

**New America  
Resilience Audio Interview**

**Arianna Huffington**

**Our cultural dismissal of sleep.**

**AMS:** Arianna, it's such a pleasure to be able to talk to you since you are an expert in many ways on resilience. And I wanted to start with your personal story. When I first knew you, you were going a mile a minute, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, running Huffington Post. You really built Huffington Post into a major media force in a very short period of time, and you were also ahead of the media curve. I would've said then that you could have handled anything that came at you. I would have said: "She's unstoppable. You knock her down, she gets back up, she's got more energy than any human being I've ever seen." I would have said: "That's clearly a resilient person." But can you talk about how you had something happen in 2007 that really changed your outlook on your own life and how other people should live? Talk to us about that.

**Arianna:** Yes. It actually happened two years into building HuffPost, which I launched in 2005. I was a divorced mother of two teenage daughters with all that goes with it. I had bought into the collective delusion that in order to be supermom and super founder, I just had to power through exhaustion, forego sleep, etc. One morning, actually the morning after I had come back from taking my daughter around schools to decide where she would apply for college, I collapsed. I literally hit my head on my desk on the way down, and broke my cheekbone. But what was interesting, to your point that you would have thought I had an amazing energy, is that if you had asked me that morning, how are you Arianna? I would have said fine. It was really the fact that being depleted, running on empty, had become the new normal for me. And what is interesting is that now we are seeing this all around us, and I'm interested in exploring this theme with you because we look around at Bernie Sanders having a heart attack, at the tragic news of Bernard Tyson dying in his sleep at 60, and it's time that we start connecting the dots. I had a painful wake up call, but it's nothing compared to the casualties that are proliferating all around us—the increase in chronic diseases that are stress-related and preventable, the increase in mental health problems and suicide. So, it's time that we saw that the way we're living and working is not sustainable. It's definitely not resilient, and we are paying a heavy price, both personally and collectively.

**AMS:** I couldn't agree more about connecting the dots. Indeed, if you look at the economic costs of stress and illness and overwork, it's very high. But people just don't connect work and life that way. When you go around, as you do now, and you have been for a number of years, both across the United States and around the world, and you say to people that we need to work less and sleep more, what kind of reactions do you get?

**Arianna:** Actually, I never say work less. I don't work less; I actually work smarter. I do work hard. If you look at my schedule, it's very dense. I think that the difference is including recovery time into an intense schedule. It's a little bit like thinking like athletes. I look at athletes, and why is Tom Brady still winning Super Bowls? Because he has prioritized recharging, renewing, and refueling, so he's able to achieve peak performance. So for me, it's a question of how you achieve peak performance. Let's say you don't care about anything else in your life—your family, your health even—peak performance still cannot be achieved sustainably if you ignore recovery time. I think what's important here is to look at the new science, which is absolutely

unequivocal on this point. We claim to be data-driven, but we are not living and working in a data-driven way. We're still kind of caught in this kind of Neanderthal pre-scientific way of thinking that in order to be super successful, we just need to power through no matter what. Look at all the recent teachable moments we have with what happened with WeWork, what happened with Uber. These broken cultures are affecting valuations. So even if we were just looking at the financial costs, as you said, the conclusions are clear.

**AMS:** You touch on something when you talk about WeWork and Uber and some of these other examples in the culture of working all the time. I remember hearing of people who, when they were on a transatlantic flight and they were going from East to West, would add more hours into a 24 hour day because, of course, they would leave from London and land in San Francisco. I have heard that described, and I've described it myself, as "time macho." It's a kind of machismo to say that I am indestructible, I can work harder. Actually, not harder. You're absolutely right. It's not about working hard and it's not about being productive, but that sense of I can work longer than you can. Do you think that that's a particularly kind of male culture?

**Arianna:** Yes. I think it's definitely a male culture. It goes back to the industrial revolution, when we started revering machines, and of course, what we love about machines and what we love about software is what we call 99.9% uptime, right? But the human operating system is different. Downtime is not a bug, it's a feature. But we're treating it like a bug, and now we need to look at the consequences. It's not just consequences in terms of health, which are obvious, but in terms of decisions. One of the things we're doing at Thrive is building our behavior change product to help people change behaviors through micro steps, but also giving people stories of successful people in the arena who are actually doing things differently. Your story, Anne-Marie, of watching the birds, that I hope you can share, is part of that. Jeff Bezos, his story of why he sleeps for eight hours because it improves his decision-making, is part of that. Philipp Schindler, who is the chief business officer at Google, wrote a story of when he realized he should not be on his phone when he is with his children, his moment of epiphany. All of those stories are part of how we are looking to help others change their behavior because people want to hear from others in the arena who can almost give them permission to integrate their own rituals for recharging into their lives. So tell us about watching the birds.

