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Gabriel Parisi-Amon, co-founder, CTO and COO of environmentally conscious shower startup, Nebia, bravely challenges the myth of “the perfect startup founder.” Parisi-Amon takes us on a journey through the seven stages of burnout he experienced in the early years of his startup, sharing how he’s emerged a more conscious and balanced leader. He offers tips and exercises for identifying the symptoms of burnout, urging us to prevent the fire before we’re consumed.



Transcript

- [Narrator] Who you are defines how you build.. - Sitting in this very lecture a decade ago, only in my wildest dreams could I have imagined being on stage one day.. I'm humbled to be here.. Thank you for having me.. Throughout the presentation, I'll refer to some resources.. I'll make them available to Tina.. And you can reach out to me and I'm happy to provide them.. I wanna start with the stories of two hardware founders.. The first hardware founder has degrees in engineering and an MBA from top schools.. He left the largest hardware company in the world in 2015 to co-found a startup whose goal was to make amazing products that truly made the world a better place..

He got into Y-Combinator and assembled a list of investors including some of the most prominent individuals in Silicon Valley.. The company launched one of the largest hardware campaigns in Kickstarter history.. He delivered a complex product that was made in the USA to over 46 countries.. 15 days after his 30th birthday, when the first commercial product shipped, he had accomplished one of the ultimate career goals in his life, taking a product from concept to mass production and into the hands of customers.. His company has shipped over 15,000 units and is currently working on some exciting future products.. The second Harvard founder also co-founded a company in 2015 and from day one has been plagued by doubts and fears of failure.. He spent months prototyping and fundraising for his company, trying to move the product forward, with a weekly crisis that looked like it would end the company for good.. He withdrew from everything except work.. He launched a product that was over-budget, eight months delayed, and took 15 grueling months of all-nighters and 80-hour work weeks.. 15 days after his 30th birthday, the day the first commercial product shipped, was one of the loneliest and emptiest days of his life..

This wasn't his bottom.. He burnt himself out so badly he spent a year gasping for air, emptiness relentlessly expanding, depressed, and for lack of a better work, broken.. He needed to take a leave of absence from his own company just to begin recovering.. His company has shipped over 15,000 units and is currently working on an exciting future product.. In case you didn't get it, these are the same founders.. The first story, the external story, and the second story, the internal story, are both true.. The gap, external versus internal, of fairytale from reality, is a gap where I burnt myself out in front of everyone that I worked with and interacted with.. This is my story.. When I started Nebia, I didn't know the second story could exist.. I never imagined my internal story would include me falling to pieces..

I never thought that something like that could happen to me.. With this presentation, I hope to eliminate this second story from the experience of all the founders in this room.. I hope to share with you how I got here and the concrete things I wish I would have known and done, and some things that I did do before I had this enormous fall, to avoid burning out.. I don't believe every founder's story is like this.. But from my discussions with past and present founders, I do believe there is a gap between the external and internal stories.. And within the gap lies the deepest personal struggles of a startup founder.. Before I delve in, I wanna preface what I'm about to say.. This is my story, the things that happened to me along the way.. It is shaped by a lot of factors, some I controlled and some I didn't.. I am white, male, whose parents prioritized education above all else..

I've been privileged in ways I will never know and never be able to truly appreciate.. And as such, it has shaped my story in ways that I'll never truly know.. You may be wondering, why should I care about this burnout stuff? Just because it happened

to other founders doesn't mean it's going to happen to me.. Well, let's take a look at what causes burnout.. There are a range of causes of burnout at work.. But the research shows these are the key ones: overcoming challenges with changing atmospheres, unrealistic deadlines, unpredictable schedules, physical demands, added responsibility without clear guidance, and difficult interpersonal demands with colleagues or customers.. And these are the characteristics of an early-stage startup.. Aside from physical demands, they are identical.. The environment of an early-stage startup is one of the ripest places for burnout, as is getting an advanced degree like a PhD or an MD, or going to work at a top company in an incredibly demanding role.. I know everyone in this room is interested in this world..

And it's an exciting world.. This why it is important for you to pay attention to yourself and to be aware and conscious of burnout.. We also need to define burnout.. It was not something I truly knew the definition of before I started scouring the internet to figure out what was wrong with me.. By stepping through the stages of burnout together, my hope is that you will recognize them in the future.. The fact that you are here means you are incredibly driven.. But that also means you are more likely to fall into burnout.. Burnout syndrome first appeared in the medical literature in the '70s.. But descriptions of the symptoms can be found throughout history, including the Old Testament.. In the early '80s, 12 stages of burnout were published..

I'll be using an abridged version of these to walk us through my experience.. You don't necessarily go through all of the stages, and they're not always linear.. But burnout usually starts with a compulsion to prove oneself and ends with depression, and eventually, burnout syndrome.. This is what happened to me.. The first stages of burnout were slow and insidious.. Looking back, I chalked them up to stress.. I kept getting wore.. But it wasn't that one day I was happy and the next day I was depressed.. I slowly got worse, day by day, sometimes hour by hour.. Sometimes I would feel joy or excitement just for a second..

