

# EP 79 - Jennifer Moss - Employee Burnout is Real! - Secrets to Motivation and Retention

**Mitch Simon:** Welcome to another episode of Team Anywhere where CEOs, leaders, and experts at building teams,

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** companies,

**Mitch Simon:** organizations,

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** and amazing cultures share how to lead from anywhere in the world. I'm your co-host on the east coast, Ginny Bianco-Mathis.

**Mitch Simon:** And I'm your co-host on the west coast, Mitch Simon. And we invite you to join us to Team Anywhere.

Today on the podcast, we have Jennifer Moss, the author of the "Burnout Epidemic," a book that I am reading, and I absolutely love. You've got to get it. Burnout is real. It is officially identified by the World Health Organization as an occupational phenomenon. At the root of burnout are bad broken, unfair policies, and it can't be fixed by wellness and meditation practices. That's like putting a bandaid on a failed artery. If you run a company or a team, you have to listen to this podcast so you can prevent burnout as you Team Anywhere.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** Welcome to another episode of Team Anywhere. I'm your co-host, Dr Virginia Bianco-Mathis on the east coast and I am here with my fabulous co-host Mitch Simon on the west coast.

**Mitch Simon:** Hey, Ginny, it's early here. The sun's coming up and I'm really excited for our guest today.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** Yes, we have a wonderful guest, Jennifer Moss, and we were able to net her from her busy schedule. Jennifer is an international speaker expert on burnout. And she is an award-winning journalist and syndicated radio columnist.

She writes for HBR and SHRM, and is the author of a recent bestseller, the "Burnout Epidemic," from Harvard Business Press and also "Unlocking

Happiness at Work." In a recent interview with Time, Jennifer talked about burnout's role in this great resignation we all have been hearing about, with 41% of the workforce planning to quit their job in the next three months. And of those 30,000 respondents, only 4% said that pay was the reason. Welcome, Jennifer.

**Jennifer Moss:** Thanks for having me. I'm looking forward to our conversation today. It's going to be great.

**Mitch Simon:** I love the contrast between the two books, the "Burnout Epidemic" and "Unlocking Happiness at Work."

**Jennifer Moss:** Yes, I've gone from being a happiness expert to an unhappiness expert in a very short amount of time.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** Interesting. Well, that may tie into our first question. We love to have folks reflect a bit on the past two years. Where are you? What have you learned?

**Jennifer Moss:** Well, you know, I've been sort of trying to get people thinking about burnout for a while now. I've been writing about it. Some of my articles go back a decade. And, you know, talking about happiness is so interesting because we sort of look at it as this nice to have, and wellbeing is nice to have. And I think we were ahead of our times when we first started the company that was gonna change all of that, making happiness a part of every organization schools.

And when we started to really dig into and you know, really what the problems were, it was that we're attacking burnout in the wrong way. We're looking at it with these wellness tactics, like do more yoga, listen to a meditation app, and that's going to fix your burnout.

And to all these wellness strategies had the right intentions, but they just were not solving for the root causes of burnout. And I think the pandemic just highlighted how bad it really was and how badly we were, you know, handling the problem. And I guess, from the perspective of silver linings, it has created a conversation and that I think will maybe get us to the root of the problem.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** Right. And how some of the things that we all saw being perpetuated at the beginning of the pandemic. Once I remembered, just some of the companies were really pumping out, well, go here for checking your stress level. And take this yoga class. They even having things saying have

your whole family watch this because you're all under stress. ' Cause I've seen the same thing. There's something else going on. How should we be looking at this?

**Jennifer Moss:** Well, interestingly in 2019, the World Health Organization actually identified burnout as an occupational phenomenon. It's workplace stress left unmanaged. And that identification, I think, really helped.

Some researchers thought, cause there's been an argument around how to define it for the last four decades, some people thought that wasn't broad enough. But I think the fact that we've actually narrowed the focus of the definition helps us really address where did these issues come from? Where did they stem? You know, and that was pre pandemic.

