



# The impact of Covid-19 on the state of mental health & wellbeing of entrepreneurs in MENA

Ecosystem  
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Microsoft for Startups

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Mental wellbeing  
partners

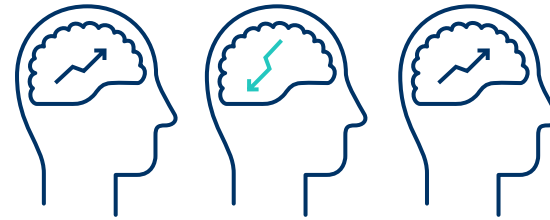


**EMPWR.**

## INTRODUCTION

Mental Health and wellbeing refer to a state of psychological wellness in which individuals enjoy high satisfaction, are able to contribute to the community, and can cope with stress.<sup>1</sup>

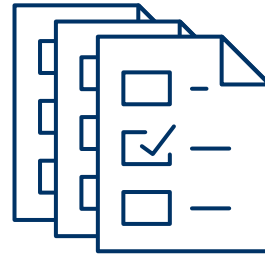
Demand for mental health programmes has grown among startup founders and entrepreneurs in the Middle East and North Africa (Mena) who began to experience additional pressures during the Covid-19 pandemic. Historically, the entrepreneurship and startup community in the region has suffered a lack of accessible mental health and wellbeing services, which drove a negative impact on the stability, mental health, and work-life balance of the region's founders.



This report aims to outline the relationship between the social and economic impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic and the state of mental health and wellbeing of entrepreneurs in the Mena region. It highlights their top affected priorities and current concerns, their individual and team de-stressing measures, and their desired support structure from the Mena entrepreneurial ecosystem.

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1. Definition according to the World Health Organization. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-health-strengthening-our-response>



We surveyed **101 startups**,  
separating them by founders' age, gender, and entrepreneurial  
experience with the purpose of understanding the rise in the  
demand for mental health and wellbeing services across Mena.

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## Founder Profile

To get a better understanding of what is driving the demand for mental health and wellbeing services, we surveyed 101 startups in the region, and separated the founders according to age, gender, country, and entrepreneurial experience.

The demographics of these startup founders provide a closer interpretation into the specific impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the mental, social, and economic factors of the region's entrepreneurs.

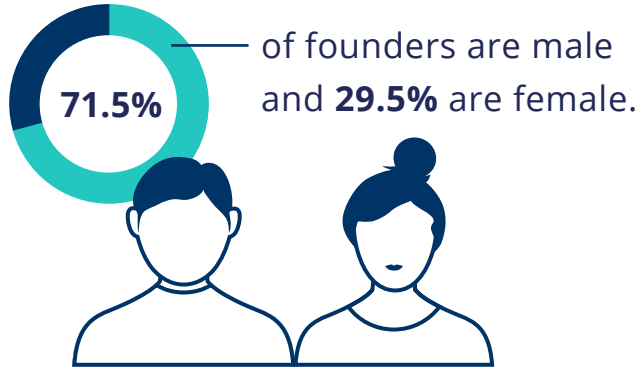
More than 71 per cent of the startup founders we surveyed are male with 50 per cent of all founders located in the UAE who are mostly between the ages of 25-35. Other countries that are experiencing a rise in young

entrepreneurs who hold between one to three years of experience include Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia.

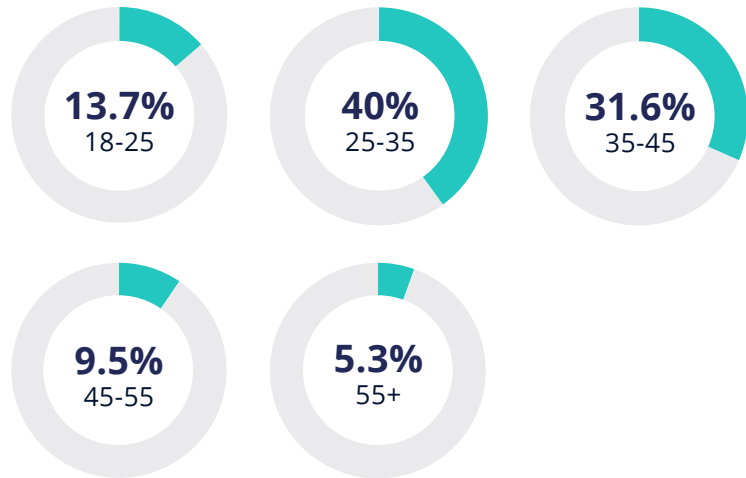
More than 62 per cent of all founders had prior experience as startup founders or co-founders.

