

HOW Design Live

Taylor Cashdan - Stress Addiction: From Morning Coffee To The Cardiac Wing

March 11, 2021

Speaker Introduction by Amy Conover, HOW Show Director:

Stress addiction. That's something we all struggle with to some degree I'm sure. Especially over the past year, right? Things like, I work best under pressure. No worries. I'll get it to you ASAP. It's fine. I can handle it. Sound familiar? Well, Taylor has a pretty unique story around this that I can't wait for you all to hear. I met Taylor when he spoke at HOW Design Live Virtual event in November of 2020. He had one of the highest rated sessions.

Let me tell you a little bit about Taylor. Hard work and grit. They're the backbones of any successful career and it's no more evident than Taylor's journey. He had a stint in journalism, pivoted to brand building and establishment and the continued fire for empowering in-house teams to create impactful work, stressful high profile workplaces. They were the catalyst that molded him and who he is today, chasing the dream, educating business partners about the impact of design and striving to best serve employers and clients and the creative community. It all landed him right inside the emergency room. So now instead of coordinating and facilitating behind the scenes, he is taking his story and his learnings to the forefront of our industry as both a cautionary tale and our realignment to what really matters most. Taylor is North Carolina based creative and a community builder. He's passionate about people, design and all the intersections in between. He has a burning desire to collaborate with others, to create exceptional work for people who give a shit. Those are his words, but please join me in welcoming Taylor Cashdan to the HOW Design Online stage.

Taylor Cashdan - Session Start:

Good afternoon, everybody. Welcome everyone. And thanks again, Amy, for the introduction and to HOW for having me. I usually like to start out this talk with like a raise your hand poll, but being that it's over video and we don't have those kinds of features it's a little challenging. So nod along if any of this resonates with you. How many of you have ever been so stressed out after a day of work that you need some isolation time at home just to recharge and reset your bearings?

How many of you have been slapped to the project at the last minute? You know, pulling your hair out to try and get it done. You just couldn't say no to something you're asked to take on or help out with because you felt bad about saying no or passing up on the opportunity? Generally, by the time we get to those three simple questions, the entire room has their hands raised. And if you were nodding your head or saying, yep, that's me, then today might serve as a bit of a warning. My story and the other things I'm going to talk about, take place in the workplace, at home, in our social lives and everything in between. I'm going to start off telling you a little bit about myself and how I got here. I'll then talk a little bit about the way the brain works. I'll tell you a story and then close with some things I've learned.

As mentioned earlier my name is Taylor Cashdan. I currently work as a Senior UX designer at Fidelity Investments working on the design systems and UX patterns teams. And I recently wrapped up a five-year stint of involvement with the Raleigh chapter of AIGA. When in-person events were still a thing. I hosted a live art competition called Basement Battle here in Raleigh, North Carolina. And I also run a coffee inspired brand called Black Soul Club on the side. I'm also a Curriculum Advisor for Hacker U and an active mentor through ADPList. And I try to sneak in a freelance gig here and there when I can. Now I

don't show you all this to brag, but to tee up a very dangerous, but now under control pattern of over-involvement. But to understand that we have to go way back.

I was born at the center of Long Island, New York in 2003. In search of a more sustainable lifestyle and to escape some of the grind, my family moved to North Carolina right as I was finishing up fifth grade. So you can imagine it's a pretty developmental time for a young person starting middle school and high school in North Carolina. I was part of every club that would accept me and every extracurricular we could afford. My parents weren't the kind of people that like ship their kids off to keep them busy. I just genuinely enjoyed having a packed schedule and I constantly wanted to be involved. And when I got to college, I was no different. I was a full-time student editor of the college newspaper. I was starting to take on freelance gigs and I had a contract job with HBO doing field marketing for the Raleigh - Durham area.

As I left college and entered the professional world, I started to sub out these activities for other activities. Oftentimes simply adding to that list. And instead of like doing a one-to-one change, so full-time job freelancing, helping run events and meet up groups, becoming more active in professional organizations, et cetera. And it was only then that I realized I had an addiction. I enjoyed stress. I threw myself into high pressure situations with all sorts of different constraints. And then I let all those things compound creating one enormous self-imposed to do list. I was addicted to cortisol.

Cortisol is the stress hormone that's created by our adrenal glands. And when cortisol is released in our bloodstream, it can act on different parts of the body to help deal with stress or danger. In some cases the chemical is directly attributed to the way our bodies respond to fight or flight scenarios. And oftentimes that's fight, flight or freeze is the kind of the new 3 F's, but let's level set. My dependency on cortisol was not at the production level, meaning my body doesn't overproduce or under produce. There's actually medical conditions where this happens. I simply gambled on the way my body would respond to cortisol by over committing myself. I was banking on the fact that I'd get stressed out and I'd always choose the fight part of that fight or flight or freeze. The hope being that this fight would manifest in some sort of like transform state of super creativity.

