

BURN BRIGHT, NOT OUT

**SHATTERING THE SILENCE
AROUND MENTAL HEALTH
IN TECH STARTUPS**



**JAMES OLIVER, JR.
DJANGO DEGREE**

FOREWORD BY TECHSTARS CEO DAVID COHEN

The Kabila Founder Mental Health Fund

Building a startup is one of the hardest things a person can do. The pressure is real. The isolation is real. And for too many founders, the cost to their mental health is real, too.

The Kabila Founder Mental Health Fund exists to change that.

Founded by James Oliver Jr. and supported by Brad Feld and the Techstars Foundation, the Fund provides direct therapy grants to startup founders who need professional mental health support but can't access it on their own.

Grants are named in honor of James's grandmother, Carmen Reid, whose memory reminds us that mental health is health.

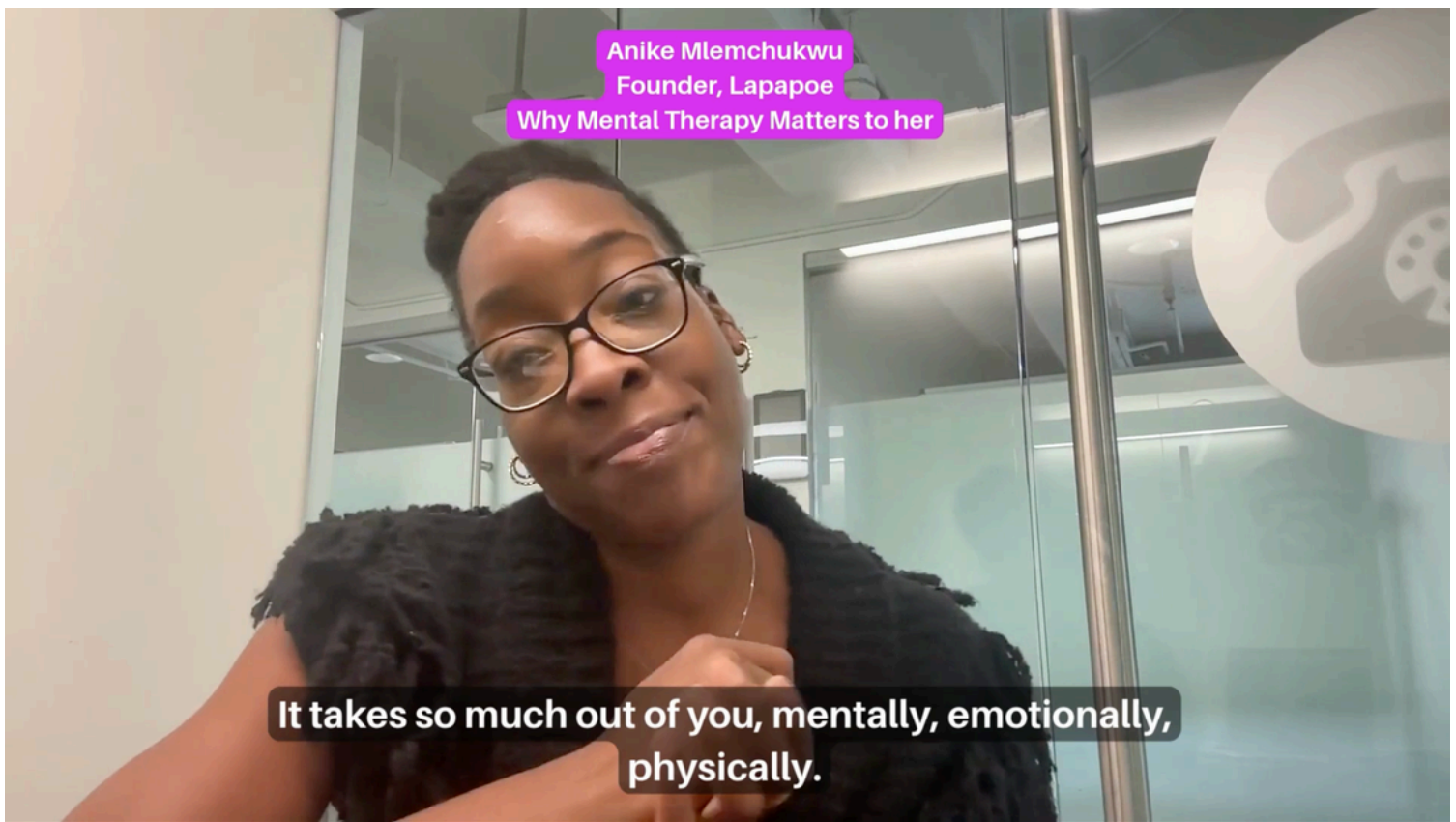
We don't talk enough about what it costs founders to build. This fund is our response to that silence.

