

The Fertile Void

Yael Melamed is a San Francisco-based psychotherapist with an MBA from Harvard Business School. It's a unique combination—therapy and business—so I was immediately intrigued. Yael works to teach something profound and necessary: compassion in the workplace. She envisions a future where companies work to lift instead of damage people's sense of self-worth. Yael is taking on the concept of burnout at its root.

We were introduced through my cowriter Jon and spoke on Zoom in the fall of 2020, during the pandemic. It was an appropriate period to talk, because so many Americans were seeking therapy to get through the challenges of life under COVID-19. So Yael had a full plate, but she exuded such calm and wisdom that, when we were done talking, I thought about scheduling sessions with her.

Yael told me that as the child of immigrant parents with high expectations, she grew up doing what was expected of her rather than what she wanted. In her words, she was “caught on an escalator”—high school valedictorian, honors at Duke, Harvard Business School. Only a few months into graduate school, however, her entire life was turned upside down when she got a cancer diagnosis.

While walking to the campus library, still absorbing the shocking news, she had a vision of her obituary—a scary thought for a twenty-three-year-old. What was even more jarring was how much it depressed her. She thought about the life she was leading, the accolades she had accrued, and realized it was “not the impact I want to leave behind on the planet Earth. It was not aligned with my purpose.” Fortunately, the cancer was successfully removed before it had spread, but the experience left a lasting impression. As she explained, the diagnosis was “like a medicine that worked itself on me” and it changed the course of her life and work.

Yael ended up graduating from Harvard Business School, but by then she knew she would only be happy in service to others. So she began to study psychotherapy and, with a foot in both disciplines,

she came to a conclusion. She knew how much impact business leaders had on the rest of the world, in the values they taught, the behavior they rewarded, and the environments they created. So that became her focus: working to make people happier and more aligned in an overly competitive, value-draining, and burnout-infested culture. Her friend summed it up nicely: she would help put those who are stuck in their heads in touch with their hearts.

One thing Yael emphasized, in her unique East meets West (Coast) style, was the need to disengage from the rat race. It's so important to have space in our lives, whether we use that time to reflect, to seek inspiration, or to simply break away. It is the unspoken key to resilience: giving yourself room to breathe. Yael referred to these gaps as "the fertile void."

There is so much to be gained from stepping back and getting a bird's-eye view of where we are and where we're going. A car that begins a journey even the slightest bit off course, and doesn't course correct, will end up *hundreds of miles* away from its intended destination! Check in with yourself and make sure you're aligned with who you actually want to be. Look up once in a while, and watch the road.

Exposure

My discussion with Yael got me thinking about the connection between burnout and keeping things inside. If you hold in your emotions, suck up the pain, and just silently bear it, you will eventually break. Those who end up succeeding, who withstand setbacks and manage obstacles, are not putting on the appearance of toughness. They're *actually* tough, which means they are open to being vulnerable.

In recent years, NBA players like DeMar DeRozan and Kevin Love have been open about their mental health in a way that is a welcome change for professional sports. Because of the place pro athletes hold in the culture, it must be hard for them to admit they