

Entrepreneurs, mental health and work-life balance

“As the founder of four companies, I can say that I’ve had quite a few stressful situations in my lifetime - the biggest one was dealing with burnout”, the founder of Chanty, Dmytro Okunyeu explains. “There was never enough time in the day and I always yearned for something more. After all, if I could launch four companies, why not five? Why not even more?” Difficult work-life balance, stress, mental issues, burnout... this article shows how entrepreneurs can be impacted at work.

Okunyeu’s story is a common one with regards to mental health. Mind cites that about “1 in 4 people in the UK will experience a mental health problem each year, while in England, 1 in 6 people report experiencing a common mental health issue (such as anxiety and depression) in any given week”. Cognitive Scientist Kristina Barger conducted research focused specifically on startup founders’ wellbeing and life balance and found that the numbers tend to be much higher within this population.

According to Barger’s findings, 69% of founders report feeling down or

depressed, 56% report being exhausted or burnt out and 51% feel anxious. A whopping 96% of them had different markers of stress per month, like panic, headaches, high blood pressure and dizziness — most of them experienced that weekly. “As an entrepreneur, you take all of the responsibility for your day,” Barger explains one of the reasons for the increased levels of stress. “Also, there is no safety net of other people noticing if you need support, logistic or emotional (as the work is often done alone and remote).” In her research, the founders marked additional reasons such as not having enough money, instability and constant worry.

“Even sending an email was beyond me”

Stephen Lynch, Founder of Lynch Communications shares how he worked himself into a burnout, just this past December. “I was so stressed and anxious I couldn’t sleep and couldn’t do the simplest of tasks,” he says. “Even sending an email was completely beyond me – physically and mentally I needed to take a break of about a week”, Lynch explains that this resulted from him putting too much pressure on himself to network and build relationships. “I was pushing very hard to secure much press wins for my clients, so I could later point to it in testimonials and case studies. I was focusing too much on an outcome instead of people.”

As a result, he didn’t schedule enough rest time or fun activities to disconnect from work. “I began to be quite dull to be around – serious, tired and ‘on’ all of the time, even when socialising.”

Rapid Transformation Coach Natasha Bray has worked in social work for many years before starting her business and tended to people with severe problems such as schizophrenia and drug addiction. “I guess my issues didn’t seem as bad, compared to that”, she says. Brays shares that her battle with mental health issues manifested through an exercise addiction, and later a work addiction.

“From the outside, it looked like I was functioning”. However, she was juggling stating her business, still working part-time and taking care of her newborn, while suffering from PTSD, as well as postnatal depression. Eventually, something had to give, and she decided to quit the part-time job for the sake of her health and life balance.

Mental health: you don't always realise you're anxious

Checking in with somebody before you experience a complete burnout can sometimes help prevent it. “You don’t have to check in with a professional”, Barger says. “Making sure your friends and family are aware of your mood or even asking them to be more vocal if they see you getting tired or irritable for a period of time is a good idea”. Other stress and anxiety symptoms you should be mindful of or ask people around you to pay attention to are changes in weight (loss or gain), changes in mood, forgetfulness, not participating in social activities for an extended period of time and generally isolating yourself.

Bray was able to identify one of those symptoms in herself. “One of the signs that something was wrong for me was that I got really forgetful”, she says. “I’d normally have such a good memory, and suddenly I’d forget an appointment – which was not like me at all.”

Treat yourself like with the same respect as you would with others

Both Barger and Bray agree that being an entrepreneur can be extremely isolating and a healthy life balance difficult to adapt. In fact, according to Barger’s research, 78% of founders report feeling lonely. The two also agree that this may be caused by feeling judged or misunderstood by your friends and family who don’t see entrepreneurship as a “real job”. “It’s important to surround yourself with other people who understand the journey, through networking events or social clubs, who will probably be entrepreneurs as well”, Brays suggests.

Barger adds that it’s always helpful to talk to people who’ve been the process of setting up a business themselves. “Maybe you need mentors if you don’t have a lot of experience with startups”. They can help you understand what role you’re best at doing, communicate better and mainly act as a sounding board. Another thing to consider to reduce stress is that you don’t necessarily have to seek out funding, which can put a lot of strain on a business. You can decide that the business will only be part-time, to not overwork yourself.

Following that advice, Bray is all about outsourcing — and not just in her business. “I see my cleaner as part of my team”, she says. “Without her, I wouldn’t have the extra time and headspace to work on my business. And my grandparents, who sometimes look after my three-year-old, they are part of my team as well”. When Okunyev, the founder of [Chanty](#), felt himself breaking

down he followed this advice and hired a CEO for each of his four companies.

Everyone interviewed can't stress enough the importance of sleep and some downtime, even if you have to forcefully schedule it into your day. The same goes for socialising, which should never be sacrificed for the sake of your business. "Be aware of what you're doing and treat yourself like you would a pet or another person", Lynch summarises. Brays adds to that you should "remember that you are your business. Without you, the business is not going to run at all."

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