

Episode 102: Why Some High Achievers Don't Burn Out, with Nick Petrie

Mandy: It's 10:00pm on a Tuesday night, and you're not relaxing. You're trying to recover. The laptop is on your knees. You're clearing emails that you couldn't respond to this afternoon because you were in mind-numbing back-to-back meetings. We're not sure how many of them were actually effective. There's a Sleepytime tea going cold beside you because somebody told you that it helps, and underneath all of the stuff going around in your head, there's a mantra, "I just need to get through to the summer holidays. Then, for absolutely sure, I will chill." Uh-huh. Maybe you've decided that this is just the way it is. This stress and constant overwhelm are the price of having a big job and the lifestyle that it gives, and when things get heavy at work, and they do, you reach for the thing that has never once failed you, head down, focus, work harder.

Then along comes my guest today with the most inconvenient idea I've heard in ages, that the exact thing that built the first half of your career and made you incredibly successful, the drive, always saying yes, never dropping a ball, and when in doubt, working harder, are the very things dismantling you in the second half of your career, and yet some people don't burn out.

They're not necessarily the tougher ones or the luckier ones or some glittery unicorn that got a memo that you didn't. Most of them have hit a wall hard. They just did the one thing that the rest of us are allergic to. Instead of running the broken formula harder and hoping for the best this time, they learned.

They reflected. They ditched it and built a different way of being successful from the ground up. Yeah, that's why I thought you'd be interested in this conversation. So for those of you who are new, I'm your host, Dr. Mandy Leto, and this is Enough, the podcast, which is not, so we're clear, the sort of show that hands you a breathing exercise and wishes you well.

We go under the floorboards of the impressive life, the proving, the over-functioning, the inner critic that never clocks off, and the question that nobody successful likes to say out loud, "Am I enough yet?" Today my guest is Nick Petrie, who has spent years studying the people who carry brutal pressure and somehow manage to stay well, surgeons, Navy SEALs, chief execs.

But I don't just trust Nick because of his research. I trust him because he's been living an unthinkable version of this himself. In his 20s, doctors found cancer, and it's come back multiple times, where it's now taken up residence in his liver. 20 years on, Nick still gets a scan every year and waits to find out if this is the year that the news changes.

What Nick has worked out in that waiting, the thing this whole conversation pivots on today, is that even living with something like incurable cancer, the stress was something he could learn to set down. And here's the part I love most about our conversation. None of what Nick has learned is about optimizing yourself to the hilt, at least not in the bigger picture. It's not a slicker set of hacks to bolt onto a life that's already running on fumes. It's a different way of working, and underneath that, honestly, a different way of inhabiting your own life. So by the end of this conversation, you'll have what they have. The pressure, it turns out, was never the thing breaking you.

The stress is a different beast entirely, and that might just be optional. Let's get into it with Nick. If we think about the typical listener of this show, who will be somebody who is probably an overachiever. They will have lots of balls that they're juggling in the air. They will be answering emails in the evenings, probably for several hours. They will be doing work that they weren't able to accomplish during the day.

They'll work on weekends. Again, that's that spillover effect. And they're just about catching up, and they're in those back-to-back meetings Monday to Friday, kinda holding on by their fingernails. But also their system, Nick, has become normalized to this, so it just feels like this is the way that it is.

Nick: Yeah. Yeah.

Mandy: From the outside, this person looks like an incredibly high achiever, and they are. Inside, their sock is slipping down inside the shoe, so to speak. So they're probably circling the drain of burnout, and they may not be aware of it because they're so accustomed to this perpetual state of exhaustion or this pace, and nobody around them would recognize it because they mask it so well.

What is this person struggling with? You have studied over 1,000 high achievers. We'll get into actually what your Thrivers group looks like in just a moment, but let's sit with this person for a moment. What are you seeing with this particular individual that I've just described?

Nick: Well, when we interviewed them, uh, we interviewed a lot of different people to see what their stories were and what the common patterns were.

And because I, at the time when we were researching this, would read a lot of stuff saying, "Burnout is caused by," and there would be one factor, and then there would be one solution that followed it. But when we interviewed people, we found it was actually quite a lot of different factors for different people.

But probably the underlying factor for, for most people, at least one of them, one of their combo we would call them, was to do with early beliefs they had picked up at some point, which at the time made a lot of sense. But it was 20 years later now, and this early thought, "I must get out of poverty. I must prove my worth. Um, I must be enough," something they picked up really early, um, was still driving them, but they couldn't even remember why or what it was. It was just so part of their being. And in, uh, gestalt, that's called an introject. An introject is something you swallow whole without examining it. And, and a lot of us, we swallowed something whole early on, and it's driving us later, and it probably needs to be re-examined

Mandy: This is fascinating.

This is where our work worlds collide work-wise.

Nick: Oh, it's right. Mm.

Mandy: Because I call these, to use Anne Lamott's brilliant phrase, I call these the hot little motors that are- Uh-huh ... burning beneath the outsize drive. And it just becomes so normalized. As you said, we've swallowed the thing whole, so we don't even realize it's there, and we just think, "This is how I must move through the world."

So what were some of those beliefs that you saw when you were working with these individuals?

Nick: Uh, it was, I must always say yes. Um, I will feel loved by... A, a lot of people who were sort of very successful in their career, when they looked back after they'd burned back, they burned out, they looked back at why they were doing it, and they said, "It was all for my father."

