

Redefining Success and Creating a Life of Well-Being, Wisdom, and Wonder: A Special Interview with Arianna Huffington

By Dr. Joseph Mercola

DM: Dr. Joseph Mercola

AH: Arianna Huffington

DM: How would you like to thrive, be successful, and create a life of well-being, wisdom, and wonder? Hi, this is Dr. Mercola, helping you take control of your health. Today we are joined by Arianna Huffington, who is the chairman, president, and editor-in-chief of the Huffington Post Media Group. She is a nationally syndicated columnist and author of 14 books. But she's here today to discuss her most recent book with us, which is *Thrive: The Third Metric to Redefining Success and Creating a Life of Well-Being, Wisdom, and Wonder*. Welcome and thank you for joining us today, Arianna.

AH: Thank you so much. It's great to be with you.

DM: You have been thriving. You're a real model for so many people. And really, your site, Huffington Post, is one of the top 100 sites in the world. Can you describe the process you went through to become successful and some of the complications you encountered along the way, which sounds like the motivation for the book?

AH: I was born in Greece, as you can tell from my accent. I lived with my mother and sister in a one-room apartment with no money. But my mother really made us feel that we didn't have to be limited by our circumstances. I always got from her that sense of unconditional loving and also the sense that we could go for our dreams. I went to Cambridge, got my degree in economics, became a writer by accident, started writing, and then moved to the United States.

As I was writing and then later starting The Huffington Post, I think I was under the collective delusion that burnout is necessary for success. I have two daughters. Two years into launching The Huffington Post and having just come back from taking my oldest daughter around colleges to pick the college she wanted to apply to, I collapsed from burnout, exhaustion, and sleep deprivation. I hit my head on my desk on the way down, broke my cheekbone, and got four stitches on my right eye.

That was seven years ago. That was the beginning of the process of learning, understanding, and making changes in my own life that led to the publication of *Thrive*. Basically, I started asking myself questions as I came into a pool of blood of what a good life is and what success is. I saw by looking around at my colleagues, friends, and the world at large that we had defined success simply in terms of two metrics: money and power. That was like trying to sit on a two-legged stool.

DM: What is your new definition of success based on your experience in seeking to achieve your previous understanding?

AH: My new definition of success includes the third metric, the third leg of the stool. The third metric consists of four pillars:

(1) Our well-being and health. If we sacrifice our health and well-being in the pursuit of success, we are really paying an insanely high price. And yet we see millions of people doing that and ending up with heart disease, diabetes, high blood pressure, or other stress-related afflictions like depression, alcoholism, or drug addiction. I began to see how exciting the time we're living in is because now we have the scientific evidence to back ancient wisdom around our well-being and prioritizing that.

(2) Wisdom. We have a lot of very smart leaders around making terrible decisions. The problem is not that they don't have a high IQ; the problem is that they are not connected with their inner wisdoms. Taking time to connect with the source of our inner wisdom and strength is essential.

(3) Wonder, a capacity to wonder at life, to bring joy into our everyday life – what Greeks called “enthousiasmos,” which really meant kind of being inhabited by the gods in the sense of being really connected with something larger in life, including the ordinary beauties and ordinary miracles of daily life.

(4) And finally, giving. No complete life is ever lived just for ourselves.

When we integrate giving, wonder, wisdom, and well-being together with the first two metrics, we really have a complete life with meaning and purpose.

DM: Have you developed some particularly beneficial or useful strategies to develop this inner wisdom or be sensitive to it?

AH: Yes. I actually have in the book 12 steps. It's kind of deliberate because I think we are addicted to a life of burnout. We really have come to think this is the way for us to be important, busy, and successful. At the end of each of these sections – Well-being, Wisdom, Wonder, and Giving – there are three steps, making a total of 12 steps.

The first one, you know. As you know, in the literature of habits, they talk about the keystone habit that you change, and then it becomes easier to change other habits. In my life, the keystone habit was sleep. I went from four to five hours to seven to eight hours. That was transformational. I mean, you know all the science. You speak and write about it around sleep. But it truly is a miracle drug...

DM: Yes, indeed.

AH: In terms of how it strengthens our immune system and in terms of how it increases our mental clarity. For me and as I recommend to our readers, just start with getting 30 minutes more a night. I believe in starting with manageable little steps rather than expecting some overwhelming change that's not going to happen right away.

The other thing that connected very much to the wisdom part was meditation. Again, I started with five minutes because everybody has five minutes. It's at least the beginning of reacquainting ourselves with that part of ourselves where our inner wisdom and intuition lie. And then gradually and naturally you can proceed to do longer and longer periods.