Every Dollar Goes Back Into Her Startup. She Had Nothing Left for Her Mental Health.

Bootstrapped founders pour everything back into the businesses. For most, professional mental health support isn't in the budgets, even when they need it most.

That's exactly who the Kabila Founder Mental Health Fund was built for.

Watch this founder, Anike, share what receiving a mental therapy grant meant to her.



[Click to watch Anike's story.](#)

FOREWORD BY DAVID COHEN

The Hidden Struggle

As co-founder of Techstars, I've spent nearly two decades working with thousands of entrepreneurs. One thing I've learned is that for startup founders, mental health isn't a luxury – it's a necessity for long-term success. Yet in the hustle of building a business, that truth is often overlooked.

To outsiders, the startup world can seem full of boundless energy and passion. But behind the scenes, many founders fight silent battles. The very drive that pushes entrepreneurs to succeed also makes them vulnerable to stress, anxiety, and burnout. In one study, 72% of founders said the entrepreneurial journey negatively impacted their mental health, but 81% felt they couldn't talk openly about their struggles. Think about that: the majority are suffering, but most suffer in silence. In our culture, relentless pressure is often mistaken for dedication, and working yourself to exhaustion is too often worn like a badge of honor.

Shattering the Silence

For too long, these struggles have been kept in the shadows. Founders often feel they must project confidence 24/7 – even when they're hurting inside. That's why *Burn Bright, Not Out* is so important. This book shatters the silence around mental health in startups, bringing into the open what so many have lived through in private. It gathers raw, unfiltered stories from founders and investors who dared to speak the truth about the emotional toll of chasing growth at all costs. Reading these pages, I felt heartbreak and hope all at once: heartbreak at the pain and sacrifice laid bare, but hope because finally our community is starting to have the honest conversation we desperately need. By sharing their darkest moments, these entrepreneurs are giving a gift to all of us – they're saying, "You're not alone," and are in turn giving others permission to speak up.

I'm especially grateful to those in our industry who have had the courage to go first. My friend and fellow Techstars co-founder Brad Feld, for example, has been candid about his battles with depression. When a leader at his level opens up, it lights the way for others to do the same. The voices in *Burn Bright, Not Out* continue that legacy of honesty. They show that it's okay to acknowledge that building something big can hurt. In fact, acknowledging it is often the first step to healing.

You Are Not Alone

And here's the most important message: it's okay to not be okay. Asking for help doesn't mean you're weak – it means you're human. I often tell founders, "If you don't take time to take care of yourself, there is no way you can take care of your team. Prioritize your own well-being, and you will be a better leader for others." I learned that lesson firsthand after watching countless leaders burn themselves out in the name of success. We must reject the myth that working until you drop is somehow heroic. Success at the cost of your sanity is no success at all.

As I write this, I'm reflecting on my own habits and advice. One personal rule I live by is simple: "Disconnect once in a while and get away from it all. Always have something to look forward to with your family." No startup is worth your soul or your family. I've seen companies fail and investors lose money, and it's possible to recover from those setbacks. But a founder who loses their joy, their relationships, or their mental health – that's a far greater loss. Remember, the entrepreneurial journey is a marathon, not a sprint. Your venture can't thrive if its leader is running on empty.