Like- Mm ... I wanted to prove my worthiness to my father, and even while I'm still working now, I picture his voice telling me things about what I need to do. And this person could finally see it, but it wasn't until they burned out and really examined it that they actually saw that's why I was driven by.

Other people who were, uh, very wealthy by any measure said, uh, after they burned out, realized their drive was to get out of poverty because when they were young, they were poor and they made a decision, "I will never be poor again." And even at the point where they were clearly not poor, they still didn't feel safe yet, so they just kept going and going. And it was because this old thing was unexamined, they couldn't even see why they had to keep going. So it's not till people pause and really have a good look, and sometimes they need some help to do that, an outsider who can see some stuff which is right there, that's when they start to finally get what is driving them.

Mandy: I think there's also a reticence to let go of these behaviors that have created this winning strategy.

So somebody might white-knuckle onto those behaviors that are actually slowly sinking the ship, and yet thinking, “I must continue to do this or else...” Dot, dot, dot. Did you find that too?

Nick: Yeah. It is one of the reasons.

And, like, the people who tended to burn out were very smart people. They were very driven people. They were great people. But one of the reasons it’s so tricky, we found, is because the things which make you successful in the first half of your career are the same things which burn you out in the second half.

So if you think about what makes you successful early on, it’s saying yes, it’s being super action-orientated, it is being really driven, having a belief, “I will never fail. If things get hard, I will just work harder. I will sacrifice myself in order to get the task done.” And if you do that, you get into-- You get good grades, you get into a good university, you get into a good company.

Now, now you’re in banking, s- finance, strategy, consulting, tech And companies love that attitude, so they will reward you. They will, they will recruit people with that mindset, then they will reward them, they will promote them. And so every- the formula just gets re-ingrained that this is the winning formula.

And the challenge is everything starts getting bigger. The jobs get bigger. You’ve got direct reports. Uh, now you might be married, um, now you might have some dependents. You’ve got some kids, you’ve got a mortgage, a house, your parents are getting older. They-- everything in life gets bigger, and the only thing that doesn’t change for people is the formula, which is when things get difficult, work harder and sacrifice yourself, never fail.

Mandy: Mm-hmm.

Nick: And that’s when people start getting in trouble.

Mandy: Mm-hmm. And I think because there’s this boiling the frog effect, because it feels so gradual, it’s harder to spot some of those signs. So there’s that piece. And here’s something that is even more sinister. There’s something about being able to hack it I can take it.

Just put more on my shoulders and I will hunker down and I will deliver it. So it’s almost working against being able to read those little fla- red flags coming up from the body. There’s almost like a pride in being able to override them. You’re smiling and nodding. Tell us more.

Nick: Well, yes, so the pride is coming from within.

You’re sending those messages. Yeah. But you look out around you and everyone else looks okay. Yep. They’re working hard and they’re staying late. And the culture, you know, people often join cultures which are just like this, where that behavior is modeled everywhere, everyone’s competing with each other, and that’s your natural way of being anyway.

So it feels quite nice to start with. You know, you’re finally with your people. Mm-hmm. The driven, the ambitious, the action-orientated, and it’s just as things get bigger, the formula only works to a certain point.

Mandy: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. So what are some of the signs that somebody might override, like little speed bumps at the beginning?

What are you s- what did you see from, from your thrivers?

Nick: Yes. This

Mandy: was- Or from the people who weren’t thriving, rather.

Nick: Right. Right, right. Th- this was an interesting one because quite a few people were asking this and saying, “Well, what are the three most common things I should be looking for?” Which is a very reasonable question.

And so when we interviewed the people who had b- burned out, w- one of the things they told us is their biggest regret is they didn’t see the early warning signs. They said, “Looking back now, it’s so obvious. You

know, it's so obvious." I- one woman said her hair was falling out and she just- Mm-hmm ... thought, "I've got alopecia," but it was the stress.

She had all these different things going on. And what was interesting, there were no universal warning signs. Everyone's warning signs were unique to them. And that's, uh, and the key was you've got to know your own ones, and most people didn't know what they were. And so for me, for example, I'm learning all this stuff, I'm doing all this research and people would say, "Well, Nick, what's your early warning signs?"

And I was like, "I don't know, to be honest." Same guy. "I'm going. I'm busy." Mm. So it took some reflection and what I worked out, it is when I, um, stop sleeping properly, disrupted sleep throughout the night. Two, I get irritable for no reason with people around me. And three, my wife notices this and she points it out to me. And that always used to annoy me, but now I've realized actually that's an early warning sign.

If she can see it and point it out, I'm actually burning too much. I'm pushing too hard. So what we do now is we have each person do that reflection to work out over time what are your three w- early warning signs, and then the second part is what are your if/thens? If you notice those three warning signs coming up, what are the three actions that you take that y- work uniquely well for you to recalibrate?

And those are different for everyone. So-

Mandy: Okay ...

Nick: three warning signs, three if/thens. That is what can quickly help people.

Mandy: So why don't you coach me on what those might be for me, for example? So we, we, instead of just talking about it, you're actually pulling it out and people can reflect for themselves.

Nick: Well, first, if you think about times in your life when you have noticed you've pushed too far, looking back, what are the early warning signs that you would start to notice?

These could be behavioral, these could be physical, these could be emotional, mental. What are, what are some early signs you've seen? I

Mandy: resonate with your disrupted sleep. That's definitely a thing for women of a certain age, for sure. But even before I was in that stage of my life, definitely disrupted sleep.

