

LIFE HACKS

How to beat burnout, get your way,
and become a “Perennial.”

By JoAnn Greco

Three recent books by Penn faculty offer advice on forging a healthy relationship with work, choosing the right words to persuade and motivate, and thriving at all stages of life in a rapidly transforming world. Though targeted primarily to business audiences, they have as much to say to anyone struggling to manage ordinary stresses, communicate effectively with others, and chart a satisfying life path in a time when traditional guidelines and milestones are fading into irrelevance.

“Many people’s attitudes about what they expect from life are changing so rapidly that organizations, institutions, and governments just can’t keep up,”

says sociologist and globalization expert Mauro F. Guillén, vice dean for the Wharton Executive MBA program and author of *The Perennials: The Megatrends Creating a Postgenerational Society* (St. Martin’s Press). “The tried-and-true sequential path of play, study, work, retire is under question,” he continues. “Younger adults are more fluid about their identities in all kinds of ways, older ones are working into their 60s and 70s, and the idea of the nuclear family is in disarray, as children live with their parents well into adulthood while single-person households continue to increase around the world.” At its crux, Guillén’s book examines the ways in which generational barriers have held us back and

how we can battle prescribed ideas of what we *should* do as we try to find a place in society for our chosen identity.

That notion crops up at one point in *Magic Words: What to Say to Get Your Way* (Harper Business), as its author Jonah Berger, an associate professor of marketing at Wharton, encourages readers to reconsider the default of “should” in favor of the more expansive “could” when faced with a lifestyle decision or work problem to solve. But that’s just one of many ways that “readers can benefit by paying more attention to the words they use,” he says. Berger, whose research interest in mining the riches of AI-assisted natural language processing has led him to parse millions of writing samples



(from emails to song lyrics) to extract what works in selling, persuading, and influencing others, says “learning the science behind impactful language is a key way to activate identity and agency.”

The idea of regaining a sense of control is at the heart of *Burnout Immunity: How Emotional Intelligence Can Help You Build Resilience and Heal Your Relationship with Work* (Harper Business) by Kandi Wiens GrEd’16, a senior fellow at the Graduate School of Education who studies how people deal with extreme stress in their work lives. Prompted by her own recurring bouts of burnout and her quest to learn more about how others keep it at bay, the book leads readers toward gaining a better understanding of their relation to work. “Heightening your awareness of your triggers and protective responses—how you react when you feel stress—is an important strategy that I use almost every single day,” she says. “I ask myself, *what patterns am I noticing that are derailing me?* And then I reflect on what that behavior is doing to me, or to others, or to my productivity. Often it comes down to boundaries, which can feel a little uncomfortable. It’s still hard for me to say ‘no,’ but it gives me enormous relief.”

Crucially, each of these books also look at the importance of reaching out, of making connections, of combating the loneliness that sociologists say plagues so many of us. Guillén touches upon how lifestyle choices like choosing not to marry or to have children, and demographic trends like living longer, can lead to isolation, while Berger says that “understanding that language can be an amazing tool helps us live richer lives by offering ways to make deeper connections.”

Wiens ties avoiding the cynicism and feelings of inadequacy that are hallmarks of burnout to the importance of building a meaningful relationship to work. But that might not be the right emphasis for “someone who feels no special connection to their work and feels stuck there because, say, they need

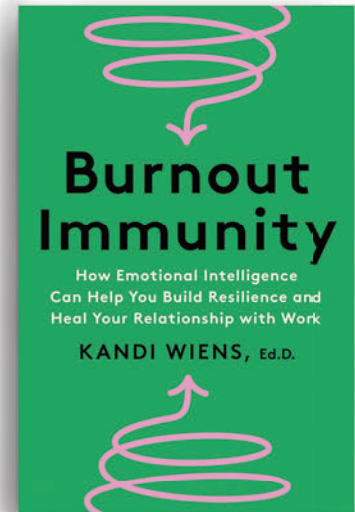
the paycheck,” she acknowledges. “In that situation, there are tricks to help you compartmentalize that stress, to isolate it so that when you’re out of work, you can concentrate on enjoying the people and activities that *are* meaningful to you.”