And I would crush whatever I was working on. And because I was a serial procrastinator, this is exactly what I was doing all the time with everything, the challenge here, being there for the longest time, it seemed effective, right? I was meeting all my deadlines. I was creating what I thought was really cool work. I was exceeding expectations at my day job and with the clients so on and so forth is continual stress. To me was triggering what I thought was my flow state. You know, when I was performing at my personal best, which is super ironic because there's a plethora of research that says in the midst of stress, our amygdala, the decision-making center of our brain are even less capable of thoughtful, future-oriented thought than when we're not stressed. Our brains are wired to deal with what's dubbed as present threat, kind of the thing we're dealing with at the moment, even if we intellectually acknowledge that delaying another task would lead to more stress down the road, researchers call this phenomenon a amygdala hijack, and it's something we all do subconsciously. There's so much research into this phenomenon that people like Dr. Fuschia Sirois, a professor of psychology at the University of Sheffield is on record with studies saying when we procrastinate, we're not only aware that we're avoiding the task in question, but also the doing so it's probably a really bad idea. And yet we choose to do it anyway. This is why performance is such an interesting metric to try and track, especially when you try to tie it to creative output. Since there's so many factors, Adobe and IDC put out a survey that said 71% of creatives produce 10 times more content than they did just five years ago, which is really, really cool considering the sheer number of tools that are out there now, new content mediums, and other disciplines you can work under are ever-changing. But it's worth mentioning that this particular study was from 2015.

So now when I see this statistic, I read it as 71% of us are creatives. Us are responsible for producing 10 times more content than we did five years ago. And that's terrifying. To give a wider workplace context, LinkedIn just recently reported in a pulse survey in April, 2019, that 49% of workers feel stressed out at their current jobs. That's almost half of our workforce experiencing stressful pressures enough to quantify a voluntary survey, the biggest drivers work-life balance and workload. Now to get even more relevant, there's a webinar I attended about a year ago to homeless today. Ad Week and Adobe Stock presented their State of Creativity Report. And their specific research calls out that despite even a global pandemic, massive social justice activation and a rollercoaster election season, that 81% of participants across multitude of industries in the creative space were reporting that they were being asked to develop more content in less time.

Now, even pre 2020, these reports like this one and many others point to us, not only working way more, but being to increase levels of general anxiety, which in turn leads to toxic forms of comparison or more commonly called the comparison trap where we get stuck in loops, comparing ourselves to other people who we work with, admire or follow on social media, often not acknowledging that everyone's journeys, interests and learning styles are different or even worse. The idea of the Superman syndrome, the feeling that you have to swoop in and save the day, because if you don't, no one else will. And all of this equates to added pressure and stress on our daily lives. Some of this, unfortunately we brought upon ourselves by encouraging this idea of the hustle mentality, and we hear it more than we think practice, practice, practice, just put more hours in.

You need more freelance clients, you need to diversify your portfolio, et cetera. There was a study published in March, 2019 by the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stress that quantifies that rest early and often plays just as important, a role in cognitive function and learning new behaviors as the whole practice, practice, practice mentality that we've been preaching all these years. But the rhetoric we see in here from what's often dubbed as motivational content on the internet. And sometimes conference talks are more than often than not about optimizing your time or hacking your schedule or worse. Yet we see content like this, and these are all pulled from Instagram or this pulled from YouTube. Now don't get me wrong. I'm a big fan of Will Smith and Elon Musk is a little weird, but some of this tech is cool. I won't even go into Gary B, but this message is often out of context and distill that it makes everything sounds so simple.

And the weird part is like, I used to blame these famous people for devaluing, the hard work it took to get where they are. But then I realized we do this to ourselves. It takes a video editor, a content marketer, a social media specialist, a copywriter, a producer, a designer, et cetera, to create this kind of content. We're the ones taking that story, that long, hard work story and trying to make a quick snippet of content and publishing it to these platforms. And then we ourselves eat it up. We share it around, hashtag it, we get paid to make it. And all it does is change our internal perceptions over time hustle and everything will be fine. Work harder. I'll work out, do more so you can stand out, get more involved so you can make a name for yourself. Are you going more recent? Did you know, the US Army has developed an app so that you can calculate the right amount of caffeine to offset sleep deprivation? Let me read you a subhead from the article about the app, here are a few examples of what the average sleep deprived person in various situations would have to consume to achieve the same level of alertness they'd have with eight hours of sleep, you know, because why encourage healthy habits when we can just drink more coffee, there's an app for that.

Now there's no definitive attribution to this quote, but I'm pretty sure many of you have heard it. It goes find a job you like, and you'll never work a day in your life, right? It's a pretty common kind of well known, but I like this one better. And it's written by a designer named Adam J Kurtz. It says, do what you love. And you'll work super hard all the time with no separation or any boundaries, and also take everything extremely personally. And for some reason, this version feels way more accurate, but it

always makes you wonder, like when did we make this shift? When did we decide that you should never turn your brain off? Never put the pencil down or give yourself time to breathe. Who decided that monetizing all of your hobbies or having side hustles were mandatory, or frankly, the right thing to do, not to mention the implication that if you're not working yourself to death, then you're not being productive.

It's a super toxic way of viewing work ethic. You know, however you define that. But when we're only hearing from those who, you know, quote unquote made it via this content that we're helping produce, it only makes sense that such storytelling would idolize this concept of struggle. And then, you know, we say to our younger generations or to each other that you know, if you're not freelancing, then you're really not creating enough. Or if you don't have a passion project, then you're not exploring enough. Or if you don't have a side hustle, then you're not serious about your craft. What we seem to constantly forget is that we don't need to do everything to feel fulfillment, and we don't need to have extra stress to make work that matters. We shouldn't continue to try to keep busy in an effort to counter the lack of fulfillment we're getting from the things we're doing and the people we're with. The whole, if you're not doing everything, then you're basically doing nothing mantra needs to die. The irony a few years ago, I was the worst culprit. And I'll tell you a story, but first I want to take a heart reading, a heart rate reading together. So for those of you with smartwatches, do me a favor and activate your heart rate monitor. For those of you without, I want you to take two fingers and hold them either to your wrists. There's like a direct line to where your bone goes. There's kind of a spot, a little munch here, and you're interested. You can, you can push in and feel your heartbeat, or if you can't get that one, right, you can go underneath your jaw, you know, wherever you can feel a pulse. So I'll give you a second to get that spot. And then when I say go we're going to count for 15 seconds and I'll stop you. So don't worry about keeping track. Okay. I'm assuming everyone's got their pulse spot. So ready that start counting.