Definitely working more. Like, work spills over the lines where it shouldn't necessarily be. So I would be still working at 10:00 PM. I'd get up early, and I'd have this attitude if somebody questioned me on it, like if my husband questioned me on it, I would get very prickly. "I just have to get this done."

Like, there's a shortness. The fuse is definitely shorter, and also there's this when anybody else asks anything more of me. Even if it's a perfectly reasonable request, I will go into this internal spin like, "Can't you see how busy I am?" Like, "You're asking even more of me." That there's almost like this resentment that somebody could try to extract even more from me, and just this heavy feeling, this leaden body of like trudging through the days, not seeing any kind of letup of this.

Like, I just have to get through. That's almost becoming the mantra, just have to get through. Like, there's this fictional date, a mirage shimmering on the horizon that this will magically lift.

Nick: Mm. That's great. And so you laying out those three things there sort of makes it visible to you, and we talk about that, it's taking it from behind your eyeballs to in front.

Yeah. Okay. So when you can actually see what these three, three things are, they don't have you, you have it or them. Got it. So that, that's the first part, you make them visible. And so I'd encourage listeners to grab a pen and paper and write down what are your three early warning signs. Most people don't know what they are until they really think about them.

Once you know them, you can see them in the moment happening. Second part then, Mandy, is what are your if-thens, which are what are the behaviors which when you do them, bring you back into some sort of equilibrium, calm you down, calm your nervous system?

Mandy: I think pausing is one thing. I don't know about you, Nick, but I notice like when I'm in that place, it's almost like time speeds up.

Everything goes really, really fast even though my body feels slow, and it's the instinct for my slow body to catch up to the fast pace, which somehow is always in a mismatch, and that's part of the wonkiness. So I think the if-then is just to create a bit more space, even if it's just micro spaces during the day of like not optimizing every damn minute.

Like, I don't need to do squats when I have waiting for the kettle to boil. I can just let myself be without any more input. So space is one thing, even if it's not big Like big chunks of space. Space is definitely something. Getting outside, I live in London, so that's not always the most pleasant thing, especially in the wintertime, but just something about being around trees, that's the Canadian in me, like looking up and seeing green and seeing blue sky, like inside my body it just goes, "Ah."

When I do that, and maybe this goes back to this, the creating more space thing, but even if I can't sleep, finding pockets of rest. Rest feels different to me than space. Maybe they're a part of the same family, but even if, if I'm finding that life is going into that direction, I've discovered the thing that is NSDR, yoga nidra, the non-sleep deep rest, and just putting on my big Princess Leia headphones and laying on the little sofa in my office and doing a 20-minute non-sleep deep rest can be such an, a reboot.

Sometimes I actually fall asleep and I'm like drooling or whatever, and then other days I just lay there and I'm, I'm conscious of the whole process. But it does something, just that 20 or 30 minutes is enough to wipe the whiteboard of my brain clear for the next call or whatever it is that I do. So those are some of my if-thens.

Nick: That's great. That's great. And what's interesting about those, it sounds like they work really well for your psychology, for your physiology, for you, right? They're a great fit. Those three things would not work for me. Like mine are quite unique, and they would be different from other people we meet. So, and what it means is each individual sorta needs to work out like what is the, uh, combination to their code to get them back- Yeah.

Okay ... into re- into balance. So that's why it's sort of, um, we found rather than be too general with those three things, be specific- Yeah ... is really helpful.

Mandy: Can you share what yours are? Your, your if-thens are? Yeah. Or-

Nick: Yeah. Happy to.

Mandy: I'm just curious so that people will see a different perspective.

Nick: I wasn't sure what they were, so I thought about it for a long time.

The first thing I found is, the first thing which really works is, uh, if I go out for half a round of golf. I don't need to play a whole round. I would find that too long on, you know, it'd be boring. But half a round, I'm in nature, it takes two hours, boom. Immediately I'm back down. If I go spend some time with mates Often- Yeah

you know, when I'm too much, all I need to spend time with them and they will take me out of my own perspective and my own world. They'll tell me stories about their problems, their families, their work, and my world sort of expands and goes- Wow ... "Yeah, that's right, Nick. Put it back in perspective." Yeah. And the third one is sort of my nuclear option, which I don't do very much.

It is I'll go to the movies in the middle of the day and I'll sit in the dark on my own and watch a movie. And while I'm in there it feels, I feel almost guilty. It feels almost wrong that I would be... This is during the workday, but I come- I remember watching Oppenheimer in there. I watched one, what is it?

One battle after another, and I just walk out of there and I don't know why. I only do it about once or once a year or once every two years. I just feel cleansed. And I don't know why, but I'm like, "That works for me."

Mandy: That's so interesting. Mm. The reason I'm, I'm sitting here smiling ear to ear, I used to do that. Ah. I forgot about that. Right. I used to do that when I was doing my doctorate and my brain would just get too

full. Right. Yes. And I could go, and often it was, it was this little kind of an old-fashioned boutique theater that had these- ... red velvet seats that were- Yes ... getting a bit ratty around the edges.

Right. And I remember sometimes I would just go in and I'd s- whatever the m- they had one movie that was playing at this place. Sometimes it was a French film or a film I didn't understand the language. It didn't even matter. Yeah. Right. I'd just buy a ticket and I would be surprised whatever it turned out to be, whether it was some kind of Haitian voodoo movie- Yeah.

