Entrepreneurs Could Be at a Higher Risk for Suicide. A Psychologist Explains Why.

Opinions expressed by *Entrepreneur* contributors are their own.

Almost a decade ago, I found my husband weeping in the glow of his computer screen. I wondered why Rob, a tech entrepreneur with engineering degrees and trademark stoicism, was so visibly upset. “Aaron Swartz killed himself,” he sputtered.

Swartz, a 26-year-old software developer, helped build the web feed format RSS and joined Reddit as a partner six months after its founding. We didn’t know him personally. Still, the death by suicide of this serial entrepreneur rocked Rob hard. I suspect he saw parts of himself in Swartz.

At the time, I was a psychology professor with a focus on traumatic stress. I’ve since dedicated my career to entrepreneurial mental health. It can be a dangerous profession, psychologically speaking.

According to Dr. Michael Freeman, one of the only well-established physicians to conduct research in this area, a startling 72% of entrepreneurs report having mental health concerns. There is no reliable data on suicide rates or suicidal ideation among entrepreneurs, although some have suggested that founders are two times more likely to have suicidal thoughts.

If you were predisposed to any deadly disease at a rate higher than the rest of the population, you’d pay attention. Entrepreneurs, we need to talk more about this risk.

Since Swartz's death, many high-profile entrepreneurs have died by suicide or suspected suicide: Unfiltered founder Jake Millar. Anti-virus software pioneer John McAfee. Zappos founder Tony Hsieh. Celebrity chef Anthony Bourdain. Handbag designer Kate Spade. The list goes on.

Through my own work, I've realized that highly competent founders and entrepreneurs don't talk about what they're wrestling with. Once entrepreneurs understand some of the factors contributing to this deadly silence, they can better recognize them in their own lives. One thing is for sure: The stigma around this conversation is deadly. Here are some observations from my practice:

Related: Shifting the Narrative: Entrepreneurs and Mental Health

Going it alone

Suicidal thoughts are common. According to one study, 9.2% of people will experience suicidal ideation over their lifetimes. Data collected by the CDC in an annual survey conducted from 2015-2019 shows that 4.3% of American adults reported having had suicidal thoughts during the preceding year. One of the factors that make entrepreneurs more vulnerable is that they tend to work in isolation. Even surrounded by teams, many of my clients still feel out of sync with others as they take on the uniquely burdensome role of leading a company. Early-stage entrepreneurs may literally work alone – without team members or sounding boards. What's more, entrepreneurs tend to build professional networks more than close social circles (i.e., networks before friendships). Most potential confidants have touchpoints in the business world. It's often difficult to discuss deep vulnerabilities.

Prioritizing performance over health

Business and performance coaches can be fantastic resources, but they are not trained mental health providers. Relying solely on this type of support becomes problematic if the focus is on the business first and the human second. Many entrepreneurs work exclusively with business mentors, without a focus on their individual psychological health.

Suppressing mental health needs to prioritize business growth allows small psychological vulnerabilities to fester. I suggest we reverse that mentality: A well human creates a well business. Put mental health first, and trust that the gain will also amplify the business. That's not always what's in the water around entrepreneurs.

Related: Tips for Entrepreneurs to Fight Suicidal Thoughts

When thoughts become actions (or inaction)

Founders don't just think, they act. They ideate and build. They put thoughts into motion. What is a company but a good idea, realized? Giving voice to suicidal thoughts scares entrepreneurs, because it makes dark ideas seem real, especially given the tendency to act readily to make ideations into realities. The opposite can also happen: a feeling of paralysis with no actions left.

Entrepreneurs solve problems all day, every day. When the path forged starts to become impassable, like a maze with no exit, it can feel like there are no good choices. Intelligent, motivated professionals who rarely encounter unsolvable problems are not used to this feeling. It is jarring. It is paralyzing. The consequences of admitting this? Entrepreneurs

worry it might be perceived as a weakness that will affect the business. Feeling trapped very often precedes suicidal thoughts.

Carrying more than your weight

Once investors, shareholders and employees are on board, it can suddenly dawn on entrepreneurs just how many lives are hanging in the balance. Their companies are holding lives and livelihoods together. Under these circumstances, hiding vulnerabilities seems preferable. Many entrepreneurs are so focused on their responsibilities to others that they deprioritize themselves.

Related: I've Had Suicidal Thoughts as an Entrepreneur. Here's How I Learned to Cope With Depression.

Embrace preventative mental health

Entrepreneurs must choose a less lonely path — build social circles, not just networking events. Learn to be vulnerable and share real feelings with supportive friends, a coach or a therapist. There are many entrepreneur groups devoted to professional development, relationship-building and the human side of running a business.

Individually, embracing preventative mental health care is essential. Make time to move your body, embrace unstructured play, find a hobby without a business angle, spend uninterrupted time with loved ones, and forge a long-term relationship with a mental health professional. And consider regular sabbaticals away from your daily work routine.

Talking about these issues, including suicidal thoughts, doesn't make them more real. When you shine a light on them, it tends to diminish their power.

*If you are in crisis, call or text **988** to connect with the 988*

Suicide & Crisis Lifeline. The lifeline provides 24-hour free and confidential support to anyone in distress, prevention and crisis resources for you or your loved ones, and best practices for professionals in the United States.

https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/432083