And then I stopped feeling altogether, a small change from the day before but a monumental change from two years before.. I fell and fell.. And I ended up at the doorstep of the final stage of burnout: total mental and physical collapse.. What follows are the things I wish I would have known as a 27-year-old, before I started Nebia, the things I wish I was doing, the things I wish I was paying attention to, some things that I did well, and some things that I think saved me.. Stage one is the compulsion to prove oneself.. As I mentioned, the fact that you are here means you're incredibly driven.. But that also makes you more likely to start down the path of burnout.. And it starts with the compulsion to prove yourself, a desire to demonstrate your worth obsessively, proving it not just to others but to yourself.. I remember waling into Math 51 freshman year.. I was terrified, because my high school only taught AB Calc..

And although I tested into Math 51, I didn't know if I was prepared.. When I walked into the first lecture, there was someone I knew from my ME classes, so I decided to sit beside him.. He quickly said, I don't know if I should be in this class.. I smiled, huge grin, and I nodded.. I was like, yeah, me too.. He continued, I took Linear Algebra junior year of high school, and I crushed it, but I might need a refresher.. I was terrified.. I sat there and smiled, frozen.. Inside, all my fears were coming true.. I didn't deserve to be here..

I was in over my head.. Stanford made a mistake.. How am I going to be an ME major when everyone is years ahead of me? I don't remember that lecture at all.. But I remember how terrified was the entire time.. Turns out, I did deserve to be there.. I got through Math 51 and 52 and 53, kind of.. I graduated with an ME degree, came back for a master's.. I was a Mayfield Fellow.. It took some long nights and a ton of hard work, but Stanford didn't make a mistake.. And Stanford didn't make a mistake with anyone else..

You deserve to be here.. You deserve to sit across from a famous VC, or in the board room of a company when you get there.. Doubt will creep in, and you will wonder, what the hell am I doing here? I'm in over my head.. You are not.. You deserve to be here.. You deserve the opportunities that come your way.. Seize them.. This is an amazing place.. And although you deserve to be here, you can never forget how fortunate you are for the opportunities that you have.. When you forget that, you can become a person no one wants to work with..

You become the worst version of yourself.. When there's a fancy article written about you, when there's buzz all around what you're doing, don't drink your own Kool-Aid.. You are lucky to be here.. I worked hard to get to Stanford; long nights, studying, extra curricular, all that jazz.. Both my parents are immigrants.. My mom came to the US for grad school with a plan to return to Venezuela.. If you don't know the history of Venezuela, it used to be a pretty thriving, developed nation.. It's now a post-apocalyptic YA novel, where it's pretty hard to find toilet paper, let alone medicine.. I didn't do anything to convince by parents to leave their family and friends and stay in the US.. It wasn't my skills that convinced my parents to prioritize education above anything else..

I can give you 100 more examples just like this.. And I'm sure there's a thousand I don't even know.. So never forget how incredibly fortunate you are to be here.. And whenever possible, you should pay that good fortune forward with kindness and support of people who may not be so fortunate.. So what can you do about the doubt? The doubt goes by another name.. It's called imposter syndrome.. And it happens to a lot of people; people in Silicon Valley but in business, and also academia.. The first thing you can do to combat it is just recognize doubts.. You observe them, you're okay with them.. You don't need to prove 'em wrong..

You don't need to work 100 hours a week.. You just notice they come up, and you observe what triggers them.. Second, a little bit of positive self-talk goes really far.. We're often hardest on ourselves.. When you catch that voice in your head beating yourself up, just stop it.. Imagine you were giving your best friend advice.. I guarantee you wouldn't be so mean to him.. And lastly, put one foot in front of the other.. Start doing that thing that terrifies you, that you doubt you can do.. You will notice two things..

One, you can do it.. And two, everyone else is kind of full of shit, too.. They're just learning as they go.. And to ensure you don't let this stuff get to your head, you don't drink your own Kool-Aid, make sure your friends are the ones who were around before you were a famous co-founder or there was TechCrunch articles written about you.. And make sure they call you on your BS.. Stage two involves working harder with the inability to stop.. Many things contribute to burnout.. But the biggest volume item is what you do at work.. And it's also the key place you see the effects of burnout.. There will always be more work to do at a startup than you have time to do..

If you don't prioritize and personally understand what work you should be doing, you will work harder and longer until you can no longer do anything.. This is burnout in a nutshell.. I wanna focus on how you prioritize work and figure out what work you should be doing.. I wore several hats at Nebia.. I started off doing R&D, and then engineering, and then operations.. As we grew, I started to manage the R&D team and manage the engineering teams.. However, no matter how far I fell, how burnt out I got, I never hired an operations team.. And that was a huge mistake.. At Apple, I was a global supply manager.. The role involved solving hard problems on how to make a million of a certain part a day..

It also involved negotiating and pushing vendors.. Because I did it at Apple, I did it at Nebia.. What I didn't realize is I really hated a large part of that role.. I loved solving problems, but I really hated negotiating and pushing vendors.. I could have hired someone to do it and managed them.. However, I had so many other things on my plate, so many other things I needed help with, I didn't, I just did it myself.. It was a full-time job.. We had two dozen vendors and hundreds of parts.. The frustrations, constantly pushing, pleading, arguing with vendors, quickly pulled me down the path of burnout.. On top of that, I ended up doing it pretty badly..