Yeah, yeah ... once I was in and I would, there was a, there was a French romance or... It was just the thing about being somewhere where the sensory input was different- Yes. Yeah ... and there was nothing at stake. There was nothing required of me. I could nap if I wanted to. Fascinating. I'd forgotten about that Yeah That's a good one

Nick: That, that's part of the value of having conversations like this.

Like, we get groups of people together and this is one of the questions we'll ask them. And people share these ideas and some of them go, "Oh, that would work for me. I've never thought of that." Or I, like you did, I used to do it- Yeah ... I never do it now. But if I did do it- Yeah ... it would work. So these conversations are really helpful.

Well, like we've... One person, it was rage vacuum cleaner. Uh, they would rage vacuum clean. And everyone was like, "Wow." It's, and so, I don't know. It's all funny. Like, people have just got very good- It is

Mandy: very satisfying when it's done and the nap of the carpet- Yes ... is all standing up in a certain direction.

Nick: There, there's another one for you. Yeah.

Mandy: What were some others? Just a couple more before we switch gears- Um- ... 'cause this is actually super helpful for me as well- Oh, good. Good ... selfishly.

Nick: A lot of them were written. Someone said their early warning sign was dad diet, and people were like, "Is that supposed to be bad diet?"

And we said, "We don't think so. We think it's dad diet." This person gets into a bit of a dad diet when he is, uh, getting too stressed. Um, other one, common one was, um, on Sunday saying, "I'm going to work on Su- on Sunday or go into the office just so I can get these things out the way, and then I'll feel relaxed."

And for them, that was an early warning sign. Once I'm starting to do that, then I'm in trouble. Um, as far as the, like, what works for people, a lot of stuff to do with nature worked really well. Stuff to do with animals. Things which are, like, really opposite, like arts. If your job is very cognitive all day, doing things which are arts-based, music, singing, dancing work really, really well, especially if they are the opposite mode of what you usually do.

Those are very powerful. So you wanna think in opposites. How do I rest the part of my brain which is exhausted, and how do I, um, activate parts of my brain which are not being used? But, and particularly look at things you did when you were younger but have stopped doing. They are often good clues for what would regenerate you.

Mandy: I've read your book, but not everybody has yet. Who are the thrivers, and what were some of the traits or characteristics that you found out about them in your research?

Nick: So initially what we were doing, we'd done lots of interviews, then we did lots of assessments, and one of the, one of the parts of the assessment was burnout risk.

So we were assessing people in corporations and high-powered busy jobs, and what we saw is a lot of people's burnout risk was getting into the orange or red zone, and people would go, "Well, it's just the way it is in this company." But then within every company, we would find about 3 to 5% of the population who were taking the assessment who had very low burnout risk stress scores.

And I remember thinking, “Well, who are these people? Like, they’re in the same company as everybody else. Like, do they not care? Do they have easy jobs? W- why are they different?” So I came back, it was over Christmas, I was just reflecting on this, and I came back and I started emailing these people, and I, first I looked to see what jobs have they got.

They had big jobs. Some were CEOs or managing directors, others were VPs. They had big jobs. So they were clearly successful, and I got in contact with them, and they all, all of them said, “Yes, I’d be happy to talk about why my scores are so low in this area.” So when I interviewed them, the, the common things we found about them is most of them didn’t..

Currently they were high performers with low stress. That is what the thrivers were. But they didn’t used to have low stress. Nearly all of them at some point had got either burned out or had got very close to it, experienced the pain of it, and decided, “I can’t keep working like this. Like, this is not the way forward.”

And rather than just taking a rest, they reflected. So if, the big difference I think, they were more reflective than most people. So they sat, they pulled back. They either got some help or they did it on their own, but they thought- How am I working that is causing me, or living, causing me to feel this way?

Why am I doing it? Like what is driving me? What are some of my beliefs? What are some of my values? And then what they slowly started to do was think about what is the path forward for maybe the next de- decade of my life. Yes, this is what helped me up till now, but if I keep going the way I have, I’m just gonna burn out again, which was a really common pattern, people burning out multiple times ‘cause they’d never examined their formula.

So these people, what they did is one of the first things they said is, “Well, what does the next chapter of my life look like? What does success look like? What does my vision look like?” And that it would look different than what it had been to this point. One person, um, was with a therapist and the therapist said, “What does success look like for you in the next 10 years?”

And she was a lawyer. She described it and she said... No, no, the therapist said, “No, no, no, Martha. Not what does success look like for your 20s. What does su- success look like for your 40s?” As in you need a new vision, not the same one. So once they sort of pictured what that was like, they started to work out what are the new ways of working which would create sustainable success over time rather than short term just from working harder.

So that, that’s sort of the starting point. They started to reflect more deeply.

Mandy: So this is interesting ‘cause this is definitely going into my turf here, which- Right ... uh, I feel like a, a full body antenna listening to

Nick: this.

Mandy: Good. So here’s, here’s what I see, is when I’m coaching a lot of individuals who have u- who have used a certain winning strategy to get to a certain place in their life, if there’s one of those deep belief systems that we started talking about earlier, like I must, uh, you know, I must say yes to everything, I can never disappoint people, I will never be poor again, I will be n- I will never be humiliated by a person in a position of power, I will become power, or that, you know, those sorts of hot little motors burning beneath, I find that sometimes it’s very difficult to get that individual to leave a winning strategy behind, even if they know it no longer works for them, because they don’t see a compelling alternative.

