

EPISODE 1241

“TH: Earlier this year, there was this wave stories about hitting the pandemic wall. That really, really resonated with me, because I so, so hit my pandemic wall. I just could sense that I was on a direct path to burnout.”

ANNOUNCER: You’re listening to So Money with award-winning money guru, Farnoosh Torabi. Each day, you get a 30-minute dose of financial inspiration from the world's top business minds, authors, influencers, and from Farnoosh herself. Looking for ways to save on gas or double your double coupons? Sorry, you're in the wrong place. Seeking profound ways to live a richer, happier life? Welcome to So Money.

[INTRODUCTION]

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FT: Our theme of how to quit continues on So Money. Today I have a great guest. He's a friend and colleague Tim Herrera, who is now a freelance writer and editor. But for many years, he worked for The New York Times, service journalism section called Smarter Living, there for five years he wrote and edited stories on personal finance, office culture, and job satisfaction as well as mental health, digital privacy much more. He was also co-editor of the, *Smarter Living* book. He's currently writing a book about self-awareness. Before coming to the times he worked at the Washington Post, where he was on the Digital Strategy Team and wrote about online culture.

He lives in Manhattan with his two cats, and his platonic life partner. I saw that Tim quit his job on Twitter. He posted it on social media recently, and I privately messaged him and said, “Hey, would you be willing to talk about this on my podcast to 10s of 1000s of people? He said, “Absolutely.” Got to thank him for his transparency and willingness to talk about something that is sensitive, but he wants to tell you all about it. What led up to his resignation, his advice for us in terms of how to prepare for quitting. The financial implications when you quit. Tim fortunately had savings, but if you don't have savings, what is his advice? What is he looking forward to next?

Stick around Friday's episode is going to be answering all of your money questions related to quitting your job. I got my friend and employment expert Dan Chevelle co-hosting with me, you don't want to miss that episode. Make sure you're subscribing. Ahead of that, here is Tim Herrera.

Tim Herrera, Welcome to So Money and congrats, fresh off the employment boat. No one owns you anymore.

[00:02:39]

TH: I'm retired. It feels amazing. I'm just done. I'm injecting myself in capitalism. I'm just done working.

[00:02:45]

FT: You are spent. I sense that from your Twitter feed, that's how I learned that you left the New York Times and everybody listening. Tim, who was one on the founding team of Smarter Living, a big feature at the New York Times. This was a section devoted to giving people advice about their careers. Interesting that maybe you took your own advice here and decided to quit. What led you to this moment Tim, besides of course, the pandemic being unbearable?

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TH: Essentially, the pandemic being unbearable. I felt like I was handling the pandemic okay in 2020. It's like doing the work and putting out what we're, I think pretty impactful stories with our work at the Times, trying to just keep ahead of the burnout and do everything I could to at the time stave that off. Last winter, I just hit this breaking point. I feel like this was not unique to me, around that January, February, earlier this year, there was this wave of stories about hitting the pandemic wall. That really, really resonated with me, because I so, so hit my pandemic wall. I just like could sense that I was on a direct path to burnout.

So I was like trying to do everything I could, like take my own advice, but nothing was really working. It was frustrating, because for literally the past five years, I've written and edited

hundreds of stories about job satisfaction and career happiness and how to prevent burnout, how to get out of burnout once you're there. I like no other tips. I know all the strategies. I know what works, but nothing was working. So I got to this point in early spring, where I literally just had to say, like I need to step away for a little bit.

So I actually went on short term disability for a while for mental health. So I was out for a couple months. That helped, but it was just it wasn't as rejuvenating and relaxing as I was hoping, partly because in the back of my mind, I knew at some point the party's over and I have to go back to having a job. It wasn't even anything specific to my jobs, I love my job, I love the Times, I love the work that I was able to do. It was just this idea of having to go back to a job was just too much.

I just like really had to be honest with myself about what is the thing that's really giving me such dissatisfaction in life and making me so unhappy. It was a tough realization to realize that it was jobs, like and again, not the job that I had, but just the concept of having a job right now was more than I was emotionally able to handle. So I just had to say like, "Alright I reach a breaking point, like this is what I need to do for my own mental health, and to make sure that this burnout doesn't turn into a serious, actual crisis.'

