

- [Cities](#)
- [Business Directory](#)
- [Book of Lists](#)
- [Upstart Business Journal](#)
- [Bizwomen](#)

- [Contact Us](#)
- [Welcome, Pat](#)

- [Like on Facebook](#)
- [Follow on Twitter](#)
- [Follow on LinkedIn](#)
- [Follow on Google+](#)

[Austin Business Journal](#)

- [Home](#)
- [News](#)
- [People](#)
- [Events](#)
- [Jobs](#)
- [Resources](#)
- [Store](#)
- [Subscriber Content](#)

Upcoming Event

Apr 09

[Humana presents Austin Business Journal's Healthiest Employer Awards & Wellness Expo](#)

Time: 7:30 am - 10:00 am

Place: Hyatt Regency Austin

[See all events](#)

Next Article: [Weddings, Ellen Pao and cyber bullying are on the minds of our women to watch this week](#)

Out of the shadows: Breaking depression's hold on entrepreneurs

A Special Report: Depression in Startupland

Mar 22, 2015, 7:37pm CDT Updated: Mar 23, 2015, 1:31pm CDT

[Share on Google +](#) [Share on Facebook](#) [Share on LinkedIn](#) [Share on Twitter](#) [Email this article](#)
[Save Article](#)
[Order Reprints](#)
[Print](#)

Pam Huff, Emily Parkhurst and Annie Zak

Entrepreneurs are expected to be obsessed with building their companies. But that obsession can be isolating and for some startup founders, lead to depression and thoughts of suicide — even when things are going well.

When things go wrong — and it's worth remembering that [90 percent of tech startups fail](#)— that can put founders who were teetering at a precipice over the edge. And sometimes, sadly, they go over.

Since the latest surge in entrepreneurship began in the aftermath of the Great Recession, a handful of stories about company founders killing themselves have commanded attention. Among them: Reddit co-founder and internet privacy advocate [Aaron Swartz](#), Disapora co-founder [Ilya Zhitomirskiy](#), and a [trio of unrelated suicides](#) of entrepreneurs with ties to the Downtown Las Vegas project.

See Also

- [Tech's dark secret: Depression in the startup community](#)
- [The 'F' Word: Failure, depression, and Tampa Bay's lack of support](#)
- [Full coverage: Entrepreneurs and Depression](#)

Each story, of course, is different, though in all of them, factors like depression, stress and failure are believed to play a big role. And geography plays a contributing factor.

Take part in a special national "tweet up" on Tuesday, March 24 at 2 pm EDT, 11 a.m. PDT by following the hashtag [#StartupDepression on Twitter](#).

In established tech centers, depression can be the flip side of the all-night work sessions, all-or-nothing funding pitches and cutthroat competition. And in cities where the startup culture is just beginning to take root, entrepreneurs are having to accept a lesson long embraced by Silicon Valley — that failure is OK.

To explore the intersecting issues of entrepreneurship, depression and suicide, Business Journal reporters in two comparably-sized metropolitan areas, on

opposite sides of the country — [Puget Sound in Washington](#) and [Tampa Bay in Florida](#)— have looked deep into their communities to see how they're dealing with the stress of launching and running businesses. Their work is being complemented by reports from Denver and New York City, and is part of a [Business Journals special report on entrepreneurs and depression](#).

"Until a few years ago, we generally sucked at" talking about depression, says [Brad Feld](#), a managing partner of the Foundry Group, who has blogged since 2012 about his own mental health struggles. "The philosophy around leaders and entrepreneurs never showing weakness dominated, and we were told never to let ourselves be vulnerable."

Feld's transparency stems from years of learning to manage his mental health while seeing many others struggling. They do so quietly and often alone, he says, which can actually make things worse. The startup community is only now [beginning to bring depression out of the shadows](#).

The Boulder, Colo.-based venture capitalist, like longtime New York City VC [Jerry Colonna](#) and a few others, have tried to encourage founders and funders to allow themselves to be vulnerable, to be more broadly open about depression and mental health.

It's led to Feld regularly being sought out for advice by entrepreneurs seeking help. "I've had these conversations many, many times," he says.

