

Episode 55: I'm burnt out, but I keep pushing, with Tatiana Poliakova & Antonia Kirkby

Mandy: Has anyone ever told you that you should slow down, that you're killing yourself at work? It doesn't help, doesn't it? It reminds me of those in your face notifications on cigarette packages, "Smoking kills, quit now." I just wonder how effective those actually are. I have never been a smoker, but thinking back to my investment banking days, I was never deterred by anybody telling me to slow down.

I had this peculiar sense of, "yeah, but I'm different. It won't happen to me. I've felt stressed before and I've always bounced back", which is a kind of arrogance towards your body really. The stress and the pressure get normalized because everybody around you is also stressed and pressured and hanging by a thread, so it just feels like this is what life is. I remember when I ultimately did burnout, I felt kind of shocked because somehow I equated burnout with losing my passion for work or my mojo disappearing, but that didn't happen. So was this really burnout or did I just need a yoga class and a massage and some green juice?

The World Health Organization defines burnout as an occupational phenomena. It's not a medical condition according to the WHO. It's a syndrome characterized by three dimensions, number one - chronic exhaustion, number two is this chronic cynicism or loss of empathy in distancing oneself from others, and number three, and now you see my confusion, low professional efficiency. So I was reading an article in Forbes the other day, and there's a new profile emerging in this burnout space. There's still the exhaustion and the cynicism and the distancing and the loss of empathy, but for some people there's not a substantial drop in their professional efficiency.

So this new profile is called the engaged exhausted, and it refers to those who are still performing at the very highest levels, but they're hanging by a thread and have strong mixed feelings about their career. In short, the mojo is still there, but the wheels are starting to fall off and almost no one would know.

I'm in conversation today with two guests, you will meet consultant clinical neuropsychologist, Dr. Antonia Kirkby, who's going to explain why some people can become so highly identified with their jobs and keep going and going and going even when their bodies are screaming "Enough!"

You will also meet Tatiana Poliakova, ex- managing director and Head of Leverage Loan Sales at Nomura.

Tatiana was in her words, addicted to success in adrenaline. She was gunning to be the top of the sales rankings every day at work, but her body started sending up flares. The most painful thing though, oh, this gave me all the feels, was hearing that her young daughters were scared of her.

Tatiana: And when I had an honest conversation with my family, my girls admitted to me and they were at the time when I was leaving, 11 and 7, and they said, "Mom, when you came home from work, we used to run away."

Mandy: When you're in the intensity of all of it, it's so difficult to see clearly. You can't see an alternative way of thinking, you're in this tunnel. So even after hearing something like this from her kids, Tatiana, she kept pushing at work thinking, "I'm actually doing this for my girls, for my family", until her body ultimately took her down.

I pulled Dr. Kirkby in at various points of my conversation with Tatiana. And Dr. Kirkby explains what might be going on here for an overachiever like Tatiana who conflated her identity with her job. But before we dive in, welcome to Enough. I'm your host, Dr. Mandy Lehto, ex-investment banker, turned executive coach. This is a show for anybody whose life looks shiny on the outside, but inside you never feel quite good enough, no matter what you've achieved. These are the leadership conversations that nobody is having. The stuff

underneath the titles and the shiny achievements, like that self-doubting voice that swirls around in your head at 2:00 AM and in the morning, you push it all down, put your work face on and dive back in. I see you because I've been there too. I drop us into today's conversation where Tatiana is explaining who she was in her banking career. Ready? Let's go.

Tatiana: I was running a sales team in leverage loans, and those were like best in leverage loans. They meant a lot to me, so I was hugely respected, both by investment banking and I was listened to by hedge fund community and by fund management community.

So Nomura was, a leader in an innovative, big leverage finance deals. We're talking about ex-Lehman team that was bought by Nomura in Europe. So in fact, investment banking was still completely almost like ex-Lehman team. So those guys, when they had some innovative transaction, they would get me on board to see whether it would sell in the market because they knew I would intensely challenge them and ask them the right questions such that we will be prepared to move this position of our balance sheet into the market. So the job combined for me, the curiosity about learning about different businesses, leading a team, being present, and kind of on both sides of the market, making tons of money, and I was bloody good at it. I was mostly every day, well, if not completely top on the sales credits, but one of the top and do not on a trading floor sales credits, I arrive on daily basis, so that was one of my addictions actually. So even if I had a bad day at home or bad day on the way to work, it was enough for me to look at the table of the sales credits and think, "Everything is good Tatiana, you're still one of the top ones, or you're still completely at the top." I love this like adrenaline of closing the deals, and I completely defined myself by my more bonus, by my interactions with top management, by my position on the league table and that's what this Russian girl dreamed of, my 18 years old self was very, very proud.