The stories in *Burn Bright, Not Out* are a call to action for all of us. It's time to change the way we define strength in the startup world. We need to foster:

- Investors and mentors who ask founders "How are you really doing?" – just as often as they ask about KPIs and growth metrics.
- Founders who feel safe to say "I'm struggling" – without fear that admitting vulnerability will undermine their credibility.
- A culture that values well-being as much as hustle – where taking care of your mind is seen as part of the job, not a distraction from it.

I'm encouraged to see efforts emerging to back up these words with action. The Techstars Foundation, for example, has partnered with the Kabila Founder Mental Health Fund to provide free therapy for entrepreneurs who need support. In fact, the authors of this book are contributing to that very cause: 90% of net profits from *Burn Bright, Not Out* will go toward funding therapy sessions for founders in need. That means every copy of this book is more than just pages of insight – it's literally a lifeline, helping a stressed-out founder talk to a professional and begin to heal.

To every founder, builder, and dreamer reading this: you are not alone. The pages ahead might be tough to read at times, especially if you see your own reflection in these stories. But they are also filled with understanding, empathy, and hope. Let this book be the beginning of a new conversation – one where we stop whispering, "I can't keep going like this" in the dark and start openly saying, "I need help" in the light of day. *Burn Bright, Not Out* is here to remind us all that your well-being matters more than any valuation or headline. It's time to speak the truth, and it's time to be heard. By picking up this book, you've already taken a brave step toward a healthier, more sustainable journey. I'm honored to walk beside you as we build a startup culture where shining brightly doesn't mean burning out.

— David Cohen, Techstars Founder & CEO

CHAPTER FOUR

THE BURN RATE NO ONE TALKS ABOUT - BRAD FELD'S STORY

Before I was the co-founder of Techstars, or even a venture capitalist, I was just another founder trying to build a company from the ground up. Like so many entrepreneurs, I carried the weight of my work in silence. Founder mental health isn't just an abstract cause for me, it's something I've lived through. Long before the world saw me as successful, I was a 25-year-old running a small startup, wrestling with depression, self-doubt, and the intense fear that admitting I was struggling would make me unworthy of being a leader.

That's why this matters so much to me. I know firsthand how lonely it can feel when you're building something and battling your own mind at the same time. The stigma around mental health convinced me to hide what I was going through, even from people who cared about me. If you're reading this as a founder and carrying your own silent battles, I want you to know you're not alone. My story is not one of unbroken strength. It's one of struggle, shame, support, and, ultimately, the decision to speak up.

Early Struggles: Hiding My Depression

When I was 25, I was the CEO of a successful company and on paper everything looked great. But inside, I was falling apart. I was in the midst of my first major depressive episode – a two-year stretch of darkness that hit in my mid-20s. Initially, I told almost no one. I was afraid people wouldn't take me seriously or would lose respect for me if they knew how bad I felt. In fact, the only people who knew the truth were my psychiatrist, my business partner Dave Jilk, and my girlfriend (now my wife), Amy. They were supportive, but even with them, I was deeply ashamed of my "weakness." I hated that I was depressed and needed help. I even remember feeling ashamed that I was seeing a therapist and taking medication – I was terrified that anyone in my professional world would find out. In my mind, CEOs were supposed to be strong and never show cracks. So I plastered on a confident face at work each day, while inside I was suffocating under a black cloud of depression.

Looking back, it's painfully clear how much stigma had its hooks in me. I felt like I had to build a wall around how I felt when I was in a work context. I've described it as putting my depression in a dark, opaque box and only letting a few people in. On the outside, I kept acting like the hyper-productive young entrepreneur who had it all together. On the inside, I was in hell. I remember days during that period when just getting out of bed was a victory. I'd show up to the office exhausted from battling my own brain all night. But if anyone asked how I was doing, I'd flash a fake smile and say, "Great!" I was determined no one could see me as weak, depressed, or in need of help. That stigma-induced silence nearly crushed me. Depression thrives in secrecy – and I was very good at keeping my suffering secret.