Okay. Now take that number and multiply by four where he got a calculator and do the math do the math on paper. It's okay. No, one's watching you now have your resting heart rate. The average resting heart rate of an app. The average adult is between 60 and 90 beats per minute. Now, if a don't fit in that range, don't panic. Sometimes it's a little lower. Those are more athletically fit or a little higher. If you just have coffee, or for example, if your kids are running around or you just cut off a stressful work meeting there's a ton of factors that can, that can play into this. But generally speaking, you should be between 60-90 beats per minute. Most of the time, that kind of sounds like this <heartbeat> right? So kind of a general a baseline. Now on June 29th, 2017 I woke up dizzy disoriented and drenched in sweat with both my head and my chest pounding. Assuming I had a nightmare or just slept terribly. I wandered into my bathroom to try and snap myself out of the state I was in and start getting ready for work. So I washed my face, took a shower, started gathering my things. The dizziness, you know, started to fade over time as did the disorientation. And obviously the sweat since I showered, but I saw this weird pitter-patter happening in my chest, thinking nothing of it. I instinctually texted my mom that my chest felt funny. And then I proceeded to go to work. When I got to work and I sat down at my desk. I was both really winded and full of energy, which is a really odd combination of feelings.

And that pitter patter from before was still serving as quite a distraction. So I called a coworker in my office at the time. And promising that I had a really weird request, asked her to take her hand and put it on my chest like this and see if she was able to feel the sporadic twitching that I was feeling, you know, just to make sure I wasn't going nuts. And she confirmed my suspicion. So it was clear. It was time to act. I first went to my doctor whose office happened to be around the corner from my job at the time, which is super convenient, but he couldn't pinpoint what was happening either and recommended the hospital. So instead of waiting for, and frankly paying for an ambulance, I drove myself to the ER, when I arrived to the hospital, it was practically all hands on deck. There were doctors and nurses surrounding me applying EKG nodes and electrocardiogram. It's a tool that helps read the heart, but there was a little

sticky. So they just put everywhere. They were setting up IV needles, hooking up oxygen tanks, the works. So it was at this point that I realized I had a resting heart rate, almost 180 beats per minute. But just to make that clear, do you remember that heart rate from before that steady between 60 and 90 sounded like this, well, this is what it looks like on an EKG. This electrocardiogram report shows your heart rate and this one's mine showing a regular 75 beats per minute. As, as the sound clip I'm playing for you. Now, this is what my heart should have sounded like I was sitting stationary in a bed, but instead it sounded more like this, right? And then you can see from even just the speed of these little ticks on the, on the screen, what that looks like also what it sounds like. So what's interesting is both these two sheets I just showed you are both EKG reports from that morning. Once I got to the hospital and you can see when I overlay them and that red line being the faster rate, just how fast my heart was actually beating. It's almost two beats for every one compared to the normal and that red line, obviously showing the accelerator rhythm laid over the normal.

So the first thing they wanted to do was try and see if they could chemically get my heart back into rhythm, using the IV they had already put in. And when that didn't work, it was apparent that it was time to update my Mom. Now, general note here, nothing good comes from starting the morning with "I'm having chest pains" and then minimal contact after that. This has been hours between when I first said that and when I was in the hospital. So knowing that I'd been less than transparent, and if I underwent any procedure, without at least giving my mother a heads up, I'd likely leave the hospital in worse condition than when I was admitted. It was time to call Mom. The other interesting thing to mention is that she had just had knee surgery, so she couldn't drive. So she literally had to call an Uber and my stepdad couldn't get away from work. Neither could my brother or my sister time nobody was available. So when I decided to call the doctor's though, like ready to go, but my mom wasn't there yet. And I couldn't give him the green light. Because quite frankly, to be honest, I was a bit scared. The next step was to put me under you know, with an anesthetic and then try to shock my heart back into rhythm. So when she finally arrived and they were just ready to roll, it was time to put me under. Now three shocks later, cause the first two didn't take, no luck. Which resulted in a two day staycation at the hospital under constant observation. Now this meant a bunch of blood tests, scans, pricks, prods, and about a hundred of those little sticky pads that I was talking about that they use for the EKG. Now, mind you, I'm of Italian and Middle Eastern descent. So chest air and those sticky pads are really not an idea way of spending a Thursday. The diagnosis after passing all of the other tests of the clean bill of health, atrial stress induced atrial fibrillation or AFib for short. It sounds like it'd make a pretty solid name for a death metal band, which was just my way of processing this in some sort of humorous way. And a fun fact, this font is called Eater of Children. Now, the way it was ultimately explained to me was AFib is an electrical overload. The chambers of the heart caused them to beat irregularly meaning instead of being sent signals of when to hit the drum by like a conductor, each chamber decided whenever it felt like that it was time to do a drum solo.

