



MENTAL HEALTH & WELLBEING ROUNDTABLE REPORT

April 2026

Thanks to generous support from





1. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of country throughout Australia and recognise their continuing connection to land, waters and community. We pay our respect to them and their cultures and to elders, past and present.



2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Instinctively and anecdotally, StartupWA appreciates how hard ‘startup life’ can be in Western Australia. Many of us have experienced this personally.

So we decided to dig into this more deeply, and have been shocked by the results. In an anonymous survey (held February-March 2026) of 129 WA startup founders (pages 8-14), we found that 46% of startups had made no income, and that founders have experienced (or are continuing to experience):

- financial stress (77%)
- lack of sleep (71%) and anxiety (72%)
- relationship stress (57%) and burnout (70%)
- panic attacks (31%) and depression (38%)

Startup founders are no good to their startup (or their team or investors) in this state. When asked what they had done about this:

- 34% had seen their GP
- 27% had had some formal mental health diagnosis

Worryingly, most founders did not know (or feel) they could get help from their innovation ecosystem. The anonymous comments in the survey were very revealing, and are summarised (some also reproduced) in these pages.

On 17 March, StartupWA held a roundtable event at Bloom, with 32 founders, ecosystem supporters and mental health experts. These issues were discussed, and some ideas for support and improvement were forthcoming.

Based on these results, a global survey (page 15) and our own discussions, StartupWA is proposing nine recommendations (pages 20-22). This is not just a founder issue, or even a startup issue. It is an ecosystem issue.

On 23 April, Meshpoints will stand up a ‘Resilience and Wellbeing’ Challenge, for the ecosystem to respond to. Applicants can be awarded grants of up to \$20,000 each for relevant programs and initiatives.

A sustainable innovative society requires a proactive approach to all aspects of a founder’s life, including mental health and wellbeing, alongside the startup. For too long the psychological safety of local founders has been left to them alone to try and manage. The time for talk is over. We need collective action.

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4. ABOUT STARTUPWA



Established in 2015, **StartupWA** is a not-for-profit, peak body for the startup sector in Western Australia.

It seeks to promote and advocate for the growth of the Western Australian startup ecosystem so that it is an internationally recognised, leading centre of early-stage technology, innovation and innovation-driven organisations.

StartupWA operates with a 'hands-on' 10-person board of directors. We believe startups are "WA's next big resource."

For more: www.startupwa.org.

2026 Board members

Main Photo (left to right):

- Matthew Lerner
- Wilson Tucker
- Lacey Filipich
- Shivani Kartik (intern)
- Charlie Gunningham (Chair)
- Kate Spencer
- Josh van Ross
- Jo Hawkins (Secretary)

Inserts:

- Sri Mondhi
- Patrick Jodas (Treasurer)
- Paul Robinson

Contact: info@startupwa.org

5. METHODOLOGY

This roundtable followed the World Cafe methodology, a proven framework used by previous StartupWA roundtables.

The discussions were held under the 'Chatham House rules' convention, meaning that nothing said or proposed could be attributed to any individual. While the aggregate of the discussion points would be published, this would be general in nature.



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<http://www.theworldcofe.com/key-concepts-resources/design-principles>

6. MEETING DESIGN

The event, held at the Bloom (St Catherine's College, UWA) in Crawley, was structured into three parts:

Part 1: Welcome, Introduce the theme, Perspectives

After the StartupWA board member set the context, the group heard from **Lisa Longman** (Bloom) and **Ashlee Harrison** (CEO, Zero to Hero).

Part 2: Breakout groups discuss 3 main questions

32 participants split into groups to discuss the state of startup founder mental health, issues, causal factors and possible solutions.

Part 3: Report back, Collect the ideas

The general discussions were captured on the day by note-takers, AI recordings, and then summarised on the day by a participant in each group.



7. PARTICIPANTS



Participation in the roundtable was 'invite-only', so as to ensure there was a good cross section from relevant, interested parties.

The mix of attendees included startup founders and employees, mental health experts and ecosystem supporters encompassing a broad spectrum. 32 stakeholders attended in person.

Each attendee was provided with a 12-page workbook, which included the results from an anonymous pre-survey of 129 startups founders, on this topic. These results are presented on pages 8 to 14 in this report.