That it’s, it’s sort of a knowing but not changing, because there’s a fear that that, uh, maybe it’s not even conscious, but that that will, will slide back down the spaghetti trail to I will lose my power, influence, status, everything I’ve built up, all the sunk cost of everything will kick in. So I think this is an interesting wrinkle here to explore of why some people are willing to release the bony death grip on a winning strategy that’s clearly defunct and keeps them spinning around a drain, whereas others are much more willing to allow a new possibility in.

Anything coming up for you as I say that?

Nick: Yeah. Yeah, yeah, for sure. Yeah, I think one thing, um, people don't wanna change generally. They are conditioned, you know, and it's part of our evolution, um, that we're conditioned to repeat what has worked, and that saves energy. Like, that is a smart way to do things most of the time.

Otherwise, if you are rethinking everything all the time, you'd be exhausted. So generally it works to repeat what worked in the past, and then when things are clearly not working, that is the time to actually use a lot of the energy it takes to make changes to reflect. I have found most people don't want to reflect.

They just wanna go again. They w- they don't, especially ambitious, driven people, they don't like slowing down. A lot of them don't like, um, going within to examine things. They like action. So sometimes what you-- that's why they need help from someone like you or, you know, expert coaches who can actually give them some actions to do, so they'll actually go try some stuff, run some experiments, have some breakthroughs.

That is one path. It's the action-based learning where they go, "Ah, actually I tried this other path and it actually does work. Like my results are still really good and I feel a little bit better. Maybe I should keep trying this way. What else should I do next?" So they can act their way and discover it.

The other thing which holds people back is they don't necessarily have good role models. Like they will look around and they will just see a whole lot of busy people who are working really hard. That was the value of discovering these thrivers and interviewing them and sort of unpacking how they do it because then it all becomes clear and you can show it to other people that, hey, you can keep being really successful in the next part of your career, in fact even more successful, but you don't have to rely on massive action to do it.

You, you should actually leverage and exploit all of the knowledge and skills and wisdom you've gathered in the first half of your career. That's what's actually gonna serve you in the second half of your career, not the fact that you outwork everyone else. Like that's, that's not a smart strategy because a lot of..

If you're making great decisions in your, you know, 40s, 50s, 60s, those might be-- one great decision might be worth millions of dollars. So you should feel sharp and clear and look after your brain and your mind, 'cause that's where you're gonna create value. So there needs to be a bit of a shift on what creates value.

In your 20s, you don't know that much often, so it's just action. Like I give a lot of time- And that's

Mandy: all you have to offer, right?

Nick: That's right. Exactly. 'Cause

Mandy: you can off- you- Yes ... you don't have the, the connections, you don't have- Right ... the experience-

Nick: Right ...

Mandy: yet. You don't, you haven't done lots of high-level pattern recognition yet.

That's right. Like all you can offer- That's right ... is your attitude- ... your go-getter attitude, and I'll work- That's it ... outwork everybody. That's it. This is so, this is so apt what you're saying because- Yeah. Yeah. Good ... some people get like trapped in the amber of time- Right ... in their 20s, and they just keep replicating that strategy- Yes

of do more. So some people will hit the wall- Yeah ... and therefore pivot. I like this idea. This is what I do in coaching. We run experiments- Mm. Mm. And they collect data.

Nick: Yeah.

Mandy: And then it's, it's less about like my coach told me to change 'cause I can't do that and I wouldn't do that anyway. Yeah. Yeah. But we run experiments and then they start to slightly- Mm

experiment with a different trajectory. Yeah. So it goes back to Marshall Goldsmith's great book title, "What Got You Here Won't Get You There." Mm. Mm.

Nick: Exactly.

Mandy: And so the, it's the exploration of this terra incognita of what the other way could be. So is it very, again, very dependent on the thriver? Is it a very individual thing, or were there certain types of patterns, behaviors, or shifts that you noticed or habits that they had that would be helpful for our listeners who are in that transition or pivot?

Nick: When we interviewed them, what we found is, ah, interesting, they're all using the same habits. They're- they've all got the same patterns, and that was true whether it was in business or whether it was in healthcare or I've just finished Roger Federer's book on him called "The Master," and hi- it is just like a master class of someone who in the first half of their career, they succeeded by grinding, and in the second half of their career, they succeeded through just being really efficient, wise, smart, using their pattern recognition, training less with a lot more variety, a lot more fun, and diversifying their life so it wasn't all about tennis, and he became even more successful.

But the great thing about him and these other thrivers, they get up to a peak and they stay there for a long time. Like Federer retired when he was 43. He was the last player still playing of his generation. So yes, there are habits. We, we saw 10 of them in total And it's not like it's a prescription because everyone's job and context and life stage is different, but these are the patterns.

And what we get people to do is sort of hear the patterns, learn the patterns, and then choose which ones they think they would like to add to their ways of working. Do

Mandy: you wanna talk us through them or talk us through a variety of them?

Nick: Probably a good one to start with is we notice that the thrivers pulse.

So they pulse back and forward. So if you think about how nature works, nature's always pulsing. We breathe in, we breathe out. Our heart expands, our heart contracts. The tides go in, out. Sun rises, sun sets. Nature's always pulsing back and forward and doesn't get tired. But if you think about the way we work, most of us stop pulsing.

So think about going to a meeting. How hard is it to be in a meeting for an hour? It's not very hard. Sit on an expensive chair in a nice office. It's easy. However, if you do seven or eight hours a day, how do you feel? You feel exhausted, not because meetings are hard, but because you've stopped pulsing.