And the tricky part about AFib is there really isn't much that can be done to monitor it or treat it unless you're currently experiencing the arrhythmia. And arrhythmia is just an irregular heartbeat. Doctors can speculate, make predictions, but when the normal causes, drugs old age, meaning 60 or above, poor health, obesity, diabetes, when all those things are ruled out, it's kind of just up to your body to do its thing. Since that first instance, in June of 2017, I've experienced three arrhythmia events. One of which my body worked itself out by the time I got checked into the ER, which was super frustrating, one that I had to get zapped again to fix. And one I was able to regulate with breathing exercises and a on the spot medication that I now have access to. The weird part, at least the doctors felt so, is that these incidents in general, weren't triggered by any particular event, like a family problem, missed deadline, or some of shocking news. I literally woke up in this hyper accelerated rhythm from a dead sleep, like from being literally out for the whole night. So this entire experience flipped my entire productivity game on its

head. I was always the I do my best work under pressure kind of guy, the whole, you know, I'll channel my stress of everything on my to-do list to get into that flow state. Like I was talking to before, you know, that kind of person and it's well known that stress is often a gateway or intro into other forms of addiction. Albeit drugs, other bad habits, you know, choices, et cetera. So in tandem, I thought maybe it was possible that my stress had caused a loop in which I craved more stress instead of ways to cope with that stress being in my stress generally, and seemingly had a positive output, you know, in this case productivity, maybe my brain was misreading this false positive as some sort of healthy behavior.

Arguably I was using a derivative of the self-medication theory to cope with my stress, which simply suggests that people who are under increased stress are more likely to turn to drugs or other means as a way to decrease that stress. My drug is my to do list. The more I had the better I thought I'd feel, and my brain didn't know how to regulate the stress I was experiencing. So instead of just drown it out with more work, because it felt like something I can control, you know, I got to add things to that list. So essentially, I created my own little toxic loop that I seemingly couldn't break. Now I'll read a quote from an Author and Stress Management Specialist named Debbie Mandela that reads "Stress robs you of your identity but doing what you love helps you to reclaim it". Which I think is a really interesting statement.

And it's not always the easiest thing to do because you can actually read this in a way that might encourage overwork, right? Doing what you love may be what you do for work, right. Or just adding more to your plate may not be the best thing from a compounding perspective. For the first few weeks after my diagnosis, I was a bit of a wreck. On the outside, I seemed calm and collected, but internally, anytime I even thought I was feeling weird or feeling a flutter, I'd immediately check my pulse. Some family and friends noticed and asked me about it, but I don't think I was ready to address it. So I would just shrug it off. As you know, I had an inch or something and it was just very weird, but I even figured I could solve this heart rate, check obsession with technology.

So I bought an Apple watch and to be honest, it gave me a sense of relief, a good portion of the time that I was manually checking my heart rate. It was just phantom feeling. I mean, there was nothing happening. I was just, you know, my brain playing tricks, but I figured with technology on my side, if there was a real emergency, the watch and these systems would catch it first, this little crutch empowered me to worry less, which is ultimately for the better. But if my AFib diagnosis has taught me anything, it's that all of this could have been avoided with four pretty basic steps. The first step is you have to ask yourself some tough questions and these questions should cover three pretty basic constructs. Ask yourself about your tasks. Do you really have to do it all? Are all of these things necessary right now in this moment? If that shell about the people around, you are these the right people? Do they encourage your success and ask you, what's your plan? How does what you're doing and who you're doing it with lead to the next thing or help you achieve what you're trying to achieve? You know, are you running around like a chicken without a head? Or is there some kind of method to your madness. Asking yourself the tough questions leads to less stress.

Now the second step is to say, it. It's time to trim the fat. If you really don't need to be taking on all of the work or tasks that you're currently doing, it's time to start saying no to the projects, you don't have interest, no to the tasks that will overload you and no to the plans that you really don't want to participate in on this same note. Sometimes you have to say, it to the people in your circle that are breathing nothing but negativity and stagnation. And this is often the hardest thing to do, especially if they're not building you up and you, them, your circle should be the ones clapping the loudest and you have success and be there to mentor you through your failures. If they're not, it's time for a new circle.

And lastly is your plan the right plan? Is your to do list what's actually helping you get to the next thing or finish the project or whatever it is? Does it include the right pieces? No, F*** it. Saying F*** it means less stress. Plus, foul language is literally proven to not only be fun, but relieve stress.

Now the flip side to step two is step three, incubate. It's time to double down on the things that move the needle, the people and things that make you happy. And you can do this by incubating your time, your things, and your circle. Let's say you have two hours of time. And your original plan is to pick two projects to start, right? Currently the options on the table seem like one you actually really liked and one you don't, and your normal plan of attack will be to split time between these two projects, because there's likely value in both. And most people when surveyed about this exact kind of scenario for a study published in the March 2017 issue of *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, which is a mouthful, said they not only start both, but they would switch and forth at their leisure when they felt creatively blocked. I say no, double down in those two hours. So, the one thing that brings you joy and furthers your goals because that's success and that happiness will move you to the next thing in a better place, a better mental state. Now research from this study and others, like it explained that our brains are not effective when constantly multitasking. This constant multitasking can lead to what's being called decision fatigue. New data has shown that when it comes to creative problem-solving things like the Pomodoro method, where you have intervals of focused work interspersed by short breaks it allows our brains to intentionally switch between convergent and divergent thinking. Those intervals could be switching tasks. They could be different parts of a problem, et cetera, meaning technically you can incubate your time through intentionality, but it requires far more diligence. Now incubation also extends back to the people you surround yourself with. There is another speaker whose name is Jim Rohn is attributed with the saying, *"You are the average of the five people you spend the most time with"*. It's time you curate and nurture your circle so that you can help each other succeed. Celebrate your circle's wins as if their own and always give more than you take. Incubating the things you enjoy leads to less stress.