Mandy: Thinking back to when I was a kid, my well-intentioned school teacher father would force me to recite times tables to the beat of his snapping fingers. Oh, I remember the shaming when I didn't win at a ski race or excel at a test, and that sinking feeling in my stomach and the hot blood rising in my cheeks when I couldn't always meet his high expectations.

So I'm curious how these early experiences start to shape how we learn to push through and override our own limitations in adulthood. Nervous system expert Jessica McGuire says that denying and suppressing and masking pain, ignoring our physiological needs and overriding our own limits, can be neurobiological adaptations from the past.

Meaning if you have this belief that you need to do or be more to be enough, you may frequently find that your stress arousal limits are at the point of overwhelm and exhaustion, huh? So this got me thinking about how the foundations for that engaged but exhausted profile, how that behavior gets laid down.

Why do some people and not others keep pushing and pushing and pushing beyond their limitations? I asked Dr. Antonia Kirkby to share her thoughts.

Dr. Kirkby: What we know is the way that our brain develops from birth is so influenced by the environment that we grow up in and the people that we come into contact with.

So we get into patterns of behaving in a particular way as a method of survival. So the number of people that I speak to who are people that are in high power positions, you know, they're in successful jobs, they've got to that point in a way because it's become a pattern that they've developed over time to survive.

So, I don't know what your background is, Mandy, but I know that lots of people may have backgrounds where there's been a lot placed on performance or achievement as a child. I personally have had that myself, and that's, you know, why I ended up in a position of burnout as well, because I got used to performing.

I got used to being somebody that was valued because of what I did rather than who I was. So a child will do anything that it can to maintain receiving that praise, that value, either at school, in the environment, from teachers or at home, from parents and the brain moulds to whatever the stimuli is. So as we get more praise, we'll do more of that particular activity and the, the brain will actually start to develop in a way that sticks and these patterns we then take into us, into adulthood and we end up believing in the same way.

We keep working, we keep trying to get that value, we like that people value us for the things that we do and who we are and the job that we go into. And so it becomes that perpetuating cycle, which can be quite okay for a long time. And I think a lot of us actually then learn to enjoy it and we get a buzz out of it and it becomes even more positively reinforcing and then we start to think, yeah, this is what I am, I am defined by my role and how people think about me in this way.

Mandy: I got curious if this was the case for Tatiana, what was it like growing up for her?

Tatiana: I was raised in a highly academic family, so in fact, my stepdad who raised me was in the leadership under of Russian Space program, and my mom was leading doctor for the Soviet government, so education was everything.

And you know what Mandy? Education didn't come easy to me when I was young, because now thinking back, I probably was dyslexic. So in particular, maths was always easy, but not Russian, that was actually very, very difficult. And I always felt that I'm disappointing. I'm disappointing, you know that I'm not smart enough.

Mandy: So there was this proving energy at play here. Tatiana shared with me offline that she spent decades still trying to prove herself. And it wasn't necessarily a conscious thing, but there was always this niggle in the back of her mind like, "Am I good enough? Am I smart enough?" And of course her performance still continued at the highest possible standard, she was an overachiever after all. So what were some of the signs that things were starting to decline?

Tatiana: First sign was I lost joy, right? So, this joy disappeared. So adrenaline was gone and I kind of started thinking things for what they were of, or started seeing things for what they were. And then I was listening more and more to various self-help books on the way to work.

I'm like, Tatiana, you have to find joy every day. You have to push yourself through, right? And I tried, I tried various techniques, right? But fundamentally I wasn't listening to my body because gradually the back pain started coming in. And, of course, I investigated all possible Physios and all possible Osteopaths.

And I remember we had Physio at work and I remember I went to this great physio at work and he said, "Oh my gosh, do you know your whole body is like tension, so there's nothing wrong but there is like everything - it's is if you are stuck in fight or flight or freeze response." And I was like, "Oh my gosh, that's crazy," and I kept on pushing through Mandy.

Mandy: Tatiana kept pushing through, it's what we do, right? Who else knows that one? It got so bad at one stage that when she couldn't get out of bed in the mornings because of her sore back, she started taking a handful of painkillers to get herself through the day. That bought her more time, but our bodies are constantly talking to us, which is what Alina Addison said from the previous episode. She was the ex-Head of Trading at Rothschild and her frozen shoulder, woo, that was talking to her, telling her it was time to move on. So my own body was talking to me too, but I didn't listen. I thought it was gonna pass.