Puget Sound: Moz's Rand Fishkin steps back

The Seattle area — home to giant companies like Microsoft and Amazon, as well as prominent startups like Porch and Docusign — has a number of vocal entrepreneurs who haven't been [shy about talking about their bouts of depression](#). Among these founders: Moz's [Rand Fishkin](#), Cheezburger's [Ben Huh](#), and UP Global's [Dave Parker](#).

"The same people who have those markers or risks are also extremely obsessive. They have some of that necessary crazy," Fishkin says. Weakness, failure and doubts are rarely things that someone leading a game-changing new venture feels allowed to reveal. "We live with that constant fear," Fishkin says. "Any day now the world is going to find out."

Fishkin founded his search engine marketing software company eight years ago. During those years, he struggled to attract investors and, even though Moz was growing steadily, it wasn't experiencing the meteoric growth that brings in the big money.

Then, Fishkin realized last May he had a problem. A project his 150-person team had been working on had gone terribly wrong. The company's growth rate still wasn't what investors wanted to see. And Fishkin was struggling with punishing depression that was affecting his business decisions.

While he was never formally diagnosed with depression, Fishkin says just the realization his happiness wasn't dependent on his company's growth rate was empowering for him.

"There was a mix of fear and joy," he says. "It felt good to be out of it enough to recognize it, and to know that maybe things didn't have to get better at the company for me to feel better."

For Fishkin, his depression prompted him to step down as CEO, handing the reins to Moz COO [Sarah Bird](#) in December 2013. It was a good business decision, he said. But that doesn't mean it was easy.

"One of the things I'm really sad about is that I think that last year and half I was CEO — especially the last 10 or 11 months, when I was deeply, darkly depressed — it cost me a lot of internal credibility," Fishkin says. He's still very involved in the company, but is no longer the one making decisions.

Stepping back, he says, has helped him handle his depression. "One thing that helps prevent it from returning is not being CEO ... God forbid, if things go horribly wrong with Moz. I will feel bad about that, but I don't think I'll feel nearly as responsible for it. That's the big difference."

Tampa Bay: Priatek's Milind Bharvirkar finds a path forward

More than 2,500 miles away from Seattle, [Milind Bharvirkar describes the journey](#) that took him from Silicon Valley to Tampa. Success and failure. Bigger and better. Upset and angry. Broken. Challenging. Multibillion-dollar potential.

"I walked away with more money than I've ever had — seven figures in the bank," Bharvirkar says about his experience with a coin-operated game business he started in San Jose that ended with him "bowing out gracefully." "I thought getting that kind of success and being on the cover of magazines and making lots of money would make me happy. I built a baby and walked away angry and upset."

He came to Tampa with family members and wanted to start a bigger and better company. He licensed name-brand games — think Wheel of Fortune and Marvel characters from "The Avengers." But the technology took too long to build and licenses expired. The recession hit and he had no capital to continue.

He lost half a million dollars, filed for personal and corporate bankruptcy, and his fiancée walked out on him . It was the lowest he'd ever been.

It took a phone call with a friend, who could hear how depressed he was, to help Bharvirkar reconnect with his faith. "The only way I could make the pain go away was to read the Bible," he says.

Now he's back in the game business, as president of Priatek, an Odessa, Florida-based company that designs and manages prize promotions for advertisers. He's

married and expecting his second child.

Comparing failure support systems in San Jose to those in Tampa is something he never thought about. "It's par for the course in San Jose," Bharvirkar says. "People understand there are entrepreneurs who have successes and failure; they're open-book about it more than they are here."

"The difference between cities like San Francisco and Tampa is that in San Francisco they embrace failure, but you've got to go beyond that," says Absolute Mobile Solutions' president [Alfred Goldberg](#), who is also a member of local startup backer Tampa Bay Wave. "They've got a huge safety net."

But there's also something else that Goldberg sees as a problem — a stigma in revealing weaknesses to peers.

"They don't want other entrepreneurs to think they made mistakes," he says. "I know some startups that were very promising and got a lot of publicity over the last two years, and then they made some really bad decisions. Their personal lives are in turmoil, their family lives are just completely in jeopardy and they're like drowning people."

Defining the problem. Finding a solution.

Aside from the headlines about suicides or the anecdotal stories like those of Rand Fishkin and Milind Bharvirkar, it's hard to pin down just how extensive a problem depression is in the entrepreneurial world.