And we saw the thrivers recognize that to, to peak and stay up there, they needed to pulse throughout the day in lots of different ways. So they needed to-- Most people are, um, doing either lots of meetings and then they're doing lots of shallow work You know, logistics, uh, messages, responding to emails- Emails setting up stuff Teams All this Chats.

Mandy: Yeah. Yes.

Nick: Yeah,

Mandy: yeah. Okay.

Nick: Whereas the, uh, the thrivers, they would pulse to deep work. So they would block in about 90 minutes to two hours where they are just focused, uninterrupted. It's cognitively straining doing high-value work hard, and then they'll come out of that, and then they would pulse back to all the other stuff the rest of us do all day, all the shallow work.

They would go from inside the office to outside three times a day. An investment banker told me he goes out three times a day, walks around the block of the inner city. The reason is just so he can pulse. You talked about getting outside a little earlier. That's an example of pulsing. Being in group time, solo time, exertion, recovery, online, offline.

There are lots of different ways to pulse, but that is sort of like the master habit we saw because when people start pulsing, their brain will replenish while they go from one side to the other, and their energy replenishes. It makes a very fast difference. Most people are not pulsing.

Mandy: Yeah. Okay. That sounds great.

That, that definitely resonates. That, that's one. What's another one?

Nick: One, one of the ones which is, uh, most popular I discovered from a, an executive at one of the big technology companies, and he said, he said, "Our workplace is pretty intense. Anyone who survives here for three years is considered a veteran."

I said, "Whoa. Okay, that's sounds hardcore." Sounds- "How long, how long you been there?" And he said, "I've been here a decade." And I said, "Well, how did, how'd you last so long without burning out?" And he said, "Well, I did, then I made some changes." And he told us a series of them, but he said the one that made the most difference actually was dancing.

And I said, "What do you mean dancing?" I was

Mandy: not expecting that.

Nick: No, that's exactly what I said. I was like, "Excuse me?" And he said Argentine, Argentine tango to be precise. I was like, "Okay, I don't know where this is going." And he said, uh, "What used to happen is I'd be at work all day. I'd be cognitive, problem solve, problem solve, logic, logic all day long, and then I'd go home.

Now I'd be with my family, but basically I was still in that work mode. I was still in my head thinking about work problems, do emails," and he said, "Then I burned out." And he realized, "I just couldn't, couldn't stop. I couldn't stop going. Couldn't get out of work mode." So he, he said he tried different things, but when he tried Argentine tango, he dis- discovered something important, which is it is the opposite of his work mode.

He said, "In Argentine tango, you must be in your heart and you must be in your body, two places I never am during the workday." He said, "Secondly, the currency is the opposite of work." He said, "In Argentine tango, no one cares how much money you make. They don't care what your job title is. They don't care who you work for.

It doesn't even matter if you've got a job. There's only one currency: can you dance?" And so he said, "I go along in the evening, I'm in my heart, I'm in my body, I'm with this different community who doesn't care about work, and I am a dancer." And he said, "It's the only time in my life where work disappears, my identity disappears.

It's over off recharging somewhere in the corner. I'm a dancer." And he says, "For two hours. I come out of there, I feel just so energized." And he says, "I go then work the next day," and he said, "I, I'm just completely recharged." He said, "It is like it is my opposite world." I was like, "That's an interesting phrase, opposite world."

And so we kept interviewing these people, the really high achievers who peaked and stayed there, and we found they all seemed to have these opposite worlds where, which was completely different from their work mode, but completely absorbed them and their work disappeared and they recharged. So we-- an investment banker who, uh, during the day was investment banking, and then in the evenings and weekends she was a quilter.

And she said she'd get into, she'd join these quilting groups, she'd go to these classes and she'd go, uh, she just became obsessed with quilting. She had all these WhatsApp groups and she said it's just so creative, like it's just so innovative. And, uh, it would absorb her and then all of them would bring those sort of mindsets back to their work and it actually, all of them would say it helped them, um, perform at a higher level back at their work.

So we re- that was one of the most consistent patterns we saw. Einstein had a, um, opposite world, which was music. I discovered the Nobel Prize winners are much more likely to have an opposite world. 88% of them, uh, had opposite worlds that they went to, much higher than, uh, normal scientists. So that, that is a powerful one.

So one thing everyone should consider is do you have an opposite world? We sort of h- some people say yes, some people say no, and some people say, "I used to, uh, but I've stopped doing it 'cause life's so big-busy. I've got kids, I got work, I've got everything else." That's the part that's gone. But we would say based on these thrivers, bring it back and make it a priority because it will serve you, your career, but also the people around you.

Mandy: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. Fascinating. Do you have, do you have one more?

Nick: Sure. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. I've got, I've got lots more 'Cause I

Mandy: know they're all there in your book, but I mean, th- there's- Yeah, yeah ... it's just fascinating to hear you bringing them to life like this.

Nick: Sure. Yeah, one of them, um, which is pretty important if you're a driven person, is to decrease your rumination.

Um, and this is one area I had to learn because, uh, I was not good at it. So if you are in the workplace, you're gonna experience pressure. So pressure is external demand in your environment. You are not going to get rid of that in your work or probably life. But one of the things we saw is not everyone who has high pressure has high stress. And you've probably seen this. You've-- I'm sure you've met people with very high levels of pressure but very low levels of stress, and you might have met the opposite, someone who's got low pressure but very high stress. And the question is why? You know, h- how does that happen? And the answer is that what actually converts pressure into stress is rumination, which is thinking over and over about events from the past.