**AMS:** Well, I should say, I deeply agree with the philosophy and indeed I have thought about interval training and athletes myself. You go hard, but then you rest. And it's also extremely important for creativity because you need to let your mind run. And so for me, being in beauty, being absorbed in nature, is very important. It recharges me, it renews me. And the piece that I wrote for Thrive is exactly about something as simple as watching the birds at your bird feeder, which most people would look out their breakfast window and think, "Oh, okay, they're birds." But I look at the birds and I look at the extraordinary patterns of their feathers, their behaviors, and it's a world that I can immerse myself in. My children laugh at me, saying that I care more about my birds than talking to them, but it is a great example of a very small pleasure and moment every day or multiple times a day where I'm not thinking about work. It is integral to my ability to be the person I am, to be the creative that I am, and to do what I do. I think you are absolutely right. We are not machines. Your point about it being a feature is 100% right, and yet we don't let ourselves take in those pleasures.

**Arianna:** But also as I know, so many of my friends with children our age and younger are so worried about what's happening to their children in terms of anxiety and depression and lack of resilience. But I think you've clearly communicated it to your kids because your son Edward Hoke is a wonderful contributor to Thrive. And he's so ahead of his generation in testing things,

in setting boundaries to his relationship with technology. I feel also for the sake of our children who need to model these behaviors, to give them a way to be in this world, which is changing so fast in a resilient way.

**AMS:** Absolutely. Absolutely. So talk a little more about Thrive and the idea for Thrive. I think it's particularly important that it's Thrive Global, which I find interesting because of course, you're originally Greek and the Europeans have a very different understanding of how we ought to integrate work and life. So to do the Australians, the Asians. So just talk a little bit about the idea behind Thrive and where you see it going.

**Arianna:** So Thrive is very much focused on behavior change. We just actually bought an AI- and neuroscience-based company called Boundless to accelerate our roadmap to be able to feed people recommendations for micro steps that are going to be particularly effective for them. The reason we're focusing on the SAAS product we've launched, which is all about behavior change, is because as the CEO of the company we bought, who is now our head of behavioral sciences put it, "a hundred years ago, we were dying of infectious diseases. Now, it's our behaviors that are killing us." So this is urgent. That's one focus. Also, in order to be able to scale, we have taken our live workshops and digitized them, so we have six 90-minute digital programs on everything from performance to mental health to the parental journey that you are involved with at New America. Next week, for example, we are launching Thriving Mind, which is our mental health digital program that we've created in partnership with Stanford medicine. We are launching it to all Accenture employees around the world; that is 470,000 employees and in 11 languages. The truth is, Anne-Marie, that the problems are the same everywhere.

Stress and burnout is affecting all of us. I just came back from Mexico, where diabetes and mental health problems are skyrocketing. I was in Brazil last week, where we are working with many companies that are increasingly conscious of the fact that all these issues are not just the province of HR departments, they should be directly affecting the CEO and CFO roadmap. Otherwise, if left unattended, they're going to affect business metrics on the bottom line. So for us, that's the priority. We work with 80 companies in 40 countries. But we also announced this year a partnership with P&G that I'm really excited about, which will allow us to work with the customers of a big brand like P&G around the world, to help give them micro steps to improve their lives.

**AMS:** I was going to ask you to talk a little bit more about the micro steps piece, because I find that fascinating, that it's a practice. It's not like suddenly you thrive or suddenly you build resilience. So talk a little bit more about the micro-steps piece.