Looking back, my mistake wasn't doing a full-time role on the side of my management responsibilities.. Although, I really don't recommend doing that if you can avoid it.. My mistake was that the role was life-draining instead of life-giving.. There are some things, even really hard things, that energize you and they give you life.. That is where you wanna spend your time as much as possible.. So what can you do? First, let's talk about prioritization.. You can do a million things at a startup and there will always be more things to do, especially if things are going well.. The opportunities will flood in.. If you try to do them all, you will fail.. You need to focus..

You need to decide what are Nice to Haves and what are Need to Haves.. Focus on the Need to Haves.. The bells and whistles of a product, meeting a C-level celebrity, hiring your second barista, these are Nice to Haves.. If you have the bandwidth, do them.. But first do the Need to Haves.. Nice versus Need to Haves also help you align everyone.. Some people may disagree on what is needed and what is nice.. That's fine, that's actually good.. You should debate it.. And you don't leave until you're in agreement..

But getting agreement amongst founders and amongst your team, you are all aligned in what to prioritize and the direction to go in.. Once you finish all the Need to Haves, feel free to do all the Nice to Haves.. Second, I wanna talk about your role.. How do you find the correct one? To be clear, your role will change over time in a startup.. It will evolve based on the needs of the company and your skills.. This framework is one way to look at where you should be spending time.. As Tina mentioned, I went to business school.. It's mandatory to have a two by two in presentation you do if you go to business school.. I actually think this one's useful, though.. So bear with me..

The x-axis is passion for your work.. And the y-axis is ability.. So ability, pretty straightforward: Are you good at it? Can you do it well? Passion goes back to that life-giving versus life-taking.. When you are passionate about it, it inspires you every day.. You get up in the morning excited.. The day kind of flies by.. That's where you wanna be spending time.. Let's start in the bottom left, things you don't like to do and are bad at.. I think it's obvious, but you shouldn't do these things.. You should find a co-founder who you trust and you get along, and they should do these things..

If you don't have a co-founder and this is an important role, you should hire an executive to do it.. The key here is you're not gonna wanna manage this closely.. You're not gonna wanna kind of dive into it.. 'Cause you don't like it, and you're not good at it.. Going to the bottom right quadrant, there are things you like to do but you are bad at.. This is where you should invest in yourself.. In a few moments, I'm gonna talk about learning and how you learn better.. This is where you should apply that process.. Read books, talk to people, work on it.. Take the time to make yourself better, and in turn, you'll make your company better..

This is my ballpark estimate, but you should spend 75% of your time in that top right quadrant.. This is the stuff that you're good at and you like to do.. Because you're at a startup, you'll actually have to continually hand off things in this top right quadrant.. It's fine, it's part of the game.. As you grow, you won't be able to do everything.. The key is you should be back-filling with things that you like to do and you're good at.. Lastly, I wanna talk about the most dangerous quadrant for burnout:

good at but dislike doing.. This is where I burnt out.. In this quadrant, you wanna hire someone to do this role.. You're perfectly suited to do that..

You know how to do it, so can manage them.. And you don't like it, so you're gonna be nostalgic and wanna take it back over.. That said, it's really hard.. Things are moving fast, and there's about a thousand things you need to do.. And because you're good at it, you're like, you know what, I'll just take care of it.. Don't do that.. Invest in other people for this quadrant.. Find someone who loves this role, train them, work with them.. Make them better than you are, or you were ever, at this role.. In stage three, you start neglecting your basic personal needs..

When you are stressed and starting to slide down the slippery slope of burnout, it is incredibly easy to neglect your most fundamental needs.. You can't.. It's a recipe to accelerate down that slope.. In early 2017, I knew something was wrong with me, but I didn't know what to do.. I didn't know why, but I realized I wasn't myself.. Usually, I was productive, fun-loving, social.. I found that by the afternoon, I would sit in front of my computer frozen.. Anxious, I couldn't process email.. Simple decisions felt like life or death.. I was paralyzed by the most basic choices..

And complex, important ones, like reliability issues, cost issues, engineering challenges, felt impossible.. On top of that, I really didn't wanna see other human being, which makes you a pretty bad boss.. Week by week, I found that it would hit me earlier and earlier in the day.. First the anxiety was overwhelming at two, and then at one, and then at noon.. You get the drift.. I didn't know how I could get better, but I knew I had to try something.. So when a friend drew a triangle on the board, he asked me how I was doing with sleep, diet, and exercise.. I hadn't thought about those three things in probably a year, maybe longer.. But I was willing to try anything, so I started prioritizing sleep, food, and working out.. When I was doing each one perfectly, I could function again 'til 1:00 p.m..

Two days of bad sleep, three days of eating only burritos, I was back to getting crushed by 10:00 a.m.. When I caught this, I would focus again.. I would work on my sleep, make sure that I was eating healthy.. And I'd get back to 1:00 p.m.. It didn't reverse my symptoms, but it did allow me to function a little better every day.. And it bought me time to figure out how to fix myself.. Don't worry, I'm not here to reteach you fifth grade health class.. But I will say that the fundamentals are really important.. In case, the burnout fundamentals are your physical health, a three-legged stool: diet, sleep, exercise.. Nailing this alone won't stop you from burning out, but it will delay it..

