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The Journey to Burnout and Back

Newton Cheng



In November 2021, I was scheduled to give a keynote at a Google health and wellbeing conference to an audience of industry and thought leaders from both within and beyond Google. This was a rare opportunity to share my own thought leadership, and gain visibility with so many professionals that I deeply respect. My plan was to talk about the amazing opportunities at the intersection of Google technology and health and wellbeing, and the great efforts we had made to support our employees during the pandemic. I spent hours crafting, refining, and rehearsing my talk. It had to be perfect.

One week before the keynote, I had completed my final draft. It was well-crafted, polished, and insightful.

It also felt completely hollow.

While I fully believed every word I had planned on saying, I could feel none of the optimism, positivity, or hope. The truth is that I had been suffering with depression and anxiety throughout most of the pandemic. I was burned out, exhausted, and likely to go on mental health leave. My therapist would put on the leave paperwork that I was overworked, and showing major symptoms of depression and anxiety.

The more honest thing to say is that I was ashamed of how I was showing up as a husband and father, and going on leave was an act of desperation. And I knew so many others were suffering just like me.

I have worked in the field of health and wellbeing for 18 years. I have seen the “state of the art” in worksite wellness as part of my role as Director of Health + Performance at Google. I have trained to become a world champion competitive powerlifter and one of the strongest pound-for-pound masters athletes in the world. Via these two incredibly unique roles paired with my personal passion for the topic, I have significant expertise and incredibly unique personal experience in health and wellbeing and its intersections with both personal and team performance.

Despite all of that, I still burned out and went on mental health leave on January 18, 2022.

Since my return to work, I’ve been openly sharing my mental health story in order to contribute to the larger conversation on mental health in the workplace. While there’s an increasingly robust body of research on this topic, sharing my story and connecting with audiences has given me a hidden view of the human suffering underneath the data.

In this article, I’ll share key insights I’ve gleaned as I’ve shared my mental health story throughout the last year combined with relevant external research. Next, I’ll propose simple steps based on my insights that you can take to improve mental health within your own team or organization. Finally, I’ll propose where we can go from here to address our shared struggles as individuals as well as leaders in the workplace.

My hope is that this article might help some leaders bring more vulnerability and humanity into the workplace at a time when it is so sorely needed. More importantly, I hope my openness about my own struggles will help those who are suffering feel less alone, and enable them to take better care of themselves and their loved ones.

Insights From Sharing my Mental Health Story

I returned to work in June 2022 after 2 months of leave that was spent doing therapy, journaling, and self-reflection. I had to take a hard look at myself, consider how I wanted to change, and decide what I was going to commit to in order to become a better husband, father, and leader. This was followed by 2.5 months of new parent leave where I received a crash course in applying everything I had just committed to.

Just before my return, in May 2022 I had the opportunity to tell my mental health story on Ross Leppala's "Project Unchained" podcast which is focused on men's mental health.¹ I was socialized both culturally and professionally to not be open about my personal struggles, to suppress negative feelings, and to overcome all challenges with "mental toughness and grit". However, it was clear that more of us (especially leaders in the workplace) needed to model vulnerability. So I joined Ross for a 2 hour interview where I spoke as openly and honestly as I could about my struggles with mental health, and my related failings as a husband, father, and leader.

It simultaneously felt culturally wrong and morally right to be sharing so openly.

When the podcast episode was released, I reluctantly posted it to social media via Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn. While there was a very positive response on Facebook and Instagram, the largest response was by far with my professional network on LinkedIn where my post received roughly 2000% more engagement than my previous posts.

Seeing the immense energy for this conversation, I've put aside my personal discomfort and continued telling my story and have observed what audiences shared back to me.

Here's what I've learned from sharing my mental health story via 7 months of presentations, interviews, and posts on LinkedIn.

First, there is far more suffering than we can see. A survey conducted by McKinsey reports that 59% of the global workforce reports "at least one mental health challenge".² A poll of 20000 people in 11 countries conducted by Microsoft found that "almost 48% of employees and 53% of managers said they were burned out at work."³ Deloitte found that 68% of employees and 81% of the C-Suite say that improving their wellbeing is more important than advancing their career.⁴

This implies that 1 out of 2 of us are suffering (if not more). However, if you were to look around your team or workplace, what you see might not match the data.

Sharing my story has helped me see what lies beneath the surface. Each time I give a presentation, I receive numerous private messages from individuals saying "Thank you for saying that. I'm suffering too." The people who reach out are junior to me. They are my peers. They are people above me in the organization. They are both within and beyond Google. They are spouses and parents, sons and daughters.

They are desperate for relief, but terrified of what might happen to their careers if they shared openly about their struggles, much less take mental health leave. The amount of suffering that gets revealed is overwhelming, but it all stays hidden due to stigma.

Second, as I share my story, I've learned that there is no magic in my words. All the magic lies in the open display of vulnerability. As professor and author Brene Brown says: "Vulnerability is the birthplace of connection and the path to the feeling of worthiness." And why is connection essential to this conversation?

Even before the pandemic, the US Surgeon General Vivek Murthy was using the term "the loneliness epidemic" to bring attention to the dramatic rise in loneliness across the world. We've grown increasingly disconnected and socially isolated during an ever growing mental health crisis, while social support is one of the most powerful factors in improving mental health. Members of my audiences often describe a deep feeling of loneliness that comes with their struggles.

