percent to your workday. I mean that's, it's getting you in balance again. So, these are just small ways, little ways that we can find back doors into resolving it for ourselves.

**Whitney Johnson:** All right. So, let's flip it. You were a boss and you've got people who are working for you who are getting burned out and they're all struggling and you want to be supportive of them. But now you yourself are at risk because they're all burned out and you're taking all their work back. What does the conversation look like with a manager and a person who works for them who is not able to deliver because of their challenges? And yet it's having, you know, it's affecting the manager themselves. What are your thoughts?

**Jennifer Moss:** This last, you know, global social experiment that's lasted the last two years has been extremely taxing on leaders. And that's why I make I think in the end, when I really wanted to focus in on a book for leaders, even though I wanted to make one for each, it had to be leaders. Because, you know, this talk that I'm doing exhausted leaders, leading exhausted teams like that's where they're at right now because they are juggling, they're doing everything that they have to do to remain stoic and handling the pressure. And they have a boss, too, and they're in this, this really difficult, challenging middle world that they're in. And so, a big part of what I've been advocating and have already before the pandemic was a place of vulnerability for leaders. And we found that even though that's really sometimes in a lot of legacy environments, that's difficult to do. But I've had lots of conversations, with leaders where they said I finally let my guard down and I talk to my team about what was going on with me in my life and the stuff that was happening, and it changed the dynamic. The engagement was higher. We had better conversations when I sort of was able to sort of stop being so stoic, they could see that I was exhausted too. And it created a different partnership. And I have heard that in my research and interviews with a lot of leaders and in institutional places that wouldn't normally be comfortable with that.

I think there was a point where everyone just said, I can't do this. And so, it's still very challenging. You don't see that with every leader. But when I've seen it happen, they always talk about the benefits of that. So that vulnerability is really important. And I think one of the other things I've been strongly recommending for leaders in that space is we need better peer mentorship, peer support. And in some organizations, you know, I interviewed Dr. Edward Allison from Kaiser Permanente Group, and he talked about this role that all these physicians got trained to wear this purple scrub. And they were any time that they've done this purple scrub inside of their hospital. It identified, I'm the person to talk to you today about anything you need. And it was a prime in that space to say, I'm here for you. And so, they could rely just even just seeing the purple scrub, created this prime that I'm going to be okay. And so, we've looked at that across even just in corporate organizations where you can zoom, someone has the hand they have like a symbol that says, I'm the person to talk to you if you need you today and people get trained, and they share that responsibility amongst each other. And it allows you to let the load off. And so those are the kind of things that we need to see these little hacks institutionalize. So, you just feel the sense of I'm not all alone in this.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah. Oh, I love that. I love the first of all, the willingness to just say this is the experience that I'm having and that vulnerability and how that place that you think you can't go is in fact the way through the challenge. And then secondly, I love the purple scrubs and you know, I'm your person today if you need something. That's really lovely.

Ok, so resilience, what are you seeing? Has it increased? Has it decreased? What are your thoughts?

**Jennifer Moss:** Absolutely it just by proxy of us going through this collective trauma, it has increased, I mean, when we think about a frame of reference that we now have and how we're going to predict stress in the future, we're basically going to be able to say, was it going through a global pandemic? No. Oh, well, then I've got this. I think I think we need to be really consistently patting ourselves on the back right now. We have gone through something that is remarkable and we have not fallen into total chaos. We somehow managed to completely pivot and learn new skills and adapt, and we've done it in a way that's probably going to make us even more effective in the future of work and care more about each other and make mental health a priority.

So, there's really good things that have happened from the pandemic, even though that sounds tone-deaf in that the good things from the pandemic. But there has been, and that's because we built this resiliency. We've reframed and we've developed social flexibility. We've developed cognitive optimism. Think of how many things have been canceled and we've had to deal with that and plan for B's and C's and Z strategies to figure it out. We were doing it and we're doing it; I think without recognizing it and having some, some self-congratulation for that. And I think every day we should pat ourselves on the back and say, You did it, good job!

**Whitney Johnson:** Let's do it right now, pat yourself on the back! Everybody who's listening, pat yourself on the back right now. So, can you just really quickly define cognitive optimism? It sounds like it's a reframe, but just for people who are wondering what you mean when you say that?

**Jennifer Moss:** Well, cognitive optimism essentially is this skill, this psychological skill that allows you to believe that things are going to turn out okay, even though it wasn't as you planned. And now that we've at first, it felt really traumatic. You know, the weddings that canceled the Proms, the grads, the Thanksgivings, the all the travel, I mean, the things that we really had felt that were pretty hard to accept, March 2020. Now we have this different flexibility around it. We think, okay well, it's going to be fine. And that then now applies broadly to so many other parts of our lives. Like think of how flexible we've become, which makes us more adapt to change, makes us more ready for change, makes us more able to try new things. And so many byproducts of that cognitive optimism that we've developed just because the pandemic is going to serve us really well in the future, especially in the workplaces.

