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When Suicide Seems Like a Good Option

A few years ago, a founder, who I'll call Mark, committed suicide. Mark had given up, was done, could not solve for anything anymore. His inner resources exhausted and spent, the range of problems he perceived were all massive, impossible. For Mark, the best option, in fact the only option was to end it all.

Mark was building a company that could have changed the way we design and develop medicine. To say that he was driven and passionate would be an understatement. He had raised money from some of the leading investors in Silicon Valley. As an investor in the company's seed round, I saw his fierce intensity up close.

Working 24/7, his entire life was entwined in his start-up, the milestone, the next financing round, the next step function of value creation. His identity and that of the company were fused as one. The company's success was Mark's success. The mantra of his start-up life was *quemar los barcos* – *burn those goddam boats*. No going back. All in. No plan B, no safety net. Those are for the weaklings. All of this was music to the investors' ears. Money flowed quickly. Mark had courage, conviction, energy, enthusiasm, and technical acumen – all the founder attributes revered in the business and technical circles. When he stood up to present his ideas, audience members

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would nod in agreement of a brave new world — reverently, silently. In hushed tones, they would exchange delighted notes that Mark was on to something big, groundbreaking. By any standards, here was a guy, *TheGuy*, who was well on his way to make a dent in the world.

And then one day, Mark was gone. The candle snuffed out, just like that.

We just saw one side, the bold and brazen exterior, the showman, while on the inside, the picture was vastly different. He was broken. Tired. Some evenings, when he would go visit his parents, he would just sit on the couch, for long periods of time, silently staring into the void. Overworked and exhausted, he would ask to just be left alone. He did not want to talk to anyone, nor go for a walk, watch a show, or read a book. He just wanted to decompress. The Silicon Valley cheerleaders had egged him on with generous superlatives like *man, you're crushing it*. But the chasm between his self-view, his abilities, and the scale of problems kept widening. He got crushed instead.

BREAKING THE TABOO: DISCUSSING SUICIDE


To start a book with a founder's suicide is no way to start a book. It's dark, gloomy and only exacerbates the downward spiral. Yet the conventional norms of burying the difficult emotions, pretending such challenges do not exist, need to be dismantled. In bringing the challenge to the forefront, we can allow the discomfort to rise. And then settle down. We can allow the emotion to surge, even for a few moments. And we

can begin to talk about the topics we should no longer be hiding from, because when we open ourselves up, we give each one another permission to bring forth the uncomfortable turmoil. And when we allow these frustrations to vent away, it might help, heal, or even save a life.



A start-up is a grand experiment, a gamble of a different kind, with our time on earth and other people's money, in markets that have yet to be formed, with products that do not exist. We do this without fully understanding ourselves, and what is for us or what is against us. And more often, we end up on a dead-end street, frustrated and crushed. Suicide is a taboo, a pariah of a subject, but a reality. On the surface of it all, we treat this subject with heavy doses of platitudes, quotable quotes, quick-fix solutions, or conclusive statistics. To confess any remote suicidal thoughts causes immense discomfort, more often to the listener. When we do not listen to the pain, the force that could have changed the world gets forced out of this world. We are humans first, and then we label ourselves as founders, employees, and everything else.

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I've tried committing suicide twice.

I've had a panic attack in front of a big client.

I suffered a mini stroke when I was 32.

I say all of this because they are still a part of who I am as a person.

Not something from my past that needs to be shoved into a box and locked away.

We're humans first.

Professionals second.

And because of that, we must take mental health seriously as individuals and employers.

Things that will help:

- Make getting help very easy for everyone
- Create an environment where it feels safe to talk about tough stuff
- Understand that leading with empathy is good for business
- Prioritize yourself in order to deliver more to others

Remember:

When we're better humans, we're better professionals...

From LinkedIn: A step towards being better humans first....

When Dreams Turn to Despair

How does it happen?

- Desires and ambitions propel us into actions (start a company).
- Actions without results lead to restlessness (slow pace of adoption, maybe).
- Prolonged restlessness leads to dejections and disillusionments (this will never work).
- All these culminate in despair (no one cares).
- And then the final question: Is this worth it?