And what we're finding is that it's way further upstream. It's lack of fairness. That's a root cause, which we're seeing in discriminatory behavior. It's overwork, which has been a legacy and a big problem for a long time. It's not feeling rewarded or valued for what you do. It's in these policies that are broken, that are causing the burnout. And so that definition, I think, has been really instrumental in getting us to be more focused on what we can actually do to solve the problem.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** Given that, now going hybrid and virtual, what should the more mindful leaders and companies be doing?

**Jennifer Moss:** Well, I think what we need to do first is pause a little bit in this moment and realize that in March,

you know, 2020, we had an emergency, which is by definition, unexpected. And so we reacted. And it's two years later almost, and we're still in this reactionary mode. We're still sort of looking towards the future as being okay, COVID free or free from the pandemic, and then we can start to move forward.

We have to move forward now, and we have to understand that there are things that we can be doing. We can control the controllables. Maybe we can't solve for the global pandemic. And as leaders, that's really hard to get their minds around, especially type A, perfectionist types of people. It's hard to think, well, why can't I just solve for that? Well, we can't. So what do we do inside of this moment?

And especially when you look at virtual and remote teams right now, there's a lot that we gain because there's flexibility. And a lot of people really like that,

that ability to sort of manage their own time in that way that feels more effective for them. But we also are swinging the pendulum really far and we're losing fun. We're over collaborating. Like so much more collaboration. We don't need this much collaboration. We don't need this much time on Zoom. We need to start, pulling back and figuring out how do we use our time better. And how do we create relationships in this paradigm?

I mean, a lot of people are expressing loneliness. And that's actually a lack of community is a cause of burnout too. So we move the pendulum really far in this direction, but then there's impacts to that. So it's time to address what the pandemic has done in a good way, maybe potentially for the future of work, and where there's potential threats.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** Excellent. And now we're gonna push you further because we know our listeners say, okay, well give me some things to do, like what?

**Jennifer Moss:** Well, there's a lot of things. I write very prescriptively in the book. It's very tactical because you know, we've talked about burnout in this nebulous way. And I'm a person that's like what are the ways that I can actually fix this? And I don't want you to say, well, it's something that's out of my hands. I want to feel like as a direct manager or a leader that I can actually do the work. There's things that I can do. And how do I do it, where I don't have to ask my boss for a hundred thousand dollars to run out a program. I want to be able to actually tactically make changes.

And so a lot of my earlier work was focused on the science of neuroplasticity. So incremental behavior changes over time, actually long-term make part of the culture stick. And that's the same thing that we need to do right now — create right to disconnect guidelines, talk about what that looks like when and where we should be working in and how, and what are those core hours and give people space and protection to take that time off to be with their family, making sure that we are having conversations about what people's workload looks like.

You know, have we actually spent any time with our team saying, hey, you know, can you spend the next two weeks documenting what you're working on? What are those urgent needs that keep coming in that I might not be aware of? What are some staples that are calling you up and saying, I need this thing that I don't even know I'm aware of. You know, let's just create some transparency in your workload. Let's document where you might need some more training or some more resourcing and create an advocacy plan to get you more resources.

You know, these are the kinds of things, just open communication about workload and creating some space around that.

And then I really do believe we need to reduce the amount of meetings we're having. Meeting fatigue was a problem long before the pandemic. It's just completely exacerbated. We're having more meetings. We need to look at this as time theft, you know, when we go over or we have too many meetings.

You know, you think about shrinkage and retail. Same thing when we look at our most expensive resources, which is our human resources. And if we're taking an additional 10 minutes overtime each time, or we're doing back to back meetings and not giving people space, that's millions of dollars.

Millions of dollars in large organizations that they're losing.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** Wow! Nice analogy. Yeah.

**Mitch Simon:** Actually, Jennifer, I was leading a group yesterday. And we were talking about confrontation and conflict, things like that. And it's hard enough when we are in a room together for a lot of us. So Jen, you just got on my team and we've been working together for maybe a year and we've actually never been in person.

How do you help, support, guide, coach team members, team leaders, to have these conversations from their houses in a group to actually bring up these things that for most of us are not discussable things? From my history in the working world where we actually work together, from my family history, we don't talk about these things. So how do you get people to talk about the untalkable?

