

Meet Jana Dowling, CEO and founder of mental fitness app MyArkeo

As part of our new quick fire questions series – or QFQs – we spoke to MyArkeo's Jana Dowling about turning experiences of personal struggle into a business to help others, bouncing back from losing funding, and addressing an unmet need for mental health support.

What was the catalyst for launching MyArkeo?

I had a major life event where I had severe a depressive episode and spent five weeks under 24-hour watch as a high-risk suicide patient. I was subsequently diagnosed with bipolar disorder and put on a course of medication.

When I was coming out of this episode, I wasn't well enough to work and so took on my recovery like a job and started to track everything I was doing to understand how the choices I was making were affecting my decisions. I found the data helpful to my recovery and others found it helpful too and I started running courses and teaching my recovery process. I met some amazing mentors who encouraged me to develop the app and realise the dream of improving more people's mental fitness and so MyArkeo was born.

Tell me about the business?

MyArkeo is a mental fitness app that allows users to keep tabs on their mental fitness by tracking everyday behaviours, lifestyle choices and challenges, highlighting when they are connected and enabling people to better manage the demands and dilemmas of everyday life. It gives you a daily score so you can monitor this to see how it changes over time and compare your data – for example amount of the sleep and exercise – to look for correlations and empower change.

Everyone should know what is going on in their mind and understand their patterns and behaviours to become as mentally fit as possible.

Mental fitness is the same as physical fitness, but for your brain.

It is something we all have – it goes up and down in all of us regardless of whether we have a mental health diagnosis or not and it is affected by lifestyle choices, life experiences and world events. Of those three things, the thing we have the most control over is our lifestyle. MyArkeo helps us to recognise these patterns of behaviour – it's not just a tool for those who are struggling, it's a tool for everyone. The quality of life you experience when you are at optimum mental fitness is so much improved – you can function better in relationships, work and in all aspects of your life.

How has the business evolved since its launch?

It's been a long slow burn for us. We started with an Alpha version in 2019 and then tested our Beta in July 2021 and soft launched in the app stores in November 2021. Our growth has all been dependent on funding. Now we are live, we're heading to our target of 5K paying users and we're out for funding again so we can market and scale. It's an exciting time but still a challenge!

How are you funded?

As a first-time founder, I wasn't aware of the challenges that raising posed or the potential pitfalls, which in a lot of ways worked in my favour as I didn't have any fear holding me back. I have had to learn as I go, and it's been a tough but rewarding journey. Initially we raised £80K in angel round of investing and as proof of concept we got lots of initial downloads.

I went on to raise £1M from a new venture capital fund based out of Dubai and went through all the due diligence and legals, however the money wasn't delivered. When this fell through, I had to take on other work to pay the bills in the interim, but I managed to raise a further £50K to finish the build of the app. I successfully launched the app at the end of last year and we are looking to get further investment soon.

What has been your biggest challenge so far?

My biggest personal challenge was my journey to recovery from a very dark place and not only successfully returning to work but taking on becoming a founder. This has helped me to understand that the step from being unwell to a full-time competitive workplace can be a huge one which is why I try and help others to overcome this gulf.

My biggest business challenge was when my funding fell through for the app development from my VC during the pandemic. I had to take on roles to help finance the continued work, but I ended up getting amazing experience in the field from my roles at Sweatcoin, working on their charity partnerships where we have managed to donate over \$110,000 in 2021 to many good causes around the world (which users donate using their Sweatcoins earned on the app) and at Velocitii Digital Solutions to build out startups.

Nothing in business ever happens the way you first envisioned it, but if you have an idea you passionately believe in, like I did, you push through and don't give in to any setbacks. Whenever anyone asks how I've managed it, I just say I built a mental fitness tracking system that works! It doesn't matter what life throws at me, I can handle it because I really know myself and how my behaviours impact my ability to deal with the pressures of life.

How does MyArkeo answer an unmet need?

It is slowly improving as more people are open about their mental fitness, but as a society we are more used to talking about our physical health – discussing our weight loss journey, for example – and I want to make conversations about mental fitness an everyday conversation.

I built the app because I wasn't well and I needed to learn more about myself to help speed up my recovery. It was important for me to have a clear overview of my behaviours (food, exercises, sleep, caffeine, alcohol, and nicotine intake), symptoms (anxiety, depression and so on) life challenges (financial stress, relationship stress) and medications and how they were all interacting. There was nothing out there that does this clearly, so that's why I built the MyArkeo tracking system.

The fundamental principle of the app is to track your mental fitness just like you would your physical fitness – it's about your active choices and their impact.

We don't think twice about reaching for Instagram or checking our fitness tracker – they're an integral part of many people's lives, and I'm aiming to make MyArkeo just as indispensable for anyone who cares about managing their emotional and mental wellbeing. The app aims to empower individuals to improve their mental flexibility, strength and stamina, just like you would in physical fitness.

The MyArkeo app is available to download in the App Store. We have an amazing community who use the app to track their mental health and people realising the many benefits and passing on their experience has been a big part of the success of downloads. We love people being playful with their scores and sharing them on social media as having fun conversations helps to move the narrative on mental health forward and make it more natural for everyone to talk about it in their day to day lives.

What's in store for the future?

I am just about to do an Instagram live with [*How Mental*](#) and I'm doing other work with them with tips and tricks for mental fitness on stamina, flexibility and strength. I already do a lot of talks to business audiences on mental fitness and resilience, and we are hoping to work with businesses to encourage them to pay attention to the issue of how work impacts our mental fitness.

We want to not only give employees the tools to take control of their own mental health, but also make sure that employers have a mental fitness policy and training around this issue so they can use our score to have discussions with their HR if they are struggling. Most people aren't paying attention to what's going on in their brain and how work is impacting that.

Also, we are about to go into another funding round and are looking to grow our user base to get our message out there about the vital importance of mental fitness and the need to track it just like you would your physical fitness.

What one piece of advice would you give to other founders?

Don't be afraid to try things and follow your instincts. Pay attention to your mistakes but don't dwell on them – move on to the next steps of whatever moves your plan forward. Try to take time to appreciate how you have turned around the feeling at the start of “I don't know what I'm doing” into being experienced in your field.

It's not about things being quick, easy and fun so work hard but take care of yourself. Remember that the true feeling of success will come from navigating the challenges and defeats and turning them into wins. Don't forget to live your life and enjoy it too, it's easy to let everything become about work.

Make sure you prioritise your mental fitness and take care of yourself, being driven towards your goals means self-care can be forgotten in the long hours – never neglect eating well, good sleep and exercise as this all feeds into business success.

Jana Dowling is CEO and founder of [*MyArkeo*](#).