## FOUNDER PROFILE

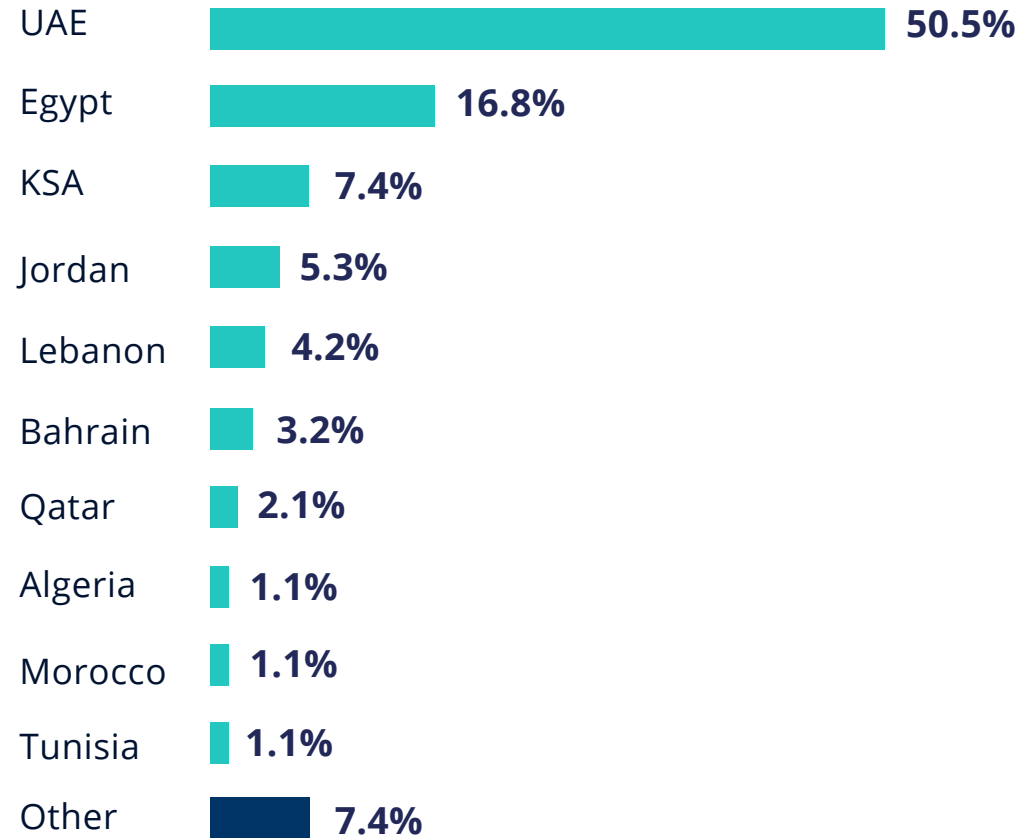
### Gender of founder



### Age of founders



### Where founders are