It can give you enough time to course-correct early in the first stages instead of the doorstep of collapse.. The thing about these three pillars of physical health is you can neglect them for a couple weeks, and you don't realize there's ramifications.. But eventually, it'll catch up with you.. You skip a workout to get more work done, you eat burritos three days in a row, before you know it, your energy's lower, and it's harder to concentrate.. To compensate, you skip the next workout, you sleep an hour less, and eat another few burritos.. You get the picture.. I'm not saying you shouldn't pull an all-nighter or skip a workout when there's an emergency.. These things happen.. But when they do, you need to lean really hard on the other two legs of the stool and get back to normal as soon as possible.. If you don't, you will slowly deteriorate, first physically and then mentally..

Right now, I bet you can go to the French House 'til 2:00 a.m., get back, turn in that problem set at eight, go to class at 11, and still feel fine.. Just remember that you have the opportunity to nap all afternoon and recuperate, even though that's not necessarily what you think you're doing.. So right now, when you have the time, figure out how much sleep you need.. You can take Sleep and Dreams.. They'll teach you all about it and give you three units.. Figure out what food works for you, what diet is healthy.. And figure out what exercise motivates and energizes you.. You're gonna see exercise come up a bunch more times in this presentation.. It's not just about physical health.. Look, this may seem pretty boring right now, but this stuff becomes more important as you get older..

I sat in this seat 10 years ago, and I called bullshit on very similar recommendations.. I felt invincible.. But it'll matter more and more.. So all I'm saying is pay attention to it.. Do yourself that favor.. At stage four, you start to revise your values.. When you get into the heart of burnout, you start to sacrifice things and make decisions you would have never made.. You start to revise what is important to you.. Things outside work start to disappear.. You prioritize work above all else, at the expense of everything else..

Our product had been delayed again.. We were all ready to start shipping in November, and one cosmetic part was messed up.. We were going to be delayed months for one nonfunctional part.. So over the 2016 Christmas vacation, my family, who has been incredibly supportive, decided to do a holiday in Sonoma so I could be close to the office.. Even though I hadn't had a vacation in a year, I worked every day of break.. I was possibly the worst, son, brother, and boyfriend in the history of a Christmas vacation.. All I thought about was shipping a product, getting it out the door.. I was sure that shipping it would fix everything.. Spoiler alert: it didn't.. (chuckles) A few weeks after Christmas was my 30th birthday..

I didn't wanna do anything.. I needed to work, I needed to ship my product.. My girlfriend insisted on taking me on a long weekend to celebrate and actually get away.. We went up north for three days.. I insisted I couldn't, I needed to work.. She insisted more.. I remember driving to Mendocino, terrified that we weren't gonna ship the product, asking myself, what the hell was I doing taking the weekend off? We got to the hotel and she went to check in.. She called my cell and told me I had to

come in to sign some papers.. I walked into the lobby and I stopped.. Everyone in the lobby was looking at me..

It seemed kind of odd.. Then I noticed a close friend from San Francisco.. What a coincidence that he would be here, too.. But I guessed it was a long weekend.. Then I noticed someone else I knew, one of my best friends from high school.. Then I realized that I knew everyone.. Standing around the lobby were my best friends, from preschool all the way to business school, the people who I loved more than anyone else in the world.. My girlfriend and sister had been planning this party for six months.. I obviously clueless.. And my friends flew in from all over the US to surprise me..

I was speechless.. It was one of the best weekends of my life.. I turned off my phone for more than a few hours, probably for the first time in a year.. Over that weekend, I realized I hadn't seen some of those people in a couple of years.. Two friends whose wedding I officiated, I hadn't seen since the wedding.. It wasn't a few months before, let's just put it like that.. (sighs) Throughout life, I valued my friends more than anything, and I had completely abandoned that value.. I didn't recognize the person who stood there shocked by surprise in front of all his friends.. I hated the person I had become.. Burnout had revised my values..

They were reduced to one: work.. All I valued was shipping a shower.. What had happened to me? While some habits like how much sleep you need may change, your values shouldn't, not without serious consideration.. Before you become a founder, you need to know your values and why you are starting a company.. The solution to not letting this happen to you is to define, explicitly, your values so you can revisit them often.. My recommendation is to do this for yourself the way the best companies do.. You define your values, your mission, and your vision.. There are many ways to define your values.. You can look up a list of 100 online and pick five to seven that resonate with you.. The way I used was, whenever I saw a quote that resonated with me, I put it in a list..

Eventually, that list got to be about 100 quotes.. And I went through them, and I characterized them by values.. I ended up with seven primary values and five secondary values.. Keep in mind that these aren't static concepts.. You need to revisit them often.. Eventually, they may change.. But they should change with deliberate consideration.. After defining your personal mission, values, and vision, you need to consider if they are compatible with founding a company.. So looking at your values, you must answer question, why am I doing a startup? If the answer is to make money, don't.. I cannot stress this enough..

