

Founder Mode Needs a Cooldown

Emotional fitness for India's startup leaders: why the people building wellness for everyone skip it themselves, and a ten-minute daily stack with board-safe metrics

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01

Executive summary

Seventy-two per cent of startup founders say entrepreneurship has affected their mental health. Board-safe metrics are founder wellbeing indicators that can be reported without disclosing anything clinical. A founder in Bengaluru logs sales calls, uptime and burn every week. Her own recovery has no line in the board pack.

Founder burnout India is not a private failing. It is a company risk. Teams under a highly stressed founder show 14 per cent higher burnout. Investors see a slide deck. They do not see the Sunday-evening tightness that wrote it.

Current answers fail for three reasons. Hustle culture treats rest as desertion. Wellbeing is still read as weakness: 81 per cent of founders are not really open about their stress. Boards will not accept a metric they cannot put in a pack without creating a clinical file.

Startup founder mental health does not need another offsite. It needs founder stress management that looks like training: countable daily reps, ten minutes, four techniques, one line the board can read. EmotionApp is a non-clinical emotional-fitness coaching platform. It does not offer diagnosis, treatment or therapy. The stack below stays on the coaching side of that line. What follows is the evidence, the ten-minute stack, the dashboard a board can hold, and a 90-day plan.

02

The problem in India: founder burnout India at ecosystem scale

India now runs more than two lakh recognised startups. As on 31 December 2025, the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade had recognised 2,07,135 entities under Startup India. Those firms reported 21.9 lakh direct jobs. In 2025 alone, 49,429 entities were recognised — the highest year since the programme began.

That is the scale sitting on founder nervous systems.

The largest founder survey we can verify is global, not Indian. Startup Snapshot's 2023 report *The Untold Toll* asked more than 400 early-stage founders about the cost of the job. Seventy-two per cent said entrepreneurship

had affected their mental health. Forty-four per cent reported high stress. Thirty-seven per cent reported anxiety. Thirty-six per cent reported burnout. Fifty-four per cent were very stressed about the future of the startup.

The more useful numbers are the ones about silence. Eighty-one per cent of those founders were not really open about their stress, fears and challenges. Seventy-seven per cent had not sought professional help. Only 10 per cent talked to their investors. Seventy-six per cent leaned on a spouse or family. The load lands at home, then comes back to work the next morning.

A later Snapshot study of startup employees makes the company-risk case without rhetoric. Eighty per cent of employees said startup life had affected their mental health — higher than the founder figure. Ninety per cent had not expected that. Employees working under a highly stressed founder showed 14 per cent higher burnout. Only 18 per cent said their founder was completely transparent about challenges. Fifty-seven per cent observed founder stress or anxiety at least a few times a month. Where founders were more transparent, employees reported 19 per cent higher wellbeing, 15 per cent lower burnout and 26 per cent lower intention to leave.

Gallup's 2026 *State of the Global Workplace* puts a similar pattern on leaders everywhere. People who manage managers evaluate their lives more positively than individual contributors. Their days are worse. Compared with individual contributors, leaders were seven percentage points more likely to have felt stress a lot the previous day, 12 points more likely to have felt anger, 11 points more likely to have felt sadness, and 10 points more likely to have felt lonely. Life can look fine on a five-year horizon and feel tight by 6 p.m.

Freeman and colleagues, writing in *Small Business Economics* in 2019, surveyed 242 entrepreneurs and 93 comparison participants. Nearly half of the entrepreneurs reported a lifetime mental-health condition, against about a third of the comparison group. About seven in ten were touched personally or through family history. The authors' operational point, not the clinical catalogue, is what belongs here: the founder's state reaches the venture's functioning. That is a governance sentence, not a medical one.

India-specific founder samples are smaller. They should be read as signals, not as census.

YourDOST's *Emotional Wellbeing of Entrepreneurs 2024*, prepared with INK, TiE Global Summit, Upekha and IIM Bengaluru's NSRCEL, analysed 120 founders. Thirty-three per cent were struggling with low wellbeing. Forty-eight per cent reported low community support. Thirty-one per cent reported imposter syndrome. Forty per cent said they did not wake feeling fresh and rested. Early-stage founders looked worse than those with six or more years in. The sample is modest. The direction matches the global data: early years cost more, and rest is the first thing the calendar eats.