based

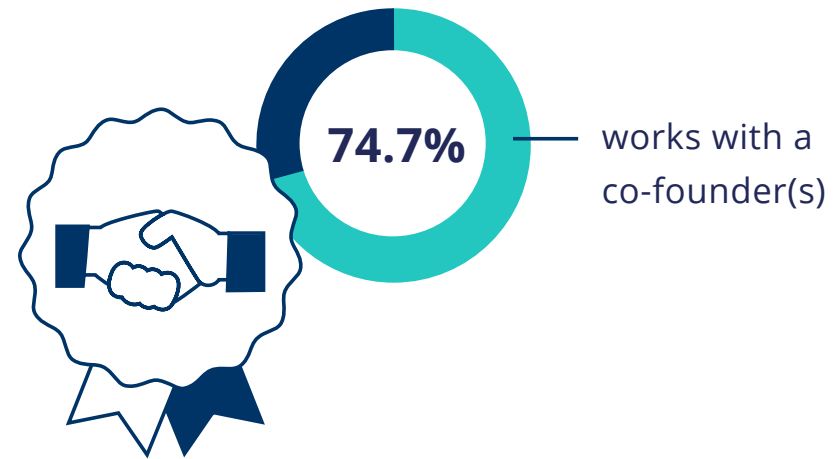
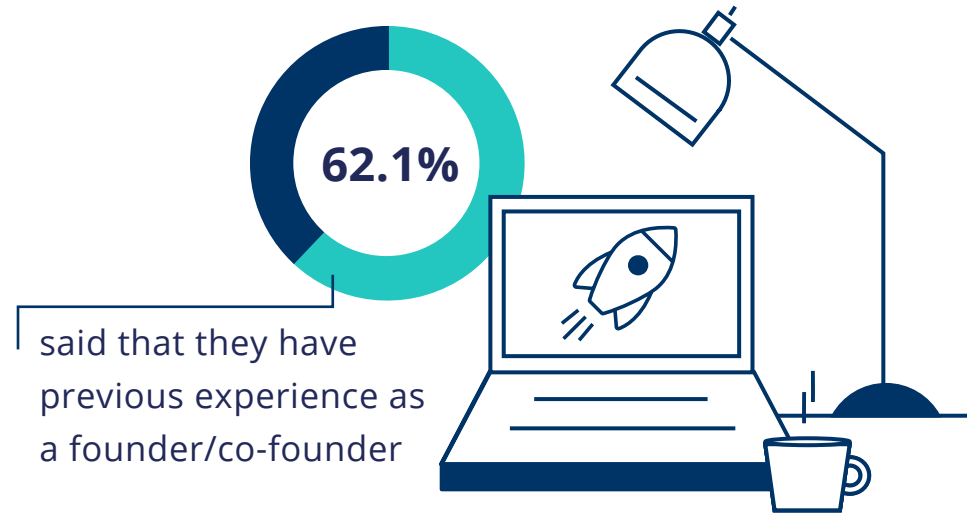
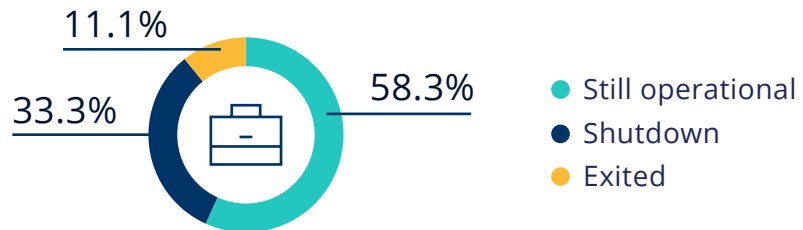