Ironically, hiding my mental health struggles didn't make me a better CEO; it just made me a lonely and unhealthy one. I was lucky that Dave and Amy stood by me during that time. Dave didn't really know how to help – we were both clueless about depression back then – but he showed up for me as a friend, and that mattered. Amy, who was my new girlfriend at the time, didn't treat me like I was broken or fragile. She acknowledged that I was going through a hard time and loved and supported me through it. In hindsight, their support kept me afloat. But I still carried so much shame that I mostly suffered in silence. I somehow functioned through the work day and then unraveled when I got home. It was a miserable way to live, and it lasted about two years before the depression finally lifted. Coming out the other side, I vowed to myself that I never wanted to feel that alone and scared again. Little did I know, it wouldn't be the last time I'd face that darkness.

The Crash of 2001: When the World Fell Apart

My next encounter with severe depression came about a decade later, in late 2001, and it took a terrorist attack to finally break me. By this point, I was in my mid-30s, juggling roles as an entrepreneur and a venture capitalist. The dot-com bubble had burst in 2000, and the economy was sliding downhill. I'd been grinding through an 18-month freefall in the tech world, stubbornly pushing forward despite the mounting stress. Then Sept. 11, 2001 hit. I was actually in New York City that morning – I'd taken the red-eye from San Francisco and arrived at 6 am on 9/11. I was asleep in my hotel room in midtown Manhattan when the World Trade Center towers collapsed. I woke up to a scene of chaos and horror. While I wasn't in physical danger, I felt terrified, exhausted, and emotionally shattered by the experience. The combination of travel fatigue and the shock of 9/11 sent me into a tailspin.

In the aftermath, I was totally drained. I flew back to Boulder and stopped traveling for the rest of that year. The last three months of 2001 were just awful – I was depressed again, but this time the trigger was clear. The trauma of 9/11 compounded all the other stresses that had been piling up. I remember feeling a kind of numb despair and I'd go through the motions with work, but my heart wasn't in it. Instead of my usual optimism, I felt constant dread, anxiety, and fatigue. It was like the world was falling apart, and so was I.

One difference in 2001 was that I did start opening up a little more – very cautiously, but it was a start. In 2002, many of my VC and entrepreneur friends were also struggling through the post-bubble hangover. I talked to some of them about the struggles of 2001 and how I was feeling, and in a few cases, they responded in kind. I didn't exactly broadcast, "Hey, I was depressed!" but I let my guard down with colleagues I trusted, at least enough to say, "Yeah, last year took a lot out of me. I wasn't in a great place." The world didn't end when I said that. No one shamed me or said I was unfit to lead. These conversations made me realize a lot of us had been suffering in silence through that period. By cracking the door open just a bit on my own struggles, I found others were willing to share theirs too.

Still, I wasn't comfortable being vulnerable yet. Even as I acknowledged my 2001 depression in hindsight, I downplayed it and wrapped it in a neat narrative ("Whew, glad that's over, let's all move on"). I was relieved to feel like myself again by mid-2002, and I happily put that episode behind me. I had no interest in dwelling on it or making it a public discussion. In my mind, I'd weathered the storm and could refocus on business as usual. I carried on, throwing myself back into work, thinking I had my demons under control. For the next decade or so, things were good. Or at least I convinced myself they were good... until I ran myself straight into the ground.

Running on Empty: Burnout and Breakdown

By 2013, I learned the hard way that you can only sprint for so long before you collapse. The year 2012 was an absolute blur of activity for me. I was in a default yes mode and pushed myself beyond all reasonable limits. I ran a 50-mile ultramarathon in April 2012 – and never gave myself time to fully recover. In September, I had a near-death bike accident that shook me more than it injured me, but I didn't acknowledge that. By October, I ran the Detroit Marathon even though I clearly had no business doing another race so soon after the accident. On top of the physical strain, I was on the road constantly – traveling probably 75% of the time – and working nonstop. In addition to normal work, I wrote two books because, hey, why not? To cap it off, my beloved dog passed away in November, which hit me more than I expected. And then, as if my body was waving a white flag, I got slammed with a kidney stone that required surgery. That put me in the hospital and forced me to take a few weeks off. In hindsight, that was my last clear warning sign: Brad, slow down – you are past your limit. But I ignored it. By the end of 2012, I was completely cooked – though I was too clueless to admit it at the time.