A 2019 study by the ASCENT Foundation and the Mariwala Health Initiative, covering 186 Mumbai entrepreneurs, found that cash, workforce management and fear of failure sat at the top of the stress list. Almost half felt anxious often

or very often. Only 7 per cent had sought professional help. The date is older. The pattern has not aged out.

What we will not use: second-hand figures that circulate as “NASSCOM 62 per cent founder burnout” or “ASSOCHAM 68 per cent severe stress” without a primary document we can open. Those numbers are dropped. Smaller India pulses exist. Where the sample is under 50, they stay out of the table.

Table 1. Founder strain, compared

Signal	Global founders (Startup Snapshot 2023, 400+)	India founders (YourDOST 2024, n=120; flag the n)	Global leaders (Gallup 2026)	India ecosystem scale (DPIIT / PIB, 31 Dec 2025)
Strain on the person	72% say the job affected mental health; 36% burnout	33% low wellbeing; 31% imposter syndrome	Leaders +7 pp daily stress vs individual contributors	2,07,135 recognised startups
Silence	81% not really open; 77% no professional help	48% low community support	Leaders +10 pp lonelier than individual contributors	21.9 lakh direct jobs rest on those founders
Who they tell	10% talk to investors; 76% to family	Early-stage wellness 57% vs 74% at 6+ years	Leaders +12 pp anger, +11 pp sadness vs individual contributors	49,429 recognitions in 2025 alone
Company spillover	Employees under a highly stressed founder: +14% burnout (Snapshot employee study)	40% do not wake rested	Life evaluation high; daily emotion worse	The board pack rarely contains a founder-rep line

The comparison is imperfect. The samples differ. The instruments differ. The direction does not. Founder strain is common. It is hidden. It travels into the team. India has industrialised startup formation without industrialising founder recovery.

03

Why current approaches fail

Hustle culture still sets the default

Three habits keep founder burnout in the private column.

The operating myth is simple. Hours are the input. Suffering is the proof of seriousness. A 50-hour week is the floor. Sleep is optional. When that belief is the air in the room, a founder who blocks ten minutes looks like the person who left the field early.

Hustle is a poor optimiser. It treats the founder as an unmetered resource. The rule — “if I stop, it falls apart” — never gets tested. The calendar does not invoice for it, so it looks free.

Wellbeing is still read as weakness

Startup Snapshot’s 81 per cent who are not really open is the number that should bother a board more than any mood score. Half of that sample perceived a negative stigma around professional support. The stigma was higher among founders under 35. Only 10 per cent spoke to investors.

That is rational inside the current incentive set. A founder who names strain to a funder fears a mark against the next round. A founder who names strain to a team fears a mark against morale. So the strain goes home. Family absorbs what the cap table will not.

India's smaller studies rhyme. YourDOST found nearly half of founders reporting low community support. ASCENT-MHI found 7 per cent seeking professional help. The ecosystem built accelerators for product. It did not build a socially safe place for the person shipping the product.

No metrics a board will accept

Most wellbeing programmes fail founders because they ask the wrong artefact. They want a feeling, a score, a session note, or a clinical label. A board cannot carry any of those without creating a file it should not hold.

That is why “we have an EAP” does not settle founder burnout India. An employee-assistance line is a safety net. It is not a training log. Quarterly offsites are events. They are not reps. Meditation apps are content. They are not a number a director can read without learning something they have no business knowing.

Boards already accept training metrics everywhere else. Sales calls logged. Uptime. Deploy frequency. Pipeline coverage. Founder emotional fitness has had no equivalent. In the absence of a countable object, the topic stays personal, and personal topics get postponed.

Board-safe metrics close that gap. They report practice, not inner life. Reps. Streaks. Vocabulary breadth as a count of distinct words, not the words. Participation. Nothing a diligence lawyer would file under health.

Until those metrics exist, founder stress management stays optional, and optional work loses to the inbox.

04

The emotional-fitness model applied

PULL QUOTE

India has 2,07,135 recognised startups and 21.9 lakh jobs sitting on those founders.