Thanks also must go to our presenters on the day:

- StartupWA board member **Lacey Filipich**, MC and main organiser
- **Ashlee Harrison**, CEO of Zero to Hero
- **Lisa Longman**, Bloom
- The team from Meshpoints
- All participants, especially those that fed back their groups' discussions

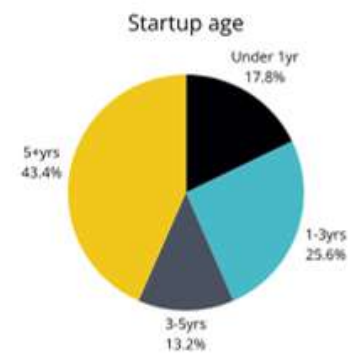
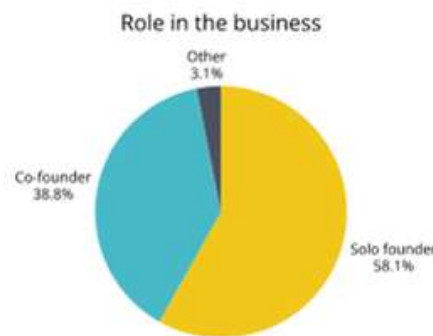
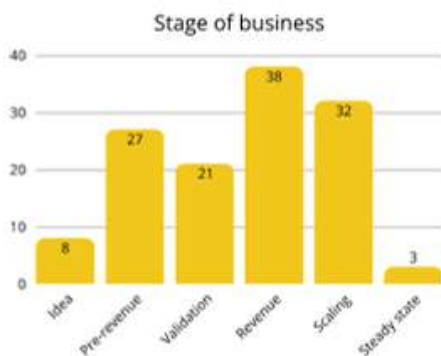
8. PRE-EVENT SURVEY

The survey was designed by StartupWA with expert input from Oqea founder Martyn Weir. It ran from 5 February to 6 March 2026 with 129 anonymous responses collected during that period.

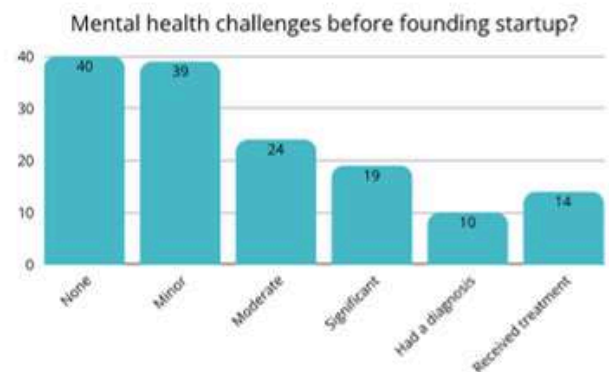
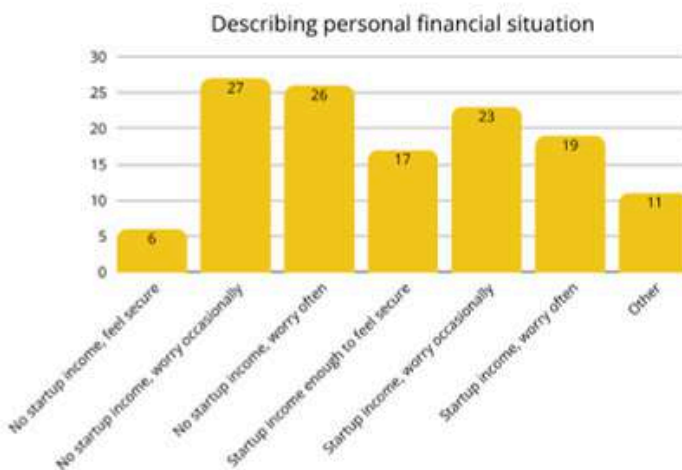
Please note:

- We only provide a summary overview here
- All charts represent 129 responses unless noted in the title. Fewer responses were collected for optional questions.
- Where many 'Other' answers received, themes of responses are noted.
- Analysis of free text answers was completed by Google Forms AI.

The Startup

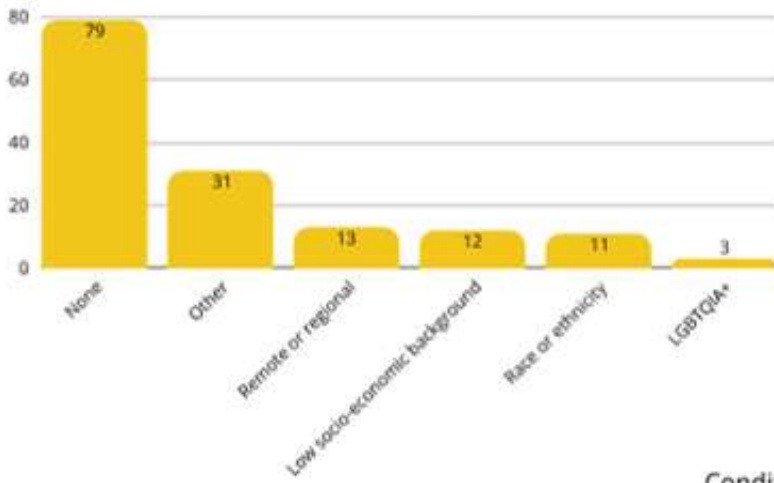


The Founder



* **Others noted:** supported by partner, working full or part time, exiting founders selling shares in startup