Now the last is the simplest to explain, but the hardest to do. You have to learn to just be. Right? It's almost that simple. Be intentional about the choices you make, the tasks you take on and the actions you carry out and more importantly, be present when making those decisions, working on those tasks, and doing those things. According to Lorin Roche, a PhD and Meditation Instructor and Author, there's over a hundred types of meditation practices. He says something like, karaoke can be a gateway to meditation. It's a joyous expression followed by relief. He goes on to say that individuals should pick an aspect of their life, that they love and build some kind of meditative practice around that. Practicing meditation and mental health doesn't mean sitting with your legs crossed, saying Om, trying to clear your mind. Roche says it's through welcoming tension that you actually get to release it. So being hopefully present and intentional as much as possible directly relieved leads directly leads to less stress. So, I think we can all use a little bit of AFib in our lives. And to be clear, I don't mean this kind where your heart's going crazy, but I do mean this kind. Now it's important to remember that none of this happens overnight. I've been trying to live by these principles since my hospital staycation, and I still had three episodes after, but it's a process. And now I'm almost three years without an incident, which is pretty cool. And the truth is I'm no expert, right? But I have learned that you need to be patient with yourself. You need to give yourself time to adjust, give your body time to adapt. And this is even more true right now when many of us are having to drug a whole new slew of stressors, not to mention we've been doing it for a year so far, right? The pressure of home and family life combined is ever more intertwined, especially with our normal standards of what we were considering work. Jenny Jaffe, a Comedian and Executive Producer put it best. She said, *"You're only unproductive by the standards of the world we lived in now over a year ago. And that world is gone now, right? Now, what's funny is this original quote said three months when I first pulled it. So time has really, really flown, but what's also interesting is for those of us who've made the switch from in-person to always on video. I'm sure you've heard the term zoom fatigue, right? Well, sure enough. The first peer reviewed study of this specific kind*

of fatigue was published in a journal called Technology Mind and Behavior. At the end of February, the study asserts that the non-verbal overload of being always on has created a particular kind of distress that has not previously been recorded.

And it's a fascinating theory and it gets even more interesting when you pair it with a study that was published a week earlier, suggesting that even the modes of communication we tend to cling to, in this studies case, texting, are showing to be greater sources of stress as compared to traditional modes like a phone call. There are super interesting studies with theories worth considering, and I'll provide links later so you can take a look at them if you want to. Now all that's to say, we have to be diligent and aware of ourselves as much as possible, how we're feeling, what we're doing, how we're reacting or coping, and especially how we're treating others. And this isn't something unique to the time we're currently in or the shitty year that we've had. But it's especially important during times of continued fluctuation like we're experiencing right now.

I also saw something recently that I thought was worth sharing. It's a tweet from Writer and Actor, Brandon Kyle Goodman. And it reads, *"I told my friend that I'm emotionally hitting a wall. And she said, sometimes walls are there so we can lean on them and rest"*. I can't even begin to express how much I really needed to hear that. What's so interesting about this particular quote to me is how truly relatable it is and how fast we are to think we have to hurdle over that wall or just power through it. Instead of embracing some sort of period of rest. What's even more interesting is we don't treat other things in our lives with that power through mentality, right? When an engine is overheating or when your pasta is boiling over, you don't add more to the throttle or increase the heat you ease off. And you can already tell I'm not about empty platitudes or inspirational statements, but we are the floating neat through space-time version of a pressure cooker. You need to tangibly release that pressure or in this case stress over time, or you might literally explode. So, here's my challenge to you, find 30 to 60 minutes during your workday to do nothing. I know crazy, but what you're not realizing right now, and your conscious brain isn't acknowledging is that our subconscious brain never stops working. So, you know, if you're doing nothing, you're not actually doing nothing, right. But find 30 to 60 minutes on your calendar and block it off. And specifically, I do not mean your lunch hour, do this for a week. During that 30-to-60-minute period, go stare out a window, pet your dog, your cat, call a friend or a relative. Water your plants. Stand out in nature. Even if it's just your balcony. I promise you after one week, you'll start integrating this into your schedule long term. And why 30 to 60 minutes? Because initially it's going to look like this. You're going to feel empowered, right? Then you're gonna have mass panic that you're doing something illegal. You're just working and not doing anything, and you know, eating up your company's time. And then you're gonna pep talk yourself through that. Everything's going to be fine. Right? And then you're going to question, if anything in your life has really been fighting this far. And then you're going to stress drink your coffee until that time period is up. But over time and with practice, it'll look like this, right? Take a deep breath and make a snack. Then share that snack with your dog because dogs they'll stare out the window to get some fresh air. You'll appreciate that moment. And you'll ease back into work, right? You're never actually doing nothing. You're just easing up on the throttle or turning down the heat. Your mind, your body, and frankly, your coworkers will thank you.

There's one last quote that doesn't seem to have a definitive origin, but I really like it. And I think it's a nice way to wrap this up. It goes, *"Destroy the idea that you have to be constantly working or grinding in order to be successful. Embrace the concept that rest, recovery, and reflection are essential parts of the progress toward a successful and ultimately happy life. Nice, right?"*

The heart is an interesting organ because it controls a lot of things for you, but it can also be influenced by your behavior. If you treat it well, it'll treat you well. And by continually running through a process like the AFib process I showed you here, hopefully you can keep your stress at bay and live a happier, more fulfilling life.

