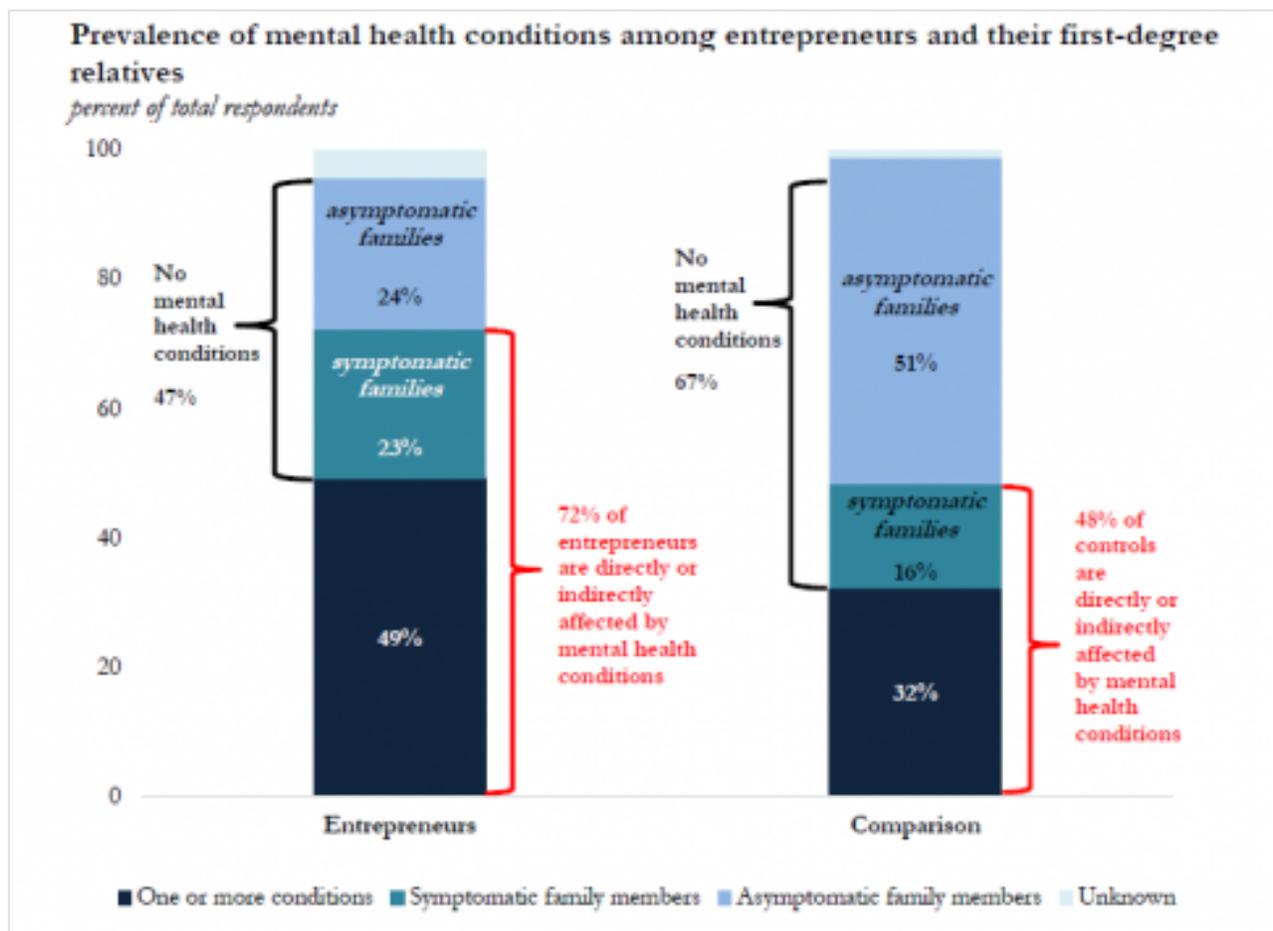


Crazy good: How mental illnesses help entrepreneurs thrive

by Matt Mcfarland • April 29, 2015 • 2 min read • [original](#)



(Courtesy Michael A. Freeman)

Michael A. Freeman had long noticed that entrepreneurs seem inclined to have mental health issues.

The clinical professor of psychology at UC-San Francisco's medical school spent a decade at a company where his clients were the founders of businesses. He estimates that about a third of them seemed to have some type of mental health condition. He still notices the trend today in his work coaching executives.

Freeman and California-Berkeley psychology professor Sheri Johnson decided to take a deeper look at the issue. They begun polling entrepreneurs and found a strong link between [mental health conditions and entrepreneurship](#).

“The people that we admire for being entrepreneurs seem to come from the same gene pool as the people who are kind of socially stigmatized because of mental health conditions,” Freeman said. “They must confer some adaptive advantage otherwise they wouldn't be so highly represented in the population.”

Forty-nine percent of entrepreneurs surveyed reported at least one mental health condition. Nearly a third reported having two or more mental health issues, such as ADHD, bipolar disorder, depression, anxiety or substance use conditions. And half of the entrepreneurs who reported no mental-health conditions identified themselves as coming from families with a history of mental illness.

This may seem counterintuitive. Why would an unstable person be most attracted and suited to launch a business?

[Why shades of Asperger's Syndrome are the secret to building a great tech company]

Freeman points out that there's a beneficial side to these mental health conditions. Those weaknesses come with corresponding strengths that the average healthy person doesn't have.

For all of its ills, depression also brings empathy and creativity. Martin Luther King Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi attempted suicide as teenagers. Uncommon levels of empathy can allow a businessman to better understand a customer's need. And a creative mind won't be satisfied on the corporate ladder, but instead in a fast-moving start-up where he or she can unfurl ideas and dreams.

Individuals with ADHD naturally make decisions faster, are comfortable working independently and are more creative, necessary skills at a start-up. They're likely to be bored working for someone else.

Shades of bipolar disorder can come in handy for an entrepreneur.

"When someone truly has manic-depressive illness and they're very disabled by it, they're in and out of the hospital, if you look at their relatives, their siblings, their parents and their children, they are all high-achievers," Freeman said. "And that's been demonstrated over and over again."

When I spoke with Freeman he drew a parallel between the benefit of having bipolar disorder in one's gene pool and sickle cell. Having the sickle cell trait is helpful in the face of malaria, but having sickle-cell disease can be deadly.

"Evolution somehow concocted this scheme by which some people get the traits and it confers advantages," Freeman said. "And a few people get the disease and they're like genetic roadkill."

For nations looking to aid entrepreneurs and encourage economic development, having a robust mental health system makes a lot of sense. After all, entrepreneurs are the ones creating new companies and new jobs.

Freeman's findings can also be seen as an explanation for the innovative tradition of the United States, which has made it the world's largest economy.

As an immigration nation the country is full of people with personalities types inclined to take the risk of moving a long ways, and of seeking out a better life. Immigrants are more likely to [start businesses](#). More than 40 percent of [Fortune 500 companies](#) were started by immigrants or children of immigrants.

The research has been submitted to a journal and is being reviewed. Freeman cautioned me that the findings are new and have not yet been replicated by other researchers. He wants to see more research in the space.

The research did find one exception to a mental health conditions being disproportionately present in entrepreneurs. There was almost no difference in rates of anxiety reported by entrepreneurs and the control group.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/innovations/wp/2015/04/29/crazy-good-how-mental-illnesses-help-entrepreneurs-thrive/>