Why did I let that happen? Why did I do that? Or events in the future. What if this happens? What if AI does this? What if my company? What if, what if, what if? Attaching negative emotion and churning over and over. So when you do that, you go into fight or flight. You get adrenaline, cortisol. It's bad for your health, it's bad for your productivity, and it is, um, it's bad for the way you feel.

The, and what you see is the, the higher you go in organizations, the more pressure is. And if you turn that into rumination, you will top out really quickly and burn out really quickly. So in fact, people at the top tend to, um, ruminate less because they have to, otherwise they can't get there. So that, that's a real key one.

Happy to talk a bit about how, how to reduce it. That's a key one for people, reducing rumination.

Mandy: Let's actually go into your story here, because you had a real life lesson on living with something that created a lot of pressure and a lot of stress, and coming out the other side, you've learned how to disentangle the two.

Would you speak to us a little bit about your personal story and maybe make this point about separating rumination from the pressure real via your story?

Nick: Yes. Yes. Yeah, so I definitely learned this lesson. Um, so in my 20s I played rugby for a living. I was playing in Japan and I got-- I was running around the field.

I had this huge headache, couldn't work out why, but I had to leave the field 'cause it just hurt so much. And I end up flying back to New Zealand and my mother saw me, said, "You don't look well." She took me to hospital and they did this, they opened me up to have a look and they found I had three big cancerous tumors in my abdomen.

So they did a five-hour operation, took them out, but they had to take out a lot of other stuff as well. It took me about three months to recover and I thought, "Geez, what am I gonna do now?" And I was 27. I just, I'm just gonna go back to Japan. I, I just wanna, like, forget this ever happened. So went back to Japan, signed another contract, but then a year later the cancer came back again and it spread to my liver.

They didn't have a treatment, but eventually they found a temporary one called RFA ablation. They did that and they said, "Just go out and just live your life. Um, this isn't a cure, but it'll help for the short term." And what I discovered is really hard in that situation is not the physical part, was the fact that every three months you need to get another scan and you've got to wait around for three months thinking, basically.

And I just spent the whole time thinking, “What if it comes back? What if I don’t live till I’m 30? What if I never get married? What if, what if I only got two years to live?” Like, they don’t have a treatment. And, uh, I was so stressed out and then I met this British academic called Dr. Derek Rodger from the UK and, uh, I read this article about him.

I thought, “This is exactly me, this stressed person.” And so I got in contact with him and I met up with him for a couple of hours and he said, “I can’t tell you what to do about your cancer, but here’s what to do about your stress.” And he explained it to me, so I did what he told me, which was all about decreasing rumination, and I went from 10 out of 10 on the stress, uh, assessment And it just started coming down slowly.

Went to eight and then to seven, and it went all the way down to zero over time. But what was eventful for me was, um, the cancer came back again, uh, three years after that, and it was in my liver. But what was different that third time, though the event was exactly the same, I didn’t have the stress with it.

So it was the same event, but very different response. And really the key thing I was focused on was, um, noticing the amount of ruminating I was doing, catching it. The first thing is catch it as soon as you say it, see it, and label it. That’s rumination. It’s not just thinking, it’s not planning, it’s not reflecting, it’s ruminating.

And just that alone, catching it and labeling it to start with, gives you some distance on it, and it interrupts it before it gets going. There’s a few more steps, but I’ll just pause there. That, that’s the starting point, actually realizing you’re doing it. And for most people, they’ve been doing it for decades, but they didn’t really know they were doing it, and they didn’t know the impact it was having on them.

So the awareness to start with is, is the key.

Mandy: Thank you for sharing that. And I think there’s something about making these stories very human, because otherwise it can feel a bit like this is just stuff that happens in a book, and this is how we optimize ourselves. And I think once we overlay real life onto it, I mean, of course you would be ruminating about something like that.

And that actually makes me sit, I’m literally perched on the edge of my seat listening to you talk about how you could still live with cancer but decrease your rumination. So this is not you just doing a study. This is you living this.

Nick: Yeah. Well, this is why I did the study. So it’s both, you know? It’s like, um, having the experiences and then it, it...

What, what inspired me about that was, um, it’s a sort of problem where everyone would go, and I certainly would go, “Well, of course you’re gonna be stressed. Like, there’s nothing you can do about it.” But then Derek Roger spent 30 years of his life working out, uh, you don’t have to be. Like, you can experience a lot of pressure in life like we all do, but stress is actually optional, and it’s much more fluid.

And so that, that’s what inspired me when I started seeing people burn out. I was like, “I think we should have a good look at this because people think it’s inevitable, but maybe it’s not. Maybe you can be in the pressure without the burnout, and maybe you can be in the pressure without the stress.” And in fact, when you go looking, people have already worked out how to do it.

So that’s why.

Mandy: And you’re obviously still practicing this ‘cause you’re still here.

Nick: Well, I am. But interestingly, you know, there were, there was still no treatment or cure for it. So that, when I said the third time I got it, which was sort of five years in total, that was, um- That was 20 years ago. So I’ve had it in my liver ever since.