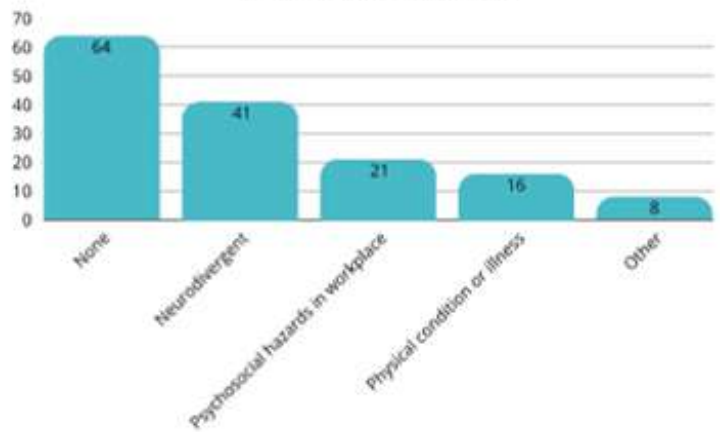
Factors you believe influence your mental health?



“ It is pretty lonely leading your startup as the challenges are often unique and need to be dealt with to "get on with it" and survive. People only see the tip of the iceberg, so assume everything is fine.

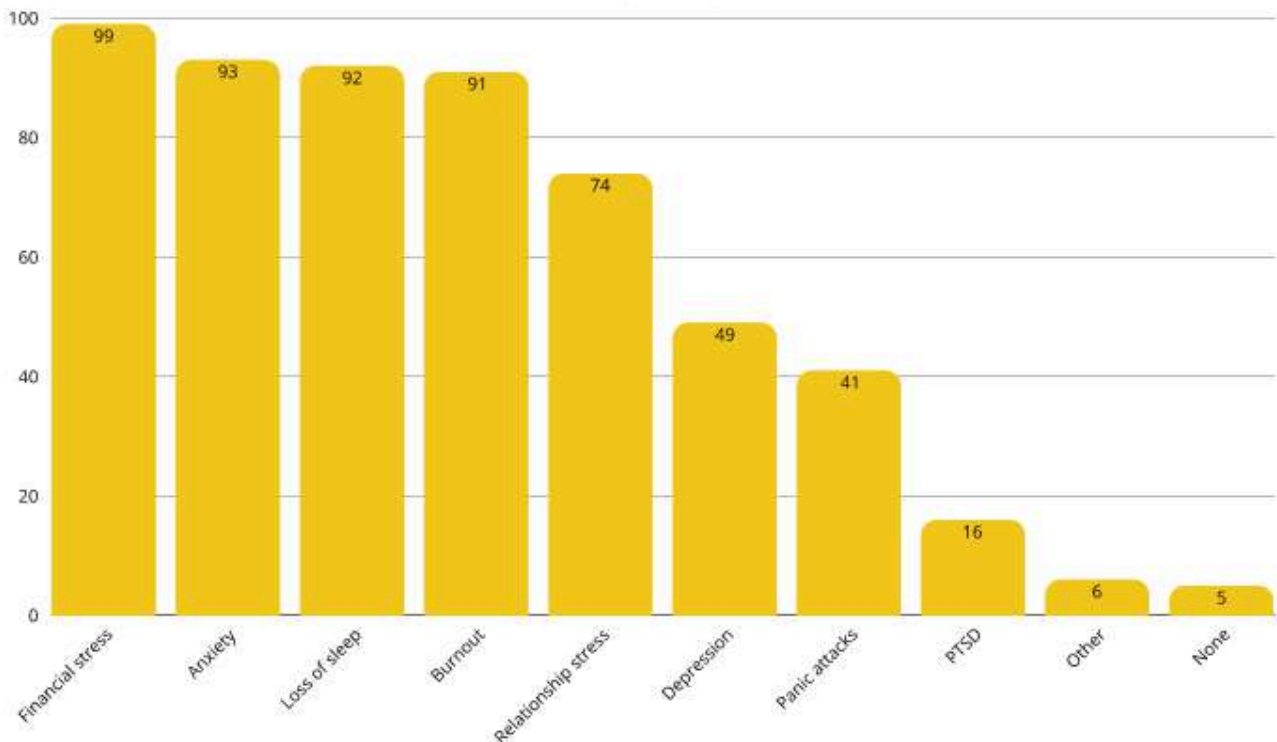
“ It's hard to find a circle of people that get what I do - I feel like there are so many coaches trying to sell services ... but not just a small group (where) I can talk about the challenges.

Conditions you think might affect mental health in current work situation?



