

## Burnout Doesn't Wear Lipstick: A Manifesto on Rest, Power, and the Future of Women in Business

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There's a silent epidemic in corporate America. It doesn't come with sirens or scandal, and it doesn't make headlines. But it's there—in the glint of fluorescent lights over cubicles, in the 3:00 a.m. email replies, in the muted tears behind closed doors. It travels in high heels and power suits, and it hides behind glossy LinkedIn updates and forced smiles during Zoom calls. It shows up in group chats at midnight, in calendar invites stacked back-to-back, in the breath you hold every time you speak in a room full of men who interrupt you, and in the way women—particularly ambitious, brilliant, high-achieving women—are burning out in silence, with no language to name the ache.

We're told to be grateful. To lean in. To hustle harder. To smile more. To lead—but only just enough, not so much that we threaten the room. To be polished, but never too soft. To say yes, even when we're drowning. We are lauded for our endurance and punished the moment we need rest. We've internalized that exhaustion is a virtue and that burnout is the price of belonging. And perhaps the most dangerous part of it all? We've come to believe that this is just what it means to be successful.

I know this epidemic intimately—because I lived it. As a woman who's worked in corporate America for over 10 years, I witnessed the toll it takes: the quiet unraveling behind achievement, the way high-performing women carry mountains on their backs and apologize for not carrying more. I began to ask a radical question: What if our exhaustion isn't a personal failure, but a symptom of a broken system? This essay is about how I found that answer. It's about community, care, and the courageous act of rewriting what leadership—and wellness—looks like for women in business.

As Vice President of the Graduate Women in Business (GWiB) club at Southern Methodist University, I watched my peers juggle leadership roles, internships, and coursework while holding themselves to impossible standards. I lived it, too—wondering if self-care was just a buzzword or something that had been mislabeled as laziness for women like us. That's when I decided that wellness wasn't just a personal need; it was an ethical responsibility.

Throughout my time at SMU, no community has shaped my values more profoundly than Graduate Women in Business. GWiB didn't just offer me a space to grow as a leader—it offered me a mirror. It forced me to confront the ways I was contributing to a culture of silent suffering: the late nights, the over-functioning, the lack of boundaries. This community didn't just reinforce my belief in equity for women in business; it expanded it. I began to understand that equity isn't just about representation in the boardroom—it's about access to rest, resilience, and resources.

At first, I thought leadership meant being endlessly available, always saying yes, and pushing through. But watching my fellow members and listening to their stories shifted something in me. I heard women talking about panic attacks before presentations, the pressure to always look polished, the silent burden of caregiving while pursuing an MBA. I saw how often they put their own needs last. These weren't isolated cases—this was a pattern. And it was one we were all complicit in, simply by never talking about it.

That realization changed the way I led. Instead of planning one more panel on "Women in the C-Suite," I began organizing events around mental health and burnout. We hosted a yoga and brunch day where no one had to perform or pitch themselves. We brought in speakers to talk about therapy, mindfulness, and the reality of emotional labor in the workplace. We created a

group chat that wasn't just about deadlines or recruiting tips but also included affirmations, accountability check-ins, and the occasional reminder to drink water.

One of our most powerful events was a night we called "Unfiltered." It wasn't a lecture or a workshop—it was a circle. Women from across the MBA programs gathered in a quiet classroom, left their laptop bags and phones at the door, and shared stories. No résumés, no titles, just real people. We talked about failure. About rejection. About the fear of being exposed as a fraud. And we cried—because for once, we didn't have to pretend. That night reminded me that vulnerability is a form of courage. It's not the opposite of strength—it's the foundation of it.

It sounds simple, but these events weren't just feel-good moments—they were acts of resistance. In a culture that rewards overwork and penalizes vulnerability, choosing wellness is a radical act. And GWiB became my incubator for practicing that kind of ethical leadership. It revealed to me that creating space for others starts with creating space for yourself. It taught me that empathy is not a weakness in leadership—it's a strategy.

But perhaps the most transformative part of GWiB wasn't the events I led—it was the conversations that happened afterward. The moments when someone pulled me aside and said, "Thank you. I didn't know anyone else felt like this." Or when I received a text from a first-year student saying our mindfulness event was the first time she had taken a break in weeks. These were more than kind words—they were reminders that even small acts of care can disrupt deeply ingrained systems of silence.

What made GWiB so powerful was its ability to turn vulnerability into a bonding force. We were all women navigating elite academic spaces while preparing to enter high-stakes

careers. The unspoken expectation was that we would excel effortlessly, lead gracefully, and never falter. But behind the accolades and polished LinkedIn updates were real struggles—crippling self-doubt, financial pressure, the fear of being the “diversity hire,” and the exhausting tightrope walk of being assertive but not “too much.”