The mind that could surge up in confidence to start a company, that could discriminate the merits of an opportunity, build a compelling narrative, raise capital from some of the world's best investors in Silicon Valley – that same mind had lost its ability to find a way out of this chaos.

Why does the powerful force that could have made a dent in the world turn inward and self-destruct?

- Varying degrees of adversity – from product market fit, to raising capital, to scaling, and dealing with competition
- A conflict in relationships – co-founders, board, team or family members
- Threats to perceived notions of success
- Financial or legal challenges
- The daily roller coaster ride of wild swings that are not experienced in most careers

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Source: Twitter, Inc.

These obstacles impact almost all of us at some point in our lives. And we often feel like it's the end. In his post "What's the Most Difficult CEO Skill?," entrepreneur-turned-venture capitalist Ben Horowitz writes that managing your own psychology is the most difficult skill. CEOs often succumb to that WFIO. Pronounced as *whee-f-eyo*, it's that sinking feeling. We are f**ked ... It's Over! And in such situations, one option that surfaces is to self-destruct.

Sigmund Freud wrote that "the tendency to self-destruction exists to a certain degree in many more persons than in those who bring it to completion."

In the United States, the ratios of suicide attempts to suicide deaths are approximately 100:1.¹

A lot of us think about it. A few actually do it. It is okay that we have an occasional thought.² We are just afraid to talk about it.

Thinking, Ruminating, Full-on Planning

When we are in a funk, we keep thinking about suicide. Those thoughts might keep spinning in our heads, and soon some of us even start to research the how-to options. We might identify the various steps, and plan the final exit in great detail.

Tim Ferriss, investor, podcaster, and author of the best-selling book *The 4-Hour Workweek*, writes about how he had gotten past the “deciding mode” and into “full-on planning mode.” “The world was better off without a loser,” he had concluded.

In his planning mode, Tim Ferriss went to Princeton’s Firestone Library. As one of the promising titles on this dark topic of suicide was checked out, Tim put a reserve request for the book. Back in those days, well before the Web, Kindle, and email, the only way to reserve a book was to put your name on a paper log. Once the book was available, the library would then mail you a postcard. *Come get this book you were waiting for. We will hold it for two weeks.* The postcard, with the promising title of suicide, landed in his mom’s hands. Sure, Mom might be wondering about this fantastical development in her son’s reading habits.

“Oo – and thank f**king God,” writes Tim. His worried mom called Tim to ask about this book and he blurted out a fast lie – a friend wanted this book for research on depression. Tim had specced out as many as six exit pathways, but that one call from his mom flipped a switch in his head. “I snapped out of my delusion by this one-in-a-million accident,” he writes. A library’s postcard may have saved Tim’s life.

Entrepreneur Ben Huh writes of his days of despondency. “I spent a week in my room with the lights off and cut off from the world, thinking of the best way to exit this failure. Death was a good option – and it got better by the day.”

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Brilliant blazing minds on fire, when faced with severe obstacles and resistance, often get frustrated and impatient. Any goal seems insurmountable. The road seems exhausting, long. Check out what some founders have said.

Founders' Voices

- As we were going to bed, my spouse – a founder – muttered, “Sometimes I think it would be a lot easier if I didn’t wake up tomorrow morning ...”
- The idea of suicide changed from a comforting option to a constant yet terrifying urge ...
- My head was filled with thoughts of suicide – that I was thinking about it in some form or another all the time shook me up ... felt like a vice clamped around my head.

To the young who want to die

-Gwendolyn Brooks

*Sit down. Inhale. Exhale.
The gun will wait. The lake will wait.
The tall gall in the small seductive vial
will wait will wait:
will wait a week: will wait through April.
You do not have to die this certain day.
Death will abide, will pamper your postponement.
I assure you death will wait. Death has
a lot of time. Death can
attend to you tomorrow. Or next week. Death is just
down the street; is most obliging neighbor; can meet
you any moment.
You need not die today.
Stay here – through pout or pain or peskyness.
Stay here. See what the news is going to be tomorrow.
Graves grow no green that you can use. Remember,
green's your color. You are Spring.*

What Drives Us to the Cliff – Is It Shame, Envy, or Powerlessness?

