Get Activated: Improving Mental Health in Startups

It’s time to talk about how they can be tough environments for founders and employees.

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One in five American adults will experience mental illness in any given year, and for one in 25 — or 11.2 million Americans — that illness will be severe enough to interfere with their daily lives and relationships. Twenty percent is already a high number, but the nonprofit org Open Sourcing Mental Illness suggests that percentage is even higher among the tech-industry population.

It shouldn’t a surprise if you stop and think about it. We have all heard of founder’s blues, and many tech people work in startups, which demand long hours and are often less than stable. While new books like *Unstoppable* by Grasshopper founder David Hauser provide a framework for being productive while maintaining a healthy lifestyle, many entrepreneurs and executives are unaware of how their business can impact both physical and mental health.

With so many people impacted by poor mental health, you might think that progressive HR policies and the open-mindedness of startup culture would address the issue with a groundbreaking solution, but the topic remains stigmatized across many organizations. Even today, it’s often a discussion for your home life, not at work.

While mental-health conversations need to take place at the

office, we need to first change the way we think and talk about our health, period.

Related: Mental Illness May Plague Entrepreneurs More Than Other People

Why Aren’t We Talking About Mental Health?

Mental health has more visibility than ever before. Why is it still so difficult to have these conversations? Segments of our society still incorrectly see poor mental health as a personal weakness. Because we aren’t interested in sharing our weaknesses with our colleagues and bosses, it isn’t something we talk about at work. However, the stigma surrounding mental health goes further than looking or feeling weak.

Many mental-health diagnoses aren’t the disorders typically characterized as illness (i.e. schizophrenia, borderline personality disorder, etc.). Instead, they encompass serious but less visible conditions such as generalized anxiety disorder or major depressive disorder. Even your closest colleagues may not be able to tell that you’re struggling, and when they find out, their reactions may range from disbelief to shaming. We need to change the tone of that conversation.

Getting Practical: How to Talk About Mental Health

Starting a meaningful conversation around mental health requires top-down leadership. First, the data shows that poor mental health doesn’t discriminate between the C-suite and your regular staff. Everyone needs to be aware that it can impact even the most unlikely suspects, including our founders (who self-report mental health issues at a rate of 72 percent).

Respecting work-life balances and boundaries, starting at the top, is critical to making progress with a mental health agenda. A typical example is not expecting a reply to an email at 2 a.m. If a team member is on vacation, encourage them to uninstall Slack until they get back. It sounds simple, but many businesses find it difficult to disengage from their employees.

While we were taught to rely on Elon Musk's belief that "no one ever changed the world on 20 hours a week," we also need to consider that the trade-offs could have negative long-term impacts on a business. Nothing undercuts morale quite like the poor health of team members. It's up to us as leaders to set the line between dedication to organizational goals and unhealthy behaviors.

Related: Why Your Mental Health Is the Key to Your Success

One new organization, Activated, is an example of how CEOs and founders can create and lead a community focused on health as a means of stimulating innovation. Leaders often feel it's a necessity to look superhuman. It attracts talent and investors, and looking good makes us feel good. In reality, one's vulnerability can be an asset because it makes you a greater ally to struggling team members. Teams who see you "doing it all" like you were born capable may feel that you won't understand or accept their struggles. Of course, leaders should be inspiring, but they need to be human too.

The Conversation Starts With Us

The startup world has a problem with the way it approaches mental health, but the problem won't fix itself. As industry leaders, it's up to us to create top-down cultures that address this crisis and avoid contributing to it through toxic work cultures and antiquated attitudes towards health. We can only start the conversation by leading it, and together we can make our businesses safe and healthy places to work, to the

greater benefit of our long-term goals.

The startup industry may revolve around innovations and new technology, but behind every groundbreaking innovation are the humans who dreamed it up. We need to dedicate as many resources to them as we do to our products.

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