DM: That's a useful recommendation. The challenge with incorporating that, of course, is that if you're going to increase two, three, or more hours of sleep per night, that means you can't do something else. If you're overworked, overburdened, and falling asleep at your desk already, that extra work that you're not doing tends to pile up. I'm wondering what strategies you used to address that work. I mean, did you just make a conscious decision not to do it or delegate it out? How were you able to do that?

AH: I found actually that when I'm really rested and recharged, I have the energy to do things more efficiently and more effectively. Also I avoid a lot of mistakes that otherwise are made out of exhaustion

and burnout. I quote Bill Clinton in my book, who said, “The most important mistakes I made in my life are made when I was tired.” He did not specify what mistakes, but I think all of us can say the same thing about our own lives. I know I definitely can say the same thing about my life.

Also, as you know, the most important thing that we have to get everything done is energy rather than time. If getting enough sleep means that we have the energy to get everything done, ultimately, sleep is a performance enhancement tool. And it’s a leadership tool. I’m a much better leader here at The Huffington Post because I’m recharged, because I can see the red flags before they become dangers, and because I can see the opportunities of where we need to go in the future.

DM: How long have you been implementing this seven- to eight-hour strategy? Have you also been able to convince and motivate your key leadership role at the Post there?

AH: Yes. I have been implementing it really for the last six years.

DM: Okay.

AH: In The Huffington Post, I have opened two nap rooms three years ago, so that our journalists and our engineers can have naps in the afternoon if they are tired instead of having a cinnamon bar or a fifth cup of coffee. Also we have an email policy at The Huffington Post, whereby when your work is done at the end of the day, you are not expected to be on email. Obviously, we’re a 24/7 media company. There are people who are on at night and people who are on at weekend. But unless you are one of these people, you’re off work. If there’s an emergency, we’ll text you or we’ll call you; we’ll find you. People can really be off.

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Also we have meditation, yoga, and breathing classes and healthy free snacks everywhere. We try to implement a lot of the things that I write about in *Thrive* and that I believe make HuffPosters much more effective.

DM: Interesting policy with the nap. [Inaudible 10:34] nap in the day in this lifespan. Because maybe a better strategy is what you originally recommended, which was to sleep seven or eight hours. If you can’t do that, napping may be counterproductive. But it’s certainly better than having some of the alternatives they were already doing.

AH: Yeah. I mean, I do recommend to everyone to get seven to eight hours or whatever it is that they need. I gave a commencement speech at Smith College. I urged their women graduates to sleep their way to the top. I do what I can but obviously I’m not in charge of people’s lives.

DM: Sure. One of the other recommendations in your books is to consider the need for a digital detox. That’s a particularly significant challenge, especially with the advent of technology and cellphones.

AH: First, we have to have a digital detox or any kind of detox, which is basically, you know... God, after five days of creating heaven and earth, he took a day off and really recharged. I feel that if we regularly completely detox from all our distractions – and digital distractions are some of the main ones we have – we are going to renew ourselves, [and] be more effective and more connected with our purpose when we return to work. I now collect role models who do that, including Padmasree Warrior, who is the chief technology officer of CISCO. She oversees tens of thousands of engineers, but she gets eight hours of sleep. She meditates. She writes haikus. She paints. Every Saturday, she does a digital detox.

It can be done. You can still be very effective and very successful at what you’re doing. It’s just that we are becoming addicted to being perpetually on. We need to deal with the fact that our devices have

become an extension of ourselves. We need to learn to disconnect from them in order to reconnect with ourselves.

DM: I think the importance of that would be especially, you know... People having their cellphones, people would call them. But now, of course, the new method of communication for many people is texting. If you're driving, that's particularly pernicious – not only can you kill yourself but your whole family potentially. I think your recommendations could be lifesaving in many cases. But it would seem to me a challenge for many people because it is an addiction. I'm convinced. I agree with you. I think it is an addiction. Many of us struggle. Numbers are increasing.

Have you found any strategies other than just biting the bullet and doing them? What have you found to be effective for yourself personally, for your friends, for your staff, and for your family?

AH: Yes. I found that a strategy that has worked for me, for many people here at HuffPost, and for many of my friends is creating like a little tribe of support. We all know that when something is hard, if we have a buddy – we call them “thrive buddies” – who can be there with you and with whom you can communicate when it gets tough... For example, I have a thrive buddy, so that if at night I'm tempted to stay on my devices longer, I can call my buddy, or I can email them and communicate with them. It's just the very act of communicating with someone about a problem and having their support that makes a difference.

