

# Entrepreneur Nataly Kogan Discovered That Well-Being Is Key to Success

The founder and CEO of Happier thought ‘leaders were supposed to suffer,’ until she experienced burnout herself.

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Nataly Kogan is still a little surprised to be the founder and CEO of a company called Happier. Before her own debilitating bout with burnout seven years ago, she would have dismissed the idea of executives taking lessons to improve their emotional well-being. “I used to think happiness was for stupid people,” she admits on a video call from her home near Boston. “I always thought that if you really understand life, you know that it’s a struggle.”

Now Ms. Kogan, 46, is an entrepreneur of “emotional fitness,” using science-backed tips to help people avoid burnout, curb self-doubt and feel more fulfilled. Thanks in part to the pandemic, her practical advice for feeling better at home and work has been in high demand. She works with employees at companies including Capital One, Dell, Google and SAP and delivers up to three speeches a day over Zoom to businesses and conferences.

“It’s been a complete watershed moment,” Ms. Kogan says. “There’s been so much stress. Companies are realizing that this stuff impacts the work, it impacts the way leaders show up, and they are asking for help.”

A big part of Ms. Kogan’s appeal as an emotions evangelist is her conversion story. The wellness tools she promotes are the ones she used to emerge from her own time in “a very dark place.”

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“It’s not an exaggeration to say that I faced losing everything meaningful to me,” she writes in her new book, “The Awesome Human Project.” In 2015, an app-based startup she founded was sputtering, her marriage to her college sweetheart was wavering, and her young daughter was avoiding her. Exhausted and overwhelmed, she says she zoned out in meetings, snapped at colleagues and made poor decisions. “The only thing I felt was dread,” she says.

It didn’t occur to Ms. Kogan to seek help, in part because she thought “leaders were supposed to suffer,” she says. She recalls being inspired by stories of how little [Elon Musk](#) slept and how quickly Marissa Meyer of Yahoo returned to work after having a baby. “I had no role models for what success without this level of self-sacrifice looked like,” she writes. She wore her fatigue as a badge of honor.



Nataly Kogan, cofounder and CEO of Happier, with artwork she made.  
PHOTO: JASON GROW FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Teeth-gritting stoicism was also Ms. Kogan's birthright. As a Soviet Jewish refugee who came to America with her parents when she was 13, she learned how to endure hardships without complaint. "I come from a tradition of suffering," she explains. "Not only are we good at it, but it's also seen as the right thing. All the great artists and composers suffer."

But Ms. Kogan's stress wasn't just hurting her; it was also affecting her company and family. She notes that her employees stopped disagreeing with her decisions because they worried about upsetting her. "I can honestly tell you that we wasted hundreds of thousands of dollars going in the wrong directions because our communication and collaboration suffered," she writes. Her problems came to a head when an investor said he wouldn't work with her unless she got help. Unable to steady herself and craft a better business model at the same time—"It's really hard to monetize an app," she says—she ended up laying off her team. "It was brutal," she says. She wrote in her journal at the time: "This feels like the END."

Terms like "self-care" made Ms. Kogan cringe, but she understood that something had to give. She began googling "how to be happy" and "top books about spirituality" and diligently read the results. She sought strength in yoga, experimented with meditation and began talking about her problems with an insightful life coach named Janet. Haunted by feelings of failure, she read scientific studies about the benefits of self-compassion and tried to be a little kinder to herself.

The experience was revelatory, says Ms. Kogan. She realized that she had spent decades chasing achievements in the hope of finally feeling content. But regardless of her accomplishments—whether it was learning from sitcoms to speak English without an accent, graduating from Wesleyan at the top of her

class, working as a managing director in a venture-capital firm in her 20s or giving a popular TED talk—the good feelings never lasted. “I kept blowing happiness bubbles,” she writes in her first book, “Happier Now” (2018). “They kept popping.”

Today she understands that happiness isn’t a reward for a job well done. Rather, it’s an approach to life that involves being present, living fully and learning how to feel okay even when things aren’t okay. “It’s about creating a better relationship with our thoughts,” Ms. Kogan explains. “And it’s something we need to practice every day.”

Ms. Kogan’s own transformation involved learning to think about happiness not as an elusive state of mind but as a set of tangible skills. Being “actively kind” to others and gentler toward herself, and feeling more attuned to even the smallest sources of pleasure or uplift—her morning coffee in her favorite mug; a luminous sunset on her commute—made her more at ease in her life and improved her relationships with others. When she stopped trying to run away from her negative emotions, she found she could reckon with feelings of frustration or fatigue better. “Awareness gives us choices,” she explains. “When we pay attention to our emotional inner experience, we naturally find ways to support ourselves.” Sometimes all it took to feel a little better was a walk or a snack.

With Happier, Ms. Kogan uses talks, online courses and yearlong leadership programs to explain how these “small, simple practices” offer lasting benefits. Given her own past disdain for hazy talk about gratitude and mindfulness, she knows that a big part of the job is convincing others that investments in well-being aren’t self-indulgent. She points to studies showing that happier people are more productive at work and that teams that feel emotionally supported are more collaborative and successful. People who cut themselves slack in the face of setbacks are more likely to work harder and do better next time. In her work with companies, Ms. Kogan has been startled by how many men write to her privately to say they feel they aren’t allowed to talk about their emotions. “I can’t tell you how many men tell me they treat themselves like drill sergeants,” she says. She now takes pains to explain how compassion can boost motivation and reduce stress for everyone. “These aren’t just ‘soft skills,’” she insists. “These are human needs.”

Although Ms. Kogan calls her approach the “Happier Method,” she isn’t promising bliss. Nudging people to be less judgmental about their needs won’t fix all of their problems, and gratitude doesn’t necessarily pre-empt sweating the small stuff. But she hopes to help people see that there are things they can do to feel better in their lives. “You can’t control what or when challenges come your way,” she writes, but “you can learn to struggle less through them.”

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