

# How approaching burnout inspired my business

Recognising the signs of an imminent burnout in his career as a doctor led Dr Anas Nader, Co-founder and CEO of Patchwork, to identify clear problems in the rigid healthcare staffing model of the NHS and drove him to use innovation and technology to solve them. Patchwork now delivers empowerment, flexibility and a sustainable work-life balance for the doctors and medics on the frontline.

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When I stepped back from a career I'd spent over half my life preparing for, I was expecting my colleagues to be hurt, shocked, or even confused. However, rather than raised eyebrows and disappointment, my fellow doctors responded with empathy and understanding. Many privately expressed their own desire to escape the onerous and stressful working environment which had driven me to the brink of burnout; in hindsight, I shouldn't have been surprised.

Doctors go through their medical training being told to always put patients and their colleagues first and, for most, medicine is a vocation rather than simply a job. However, despite truly loving my role as a doctor, working full time as a medic is incredibly demanding and can take a mental and physical toll. As a junior doctor, I'd regularly work 13 hour night shifts with barely time for a cup of coffee, and my never-ending task list forced me to miss out on precious moments of human connection with patients and colleagues. And whilst it's

what you train for, the daily stress and exposure to human suffering would at times weigh me down.

What's more, whilst my friends in other careers were increasingly being encouraged to take control of their working hours – accommodating caring responsibilities, other professional interests, leisure time and family life – this just wasn't an option for those working within the rigid healthcare staffing model. I knew that a sustainable work-life balance was far out of my reach, and something had to give.

I felt like a phone with a broken battery – constantly running low on energy, at risk of crashing at any moment, unable to fully recharge during my infrequent breaks. As I struggled to find the energy to carry on in the job I loved, it became clear that I was on a fast-track to burnout – a dangerous mental and physical state triggered by the mismanagement of workplace stress, and a condition which I'd seen numerous colleagues succumb to.

But I refused to become just another statistic, another one of the thousands of doctors and nurses permanently exiting the NHS each year on account of overwork and stress. Instead, I set out to craft a solution to a problem plaguing the health services which I cared deeply about.

I decided to step back from the wards in order to dedicate my efforts to fixing the root cause of medic burnout: healthcare's outdated and unfit for purpose staffing model. In partnership with another passionate young doctor, I built Patchwork Health, a tech startup which supports hospital trusts recruitment and offers healthcare workers flexible shifts via a bespoke digital staff bank solution.

Driven by the same desire to help people and make a lasting difference to their wellbeing that inspired me to pursue medicine in the first place, I noticed my old energy levels and motivation quickly return. My own experience within the NHS helped me get the business going in earnest, as I was taken seriously by the hospital managers and healthcare workers I needed to win over. I knew what would and wouldn't work on the ground, and I understood the internal complexities of the problems which needed to be solved.

When it became clear that our technology could enable hospitals to dramatically expand their pool of reserve staff, and that these staff would be able to self-select their shifts via an app, our user base grew and grew. Administrators and clinicians alike began to celebrate their escape from the unpredictable tyranny of the centralised rota. We were delivering empowerment, flexibility and breathing space – the best antidotes to burnout available.

As I've worked to grow the business over the past few years, partnering with

NHS organisations up and down the country, I've learnt a thing or two about building a resilient, sustainable staffing system. If I were to choose some actionable pieces of advice to pass on to managers and employers in all sectors, I'd start with the following:

1. You need to collect, analyse and learn from your data. Only by securing visibility over shift patterns will you be able to predict and manage moments of increased demand and preemptively accommodate for this in your staffing plan. 360-degree visibility will also enable you to identify staff who might be at risk of burnout, and to target your support accordingly.
2. No one should feel irreplaceable. Of course your staff are individually valuable to you, but if they feel that they are holding too much weight on their shoulders then they may feel unable to take essential time off. Make sure that you have a robust system to bring on extra team members to provide support and cover.
3. Look to a tech driven solution. If you believe that it's impossible for you to make the changes which deliver empowerment to your team, it's more likely that you just haven't found the right tools. Keep searching for that perfect tech-driven solution – and if it really doesn't exist, set about creating your own. The costs may be high, but in the long term you'll recoup the money in enhanced productivity, improved staff health and reduced staff turnover.

When it comes to making these changes, start today. The COVID-19 crisis has laid bare the importance of building a resilient and adaptable workforce, and now more than ever we need to embrace the technologies which deliver flexibility and facilitate trust.

Finally, as you travel your professional journey, reframe your low moments, challenges or crises as valuable opportunities for growth and inspiration. It's only after you've experienced a problem that you'll really understand how to solve it, so stop expecting inspiration for that killer business plan to fall from the sky and start digging deeper into your everyday reality.

*Dr Anas Nader is an A&E doctor and the CEO & Co-Founder of Patchwork Health. He's committed to delivering digital solutions which revolutionise healthcare staffing and empower clinicians to work flexibly.*

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