Now I'd encourage you to dive into some of the articles I've linked here on this kind of collect-all. There are studies, there are statistics. I link off to many of the sources I use to generate the content for this deck that I've shown you today, as well as other interesting things I've found. The more we can collectively know, the better, because we can help each other to get through. Well, that's all I got. Thank you.

Amy

That was so good. It's funny, why do we feel like always have to be doing something? I love the idea like our subconscious never stops working. I love the 30-to-60-minute thing. I'm going to start taking a 60 minute walk every day, just to kind of chill a bit.

Taylor

Right. Separate it from the time you already bake in. Right. So, making sure it's not the lunch hour, it's not your morning coffee. It's gotta be an additional thing if you're just subbing stuff out. You're not doing yourself any favors.

Amy

It's hard to think about. And I know a lot of people are in this boat. I've said to my team often, it's like this past year, we have worked harder than we have previously just to get the same job done. Right? Get the same amount of work done and be as productive.

What other, what are some other strategies that you have? Like the 30-to-60-minute deal? Are there some other strategies, you can share with us? I'll get to the Q and A, but just that.

Taylor

Yeah. Well, I mean, frankly, best way I've been able to process it is that kind of AFib thing. Right. Just making sure you're asking yourself what's going on, you know, cutting out the, you don't need focusing on the things you need. Because I think what's often difficult is, the platitudes or the this is the process that helps people, like is often so convoluted and difficult to remember. You know, it's easy for me. My condition is also the, the acronym, right? So, it's an easy thing I can ping to all the time. But frankly, those simple things have been the best. But if you to get, I guess, an elaboration further I found that like being intentional about also taking breaks from the screen, right? Not taking all of the phone calls, you know, all of my calls for the day from a computer. If I can go call on the phone and just kinda like sit in the living room and not be staring at a screen. Initially helped with headaches, especially in the beginning of this full-time work from home thing. I think we don't really take into account, especially those of us who have family at home or kids, the amount of breaks that we actually took during the workday, from like getting up to use the bathroom, going to get water, you know, having a quick chat with a coworker, walking to lunch, like all of that time adds up to this 30 or 60 minute thing that I'm telling everybody to do, but we don't do it at home. Right. Because it's too easy to just keep going. It's too easy to use that as a distraction. So, you don't have to worry about all the other things that are going on in life.

Like for me, it was doubling down on work. Right. It was always my comfort space, but especially in times where like we are arguably confined to your workspace, to remember like work is not always the solution, you know, and it's always going to be there tomorrow or in an hour or a week from now. Right. But if you're burnt out, you know, and you can't process your own thoughts, you're no good to yourself or your team, right. You can't pour from an empty cup. So, it's really having the awareness to be able to set yourself back and go, I need to check myself, right. Or what's even better is to have like an

accountability buddy, right. If you have a close co-worker you're close with, or roommate, a spouse, whatever who can go, Hey, you know, I think you're a little over edge today, you know, and you being a conscientious person would go, ok maybe I need to think about that for a minute. Right. And address, because oftentimes, like I said, we power through, we just, we overwrite whatever we think is right in order to get the thing done. And it's a toxic trauma.

Amy

Yes, I love the accountability partner. In fact, I was just on a call earlier and some of my friends that I was on the call with, maybe on this one. But I literally just said that. We just keep going and doing, and just having somebody that holds us as accountable, not just to getting work done, but to, you know, taking a break. So, I love that idea.

Q&A

Q: HOW Design Online Attendees for Digital Session – read by Amy Conover, HOW Show Director

A: Taylor Cashdan

We have a couple of questions in here and please feel free to, to keep throwing some questions in there. We've got some time here for Taylor to answer them.

One of them, how did you approach your boss saying you needed less work or were overwhelmed?

Taylor

Yeah. So that, that's probably the most asked thing that comes from this. Cause it's easy to do that in your personal life. Right. but how do you, how do you tell your boss, like I'm overworked without feeling like you're like giving away like that you can't handle the workload or something. And, and I honestly, it's difficult. It's very difficult. I think what I leaned into for myself and I've worked in multiple places. Fidelity, for example, where I work now is really good about giving us, you know, the opportunity or the person to check in with. But you know, there's not every employer has that kind of accountability system or that, you know, you can call a safe space to be able to do that kind of check-in. But what was helpful for me at jobs that were less aware of that kind of thing was to start that list of the things I've finished and the things I have not yet got you.

And then really look at the timeline. You kind of have to be a project manager of yourself for a moment, like analyze the workload and that way you can tangibly bring it to your manager or your boss wherever, and go look, this is the amount of things going on. This is the amount of things that need to be done by the time, you know, this is done. We thought we can get this far. We've only got this far and I'm feeling taxed. I really want to get it done. Right. But there's, something's got to bend or break, or this isn't going to work. And to be frank, sometimes the answer is, well, we can't change anything. Right. That's, that's a very normal thing, especially in the marketing space. Like sometimes those, those timelines just aren't flexible. But what's important is even if you can't fix that particular instance, is raising that flag and going, Hey, next time we really can't do this. We'll set you up for the next one, right. Again, it's not always the thing that you could fix at the moment. And I'm very cognizant of that. There's sometimes deadlines are deadlines, right? But raising the awareness of it is just as important as getting the fixed up because you can start to log against, you know, this is the things that, you know, stacked up that made me feel stressed out or overwhelmed, and you can plan ahead for them in the future or better yet your manager, your boss, your, your coworker can help navigate through those things instead of them being stuck to you.