## FOUNDER PROFILE

### Number of years as an entrepreneur



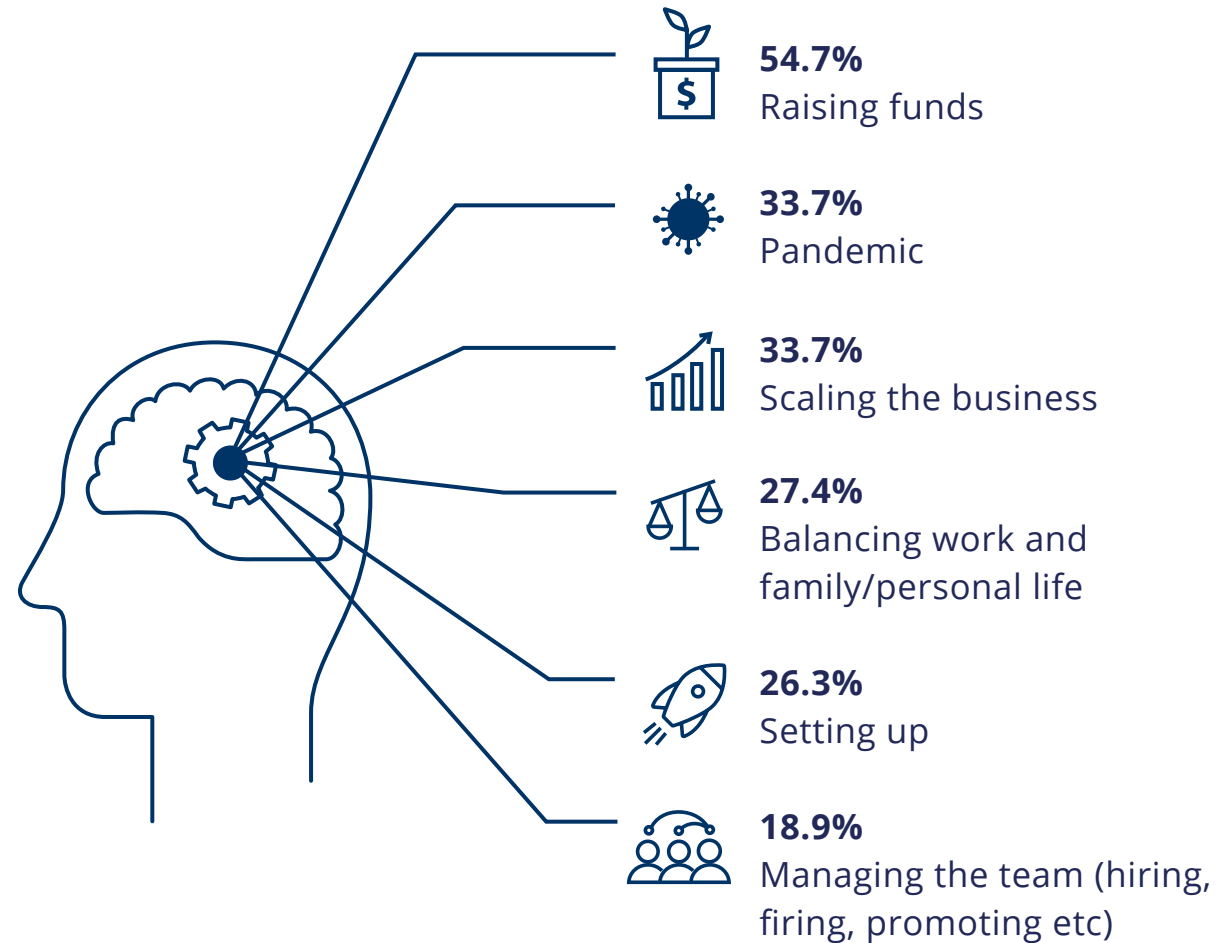
### How did your first company perform?



## FOUNDER PROFILE

Raising investment is still the main stress-inducing factor for all startups of whom more than half were forced to change their immediate and long-term priorities due to the pandemic. This made the coronavirus pandemic the second most cited reason for entrepreneurial stress with 33.7 per cent of all founders facing struggles, a rate identical to those struggling with scaling their business.

When have you felt the most stressed during your journey as an entrepreneur?