In this crucible of expectation, GWiB became a sanctuary. It reminded us that mentorship wasn’t just about career advice—it was about emotional mentorship, too. It was about the older student who pulled you aside after a networking event and reassured you that everyone feels imposter syndrome. It was about the alum who got real about the mental toll of being the only woman on a senior leadership team. And it was about the peer who encouraged you to take that internship across the country because “you can do hard things, and I’ll be here when you get back.”

We often think of communities as places to “grow our network,” but GWiB redefined what networking could mean. We weren’t just building professional bridges—we were holding emotional lifelines. And that changed me. It made me understand that the most ethical, impactful communities are those that don’t just push you to succeed—they hold space for your failures. They see you not just as a résumé, but as a whole person with complex emotions, messy days, and boundless potential.

The constant feeling of “not being enough” is one of the most pervasive challenges women face in business—yet it’s rarely named out loud. GWiB gave us language for it. More importantly, it gave us a framework for dismantling it. We normalized rest. We celebrated small wins. We stopped glorifying all-nighters. We built a culture where asking for help was seen not as weakness, but as wisdom. That kind of shift isn’t just meaningful—it’s revolutionary.

One author who helped me articulate this internal transformation is Mel Robbins. Her words often found their way into our GWiB discussions and my own self-reflection. In her book, *The 5 Second Rule*, she writes, “You are one decision away from a completely different life.” That line lived on our whiteboards and group chats, not as a cliché but as a reminder that change doesn’t have to be dramatic to be effective. Choosing to speak up in a meeting. Choosing to rest instead of overextend. Choosing to believe in your worth. These micro-decisions defined our leadership ethos in GWiB.

Mel Robbins also talks about the power of momentum: “You can’t control how you feel. But you can always choose how you act.” That mantra reminded me that fear and self-doubt don’t disqualify you from being a leader—they humanize you. And when I applied it to our community, I saw a pattern: our greatest breakthroughs didn’t come from perfection. They came from showing up anyway.

That same ethos carried over into Kiwi, the app I’ve founded and developed during my MBA journey. While GWiB helped me serve the women around me, Kiwi was my way of reaching the next generation. Kiwi stands for Knowledge, Insight, Wellness, and Innovation—four pillars I wish I had more access to as a young girl navigating the complicated intersection of health, hormones, and womanhood. Designed for girls ages 12 to 16, Kiwi is a preventative health education app that helps users track their menstrual cycles, understand their bodies, and advocate for themselves in medical settings.

What makes Kiwi unique isn’t just the technology—it’s the philosophy behind it. Just like GWiB taught me that business isn’t just about metrics but about meaning, Kiwi is built on the belief that early education in wellness creates lifelong advocates. We don’t just offer

symptom trackers or health tips—we offer language. We offer confidence. We offer girls the same thing I needed when I joined GWiB: a community that says, "You matter."

Kiwi also gave me a tangible way to explore the intersection of ethics and innovation. How do you design something educational that doesn't feel patronizing? How do you balance health literacy with privacy and autonomy? These questions pushed me to think more deeply about what it means to build products that don't just function—they uplift. Working on Kiwi taught me that ethical leadership doesn't stop at how you treat people—it extends into how you build systems, products, and cultures.

As I prepare to graduate from SMU, I think about legacy—not in terms of prestige, but in terms of impact. The legacy I want to leave isn't in how many events I organized or how many users Kiwi gains, but in the culture I helped foster. A culture that centers care. A culture where women can breathe, share, lead, and grow without burning out to prove their worth. A culture where mentorship doesn't stop at professional advice but includes, "How are you really?"

GWiB reminded me that leadership is about presence, not perfection. About showing up, even when you don't have it all figured out. About reaching back to pull someone else up the ladder while building an entirely new ladder if the old one was never built for us in the first place. That's the version of success I now carry with me—not one of competition, but one of collective uplift.

Both GWiB and Kiwi have made me rethink what ethical leadership looks like. It's not always the loudest voice in the room or the person with the longest résumé. Sometimes, it's the person who says, "Let's slow down." Sometimes, it's the one who makes space for someone else

to speak. And sometimes, it's the person who chooses to lead with care in a world that tells women they can only lead with strength.

Being part of the Graduate Women in Business community didn't just help me evolve my values—it made me interrogate them. It made me ask why I thought busyness equaled value, why I believed leadership meant self-sacrifice, and why rest felt like a reward instead of a right. And most of all, it showed me that ethics isn't about abstract ideals—it's about daily choices. About how you show up. About who you lift up. About the legacy you leave behind not in titles or awards, but in how people feel after working with you.

I hope that through GWiB and Kiwi, I've left behind a legacy of care—and that I've helped others believe they're worth that care, too.

Because at the end of the day, as Mel Robbins says, “You need to hear this loud and clear: No one is coming. It is up to you.” But through GWiB, I've also learned this—while no one may come to save you, community can come to sustain you. And that's the kind of leadership I want to champion: not the solo hero's journey, but the collective uplift. A world where women don't just survive the grind—we rewrite the system.