Amy

Good answer. I've got a question here from Sherry. This year has been so stressful based on what pressures we feel to produce more in less time. Do you have tips for how to broach this idea to coworkers / managers in the current situation? Feeling grateful I even have a job if that makes sense.

Taylor

So, I'll start with the latter. I feel that right. Grateful to have a job, because there's many that aren't in that same situation, there's many who got laid off furloughed, et cetera, who are in not-so-great situations, but I think it's important to remember the switch of that is you've also earned your spot at that job, right? Give yourself a little bit of credit. So, I'm going to start there and saying, you have a job because you're good at your job, right. And as long as you continue to perform at some level and be transparent, nothing's going to happen to you now, that's obviously not a guarantee. Things happen, layoffs happen or whatever, but I think what's weird about this whole pandemic time. And then all the, the roller coaster of emotion that was over the past year, year and a half. And what will probably last the rest of the year. It's really a good chance for us to reset a lot of the processes and things that we, what we once held normal. So, I would suggest like be parasitic, right, in the sense of like take advantage of this time to be able to raise these issues, to bring awareness to these things, because I guarantee you, you're not the only person feeling it. Right. And it takes a big person and a lot of balls, frankly, to be the first one to raise your hand. Right. But it's, it's crazy important. It's like the crux that will allow everyone else to take that breath themselves. And I guarantee that the moment you tell that to one of your teammates mates that you find comfortable and eventually maybe bring it to your manager. If it's someone you're comfortable with as well, you'll start to have that weight lifted off you. And it's a feeling like no other.

Amy

Okay, good. A lot of questions around this 30-to-60-minute break we're seeing. So, what happens if taking that 30 to 60 minute break leads to working frequent late nights? At what point do you just close the laptop and say enough is enough?

Taylor

I'll harken back a little bit to the point that the work will always be there tomorrow. Work is not going anywhere. You could die tomorrow, the wheels are going to keep. And it's a very somber way of thinking about it, but it helps me remember, like the stuff will literally be there later. Right. and I think it's also important to record, to recognize that, like what I mentioned earlier as well, like our brains are never not working just because you're not in front of the computer. You're not processing the stuff from the day or thinking through the problems you were dealing with. So, for me, I found you know, that it took a lot of trial and error to figure this out. But like I found that taking like an extra hour after lunch, while it's in the middle of the day, it's often nice out can get some fresh air and then maybe working an extra 30 to 60 minutes tops at the end of the day to kind of make up for that time in my head was the way I was able to process things quickly. But I think it's also important to remember that we're not factory workers, right. I'm going to assume that that the majority of folks on the call are not hourly employees. And if you are, I would argue, you could still do something like this, you know, just don't take advantage of it. But keeping track of time is important. But I think someone in the chat also said, work smart, not hard. There's an efficiency play there, right? Especially when you're planning projects or planning your day or whatever, you can have some days where you work a little longer and some days

where you don't right at some level, you have to trust yourself that you're going to get the thing done. You just need the time to process it appropriately. And the hard part about this is not all employers respond well to this kind of thing. So, if you're like me, you just got to try it, right? And then when you can prove that by structuring your schedule like this, that you can get the things done when you can prove that to yourself. That's why I suggest trying for a week before you get into a rhythm that you're going to realize that you're going to be just as productive, if not more productive by taking that break and not working that extra hour or that extra, you know, whatever to make up at the end of the day, because you're going to be able to really like allow your brain to rest and think more critically about the work you're doing. Now, I think the question also, I was talking about how do you not add time at the end of the day, if working a little bit later for you 30 minutes or so or adding that time back at the end of the day is the way you can process getting the work done fine.

But don't double that time. You know what I mean? Like if you, if you normally budget for, let's say budget eight hours of the day, and you want to work in an hour break in there somewhere fine work an hour later, right. It's taking the break. That's important. Allowing your brain to chill for a minute, giving yourself a pause that's separate from consuming food to survive.

Amy

Good. So, a couple more here. What were some signs that in retrospect you ignored, like looking back, what do you see now that you didn't see then that might be helpful to all of us?

Taylor

Yeah. And this is this one's hard because I don't think that, I hope not that everyone that may be experiencing this kind of stress is going to end up in the hospital. And there were no clear signs that were indicating that like, Hey, your heart is going to tell you that this is a problem, not your brain. Right. so, in that respect, it's kind of a crapshoot. However, what I did realize in retrospect is I was feeling every moment of every day. Right. whether it was, you know, I felt like I had to take advantage of like client work that I needed to do after the day job, I was taking a more responsible responsibilities at the day job, because I felt that's the way I could move you up, you know? And when you start to like, realize that your schedule is like Pat, Pat, Pat, Pat, Pat, all the way until like you eat dinner or go to bed, that's a pretty good sign that there's a problem. Because what I realized for myself is, I was packing the schedule with things, but it was also decreasing the quality that I was able to put out for those things. Right. Because it's just a time to task balance. So, I would argue if you're trying to figure out like, am I teetering on this high stress thing? Like pick a duration of time because it's easier to like, think about the, the study about yourself, right? Let's say a month, take a month where you don't take on freelance clients outside of your day job. Right. If that's not your day job, right. Or don't attend a webinar every afternoon for, for a duration of time, see how you feel, right. Everybody's going to be different. I think the, the crux is, like I said earlier, like during the being of this pandemic, like I leaned into work because it was the stable thing that was a distraction for me. And I knew that there was a danger of like, I could go back to my like bad habit of overwork, but there's a point at which you have to just be real with yourself and go, okay, I need to analyze this. Right. And self-study, and go for me, you know, it was, I'm going to work extra today and see how I feel. And then I'm going to work last next week and see how I feel. And then give myself some time to figure out whatever flow works for you. There is no clean-cut look for these 10 red flags kind of thing. With the exception of like, if you're not sleeping, if you're not eating, if you're tired all the time, like these things are obvious, you know, senses of like, you're not treating yourself well, right. You're, you're getting increased anxiety above what's normal for you as an individual. You know, those are all signs of something's got to give. It might be your work. It might be some other habits. It might be something else you're doing, but it's important to kind of like try and try