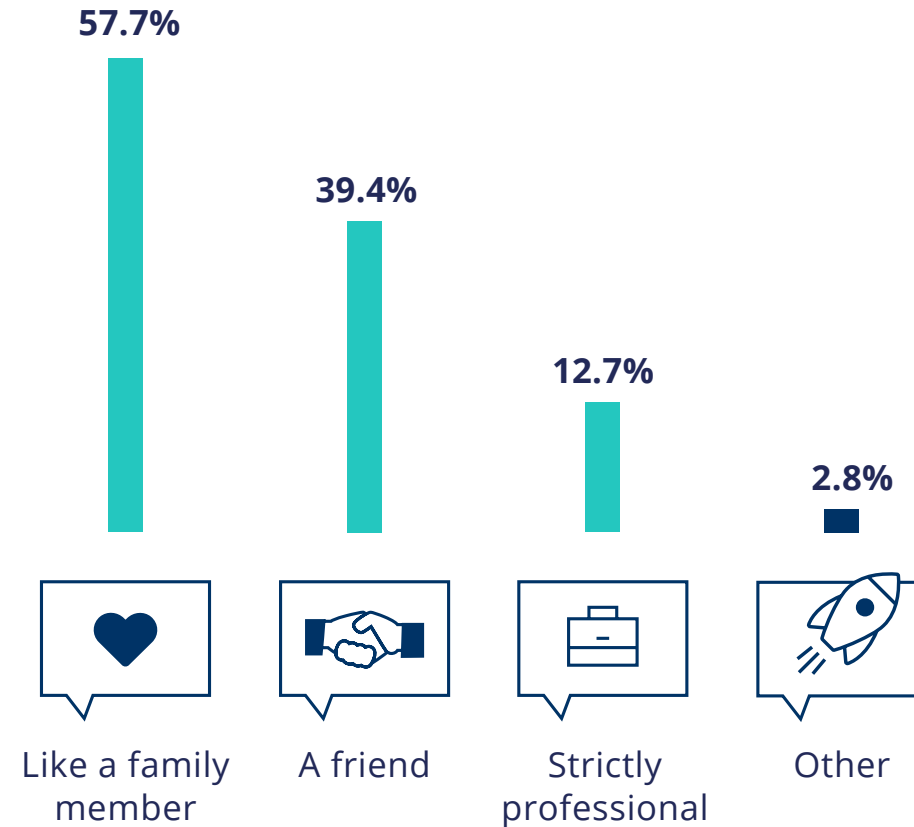




## FOUNDER PROFILE

Having a good relationship with co-founders can help startups navigate a pandemic-hit market as more than 95 per cent of entrepreneurs view co-founders as family members and/or friends, taking away some of the pressure of managing a startup team.

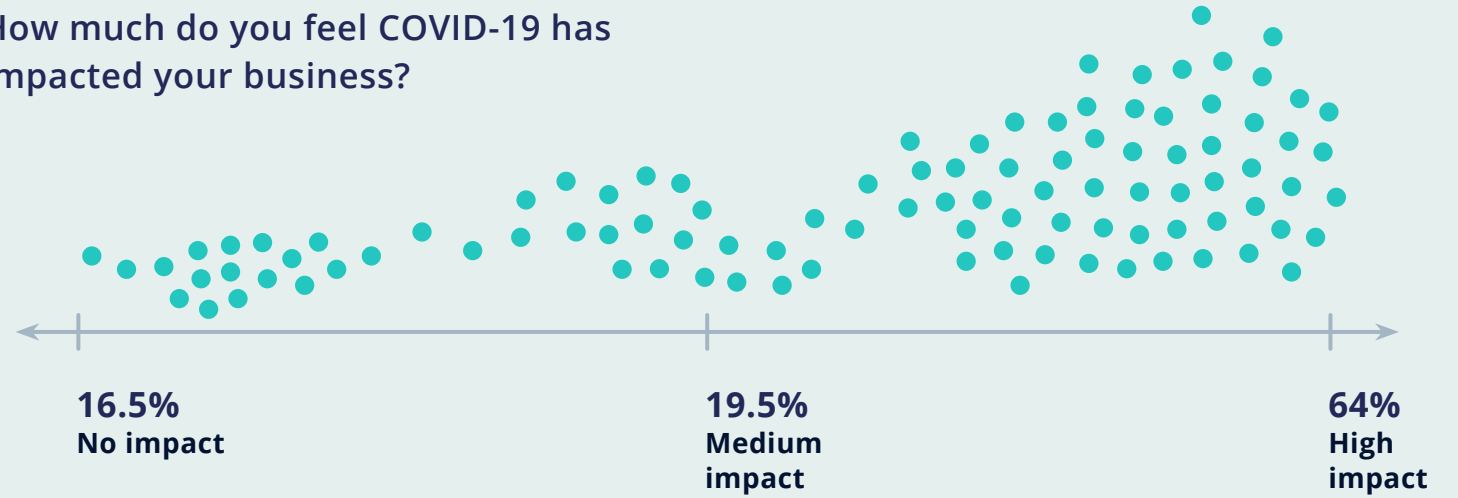
### What's your relationship with your co-founder(s)?