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** Excellent.

**Jennifer Moss:** I love that question, Mitch, and we did some novel research inside of the pandemic and we wanted to just see how people were feeling. And we kept finding that, especially in our younger workforce saying, I feel like my career is being completely stalled because I've not met my boss. I've not been my coworkers. They don't know my reputation. You know, they don't know who I am.

Someone that has more seniority and has been sort of in the pre pandemic workplace, they've established who they are. And these young people are

coming in and they just haven't created that established brand. And so, what happens is they're feeling overlooked. They're feeling disconnected.

And for a lot of people too, in our younger workforce, this is the time of their lives, where they're meeting their best friends, those people in your life that you keep with you for a long time. Lots of spouses are met in the workplace.

**Mitch Simon:** Right.

**Jennifer Moss:** And so you're not getting that kind of rhythm. And so I think, you know, when we even just had those opportunities to like meet at each other's desks, we would ask about the kids. We talk about those things where you can maybe further the conversation around how people are actually feeling. You dig a bit deeper. You say like, are you really fine? You've talked about being tired of the last few days.

We need to kind of create that. And I personally think that having some sort of mix of some level of in-person as well as some remote is more of a Goldilocks zone than just all or nothing. Flexibility is still important, but when we think about what matters to us as humans, tribes are part of our humanity. It's part of who we are. And you can only get that through sharing non-verbal communication or using your mirror neurons to connect.

And so we need to sort of create opportunities. Maybe it's not two days in the week and three days off. Maybe it's just, you know, once a quarter, you have a two or three days together and you bond and you talk and you get [inaudible].

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** Yes.

**Jennifer Moss:** So then you can have those off side meetings, just one-on-one with someone that you feel like you can trust about things that are really going on with you, because you can't really host a meeting necessarily where we're like, let's all talk about our mental health. There's a lot of people that don't feel super comfortable about sharing what's going on. So we need to create these opportunities to build trust, make it so that it's authentic, and then find technology is augmenting relationships, not replacing them.

And I think that's what's happened is we're replacing those relationships and it's hard to establish when there's no foundation. So I think that's how we're going to get more comfortable about talking about mental health in these settings.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** Right. So establishing the infrastructure through certain amount of interaction.

**Jennifer Moss:** Yes.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** Which can be done safely it may look still different. It doesn't mean going back to the office.

**Mitch Simon:** Right.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** But there's still some interchange.

**Mitch Simon:** Yeah. One more question then for Jennifer is, I haven't read your book, but I will get it. I'm just too burned out to read right now.

Is it obvious? Is it obvious? I want you to tell me a little bit more 'cause, Ginny, we have a really amazing guest today.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** Oh I know.

**Jennifer Moss:** Thank you!

**Mitch Simon:** I would assume then if we would continue this, the sentence conversation is how would you then structure that in-person? What would be the focus of that in-person so that when I go back to my ranch for 3, 4, 6, 10 months, I would be able to have that safety to have those conversations, to feel vulnerable. Okay, if you could share with us more about that.

**Jennifer Moss:** Well, that's another really great question. I do break it down a lot in the book and this idea that we, as managers in leadership roles need to say, I'm not a healthcare practitioner. I'm not an expert in health care and especially mental health, but I do know how to be the conduit. You know, that's my job is be the conduit to the things, and really direct managers need to know exactly what is available to the folks in each, not just for them within the EAPs, within the programs, but what our local supports. Do you have issues with people dealing with LGBTQ plus issues? Do you see that people are dealing with some sort of discriminatory experiences, potentially they're at risk of that. Women disproportionately were impacted this year, especially through the pandemic because of how much unpaid labor they were forced to engage in, and really that.

All of those things we need to find out more about what's going on. So these exercises are to create depth of relationships, not breadth of relationships. No more, just like trying to get as many people together to meet as many people and you know, exchange numbers. And it's about really creating more depth and bonds within our smaller team. So it should be smaller teams and the way we connect, not large groups, small teams, and creating that depth of trust and relationship.