HARD WORK

As she relates in *Burnout Immunity*, it took a long time for Wiens to come to terms with her own workaholic tendencies. A child of divorce who grew up on an Indian reservation with her mother, she experienced “abject poverty, little opportunity for education, and, on my mom’s side of the family, a long history of mental illness and alcoholism,” she writes. At age 12, though, her circumstances changed when the judicial system allowed her to decide where to live and she moved in with her father and stepmother. Overnight, discipline and a work ethic became part of her daily life, and she began flourishing academically. With this success came new problems, however: “an addiction to external validation and an overactive need to achieve.”

The first in her family to attend college, she—not always expertly—juggled work with her studies, sometimes holding down more than one job. Once she obtained her MBA, a career as a management consultant saw her routinely working 65-hour weeks. “Every Sunday evening I was filled with dread and anxiety,” she recalls in the book. “I’d calculate how much of my signing bonus I would have to repay if I quit.” The golden handcuffs of “more money than the skinny little girl on the rez could have dreamed of” couldn’t protect her from imposter syndrome or worrying that she was turning into a bad wife and neglectful mom to her two young kids.

Things came to a head when, during a routine physical, she was told that her blood pressure had soared so high she was considered in hypertensive crisis. On bedrest at home, she prepared to embark on a new phase—one that made



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time for exercise and mindfulness, for leaving work at work, and for taking real vacations. She started doing some serious learning about burnout.

Wiens’s first book is the fruit of what happened after she enrolled in the doctoral program at Penn GSE, completed her dissertation, and began designing studies that looked at the seemingly remarkable ability of those working in very stressful jobs—chief medical officers at large hospitals, leaders in big city police departments, etc.—to withstand burnout. Their secret sauce: *emotional intelligence*, defined by Daniel Goleman, the psychologist who popularized the term in a 1995 book, as a blend of learnable skills like self-awareness, self-regulation, self-motivation, empathy, and relationship-building. “Their experience clarified for me a key fact,” Wiens writes. “No one is immune to stress, but everyone can acquire burnout immunity.”

Through a mix of exercises, tips, case studies, and explorations of aspects of burnout, Wiens helps readers armor up against a plague that incidentally, she points out, is solely related to our work-

ing lives. “Many people use the word ‘burnout’ very colloquially,” she says. “They throw it around left and right because it’s a good way to express a lack of engagement or motivation. But those who started researching burnout in the early ’80s defined it as a psychological syndrome that people experience as a result of chronic stress at work. And while my definition goes beyond that to encompass other facets of a person’s life, it starts with work. When we experience a lot of stress at work, it limits our ability to deal with personal stressors.”

As Wiens discovered, self-awareness is key to beginning this process, and an early chapter is simply titled “Case Study: You,” in which the reader is led to a better understanding of how their temperament, personality, childhood traumas, and triggers influence their responses to stressors. A companion “Burnout Risk Assessment” asks the participant how strongly they agree or disagree with statements such as: *I view stressors as problems that can be solved* and *I feel like I am good at my job*. The exercise might prove eye-opening, she adds, because there are endless reasons we find to avoid confronting our burgeoning burnout, including being afraid that if we slow down, we’ll get passed over for opportunities or, most disconcertingly, simply not having enough time to think about anything other than work.

The book’s succeeding chapters explore key strategies for resisting and tackling burnout. Drawing on recent neuroscience research, Wiens suggests, for example, that the familiar knots and flutters we feel when we’re stressed can be transformed into confidence-builders if we reframe them as challenges instead of threats. “The next time your stress response gets triggered—your heart pounds, you sweat, you start to worry and doubt yourself ... acknowledge and accept it,” she writes. “[T]ell yourself you’ll prevail ... *I’m stressed right now, but this ain’t my first rodeo, and I’m going to kick some ass.*”



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Elsewhere, Wiens shares a personal story about a strategy she and her sister, Jodi, developed to downgrade their negativity spirals when faced with routine stressors like teenagers sulking and bosses barking. They came up with a stress taxonomy of “honkers, hassles, headaches, and hardships that,” she writes, “helps keep things in perspective.”