The tumors, there’s multiple of them. They grow, they grow slowly, but I’ve sort of changed my lifestyle and I’ve changed my mindset. I’ve changed a lot of things, and they started just to slow down, and then they sort of stopped growing. But they’re, they’re now, I get a scan every 12 months, and my oncologist tells me what the results are.

So I'm still in the same situation, so it just reminds me, don't waste my life because you never know when different results are coming through.

Mandy: Yeah. And I think there's something too that I, I wanted to talk to you about here was this is actually about living your life. The whole point of your work, the whole point of my work, where the Venn diagrams of our work intersect are we're both supporting people to really be in their lives more of the time.

And it's so easy where so much of leadership books and self-help and, you know, even the, the, this week's kind of kerfuffle that has happened on social media with, with Steven Bartlett about how having two glasses of wine, air quotes, "ruined his life for three days" because, you know, it ruined the sleep and all the dominoes of all the optimization culture went down.

And I think nothing to do with Steven per se, but I think it's easy to look at even a study like you're doing, I'm doing some, some original research at the moment for my own book, and to remind ourselves that this is not just about optimizing to be more effective or to do Tango to be better at your job and to squeeze more productivity out of life.

That can be a way of getting joy and pleasure for people who love their jobs. I suspect the way that you light up when you talk about your work, I suspect you really love what you do. And also continuing to live with your cancer is also a lens with which to look at life that if I'm hearing you right, what you're talking about in this book and the way that you are living and moving through the world, it's not just about optimization.

Tell me more about that.

Nick: I went through different phases. I wa- I didn't start out like this when the cancer happened. At the start, I was probably very much in optimization mode, to be honest. What I did the second time I got sick, I thought, "If I... The cancer came back one year later. I've had a procedure. If I don't change anything, why won't it come back one year later again?"

I actually need to change some things." So I went out and I studied who are the cancer patients who live the longest after getting a cancer diagnosis? What do they do? So I went out and I studied this, and what I saw was They made transformational changes in lots of different areas. They, they changed the way physically they were doing things, mentally, emotionally, socially, spiritually.

And there, there were lots of different practices in each of those areas, and I thought, "I'm just gonna try and do all of them. I'm not very spiritual, but hey, m- they seem to meditate. I'm gonna meditate." So I just... I did as many as I could, and it really changed me, and I think that helped a lot. But one of the things which happened is I became a bit of an optimizer because the stakes were so high.

In fact, after the first year or two, the cancer actually got smaller, and I was like, "My God," you know, "I can-"

Mandy: It's working. "

Nick: Yes, I can heal myself."

Mandy: Yeah,

Nick: yeah. This is- Yeah ... you know, I can heal myself. I can make these disappear. This is amazing. So I got quite obsessive, and I just wanted to... I was so careful about what I was eating and drinking and everything. And then one day I just realized, "I am so stressed." Like, I'm just so stressed by all of this. And I thought, "Nick, you've just gotta let go a little bit, okay? This stress is not good for you." And so that's what I did, and that was about two years into it, and I let go, and I just relaxed a bit, and I just realized this is better.

This is better. This is the right way to do. I feel happier, I'm more fulfilled, and I'm still living a healthy way. And I, I saw that Steven, uh, Bartlett thing, and I do feel a bit sorry for him 'cause he's a podcaster and he's putting stuff out there. I think I quite... I like him, but I also like the people who push themselves a bit.

You know, they're, they're the outliers and they're, they're sort of seeing what's possible. Doesn't mean everyone has to do it, though. You don't need to mimic everything. You don't need to try and be perfect, but we can still learn from those people. So, um, I think just personal experience, and he's probably feeling this

at the moment, when you really try to optimize too hard, it comes with a lot of stress and a lot of inner critic beating yourself up all the time, and that's not that healthy in many different ways.

Mandy: Optimization can just be perfectionism in- That's true ... a cashmere sweater, right? So I think-

Nick: That's nice.

Mandy: What's one thing you've recently said "enough" to and been better for it?

Nick: Well, I stopped drinking any alcohol a while back. That felt really good. And I've also said no to being on my phone very much at all.

That the more I do that, the better I feel. I don't do social media. I do LinkedIn. That is all. Post there. Any of the stuff to do with the phone, the technology, all of that, I've said enough to that, and I haven't missed any of that at all.

Mandy: The line I keep coming back to from Nick is that the very things that built the first half of your career are the same things quietly burning it down in this season of your life. I've been turning that one over, 'cause it means that the way out was never trying harder, even for Roger Federer. Somewhere in the last hour we've just spent together, you may have heard me talking about optimization being perfectionism in a cashmere sweater.

This is a line I'm gonna be quoting back to myself. We can learn a ton from optimization culture, and the whole point of this conversation today is Nick is encouraging us to reflect. It's not easy to reflect. Most of us don't wanna reflect. Even fewer of us want to reflect and then make changes. But maybe, just maybe, it's time to sit with that old formula, look it in the eye, and actually see, is it still serving me, or is it actually quietly dismantling me?

And Nick is the rare person who can say all of this without a single sour note of an optimization sermon, because he's earned every word in one of the hardest ways there is. If any of what we talked about today piqued your curiosity or hit a nerve, you'll probably wanna pick up his new book, *Burn Bright*, where the rest of the *Thrivers*' 10 habits are.

And one more thing before you go. Picture the person who came to mind when you were listening, who's also running this formula, and you think, "Yeah, I really should send that episode to them." Please do. You already know who they are. I'm Dr. Mandy Leto, and this is *Enough*. I will see you next time.