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FT: I want to learn more about your next steps and what – when you envision going back into the workplace, what that would mean for you? But going back to you, you said earlier this year and experiencing burnout, what was that like for you? I want to explore this only because people listening may not realize they're experiencing burnout, but you are and what are the consequences of that?

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TH: Yeah, so I mean, it can take so many different expressions, right? So for me, what that looks was like physically being unable to do the work that I knew I needed to do. In general, any journalists like, I'm not super great at deadlines, but generally speaking, I know how to get the work done by the time that it needs to be done. So I was just having this week after week, I was like unable to get the work done, by the time it needed to be done. This was, again like it's

someone who's okay with deadlines, not great like this was a total different flavor of that. This was being physically unable to actually get out the smarter living newsletter every week, or like write the story by the deadline than it needed to go.

So this was a new experience for me. From there, the way that I experienced it was just this cascading effect, where I was falling down in one area and that stressed me out and gave me more anxiety and it made me fall down in other areas. It really was just the snowball, where I just like felt this deep exhaustion in a way that isn't the type of exhaustion that you can hear with like a weekend of sleeping in. It was the type of adjustment that I know needed a serious concerted effort to resolve. Once I had the realization that this was not, this is something new, this is not anything that I had experienced before, this was just this exhaustion that was just all encompassing.

That's when I realized like, alright I need to get away from the day job before things like truly turned awful, and it becomes a much more serious issue. That was my breaking point, but burnout can take so many different – you have so many different expressions, you know like people will experience it a lot of the times in concert with depression, or overall anxiety, or changes in eating habits, changing and sleeping habits, all kinds of different symptoms. So it really does vary, but for me, the overarching one was just this exhaustion to the point where I couldn't function on a day to day way.

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FT: I'm sure in the past, if you were writing this article or I have read articles where if people are experiencing this at work, maybe the first step should be to talk to your employer, talk to your manager. Did you have conversations with people at work, who could have helped to create a more amenable environment for you? Or if you did take time away and you took short term disability, but if you had those conversations, what were they like?

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TH: This is one thing that I very much did wrong and to anybody who thinks they're on the path to burnout or is there like the biggest piece of advice that I would have is to speak up early

before it gets to a crisis point. Like, I didn't, because again this is an area that I literally like cover professionally. So I kept thinking I know how to dig myself out of this, I just need to give myself time to do it. I wasn't able to do it. So I didn't eventually reach out until it was too late. So the first conversation that I had with my manager at the time was the compensation race of like, "Hey, I'm two weeks away from a crisis, I need to take some time off." In a different universe, like, how did I have that conversation, like the first week of January, instead of waiting another two months? Maybe things would have panned out differently, but that was the best way that I could deal with it.

I was just unable to deal with it in any other way. So that's where we landed and at the end of the day, I'm very satisfied with where I am right now, and things are so much better. But it could have been, I think I probably eventually would have reached this point anyway. I think the path here would have been so much smoother if I had had these conversations much earlier on than I did. So it'd be much better biggest piece of advice for people in the job who may be experiencing burnout or think they're on a path to burnout.

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FT: Employers, would you agree, they're more prepared for these types of conversations, especially now?

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TH: Oh, absolutely. Even like in normal times. If you're working a generally well-run company, there are protocols in place, specifically to deal with this issue. Even now more than ever, there's been so many stories about employers, who are dealing with employee burnout on skills that dwarf anything that has ever happened before. I think, even now, employers are so much more cognizant of how to handle employees who are in this type of situation.

I think, for the most part, they want to encourage folks to reach out if they're feeling like this. When an employee reaches burnout, it's not good for the employee, it's not good for the employer, it's not good for the managers, it's not good for the work. Nobody wants anybody in

the whole machine. Nobody wants an employee to reach burnout. There are specific protocols for dealing with this.

For example, for me, so when I finally brought this up with my manager, it was a relatively straightforward process, where like, “Okay. Glad we had this conversation. From here, what happens is we put you in touch with occupational safety, occupational safety talks to you, you figure out what the best solution is.” For me, that turned out to be short-term disability. There is a specific path for short-term disability, for people who are having mental health issues. There are so many systems in place, specifically to deal with this, that it's not a burden. It's not cumbersome on anybody. This is just part of having a job that sometimes these things come up, and companies are prepared to deal with it.