And if I've learned anything from my time at SMU, it's this: success means nothing if you're too burned out to enjoy it, and leadership means everything if it helps someone else feel seen. Graduate Women in Business didn't just leave a mark on my values—it etched itself into my purpose. And that purpose will guide me far beyond the walls of SMU, into boardrooms, startups, and every room I enter from here on out.

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To expand on this legacy, I look back to one of the most pivotal moments I experienced in the GWiB community: a retreat we hosted called "The Business of Being Well." This wasn't a typical networking or recruiting event. It was an event designed for healing. We focused on recalibrating our personal compasses. The women who attended weren't there to talk about job offers—they were there to talk about their mothers, their health scares, their relationships, their self-worth. We practiced guided meditation, wrote letters to our future selves, and had an open-mic night where laughter, poetry, and silence all had equal value. One participant said, "I didn't realize how much I needed this until I exhaled." That retreat changed the way I understood community. It isn't about proximity—it's about presence.

Another crucial initiative was our GWiB mentorship pairing program. We started with the goal of connecting first-year students with second-year leaders, but it became so much more. When I was paired with my mentee, Emma, I assumed I'd be answering questions about class registration and job interviews. Instead, she opened up to me about how she constantly felt like she was faking it—how her voice shook every time she spoke in class and how she dreaded group projects for fear of being ignored. We spent weeks unpacking those feelings. I shared my own stories, and more importantly, I listened to hers. By the end of her first semester, Emma was



leading a case competition team and pitching ideas in class with confidence. Watching her bloom reminded me why this work matters. It's not just professional development. It's transformation.

These experiences—retreats, mentorship, and moments of mutual vulnerability—are not bonuses to our education. They are the education. If business school teaches you how to lead others, GWiB teaches you how to lead yourself. And too often, women are taught that leadership requires erasing parts of themselves. Don't be too emotional. Don't speak too early. Don't wear pink. Don't ask for help. GWiB handed us a new playbook. One that said: be human. Be heard. Be whole.

There's a broader implication to this work, too. When women support other women in spaces traditionally governed by masculine values—aggression, stoicism, zero-sum competition—we begin to model a new kind of workplace culture. One that values reflection over reaction. One that encourages mentorship over rivalry. One that treats wellness not as a perk but as a principle. And the business world is better for it.

We also advocated directly with SMU administration to extend access to mental health resources specifically for graduate students, pushing for better visibility of counseling options and more inclusive faculty training. Change didn't happen overnight—but we got traction. We were invited to speak at a graduate student leadership summit. We were consulted on student wellness surveys. And most importantly, we made sure our members knew their voices mattered—because we practiced using ours.

The ethical core of my time with GWiB lies in that one word: voice. Too often, women learn to shrink theirs to fit into systems never built for them. In GWiB, we grew ours. We used

our voices to celebrate each other, to advocate for change, and to challenge norms that said vulnerability is a liability. We found strength in each other's stories, and in doing so, discovered the power in our own.

When I launched Kiwi, it was this exact spirit I wanted to pass on—not just to women already in the workforce, but to girls standing at the threshold of adolescence. I wanted them to have access to tools that spoke their language. I wanted them to feel powerful before the world tried to shrink them. I wanted them to know their questions about their bodies, emotions, and boundaries were valid. And I wanted to make sure they had a space to ask those questions without shame.

Now, as Kiwi evolves with feedback from teenage users, school nurses, and nonprofit partners, I'm reminded again and again: this is the long game. Changing culture doesn't happen in a keynote speech or a quarterly report. It happens in the steady, sometimes invisible, building of community. It happens in showing up. In listening. In leading with care. Just as GWiB taught me.

Looking ahead, I carry a vision: one where women never have to wonder if they're "too much." Where ambition and wellness are not at odds. Where community care is woven into corporate infrastructure, and where mentorship is recognized as a business strategy—not just a side project.

We are not just future CEOs, founders, and consultants. We are architects of a different kind of business world. One that values dignity as much as disruption. One that starts every pitch, policy, and practice with a simple but radical question: Who are we leaving behind?

GWIB made me ask that question. And now, I can't stop asking it.

That's the power of a community that doesn't just help you succeed, but helps you become someone worth following. Someone who values kindness as much as KPIs. Someone who knows that ethics don't belong in a footnote—they belong in every conversation.

And that's what I will carry with me—into every role, every room, and every decision I make. Because leadership is not just about what you build. It's about who you become while you build it.

And I, for one, intend to build with care.

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*\*\*Note: ChatGPT was used to help organize bullet points and talking points based on personal journal entries and meeting notes. All of the content, narrative, and analysis in the body of this essay represents the my original work, ideas, and lived experience.*