We never would fully know the range of emotions that drives founders to the cliff. One can speculate, a bit too simplistically, that a faltering self-image is one factor – that we no longer see ourselves as brave, bold, and skilled. We are disillusioned with our inabilities, expectations, and the world's incessant demands. We pull over to the side of the road. The state of helplessness spirals, often oscillating between disappointment and anger. We become harsh on our own selves. Suicide becomes a form of protest, revenge, and/or appeal.

In a rapid-paced world, the fastest runner, the unicorn-bagging CEO, becomes the hero. But very few get there, and for the vast majority who don't, the self-image crumbles. "This state of shame and envy is followed by self-destructive impulses ... the suffering ego wants to do away with the self in order to wipe out the offending, disappointing reality of failure ... the self-destructive impulses are to be understood here as the expression of narcissistic rage," writes psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut. Founders have to be mildly narcissistic, and believe that their images, their views can change the world. When faced with resistance, this perspective and energy turns dark, angry, a rage when it does not meet its self-appointed goals.

Those who may have started off on the hero's journey may soon feel powerless against the stagnant forces of the market adoption risks, technology stasis, and fickleness of investors, who were chasing the next big thing. Mark probably felt weak and helpless. And his identity was so attached to his start-up, unable to separate the two, he decided to end it all.

Vulnerable Egos and High Expectations

Founders hold themselves to high expectations – statements like *make a dent in the world* are a part of their daily dialogue. The chasm between their expectations and outcomes may be wide, and the resources required to build the bridge or cross this chasm may not be available, but that does not scare nor stop them.

To propel the founder to greater heights, a self-image of a hero is an essential mind hack. As one VC told me, every founder aspiring to change the world should first *believe* that they can do it; that they have the courage, the magical powers to pick the right direction, to influence others, to gather resources and deploy these effectively; to persist and stay the course. We are often unaware how we subconsciously build and shape our belief systems. In building our belief systems, a healthy self-image is an asset. It helps us pick aspirational goals, but our ability to manage our own psychological barriers becomes a hurdle. Inflated self-images combined with vulnerable egos can make us our own worst enemies. We tend to be overly favorable in our self-view in many domains, as the Dunning-Kruger effect shows us.

SELF-IMAGE AND INEPTITUDE

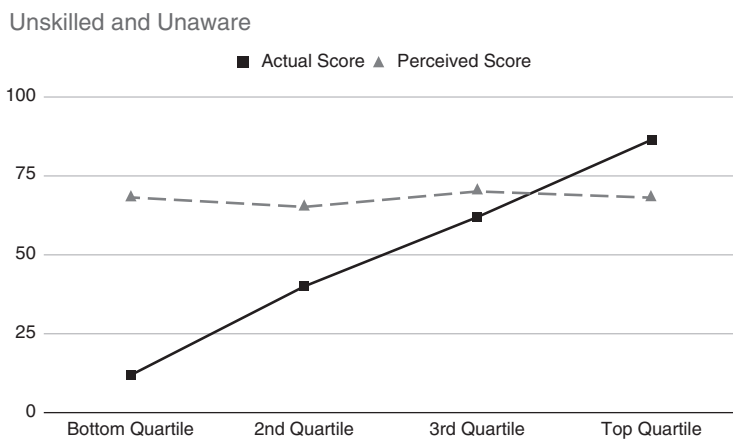
McArthur Wheeler robbed two banks in Pittsburgh in broad daylight. He had worn neither a mask nor any form of disguise and was promptly arrested in a few hours. It was not just incompetence but lack of application of knowledge of lemon juice. Wheeler was under the flawed impression that applying lemon juice to his face made him invisible to the video surveillance cameras. Thanks to this inspiration and case of stupidity, researchers David Dunning and Justin Kruger went on to publish a fascinating study, “Unskilled and Unaware of It: How Difficulties in Recognizing One’s Own Incompetence Lead to Inflated Self-Assessments.”³

The summary of the study is quite simple. We think we are way smarter than we actually are. And because of such inflated self-images we tend to make stupid choices. Like rubbing lemon juice on one’s face and then robbing a bank. And our stupidity makes it nearly impossible for us to realize that we are – pause for a drumroll – stupid. Dunning and Kruger state this in a far more polished manner. Read on.

