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How to Stop the Chronic Overworking

January 16, 2022

Well hello Friends! I hope you guys had an amazing week.

Today I want to talk about the issue of chronic overworking. It’s a widespread in corporate America but for entrepreneurs as well.

A few decades ago, laptops and cellphones blurred the lines between work and home. And for many, it took away clear boundaries. It made it harder to be clear around when work for the day stops, and for many people, quite simply, it doesn’t.

And now, with the rise of remote work during the pandemic, the boundaries are even blurrier because now our home IS the workplace. And if THAT’S true, can we EVER stop working?

And it’s not just the corporate types that struggle with this. It’s long been an issue for entrepreneurs as well. While in theory, business owners can set their hours and work when they choose, the truth is, it’s not that simple for many. And this is getting to the heart of the issue. Chronic overworking is about so much more than choosing the hours you work or having a lot to get done or whatever. It’s about something much deeper. And that’s what we’re going to explore in this episode.

Now it’s important to know, when I talk about overworking here, I’m not referring to short periods of intense work when you’re trying to hit a specific deadline. I’m talking here about when overworking has become ingrained. It’s a habit. It’s part of our life.

And for some that’ll happen periodically. For others, it’s just the way they live, permanently. This is going to be an interesting one, so let’s dive in.

When you look at the issue logically, overworking can seem super easy to solve. Just set clear boundaries and live within those. But the truth is, chronic overworking is complicated. It’s about far more than the work that needs to get done. It’s primarily caused by what we THINK and how we FEEL about the work that needs to get done AND by our assessment of our ability to be successful at it.

So, while other well-meaning family and friends might tell you “Just shut it off at 5”, the issue runs much deeper than that. Chronic overworking is typically caused by feelings of stress or anxiety that can get triggered in two ways:

1. They can be triggered by external forces. So, through the expectations or culture of our employer or boss.
2. Or two, and I think even more commonly, the feelings of stress and anxiety get triggered INTERNALLY, because of something we either want to do and fear we can’t. OR, because of something that’s happening around us that we interpret in a way that triggers our stress and anxiety. So, we overwork to self-soothe ourselves. To make it easier to cope with these unpleasant feelings of self-doubt, anxiety, fear, not feeling good enough or whatever.

Whether the feelings of anxiety or stress are coming from external or internal forces, our default response to those negative feelings is the same. We work longer and harder to give ourselves a false sense of control and to ease the anxiety and stress we feel.

So, we work all the time. Nights. Weekends. We answer emails at all hours of the night and it’s the first thing we check when we wake up in the morning. We don’t take a lunch break or any break really. We skip vacations or we work through vacations. While the rest of the family is frolicking on the beach, we’re glued to our phone or sneaking in calls to the office while we think no one is looking.

Sound familiar? I know it does for me.

It’s not something I do anymore, but it’s the way I lived for a very, VERY long time. So long that I never really thought about it anymore. It was just what normal work life was.

Overworking becomes a form of self-medication. We FEEL stress or anxiety. And then we try to manage it by overworking.

By not saying no to the boss’s or company’s unreasonable demands for us to be available 24 x 7 or to deliver the project over the weekend. Or we do it to ourselves to prove that we ARE good enough. That we CAN do the thing our inner critic is telling ourselves we can’t do.

And once we slip into the habit of chronic overworking, It’s a VERY slippery slope. Because the more we overwork the more we THINK we NEED to overwork.

It happens subtly.

Decision by decision.

Week by week.

Until gradually, work starts to override every other part of our life. Work starts to BECOME our life. And the other parts of our life, like relationships or hobbies or self-care are de-prioritized.

We slip into this habit of overworking because initially, it actually DOES soothe us. We DO feel more in control. And unfortunately, in the early stages, it can serve us.

Maybe our output is better. We deliver more than others. So, we’re viewed by our boss as being highly productive or self-motivated or a top performer and so it brings rewards like promotions or higher pay. So, we think we have to keep doing it in order to maintain the competitive edge or even to just be successful at our job. And once that pattern settled in, the thought of NOT overworking can cause us even more stress and anxiety than we initially felt.

So, the overworking becomes this non-virtuous cycle whereby we initially feel stress or anxiety, so we overwork to compensate. And because we initially experience some benefits of doing that in the short term, our brain tells us that we MUST keep overworking to STAY successful.

But of course, all this overworking comes at a price.

Because ultimately without a healthy work life balance or proper self-care, eventually it’s going to catch up with us and we’ll experience the negative effects. And this usually shows up in our emotional health.