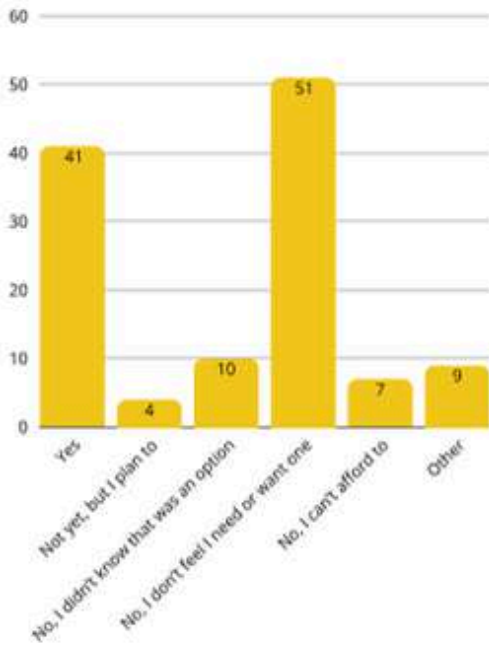
* **Others noted:** being a migrant, female, caring duties, menopause, single parent, disability, grief/trauma, being over 50, neurodivergent, ASD and ADHD.

Which of these have you experienced while running startup?

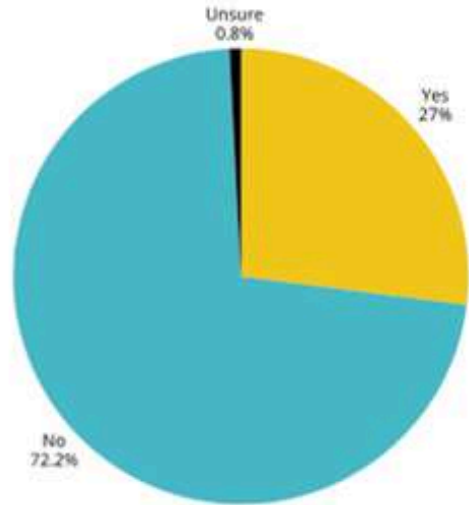


Founders accessing support

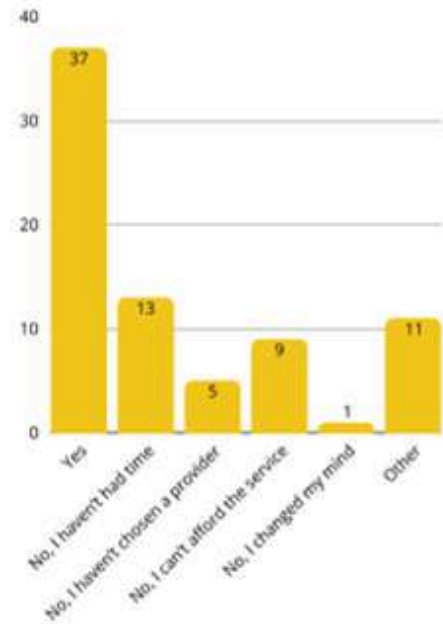
Have you seen your GP for a mental health plan? (122 responses)



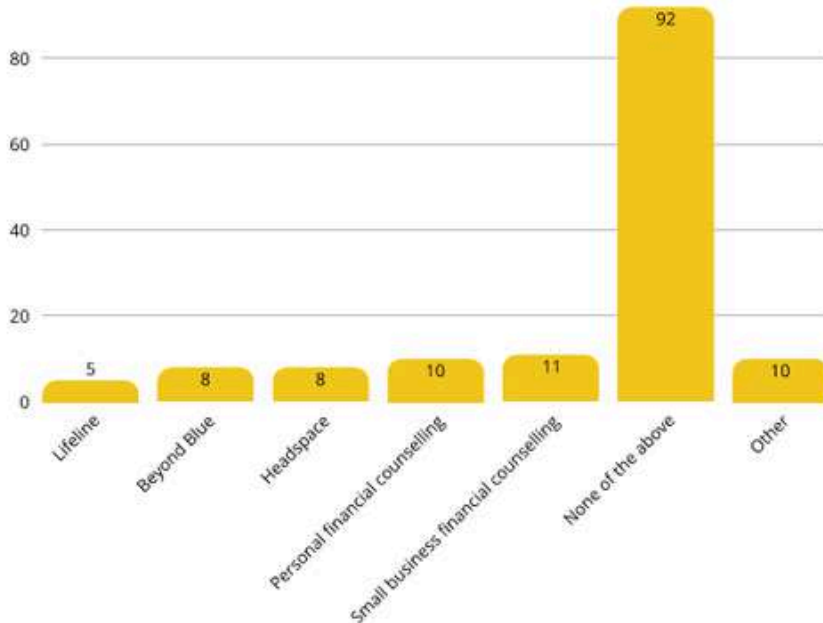
Have you had a mental health diagnosis? (126 responses)



Have you used your mental health plan? (76 responses)