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People tend to hold overly favorable views of their abilities in many social and intellectual domains. Not only do these people reach erroneous conclusions and make unfortunate choices, but [also] their incompetence robs them of the metacognitive ability to realize it.

Across four different studies, the authors found that participants scoring in the bottom quartile on tests grossly overestimated their test performance and ability. Although their test scores put them in the 12th percentile, they estimated themselves to be in the 62nd (see the following figure). In other words, we assume ourselves to be five times better than we actually are. Imagine trying to fly an airplane with such an inflated self-image. Or performing brain surgery. The BBC summarized the findings of the Dunning-Kruger study with the headline “The More Inept You Are the Smarter You Think You Are.”



But here is the best part. The researchers conclude that improving the skills of participants increased their metacognitive competence, and helped them recognize the limitations of

their abilities. In other words, as our skills improve, we come to realize our own stupidity. As W. B. Yeats writes in his 1920 poem "The Second Coming,"

*The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.*

To invert this effect, and calibrate your self-image, try to think about any skill in which you believe you are the best. Adjust that self-score downward by 5X and then start working toward building your skill. As your skill improves – voilà – the self-image gets calibrated magically.

Researchers have found that those who have high expectations of themselves and have a vulnerable ego are susceptible to suicide. What is this ego? And should it be vulnerable? Can it become stronger? Being unaware of such basic psychological notions, we are unable to decipher, let alone harness this strange inner force. Pick any book with its esoteric pearls of wisdom and you will find references to *destroy your ego*. *The ego is an enemy*. This is a fundamentally flawed notion in the context of entrepreneurship. Just as money is not the root of evil, but an excessive lust for money is, the ego is not the enemy. An inflated out-of-control ego, like an unbridled horse, is the enemy. A weak ego, unable to handle responsibilities and frustrations, overwhelmed perpetually is the enemy. **The healthy ego, in fact, can be a founder's greatest ally, an essential resource in changing the world.** A healthy ego is your wingman, your charioteer, your guide. It helps the entrepreneur to navigate the journey. It tackles everything with the ease and grace of an agile problem solver. A healthy ego could even become a force for good in society.

Having strong views of their own selves is supremely important for founders. It is indeed a precondition. A vulnerable ego can turn that same strength against its own self, destroying the inner drive. Freud holds the view that when we

do not get what we yearn for, we turn against that very object of yearning. Sometimes that object can be our own life.

When Tim Ferris was contemplating suicide, he could well be yearning for something that he could not get. The self-view as a loser soon starts to propagate. The loser's mind then starts to descend into a steady drumbeat: "The world does not need another loser."

From the trio of image, expectations, and ego, founders can turn some knobs around. We can paint our own self-image as work in perpetual progress. We can forgive ourselves and others and accept that we are not fully formed Greek Gods. At least not yet.

Our expectations of our work can be tied to self-transcendence as opposed to being stuck on hedonistic treadmills.

Our self-confidence need not collapse into self-doubt, leading into a downward spiral of fear and anxiety.

Above all, I often wonder if our ego can save us from frustrations, exhaustion, and this gnawing sense of hopelessness.

If yes, how do we go to this "ego-gym" and build this strange muscle inside us, in a healthy way?

Especially when the world out there has declared the ego to be the enemy.

The Tyranny of Ambition, the Agony of Success

The siren call of suicide is not exclusively restricted to those who have suffered setbacks or failure. Successful founders have often struggled with a sense of loss after the victory lap has been completed. An investor I knew really well committed suicide. He was a great friend, someone I would call as often as three times a week. We talked often, bantered, had fun, and had co-invested in dozens of companies. We spent time together on the cap-table as well as the dinner table. When in town, he would often stay with me. He was a part of *mia familia* yet I was clueless about his mental anguish. To this day, I wonder why he committed suicide, when he had made his millions.

In his self-view, he may have lost his motivation, facing some inner hurdles. In his worldview, maybe there was no further joy, contentment, or challenges. Successful founders often experience a feeling of emptiness, a void.

L'appel du vide

This French phrase roughly translates to “the call of the void” – that strange fleeting urge to jump when standing atop high buildings, peaks. When you get up to the higher levels of the Eiffel Tower, some might get the call of the void. They have nets all over to prevent people from jumping, and for most, this fleeting urge passes in seconds.

