



THE NEW WORK ETHIC

TODAY, TAKING CARE OF BUSINESS MEANS
TAKING CARE OF YOUR MENTAL HEALTH

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illustration by Izzy Lawrence

One of the biggest conversations around entrepreneurship these days has to do with mental health. Historically, small business owners, aspiring unicorns, and start-up icons alike have been prized for their smarts and their savvy—not their sensitivity or self-awareness—and topics like life-work balance have been praised publicly, but ignored privately. That’s changing as the nature of work and the definition of professional success shifts in these pandemic times.

To learn more, I talked to Dr. Ariel Zeigler, a licensed clinical psychologist with Clarity Therapy, a boutique psychotherapy practice in New York City.

What type of mental health challenges do entrepreneurs face?

Unique challenges include extreme anxiety, consistent exposure to rejection, the pressure to steamroll through these feelings and be resilient, as well as navigating issues of self-confidence when things don't work out. Entrepreneurs are very likely to hold their entire identity and self-worth in their business or idea, and to struggle with pressure or the need to make changes and adjustments to ideas that they feel incredibly passionate about, which impacts self-confidence. There is also a tendency for extreme isolation, whether just physically or separating from friends/loved ones, and difficulty maintaining romantic relationships as it is common for entrepreneurs to feel unable to pour themselves into anything but their work. It is common for partnerships to be strained and even end in the context of entrepreneurship.

There is also the overwhelming depression that accompanies the loss of major amounts of money or disappointing those who believe in and love them, such as investors, friends, and family members.

You mention the tendency towards isolation. The life of a founder, CEO, or “the boss” can be lonely and insular. What tools and strategies can entrepreneurs employ to help combat this issue?

Scheduling time actually putting it in your schedule. It is extremely easy for these folks to completely ignore free time or social time as there is a tendency and pull to use every free minute toward “productive” tasks with tangible results. Spending time with friends and family often does not fall into that category, but it is extremely important to try your best to get face time, not FaceTime, with others. We are inherently social beings and thrive on interpersonal connections at the core and it is important to be feeding this part of ourselves.

One way to do this is to actually plan it in your calendar the way you would an important meeting, call, or pitch and make sure you stick to it. Time-blocking is an extremely important executive functioning skill that allows you to look at your schedule and outline your tasks in blocks of time to make sure you can accomplish everything that is needed.

How can founders and entrepreneurs best deal with failures and setbacks?

I believe that a huge part of navigating failures and setbacks is validation—validating that a “failure” or a setback really sucks, whether it comes from ourselves, our team, friends, or loved ones. It is normal for people to respond with “it is all going to be okay!” or “it will work out next time!” but that overly positive attitude and outlook can feel extremely invalidating and honestly annoying to the founder or entrepreneur who just poured their entire self into whatever it was that resulted in an unfavorable outcome. It is incredibly important to sit in the yucky feeling, to really feel it, and to maybe even schedule the worry or sad time. I know some folks will say “I don't have time for that!” but I promise you do.

I would argue that if there isn't the time spent in the validation of the emotion and you just bulldoze through as if you were a robot, it will come back at a different time or in a different moment in a destructive way because you never gave yourself time to fully feel it.

Only through fully feeling and validating that it feels upsetting can we then move through the emotion onto the other side. I forget who said the quote, but the “only way out is through,” and I can't agree enough. That mindset plays an important role in managing setbacks.

Secondly, I do not love the word failure in this case. I understand that in the world of entrepreneurship there will always be aspects that are objectively categorized or defined as failures or setbacks, but, as I am a psychologist who can't shut off that part of the brain, I prefer to validate that yes, a failure can feel soul-crushing and unbelievably disappointing, but there has to be something that was learned as a result. Ask yourself: What was the learning point or the teachable moment? In light of the oh-so-important

therapeutic reframe, there must have been something that was uncovered or learned in the midst of an incredibly upsetting setback.

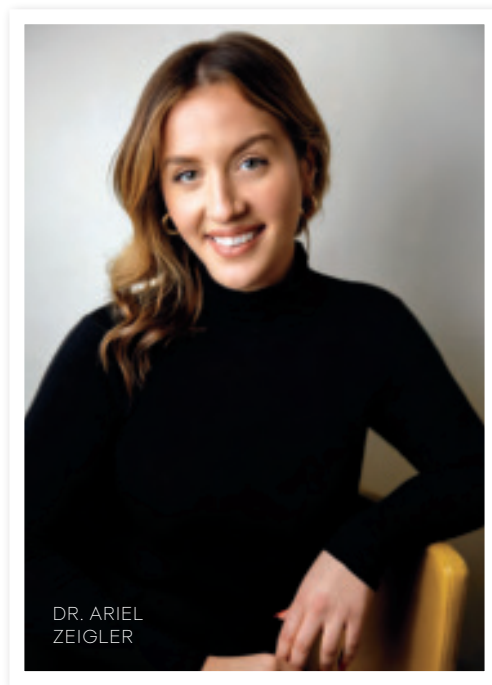
I think failures or setbacks are juicy opportunities to reflect, revisit, and revise. I also recognize that startup culture does not necessarily foster time and space for emotional processes, but this is where therapists, coaches, and support systems play a role. It is impossible for these folks to carry the load of both the actual work of the business and the emotional work of the ebbs and flows of entrepreneurial life on their own. This is where outsourcing and division of labor play an essential, critical, arguably life-changing, and life-saving role.