Your highest net present value as a worker is at Goldman Sachs, McKinsey, Apple.. Many other companies will pay you a ton of money to work there.. You'll do awesome stuff.. It's not a bad place.. I recommend it.. In the long run, your NPV will be much higher working for these guys than a startup.. Of course there's outliers.. But they're just that: outliers.. Everyone here understands statistics.. You how that works..

There are good reasons to start a company, but you need to understand your reasons.. Why do this thing you wanna do in the hardest possible way? Because that's what you're doing.. If you wanna build hardware, there are companies that do that.. You don't have to do it from scratch.. If you wanna save the world, many places are doing that 100 different ways.. Go join those companies.. Only do a startup if you are convinced it is the only way to achieve your dream.. And then make sure its mission, its visions, and its values align with yours.. By stage five, denial, problems, and displacement of conflicts, you've diverged completely from that first stage, the compulsion to prove yourself.. You're panicky, you're short-tempered..

You see everyone else as falling short of what they should be doing.. And you bring aggression and cynicism to every contact you have.. Nothing is your fault, the world is to blame.. As I mentioned, I'd taken very little vacation at Nebia.. And I was actually even worse before.. I left Apple having used one vacation or sick day in my entire tenure.. The lack of unplugging was a key factor in my descent to burnout.. That Christmas vacation where I worked every day and was a terrible son, brother, and boyfriend? I ended up returning just as frustrated, empty, and destroyed as ever.. It was the worst of all worlds.. People describe a startup as a marathon, not a sprint..

And I completely agree.. When you run a marathon, you take water at mile three even though you're not thirsty.. You don't take water at mile three so you can run mile four super fast.. You take it so you can survive and thrive at mile 23 when your legs are shaky and your knee hurts and your brain is screaming stop.. At a startup, you take a three-day weekend in month five, not so you can perform in month six, you take it so that at month 18 or month 36, when your funding is running short, your product is delayed, and you just lost a key employee, you can sit down clear-headed, form an action plan, and go execute.. By this point, without vacations or time to reflect, I'd become a pretty miserable coworker, friend, and significant other.. Although I'd barely held it together with my team, I lashed out at my co-founders whenever I thought they did something wrong.. Instead of trying to understand a problem and troubleshoot, I would get angry and launch blame.. My friends had to listen to endless complaints about vendors, engineering challenges, and everything else that was eating me up.. In March of 2017, two months after we started shipping Nebias, two months after everything was supposed to be fixed, I finally took a vacation..

Took 10 days, went away, spent a little time alone.. I read, slept, exercised.. But above all, I reflected.. I spent time with myself, the part of me that was unhappy, the part of me that was broken.. It was a turning point.. I realized I had to do something.. I finally started to brainstorm what.. It still took six months from there for me to take a leave of absence.. How do

you avoid getting to where I did? You get to know yourself.. Knowing yourself means understanding the behaviors and emotions that are going through you right now..

Unlike values, which you set and rarely change, these are ever-changing, and understanding them is key to responding to them instead of just reacting.. This is probably the most important thing that you can do to stop yourself from sliding down the slippery slope of burnout.. My recommendation, and what I wish I did, was find out where and how to best listen to your deepest thoughts; the thoughts that get hidden by the urgency of work, social life, bills, and everything else that always takes precedent.. I wanna be clear, these are not the voices in your head that beat you up with doubts, or obsess on conversations of the past or problems of the future.. This is past that.. This is the part of you that truly understands how you are feeling and what you want.. If you don't carve our time to reflect and connect with this side of you, you will start to make rudderless decisions.. And no matter how hard you work, you will not end up where you are trying to go.. People do different things to listen to themselves; run, meditate, pray, hike, list goes on.. I can't tell you what to do or what will work for you..

You need to find that for yourself.. But find out what combination of activities, on a weekly or daily basis, allow you to listen to yourself.. I can't stress this enough.. Having these places, activities, and times is a real game-changer.. Furthermore, there are several specific situations where getting to know yourself pays huge dividends in a startup and in avoiding burnout.. One of these situations is how you deal with stress.. Startups are stressful.. You're trying to create something from nothing.. You have to deal with every type of problem under the sun, problems you never expected to deal with when you started a company.. There will be stress..

Knowing how you deal with stress in a healthy way is going to be key.. In my early stages of burnout, all of my symptoms seemed like stress.. But I didn't have an effective way to consistently deal with it.. I'd get to a breaking point and lash out, or I'd go home and allow a bad mood to permeate everything.. I was not exactly a fun person to be around.. This is not an exhaustive list of activities that may help you deal with stress, but there are some ideas here.. You need to figure out what works for you.. As you develop your own process to deal with stress, keep in mind, you wanna deal with it in a healthy way.. Even originally healthy stress solutions can turn pretty unhealthy.. So going for a run every time you're anxious is awesome..

