

# **At Your Best**

# What's in it for me? A simple guide to beat burnout and start thriving.

Do you feel like there's never enough time? You work hard all day, but accomplish little of what you wanted to. Meanwhile, your life goals slip further away. Busy is a built-in feature of life. Distractions are everywhere. You're probably overworked and overcommitted. But the thing is: this much stress takes a serious toll on your health. You deserve more. It's time to burn the script on stress and stop living at an unsustainable pace. It might not seem like it, but the truth is you do have time. You have the same amount as the most productive people on Earth. The question is how you spend it. In these blinks, you'll discover why simply managing your time isn't enough. Drawing on the author's experience recovering from burnout, you'll learn how to align your three core assets – time, energy, and priorities – to avoid burnout and start living at your best. In these blinks, you'll learn

how your focus and priorities get hijacked; why your energy zones are the key to success; and the fine art of saying no, nicely.

## Thriving is when your time, energy, and priorities are in sync.

In 2006, things appeared to be going exceptionally well for the author Carey Nieuwhof. Only in his late thirties, his organization had grown bigger than anyone expected. He was happily married to his high-school sweetheart, and they had two healthy sons. But inside, it was a different story. Nieuwhof describes the professional demands as almost unbearable, and it was taking a toll on his health and family life. He'd been sucked into a spiral of stress and began dreaming of abandoning everything for a hammock in Fiji. There had to be another way. As Nieuwhof began to recover from burnout, he discovered three key assets to building a life he didn't want to escape from. The key message here is: Thriving is when your time, energy, and priorities are in sync. In his quest to live at a pace he could sustain, he looked at what other top-performers did so well. What he found was that they didn't only manage their time. They also had a strategy to leverage their energy and priorities, so that all three worked for rather than against them. As soon as he brought these three key assets in sync, he not only recovered from professional burnout, but also found himself thriving physically, spiritually, and with his family. The first key asset is focused time. One reason you never have enough of it is a failure to focus your time. You probably treat all hours equally, but they're not. Your time gets eaten up by distractions and small tasks. The day gets away from you and you don't get around to the important things. While most people know they're competing against time, few think about their energy, the second key asset. When you fail to leverage your personal energy levels, you end up squandering your most productive and valuable time, leaving you with little energy for the important tasks. The third and final key asset is priorities. Your priorities can easily get hijacked when you allow others to determine what you get done each day, as they force you to focus on their priorities rather than your own. The key is learning to say no and feeling okay about it. In these blinks, we'll explore how to escape the stress spiral, and instead, live in its opposite – the thrive cycle – by aligning your time, energy, and priorities.

# **Focus your time by discovering your energy zones.**

It's 2:00 p.m. and you're trying to focus on your colleague's presentation but you practically need toothpicks to keep your eyelids open. Sound familiar? You may have noticed that your energy waxes and wanes throughout the day. This is perfectly normal. It's true even for doctors. Researchers found that the rate of adverse events among anesthesiologists, for example, increases as the day goes on. The important thing is to understand your energy cycle so you can get it working for you. The key message here is: Focus your time by discovering your energy zones. While everyone's energy cycle is different, if you're like most people, you have a good three to five hours each day when you're at your best. The author calls this your green zone and it's characterized by being focused, productive, and in good spirits. Despite having a limited number of high-energy hours, many people use their precious green zone randomly and non strategically for things like routine meetings or answering emails. Instead, this time should be used for your most important and demanding tasks. What about the other hours of the day? Your yellow zone is when you feel neither at your best nor worst. It's no wasteland: You can get many things done in the yellow zone, just not your best things. Your red zone is when you're at your lowest energy. You feel sluggish and struggle to pay attention. It's when you really have to force yourself to do just about anything. Over the next few days or weeks, take time to figure out your own energy cycle. Notice when you feel your best, ready to tackle anything. Or when all you want to do is nap. Use the green, yellow, and red zones to draw your own energy clock and the hours you spend in each zone. A few notes to help you out: Your green zone hours aren't necessarily consecutive. For example, the author's best hours are between 7:00 a.m. and 11:00 a.m. Then he has another spurt of energy around 1:00 p.m. There's also no need for perfection here. Things can change from day to day, just be as honest and accurate as possible. Lastly, don't overstretch your green zone, it'll only work against you. Three to five hours is normal and enough to live in the thrive cycle. In the next blink, we'll explore the kinds of tasks you should do in each zone.