But also creating an environment that makes it more likely that I'm not going to be tempted. My bedroom is a device-free zone. I know you have advised not to watch television before you go to sleep. I never watch television before I go to sleep. I don't nod on email. I only have real books, old-fashioned books, by my bed.

DM: No Kindles.

AH: No Kindles. No screens. Also I have books which take me away from my workday. I like to read poetry. I like to read philosophy. I like to read spiritual teachings. It's a transition. I also completely believe what you said about having a hot bath. For me, it's introducing some rituals, designing my immediate environment in a way which is conducive to my new habits, and having a thrive buddy, who can help me when I'm particularly tempted.

DM: Okay. Those are some really good strategies. Now, if you could consolidate... I mean, your book is awesome. Anyone who's interested in more details, it's available on Amazon. I certainly recommend that you consider getting that. But if you can consolidate your recommendations to just a few points, maybe five or less, how would you do that so that people can understand what you're trying to teach in the book?

AH: First of all, I really appreciate the fact that you are focusing on practical steps. Because my hope is that *Thrive*, the book, is going to be a bridge between knowing what we should be doing and actually doing it rather than just agreeing with these things but not implementing them. Just a few other steps:

(1) We already mentioned sleep. I think that's a very important step.

(2) Meditation is the second important step, and not feeling overwhelmed. Just starting with five minutes, allowing the thoughts to come and go, and returning to the breath.

(3) Number three has to do with our mind. Very often, we have all these anxious thoughts about the future and judgmental thoughts about the past. What I recommend is that at the end of each day, if we can look at a particular thought or feeling that no longer serves us, drop it. It could be resentments, anger, or jealousy. Something that no longer serves our lives or anyone we love. Can you still hear me?

DM: Sure. Yes.

AH: (4) The fourth step that I would recommend is our own gratitude, like doing a gratitude list that focuses us on the blessings in our lives. Because every life includes a mixture of challenges and blessings, and our mind tends to focus on the challenges. If we can redirect our mind to focus on the blessings, I find that I feel much more joyful and much more filled with energy.

(5) The fifth step around giving is to really start with, again, baby steps about making personal connections with people who we come across every day that we might take for granted – it could be the cleaning crew in our office, the checkout clerk, the barista in the coffee shop – so that we could be more present and more connected with the rest of humanity and tap into our own empathy and compassion.

(6) And the last one, the sixth step, has to do with our sense of wonder. If we can avoid multitasking, you know. Multitasking is an illusion; it doesn't really exist. Scientists are telling us that it's actually task-switching and it's very stressful. If you can walk down the street, and really just walk without texting or talking on the phone, it just connects us with the moment. We may be able to notice the sunset, a flower, or a building. I mean, I know it happened to me. I was walking down a street in New York I've walked a thousand times. I looked at this building, and I said, "When did that go up?" And they say, "1890." I had passed by it I don't know how many times, and I hadn't notice it.

The final thing I want to say is you can start taking good care of ourselves as we think of our smartphones. We get alerts on our iPhones. We get like "20 percent of battery remaining," or "17 percent of battery remaining," and immediately we try to find a recharging shrine to charge our phone, so that nothing bad would happen to it. When I collapsed from exhaustion, I must had been below zero percent battery remaining, but I didn't even know it. Increasing our awareness of the state of our being and our mind is critical.

DM: Those are really great steps. I particularly appreciate the gratitude and the challenges one. I found personally that if you can integrate the two of them together, so that in your challenges, if you could find the kernel that really is going to make you a better person or improve your life dramatically and then turn that into gratitude... I mean, that can help you really get over that challenge and just turn the whole perspective on its head.

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AH: Which is really actually what historic philosophers believed. I quote Marcus Aurelius in the book. He was a historic philosopher and the emperor of Rome. He wrote something which is very similar to what you said: look for the hidden blessing in the challenge. Look for the hidden purpose that may not be obvious. But it's actually what will transform us and help us in our own evolution.

DM: That's terrific. Now, what's particularly impressive about your recommendation is that you're not just making them, but you're doing them. You're doing them in light of running a massive organization. I mean, you, by any perspective, have been enormously successful and are thriving at the highest level. I'm wondering if I could ask you a practical question with respect to how you handle electronic communication, specifically email.

