Crazy good: Mental disorders as strengths in entrepreneurship

Individuals with mental disorders can flourish in the appropriate environments. Entrepreneurship constitutes an environment that offers people with mental disorders unique opportunities to capitalize on personal strengths (arising from their mental disorder) and design their work to limit personal limitations (arising from their mental disorder). By Isabella Hatak

Estimates show that over one quarter of most countries’ population has some form of mental health problem at some point in life and this number is increasing such that it will be the second leading illness (behind heart disease) by 2020. While mental disorders place a considerable burden on a nation’s health-care system and economy, the costs are more strongly felt by the individual suffering from the mental disorder and his or her loved ones. Individuals with mental disorders not only experience reduced psychological well-being directly from the disorder, but also indirectly through the disorder’s negative effects on their careers, relationships, and opportunities for personal growth. For example, attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) has been
associated with crime and imprisonment, academic underperformance, drug use, and social exclusion. Bipolar disorder has been linked to decreased health-related quality of life, poor physical and social functioning, unemployment, and low work productivity. Thus, people with mental disorders face adversity in the conventional workplace and in their private lives, which, for many, leads to considerable suffering.

**Is there a bright side to mental disorders?**

The evidence above paints a gloomy picture for those with mental disorders, for their loved ones, and for society as a whole. However, what is functional and dysfunctional in terms of human characteristics and behavior is largely a matter of context. Specifically, in our research, Johan Wiklund, Holger Patzelt, Dean Shepherd and I propose a different picture – one that is light, hopeful, and valued – by considering mental disorders in the entrepreneurial context. Indeed, it is possible that certain mental disorders make people more attracted to, and better adapted for, the tasks central to an entrepreneurial career. For example, Sir Richard Branson, founder and CEO of the Virgin Group, has dyslexia, which he credits for contributing to his entrepreneurial success; David Neeley, founder and CEO of Southwestern Airlines, has ADHD, which he believes has contributed to his success; and John Gardner, in his book “The Hypomanic Edge: The Link Between (A Little) Craziness and (A Lot of) Success in America” details several entrepreneurs that seemingly have a bipolar disorder. This anecdotal evidence suggests that the very characteristics of mental disorders that make it difficult to thrive in a conventional workplace provide advantages for working in an entrepreneurial context.

**The bright side of mental disorders in entrepreneurship**

Entrepreneurship is predicated on the ability to identify opportunities that others cannot, which highlights the importance of entrepreneurs being different. Indeed, there are indications that certain mental disorders provide unique abilities and perspectives that are particularly
valuable in entrepreneurship. For example, both ADHD and bipolar disorder have been associated with higher levels of creativity. Similarly, many individuals with dyslexia develop unusual right-brain capabilities having to do with creativity and superior interpretive capability, which may enable them to identify opportunities others fail to even imagine. Moreover, individuals with bipolar disorder and ADHD experience unusually high positive affect; high positive affect facilitates opportunity recognition and persistence in entrepreneurship. It is also worth noting that the entrepreneurial context involves risk taking so that the heightened risk tolerance of people with ADHD, dyslexia and bipolar disorder can become a strength when leveraged in entrepreneurship.

Consequently, for individuals with mental disorders, entrepreneurship likely provides an important alternative career path to earn a living, reduce suffering, and live a “good” life – a career in which their uniqueness may provide an advantage and the process may improve their mental health.

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