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FT: When you said earlier that you were just done having a job, explain what that means. It was the accountability, it was the structure of what you just needed. What were you looking to get away from? What was it about it, the grind, that was really, you needed to get out of?

[00:11:58]

TH: That aspect of it all is a much broader, much higher level, big picture. It's philosophy that I've been developing for a couple years. I just realized, I've had a full-time job for 12 years now. A couple years ago, I just had this thought that I want to work for myself. I'm going to devote so much of my life to something and work so hard at something, I just want to work for myself. The Times is an incredible place to work and all my co-workers are amazing. That aspect of this is much less about wanting to leave the Times specifically. It was about just wanting to work for myself, and just own the things that I'm doing 100% outright.

When I talk about just not wanting to have a job again. For the next, at least until the end of the year, I'm just going to hang out and travel and just not really work. Once the time comes for me to figure out next steps, I think, the next step is probably going to be either working for myself, or some combination of working for myself and other partnering, or whatever it may be with a company, or structure, or whatever it may be.

I just think, the idea – I've never worked for myself. I think, the idea of doing that is just really appealing. It's an interesting challenge that I've not ever had, that I think I would like to just experiment with and see how it goes.

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FT: Do you think you would have been able to make this decision if you didn't have a financial cushion? What's your advice for those who are like, “Yes, I'm feeling Tim's energy. I am where he was at a couple months ago. I want to quit, but I don't know if I can afford it.”

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TH: I've been extremely fortunate that I've been in a position to build up a cushion. As you know the advice is if you can, have a year's worth of expenses. If not a year at least, six months, and yada, yada. I was able to have that cushion. I feel very fortunate and fully accept the privilege of being in that position, and not so many people are. For people who aren't there, I think – and this is something that I was aggressively doing was just trying to reprioritize one's finances in a way that sets you up for that.

At the time that I made this decision earlier this year, I wasn't necessarily positioned in the way that I am now to take as much time off that I'm going to. I was working towards – when I was still working, reprioritizing my finances and reconfiguring what the pie of my personal finance life looks like. Taking things away from here and putting them here and all that and trying to build up that cushion aggressively in a way that would position me to take all this time off. Because once I realized that I needed so much time off, then I just had to work backward and figure out, okay, practically and operationally, how do we actually make that happen? Then you unspooling that thought.

It was like, well, on the most base level, you need to have money to live your life and pay rent and afford food. That became my top priority, once I was able to establish that this is the goal that I'm trying to get at, so what is the path that I get there?

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FT: On an earlier episode this week, I was spoke with Jessica Carney, who's the podcast host of And Then I Quit, in talking about how to financially afford quitting. She had a great tip, which was there's so many other jobs out there that are desperate for hires. If we could just for a moment, detach our sense of self-worth from our jobs. If you're hating your job right now, or you hate the idea of working the job that you have, and you don't have a cushion, well, could you take on maybe a lesser paying job, that's less stressful, better hours, just to buy you some time. It's at least keeping your head above water, so then you can think about what your next act is going to be and start to really save your money. It won't work for everybody, but it was an interesting strategy.

[00:16:07]

TH: I love that idea. Last year, one of the most popular stories that I wrote, on that headline was – I wrote this maybe in August or September, and the headline was something along the lines of remember, your job is not who you are. The idea behind this was trying to disentangle our personal identity and lives from our work identity and lives. This was so, so difficult. For me, personally, this is – it's been such a difficult thing for me to do, because I was so tied to the work that I was doing, and being at the Times and everything.

This is a problem, you reach a point in your career, where you define yourself by the work that you do, and the place you work at, and what you're working on and all this. It's so, so difficult to disentangle that. I really had to put in the emotional work to get that place. Even at the time that I've written that story, the reason that I've written that story was because we were all working – Essentially, because of lockdown, lived at work.

I feel like, any other point in history was so, so difficult to realize that you have two separate identities, and they don't have to be tangled up into this one identity. Having that realization of, okay, it's actually fine not to define your entire life by the work you're doing, where you work, what you're working on.