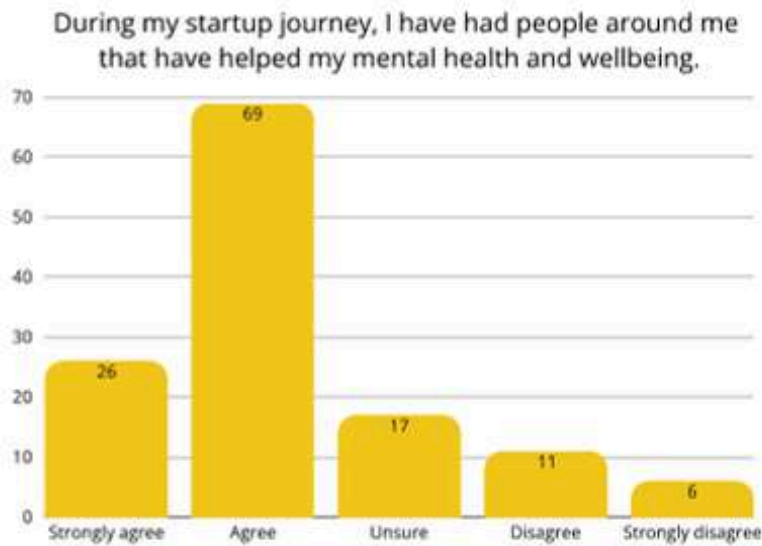


“ It's a really hard personal challenge and I don't think I would be ready to sit in a group and 'expose myself'. I'm stressed enough as it is. Just the thought of going to training with other people makes me even more stressed. It's a hole. It's hard to get out of.



- 'Other' entries mentioned:
- Mental health OT (occupational therapist?)
 - SoulScope
 - Richmond Fellowship at UQ
 - Mentors
 - Free meditation apps
 - 1800 RESPECT
 - Partner's employee assistance program (EAP)

Founder perception of support

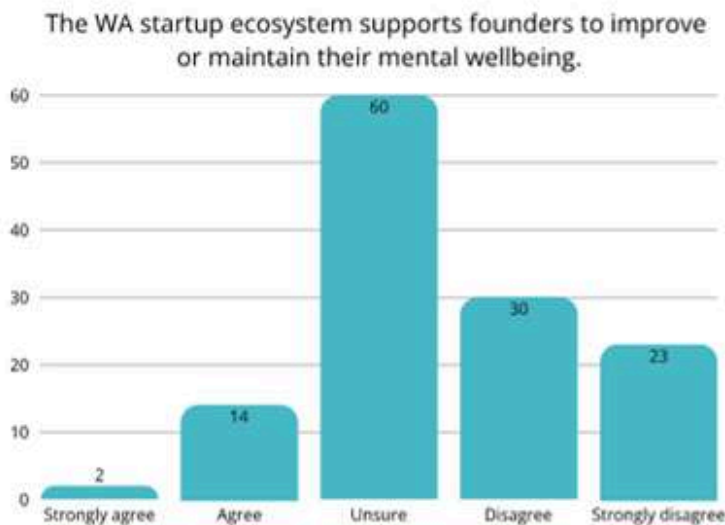


Summary:

- 74% agree or strongly agree
- 13% disagree or strongly disagree

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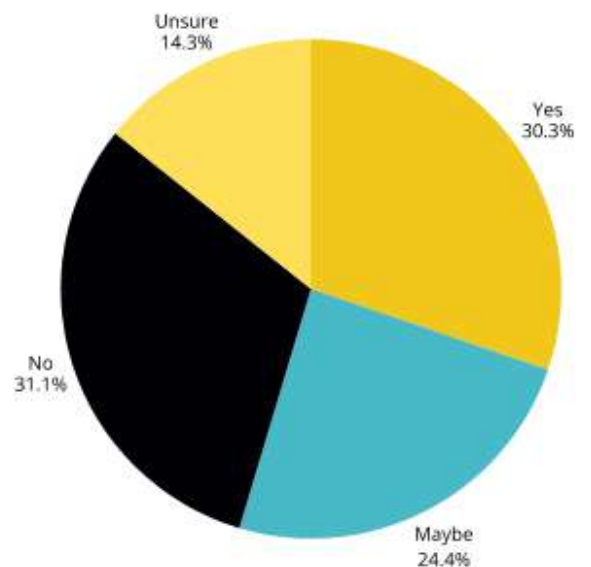
I have never had any one ask me how is my mental health while on this journey. I've also been pushed to do a pitch 'their way' as the way I requested that would made me comfortable was not the 'normal' way. This has been done to me 2 times while doing different programs and it has now left me very scared and traumatised as I feel I was not heard or listen to about how I was feeling and why.



Summary:

- 12% agree or strongly agree
- 41% disagree or strongly disagree

Would you be interested in sector training and education to support your mental wellbeing?



SURVEY COMMENTS

Founders wrote many comments, under various headings. These have been summarised, and listed below...

Personal support systems (partner, friends, family..)