It's a great way to deal with stress.. Running a marathon every time you have a bad day will probably end up killing you.. Going out with drinks with friends, great way to unwind.. Having 12 drinks with friends every time you have a bad day also will probably kill you.. Find out what works for you.. Give yourself the slack, both in terms of your schedule and your life, to go do them.. I'm gonna quickly go through some of the other things you should know, or know about yourself, before you do a startup.. You should know how you learn.. You should know how you take feedback.. You should know how you have hard conversations..

You should know how you deal with unexpected problems.. I know what you're gonna say.. I got into Stanford, I learn pretty damn well.. And I'm sure that's true, especially when it comes to standardized tests and 10-week courses.. Startups are anything but standard.. And the only startups I know that are 10 weeks long failed.. Part of founding a startup is learning new skills.. Because you'll not have all the skills you need on day one.. Do you know how you learn outside of school? Do you read books, search Google, talk to people, learn by doing? Most likely it's a combination of these things in a specific order.. Do yourself a favor, know how you learn new skills so when you have to, you can just go apply it..

Similarly, how do you take feedback from people? Because there's a lot of feedback in a startup; feedback from co-founders, feedback from investors, employees, customers.. Some of it's good, some of it's bad.. I can tell you that I have had many customers walk out of a shower and tell me that they just showered in the worst thing that they had ever experienced.. That's crappy feedback, and it hurts.. And if I would have taken that and gone home and just been like, well, no one likes this, I should stop doing it, we wouldn't have 15,000 units in the field.. Also, when someone comes out and is like, oh, that's perfect, you don't need to do anything else, you probably also need to be like, huh, is this one person's idea? Is this everyone's? Just figure out how you take feedback.. Figure out how you're gonna implement that feedback.. Conversely, how do you give feedback; mainly, have difficult conversations.. You need to learn how to have these conversations.. If you don't, if you don't learn that skill, small, not big problems turn into startup-stopping problems..

They balloon, they make life a lot more difficult, and eventually, they lead to burnout.. Lastly, startups are just a series of unexpected issues.. On day one, you will never predict what will happen on day 15, let alone year two.. How do you deal with problems that come up and are unexpected? Do you have a process? My stage six, withdrawal, emptiness, and collapse, combined several of the final academic stages of burnout.. This is where life really starts to unravel, where all of what we have talked about catches up to you in a way that you can't begin to deal with alone.. These stages are where people turn to unhealthy and dangerous responses, like drinking and drugs, to numb the pain and emptiness; where if things go unstopped, you collapse, both physically and mentally; where you end up in the darkest of places.. This section will not follow the normal cadence of the other sections.. The truth is these stages are messy.. And while I have a lot of tactical advice for the first stages of burnout, I have no frameworks that work for these next ones.. At this stage, you're not functioning or logical, you're lost..

I was broken.. This section involves investments you made years earlier.. It involves the people in your life.. You can't build these relationships once you get to this stage.. They need to have already been there.. You need to be cultivating these your

entire life.. Some of the best ETLs talk about the importance of people in your company; co-founders, hires, et cetera.. I could not agree more.. The people you work with at a startup are among the most more decisions you will make.. Listen to those ETLs..

They nail it.. I wanna talk about the people who aren't on your corporate website, the people who made a difference for me; the difference between walking away from Nebia, from SF, from life as I knew it; the people who peeled me off the floor when I was sick to my stomach, tired, angry, broken.. Those people are rarely on your cap table or your board.. They never have a photo on the About Me page of your company.. They are your real friends and mentors, the ones you were born with, the ones you grew up with, the ones who are sitting beside you right now, and the ones who you will meet along the journey who have helped you without any ask in return.. They don't just email you when you hit \$3 million on Kickstarter or you appear in Forbes 30 Under 30.. They email you when they haven't heard from you in awhile.. They pick up the phone when you call at 10:00 a.m.. on a workday because you've been outside crying in a park outside your office.. They help you get out of bed when you wake up nauseous for the 18th day in a row and you don't know how you're gonna eat enough to survive, let alone go to work..

They are the unsung heroes of every founder's success story.. The first set of these people are mentors.. I both screwed this up royally and nailed it.. Several times, people offered to help, and I was too embarrassed to take it, often where I was weakest.. I thought, because of my degrees and experience, I should be able to do this alone.. I was wrong.. I learned things the hard way.. I made mistakes I could have avoided, because I was too proud to take help.. Please don't make this mistake.. Mentors are people who have been there..

They don't have to, and probably shouldn't, be famous.. But they need to care and understand what you are going through.. They are founts of wisdom, but also hard truths.. They encourage you, and they reality-check you.. Most of all, they don't ask for anything in return, except maybe to pay this kindness forward.. I've been fortunate to have half a dozen people who have done this for me.. And they blur into my friends.. One particular mentor is a former Mayfield Fellow, someone who, every time I walk out of a meeting with him, I feel inspired and ready to execute.. He's a rare balance of exceptional intellect and profound emotional intelligence.. I could spend the rest of the talk sharing just a fraction of what he's taught me..

