# Entrepreneurship Was Tough Before COVID-19. Now It's Testing Founders' Mental Limits.



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There's a truism: "It's lonely at the top." Prior to COVID-19, half of CEOs reported feelings of loneliness and isolation. Now, with offices closed, in-person interactions minimized, and formerly meaningful relationships relegated to Zoom calls, each of us, particularly those in leadership positions, feel as though we are facing this pandemic somewhat alone.

My firm has been conducting research into how business leaders have been coping with the mental stresses of this pandemic.

The early data suggests that the loss of our “tribes,” personally and professionally, has compounded with stress, uncertainty, and disconnection. Isolation is taking a considerable toll on the mental wellbeing of America’s tech founders.

Since the onset of this pandemic, a great deal of focus has been placed on how leaders can support their employees. Some recent articles even suggest that in today’s age, *every* company is a healthcare company – since they’re now in the business of protecting the mental and physical health of their employees and customers.

All of that is true. But what about the founders and leaders themselves? It seems that little attention has been paid to how those in leadership positions are actually coping right now. While my firm’s focus is generally on helping tech leaders thrive, the importance of “self-care” and mental wellbeing applies equally to our senators, mayors and public-sector leaders.

As we accept that this pandemic will continue for the foreseeable future, it’s important for those in positions of power – whose decisions impact the lives and careers of countless others – to carve out time for self-care if they are to sustain their ability to be of service.

Here are five ways leaders can stay mentally fit during these trying times:

## Renew your purpose

A hopeful prospect of all the losses we are experiencing is the opportunity to see what remains. As we divest of distractions, commute time, trips, and social gatherings, we are left with more time alone. While a degree of loneliness is inevitable, there is an opportunity to dig deeper and unearth new meaning. Change of this magnitude can be the precursor for

personal transformation, if one is willing to go into unknown territory — equipped with persistent curiosity and a tolerance for suffering. Staying vigilant on this journey requires allowing discomfort long enough to examine what we truly want in life and how we are getting in our own way. If you choose to maximize your solitude and clarify your purpose, you may one day look back on COVID-19 as a period of immense, positive personal transformation.

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## Find a support group and "tribe" you can be vulnerable with

No matter how much the world changes or how rapidly technology progresses, one enduring characteristic of our species is the need for community and social connection. As our traditional tribes have been disrupted, many leaders have become isolated from their peers. They maintain necessary communication with their direct reports and other stakeholders, but relationships that bring objectivity, perspective, and genuine support have been upended. It's time to be deliberate about cultivating meaningful relationships with a community of peers. I would suggest an "official" support group. For women, a company called Chief has pioneered a national women's network. In Los Angeles, a men's group called METal gathers every Saturday (albeit through Zoom as of late). There are countless other groups like these — I even host one myself — in which people can meet regularly, offer structured support for one another, and gain perspective from those they respect. Anybody in a leadership position can benefit from such groups, and in the absence of other strong, consistent, supportive relationships, they can serve as a critical building block of one's mental wellbeing.

## Curate your time

As you test a renewed personal vision, examine how you are spending your time. Just as Google famously encouraged employees to set aside 20 percent of their time for innovation of their choice, you may want to devote a slice of your time to exploring the next version of your life. This may take the form of time in nature to reflect on important questions, finding wise counsel, writing, or forming new tribes with people who have similar commitments or values. It could be as simple as scheduling breaks between meetings and as complicated as making decisions to edit out relationships and activities that are not serving your higher purpose. Sometimes you just have to press delete. The gravitational pull of today's many obligations will be an easy default. Left to run on auto-pilot, life becomes a series of back-to-back meetings and completed checklists. Use this time to upgrade your quality of life.

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## Appreciate the people you are "stuck" with

It goes without saying that we are now spending more time with our families – partners, parents, and children – than we ever have before. It becomes easy to take those around us for granted, and to have those around us take us for granted. Apathy on the home-front can quickly spiral into conflict. One cannot have a thriving professional life if their home life is a wreck, and keeping the joy alive in your closest relationships is critical to avoiding this spiral. Even if you aren't going out to restaurants, be creative and cultivate *new* experiences despite the more static general setting. Have conversations that matter, including the difficult ones that build resentment when they go underground. While focusing on

your personal life as you try to build a thriving career seems counterintuitive, it actually is essential. The more focus you place on making your closest relationships thrive, the happier you will be and the more capable you will be of leading others.

## Develop rituals around your personal wellbeing

With our longstanding former routines disrupted – like waking up, meditating, going to an office, leaving at a certain hour, and hitting the gym – we have to create new rituals and routines. Consistency is the fastest way to build new habits, and with the aid of Google Calendar, it's quite easy to build in time for things that you normally wouldn't imagine scheduling. Use your calendar to carve out time for exercise, walks, meditation, and whatever else nourishes you. Treat your daily "walk" as a critical meeting. Block the time in your calendar and honor that commitment to yourself. I see so many people overworking and burning out right now, and it seems a bit ironic that as offices close, people have gone into work hyperdrive. My advice: Slow down, plan how you're going to nourish yourself, calendar it in, and treat your wellbeing with the same degree of importance as you do an investor meeting.

There are countless philosophies around stress reduction and the cultivation of a meaningful life. Frankly, many founders don't make time for them. Their work is their religion and their companies are their creative vessels. If you take the advice above to heart and translate the five remedies into action, your experience of this pandemic can be transformed from one of stress and uncertainty into a more meaningful time of creativity, joy, and growth.

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