So I had a series of very, very unpleasant digestive issues. I got this ugly oozing scabby rash around my nose and mouth, yeah, that's ultimately what got me to the doctor, vanity. There was the exhaustion, there was the insomnia, there was the snappiness. Dr. Kirkby, do we simply become desensitized to this worsening state?

I mean, all of us that we're talking about here are very smart people, and yet things are going downhill fast. And there's this normalization, this like, "Oh yeah, it's fine. It'll pass," what's going on there?

Dr. Kirkby: And that will go on and on and on until something comes along that stops us. And what I find frequently is, we don't stop us. Our body stops us, so we keep going and going and going with just little things bubbling along under the surface. Oh, you know, I'm feeling really tired, but I'll still carry on. I'm feeling, I can't think straight. I've got a bit of brain fog, but I'll carry on. You know, I'm feeling this sense of pressure, I know I should probably take a bit of time-out. People around me who care about me are saying I should take a bit of time out, but I'll carry on. So we just keep going against what our body is telling us and underneath the surface, our body is trying to tell us, okay, we actually need to stop. We need to get away from this thing that is making us feel unwell.

We are running out of energy, we are running out of the ability to function. We might be getting headaches, stomachy problems, dizziness, maybe our blood pressure is starting to do funny things, but we might have a few tests, but then we still carry on because the idea of losing that, feeling, that buzz as well, and all that praise and all of those things that keep us going in that role, feel too scary. That feels like a different kind of fear. So we just keep going until eventually we get to a point where either another life event comes along and knocks us off, so we might have something happen around us. Somebody might become ill in our lives, somebody that we know we might suffer a bereavement. We might get asked to do an extra thing, but there's often another thing that comes along that finally knocks us out of kilter.

So the pandemic, is a big one that I know added for so many people, for them to go over the edge when they were just about hanging in there. And at that point then often quite extreme things can happen. People can collapse, people can start fainting episodes, detachment, feeling very detached even though you're carrying on doing what you're doing but people [are saying] "Are you listening?!", they're talking to you and you're not taking things in, you are present, but you are not really present and obviously exhaustion can be a huge part of that as well. So it can show up differently for different people, but either way, it's the body and the nervous system saying "Stop!", and it will do it in any way it can to get you to listen.

Mandy: When you're used to your system feeling jacked all the time, it's amazing how many of these symptoms feel normal. When I noticed my engaged exhausted state, though I didn't know what to call it that at the time, I kept trying to do all the things that had propped me up in the past.

More caffeine, more high intensity interval training until one day I outright collapsed in the gym whilst boxing with my personal trainer. Dr. Kirkby, do we simply become desensitized to this worsening state?

Dr. Kirkby: We will experience that and we will learn that we can tolerate it because we have to keep tolerating it.

So we just keep going along that pathway and we get used to going along that pathway despite feeling nervous, palpitations, stomachy problems. But we learn to live with it so that it becomes part of, 'oh, it's a bit of an adrenaline rush'. It's like excitement - that fine line between what is excitement and what is anxiety - and so we just get used to experiencing it and it becomes part of daily experience getting up in the morning.

[inhales sharply] Let's go! You know that, that feeling, so we are experiencing the feelings, but we are normalizing them. Whereas another person who doesn't have that pressure, when they occasionally exposed to that pressure and they notice those feelings, they might go, "Ooh. This isn't okay. I don't like feeling like this. What's this about? Do I need to do anything about it?" Okay, so we will just get so used to feeling that we just keep going with it and it's not that we are not noticing it, it's that we've normalized it for ourselves as part of our experience.

And of course, by continuing to allow that to happen, what the nervous system then does is it learns that, 'okay, this person is not taking themselves away from this threat, so I'll do something more radical'.

And that's when it takes us into what is called the freeze response, so this is exactly what you've described with Collapsing Monday. It's where the nervous system goes, "Do you know what? This person is not doing anything to get me away from this threat. I'm just gonna take them outta the equation."

So I see this so often and I see it in all sorts of manifestations: collapsing, fainting, some people even have seizures, which, are not epileptic seizures, but it's where the body has gone into even more shutdown, and this can become a real problem for people that can go on for a very long time.

Mandy: So Tatiana resigned from her 23 year career in banking. I know from my own experience and also from many of the people who I coach, that this period after leaving a job that you feel defines you, wow, it can be utterly discombobulating.