Here are some numbers that we do know: Nearly 7 percent of Americans over 18 have had at least one episode of depression in the past year, according to the National Institute for Mental Health. That's 16 million people.

As for suicides, the national rate has been on a slow but steady upswing since its low point in 2000, with 2013's rate being 12.6 deaths per 100,000 people, according to the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention. In another study, this one from National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, a greater number of suicides while someone was at work increased from 2007 to 2010.

One San Francisco researcher, [Michael A. Freeman](#), is trying to dig deeper on the question of depression and the workplace, specifically about entrepreneurs. About 13 percent of the U.S. working population is involved with the startup industry.

Freeman, who is doing his analysis at The Entrepreneurship Center at the University of California, San Francisco, hasn't published his work yet but found that among the entrepreneurs who have participated, 49 percent report having a lifetime history of one or more mental health conditions. Only 32 percent of the comparison participants — non-entrepreneurs — report a history of having one or more mental health conditions, he said.

"Impulsivity and risk propensity are essential for entrepreneurship; however

taking the wrong risk or acting in the wrong can have very bad outcomes," Freeman says.

There are some simple ways to begin to confront the problem, many people we spoke to say. Entrepreneurs need to feel comfortable speaking up. And the startup community needs to show its open to their words and feelings.

The [growth in popularity of coworking spaces](#) is a big step forward on both those fronts.

At New York City's Fueled Collective, home to about 30 startups, general manager [Stephanie Spiegel](#) does her best to act as a sounding board for the members who spill their worries at her desk. She also keeps Tylenol on hand.

"I feel like bit of a psychologist in some regard," Spiegel says. "I think it's just really listening. I don't come from a tech background, so a lot of the time I just try to connect on a personal level."

Beyond non-prescription painkillers, Fueled also offers weekly yoga and meditation classes "to get people away from their computers" and an annual health fair.

"I think it's just a built-in support system," Spiegel says. "There's companies that don't have anything to do with each other business wise and they'll sit next to each other. There's a high potential somebody else is having the same issues."

While startup communities can offer support, they're not insulation from the pressure and competitiveness of the startup world. Dan Putt, a New York City entrepreneur who tackles topics of burnout and depression in workshops for the coaching company Reboot, says while yoga is great, startup communities like coworking spaces could intentionally tackle the issue of depression in their programming.

"I think a big part of it is intentionally talking about it," Putt said. "A lot of these communities will do fireside chats, have successful entrepreneurs come in. Somebody talking about their struggles with depression. Somebody who is willing to come in and be a little vulnerable and open up will make it safe."

As powerful as those support networks can be, their effectiveness is dependent on how open and honest their target audience is willing to be.

"The definition of a blind spot is a place you can't see," says [Dave Parker](#) of Seattle's UP Global. That's true in business, and it's true in mental health. So having a professional, Parker adds, is worth the money and effort. Just as important, too, is to build a personal support network early on in your startup's life.

"Invest in friendships with people who understand what you're going through as an entrepreneur — before you need them," Parker says. "People always ask me if I can introduce them to my network of investors. But they should be asking for

[introductions to] other entrepreneurs. It's too late to make a friend when you need one."

— Pam Huff reported from Tampa while Emily Parkhurst and Annie Zak reported from Seattle. Contributing to this report were Greg Avery from Denver and Alex Dalenberg from New York.

Next Article: [Weddings, Ellen Pao and cyber bullying are on the minds of our women to watch this week](#)

We Recommend

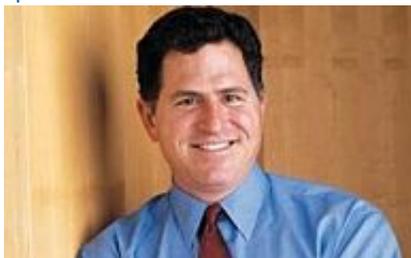
Promoted by Taboola



Meerkat: Meet the breakout superstar of SXSW Interactive



SXSWi: How startups can get their voices heard



Michael Dell: More public but private - pushing hard to expand the Dell brand

From Around The Web



Ex-Microsoft exec is disrupting the traditional broker model
Yahoo! Finance | Motif Investing



1 Dirty Little Secret To Eliminate 15 Years Of Mortgage Payments
LowerMyBills



Brilliant Method to Pay Off Your Mortgage
AmeriVALUE