I saw you give a presentation; I first learned about your book from watching your presentation at Google. I was kind of shocked to hear you share your private email. When we communicated, you responded like immediately, yet you still maintain and balance your life. How do you do that?

AH: I think what is very important for me is not to try and complete my emails by the end of the day. That used to be something that meant... Sometimes I would be up until the middle of the night answering

emails. It's also a very unsatisfying thing because it's like trying to bail water out of a leaky boat. You clear emails and then more keep coming in.

For me it's picking the time to do it. I actually like also doing it over weekends because I can lie in bed. I like doing work in bed over Saturday or Sunday, and piling up work, emails, and everything. But then I feel like I'm communicating with people. I actually love communicating with people who've heard me speak and who tell me their stories. I learn so much from people's stories.

That's how I learned how pervasive the dangers of burnout and the collective delusion that we have to burnout to succeed is. That's how I've also learned from people about how they thrive. We launched this campaign #HowIThrive because we want to share recipes of thriving. Email for me is a great way to communicate. It's like a research project. I learn from it. When I learn, I communicate that to our editors and we incorporate a lot of these teachings into our own editorial offerings all around the world.

You mentioned leading Huffington Post teams here. All I can say is that ever since I've been practicing what we've been discussing here, I think I've been a better leader. I've been able to see where the opportunities lie. Just to give you one example, three years ago, The Huffington Post was a purely domestic media company. Now we are in 11 countries because I saw very clearly that we had to grow globally. Out of our 92 million unique visitors, almost 50 percent are coming from outside the United States.

DM: That's terrific.

AH: This is just one small example of how, as a leader, the most important thing is to be clear about our direction and the vision, and make sure we execute accurately.

DM: Now, we all are given the limitation of 24-hour days, especially if you're taking another three hours out of that day to sleep. I'm wondering if you've found a useful strategy to maybe do an inventory of everything you're doing, seriously reflect and meditate on that, and then bail on or eliminate some of those tasks so that you can free up time to do these other activities. Was that a tool or an approach?

AH: Absolutely. I do regular life audits.

DM: Okay.

AH: I started with projects that I wanted to do. But I realized I didn't really have the time and they were not high enough on my priority list to invest the time in completing them. Just to give you an example (it may seem trivial but we all have these trivial projects on our list), I wanted to become a good skier because my children love to ski. I wanted to become a good skier to ski with them. And then I realized that really I was never going to invest the time to become a good skier. I'm still a lousy skier. You can complete a project by dropping it. I dropped it.

DM: Okay.

AH: Now when we go skiing, I sit by the fire, I drink hot chocolate, and I read a good book. There are many examples like that. Of course, we all have our own list. But it's important not to have incomplete projects even if we never do anything about them because they drain energy subconsciously, as you know.

DM: Now, one of the impressive elements of what you're speaking about is the fact that... It would be unimpressive if you were a man saying this. But you're not; you're a woman. You've accomplished so much at being a woman. Just being a woman in a business organization, of course, has its own limitations and challenges. I'm wondering if there's any particular advice you have for women, particularly maybe

the glass ceiling or anything. Obviously, all these recommendations still apply. But are there any specifics that you can direct toward them?

AH: Thank you for raising that. I think there is a specific recommendation. Because as you know, the data shows that women in stressful jobs are paying a particularly high price. We have a 40 percent greater risk of heart disease, and a 50 percent greater risk of diabetes because of the way we internalize stress and take things more personally.

I actually recommend in *Thrive* a third women's revolution. The first was giving us the vote. The second was giving us access to all jobs at the top of every field. It's still incomplete – there are a lot of glass ceilings still to be broken. But I don't think we're ever going to complete the second revolution if we don't launch the third, which is about changing the workplace, changing the way so many workplaces are fueled by burnout, exhaustion, and sleep deprivation because a lot of women end up leaving instead of staying in this environment. Forty-three percent of women leave after they have children. Only 40 percent of those will return full-time.

For the sake of everyone – women and men – at companies, we need to rethink and reimagine our workplaces. It's already happening. Already many companies – small, large, and medium-sized – in America are doing that, and around the world.

DM: Yes, indeed. You're an amazing role model for so many other women. I really want to congratulate you for all your success and your ability to really focus and integrate health into the equation, because I think that's part of it. If you're healthy, you can be successful. I mean, it certainly adds this sort of a stealth benefit that many people fail to fully appreciate. But you certainly do. Congratulations again on all your success and continued success, and for your leadership in this important area.

AH: Thank you so much. Thank you so much for having me on the show.

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