Tatiana: When that happened, yeah I had grief. I had a lot of grief. I had a lot of, "Oh my gosh, who am I? What am I going to tell people? Wow. So I'm not managing director anymore, so what am I going to tell people? I don't think I'm as good of a mom as all those moms I know because I don't even like baking. I

mean, I have never baked anything for my children. So what does it mean? Have I failed, not only at being a managing director, I also failed at being a Mum. So then I found out once I was at home that's what was happening to my girls, that they know they were scared when I came home and I'm like, wow. So now what? What do I do now? Eventually I thought, "Okay, do you know what Tatiana, you have to find a really, really fast something else and become the best at it."

Mandy: Tatiana trained to become an executive coach and she used her old winning strategy from her banking days, what she now calls her 'toxic intensity' fueled by a fear of not being smart enough or good enough. Was she a good enough coach? Was she successful enough? Did she have the right kind of impressive clients?

I think back to trying to recover from my own burnout. I was using my overachiever and perfectionist tendencies trying to hack my own healing. "I'm gonna be the best meditator. I'm gonna drink so many kale smoothies and speed up my recovery so I can get back to the old me faster." Yeah, no prizes for guessing how that one worked out for me.

It was so hard letting go of the person that I thought I was. Dr. Kirkby, can you give us some thoughts on the challenges of being in the messy middle?

Dr. Kirkby: I think the huge problem with this process of moving away from those old trajectories, it creates something akin to a grief reaction, a huge sense of loss.

The day I left my job that I left over a couple of years ago to get to a place that I knew would be healthier for me. I knew it was all the right things to do to leave, but I can't, I don't think I've cried ever about anything so much. It was horrific, I just cried all day uncontrollably and it's akin to leaving, I always describe to people, like a dysfunctional relationship, you know you shouldn't be in it. Everyone is telling you it's not doing you any good but it just feels like the worst thing in the world to leave it because you are not in a place or a mindset to be able to think about the positives yet because you're not experiencing them.

There's also kind of like an element of withdrawal as well, so that buzz, that high, that adrenaline that all has to decompress and run over the system and become used to other things, creating a reaction for you. So my, my headline word would be 'kindness', that's where this has to start with treating yourself with kindness and accepting that being slow and considered and giving yourself that space and time is the only way to move forward from this.

It can't be resolved quickly. It can't be resolved by rushing around trying to fix it in, it really is a process and a journey and a commitment.

Mandy: Within a few months of leaving her investment banking career, Tatiana's back pain disappeared entirely. She reckons it had a lot to do with emotional pain that she was holding, and now she's in the deep work and in the journey of discovering who she is and understanding how absolutely enough she is, no hustle required. To close I ask her to share a brick of wisdom with us. What advice would she have for anybody who might be in the messy middle, or whose body might be talking to them or who might be in that place of feeling that you're still productive, but you're hanging by a thread? Here's what she says.

Tatiana: Start listening to our bodies, starting [to] pay attention to that, and also it, it is having those honest conversations with family and friends, right? So how would it look for me if I actually spoke properly to my girls then, right? If I ask them what it is like for you when I come home from work, that would be a scary conversation to have. And how powerful would it be, right?

Do you know in our car there is engine fuel indicator, there is water indicator when water runs out, who is our indicator in our life that tells us, do you know what, the water here right now running very low, the fuel is running low. What are the signs? I would say for any, any person in a position when they feel their body is stuck in fight, flight or freeze, and, uh, they have so much tension, definitely ask for help.

Speak to the coach, speak to the therapist, start getting to know yourself and that within you, there is this absolutely fantastic person and there is this child who wants to be loved. And who has tried to keep you safe. And now from, from the wisdom of where you are who'll laugh on this, your inner child?

Mandy: I love Tatiana's suggestion of showing our inner child some kindness and compassion. Also Dr. Kirby's suggestion that kindness is the key to this slow, non-linear healing work, that can be helpful to think about it from the perspective of your inner child, because if you are someone who's used to driving yourself relentlessly and just riding roughshod over all of your body's signals that we've been talking about in this episode, I found it much easier to imagine giving my inner child rest and healing and slowness and ice cream and all the other things that were really useful for me at the time.

I found it harder to do it for Mandy and easier to do it for my child self. I even put a picture of her on my desk, my little child self. If you want to learn more about the engaged, exhausted profile that we were talking about today, if you're the person who's still passionate and delivering high quality work, but you've got mixed feelings and you're super stressed, that Forbes article is linked in the show notes.

There, you will also find links to Tatiana, Dr. Kirkby and Jessica McGuire all mentioned in the show. Did someone come to mind as you were listening to this episode and you think, oh, they really need to hear this. Thank you so much in advance for sharing. It really helps to get this show in people's earphones around the world, and so do your reviews on Spotify and Apple Podcasts, so thank you for keeping those coming.

They help immensely. I'm so grateful that you're a listener here. Let's do this all again in two weeks.