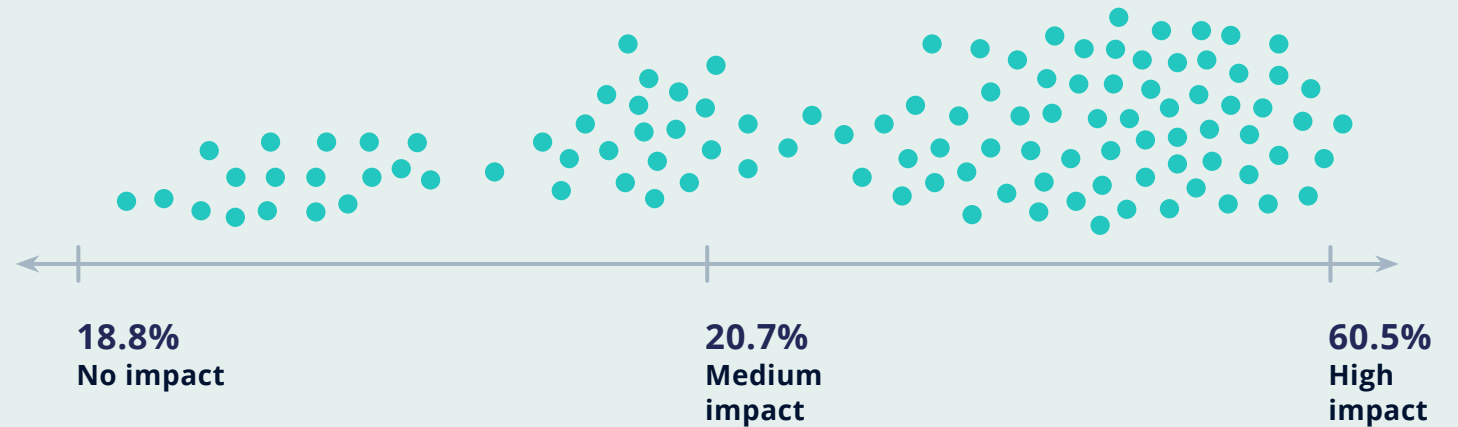


# Impact of the Pandemic

How much do you feel COVID-19 has impacted your business?



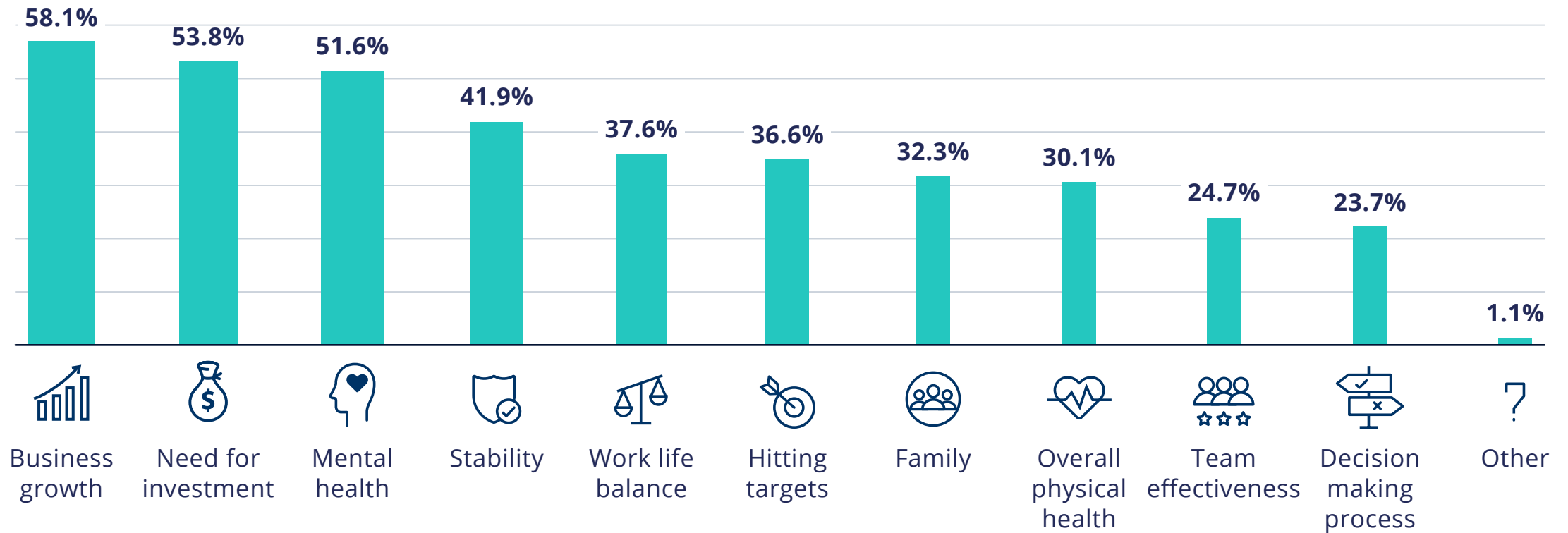
How has COVID-19 changed your overall priorities both immediate and long-term? (personal and professional)



## IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC

Reflecting the lack of accessible mental health and wellbeing services for the startup community, the majority of startups suffered the greatest impact on their founders' and teams' mental health with 51.6 per cent affected almost entirely negatively.











### Priorities that were impacted



## IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC

While the pandemic had its most positive impact on the startup's business growth, about 60 per cent of all startups we surveyed were affected negatively from the period, with concerns over work-life balance, overall stability, and the need for investment adding additional pressures to their impacted mental health.

Were your priorities negatively or positively impacted?

										
	Business growth	Need for investment	Mental health	Stability	Work life balance	Hitting targets	Family	Overall physical health	Team effectiveness	Decision making process
Positive	16.6%	8.1%	5.4%	8.1%	9.3%	7.3%	13.9%	9.3%	9.3%	12.7%
Negative	9.7%	12.7%	14.9%	11.6%	9.4%	11.3%	6.6%	8.8%	8%	11.3%



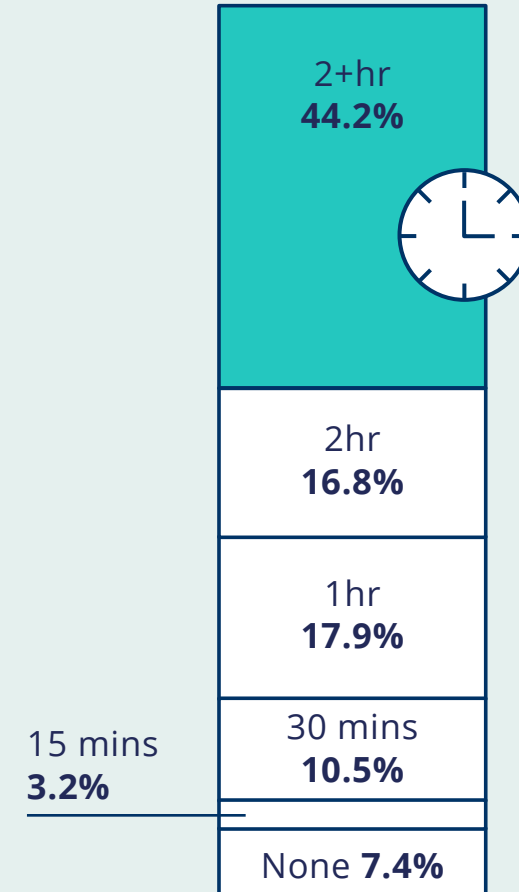
# Mental Health and Wellbeing

For the vast majority of those surveyed, the pandemic has had a medium to high impact on their business and both their professional and personal priorities.