Wiens’s last chapter begins by noting that burnout isn’t just a “temporary setback or a rough spot in your career,” and continues with prescriptions for the road to recovery. It ends with a look at how she reconnected with and reimaged her own sense of self during a leadership class in which, “for two whole days, we did visioning exercises, leadership development lessons, small group discussions, and lots of deep self-reflection,” she writes.

Emerging with a tactical plan toward realizing her career and lifestyle goals,

Wiens got her doctorate, started teaching, took on big research projects, and got a coaching certificate. The plan helped her “pursue meaningful work ... without sacrificing my physical or mental health, or my time with family and friends,” she concludes. “And that, my friends, is how after years of work I finally acquired burnout immunity.”

WORD PLAYS

Developing a strong sense of self is at the core of Jonah Berger’s *Magic Words*, too. The strategy shows up in his first chapter, where he outlines how mentally casting yourself as the lead actor in your own story gets results. “People can be described in various ways,” he writes. “Charlie likes baseball, Kristen is a liberal, and Mike eats a lot of chocolate. ... From demographics like age and gender, to opinions, traits and preferences, descriptions like these provide some sense of who someone is or what they’re like.

“There are many ways, however, to say the same thing. Someone who has left-leaning political beliefs, for example, could be described as being ‘liberal’ or as being ‘a liberal.’ Someone who likes dogs a lot could be described as ‘loving dogs’ or as being ‘a dog lover.’”

Berger contends that using a noun instead of a verb or adjective moves the actor into the company of a specific set of people. And such “category labels,” he continues, “often imply a degree of permanence or stability. ... Regardless of time or situation, this is the type of person they are. They will always be that way.” Good to know, but Berger is interested in the research that backs up these seemingly intuitive feelings, and how they can produce desired results.

In a study of four- and five-year-old kids, researchers got better results by asking kids to be “helpers” rather than to “help” tidy up a pile of blocks on the classroom floor. In another example with higher stakes, when researchers talked about the chance to be a “voter” in a get-out-the-vote effort, turnout increased by

more than 15 percent. These simple shifts turn “what was previously just an action into something more profound,” Berger observes. “An opportunity to claim a desired identity.” The same goes for discouraging negative behavior. Research finds that saying “Don’t be a cheater” rather than “Don’t cheat” more than halves the amount of cheating. Another one of Berger’s tips in the arena of harnessing language to foster identity and agency involve changing *can’t* into *don’t* and *should* into *could*.

Berger touts the “new science of language,” which he first employed in researching his debut book, *Contagious: Why Things Catch On*. “Technological advances in machine learning, computational linguistics, and natural language processing, combined with the digitization of everything from cover letters to conversations, have revolutionized our ability to analyze language,” he writes in *Magic Words*. More recently, “hundreds of new tools and approaches have emerged” for counting chosen terms, revealing a document’s main themes, and “extracting wisdom from words,” which have “transformed the social sciences, providing insight into all types of human behavior.”

As he reveals again and again in the new book, they’ve allowed researchers to become much more granular, parsing how a different word, or even an additional letter or two, can make a big difference. “By some estimates, we use around sixteen thousand words a day,” he writes. “Individual words often seem interchangeable. ... [T]hat’s wrong. Very wrong.”