And then providing those specific support tools. And then also saying what's local to them so that you can do that bit of research to make sure that you're providing what is available, where they are, where they live. And then having conversations, over the course of a couple of days that allow us to have everyone create a dissenting opinion.

So I talk about the RBG robe, the dissent robe, that if we create these environments where we can give everyone a chance to take the black hat topic, or feel like they can open up and take the opposite side of the conversation, it makes everyone feel this generated psychological safety. One of the people that I worked with through this and the research for the book was Dr Martha Bird, who is the chief anthropologist of ADP.

And she says that managers need to be professional eavesdroppers. So they need to look at the semiotics. They need to look at the signs of what people are saying. They need to look at body language. They need to be reading between the lines. What are the language that people use around what motivates them? What is the language that they use about what are their stressors?

So creating opportunities to find out those things that make people tick and the things that are really weighing on their mind. And all of that together then can come away with us feeling like we can speak up. We feel like there's turn-taking a meeting. There is psychological safety. And that we have people that were more bonded and connected with because there's a depth of relationship versus just meeting a whole bunch of people in a large group, and then leaving with no real friendship.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** Yeah, just a bunch of cards. Yeah. What are you finding leaders now who have to learn a whole new way of pick up cues, a whole new way of role modeling? This is how open I'd like us to be. And I want-

Obviously they're going to have to go first. What are you finding with leaders? Are they embracing that? Or are they going, oh, no. Someone else needs to do it.

**Jennifer Moss:** I love that question as well, because it does vary between industry. We know there's a legacy in certain industries where there's stoicism. You don't talk about it. And there's also this culture of we haze our new employees basically for the first decade, and see how many hours they can work, and it's survival of the fittest. And so by the time, 30 years into their career, they don't really have the same empathy for those people saying, I don't want to work this way any longer. And that's a really hard cycle to break.

We're seeing it shift a little bit. We're seeing people that have different ways that they were brought up in their careers approaching vulnerability in their role a little bit more in a healthy way. We're seeing that just increase in general because I think there's some really great declarations made by a lot of leaders in these large organizations that are saying that this is a big part of what we do inside this company. And so that helps.

But again, this is a long process. And until we sort of stop that at this moment, which may be with the pandemic is done, because we are collectively going through the same trauma. Different experiences of it, but we are all going through something that makes there be more parody in the conversations we have.

We're seeing C level executives that are single parents that have had to juggle you know, kids scrambling on top of them in the middle of the meeting. Before that would have been just really looked down upon. And now it's like, well, that's just life around us. And I think that's creating a compassion and empathy that we haven't seen before.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** Right. Right. And I'm finding, I don't know if you're seeing it in your work, that's what a lot of leaders now are looking for personal coaching on, and actually role play. How do I be more empathetic? Right. How do I recognize burnout? What do I say? Suck it up. That's what we all did. Changing those neurons in their brains to go to a different place.

**Jennifer Moss:** Yeah. We're seeing a lot of desire at least from senior leaders to say I'm out of my depth. My learning curve is on vertical and I'm seeing really great high-performing people, literally. They don't call in sick. They're calling in quit. And they just are done.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** I love it. Yup.

**Jennifer Moss:** And that's it. They're just not showing up. Senior executives are left with these, like these big gaps to fill and it takes a long time to figure it out. And then they see this vacuum of people following in suit. And so they're saying, okay, I need help in figuring out how to do things differently because I'm in this paradigm shifting time of my career.

And again, like I've been doing this talk, Tired Leaders Leading Tired Teams, and I think that's where they're at right now. They're so exhausted. They feel just as much uncertainty in their own lives and in their own roles as they are feeling in their teams. I'm sure their employees are feeling the same way.

So we're seeing leaders saying, how do I deal with my own burnout? How do I act as a better, more empathetic leader? And how do I make it so that I don't completely drain myself while I'm trying to also help the people that need me?

Because they're just done. And I see this as a hitting the wall moment and something dramatic needs to happen pretty soon before we have an issue.