for a period of time to trim back. Those things. One day is not enough time to figure out if something you're changing is affecting, you know, your whole being, because you can just sleep well at night. Everything's fine. You know, so I'd say pick an amount of time try to trim stuff out, see if you feel better than when you did, when you have them and then adjust accordingly because your quality will increase when your quantity decreases.

Amy

One of your slides was about looking at your tasks and your people and your plan. So, it sounds like what you're saying here is it may not just be work. It may some of the people around you and situations you're in and I think looking a little more holistically. A lot of times, and a lot of it likely is work, but a lot of times it's all the factors maybe reaching ahead at the same time.

Taylor

Absolutely. And that's like I said, they're the position, that's the hardest part, right? Work's the easy thing to change, right? Because it's transactional, you put in hours, you know, you get money, it's harder to be like, you know, the person I'm hanging out with is toxic or, you know, my partner and I have been fighting, you know, or, or the stress of having to deal with teaching my children and working is too much. Right. Because some of these things feel like they're unchangeable, right. Where work is kind of the one like, Oh, I can, I can change that. I can change jobs, you know, whatever it is, the hard part is, is being able to address those. And again, it takes, it takes certain level of self-awareness to be able to go, you know, okay. Maybe it's XYZ thing, you know, it's not ABC thing. And then finding a way to approach that situation or that person or those people in a way that's constructive. Right. And not all people respond in the same way to those kinds of things. So, it does make it a little difficult, but again, that critical eye about like how you yourself are responding to stuff and how you're feeling is the first step to like being able to rationalize or fix things as you go.

You know, and I'm a list-maker. I'm that person that once I figure out something's happening to me, like the analog process of writing it down in a journal, right. Helps me process that emotion. And no one sees that journal. It's just for me. So sometimes it's just full of, you know, a string of curse words. If I'm feeling like or, you know, it's, it's happy things or whatever, but it's the manual recording that allows like my brain to feel like it's like getting it out. Right. And then I can read that back and go, okay. I was just overreacting or, Oh, this is a real thing that I need to figure out how to fix. Right. And it gives you some sort of quantifiable thing to look at and go, okay, so now I'm going to try and approach it this way, like for me, and I'm going to assume many of you on the color or designers are in the creative space. Like it's a design problem. Right. You have designed your life in some way. You can analyze it and adjust it. It's possible. You just have to find the right way to do that. And it takes time.

Amy

One last question. And I think you've kind of hit pieces of this, but knowing what you know now, how do you resist the urge to do it all? And we'll end with that one.

Taylor

I've found again, the, my quality of work changes. My quality of enjoyment in activities changes when I stack stuff too much. Now that's not to say that I don't do it, you know, anyway, sometimes you know what I mean? But I think now the difference is now that I know better, I can identify when it's

happening. Right. Or when I know like, like Mondays, for example I tend to dedicate Mondays after work to mentor. So, there's oftentimes on like Sunday or Tuesday where I'm like, ah. I know I have a really long Workday and I stack the evening with mentor stuff, but again, I committed to it. So, I was like, I know this is a thing. And I don't want to bail on the people that are looking to get help. And I can't bail on the projects at work. So, I'm going to have to power through for that specific day. But again, I think it's, timeboxing right. I'm recognizing like Monday is going to be, but it doesn't mean every day needs to be a repeat of that. So, it's like it's going to come and it's going to go. And being aware of it is the first step to any of this stuff. And so, I'm able to now go, okay, I know this Monday is going to be a problem. I need to be mindful and intentional to not repeat that over and over and over. And again, it's a process and it comes and goes, and it's a roller coaster and the pandemic hasn't made it easy. Cause like, how do you socialize now? Right? Like it's over video or at a distance, you know, outside when it's cold and rainy, it's hard to do any of that shit. And I'm like, when I'm staring at a computer all day or being at events like this, the last thing I want to do is get on a call with a friend afterwards. Right. It's just like, not that I don't want to see them, but it's exhausting. So, my normal modes of like decompressing no longer exist or harder. So again, it's all about that awareness. Right? I'm realizing that I can't do the thing I normally did. So, I gotta find something else. And I gotta make sure I don't fall into the trap that I've identified for myself as like I overwork when I'm stressed. And my hope is that my story, and this presentation we talked about might be the wakeup call for some of you guys. If it's something that you're resonating with, right. This may be the kind of the kick in the teeth you needed to go, Hey, look at your life a little bit. Look at your work style, look at your schedule. Maybe there's some things to give, right? Or some things you need to change so that you can either, 1 avoid the that I had to deal with or 2 just be happier. Right. Especially in a time like this,

Amy

I just saw Jason added to the, the audience chat, you know, we just, we have to set boundaries, we got to set boundaries. So many good points in this presentation, Taylor. Which is why I just appreciate you coming back and sharing all about stress addiction and how it can help us. Taylor, thanks again. And we will be working with you more. Appreciate your time!