



THRIVING *under* PRESSURE

A potent combination of overwork and exhaustion forced Arianna Huffington, one of the world's most influential women, to rethink her life and her approach to pursuing work-life balance.

By Sarah Linney

When Arianna Huffington woke up in a pool of blood on the floor of her home office on 6 April 2007, she knew that she had to make some drastic changes. Collapsing from exhaustion and lack of sleep, Arianna had hit the corner of her desk, cutting her eye and breaking her cheekbone.

In the weeks that followed as she went through a brain MRI, CAT scan, and echocardiogram to discover if there were any underlying medical problems, it quickly became apparent that her hectic lifestyle and work commitments had caused her collapse.

In 2007, Arianna had been named by *Time* as one of the world's most influential people and was working single-mindedly on growing and developing *The Huffington Post*. Two years after establishing the groundbreaking news and blog site with Kenneth Lerer and becoming its editor-in-chief, Arianna was seeing phenomenal growth, with *The Huffington Post* quickly becoming one of the most widely read, linked-to, and frequently cited media brands on the internet.

Despite this amazing success, Arianna was overworked and exhausted, working 18-hour days, seven days a week as she built the business, expanded its coverage, and brought in investors. Her

collapse in 2007 proved to be a desperately needed wake-up call that forced Arianna to rethink her work and life choices and implement daily practices to help her lead a more fulfilling life.

Speaking exclusively to *The CEO Magazine*, Arianna states that it's a hard-won lesson that many CEOs must discover for themselves. "Unfortunately, for me and for many people—including business leaders—it takes a painful wake-up call to alert us to the importance of redefining success. That's because for far too long we've been operating under the collective delusion that burning out is the necessary price for accomplishment and success. This couldn't be less true. >



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“For me, the change came when I understood that not only is there no trade-off between living a well-rounded life and high performance, but performance is actually improved when our lives include time for wellbeing, wisdom, wonder, and giving.”

- Arianna Huffington

“Plenty of CEOs have arrived at the same conclusion. Mark Benioff, the CEO of salesforce.com, confessed that he has been meditating for 25 years; Ray Dalio, the CEO of Bridgewater, for more than 40 years. For Mark Bertolini, the CEO of Aetna, it was a skiing accident that left him with a broken neck and eventually led him to the rejuvenating practices of yoga and meditation.”

This transformative experience led Arianna to write her latest book, *Thrive: The Third Metric to Redefining Success and Creating a Life of Well-Being, Wisdom, and Wonder*, which was published by Crown, a division of Random House, in March 2014 and debuted at number one on the *New York Times* Bestseller list.

In *Thrive*, Arianna re-examines and redefines what it means to be successful in today’s world and

details how to strive for work-life balance in an environment where overwork and a constant connection to the office is not only common but expected. Arianna says that everyone has a role to play, both within their own lives and within wider society, in reshaping the modern workforce and its priorities.

“Over time, our society’s notion of success has been reduced to money and power. In fact, at this point, success, money, and power have practically become synonymous in the minds of many. This idea of success can work—or at least appear to work—in the short term. But over the long term, money and power by themselves are like a two-legged stool; you can balance on them for a while, but eventually you’re going to topple over. More and more people, very successful people, are toppling over.

“To live the lives we truly want and deserve, and not just the lives we settle for, we need a third metric, a third measure of success that goes beyond the two metrics of money and power, and consists of four pillars: wellbeing, wisdom, wonder, and giving.”

“This translates to the modern-day executive because we are living in a time when it can be exceedingly difficult for leaders to tap into their own wisdom, creativity, and intuition. For example, going offline can often become harder and harder as you advance up the career ladder.

“Increased power also brings with it the danger of losing the very qualities that are most essential to leadership. One study found that increased power lowers an executive’s ability to be empathic. Another study on leadership and perspective found that power makes us ‘prone to dismiss’ or misunderstand others’ viewpoints. Therefore, executives—and their companies—can especially benefit from a redefinition of success.”

As the chair, president, and editor-in-chief of the Huffington Post Media Group, a nationally syndicated columnist, and author of 14 books, Arianna understands this problem well. In addition to these roles, Arianna also serves on several boards, including *The Huffington Post’s* partners in Spain, the newspaper *EL PAÍS* and its parent company, PRISA; Onex; The Center for Public Integrity; and the Committee to Protect Journalists.

