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The 'F' Word: Failure, depression, and Tampa Bay's lack of support in the startup community

Cover Story

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Successes and failure. Bigger and better. Upset and angry. Broken. Challenging. Multibillion-dollar potential.

These are all words Milind Bharvirkar, 47, used to describe his journey from starting a business in San Jose, to leaving San Jose, to starting up in Tampa and losing everything, to starting over again.

"I walked away with more money than I've ever had — seven figures in the bank," Bharvirkar — now president of Priatek — said about his experience with a coin-operated game business he started out West that ended with him "bowing out gracefully."

See Also

- [Puget Sound: Depression in the startup community](#)
- [Our goal: Bring light to the darkness of business-related depression](#)
- [Q&A with author Jonathan Malkin on taking the road back from hell](#)

"I thought getting that kind of success and being on the cover of magazines and making lots of money would make me happy," he said. "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 big-name games — think "Wheel of Fortune" and Marvel characters from "The Avengers." But the technology took too long to build. Licenses expired. The recession hit. He had no capital to continue.

Bharvirkar lost half a million dollars, filed for personal and corporate bankruptcy and his fiancée walked out.

It was the lowest he'd ever been.

Join us on March 23 at 4:30 p.m. for an informal discussion about "The F-Word."
Space is limited. Email phuff@bizjournals.com for details. Or join our Twitter chat at 2 p.m. EST on March 24 using #StartupDepression.

[Comparing failure support systems](#) in San Jose to those in Tampa is something he had never thought about.

"It's par for the course in San Jose," Bharvirkar said. "People understand there are entrepreneurs who have successes and failure; they're open-book about it more than they are here."

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 said.

Now he's back in the game business, married and expecting his second child.

Lacking a support system could be a factor in holding Tampa Bay back as a hub of entrepreneurship. While our large economic development agencies chase corporate relocations, the scrappy startup community is left to fend for itself. Though the **Tampa-Hillsborough Economic Development** Corp.'s Business Recruitment and Expansion program assists companies of all sizes in Hillsborough County, its primary focus is retaining companies with a significant capital investment in the area that pay higher than average wages in the state, according to an EDC spokesperson.

If entrepreneurs are better able to pull themselves out of a slump, homegrown companies will turn into larger companies, which will provide jobs and have significant community impact.

Absolute Mobile Solutions' president [Alfred Goldberg](#), also a board member at **Tampa Bay Wave**, agrees.

"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," Goldberg said. "They've got a huge safety net."

Linking the two

New research shows entrepreneurs are more likely to suffer depression and other mental illness than the general population. Several high-profile suicides, including that of tech whiz [Aaron Swartz](#), have highlighted the problem and brought attention to resources available for entrepreneurs in markets like Silicon Valley and Boston. But in metros with nascent startup communities, like Tampa Bay, the support system helping to deal with failure and its fallout essentially doesn't exist.

In more mature tech hubs, startup events go a step further than connecting idea generators

with each other and with funding. FailCon, for example, is a one-day conference started in San Francisco that has popped up in other cities around the globe. Tech entrepreneurs, investors, developers and designers study their own and others' failures to help them prepare for success. [Cass Phillipps](#), global producer for FailCon, said she's interested in creating something even more intimate, where founders can open up to each other.

"There is support for founders who have moved past their failures and are now working to come back — tons of places that love to have them share their stories and offer support for others," Phillipps said. "But as you can tell, it's still really lacking in between the failure and acceptance."

Portland, Ore., is an area known for collaboration. Starve Ups, a peer mentoring, networking and support group for entrepreneurs, bills itself as a resource of founders for founders.

Highly driven people are very self-critical, said Dr. Rahul Mehra, CEO and chief medical officer of MehraVista Health, a company in Indian Rocks Beach that implements employee assistance programs.

"There's a delicate balance between being self-critical but taking it too far, to the point of really beating yourself up," Mehra said. "It's that self-criticism that can lead to depression, anxiety and a further state of emotional barriers that are created that keep that entrepreneur from overcoming those hurdles and achieving their own business goals."

There is also a stigma in revealing weaknesses to peers.

"They don't want other entrepreneurs to think they made mistakes," Goldberg said. "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."

The spark

Entrepreneurs are built differently than the people who work for them. They put themselves at financial risk more often, have more motivation, purpose, determination, charisma and other personality traits. So it stands to reason that the extra spark of creativity they possess works for them at times, but could make them vulnerable during the darkest periods, potentially leading to depression and a feeling of isolation when a business begins to fail.

It was Swartz's suicide in early 2013 that drove Dr. [Michael A. Freeman](#) to begin studying entrepreneurs, depression and a link between the two, research he's doing at The Entrepreneurship Center at the **University of California**, San Francisco.

Freeman and his team began the research out of compassion for young entrepreneurs; they wanted to create a resource for the startup community "to prevent [suicide] going forward," Freeman said.

His research is likely to be groundbreaking. While there have been many studies about entrepreneurs' personalities, it's difficult to find research that drills down directly to the link between them and their mental health.