But I won't.. I will discuss the most important meeting I ever had with him, which is why I'm giving this presentation today.. It was when I finally got the nerve to tell him I was burnt out and I needed a break, and how embarrassed I was that I failed.. And his response, without the least bit of hesitation, or anger, because he was also an investor, was, I'm not surprised this happened.. Many people go through this.. You didn't fail.. He then shared a story with me of someone everyone in this auditorium would recognize, who also had to take some time off.. He told me I should take the time I need, that he thought that I'd come back and be stronger, but if I didn't, that was okay, too.. That night, for the time in a year, the weight on my chest felt lighter instead of heavier.. Three weeks later, I took my leave of absence..

There is one place where I hit a home run, partly due to luck and partly due to my value of friendship, in dealing and preparing for a burnout.. It was the network of people who surrounded me.. I can say, without a doubt, I wouldn't be standing here today, still struggling but making it through, without the friends from throughout life, some who sat beside me in this very lecture, some of which I've known since I was two.. When the stress of trying to ship a physical product that was over-budget and not working forced me to leave the office at 10:00 a.m.. and go for a walk so I wouldn't break down in front of my team, I called a Stanford friend.. When I was missing the Stanford football game because I had an employee breaking down, threatening to quit, I used his bedroom to take the call, and then we got a burrito and a beer, and he listened to me vent.. When I couldn't get up in morning because I was so nauseous about having to deal with dozens of vendors who wanted to know when we were gonna start building units for the millions of dollars of parts they had already made, it was my significant other who helped me make it through, one day at a time.. When I thought I couldn't take the weight of expectations, the team that depended on me, the customers who were demanding their delayed product, the investors who had invested millions, it was my sister, with the compassion of someone who loves you as much as they love themselves, who listened to me and helped me make it through.. Andreina, Dan, Andrew, Andrew, Lindsey, Sara, mom, dad, Richard, Josh, Scott, all of the people on this slide behind me, they're the reason I came back from the brink, from the darkest place I've ever been.. And I wish I could tell you I was all fixed, that I was back to 100%..

I'm not, but I am working at it.. There are costs to doing a startup.. I mentioned opportunity cost of salary.. But more importantly, there is an opportunity cost in life.. Things outside of work get crowded out.. And if you're not careful, some go to zero.. When you burn out, they all go to zero.. My friends, some time off, and some tough choices helped me pull back from the ledge, back to a place where I can function, contribute, and get stronger.. But opportunities, and more importantly, relationships, were lost along the way; opportunities that I missed, ignored or blew up, and most sadly, people who had to share too much of the burden of a startup, of the burnout.. These lessons aren't easy for me to share..

I wish, beyond anything, I could go back and teach my 27-year-old self these lessons.. I hope that when you start to slide down the slippery slope of burnout, you can recognize it and use it to pull yourself out.. Or if you're fortunate enough to never be there, you can recognize it in a friend, and you can pull them out.. In stage seven, recovery from burnout depends on how far you've fallen.. A long vacation with some structural life changes could be enough, if you catch it early, or a leave of absence with some pretty monumental changes, if you catch it late.. If you don't catch it at all, it can end you up in a hospital

or worse.. My road back started with small things, like the health triangle I showed you.. Then I started to let friends and mentors in.. And I started to see a therapist.. These things helped, but it didn't reverse my slide I eventually took a leave of absence and stepped away completely..

I didn't know if I was gonna come back.. During my first month, I didn't think I would return to SF period, let alone Nebia.. I spent my leave of absence visiting friends I hadn't seen in a long time and soul searching.. Although it sounds like a vacation, it was brutally hard for me.. I spend some nights doubled over with anxiety.. But then I spent some nights truly relaxed, without a million thoughts racing through my head at all times.. I got excited by something I saw or ate, or a discussion I had.. And then it happened again.. I visited a new place and saw old friends.. And sparks of excitement that I hadn't felt in years returned..

I spent time with amazing people, in amazing places.. I bungee jumped off a bridge for good measure.. I realized I wanted to come back.. I had things I wanted to prove to myself.. But more than that, I wanted to come back to SF and Nebia to contribute and continue my journey.. But before I returned, I did all the tactical things I mentioned above and some others.. I found a new therapist as soon as I got back to SF.. I started doing yoga, as well as running, sometimes during the day.. That's when having a shower company comes in really handy.. I track my exercise, my sleep, and my diet..

I review my values quarterly.. I make sure I'm spending time on things outside of work.. I also took 10 days to do a silent meditation retreat, one of the ways I'm trying to quiet the many thoughts in my head and deal with stress.. All of these things have been instrumental in coming back.. For the first time, a few weeks ago, I was walking and I broke out into an ear-to-ear grin, teeth-showing, cheek muscle-hurting grin.. I cannot remember the last time that happened.. It was years ago.. Although I'm not 100%, I'm getting there, day by day, sometimes hours by hour.. I'm getting to be my old self.. Well, actually a new self, with my old excitement and a little more wisdom..

I hope that sharing my experience will help someone avoid the pitfalls that I have had.. Or perhaps you will notice them in a friend.. If I can ever be of help, please don't hesitate to reach out.. Thank you.. (audience applauding) I think it's time for questions.. But I'm not sure if you guys were expecting that.. So, Tina? - [Tina] Thank you, first, I'll thank you so much for sharing your experience.. I mean, it's really, really, really powerful.. What could someone have said to you when you were sitting in this room that you could really believe this? Because it's super easy, when you're a student and you feel invincible, to think that this won't happen to you.. - Absolutely..