These and other commitments keep Arianna constantly busy. However, with her new approach to work-life balance and focus on the third metric of success, she has carved a fulfilling and balanced life for herself. Through *Thrive* and her own experiences, Arianna states that there would be one piece of advice that she would urge all Australian CEOs to incorporate within their own lives.

“Get more sleep! The most basic shift we can make in redefining success in our lives has to do with our strained relationship to sleep. And that includes CEOs. As Dr Michael Roizen, chief wellness officer of the Cleveland Clinic, put it, ‘Sleep is the most underrated health habit. Most of us fail to make good use of such an invaluable part of our lives. In fact, we deliberately do just the opposite.

“We think, mistakenly, that success is the result of the amount of time we put in at work, instead of the quality of time we put in. Sleep, or how little of it we need, has become a symbol of our prowess. We make a fetish of not getting enough sleep, and we boast about how little sleep we get. I once had dinner with a man who bragged to me that he’d gotten only four hours of sleep the night before. I resisted the temptation to tell him that the dinner would have been a lot more interesting if he had gotten five!”

These and other lessons are detailed in Arianna’s book *Thrive*, which focuses on how people can transform the way they approach work and life, under the key areas of wellbeing, wisdom, wonder, and giving. And it’s something that other businesses are waking up to as well.

Earlier this year, Arianna wrote a blog post titled ‘Big Business Finally Learns that Wellness is Good Business’, where she points to countless examples of corporations recognising the need for a more holistic approach to work. In the post, Arianna states that “big business is finally realising that the health of their employees and the health of their bottom line are inseparable.”

For example, American clothing retailer L.L. Bean is encouraging its employees to create their own wellness initiatives, and, if they can get at least 15 other employees to



sign up, then the company will fund the program. Meanwhile, at San Francisco-based task management company Asana, employees can create their own customised workstations and enjoy two organic meals a day, yoga, massages, and life coaching.

In the custom-made, quirky world of e-commerce website Etsy, workers receive a stipend to use on their workstations, many of which are handmade in Etsy’s woodshop. The company also provides employees with a breathing room where employees can switch off their devices and relax on meditation cushions. Furthermore, the Etsy School allows employees to share their passions with their colleagues, whether it’s juggling, meditation, screen-printing, or even ‘therapeutic doodling’.

Recent studies reflect this significant shift, with a survey from Fidelity Investments demonstrating that wellness participation is up nearly 60 per cent from 2009, while almost 90 per cent of employers provide some kind of incentive for wellness participation. Additionally, a Harvard study reported that for each dollar spent on wellness programs, large companies got back \$3.27 in reduced health costs, and \$2.73 in costs connected to absenteeism.

Arianna is leading this charge, with *The Huffington Post* boasting two nap rooms in its New York newsroom; meditation, breathing,

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and yoga classes in its New York offices; and dedicated meditation, yoga, and nap rooms in its Washington DC offices. She stresses to all employees that no-one is expected to check work email and respond after hours or over the weekend; she encourages all staff to take their three weeks of vacation time; and she urges people to enjoy lunch away from their desks.

As one of *Time’s* 100 most influential people, Arianna is trying to use her global influence and presence to bring about substantial change in the media landscape and business world. “Bringing together people from different parts of my life and facilitating interesting conversations has always been part of my Greek DNA,” explains Arianna. “So from the beginning, the whole point of *The Huffington Post* was to take the sorts of conversations found at water coolers and around dinner tables—about politics, art, books, and food—and open them up and bring them online.

“Today, that founding vision remains the same, but we have many more tools at our disposal to further the conversation. We strive every day to grow and seize new opportunities, but at the same time stay true to our DNA, rooted in our core values of engagement, starting conversations, and helping people live the lives they want, not the lives they settle for.

“We are also continuing our international expansion: nearly 50 per cent of our traffic now comes from outside the United States. We’re now in 11 countries, with >





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India, the Middle East, and Greece coming next.”

In addition to *Time’s* acknowledgement, Arianna was also named on *Forbes’* 100 Most Powerful Women list. She says Australian female executives need to forge their own path in the male-dominated boardroom. “There are still many institutional barriers to women succeeding in the still male-dominated boardroom, and we need to accelerate removing them. But also it’s important for all of us women to live our lives in our own unique way, not as carbon copies of men—briefcase-carrying, pinstripe-wearing career machines.