- **Personal Network is Crucial:** Spouses, partners, and family members are the primary source of support, though some noted they may not fully understand the challenges. Friends were also mentioned as a key supportive resource.
- **Peer and Professional Support:** Connecting with other founders, co-founders, mentors, advisors, and business coaches provides a necessary sense of community, shared experience and professional guidance. Therapists / psychologists were also used when other resources felt inadequate.
- **Feeling of Isolation and Misunderstanding:** A major theme is the sense of loneliness, as many feel their personal network (family and friends) doesn't fully grasp the mental, physical and emotional load of being a founder, often viewing it as a simple "work from home" job.
- **Hesitancy in Seeking Help:** Some founders hold back from sharing the full picture with loved ones to shield them from stress or are reluctant to "bother" their network, indicating a general difficulty in openly discussing their mental health struggles.
- **Proactive Approach to Well-being:** Founders who have previously experienced burnout have actively prioritised self-management, sought out supportive networks, and applied methodical coping mechanisms to stay resilient and prevent overwhelming stress.

WA startup ecosystem support

- **Lack of Awareness and Visibility:** Many founders are unaware of existing mental health support, stating they haven't seen any material, local initiatives or active conversations on the topic, or that the issue is not generally tabled.
- **Ecosystem and Investment Pressures:** The prevailing culture of "hustle," celebrating "endurance and resilience" (15 hour workdays), and the focus on rapid scaling, revenue, and VC funding (often involving high pressure and unrealistic expectations from investors) are seen as significant causes of stress and burnout, with little regard for human limits or work-life balance.

- **Need for Practical and Personal Support:** Founders feel support is often high-level, and not much genuine, practical help. Some noted a desire for less focus on "pitching" and more on the daily "grind" of a startup.
- **Financial Stress:** Funding issues are highlighted as the number one stressor, with a lack of acknowledgement or programs to support founders through this, especially when funding is difficult to secure locally.
- **Isolation and Community:** Many founders say they feel isolated and that events/gatherings - while providing temporary connection - do not create an ongoing, consistent sense of community or belonging needed to improve mental health long-term.
- **Discrimination and Bias:** Some founders - particularly women and older women - describe experiencing biases in the investment landscape, credibility challenges in tech, and harsh criticism from accelerators, further impacting mental resilience.

Founders' advice for fellow founders

- **Seek Support and Talk to Others:** Reach out and talk to other founders, a trusted support network (friends, family, peers), or professionals (GP, therapist, coach) early.
- **Prioritise Self-Care and Health:** Make mental health, physical health (exercise, sleep, diet), and overall well-being the number one priority. Schedule time for self-care, take breaks, and remember that the business is not who they are.
- **Separate Identity from Business Outcome:** Understand that a founder's worth as a person is separate from the success or failure of their company. It is important to have an identity outside the business and realise that their reaction to stress is data, not a personal failure.
- **Build Resilience and Support Infrastructure:** Recognise that the journey is long and tough; build resilience, frameworks, and support systems (therapy, routines, boundaries) to sustain the stress. Don't mistake struggle for inadequacy, and accept help when offered.
- **Be Aware and Proactive:** Proactively manage mental health, recognise signals of distress, and seek help immediately before things worsen. Be financially secure, and be cautious about who money is taken from, ensuring they do not add undue pressure.

- **Need for Systemic and Cultural Change:** The primary need is for structural changes within the startup ecosystem, especially concerning funder/VC expectations, government grant requirements (such as co-matching), and moving away from glorifying the "hustle" and "70-hour weeks."
- **The Lonely and Personal Nature of Founding:** The journey is described as hard, lonely, and deeply personal, with founders feeling the pressure to constantly project success. Peer and mentor support from those who have "been there" is valuable.
- **Financial Stress is a Major Factor:** Founders advised that having spare cash, a financial lifeline, savings, side gig (part time job) can help keep things moving forward, putting food on the table. Financial stress can easily feed into relationship stress, poor eating habits, lack of sleep and exercise.
- **Importance of Proactive Self-Care and Support:** There is advice to treat the mind like infrastructure (prioritising sleep, food, movement), build psychological redundancy, and seek help earlier, not waiting for collapse.
- **Specific Challenges and Systemic Gaps:** Founders noted challenges with unproven businesses, competition from incumbents, staff issues, and the poor response rate from businesses they try to connect with. There are also calls for more recognition of challenges faced by diverse groups, including women over 50, in the regions, new migrants and those living with disabilities.



9. GLOBAL SURVEY

The **2023 Startup Snapshot** global report ("**The Untold Toll: The Impact of Stress on the Well-being of Startup Founders and CEOs,**") backed up much of what our local founders told us.

Based on a survey of over 400 founders globally, the report found a "stress paradox" where drive for success often lead to a dangerous, overlooked toll on personal wellbeing.

Scale of the Crisis

72% of founders reported a negative effect on psychological wellbeing.

The most prevalent issues included:

- High Stress: 44%
- Anxiety: 37%
- Burnout: 36%
- Depression: 13%
- Panic Attacks: 10%

Overall, 54% felt 'extreme stress' about the future of their ventures.