## **Leverage your energy by doing your best work when you're at your best.**

You've identified your energy cycle, you know when you're in your green zone and feeling energized. You also know when the energy starts to curb into your yellow zones. And finally, you know which times of the day you're struggling through most tasks in your red zones. So, what should you actually do in each zone? The key message here is: Leverage your energy by doing your best work when you're at your best. Thriving is all about maximizing your green zone by completing the tasks that matter the most: Your gifts, your passion, and your impact. Your gifts include anything you find easy that others find difficult; the talents unique to you. For example, the author can speak in front of large audiences without much prep or notes, something that terrifies many. But don't settle for natural aptitude. Your green zone is also for developing those gifts. Use this time to improve on your skills, learn something new, and practice. Your passion is what you love to do. You're most likely passionate about what you're good at, but your passion can extend beyond your gifts. Look for activities that give you energy rather than drain you, that you find rewarding or can't live without. These may include hobbies

or spending time with loved ones. Lastly, focus your green zone on tasks that make the biggest difference. These are often the core responsibilities that bring the highest value to your organization. Or big life goals, such as writing a book. Ask yourself, What am I trying to accomplish with my life? Spend your green zone time on getting there. Once you've got the important tasks out of the way during your green zone, you're free to do less demanding work. Use your yellow zones for moderately important or medium-energy tasks. For example, you could hold meetings or send company-wide emails. Your red zones are for your least important tasks. You might want to tackle emails, complete routine administration, and exercise during these times. Importantly, remember your red zone isn't for critical decisions or delicate tasks like addressing interpersonal conflict. Now, take some time to chart your tasks and goals into each zone. Anything that's important, energizing, and you're good at goes in the green zone. What tasks can you leave for the yellow zones? And how can you best spend the low-energy hours of the red zones?

## **Realize your priorities by focusing on the right tasks and fighting distractions.**

You settle into your desk and open the calendar. To your complete surprise, it's completely empty. From 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. not a single appointment. This is perfect, you think. You can finally start that big project you've been dreaming about. Maybe write a new blog post. But then . . . there's a knock at the door. A colleague just needs five minutes, which turns into 20. Meanwhile, your inbox has filled up and an emergency afternoon meeting is called. When you finally return to your desk, the day is almost over. What happened? You worked all day but accomplished zero goals. The key message here is: Realize your priorities by focusing on the right tasks and fighting distractions. What happened is your priorities got hijacked by distractions and tasks you didn't prioritize. You spent the day reacting to everything that came your way. These seemingly urgent but unimportant tasks eat up your time if you let them. Minimizing distractions is essential. In our tech-driven culture, everything is competing for your attention. One study found that the average person touches their smartphone 2,617 times in a single day! No wonder you can't focus. So be sure to turn off those notifications. It also helps to do your best work in your best environment. You're like a plant that way, you need the right ecosystem to thrive. Set yourself up for success by creating a cozy and distraction-free workspace. In reality, there'll always be urgent and important tasks that take up your time, like taking a call from the boss or preparing for that presentation. But the key to maximizing your green zone is knowing the right tasks to prioritize. This is easier said than done, as anyone who's lost an entire day knows. A helpful strategy is to focus on high-yield activities. Italian economist Vilfredo Pareto observed that 20 percent of effort often yields 80 percent of results. The author realized that a few core priorities, like delivering great content and fostering a healthy work culture, drive his organization's value. Those important but nonurgent activities are exactly what help you meet goals, make an impact, and put you in the thrive cycle. Yet they're so easy to push to the bottom of your to-do list. That's because the consequences for skipping them are often minimal. But the benefits you experience by making space each day for your priorities pay off exponentially.