**Mitch Simon:** How do you answer, Jen, the sandwiches? I'm a leader, a CFO, COO or whatever. And my boss who, usually is the smartest, brightest, most attractive person in the room. He or she is like I hear all this burnout stuff and we just really need to work it. And then you've got your C, blank, O, which is like, yes, sir. Yes, ma'am. Boss, yes. But that person inside is completely exhausted, and knows that their people are completely exhausted. How do you coach them to have the rigor compassion for themselves to speak up and say something?

**Jennifer Moss:** It's a very difficult role to play. And I think that's why the book has been resonant because I've been saying it's an organizational problem, not an individual problem. And leaders have a role. We as individuals have a role. But it's organization wide and everyone needs to be participating.

So if you're doing all the work to develop your resiliency, to remain psychologically fit, to do all the things that you need to do, but then your boss still says, whoever way at the top is saying no, we still have to hit those stretch goals. We still have to hit however much in revenue, and you don't have a choice, it's just going to continue the cycle. And you end up being in that situation where people are quitting because they just can't meet those demands.

But one of the things that I've always said is a really great way to communicate with senior leaders and C-levels leaders is to gather data. And you can be doing that in very simple ways of pulse checking your team, seeing what happens when they burn out, what that looks like, how it impacts revenue, how it impacts the numbers that really matter to those CFOs, CEOs, et cetera.

And start to introduce your own interventions. Like what if I have a right to disconnect that I put in with my team. Let's measure, does their job satisfaction improve? Does their EMPS improve? What are those things that we can measure that can demonstrate, hey, I think this could work broadly across the organization if we have these things in place.

And then it gives you the right to model the behavior and give your own time to regroup. But also it's saying this is good for business. And when we say things are good for business, it makes a lot more people feel like they can-

**Mitch Simon:** That's right.

**Jennifer Moss:** They can adopt the behavior.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** And you answered my question. I was going to ask about measurement. Data does speak. At least it's an entree for a lot of discussions to at least start. It goes back to the safety issue. Is it safe for me to say, I am totally burned out.

And I hear what you're saying. And that should be done. I think we need a powwow. It's time for a tribe meeting. Yes, the work has to get done, and there's the goal, and the client is breathing down, right? And we're at our end of the rope. Together, let's come up with what's the new ground rule? What's the new approach? What can we do here?

Interestingly enough, one organization I'm working with, the permission is coming in an indirect way. They got a cadre of coaches to start working with individuals, who said, all right. New world. New way of working. I don't know. I'm trying to survive what that's gonna look like. I need help. I need help in how do I throw everything off my desk and sorta start over write a whole new approach. And I need help doing that.

And if the leader says I'm getting help, so there's the permission. However, it's the coaches behind the scenes who come up with the trends without naming names goes and says, Hey, it's time for tribe meeting. These people need now

some parameters and permissions. That rarely happened in the past and needs to absolutely start happening in the future.

So let's go to your experience. Can you tell a story of an organization that they're on the path of doing this right?

**Jennifer Moss:** Through the research of the book and that was being written before the pandemic hit, I did a lot of changes as the pandemic hit. I tried to jam in as many more novel pieces of work and actually did new research inside of the pandemic because it was so ever-changing and so rapidly changing.

The organizations that I found had really high sort of employee trust and employee experience scores were the ones that had been building in these burnout prevention strategies long before.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** Right.

**Jennifer Moss:** The pandemic. And what I also found was that they really understood the bifurcation between burnout prevention strategies and wellness tactics. And so they had these great tools to optimize because there are a group of people that especially pre pandemic that really wanted to be able to optimize, you know, get to those that next level, they were in that high-performing group, but that 20 percentile, that just wanted the extra.

And yet, there were also the burnout prevention strategies that dealt with those other issues like inequities. I mean, Hewlett Packard is a great example of really great paternity and maternity leave policies. And that, for example, really helps when it comes down to the female labor force participation issue that we're seeing right now. Because more men, more males would take time off to be primary caregivers. Their roles were protected. And it was like really, way better than a lot of other places I've seen, even globally.

