

It doesn't have to hurt; Stress, mental health and entrepreneurship

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

Dr. Arla Day is a Canada Research Chair and professor in Industrial and Organizational Psychology at Saint Mary's University. She is also a founding member of the CN Centre for Occupational Health and Safety and chairs the Nova Scotia Psychological Healthy Workplace Program committee. "We're very good at ignoring ourselves," she says. "You have to be a very special individual to start a business, and it's hard for them to admit they need help." Her work involves shifting the perception that asking for help equals failure. "You wouldn't say that a top athlete is weak because they have a physiotherapist or sports psychologist. It's not about ill health, or weakness. It's about maximizing your potential."

What destructive messages are business owners getting about what it takes to be successful? First and foremost is the idea that we have to be on 24 hours a day, seven days a week. "There's a bravado to that - how many hours you put in, how late you stayed up, how much coffee you drank. We have to replace this with, God forbid, slow down," says [Michael DeVenney]. "I think this generation coming in is not going to take it. They've been raised to talk about how they feel, what's working and what isn't working. I hope they're going to push back and say, 'I'm having my own business but I'm having it on my terms.'"

"You don't have to sell your soul, it doesn't have to feel awful and miserable," she says. "That belief we have - and it's a Nova Scotia-wide belief - if there isn't blood coming out of your fingernails you haven't earned it. I wholeheartedly disagree. You have to work hard to preserve who you are, how you show up in the world, and how you do the work that you do. We somehow convince people that there is no alternative. I would like people to ask themselves: Is there an alternative? What does it look like? How might I live my life that way?"

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Entrepreneurs also reported that their family members experienced a high rate of mental health problems. First and foremost is the idea that we have to be on 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Realizing there was very little research about the link between entrepreneurship and mental health, they created the Mindset Project and are getting ready to launch a Canada-wide survey to find out more about the lived experiences of entrepreneurs, the stress of their businesses, and their individual stories.

FULL TEXT

"It's probably the biggest unacknowledged business risk of this century."

That's quite a statement. You could be forgiven for assuming it's about taking on too much debt, failing to innovate, or not doing your market research. It's actually about mental health, and the vastly underreported rates at which entrepreneurs experience symptoms of depression, anxiety, ADHD, and bipolar disorder among other issues.

The quote comes from Michael Kennedy, self-described "owner of the now deceased Canadian Bacon Cookhouse," which shut down in 2014 after two years in business. Today, Kennedy is sharing his story of mental health crisis and recovery, and working to help other entrepreneurs maintain balance.

"It was a seasonal business and a tough market," Kennedy explains. "You put yourself out there, and a good chunk of your personal identity is tied to the business. When it comes crashing down, it definitely takes a toll."

He was officially diagnosed with bipolar II disorder not long ago. "After the failure of the Cookhouse, the tell-tale signs were there, but I've probably had symptoms since my late teens or early 20s. I could manage it, but this pushed me over the edge. Diagnosis provided a ton of retrospective coherence, and a lot of relief."

Most of us have heard the statistic that three-quarters of new businesses fail. But did you know that according to a study by Dr. Michael Freeman at the University of California at San Francisco, 72 per cent of entrepreneurs reported struggling with mental health issues? Entrepreneurs also reported that their family members experienced a high rate of mental health problems. In other words, entrepreneurs are suffering, and so are the people closest to them.

Michael DeVenney, a close friend of Kennedy's, knows this firsthand. "I've been fully diagnosed with clinical depression for about four years. I have anxiety disorder, panic attacks, all that stuff. I have a cocktail, and a bit of ADHD as well. I'm the perfect entrepreneur," says DeVenney, referring to the theory that the typical personality traits - and strengths - of entrepreneurs can make them more susceptible to mental illness.

"People who have challenges with attention find it hard to be in a structured job environment," he explains.

"Creative people also like to have a lot of space and room. In talking to hundreds of entrepreneurs, they love the chase. Every opportunity looks like a good one. It's hard to say no, and you don't want to hurt people's feelings, but you're not afraid to hurt yourself."

As president of Bluteau DeVenney, a company that helps organizations and entrepreneurs strategically grow their businesses, DeVenney recently shared his story of mental illness in a three-part series in *The Chronicle Herald*. His mission is to reduce the stigma around mental health.

Why start talking about it now? In the last couple of years, it became harder and harder to hide and power through on his own. "Everyone was figuring it out, and when I finally talked about it at work, they said, 'We all knew that and we were waiting for you to talk about it.' And I wondered how many other people were in the same position and wouldn't speak?"

Anyone who's been a business owner or knows one well won't be surprised. Compromised mental health is an open secret: Everyone knows, but nobody talks about it. Ginny Sterling-Boddie owns Junkery, an award-winning Halifax junk removal business, with her husband John Boddie. "I've never been diagnosed with depression, but I know that on any given day I could read a checklist for burnout, stress, and depression and see myself."