Being an entrepreneur seems like an exciting career with very few downsides from an outsider's perspective. How can entrepreneurs bring awareness to the challenges they face so they can receive more support?

I think it's important for entrepreneurs to be honest and vulnerable not only with themselves but with their friends and family and even publicly. There is a constant fear that they need to come off as they can do it all but this tendency to put on a facade that everything is okay (especially when there are large amounts of money on the line) when they are actually melting inside perpetuates this idea that being an entrepreneur is easy and fun. As a result, when people who are new to this space struggle, they think it is a reflection of them and not a reflection of the fact that what they are doing is extremely difficult! If leaders in entrepreneurial spaces were more open and honest with their feelings and struggles, this community-level validation would help to break down the stigma around prioritizing mental health resources and lead to extremely better outcomes.

What signs of mental health challenges should entrepreneurs look for in themselves?

In terms of depression, it is extremely important to pay attention to feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, and worthlessness, losing interest in things that were previously enjoyable, any



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feelings of wishing you were not alive, or thinking about how you would end your life, and significant changes in sleep, appetite, and concentration. Symptoms of anxiety can interfere and complicate the latter, but if these symptoms or changes are becoming consistent, it is important to reach out. In terms of anxiety, it is important to pay attention to constant, pervasive worry that may feel unmanageable or not based on reality. It is natural to worry about a big deadline, a new investor, or an exciting pitch, but if you are having a panic attack over the fact that your Seamless driver is five minutes later than expected to deliver your lunch, it is important to take a step back and take note.

In addition, as someone who also has a specialization in health psychology and takes a holistic approach to mental health, it is important to pay attention to what is happening in the body of entrepreneurs. Are you noticing more frequent stomachaches or GI symptoms? Do you feel like your heart is beating rapidly, even outside of anxiety-provoking situations? Headaches? New feelings of aches or pains? Our bodies are extremely smart and attuned and they give us clues! It is important to pay attention to any minor-to-major changes in our bodies and act accordingly.

What are the benefits of good mental health practices specific to entrepreneurs and what are your top steps for making a “take care” plan for entrepreneurs and their teams?

The benefits are substantial! Increased insight, self-confidence, problem-solving skills, ability to delegate, resilience, coping skills, better sleep, and overall physical health. Mental health practices also allow entrepreneurs to be better communicators, networkers, and people.

You need a lot of courage and determination to become an entrepreneur. Managing your mental health and growing a thriving, impactful business can be formidable, but it is possible.

TAKING STOCK... IN YOURSELF

- **STEP BACK AND TAKE INVENTORY** of the habits of yourself and your team. What is missing? Where are the gaps? Where are you now and where do you want to be?
- **WHAT ARE YOUR NEEDS?** What are the needs of your team? Especially if you are working in a team, it is important to be open and non-defensive when it comes to the needs of others. It is very easy to say “you are being dramatic” or “that is dumb!”—but it is important to listen. Validation and being open to a difference of opinion are essential when being a leader.
- **UTILIZE THE SMART GOAL MODEL**—specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-based. When creating a new goal and instilling a new habit, you want it to be something specific, that can be measured over time, that is realistic, relevant to the needs of your team, and can be achieved within a certain time frame. The beauty of SMART goals is that when you outline one and achieve it, your sense of self-efficacy and confidence builds and you then feel comfortable moving onto the next step. Additionally, **WRITE** these down! Ideally, on paper. We encode information differently into the brain when we hand write as opposed to typing. If you are in an office, write them down on a whiteboard or a large piece of paper and keep them in view for all to see.
- **SCHEDULE TIME ON YOUR CALENDAR!** As mentioned before, just as we make time and schedule ourselves for meetings, it is important to schedule/time-block our self-care activities into our weekly planners.
- **REVISE AS NEEDED!** Something not working out? Tweak it! Feel like you could do a little more? Add it in! Make sure that all of these things are within reason and keep your sense of self-efficacy building.
- **HAVE A STRONG SUPPORT SYSTEM.** You can find support from other entrepreneurs who know what you are going through, but it’s also important to have people who are not involved in entrepreneurial ventures that you are close with. Family and friends are key people to turn to during difficult times. They can offer emotional support, help brainstorm new ideas, and provide different perspectives on how things should be done.