“Our current notion of success—in which we drive ourselves into the ground, if not the grave, in which working to the point of exhaustion and burnout is considered a badge of honour—was put in place by men, in a workplace culture dominated by men.”

Challenging, questioning, and debating the status quo has been a hallmark of Arianna’s approach as she’s traversed the fields of academia, business, politics, publishing, and media. Born in

Athens, Greece, in 1950, Arianna Stassinopoulos moved to England at the age of 16 and earned her master’s degree in economics at the University of Cambridge. At 21, she became president of the famed debating society The Cambridge Union.

Living in London, Arianna pursued a career in writing. In 1974, she published her first book, *The Female Woman*, which looks at and critiques certain trends in womens liberation movements. In 1980, she published the politically oriented work *After Reason*, and subsequently moved to the United States.

Throughout the 1980s, Arianna published three books: an acclaimed biography of one of the world’s opera greats, *Maria Callas: The Woman behind the Legend*; *The Gods of Greece*, which looked at the importance of ancient myths; and a biography of Picasso.

In 1986, Arianna wed Michael Huffington, a secretary within the US Department of Defense, and had two children. Michael Huffington earned a seat as a Republican in the US House of Representatives between 1993 and

1995. Arianna assisted him in his subsequent, unsuccessful Senate campaign, and the two divorced in 1997.

As a Republican, Arianna was initially known for her conservative political views and commentary, but as the years went by she began to shift towards more left-leaning platforms, including ecological activism and corporate reform. Arianna states that this shift was a natural one for her.

“It wasn’t the goals that I thought our society should be striving toward that changed, but my thinking about how best to reach them. At a certain point, my understanding of the role of government changed. I had once believed that the private sector could address the major issues our country was facing—income inequality, for example, and the need to care for those left out of America’s prosperity. But I saw firsthand that this wasn’t enough. It became clear to me that we could never really address some of our society’s most fundamental problems without the raw power and agenda-setting potential of government appropriations.

“The biggest effect of this change can be seen on *The Huffington Post*, where we’re committed to looking beyond the outdated dichotomy of left versus right. There is nothing left-wing or right-wing about caring about one’s fellow citizens who are unemployed, about the problems facing families and the middle class, or any of the other multiple crises affecting people around the world.”

Her change in viewpoint can be seen in her *New York Times* bestseller *Pigs at the Trough: How Corporate Greed and Political Corruption are Undermining America*, which was released in 2003. That same year, she ran against Republican Arnold Schwarzenegger for the California governorship on an independent ticket. However, she withdrew from campaigning to throw her support behind thwarting the



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recall vote aimed at Governor Gray Davis.

This all led to the establishment of *The Huffington Post* with American businessman and media executive Kenneth Lerer. The popular site was initially known for its blogging, liberal punditry, and news aggregation, and later tackling a wide range of categories and interests, from politics to sports, business, and popular culture. In 2008, *The Observer* ranked *The Huffington Post* as the most powerful blog in the world.

This August, *The Huffington Post* reached 115 million global unique visitors, the first time the site has surpassed 100 million unique visitors on comScore and making it the number one news site in the United States.

August also marked the fourth consecutive month that *The Huffington Post* was recognised as the largest publisher on Facebook, with more than double the social actions of the second-largest publisher.

In a blog post titled ‘100 Million Thank-Yous to HuffPosters Around the World’, Arianna released these figures and expressed her gratitude to everyone within *The Huffington Post* team and community who contributed to its success.

“I have to say that this news made me a lot more emotional than a comScore stat usually does. It’s the same feeling I get when I walk into our newsroom and see how a group of five has become a team of hundreds, or when I visit

one of our 11 flourishing international editions.

“It’s a lump-in-the-throat combination of gratitude; amazement; satisfaction at what we’ve accomplished; surprise at how fast it all happened; nostalgia for the early days when we celebrated every small spike in traffic; and delight in knowing that, without question, our best days still lie ahead.”

Arianna and her team will ensure that these days are filled with innovation and evolution as *The Huffington Post* continues to set the benchmark for the media industry. While this dedication to the success and development of the group is vital, Arianna is determined to inject a bit of wellbeing, wisdom, wonder, and giving into the lives of everyone she touches and collaborates with across the globe. ●