Unsurprisingly, I crashed. Early January 2013, I went to Las Vegas for the Consumer Electronics Show, trying to jump back into work after the holiday break. It did not go well. Within two hours of landing in Vegas, I was in my hotel room with the curtains closed, the door locked, and a pillow over my head. I just shut down. I couldn't face the conference, the meetings, the crowds – none of it. All I wanted was to hide in darkness. I remember lying there in that hotel room, feeling paralyzed and empty, thinking "Oh no... it's back." I knew exactly what "it" was: I was in a deep depression again. This time, though, I recognized the signs immediately. I'd been in that dark place before, and as miserable as I felt, there was oddly some comfort in recognizing it. Like, okay, I know this demon.

From the outside, my life in 2013 looked amazing – I was a high-profile VC and my firm was doing great, I had a wonderful marriage with Amy, and plenty of friends. But that didn't matter; physiologically and emotionally, I was shredded. I had burned myself out completely, and my body and mind finally mutinied, as if saying, "We're not doing this anymore." All the unprocessed pain and exhaustion of the past year came due at once.

This time I didn't hide it. I was too exhausted to put on a fake smile, and by now I also knew, deep down, that hiding it was counterproductive. Over the past decade, I had gradually learned that being open about this stuff helps, not hurts. I was a well-known blogger in the tech world, and I'd always preached about authenticity and "showing up as your whole self." If I didn't share about this depression, I'd be a total hypocrite – I'd be "full of shit" telling an incomplete story of my life. So I decided to write blog posts about my depression while I was in the middle of it. With zero polish or PR spin, I wrote about what I was experiencing – the hopelessness, the fatigue, the anxiety. While hitting "publish" on some of the posts was uncomfortable, it was also liberating. While I wasn't sure how people would react, I didn't really care, as I was doing it for myself at that point. If my blog was truly an authentic reflection of my entrepreneurial journey, then I had to include the mental health part, especially in the moment when it was hardest to talk about. There was another motivation for me: in the months around that time, a few well-known entrepreneurs died by suicide, shocking our community. It was heartbreaking, and it underscored how urgent it was to start talking openly about mental health in the startup world. I felt too many founders were quietly drowning, thinking they were the only ones, and none of us were speaking up to break that illusion. I wanted to do something to change that. So part of why I blogged about my depression was to say, "Look, if I – this supposedly successful guy – can be vulnerable about feeling awful, then maybe you can too. Maybe you don't have to hide." At the time, I didn't overthink this or strategize it; I just wrote from the heart because it felt like the right thing to do. And then an amazing thing happened: people responded.

Finding My Voice: Breaking the Silence

Once I went public with my depression, the response was immediate and overwhelming – in a positive way. Over the next few months, many founders, including some extremely famous and successful ones, reached out to me privately to share their own stories of struggle. Many of them said something like, "I've never told anyone this, but I've been dealing with depression (or anxiety, or burnout) too." They felt safe confiding in me because I had been so public about my experience. In some cases, I was the first person they'd ever talked to about their issues with. On one hand it was heartbreaking – so many brilliant, capable founders quietly living in pain, thinking they were alone. On the other hand, it was incredibly validating. My sharing gave them permission to share. It confirmed for me that speaking up was absolutely the right call.

It wasn't just personal emails and calls. My public candor got picked up by the press. I found myself being interviewed by places like Inc. and Fortune about depression in startups. I hadn't expected that, but it showed how timely this conversation was becoming. High-profile suicides in the entrepreneurial ecosystem had put mental health on the radar, and here I was openly saying, "I struggle with this, and I'm still here." I inadvertently became known for talking about founder depression – a role I embraced, because someone had to. I've been around the block in this industry and I'm financially secure enough that I don't fear backlash; if lending my voice can help destigmatize mental health, I'm all in.

I started speaking about mental health at tech conferences, not just writing about it. I'd get on stage at entrepreneur events and say, "Guess what: I take antidepressants. I've been in therapy. I've been so depressed I couldn't function. And I'm not ashamed of it." I was blunt, intentionally, because I wanted to shake people out of the illusion that this stuff doesn't happen to "people like us." And you know what? By and large, people were relieved to hear it. Instead of losing respect for me, founders would line up after my talks to thank me for putting into words what they'd felt. They'd say, "I thought I was the only one," or "I've been terrified to admit this to anyone." We'd end up hugging or shedding a few tears together. It was powerful.