**Whitney Johnson:** What's something that you learned? What was useful for you in this chat?

**Jennifer Moss:** What I loved about this, and this doesn't always happen in a lot of these interviews is in these conversations is that, I don't get pressed to dig deep and as much as about my own personal journey. I talk about it, but I love that you pushed me a little bit harder to say this is actually what happened, and there were really big impacts from it. And I realize too emotionally that it's still very raw, you know how I feel about it and that people need to understand on a personal level how dramatic it can be in your lives if you really get to that stage of burnout. And it was good that you, you got that out of me because people need to know that not only do I care about it, but that. That I feel it still. And I don't want that to ever happen again to me, to me, and I don't want it to happen if I can and prevent it for anyone else because it really does impact your life in a really interesting and challenging way.

**Whitney Johnson:** Where can people find you if they want to learn more about your work? How can people engage with you further?

**Jennifer Moss:** Well, they can go to my website. Jennifer-Moss.com But I'm really present on LinkedIn and I do a lot of, I do share a lot of the articles that I write and have common and communication there. I'm very open to having dialog. It's a great place for us to be able to talk to each other, I feel like. But yeah, I mean, in the book is just basically everywhere. Now you would know with your books being everywhere, so it's that's pretty easy to access.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, read your book, buy your book, read your book, and go find you on LinkedIn

**Jennifer Moss:** And talk about it with me. Tell me what you thought of it. I'd love to know.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yes, everybody tell her what you thought of this. Any final thoughts?

**Jennifer Moss:** Well, I just really like this conversation. It was very helpful, and I think I just want to remind everyone and I say this really as much as I possibly can. Burnout is not your fault, so don't feel shame and don't feel bad if you can't do the things that you thought that you could in a day. The self-compassion piece, I think, is the most important skill right now, not just empathy for others, but in, you know, internal empathy. And give yourself slack, give yourself grace, you know, take time to, you know, just ignore those things that are bugging you or frustrating you. You can't get done. Look at them as not consequential. Instead, just hug your kids or hug your husband. Or, you know, take care of yourself, have a bath, watch a Netflix movie and lie in bed if you need to with a bowl of ice cream. Whatever it is that you need to do, read a good book. Be frivolous because it's not frivolous, you know, and ignore those other things that we feel like we can accomplish right now because our brains are tired. So let them rest and let yourself off the hook for that.

**Whitney Johnson:** Hmm. So good. All right, Jen Moss, thank you very much for being with us.

**Jennifer Moss:** Thank you. It was my pleasure, thank you so much.

---

Four takeaways.

Number one, burnout is not cured with self-care alone. In fact, we need preventative care the same way we eat healthy and exercise to ensure we don't need medicine later. We should be proactive in setting boundaries and modeling work habits that will stave off burnout in the future.

Number two, burnout is a we problem. Jen explained that burnout is systemic within organizations, it comes from the top down. If you're experiencing that disconnection or cynicism, it may be time to talk to your boss. And if you're the boss, heed John's advice regular check-ins, leading with empathy, and open conversations about mental health. Lean on collaborative goals rather than individual ones. Letting your guard down to talk about your own burnout can completely change the dynamics of your team.

Number three, our brains don't like being in a chronic state of emergency. We've all been feeling this for the last year, but if your organization is constantly shuffling priorities and overscheduling, Zoom calls your team could be feeling the constant fight or flight response which burns people out. Being aware of this should be part of that preventative care for burnout.

Number four, empathy is a hard skill. Understanding where other people are coming from and ensuring they're not alone is huge in preventing burnout. But real deep empathy. It's not easy. It's a skill that must be practiced and modeled across your organization if you want to benefit from it.

If you enjoyed this episode, be sure to check out [episode 209](#) with physician Megan Rothenberger, who herself experienced burnout. [Episode 165](#) with Hubert Joly on putting people first, as well as Leena Nair in [episode 235](#) on emphasizing why we do what we do.

And remember, to fill out the survey so that we know what's useful to you, so that we know how to help you stay engaged with this podcast. You can find the link in the show notes of this episode.

Thank you again to Jennifer Moss for being our guest and thank you to you for listening. Thank you to our team. Matt Silverman, Producer. Whitney Jobe, audio engineer and editor. Steve Ludwig, assistant producer. And Maddie McDaniel, production assistant. I'm Whitney Johnson reminding you that if you want to be an agent of disruption, first become its subject

And Disrupt Yourself.