

Mental health stigma is still scarring lives: startups need to step up

Without a doubt, in Europe we are living through a mental health revolution. The past decade has seen previously unimaginable advances in awareness, acceptance and treatment of mental health conditions that were previously ignored and hidden.

It's been incredible to see the leaps made in understanding, and in public dialogue surrounding conditions such as depression, anxiety, and anorexia. Spurred on by social media and by celebrity advocates, the individuals affected now have a community, access to support and a wealth of online and offline treatment resources.

But these advances mask the reality. When you peek below the surface, it doesn't take long to realise that we are still a long way off from the destigmatisation of the full spectrum of mental health conditions. It's the awkward, the non-Instagrammable, the complex and the antisocial disorders that are still routinely ignored, downplayed and shamed in society, popular culture and by the media.

Because these conditions – from bipolar disorder to binge-eating disorder and schizophrenia – are considered too socially unacceptable or embarrassing to talk about, no one truly knows how many people are affected by them. There is nowhere near enough investment in research and treatment development, doctors struggle to help their patients, there are few resources and information

sources, and sufferers feel isolated and in the dark.

With our mental health treatment services stretched to breaking point, grossly underfunded and under-resourced, it's time that we took matters into their own hands.

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I passionately believe that, in 2021, it's the vibrant community of entrepreneurs and startup teams who hold the power to make change. What we need to tackle the hidden mental health crisis are brave, committed founders willing to pioneer innovative solutions. We need outside-the-box thinkers who are not afraid to break taboos, take risks, win investors and demand action.

My personal experience with a little-known but surprisingly common condition opened my eyes to the reality of the state of mental health stigma across Europe and the US. The condition is classed as a body focused repetitive behaviour (BFRB) – an umbrella term used to refer to compulsive skin picking, hair-pulling and nail biting. The limited research into these debilitating conditions suggest that as many as 1 in 20 people will be affected at some point in their lives, with the most severe cases lasting for decades and severely impacting on the sufferer's quality of life, wellbeing and physical appearance.

I realised, through tentative enquiries with friends and family members who were also affected, no-one was talking about BFRBs. Sufferers were going to great lengths to hide their behaviours, few support resources existed, and treatment was rudimentary at best. I knew that more could – and needed to – be done. This motivated me to launch Nudge, a startup building 'smart' tools to support people who suffer from compulsive hair pulling, skin picking and nail biting. It's not been easy – how do you speak to customers who may not have even admitted to themselves that they need help? How do you explain a product to investors who have never heard of BFRBs? However, it's been unbelievably rewarding to receive messages from customers who no longer feel invalidated and ignored, but instead feel empowered to take steps towards recovery.

There is, of course, profit to be made by companies that truly commit to researching, developing and marketing tools, solutions and treatments for

stigmatised mental health conditions. However, anyone pursuing this mission for monetary gains will never provide what their customers really need. Startups operating in this space cannot shrug off their responsibility to pioneer a public dialogue on the mental health conditions they are profiting from. Their role is to establish not just a community of customers, but the safe, educational, supportive space that is sorely needed.

So, let's not jeopardise the progress that we have made in our societal attitudes towards mental health by getting complacent, or by prematurely congratulating ourselves. As entrepreneurs and startup founders, we can lead the charge in delivering the solutions that are still sorely needed by communities of people struggling with their mental health. By facing the stigma head on, by refusing to stay silent or to fuel the cycle of shame, we can build a new community and shape a new reality. And, no matter how small we might feel, we must remember that the tiniest tremor is capable of triggering an avalanche.

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