**Arianna:** Practice is a great way of putting it. Basically, as you know, all the latest science shows that the most effective way to change behavior is through small daily incremental steps that we call micro steps. They are too small to fail. Instead of New Year's resolutions, which as we know fail after two weeks, we basically break down whatever we want to achieve to easily achievable changes in our lives. You want to start exercising? Don't tell yourself "I'm going to do an hour in the gym every day." Say, "today I'm going to take the steps rather than the elevator," or "Tomorrow I'm going to walk for two blocks." Just break it down in ways that you are not going to fail. And we do that across the board, including our relationship with technology, including sleep, including mental health. The way this applies to how we work with consumers as opposed to just employees, just to give you an example, is through what neuroscientists call

habit stacking. It means adding a healthy habit on top of an existing habit. So with P&G, for example, we worked with Pantene, because, believe it or not, they did a study at Yale that showed that most women think they have a bad hair day. In fact, #badhairday had over a million entries. There was a #goodhairday, but when I last checked, it had about 70,000 entries. So we worked with them to practice an affirmation that empowers them while they're washing their hair. We did an experiment with women and gave them 300 affirmations to choose from, and then after two weeks, we recorded them and the changes they had made in their lives. And they were amazing changes, simply by repeating an affirmation that made them feel empowered while they were washing their hair. That's habit stacking, as opposed to what happens normally, which is very often our default position, when our brain is not engaged in something is to go to the negative, to worry about something in the future or ruminate about something in the past. So by directing the brain to something positive, we begin to change the neural pathways of the brain. That's what is so exciting, that something as mundane as what you are thinking while you're washing your hair or brushing your teeth can actually affect how you live your day.

**AMS:** It is just extraordinary. It's hardwired software because you can change it, but I use an affirmation every morning when I'm doing sort of five minutes of exercise, just little stretches while I'm waiting for my coffee. Just the experience of breathing in and breathing out and affirming positive things about myself, about the world and it does make an enormous difference. And I love the idea of doing it while you're washing your hair.

**Arianna:** Now I'm going to ask you to write about your affirmations.

**AMS:** I will do that for you. But you also say something that I think is very important in terms of working with consumers and employers because one of the larger issues here is that the stress that we are encountering is a function of technology, of life being sped up, but also of larger changes in our economy, in our society. People can't earn a living wage on one job, so they're doing two jobs or three jobs. And some of that, of course, we simply have to address with policy. But it's also important that things like work-life balance or yoga or all the ways in which very affluent people often manage stress are not limited to a tiny slice of the population, that you're actually trying to work with as broad a slice of people as possible, as well as with their bosses to convince people that more is just not better in so many cases.

**Arianna:** Absolutely. And you know, I think it's so important to realize that everything we're saying applies to people from the C-suite to the gig economy to call center operators. Just to give you an example, we are working with call center operators around the world, say with Microsoft. We're working with their operators in Nicaragua, in Vietnam, and the results have been amazing because what we've done is we've given them small interventions. They don't have to do a yoga class or meditate or all the things that seem like luxuries, and they can just do 60-second recharging pauses in the course of their day. Again, we have the neuroscience that shows that it takes 60 to 90 seconds to course correct from stress. That's how long it takes for the cortisol hormone to get through our body. The rest of stress is in our minds. So what we do is you have these one minute interventions. Ideally through machine learning, we can know when you've received a particularly stressful call from a client, and the next call is a Thrive call that asks you to take a minute for yourself and remember three things you are grateful for, or get up and stretch, or breathe consciously. And what is amazing is how much of an impact this has. First of all, the operators are amazed that anyone cares for them because they feel very disposable. And secondly, it really intervenes. Although stress is never anything we're going to eliminate, what happens is, it doesn't become cumulative. And that's the key.

**AMS:** That is the essence of mindfulness practice, to allow things to pass by you, to flow over you. Of course there's going to be a reaction, but you determine the degree of the reaction. It's also about reasserting agency when we feel completely overwhelmed, which is also deeply necessary for human beings, to have that sense of even micro control in a world where we can't control the larger forces.

**Arianna:** And actually, that's what resilience means, to be able to transcend our circumstances, no matter what they are. That in no way removes the need for policy changes, changes at the employer level. But we have examples from history of people who are able to tap into their own center of peace and wisdom, the eye of the hurricane, in the middle of the most extreme circumstances. Viktor Frankl in the concentration camp. These extreme cases that show what is available to us as individuals and how can we create this micro steps during our day that are reminders that we all have that eye of the hurricane in us.

**AMS:** Well, that is a lovely note on which to end. The idea of resilience as being the eye of a hurricane deep within us that we can access even in the very worst circumstances, and that learning how to access that well of resilience is the key to learning how to thrive. So Arianna Huffington, I loved our conversation and I'm so glad we could have it.

**Arianna:** Thank you so much, Anne-Marie, for everything you are doing. We'll go forward together.

**AMS:** Thank you.