These experiences, combined with my own liberation from shame, really drove home for me how toxic the silence around mental health had been. We (entrepreneurs, investors, and leaders) had collectively bought into this myth that showing vulnerability will get you kicked out of the club. In reality, hiding our struggles was what was hurting us the most. I often quote my friend Jerry Colonna, who says that leadership is about being vulnerable and authentic. Jerry helped a lot of us realize that being open about our fears and flaws isn't a weakness – it's a strength that makes us better leaders and humans. I lived that transformation: the moment I stopped pretending to be Superman, I actually became a more grounded and effective person.

Over time, the conversation around founder mental health has improved. What was once a taboo topic is now openly discussed. I'm grateful to have played a small role in that shift. But we still have a long way to go. I've said publicly that I won't consider my work done until mental health is treated on par with physical health. Think about it: society used to attach stigma to diseases like cancer or diabetes, as if they were some kind of personal failing. Now we understand they are medical issues that can be treated – no one "shames" you for having cancer. We need that same attitude for depression, OCD, bipolar, and other mental health issues. They're health conditions, period. No stigma, no shame – just support and treatment.

I'm heartened by the fact that in the startup community, at least, we've started normalizing this conversation. Founders are sharing their stories more freely. Investors (the good ones, anyway) are recognizing that a healthy founder equals a healthier company. We're not where we need to be yet, but we're making progress. And I intend to keep pushing that momentum for the rest of my career.

Healing and Growth: Therapy, Habits, and "Mental Fitness"

Therapy literally helped save my life. Back in my late 20s, I went to a psychiatrist for the first time (thanks to a gentle push from my PhD advisor) and began therapy during that two-year depression. At first, I felt ashamed about it and viewed going to therapy and taking meds as admitting defeat – I thought it made me "weak." But I went anyway, and it turned out to be transformative. Therapy gave me space to unpack my feelings and figure out what the hell was going on in my head. It also introduced me to tools like cognitive behavioral techniques to manage my OCD. Gradually, I got better. By the time the depressive episode lifted, I understood myself so much more.

Fast forward to my 40s – when depression hit again, I didn't hesitate. I went straight back to therapy, enthusiastically and with zero shame. I called my weekly session a trip to "Planet Brad," an hour where I got to focus entirely on myself. I reframed therapy not as a last resort for the "weak," but as an ongoing workout for my mind – a type of mental fitness regimen.

I worked with the same therapist for a decade, digging into layer after layer of my psyche. It's not always easy, but it's always valuable. Therapy helped me navigate that brutal 2013 depression, and it's helped me avoid new ones since by keeping me tuned into my internal state. I liken it to having a coach or guide for your inner world. Just like a great business coach can improve your company, a great therapist can improve your life.

Besides therapy, I've completely changed my day-to-day habits to prioritize mental health. In my 20s, I treated my body and mind like an infinite resource – I could pull all-nighters, subsist on Diet Coke and adrenaline, travel constantly, and I figured I'd be fine. Not anymore. After breaking down a few times, I finally learned that self-care isn't optional if I want to perform at a high level consistently. Now I treat my mental health with the same importance as my physical health. I often use the term "mental fitness" – just like you'd go to the gym to keep your body fit, you've got to do regular work to keep your mind fit.

So, what does that mean for me in practice? I've built a set of habits and routines that keep me balanced and resilient. For example:

Prioritize sleep: I aim for around eight hours of sleep every night and fiercely protect that time. No more bragging about all-nighters – quality sleep is non-negotiable for my mood and clarity. I go to sleep early and don't need an alarm clock to wake up, as my body decides when it's had enough sleep.

Cut out the substances that mess with me: I no longer drink alcohol at all. I've also cut way back on caffeine (one cup of coffee is my max), and I avoid other drugs. These might seem like small choices, but they have a huge impact on my mental equilibrium.

Daily meditation: Every morning, I do a short meditation practice. It might be 10 minutes of breathing, or a guided meditation app. This centers me and reduces anxiety – it's like a warm-up for my brain each day.

