

ALL'S NOT WELL WITH THE HEALTH OF START-UP FOUNDERS

Two founders of a logistics firm started seeing a doctor for insomnia and depression a couple of months ago. Late last year, the founder of a wellness start-up suffered a heart attack, as did another executive at a fashion portal more recently. Why are these people who are experiencing a bad health patch being mentioned in the same breath? For two reasons: one, they are all too young—in their late 20s or barely in their 30s—to fall prey to such serious ailments. Besides, they all belong to the same buzzing world of start-ups, especially e-commerce.

While it may be hard to establish a direct link between their ill-health and the sector they operate in, anecdotal evidence suggests that all is not well in the glamorous world of start-ups. And things could only get worse if a *Mint* report in January (<http://bit.ly/1R0NRSU>) is anything to go by, with investors back in the driver's seat and venture capital firms setting performance milestones for start-up founders, asking them to slow expansion, slash costs and cut discounts.

Entrepreneurs in their 20s and 30s, with millions of dollars of investor money, frenetically building up their online businesses, are feeling the heat. Between giving interviews to newspapers and trending on social media, the poster boys of e-commerce as well as those who may not be as high profile, are suffering a silent health crisis.

To be sure, founders of start-ups—many of whom spoke on condition of anonymity—avoid using words like depression, anxiety and insomnia, but admit to enduring unspeakable stress. "Anyone who says they are not under pressure is lying," says Mehak Sagar Shahani, co-founder of wedding planning portal WedMeGood, run by Anameha Infomedia Pvt. Ltd.

In the absence of research, it is difficult to quantify the number of people who have resorted to treatment for their problems, but talking to founders brings to light the stress that is affecting their physical and mental health.

The chief executive of a fashion luxury portal says that start-ups show no mercy. "Either you achieve glory or death," he says. Of course, by death he really means the ignominy of failure, which could lead to further anxieties. In his view, it is a battlefield out there where financial and physical strain takes a toll on health, finances and personal relationships.

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Acute lack of sleep adds to the damage since most of these founders work round the clock. You are constantly juggling a number of things at the same time "with one eye on the product, one on revenue, one on traffic and one on investments", says Shahani. Besides, investors demand to see hockey stick growth. Also, there is no such thing as work timings and there is no job that you are not involved in. You're both the janitor and the chief executive, founders say.

That is not all. Once you hire people, get funds and invest in marketing, suddenly the business acquires scale, which may not be the easiest thing to manage. Remember, most of the start-up founders are first-generation entrepreneurs and come from salaried backgrounds. This business is not really for the faint-hearted, they say.

Yet, those who are currently in this space are not sorry for themselves. Good or bad, they seem to be willing to sacrifice even their health at this stage in life. Although Suchi Mukherjee, founder and chief executive at lifestyle products platform *Limeroad.com*, argues that such health scares could be true of any high-impact job, she agrees that people in start-ups should be on the alert.

Senior consultant psychiatrist Sanjay Chugh does not disclose if start-up entrepreneurs are increasingly among his patients but points out that there's a direct connection between physical and psychological health. "We are now seeing cases of young men and women suffering from physical health issues like diabetes, hypertension, cardiac conditions, which are all stress-related. Along with this, there is a host of psychological problems that young adults are struggling with. The commonest of them is depression and a variety of anxiety disorders such as generalized anxiety disorder, panic attacks, social anxiety and obsessive compulsive disorder," he explains.

Dr Chugh adds that high mental stress creates disturbances in sleep patterns, appetite, level of focus and concentration, which can affect a person's overall well-being. "It is important that these young adults try to keep a healthy work-life balance to prevent the occurrence of such mental and emotional stress," he says.

One of the founders says that the only way to survive in the start-up world is to know your limits. "The biggest skill that you can develop is to choose what you will stress about and what you will not stress about...because every day something will go wrong. It's normal in the start-up world," says Mukherjee of *Limeroad*.

Shuchi Bansal is Mint's media, marketing and advertising editor. Ordinary Post will look at pressing issues related to all three. Or just fun stuff.