For instance, in a chapter on conveying confidence, Berger reports on a study he and his colleagues designed that sought to determine whether using a different tense might influence persuasion. When they analyzed more than a million online reviews, they found that no matter the category, “present tense boosted impact. Saying music ‘is’ rather than ‘was’ great, a printer ‘does’ rather than ‘did’ a good job, or a restaurant ‘makes’ rather

than ‘made’ delicious tacos led people to find the opinions more helpful, useful, and persuasive.” The reason? Past tense suggests a subjective personal experience that happened one time, while present tense feels more general, enduring, and expansive.

In another look at confidence, Berger references former president Donald Trump W’68’s ability to make forceful declarations with conviction and certitude. “To convey confidence, ditch the hedges [like *probably* or *maybe*],” writes Berger. “And in their place, do what Donald Trump does. Use definites. Words like ‘definitely,’ ‘clearly,’ and ‘obviously’ remove any shred of doubt. Things are *unambiguous*, the evidence is *irrefutable*, and the answer is *undeniable*. *Everyone* knows it, it’s *guaranteed*, and it’s *precisely* what we need right now.”

Berger expands on these ideas in a segment devoted to emotional language. “Products or services can be described as more hedonic or more utilitarian,” he writes. “Music, flowers, and other hedonic things are consumed for the pleasure and enjoyment they provide. ... Glue, gasoline, toasters, and other utilitarian objects, in contrast, are consumed for more functional or practical reasons.” Correspondingly, researchers have found that more people chose a restaurant described as “amazing” and “enjoyable” than the one cited as “perfect” and “worthwhile.” But, Berger continues, “for razors, emotionality backfired. Emotional reviews were [rated as] *less* helpful, made people *less* willing to purchase.” That’s because, he continues, “while someone might say a blender is ‘amazing’ or ‘delightful’ ... such emotional language often ... violates people’s expectations ... [and] may even lower trust in what was said and the person who said it.”

Language may help us get our way, as Berger’s subtitle suggests, but he emphasizes that its impact goes beyond winning friends and influencing people. “Language is a window into many different aspects of our daily lives,” he says. “We can learn so much about people and

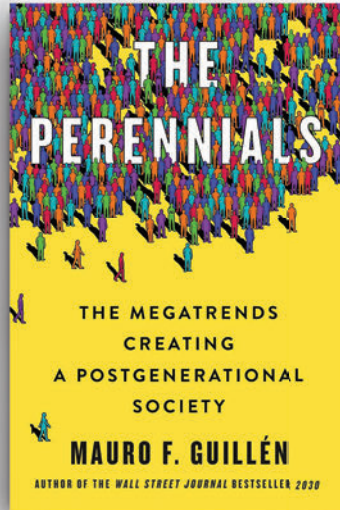
society from it. Take gender bias. Why does it persist? It’s one thing to say, ‘It feels like men and women are treated differently,’ and another to go through thousands of children’s books and tally the genders of the protagonists. Opinions are great, but people trust data, and the easier it is to use new language processing tools to measure and document the things that hold us back as a society, the better we can address them.”

LIMITLESS POSSIBILITIES

Gender and other demographic boxes lie at the heart of *The Perennials*. For instance, Guillén, who is also the William H. Wurster Professor of Multinational Management, discusses how women’s careers can be penalized when they have children. “The Modern Family Index, published annually by Bright Horizons, shows that two-thirds of Americans believe mothers are more likely to be passed over for a new job than fathers,” he writes. Another study finds that “working mothers get a 4 percent *pay cut* for each child, whereas fathers enjoy an average 6 percent increase.” He quotes the study’s author, sociologist Michelle Budig: “Employers read fathers as more stable and committed to their work ... the opposite of how parenthood by women is interpreted.”

Guillén’s observations on working women are in the service of his overall examination of the societal changes—like gender identity and rises in both childlessness and single motherhood—contributing to the upsetting of the apple cart that he calls the “sequential model of life.” These and other demographic shifts have thrown out the playbook on how we live, learn, work, and consume.