Colette O'Hara joined the team at *The Chronicle Herald* in January after wrapping up Red Balloon, the "inspiration design studio" she and her partner Laura Whitman ran for several years to help organizations innovate and be more creative.

"We fundamentally believed in taking care of our own health and mental wellbeing, because we needed that to bring inspiration to other businesses. As an entrepreneur, you're the product, and if you're arriving not tuned, you're not going to bring the best to your clients." She cites decision-making fatigue as a key reason they wrapped up the business.

Many of the qualities that make us good entrepreneurs can also jeopardize our mental health: Persistence, creativity, divergent thinking, the need to be in charge and in control. And having a mental health issue, whether it's officially diagnosed or simply a recognition that you have symptoms, doesn't mean you won't be successful.

"I know this is for the rest of my life," says DeVenney. "This is who I am and I'm not ashamed of that. There's people that will, with all the right intent, want to fix you or cure you, and I don't need to be fixed or cured. I want to show that you can have depression and still be creative, productive, and an achiever."

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weak because they have a physiotherapist or sports psychologist. It's not about ill health, or weakness. It's about maximizing your potential."

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"There's this belief that unless we're in misery we're not working hard enough," says O'Hara. Day agrees, noting that both the long hours and the intensity of entrepreneurship can be damaging. Many entrepreneurs feel like they have to do everything themselves.

"A lot of business owners like that autonomy and flexibility and control, so asking them to give it up is scary," she says. Ginny Sterling-Boddie has experienced this, saying: "When you own the business, there's no go-to for you. When I'm sitting here with an accounting, HR, or supplier problem, there's no one to turn around to and say, 'What should I do about this?' You feel like you have to be an expert in all these things."

Today's entrepreneur also spends a lot of time cultivating her or his personal brand, so the pressure to be not only on but up all the time is exhausting.

"Leaders today need to start walking the walk, instead of bragging about all the stuff they did," says DeVenney. "Everyone feels they have to tell the story, and live the story, and we have all this money, but something's wrong. Taking time for yourself. That is something we simply do not allow ourselves to do, and we have to."

Combine long hours, constant decision-making, responsibility for employees and families, and creating and maintaining a successful image. Throw in high expectations, a dash of perfectionism, and more than a pinch of exhaustion. What do you get? A recipe for disaster, a lonely place where the person behind the business - and its most important asset - is last in line for care and attention.

But it doesn't have to be that way. DeVenney believes that self-care and personal development for business owners is crucial.

"Entrepreneurs who keep it together and get the most out of their businesses are the people who continually invest in developing themselves."

O'Hara sees that people are hungry for a different way of doing business.

"You don't have to sell your soul, it doesn't have to feel awful and miserable," she says. "That belief we have - and it's a Nova Scotia-wide belief - if there isn't blood coming out of your fingernails you haven't earned it. I wholeheartedly disagree. You have to work hard to preserve who you are, how you show up in the world, and how you do the work that you do. We somehow convince people that there is no alternative. I would like people to ask themselves: Is there an alternative? What does it look like? How might I live my life that way?"

Developing leaders who value balance and good mental and physical health is the best thing we can do to break down the culture of work that is making so many of us sick. That, and talking.

"More open dialogue, people sharing their stories and not fearing repercussions," says Kennedy. "Holding your cards close to your chest is probably more stressful than anything."

Kennedy and DeVenney met through a friend who thought they'd connect over their mutual love of cycling, and immediately hit it off. Realizing there was very little research about the link between entrepreneurship and mental health, they created the Mindset Project and are getting ready to launch a Canada-wide survey to find out more about the lived experiences of entrepreneurs, the stress of their businesses, and their individual stories. The plan is to change the way entrepreneurs are supported, and develop programs to help them grow along with their businesses.

Day's advice to leaders? Share the responsibility, even if it's hard to give up control. "Develop your employees, and that trust, and that competency, so you are allowed to take breaks." It's a less paternalistic model, where the work is shared and everybody wins. And there's more good news: "In small business, the culture change can be much

easier. There's less infrastructure, and fewer people to influence. If the business owner is committed to a change of culture, they can do it by choosing."

Change is hard, but it's worth it. "Having good relationships is the centre of happiness. I wouldn't have said that even six months ago," says DeVenney, who is reshaping his life to maintain his health and still do the work he loves.

O'Hara says we should pay attention to a new breed of entrepreneurs breaking down old values. "There is an influx of women who fundamentally believe that it can and should be done differently. The value that women bring is that nine times out of 10, we put people first. It's a more profound way of doing business - it's vulnerable, and counterintuitive to everything we've been told."

"Women desperately crave to show up as themselves, but worry if that's an acceptable way to do business," she says. "But the only person I know how to be is me."

Ultimately, that's true for all of us. It takes courage and confidence to stand up for our mental health, but it's becoming more and more clear that we can't afford not to.

Credit: Erin Elaine Casey Business Voice

Illustration

Michael Kennedy works to help entrepreneurs deal with mental health issues.

Contributed

DETAILS

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