But in the US, it was quite alarmingly phenomenally good. 18 months of protected time and able to go back another year, part-time. And I mean, that's just one micro example, but those are the kinds of things that we're looking at a policy level, where it shapes the future risk of losing a whole swath of a certain demographic of your workforce.

They had also been doing a really good job of flexibility before that. So when it was really remote, it wasn't as dramatic, and such a shock to the system. And there was also a belief that social collaboration tools are meant to be for fun too. And that there's still an element of fun that we need to have in our virtual and

in-person environments, and not those dusty ping pong tables, where we put them there and people are reminded of how little time people actually have to use the fun things inside of their offices.

But more like, please use these. Please use them without me proctoring or telling you. You have to only have certain amount of time that you can talk about quilting on your slack channel. No, it was just like, do whatever you want. I trust that I've hired the right people. I don't need bossware to make sure that you're doing what you're doing when you say you're doing it. You know, there's trust. And they had really high trust and employee experience scores during the pandemic.

And because of just establishing those and understanding that there's two different ways of looking at wellness and burnout prevention and had adopted a lot of that leading into the pandemic. And there's lots of stories like that.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** Oh, that's great! Folks can investigate that further and begin to get wonderful ideas.

**Mitch Simon:** If I could pick up the "Burnout Epidemic," or "Unlocking Happiness at Work," what would I get from each two of these books? I'm sure, Jennifer, you're gonna say, well, just buy both, Mitch. If I had to go to one first because I love the fact that you're, so research-based in your approach, what would be the different approaches for each of those different books?

**Jennifer Moss:** Both of them are very evidence-based. I do my own research and I work with academic partners all the time. Really believe in that connection between my university partners and the practice. It's so critical. And so both are evidence-based. But "Unlocking Happiness at Work" is really around our own psychological fitness, how we can develop, the traits of social, emotional intelligence inside the workplace. And so I think they're helpful because, you know, I talk about these seven traits: Hope, Efficacy, Resilience, Optimism, Gratitude, Empathy, Mindfulness. Those are the seven traits of healthy leadership. So I do strongly believe in those seven traits. That helps just as an individual. It's more individualized that conversation. And then how leaders can bring that into the workplace.

But then the "Burnout Epidemic" is quite dealing with chronic stress and how it becomes the barrier to happiness. And so I think both are important. A lot of it too is just very relevant, recent, what is happening right now and how leaders can address it. But the other one is also important, 'cause I think we do need to

remind ourselves that part of what the pandemic has taught us is social, emotional flexibility.

We've learned how to pivot. We've learned to develop the science of focusing on what we have versus what we don't have, which is pure gratitude. It's like we've narrowed down our focus in life. Our priorities have shifted. We've developed resiliency because we've gone through this collective, traumatic experience that has changed us. And so I think, you know, those skills are useful for us as people. But we do need to figure out this burnout problem because it's catastrophic, and it's really not going in the right direction currently.

**Mitch Simon:** Right.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** Totally.

**Mitch Simon:** Can you share with our listeners how we can find you, access you and get to all of your podcasts and books and articles and et cetera, et cetera, Jennifer?

**Jennifer Moss:** Yeah. Go to [jennifer-moss.com](http://jennifer-moss.com). I'm also on LinkedIn. I love being there to talk actually about the work and I'm pretty accessible and try to have conversations there, and Twitter. Any of the social channels I'm available. And I do like to have good conversations about what's going on right now and happy to answer questions that people have in a more direct way.

**Mitch Simon:** All right. Well, great. Well, thank you, Jennifer. Thank you.

**Jennifer Moss:** Thank you!

**Mitch Simon:** This is a super smart guest, everybody.

**Jennifer Moss:** I love this podcast this is my favorite one of all time.

**Ginny Bianco-Mathis:** Of course!

**Jennifer Moss:** Keep this on. I love it.

**Mitch and Ginny :** Thank you. Thank you so much.

**Mitch Simon:** I love this podcast too. So thank you, Jennifer. We'd love to have you back with your third book, which I'm sure you're writing. But until then

thank you so much for listening. Please share our pockets with your friends, colleagues, bosses and business owners. And we'll see you next week, next time on Team Anywhere.