More than 400 entrepreneurs participated in Freeman's research, which has yet to be published, and 242 of them were deemed valid, meaning they met the definition of being a business founder or co-founder.

In his sample so far, 49 percent of the 242 entrepreneurs report having a history of one or more mental health conditions, he said. Only 32 percent of the comparison participants — non-entrepreneurs — report a history of having one or more mental health conditions. They were surveyed via online questionnaire, which was posted online and published in entrepreneur community newsletters.

"Impulsivity and risk propensity are essential for entrepreneurship. However taking the wrong risk or acting in the wrong can have very bad outcomes," Freeman said.

Support in numbers

Michael Scott Novilla was involved in a 20-year real estate venture that failed. He lost money, turned to martial arts and eventually invested in Nova 535 in downtown St. Petersburg, an arts and entertainment lounge that, so far, is a win for him.

He started the Entrepreneur Social Club in 2009, a weekly meeting at Nova 535 that broaches topics ranging from failure and ideas to "How's that business card working for you?"

Novilla modeled the organization after [Benjamin Franklin](#)'s Junto club, where he encouraged a free exchange of ideas. The impetus for starting the club was to connect with fellow entrepreneurs.

"Our club is very honest, open and frank, and we'll tell you, 'Hey, your business card is horrible, but here's what's wrong with it specifically,'" Scott said.

He agrees entrepreneurs are built differently from other people. "We're the people who take the risks, and we'll try and try and try again. We're the people that build the airports and go to Mars and invent the apps."

But their own egos can get in the way. "You can't be a solo-preneur. It's impossible," Novilla said.

Spending time with other entrepreneurs can be the difference between happiness and loneliness, between success and wanting to give up, Novilla said.

Be a mentor, find a mentor

[David Osterweil](#) launched Fitlife Foods four years ago in Tampa. He liquidated his savings and put his house up as collateral, all while his wife was pregnant with their second child. He described it as a "very vulnerable" time.

"You have this 'this is going to be great' feeling and you move forward with it, excited about it," he said.

His hunch was right. Fitlife Foods has been a success and has [expanded in Tampa Bay](#).

The very product he sells — the “fit” lifestyle and good nutrition — are what kept him from getting down while starting the business. He also leaned on his wife, Laura, and their children for support.

FailCon’s Phillipps said many founders are turning to advisors or career coaches when they are down. Osterweil called upon [Jennifer Hall](#), an executive coach and senior trainer at **Eckerd College** in the Leadership Development Institute. She’s author of the [Entrepreneurial Mindset Profile](#), an online profiling system and test of sorts that gauges how entrepreneurial you are. (*For the record: I’ve taken it and discovered I am not entrepreneurial.*)

“There are times when you know your spouse doesn’t want to hear it, so you have to have somebody who could be objective and give you good feedback,” Osterweil said.

Hall warns other entrepreneurs to be careful of the “coach” title.

“I’m a trained psychologist,” she said. “That’s a protected term. Coaching is not a protected term and anybody can call themselves a coach.”

Finding someone you trust to advise you is important when you feel there’s nowhere else to turn and you don’t have health care coverage yet. But “it’s a buyer beware situation” when reaching out to a coach, Hall said.

Life coaches and advisers are incremental aspects of establishing a viable support system for local entrepreneurs. It’s going to take a broader community effort like the ones found in startup hotbeds. That’s no small feat. Entrepreneurs are by nature busy, independent people. But building a network of lifelines will pay dividends for the Bay area startup scene’s mental health — and business health as well.

STARTUP WEEK PANEL TALKS STRESS

The topic of stress came up [during the final speaking event](#) of Tampa Bay’s first Startup Week, hosted by [Ryan Sullivan](#).

Sullivan, owner of the TruHair by [Chelsea Scott](#) line of hair care products, asked St. Petersburg entrepreneur [Chris Bennett](#) how he’s coped during the dark times that come with entrepreneurship.

Bennett said he considered many of the companies he founded “miserable failures” before he became known for Callyo 2009 Corp., which offers phone technology for law enforcement. He would turn to his family when he needed support.

Sullivan advocated showcasing local success stories for inspiration and checking in with startup owners to make sure they are OK and receive the mentorship they need.

“Someone must be there to say, ‘This is only the beginning,’” he said. “‘Let’s pick up and move on.’”

In a conversation after his panel with Bennett and other figures in the local startup and technology communities, Sullivan said he considers Tampa Bay’s community welcoming.

People shouldn't fear sharing their difficulties with others, he said.

"These things need to be talked about," he said.

— Wade [Tyler Millward](#)

Behavioral health services

- Central Florida Behavioral Health Network Inc.
- Mental Health Care Inc. dba Gracepoint
- Manatee Glens
- Suncoast Center
- Personal Enrichment through Mental Health Services (PEMHS)
- Drug Abuse Comprehensive Coordinating Office Inc. (DACCO)
- Northside Mental Health Center
- Crisis Center of Tampa Bay

Research by [Chris Erickson](#)

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