Emotional fitness is training. It is not a mood. It is not a personality transplant. It is a small set of reps, done often enough that the nervous system has a practised down-shift when the week turns.

EmotionApp delivers positive-psychology techniques as countable daily reps. Delivery is WhatsApp-first, in 23 Indian languages, with an AI coach and a human hand-off when a founder needs a person. Data is India-resident. Processing is designed against the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023. The product sits on quality systems built under ISO 9001 and ISO 13485. The legal boundary is plain. This is coaching. It is not a clinic.

Four reps make the founder stack. A fifth line — the weekly board-line — is how the work becomes governable.

The Why That Carries

Founder mode without a why is just velocity. The Why That Carries is a 90-second purpose reconnection. Pick one task already on today's list. Trace it to the actual human it protects or serves. Write that name against the task. That is the rep. The count is why-reps, or threads traced.

Work regains meaning when it reconnects to the person it serves. One name restores the why. The founder does not write a manifesto. The founder writes a name. The dashboard stores a count, not the name.

The Big Sigh Reset

The body already knows this pattern. Researchers call it the physiological sigh. It shows up in sleep and after crying. The rep is doing it on purpose.

Double inhale through the nose. One long exhale through the mouth. One to three times. About eight seconds a round. No posture project. No one in the meeting needs to know.

The extra sip of air re-opens collapsed air sacs. The long exhale applies the body's built-in brake. A 2023 randomised study in *Cell Reports Medicine* compared five-minute daily breath practices with an equal period of mindfulness meditation over a month. Cyclic sighing — the exhale-heavy version of this pattern — produced a greater improvement in mood and a greater drop in respiratory rate than meditation.

Counts: resets plus streak. Use it before the hard call, after the heated one, and in the two-breath gap between back-to-back meetings.

The Zone Dial

Pick one task. Tune the difficulty until it is stretchy but doable. Remove interruptions. Clock the immersion.

Deep work arrives when challenge sits just above skill and the room is quiet. Difficulty is the dial the founder controls. A day of context-switching is not a day of building. Six protected minutes still count. Forty protected minutes are better. The metric is flow minutes and the pattern of when they happen, not a story about genius.

This is the opposite of founder mode as continuous partial attention. It is one window, one difficulty setting, one clock.

The Joy Fixed-Deposit

Schedule one positive experience in advance. Log it as a deposit. Draw on the ledger in lean weeks.

Scheduled positives beat waited-for ones. Anticipation pays interest before the event arrives. A founder who only takes joy if the week “allows it” will not take it. The week does not allow it. That is the design of the week.

The deposit can be small: a walk with a child, a meal that is not a pitch, a Sunday block that is not a catch-up. Counts: deposits made. Pair it with a Sunday habit of placing at least three positive, mastery or connection blocks on the calendar as appointments. What gets an appointment happens.

The weekly board-line of rep counts

Four techniques are still a private hobby until they produce a line a director can read.

The board-line is one sentence. It carries counts, never confessions.

Founder stack, week of 15 September: 6/7 why-reps · 18 sigh resets · 142 flow minutes · 3 joy deposits · 11 emotion words named · 6-day streak. No clinical data held.

That sentence is the difference between “we care about wellbeing” and “we measure the practice.” It is also the difference between a founder sharing inner life with a board and a founder sharing training volume.

05

The founder stack minute by minute, plus the one-line board report

Ten minutes. Same time each day if the calendar allows. First thing after the first chai is fine. Between the school drop and the stand-up is fine. The stack fails when it waits for a free hour. There is no free hour.

0:00–1:00 — The Why That Carries

Open today's list. Pick the task that will eat the morning. Write one name next to it: the person this task actually serves. Customer. Teammate. Parent. Future hire. One name. Close it.

1:00–2:00 — The Big Sigh Reset

Two or three rounds. Nose, sip, long mouth exhale. Shoulders, jaw, hands. Then start.

2:00–8:00 — The Zone Dial

One task. Difficulty set to stretchy-but-doable. Notifications off. Six minutes is a valid block when the day is brutal. The point is a protected interval, not a performance.