Conversely, what I've found is that vulnerably sharing my story enables deeper connection with those audience members. That deeper

connection enables us to have harder conversations on topics such as mental health, burnout, loneliness, etc. Those deeper conversations are what enable the hope for change. And for many, that feels like a lifeline.

Finally, while I stated that there is no magic in the words of my story, the story itself serves a very important purpose: it is a mirror for others to self-reflect, and to see parts of themselves that they had painfully avoided.

As film director Jean-Luc Godard said: "Sometimes reality is too complex. Stories give it form."

Some who reached out to me after sharing my story were parents who realized they were also "ashamed" of how they were showing up for their families.

Others were people leaders at work who could relate to the crushing responsibility of supporting the mental health of their teams, but feeling they couldn't let anyone know they needed help as well.

People of color, especially those from the AAPI community, expressed how they also struggled with the dual stigmas of their workplace and their cultural upbringing, and expressed feelings of shame from both.

Hearing another leader that was "like them" speak openly about his struggles, and "name" hard feelings such as guilt, shame, and loneliness helped them to more deeply understand the hard reality of what they might be experiencing in their own lives.

And this deeper understanding led to connection, conversation, and hope.

So What can Leaders in the Workplace do?

When facing daunting and complex problems such as our struggles with mental health and burnout in the workplace, I go to the words of civil rights activist Arthur Ashe: "Start where you are, use what you have, do what you can."

First, we can all share more vulnerably. I am not suggesting you need to share as openly as I did, but that you "start where you are." Carole Robin is the author of the book "Connect" and previously taught the course "Interpersonal Dynamics" at Stanford Graduate School of Business. When experimenting with vulnerability, she suggests using "The 15% Rule".

Dr. Robin describes it as follows: "I want you to think of three concentric circles, the inner one, smallest one is my comfort zone where I can operate and feel perfectly safe, but I'm not taking any risk. And we urge people to take a 15 percent risk, which is the next ring around this central one. And that's why I'm not sharing everything. But I'm 15 percent out of my comfort zone and a little uncomfortable. Now, if this doesn't go well, it's probably not a disaster, but in all likelihood, it's going to go well. But it's only 15 percent."⁵

We can all stretch 15% beyond our comfort zones. And when we feel comfortable with that, we can stretch another 15%. And another after that, and so on.

In a forum of Google directors, I was about to say that a certain event made me "uncomfortable". At the last moment, I stretched another 15% and said something more honest: that it made me feel "sad". After that, I heard others use words like "scared", "terrified", and "overwhelmed". When you stretch, it gives others permission to stretch as well.

Second, we as leaders in the workplace are responsible not just for modeling vulnerability, but for creating an environment where it's

safe to be vulnerable. Even if you're not comfortable sharing, you can create space in meetings and forums for others to share. You can support those who model vulnerable sharing, and point to them as a model for leadership. And you can even "name" your own discomfort with sharing, which in itself is a display of vulnerability.

Early in the pandemic, my vice president was holding his team meeting. We were doing individual check-ins answering the prompt "how are you doing". He had created a safe and non-judgmental space for us to share. When it was my turn, I began to cry, and admitted that I was struggling as a husband and father. This was the first time I had cried in front of my coworkers, and many of them offered their support afterwards.

While it was only a few tears, showing this emotionality violated so much of my cultural upbringing, but it also let my coworkers know that I needed help. None of this would've happened without my vice president creating a safe environment for us.

All of this seems quite simple, but none of it can happen without some risk. Transformational change requires true leadership, and true leadership requires us to take risks for the common good. However, we can take small steps to mitigate risk both for ourselves as leaders, and for those around us in the workplace.

Where do we go From Here?

We won't solve our problems around mental health until we make change at the individual, team, organization and systemic levels. There is much work to do, and it will take time for change to happen. However, by applying the insights I've shared with you, we can start enabling a culture of vulnerability today and addressing the stigma around mental health for our team and organization. You can't fix something until you can talk openly about it.

As for me? After I saw the response to my original story, I committed to sharing my story wherever I'm invited to do so for at least 12 months. Initially, I was worried no one would care. It turns out that my fears were completely unfounded.

My speaking schedule is now booked into 2023, and I've received one million impressions on LinkedIn because there is a deep hunger for this discussion. I have now set the goal of reaching as many people as I can by sharing my mental health story 100 times via presentations and interviews, and aiming to receive 10 million impressions on LinkedIn. As I go through this journey, I will share what I learn via LinkedIn so that other business leaders can learn alongside me.

However, broader systemic change will take time, energy, and commitment from many different leaders across entire industries. We need your leadership.

While you consider what role you might play, I ask you to ponder the insights I offered you, and imagine what might be possible if we worked together.

What would it be like if:

We all remembered that there's far more suffering than we can see?

And in remembering that, we each stretched just 15% more to show a little more vulnerability?

And in that sharing, we actually "named" our struggles with guilt, shame, loneliness, etc. so that others might feel less alone in their own struggles?

If each of us took on those small challenges:

What new and deeper connections could we make with one another?

And therefore what hard conversations could we have that we can't have today?

And if we could talk about those hard things, what change might be possible: for you and your loved ones, for your team and organization, and for the world?

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