Regular exercise: I've always been a runner – I've run marathons in many states – but now I view running (or any exercise) as therapy, not just sport. A good long run clears my head and floods me with endorphins. It's hard to feel despair after a hard 5-mile run; the body-mind connection is real.

Personal time and hobbies: I make sure to carve out time for myself that's not about work. For me, that's often reading, writing for fun, or hanging out with Amy with no goal. The key is to let my brain have downtime and not feel guilty about it.

"Digital Sabbath": One day a week – for me it's Saturday – I completely unplug from work. No email, meetings, or calls. I'll spend time with Amy, read, go for a run, or hang out with a friend. This weekly reset where I step off the hamster wheel has been amazingly restorative.

Real vacations/off-grid time: Each quarter, Amy and I go away for a week off the grid. And I do mean off – we choose places with no cell service, or we turn off our devices. We've gone to remote parts of Alaska, or simply stayed home and ignored email for a week. Disconnecting fully lets us reconnect with each other and ourselves. Every single time I come back from an off-grid break, I feel re-energized and refocused.

All of these habits are now integrated into my life and are my maintenance plan for my mental health. Do they guarantee I'll never struggle again? Of course not. I'm sure life will throw me more curveballs. But these practices increase my resilience and are an insulation against the extreme ups and downs. If depression or anxiety starts creeping in, I usually spot it sooner now because I'm routinely checking in with myself. And by keeping myself generally balanced – well-rested, exercised, and not over-caffeinated – I give myself the best shot at riding out the stress without tipping into an absolute meltdown.

I want to emphasize that taking care of your mental health is not some indulgence or luxury for founders; it's mission-critical. If you're burned out, depressed, or running on fumes, you can't effectively lead your company or support your team. As I once said in an interview, "Founders often ignore these issues until they become extremely inhibiting. The best founders recognize that mental fitness – and the challenges around mental health – are part of the journey and invest time and energy in the mental health of themselves and their colleagues." Taking care of your business starts with taking care of yourself. I believe that, and I preach it every chance I get.

You Are Not Alone

Today, I feel a profound sense of purpose around mental health advocacy in our entrepreneurial community. I often reflect on how far I've come from that 25-year-old kid who was terrified to let anyone know he was hurting. I wish I could reach back in time and give him a hug, tell him, "It's OK, you're not the only one, and you're going to get through this." In fact, being part of this book – *Burn Bright, Not Out* – is special to me because it's exactly the kind of resource I wish I had back then. I felt alone during my first depression; if I had read stories of other founders battling similar demons, I would have realized I wasn't alone and that I wasn't broken – I was just human.

I'll keep speaking up to support initiatives that help founders in tough times. Talking is important, but action matters too. Over the years, Amy and I have put our money and time into mental health causes in our community. We helped fund a new mental health center in Boulder and an endowment to expand services. I'm also particularly passionate about making therapy accessible to entrepreneurs. The Techstars Foundation (Techstars is the startup accelerator I co-founded) sponsored a program to provide free therapy to founders in our network. I personally contributed a seed grant to help launch the Kabila Founder Mental Health Fund, which pays for founders to have sessions with professional therapists at no cost. This kind of thing makes me incredibly happy – to see the industry recognizing that founders need support too, and lowering the barriers to get that support. I want to see more of that. I challenge investors and tech leaders to step up and invest in their founders' mental well-being, not just their cap tables.

Just remember, you are not alone in what you're going through. It might feel achingly lonely, but countless others have felt what you're feeling. I have. Don't buy the lie that you're the only one or that you have to tough it out in silence. There is strength, not weakness, in reaching out for help. Whether it's calling a friend, finding a mentor who gets it, or seeking a therapist – do it. The people who matter will support you, not judge you.

Struggling with mental health does not make you a bad founder or a bad leader; it makes you human. Depression, anxiety, OCD – these are part of my story, but they don't define my ability to build great things. I used to fear that admitting "I'm not okay" would disqualify me from the startup world. In reality, confronting these challenges has made me more effective in the long run, because I'm healthier and more self-aware now. If you address your mental health head-on, you'll come out stronger. It's just like fixing a buggy piece of code in your product – ignoring it doesn't make it go away, it just causes bigger crashes down the line.