8:00–10:00 — The Joy Fixed-Deposit

Put one deposit on a future day this week, or log one that already happened. If it is Sunday, place three joy, mastery or connection blocks on the week as calendar appointments.

That is the daily work.

The weekly work is the board-line. On Friday, or on the morning of the board pack, the founder (or the People lead, if the founder has agreed) pastes one sentence into the appendix.

One-line board report

Founder stack, week of [date]: [x]/7 days · [n] why-reps · [n] sigh resets · [n] flow minutes · [n] joy deposits · [n] emotion words named · streak [n]. No clinical data held.

A VC who cannot read that line can still read a burn multiple. The two belong in the same pack. One describes cash. The other describes whether the person steering the cash still has a down-shift.

If a week is missed, the next week starts at one. Streaks are useful. Shame is not. Tiny Wins, Big Flywheel — another EmotionApp rep — is the rule here: shrink the step until it is almost embarrassing, then do it.

06

Measurement — a dashboard that holds no clinical data

The measurement rule is the product rule: counts, never confessions.

What the dashboard holds

- Daily and weekly rep counts for each of the four stack techniques.
- Streak length in days.
- Participation: days practised in the last seven and the last 30.
- Emotional-vocabulary breadth: how many distinct emotion words the founder named in the period, not which words, and not the story attached to them.
- Optional: flow-minute totals and when-you-flow pattern (morning / afternoon / late), because timing is an operations fact, not a feeling.

These are board-safe metrics. They can sit in a People appendix, a founder update, or a board observer note. They disclose practice volume. They do not disclose a state that could be read as clinical.

What the employer sees

The employer sees the list above, aggregated, for the founder who has opted in, and only at the resolution agreed in writing. A weekly sentence is enough for most boards. A monthly sparkline of reps and streak is enough for most People partners. Cohort view — “three of four founders practised five-plus days” — is enough for a fund that wants portfolio hygiene without building a clinic file.

What the employer never sees

- Journal text.
- The names written in The Why That Carries.
- The content of any named feeling.
- Coach transcripts or AI-coach chat.
- Mood scores, symptom checklists, or anything that could be mistaken for a clinical instrument.
- Location traces, contact lists, or WhatsApp message bodies.

Technique microsites on EmotionApp already state the local version of this rule: everything you do here stays on this screen; nothing is sent; nothing is stored. The company dashboard must obey the same spirit at a coarser grain. Counts travel. Content does not.

What this is not	EmotionApp is not a clinic. It does not offer diagnosis, treatment or therapy. A dashboard of reps is not an assessment. If a founder is in acute distress, the correct next step is a qualified professional or Tele-MANAS 14416, not a longer streak.
Why this survives DPDP and diligence	The Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023 (Act No. 22 of 2023) requires lawful purpose, notice and consent for personal data, and it treats health-adjacent data with extra care in practice even where a board never asked for it. The clean design is to collect almost none of it. India-resident processing. Purpose limited to coaching the practice. Employer reports limited to counts. No inferred clinical state. No secondary use of journal text. A founder can stop, and the content path should already have been empty. A fund running diligence on a portfolio company should be able to ask “does the founder have a recovery practice?” and receive a number, not a narrative. That is the test board-safe metrics have to pass.

07

Implementation — a 90-day plan

Owner means the person who moves the action. Metric means the only number that counts that week. Keep both boring.

Table 2. Ninety days

Week	Owner	Action	Metric
1	Founder	Run the ten-minute stack on five mornings. Do not announce it.	5/7 days practised
2	Founder	Add The Why That Carries name to the top task before stand-up.	5 why-reps
3	Founder + chief of staff	Protect one Zone Dial block on the calendar as a meeting with a name, not “focus time”.	3 blocks kept
4	Founder	Log two Joy Fixed-Deposits for the coming fortnight. Keep one.	2 deposits scheduled; 1 kept
5	People lead	Agree in writing what the board will see: weekly one-liner only.	1 signed note; 0 clinical fields
6	Founder	First board-line in the internal weekly. No speech. Just the sentence.	1 board-line sent
7	Founder + coach	Human hand-off session if the AI coach is the only voice so far.	1 coaching conversation
8	People lead	Offer the same stack to the leadership team as optional reps, not a campaign.	2 additional leaders opted in
9	Founder	Review streak breaks without a post-mortem. Restart the next morning.	Streak rebuild ≥ 3 days
10	Board observer / investor	Read the board-line. Ask one operations question, not a feeling question.	1 question on calendar protection
11	Founder	Add vocabulary-breadth count (words named, not the words) to the line.	Breadth number present

Week	Owner	Action	Metric
12	Founder + People lead	90-day review: days practised, streak, team spillover (sick days, after-hours pings). Decide keep / adjust.	60%+ days practised across 90 days

Ninety days is long enough for a habit to stop needing a speech. It is short enough that a board will wait for the first line.