* We have a shorter fuse
* We get frustrated more easily
* We’re more negative or pessimistic
* We make poor judgment calls
* We don’t work well or collaborate well with others
* We find it hard to deal well with conflict

Overworking is pervasive. It’s a thing.

According to a recent study, chronic overwork and burnout contributed to nearly 750,000 deaths in 2020. And over 60% of corporate employees say they suffer from chronic stress or anxiety.

I alluded to this earlier, but the rise of remote work during the pandemic has only made this worse. While on the surface it seems like a good thing, like you’d have more balance, the truth is 70% of people working remotely say they now work weekends and 45% work MORE hours than they did when commuting into the office.

We’ll look at the fixed in a moment, but first, let’s look at some of the deeper drivers behind overworking.

1. **Busy work.** Or as a former co-worker liked to call it, “the tyranny of the urgent.”

This means we sometimes spend a high percentage of our work time on things that SEEM urgent and must be done NOW, but which are not high value activities. These are administrative tasks like searching for documents, chasing approvals, searching for emails, or trying to keep up with emails in real time, technology issues and things like that).

And every minute we spend on these URGENT but low impact tasks takes away from the high impact tasks that really deliver value. The things that drive

So, in corporate America many times busy work is about ill-defined roles, bare bones work forces or an overdemanding “I need it now” culture that forces employees to over prioritize delivering things that just aren’t all that important. While delivering that urgent task seems incredibly urgent and can be highly valued by some (dare I say, poor leaders), spending too much time on administrative tasks just means that we must work longer hours to get to the important stuff.

Now for entrepreneurs the drivers of this are a little different. For some, they might find the administrative tasks to be soothing or less scary than tackling some of the harder tasks or items they’re not as comfortable doing. Either way it means the same thing. Those administrative tasks aren’t going to drive revenue and so you end up having to work longer hours to get to the high impact work that’s going to move your business forward.

1. **Poor leadership.**

While this thread runs through a lot of these issues, it’s worth calling out as its own thing because poor leadership is a pervasive issue in corporate America. Not in all companies to be sure, but it’s very widespread.

Too many times, bosses or employers don’t provide clarity on priorities, don’t clearly define roles within and across teams and sometimes, have an organizational structure so highly matrixed it takes three times as long to get even the simplest of things done. This is a problem with leadership. Their job is to provide clarity in goals, roles and organizational structure. And so many times, they simply don’t do it. In fact, one data point I read is that 13% of employee time in corporate America is spent doing work that someone else in another part of the company has already done. This equals 246 hours or 30 days a year, lost to employees doing duplicate or unnecessary work.

Another big one is bosses who constantly change their mind. So, then the people underneath are doing triple the work to try to respond to these changes in direction. Agility and responsiveness are great UNTIL they become the way that leader does business all the time. Then, it’s an issue that leads to chronic overworking and I believe, underperformance.

I don’t know about you, but I can definitely relate to that one. I haven’t had many bosses like this but the few I’ve had have a very negative effect on not only the people that work for them but the performance of the organization.

So, when you’ve got poor leadership, it means YOU’RE paying the price. All that wasted time and rework can trigger anxiety and stress and it also then becomes MORE time you need to spend working longer hours so you can get the important work done.

1. **An always on culture.**

We’ve hit on this earlier but this always on culture really picked up pace in the late 90’s with cell phone and laptops. Being connected through technology meant we were expected to be available. All. The. Time. And while some employers and bosses don’t take advantage of this, many more do. I literally had one boss who was a night owl. And they’d send emails out at 11:30 at night. And if you didn’t answer them, they’d let you know that it was unacceptable.

The truth is, if your boss is a chronic overworker or a poor leader, they aren’t likely to respect the boundaries of their staff. We’ll talk more in a minute about how to deal with it.

The same can happen with entrepreneurs. If you have clients that expect you to be on 24 x 7, you might be tempted to overwork in order to deliver on those expectations. And while this can work in the short-term, as we’ve said throughout this episode, it’s not sustainable.

1. **An overactive Inner Critic.**

This I think runs through the other 3 reasons as well. The Inner Critic gets triggered because of what we’re thinking about what’s going on. And it tells us things like “you can’t do it” or “you’re going to fail” or “if you don’t get this right you’ll lose your job” or “you better get this perfect” or whatever.

These negative internal talk tracks cause us to feel self-doubt or fear or anxiety. And at the heart of it is a belief or fear that you won’t be good enough.