Well, part of that whole speech was what I wished someone would have said to me 10 years ago.. So hopefully some of it resonated.. I think the truth is I never expected this to happen to me.. I never thought it could happen to me.. You know, when little things went wrong, or when I lashed out at someone I didn't lash out at before, or my friends wanted to spend less time with me, it's really easy to chalk that up to basic things that don't have to do with you.. But if you spend the little time kind of reflecting, you realize it is you.. I would be surprised if there wasn't something in this speech, imposter syndrome, lashing out at someone because you didn't sleep enough or you weren't exercising, that didn't kind of tickle the back of your head and say, huh, that happened to me before, even now when you're young and healthy.. It's like that but a thousand times worse when you get burnt out.. You know that week after finals, when you're finally starting to unwind, but you go home and your mom's like, do want something to eat, and you snap at her? It's that but a million times worse.. So hopefully that's a little bit of a warning that you guys can realize in the future..

- [Tina] Well said.. - Yeah.. - [Tina] So what could you do as a leader of a company to create a culture that this doesn't happen? - Absolutely, I think that's an awesome question.. The first thing I did is, when I took a leave of absence, I got up in front of the entire company and I told them why, told them what was going on with me.. And it allowed for a place to have these discussions, to talk about why things were hard and what things were making my life more difficult at work and outside of work.. And I think the most important thing is being able to have a culture where you can talk about things like this.. But also, I mean, best practices for being a manager; having one-on-ones.. What you're trying to get at in a one-on-one is, where is that person in front of you mentally? It's not how good are they doing their work.. Those are other meetings.. In a one-on-one, what you should be figuring out is, is this employee at risk of burning out? Are the other things in their life going on that I should be worried about, that I should be helping them with? That's incredibly important..

If you're not sitting down with employees regularly to have those one-on-ones, you're gonna miss that.. And before you know it, they're gonna burn out.. As a boss, and I've gone back and forth on this, but I think you can tell an employee, hey, you should take time off.. You need to unplug a little bit.. And I think that's incredibly healthy.. Yeah? - [Man] So, I've come to these talks for VCs talkin' about what the ultimate CEO is and what they're looking for.. And it sounds like they're lookin' for somebody that's ready to burn themselves out.. - Yeah.. - [Woman] Can you repeat that? - Yes, so, the question was that, a lot of VCs who come and speak at ETL, the optimum CEO is someone who is ready to burn themselves out.. My pushback on that would be, you're asking for some pretty bad things to happen if that's what you really want..

I think that's a great way to get 18 months of incredible work out of someone, and then watch them crash and burn.. I think that if a VC is really trying to build a company for the longterm, they want someone who won't burn themselves out.. It doesn't mean that you're not gonna work incredibly hard at times.. That's just a given in a startup.. But you need to be able to have the balance.. You need to be able to know that, yeah, you're doing 80 hour weeks for a month, and then you're gonna

stay away for a week.. - [Tina] Any more questions? - [Man] Yes.. So, that's a really interesting perspective as you look at the misaligned goals of an entrepreneur and a venture capitalist, right.. So a venture capitalist is strictly, all they really care about at the end of the day is the return.. What's missing on all of this, which you've so eloquently captured, is being a human being, and a human element of that..

And I don't think you're gonna get that from the VC world.. But as you stand here today with this incredible story and these incredible perspectives, what types of structures or bumper guards do you think future entrepreneurs or companies should be starting to put in place, knowing, I'm a recovering founder myself.. So what you've highlighted is, it's gonna touch anyone that wants to enter this space.. So think about that having this foresight.. If you were starting another company, what would you do, anything differently, to charge the leadership team to anticipate what's gonna happen down the road, the train wreck down the road? - Absolutely.. - Can you repeat it? - Yeah.. So, in short, essentially, if I was gonna start another company, what would I put in place to make sure this doesn't happen to me and to everyone else in the company.. I think on the very earliest levels, going back to that two by two, and really making sure that the role that people are doing is a role that is life-giving, that they enjoy doing and they're good at or they're learning it.. There will be times when you're in a quadrant that you don't wanna be in.. That just part of a startup..

But you need to be really aware and be like, all right, for a month, we're gonna ask you to do this thing that you're good at but you don't like doing, but we're gonna find someone else.. Making sure you're checking in regularly, both above and below you, but also horizontally, checking in with your co-founders, checking in with the people who don't report directly to you.. I think, you know, I made this mistake.. My co-founder often wanted to do retreats.. And I was like, how are we gonna do a retreat? We're eight months delayed on this product.. And you need to put those things that are incredibly important, those longterm strategy things, and there's strategy company things, like where do we wanna be in three years, and there's longterm important things, like how do we keep a company healthy, and you need to prioritize those ahead of just the urgent things.. 'Cause the urgent things always feel like, you need to go do these.. If you do the urgent things but not the important longterm things, you're gonna fail.. And that's both in terms of strategy and human capital.. - [Tina] This has been incredibly important..

Please join me in thanking Gabriel again.. (audience applauding) (stirring music)..