If the founder is in a raise, a fire, or a family crisis, shrink the stack to two minutes: Why That Carries plus three sighs. Keep the count alive. Volume can return when the week returns.

08

One-page checklist the reader can run this week

Print this. Tick it. Do not add a project plan.

Monday - ☐ Write one name against the first task on the list. That is The Why That Carries. - ☐ Do three Big Sigh Resets before the first call. - ☐ Put a 25-minute Zone Dial block on tomorrow, labelled with the task, not with “focus”.

Tuesday - ☐ Repeat the 0:00–2:00 pair (why + sigh) even if the Zone Dial slips. - ☐ Schedule one Joy Fixed-Deposit for this week. A walk counts. A dinner that is not a pitch counts.

Wednesday - ☐ Protect the Zone Dial block. Close the other tabs. Six minutes still counts. - ☐ After a heated exchange, do one sigh before the next room.

Thursday - ☐ Name three precise feeling-words in a private note. Do not send them to anyone. The dashboard, if used, stores the count. - ☐ Check who on the team is absorbing founder hours after 9 p.m. Cut one of those threads.

Friday - ☐ Write the one-line board report, even if it only goes to yourself this week. - ☐ If the week was missed, write “1” for next Monday. Do not write an apology.

Sunday - ☐ Place three joy, mastery or connection blocks on next week’s calendar as appointments. - ☐ If you are in crisis, stop the checklist. Call Tele-MANAS 14416.

Five days of imperfect reps beat one well-designed offsite. The checklist is the offsite, distributed.

09

FAQ

Q1 Does my board get to read how I am feeling?

No. Board-safe metrics are counts. The pack can show 6/7 days, 18 resets and a 6-day streak. It cannot show journal text, named feelings or coach notes. Zero clinical fields belong on the dashboard. If a director asks for a mood score, the answer is the same sentence again.

Q2 How long does this take when the week is on fire?

Ten minutes for the full stack. Two minutes for the emergency version: one why-rep and three sighs. Startup Snapshot found 72 per cent of founders already paying a mental-health cost. Ten minutes is smaller than the cost.

Q3 Is this a clinic? Am I supposed to be a patient?

No. EmotionApp is not a clinic. It does not offer diagnosis, treatment or therapy. It is coaching plus countable reps, with a human hand-off when a founder wants a person. Distress that does not ease belongs with a qualified professional or Tele-MANAS 14416.

Q4 Does founder stress actually reach the team, or is that a slide?

It reaches the team. Employees working under a highly stressed founder showed 14 per cent higher burnout in Startup Snapshot's employee study. Eighty per cent of those employees said startup life had affected their mental health. This is an operations number.

Q5 What number goes in the board pack for an Indian company?

The weekly one-liner. India now has 2,07,135 DPIIT-recognised startups and 21.9 lakh jobs attached to them. A board that can read headcount can read a streak. That is founder stress management a director can hold.

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Dr Atul Aswani is a Mumbai Psychiatrist and trained as a Results Coach. He is the author of EmotionApp's emotional-fitness techniques and the founder of Tranquilo Meditek Sytems Private Limited, Mumbai. His work translates positive psychology into countable daily reps for Indian professionals — WhatsApp-first, in 23 languages, with an AI coach and a human hand-off. EmotionApp is non-clinical. Data stays in India.

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NOTE

EmotionApp is a non-clinical emotional-fitness coaching platform. This paper describes practices, techniques and coaching. It is not therapy, treatment, diagnosis or medical advice.

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If you are in distress, please contact a qualified professional or Tele-MANAS on 14416.