For me, that was a huge hurdle, but it was crucial in getting to a place where I felt I could actually leave that life behind. This idea of stepping away from like, I don't believe in this concept, but what people refer to as a dream job. Stepping away from that, and taking like you're saying, a lesser paying job that's maybe less stressful, and requires less of your time and less commitment. That's a huge leap. To get to even thinking about that leap, you do need to realize, even if you get your "dream job," which they don't exist, but if you're at a job that you love, and really have been working toward, realizing you can leave that and still be okay, and still have an identity. For me, personally, that was a difficult realization.

Even just this weekend, since I tweeted that I'd left, this is a conversation I've had with folks who are anxious about quitting a job that they've worked years to get to. Because they just felt because they were there, they couldn't leave, because their identities were so wrapped of it. I so, so felt that way. Getting out of that mindset for me was really, really crucial.

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FT: I'm sure there's a lot of pause for those who want to quit. They don't, because, well, you don't want to be a quitter. You're literally quitting, and that's the thing that you're trying to avoid in your life. Because we've always been taught that you never quit. You always stick it out. It's a sign of weakness, perhaps. How should we change the narrative around the idea of quitting? I think, this is a real opportunity for our culture to give this idea of quitting more merit than it has received.

[00:19:07]

TH: I have two thoughts about that. This is a question I've thought a ton about. First, and the most straightforward is, I think, part of the thought process around that idea is loyalty and trying to feel like you are committed to something and you have loyalty to something. We need to realize, like workplace and company loyalty is a one-way street. Your company has no loyalty to you, and they'll drop you much easier than you will drop them. I think, we need to realize that and understand that company loyalty is a one-way street. You'll never get that back from a company, any company in the world. That's your framing company.

The other thing is I really thought back to when I work at Washington Post, I had an editor that when I was leaving, he was the editor that I put in my notice to, he had this wonderful philosophy about jobs. He said, "Look at jobs more as tours of duty. Sometimes tours of duty come to an end." I think, that is such a smart and insightful philosophy that I had never thought of until that point. It really changed the way that I looked at jobs.

The days of our parents working the same job for 40 years, and then retiring with a pension. Those are gone and that's never coming back. Getting away from this idea that we need to be loyal to a company for our career, I think is a really healthy outlook. It's also so beneficial for the worker. There's study after study that says, really, the only way to get substantial increases in your income is to quit a job and find a new one.

I think, job hopping and getting around and leaving a place, I think we should look at that less as quitting, and more just part of having a career, and that's just how careers work now. Nobody's going to stay at a job for 40 years anymore. Those days are just not coming back. I think, reframing the whole idea of what a career is, around, rather than one job you have for decades, to maybe five jobs you have for a couple years each.

Again, that's good for workers. It's good for your income. I think, it's good for our emotional and spiritual growth as we explore other things and other areas we might be interested in. I think, there's really not a downside. I think, a lot of us and I certainly did, a lot of us grew up under the impression that employers look down on having a bunch of jobs in the span of a decade, like having three jobs in a decade, employers would look down on that. That is simply not the case.

I think, just reframing what we think of as a career, I think, is something that a lot – I think, was a long-time coming, but I think that the pandemic has really accelerated. Literally, I know, so many people who have just left jobs, and the way that I did this, without anything on the horizon. I think, that's so, so healthy. I think, just hopping around is, I think – what I think to be the healthiest way to approach one's career.

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FT: I love the idea of tours of duty. Sometimes your tour is six months, sometimes it's six years. No one should judge you on the length, but really, what were the takeaways during your time there? Someone else wrote on social media that your career, like, let's stop looking at our careers as ladders, climbing the ladder. Let's look at it as navigating a jungle gym, where you go wherever you're drawn – however the momentum is.

[00:22:34]

TH: Yes. That is amazing. I love that. This is certainly, I think, accelerated by the pandemic. At least, in my personal lives, and even when I was writing at Times, and things that I would hear from readers, now because everything around us is so awful, that we are prioritizing life satisfaction and happiness and job satisfaction in ways that we never did before. I think, leaving a job is a direct action we can take to reprioritizing your life around satisfaction, or happiness, if you're not getting the right type of satisfaction you are from a job.

[00:23:10]

FT: Well, tell us how your days are now. Still pretty recent, since you left. By the way, how did you leave? What, did you send an email? Tell us about the mechanics of quitting. How do you quit your job, actually?