Culture of Silence and Stigma

Despite this, 81% of founders were not open about their stress, fears, or challenges. Only 23% of founders sought out a psychologist or coach, while only 15% of their staff felt they could openly discuss their stress and wellbeing challenges with their managers.

This "masking" behaviour leads to a vicious cycle where increased worry leads to decreased self-care.

Lifestyle and Family Impact

Sleep: 59% of founders reported sleeping less since starting their venture, a trend that *worsens* as the company raises more capital.

Physical Health: 47% of founders exercise less now than before they started their company, despite exercise being a primary defense against stress.

Family Life: The "balancing act" often fails, with 73% of founders spending less time with friends and family, and roughly 60% spending less time with their partner and children. Startup stress is contagious, affecting home life, putting pressure on the relationships the founders are most neglecting.

Resilience

Despite these heavy tolls, the report notes a paradox: 93% of founders say they would start another venture even if their current one fails. This suggests that while the journey is fraught with stress, the "entrepreneurial high" is addictive and the drive to innovate remains a dominant force.

Conclusion

The report concluded that the **ecosystem's job is to normalise the conversation around mental health.** It calls for investors to move beyond "fake it until you make it" cultures and for founders to build "difficult-conversation muscles" with cofounders and partners to break the cycle of isolation.

10. ROUNDTABLE QUESTIONS



The following three questions were crafted based on insights gained from the research:

- 1** *How might we shift founder wellbeing in WA from an individual resilience issue to a shared ecosystem responsibility - e.g for programs and funders?*
- 2** *How might we reduce the social isolation of founders (especially solo, underrepresented and regional founders) in ways that actually fit their schedules?*
- 3** *How might we equip founders to cope with financial (& all causes of) stress, before launching, and while running, their startup?*

The cohort split into groups to discuss these questions, for 60 minutes.

Following this, everyone reconvened to hear a spokesperson from each group report back on the main themes and recommendations.



11. ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

Question 1 — How might we shift founder wellbeing in WA from an individual resilience issue to a shared ecosystem responsibility?

Area	Discussion capture
Collective duty	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Founders face stress from ecosystem pressures, requiring collective action to alleviate challenges. Ecosystem must act
Language and Framing	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reduce stigma of “mental health”. Terms like "mindset coaching", "performance," and "wellbeing" can increase acceptance
Reduce the glorification	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Stop glorifying the suffering, hustle culture and founder deprivation as badges of honour
Start earlier	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Set realistic expectations to startup founders about the emotional, financial and leadership realities of leading startups
Programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Build wellbeing support into accelerators, incubators and founder programs, rather than treating it as an add-on after problems arise• Make post-program support stronger, as pressure can rise after formal programs end
Train Program leads	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Programs should recognise distress, respond safely and refer appropriately. They don't have to be therapists, but they should be able to hold space and know when to escalate
Investor Roles	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Investors must prioritise founder wellbeing and have open discussions about stress without penalising the founders for their honesty

Question 2 - How might we reduce the social isolation of founders (especially underrepresented) in ways that fit their schedules?

Area	Discussion capture
Pay attention to isolation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Regional, CaLD and solo founders may be bearing everything on their own shoulders
It's not just geography	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Isolation is not just geographic - it also comes from not being able to talk openly with staff, investors, friends or family
Reducing Social Isolation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Tailored social connection opportunities are crucial for isolated founders, including diverse event formats and community hubs
Family, friends, supporters	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Help founders' families better understand, so isolation is reduced at home too• Founders do not want to bring stress home
It's OK to ask for help	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• It's OK to be vulnerable, and ask for help• Help (when needed) has to be available
Develop support models	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Early-stage and mid-stage founders face very different decision loads
Mentor walks and coffee	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Founders can benefit from a coffee catch up with an experienced mentor (who buys the coffee, and listens), walks, heart to hearts
Online is not a solution	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Online meetings are not good enough for founders that cannot get into the city• A buddy can attend on their behalf, take notes, chat during the event
Build on proven programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• You may not need new programs; just add a dimension to existing, good ones
A third space	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Founders need a space that's not home or work; a cafe, social club..

Question 3 - How might we equip founders to cope with stress, before launching, and while running, their startup?

Area	Discussion capture
Upfront realism	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Founders need to hear the brutal facts early• There could be long periods with no revenues and pay; with extended bootstrapping• Founders need to be ready for the long haul
Financial planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Teach practical financial planning for founders
Early signs	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Spot early warning health signs, and act• Does the business struggle without the founder (e.g. when they are away/on leave)?
Validate early	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Founder has to check the business model is working, well before money runs out• If not, then pivot, pause or exit. This is OK, and is not to be deemed a failure
Mentors & advisors	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• These supporters need their own training on founder mental health and wellbeing• They should ask honest questions about wellbeing, not just traction and financials
Do you need investors?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Investors can add stress; reduce the focus on investment being an end game
Experience counts	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Experienced founders can 'give back' mentoring a new startup founder
Peer & support groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Create small, safe, trusted spaces where founders can share experiences, be supported
Founder stories	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Authentic stories, exposing honesty of startup journey's dark days, and coping mechanisms
Support directory	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Online list of available support, from early checks to clinical mental health experts

12. RECOMMENDATIONS

TLDR: Everyone in the ecosystem has a part to play.