So, we overwork to ease those negative feelings. And while that’s not a real, long-term solution to the problem, it’s only a false sense of control we gain by overworking, the real problem happens when we get rewarded for doing so. Because initially, this overworking can propel us forward. We get the work done, maybe it’s really amazing and so we get rewarded for our high performance.

But the downside of overwork becoming chronic comes in two ways. First, we convince ourselves this level of overworking is necessary, that we can’t let up or we’ll fail. So, it adds more stress to the original stress we already felt. And second, we usually can’t sustain that level of overworking over the long-term because it takes a toll on our mental and physical health.

So, now that we’ve explored the drivers, what do we do?

The answer is actually simple but also hard. Meaning there’s a part that YOU can control changing and depending on what is triggering your overworking, there might be part that also involves you having to approach others to renegotiate your work contract.

Here’s the simple part or the part you can control. You have to do some inner leadership work (that’s what I call it) to explore:

1. The circumstances that trigger us.

2. What we think and feel about those circumstances (which is what is CAUSING the overwork).

3. We must choose to think and feel something different when we’re triggered in the future.

We teach inner leadership, which is a process that helps you understand your underlying patterns of thought that don’t serve you and help you choose new, productive thoughts that do. AND, how to take that work and incorporate it into your day to day until it becomes a habit.

By doing the daily self-coaching work – a process we teach – you can do the thought exploratory, so you understand the thoughts that are actually driving you to FEEL the stress and anxiety. And then you choose new thoughts that cause you to feel emotions that better serve you.

When you practice doing this over time it becomes your new way of operating. So that same thing can happen but now, instead of having the thoughts that trigger emotions like stress or anxiety, you now have new productive thoughts that keep you on an even keel.

They say a new habit takes 60 days and I think this thought work is no different. It takes awareness to understand your underlying patterns of thought. And then it takes time to build a new neural pathway with that new thought you choose before you’ll actually BELIEVE it and it becomes your new way of being.

So that’s the simple part and I say simple but it’s a process YOU undertake and control. You can choose what you want to think and feel and do as a result of what’s happening to you. That’s your choice.

But then there’s the HARD part I alluded to earlier. And that’s the part that involves other people.

Back to those triggers we talked about earlier. If you work for a company or boss that fills your time with low impact URGENT tasks, expects you to respond to their emails at midnight, constantly changes direction, expects you to regularly be available on weekends or any other poor demonstration of leadership you’ll have to go a bit further.

You’ll have to set clear boundaries. Because the truth is with these types of bosses, they learn who they can push and who they can’t. And the employees they can’t push are the ones who are clear about when a demand is unreasonable. And they’re good at saying “Because this direction changed, I need more time” or “I’m not available this weekend” or whatever. When approached in this way, many bosses will recalibrate their demands. But at the same time, those bosses might still be taking advantage of others on the team who don’t feel confident speaking up. And in my view it’s very, VERY poor leadership.

And of course, sometimes, even when you do with clear boundaries or push back on unreasonable demands, you might still find yourself with more work to do than you can reasonably manage in a regular set of hours. And if that’s the case, you probably have a choice to make. You might need to pursue a new job, hopefully with a better boss or more reasonable culture.

But here’s the really important part. BEFORE you leave. Before you just assume that it’s your boss or your company or whatever, ALWAYS do the thought work. Make sure it’s not your Inner Critic driving you to do it so you can feel better about your work. Clean that up and make sure YOU’RE not the one driving the overwork. Because if you don’t, you will likely simply fall back into the old patterns of chronic overworking at the new job.

Bottom line, it’s a complicated issue because sometimes it’s being triggered by outside factors. And it’s so easy to look at those external demands and blame it on that. But I’ve found that in almost every instance, it’s mostly about what we’re THINKING about those outside demands or about ourselves. And that’s something you need to get mastery of first, before you do anything else.

This is what I teach in my practice. We’re about Inner Leadership. Learning how to consciously choose what we want to think, feel and do so we get the results we want. It helps with everything. Overworking to be sure. But everything else as well. Productivity, confidence, boundaries, relationships, money, fear and so much more.

Doors are opening soon for February, so go to thepurposefulcareer.com/nextlevel to get on the waiting list.

You can conquer overworking (and everything else that’s holding you back). And once you do, imagine the impact that’ll have on your family, your friends, your health. Imagine how much happier and more balanced you would feel. And most of all, imagine how much different Monday morning would look.

Until next time, make it a great week my friends.