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TH: Yeah. I mean, so like I said, I was out on leave for a couple months. Just the idea of going back was too much for me to bear. I think, in general, anywhere you quit, it's pretty much the same process. You say, "Hey, I'm putting in my notice." Basically, automated HR process kicks in. I think, that process can seem daunting, but I've had what, five or six jobs over my career. Every time I quit, the process is the exact same. That is such a regimen – in my experience. I mean, I'm sure people have had other experiences.

In terms of what I've been up to, really just vibing. I've been traveling a lot. I've been trying to catch up with folks. If I want to take a midday lunch and just hang out there for a couple hours, I can. If I just want to go to the park on a Wednesday afternoon and read, there's nothing

preventing me from doing that anymore. I'm sure at some point, I'll get bored of this, but also, maybe not. Again, maybe I'm just going to be retired and have hobbies. That life sounds amazing to me.

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FT: What's your runway, though? Can you just do that without working, making an income?

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TH: Well, again, I was fortunate enough to have – to be in a position where I could position myself up for this. Again, when I realized that this is where I want to end up, I spent a lot of really aggressive and concerted efforts to build up my war chest, so that I could just vibe for a while. At least, until the end of the year, I'm just going to hang out and chill. You don't have some runway after that. If it gets to January, and I'm just like, "I am not ready to go back to work, I'm not ready to have a job again." Again, I'm in a very fortunate and privileged position, where that can be an option for me.

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FT: I love that. Congratulations to you. I've been collecting some questions from listeners about just the how to quit and any thoughts you have related to that, I'm going to answer that on Friday's episode. One thing that keeps popping up, and it has always come up when the topic is on quitting and leaving a job and having that in between, where you're looking for a new job, or maybe you're going to start a business, but getting your insurance. The health insurance piece of this is often what keeps people from not quitting, or at least slowing down that journey. Any advice you have for those who are listening, who are like, "I want to quit, but where do I get my benefits?"

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TH: This part, I will say, I actually have not figured out. My insurance actually just ran out. This has also been my experience in all the jobs that I quit. Basically, Cobra is the go to option.

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FT: Cobra. Right.

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TH: I mean, that's where I'm going to land once I – I just haven't figured out, because I just haven't gotten around to it. I'm just so busy. My days are full of just playing with the cats. Who has the time?

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FT: Yeah. Cobra's a great solve for the interim. It's not cheap, but it is probably the low-hanging fruit. There's obviously the marketplace and you can shop around for a fresh plan there. Cobra allows you to basically extend what you had when you were working, and pay your premium, plus your company's premium, plus a fee. It's more than what you were used to. If it's just what's easiest, it's what a lot of people opt in to. I've benefited from Cobra.

I understand, you're catching up on some television. You were asking whether to watch The White Lotus. What do you think of it? I think it's pretty great. I have one episode left.

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TH: I haven't started it. I tweeted this over the weekend and literally, everybody without fail was like, "Yes, you need to watch it." Just getting to it.

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FT: I love these series that just are six episodes and then you're done, then you can move on. There's not a lot of commitment level. It's making me want to go on a very long vacation. It's played on an island in Hawaii and everything. I think, it was actually the four seasons in real life, but they turned it into something different for the series.

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TH: Oh, that's amazing.

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FT: For the series. Yeah. I'm like, "One day. One day, I'm going to that."

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TH: That's what we're all working toward.

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FT: I know. I'm like, remember three-hour long breakfasts by the beach? No, I've never done that, but it would be nice.

[00:27:50]

TH: Someday, we'll get there. You and I will have a three-hour long beach breakfast.

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FT: Before that, maybe we should get a drink and talk more. Thank you so much. I feel very lucky to be able to have talked to you and bring you on, and introduce you to the audience so quickly after you've made this big life decision. We're really happy for you. Thank you for the inspiration, and some of the strategy, Tim. I hope you enjoy this period in your life. You deserved it.

[00:28:18]

TH: Thank you so much. Thanks for having me. Really great to chat with you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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FT: You can follow Tim on Twitter @TimHerrera, and on Instagram @Tim_Herrera. See you back here on Friday, answering your money questions about how to quit. Thanks for sharing your time with us and I hope your day is so money.

[END]