Based on the local and global survey results, the roundtable discussions, comments and other work, StartupWA is proposing some important changes to how our local innovation ecosystem functions.

While you cannot solve problems like these with 'yet another training course', education and awareness *will* be part of the solution. Founders also need to understand what they are up for. Investors - and the ecosystem itself - must be aware of the pressures involved, and try not to exacerbate them.

Existing programs should be made aware of these issues, during and after their program. Founders (old and new) need to look out for each other, and check in regularly.

1

This has to be the ecosystem's collective responsibility

You can't put this all on the founder(s). They need (and deserve) peer support in small groups: confidential, accessible, safe spaces, where open and honest discussions and sharing can occur.

A program calling for founders to check their 'mental health' may not appeal. However, initiatives that check in on wellbeing and look to build resilience and sustainable performance for scaling could.

2

Have to start awareness early

Founders (and their partners/families) need to know what to expect, from the outset. Experienced founders have a role to play. What skills will they need? How can they acquire and build these?

Founders need people around them who can recognise the warning signs (bad eating habits, lack of exercise and sleep, snappy stressed out answers...) and intervene carefully and calmly.

3

Investors must be empathetic to the pressures

Startup investors are investing in the **person** - the founder(s) - more than the actual product. It is in their best interest to ask open, honest questions about wellbeing early.

Wellbeing initiatives should be viewed as as 'investing in their investment'. It takes more than capital to build a successful startup.

The founder is no good to the investor, or their investment, if they are permanently stressed. Investing in the wellbeing of the founder is both strategic and essential to their psychosocial health and that of their team and the startup overall.

4

Founder Buddy System

A early stage startup founder can gain a lot from having access to a more experienced founder. The experienced founder may have been through similar stressful times, and got out the other side. How did they cope? What worked, and what did not?

Connect an experienced founder with a startup founder; so they can check in on each other, regularly. Develop a website to match people (probably by convenient location, startup type).

5

Directory of Support

If and when a startup founder needs help, there needs to be a central resource where they can go and find it.

Develop and host a website showing all kinds of relevant, existing support for founders experiencing unhealthy stress levels. Also, provide a checklist for founders (in relation to their sleep, eating and drinking habits, exercise..) so they can self-assess and head off any bad habits well before they become problems.

6

Teach existing programs how to cover this area

We may not need new programs (but we may). Existing programs may reach much of the sector - and founders - already, so educational materials and ideas for existing startup programs could be prepared and disseminated. It is also important that programs check in with their graduated cohort to support them lest 'post program blues' occurs, after all the excitement, mentoring and advice finishes.

7

Awareness campaigns & check ins

Ad campaigns (on social media and elsewhere) can make founders/others aware of the warning signs, and how to seek help well before things get serious. Likewise, regular checkins (quick pulse surveys) can gauge the stress levels of the ecosystem.

8

Resilience & financial counselling programs

Programs (or modules of programs) for founders and their teams on how to deal with uncertainty, financial issues, dealing with cashflow, having back up plans, how to pivot, knowing when to stop loss... could be devised as standalone programs or important parts of existing programs.

9

Pay particular attention to vulnerable groups

Some startups may be well funded, come from privileged backgrounds, but many will not. Those in lower socio economic areas, CaLD, migrants, regional... may need especial care.

“

I don't really see there is much support. Pitch nights seem to be the only way to get attention ... and it's very hard to actually get support outside these high profile, high noise events.

13. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



StartupWA would like to thank Bloom for hosting the event, Meshpoints for its funding of the 2025/26 roundtables, the StartupWA board members and all who attended, presented and contributed, as well as those that provided input into the survey, workbook and this report.

Next steps

On 23 April, Meshpoints will open a **'Resilience and Wellbeing' Challenge**. Grants of up to \$20,000 are available for programs and initiatives that can help alleviate the issues raised. Anyone with ideas is encouraged to apply for this funding. More information will be available on [Meshpoints.com](https://www.meshpoints.com).

Help is available

If you, or someone you know, is experiencing unhealthy levels of stress, lack of sleep, anxiety attacks, or related symptoms, please seek help:

Lifeline 13 11 14

HopeWA 1300 467 392

Here for You 1800 437 348

Helping Minds (08) 9427 7100

You can also talk to your local GP, who can create a 'Mental Health Treatment Plan', which entitles you to Medicare rebates for up to 10 individual sessions with a psychologist per calendar year.



StartupWA

Published by StartupWA, April 2026

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