“Let me call these massive transformations the *postgenerational revolution*,” Guillén writes in his introduction. “As a result, we will witness the proliferation of perennials.” The term that gives the book its title was actually coined by Gina Pell, a San Francisco-based content creator and marketer, acknowledges



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Guillén. “The publishers preferred the sound of it,” he says. “In any case, I am referring to people who behave in a way that is not age dependent. We’ve become subject to the tyranny of age and life-stage to an extent that doesn’t unleash our fullest potential.”

His book begins with a look at the historical traditions around the four stations of life—childhood, adolescence, working, and retiring—and the ramifications they have on how we do or don’t pass through them. The “reification of [these stations] is so deeply ingrained in our mind that we have come not only to take them for granted but also to castigate those who do not make progress from one stage to the next on a timely basis,” Guillén writes. “Those who do not shift from infancy to adolescence as a prelude to adulthood are called Peter Pans. An adolescent who never grows up to become an adult is a rebel. A worker who can’t afford to retire is a failure, spendthrift, or irresponsible.”

It’s no wonder that phrases like *rebel without a cause*, *parent trap*, and *midlife crisis* have become common currency, and that intergenerational conflicts have become a cliché no matter what decade we’re in. What’s new, Guillén points out, is that we now have more generations than ever before alive at the same time. That’s due not only to longer life spans but also to increased stratifications—whereas Baby Boomers span almost 20 years, or what we typically think of as a “generation,” Millennials, as commonly defined, were born within just 14 years of each other.

Later, Guillén questions generational stereotypes and constructs, suggesting that comparisons of attitudes and behaviors are more nuanced. “Age is merely the position of each individual in the life cycle,” he writes. *Period effects* involve events that change all generations equally, while *cohort effects* are events or trends that affect one generation differently from another.”

Today’s life-stage shakeups—like skipping college, postponing marriage, or exploring new careers later in life—combined with people who for a variety of reasons haven’t wanted, or been able, to hew to the accepted roadmap, compound the growing irrelevancy of generational boundaries, Guillén asserts. “There’s all this stuff on the web that tells us who ‘millennial women’ are, for example,” he says. “But how can a group be pigeonholed by their birth years? If a 42-year-old has no kids, a graduate degree, and a great job at a consulting firm, and a 28-year-old has two kids, no high school diploma, and works nights at Home Depot, how could these two women possibly approach life in the same way? To even think that is stupid.”

Guillén says he was prompted to ponder all of this while delivering a webinar to executives from prominent American zoos and aquariums about the ideas in his previous book, *2030: How Today’s Biggest Trends Will Collide and Reshape the Future of Everything* [“The Future Is

Coming—Fast,” Sep|Oct 2020], published during the height of the pandemic. As he spoke, he realized that these institutions were losing the vast swath of the public that’s not comprised of young children or their parents or grandparents. “How does a zoo attract teenagers, adults without children, and those whose children are no longer small?” he writes. “These organizations have begun to add special events or exhibits incorporating video games, virtual reality, and the metaverse to do just that. In this postgenerational world, not just zoos but all organizations need to use every tool at their disposal to capture the imagination of people at different stages in life—all at once.”

The pandemic forced all kinds of institutions to examine their old models, as the inequities inherent between races and genders were exposed, the possibilities and limitations of remote work were examined, online shopping and learning were pushed to the fore, and the very idea of who stayed home and what they did there went up in smoke. Guillén ends the book optimistically in noting the increased prevalence of multigenerational households and workplaces and a trend toward more people of all ages seeking continuing education in person and online (something he experiences in his work related to the MBA Program for Executives). “The postgenerational revolution is already in the making, with more and more people becoming true perennials,” he writes. “We just need to escape from old conceptions and ride the wave to change.”

And, as Wiens and Berger also remind us, it’s never too late to change. Committing to understanding our relationship to work, learning to tap into the power of the correct word, and inviting people of all ages and stages into our lives are a few of the ways, these authors assure us, that we can change ourselves, our relationships, and society for the better.

JoAnn Greco is a frequent contributor to the *Gazette*.