In my experience, it can get better. When you're in the thick of a depressive episode or an anxiety spiral, it can feel endless – but it will pass. Recovery is possible. It might take time and it often takes help from others, but you can climb out of that pit. I've done it multiple times now. And each time, I gained something – a new insight, a new coping skill, a reminder of what truly matters. As painful as those experiences were, they have shaped me in profoundly positive ways. I often say that my 2013 depression was a "fundamental transition into middle age" for me – it forced me to re-evaluate how I was living and make better choices. In hindsight, it was a turning point that set me up for a much more sustainable and fulfilling life. So if you're in a dark place, don't fight it by pretending it's not there. Instead, acknowledge it and reach for the tools that help – whether that's therapy, rest, connection, medication, or all of the above. Be kind to yourself in the process. Let the emotions exist without shame. Know that you're not weak – you're wise for facing this. And be encouraged by the fact that many of us who have been where you are have found our way to brighter days.

I'm still on this journey myself, and I'm okay with that. I continue to learn about my mind every day. I still have highs and lows – that's life. But I no longer feel controlled by them, and I no longer feel any embarrassment about them. I'll talk about my mental health, not because I want attention, but because I want everyone to feel free to talk about theirs. The more we share, the more we normalize it, the easier it becomes for the next person to get help, creating a virtuous cycle of openness and support.

In the startup world, we love to celebrate the hustle. But burning yourself out helps no one. You can be insanely ambitious and still take care of yourself – in fact, you'll achieve more if you take care of yourself. The title of this book says it perfectly: Burn Bright, Not Out. That's the goal. We want your light – your passion, creativity, vision – to shine for the long haul, not flame out prematurely. And the key to that is pacing yourself, seeking support when needed, and treating your mental health with as much importance as your next funding round.

Let's break the stigma around mental health once and for all. Let's create a startup culture where asking for help is seen as a sign of strength and self-awareness, where taking a mental health day is as normal as taking a sick day for the flu, and where no founder feels like they have to pretend to be invincible.

If you're reading this and you're struggling, please know: I see you. I've been you. You are not alone. There is an army of us out here who have walked through the fire and are ready to walk with you. Reach out – to me, to someone – and keep living. Your startup needs you, but more importantly, the world needs you, healthy and whole.

Take it from someone who went to the brink and back: there is a path forward, and it's paved with honesty, self-care, and the support of others. Let's all help each other find that path so we can continue to build amazing things without destroying ourselves in the process. Together, we can ensure that we all burn bright – and never burn out.

THE FINAL WORD

The stories in this book were shared so that you would never again mistake solitude for normalcy. They were offered so you could see that your struggles are shared, your fears are valid, your exhaustion has context, and your desire for relief is not a sign of weakness but a sign of wisdom.

You belong to a quiet, powerful community of founders who are learning to speak the truth out loud. A community standing at the intersection of ambition and humanity, refusing to sacrifice one for the other. A community that wants to see you. Not your metrics, not your milestones, but you.

And if the world has not said it clearly enough yet, let this book be the place where you finally hear it:

Your life matters.

Your well-being matters.

Your story matters.

Burn bright.

Not out.

And when you need help, reach for it without hesitation.

Because the fire that built your company was never meant to consume you, only to light your way forward.

The world needs you. Please remember to burn bright, not out.

With love,

James Oliver, Jr.

YOU CAN BE PART OF THIS!

Brad Feld is matching donations to the Kabila Founder Mental Health Fund through May 31! Every dollar you give doubles before it reaches a founder in need.

Here are three ways you can get involved:

Give:

Become a donor [here](#). Brad's match is active now through Mental Health Awareness Month. So every dollar doubles.

Share:

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Burn Bright, Not Out is available on [Amazon](#). 90% of the book's net profits go back to the Kabila Founder Mental Health Fund to provide free mental therapy for founders. Every copy that reaches a founder is a step toward normalizing this conversation.

The fund has already impacted over 50 founders' lives. With your help, it will impact more.