# **Prioritize the right relationships and learn to say no.**

As a child, the author spent a lot of time at his grandma's. Every day at ten o'clock, her friend Nancy called. Grandma always picked up, but reluctantly because Nancy could talk for hours. Grandma never figured out a polite way to cut the call short, sometimes soliciting her grandson's help to save her instead. You've learned that all the wrong things usually want your attention, hijacking your focus and priorities. But what about people? Relationships are important and you also don't want to be mean. The key message here is: Prioritize the right relationships and learn to say no. It's sadly true that the people who want your time are rarely the ones who should get it. At work, it's underperformers who don't seem to want to improve, or draining people who pull you into their drama. Meanwhile, the people most deserving of your time rarely ask for it. Remember Pareto's principle from the last blink? It's also relevant here. Invest in your best: Spend 80 percent of your time with your top performers, the people who energize you, and the people you care about most. The reality is, if you don't prioritize who you invest your time in, others will decide for you. British anthropologist Robin Dunbar theorized that there's a ceiling on the number of meaningful relationships humans can cultivate. Just how many? Well, picture three concentric circles. Your three to five deepest friendships are in the center. These are people you connect with once per week. The second circle includes 12 to 15 people in your sympathy group who you connect with, say, once per month. In the outermost circle is your extended network. Most people have the capacity for about 150 people there, roughly the size of ancient human villages. Dunbar's framework helps demonstrate that you don't need to treat all people in your life the same because your capacity for different relationships is limited. Still, navigating the demands for your time is part of life. It's important to have a clear strategy for saying no, or you will default to yes. Try to say no in a gentle way, so you don't burn bridges and hurt feelings. For example, tell people you'd love to meet with them, which is likely true; express empathy that you can't, but be firm; redirect them to another person or resource for help; and lastly, express gratitude for thinking of you and reaching out.

## **Life happens. Focus on what you can control and recalibrate when needed.**

A few years ago the author bought a new SUV and in no time he'd racked up over 300,000 miles. It was still in great shape and people kept asking how he got such great mileage out of it. But there was no great mystery: he simply always took it in for the recommended service. Fixing something before it breaks is often easier and less costly than after it breaks. We all know that stress is part of life. So is change. And both stress and change can threaten to pull you back into a spiral of stress. So let's explore some strategies to maintain thriving and prevent breakdown. The key message is: Life happens. Focus on what you can control and recalibrate when needed. The first strategy is to schedule all your priorities, including time with your family. That's because a blank space on your calendar can be a trap. When the author was at a board meeting, for example, he found himself saying yes to a Saturday barbecue because his schedule was clear. Keep in mind that the week will never turn out perfectly as planned - and that's okay. Don't aim for perfection. But scheduling all your priorities helps keep you on

track. That said, many people feel they have no control over their calendars. You might be thinking that these strategies are easy to implement if you're the boss, but the reality is that some jobs have very little flexibility. If you've really looked at your calendar honestly and can't find wiggle room, you can try having a conversation with your boss to see if anything can change. For example, you could adjust your start time to better suit your green zone. Even if you don't have much control over the 40 hours you work each week, there are still 128 hours that are completely yours. Of course, homelife can be exceedingly busy, especially at certain life stages like raising young children, caring for an ailing parent, or dealing with health issues. Sometimes your approach may need a reboot to match your life stage. For example, if a baby is on the way then it may not be the right time to start an ambitious project or try losing 20 pounds. If ever you feel thrown off your thrive cycle, track how you're actually spending your time. Have your zones changed? What's wasting your time? How have priorities shifted? It's best to embrace change, because it's bound to happen eventually.

## Final summary

The key message in these blinks is: Getting sucked into the spiral of stress and busyness of modern life is by no means inevitable. Instead, discover your energy zones and get them working for you. Do your best work when you're at your best by prioritizing that time for deep focus on the activities and people that matter most. When you work with your energy cycle, focus your time, and stop letting your priorities get hijacked, you can begin to thrive in all areas of life. And here's some more actionable advice: Make categorical decisions. An easy way to win back time is by spending less of it on decisions. Categorical decisions allow you to make one choice that eliminates dozens of others. For instance, in your work life you could agree only to meet as a team at certain stages of a project to reduce time spent in meetings, or only to work with clients from a certain sector. In your personal life you could make a categorical decision to choose three charities to support each year, taking the pressure off you when someone asks for a donation. Once you've agreed on categories, stick with them, and only make exceptions when absolutely necessary.