Such a call of the void often comes after those millions have been banked. The lack of an ongoing challenge, no monsters to wrestle with, puts an energetic founder in a state of helpless despair. There are no problems to solve anymore, what should I do with myself? Maybe create a new start-up? And thus we stay trapped on the treadmill.

Irvin Yalom, author and therapist in Silicon Valley, writes that “the success of young high-tech millionaires generates a life crisis that can be instructive about non-self-transcendent life-meaning systems.” In other words, the millionaires are stuck with “What next?” Making the millions did not transcend their own selves. They start new companies, try to repeat their success. Why? They tell themselves they must prove it was no fluke, that they can do it alone, without a particular investor, partner, or mentor. They raise the bar. They no longer need 1 or 2 million in the bank – they need 5, 10, even 50 million to feel secure. They realize the pointlessness and irrationality in earning more money when they already have more than they can possibly spend, but this does not stop them. They realize they are taking away time from their families, from things closer to the heart, but they just cannot give up playing the game. “The money is just lying out there,” they tell themselves. “All I have to do is pick it up.”

A successful entrepreneur who made a ton of money or a failed one who did not make any both ended up at the same juncture.

Money, fame, and success are not necessarily an antidote for our inner chaos.

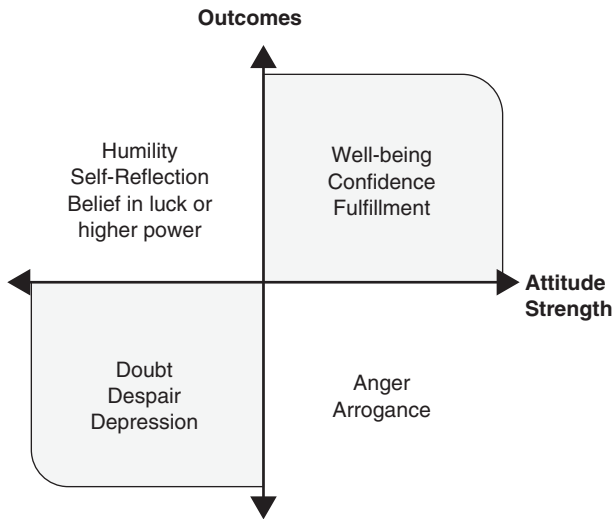
DOES OUR ATTITUDE DEFINE OUR OUTCOMES?

When things are working out well, our self-confidence starts to soar. We end up tasting the elusive yet delicious elixir of success – fame, fortune, and glory. Our sense of well-being flourishes. We become benevolent members of society, sharing our gifts, glowing in the attention. We feel good about ourselves and our achievements and perch atop the apex of the self-actualization pyramid, our joy flowing, serving the society for a greater good. Even if all this is for a fleeting moment, we sure aspire for, and relish this moment.

But more often things don't quite work out. Our ambitions are often greater. Reality bites. And if our plans do not come to fruition, we succumb to an angry, arrogant, disillusioned state. Our self-confidence shrivels up, and we can descend into fear, despair and depression.

From such a dark state, we can decide to move into a state of self-reflection and improvement, and develop a path toward adjusting our self-images and skills. See Figure 1.1.

But more often than not, it is easy to stay stuck in that lower left corner. Is there a way to move to another box, ideally the one in the top right corner? Entrepreneur Ben Huh, whose suicidal tendencies trapped him in a dark room for a whole week, finally walked out. He does not recall why he left the room, but wrote that the most meaningful act he performed was to *leave that room*. In doing so, he saw the positive in the very act of moving out of darkness. "Dealing with reality was the best antidote to a make-believe world. Instead of fantasizing about death, I decided to deal with the harshness of reality," he writes.

Figure 1-1 **Do our attitudes define our outcomes?**

Ben blogged openly about his inner struggles. His expressions resonated with founders worldwide.

The first thing he changed was his behavior.

He left the room.

Maybe getting up and leaving the darkness, making the choice to deal with reality, is the first step toward recovery.

Developing the right attitude, strengthening it - it all takes time. We would not be here if we had those traits. But let us take the first step - like Ben, let us leave the dark room. And move one step closer to well-being.