## Top 5 concerns to founders

- ①  **72.6%**  
Business growth
  - ②  **68.4%**  
Financial
  - ③  **51.6%**  
Mental wellbeing
  - ④  **37.9%**  
Family
  - ⑤  **31.6%**  
Physical Health
- 2.1%**  
Other

## How much time do you actively spend on activities to de-stress / relax per week?



## MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

The broad majority of the founders we surveyed remain concerned about their startup's financial stability and growth prospects with 68.4 per cent of founders considering it a top concern, while slightly more than half of all founders cite mental wellbeing as their current worry. This is reflective of the need for mental health and wellbeing services among startup communities as most founders (44.2 per cent) dedicate more than two hours per week for mental relief.

The same need is demonstrated in the number of founders demanding accessible mental health services with 40 per cent wishing for both direct and indirect support, including better access to health professionals.

### What would you like to see from the ecosystem with regards to a support structure when dealing with mental health challenges?



Executive/Business/  
Leadership Coaching



Access to networking platform  
just for entrepreneurs



Access to mental  
health professionals



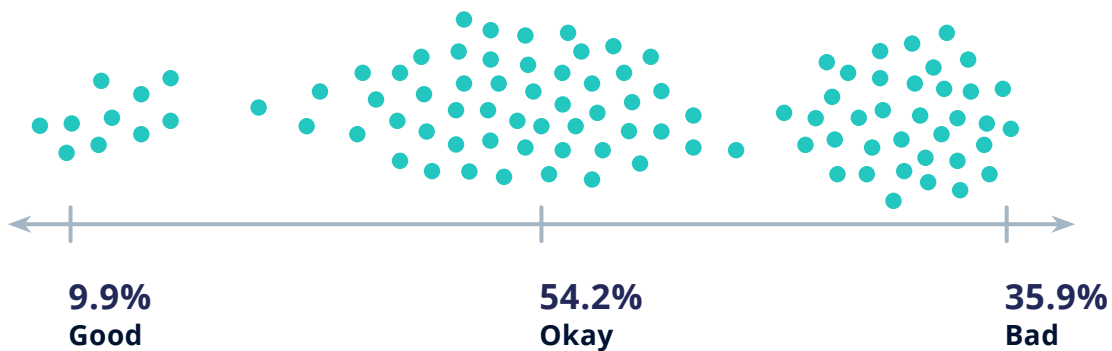
Other



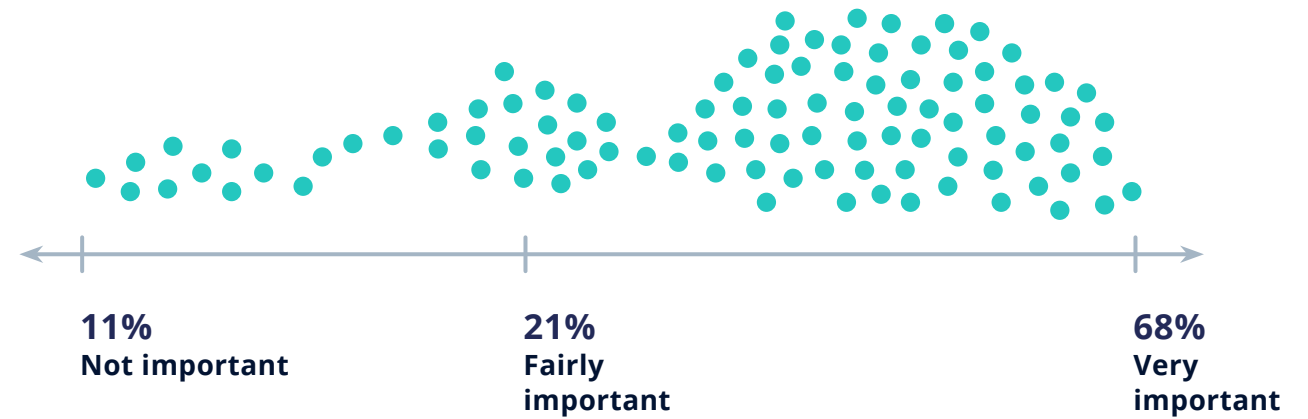
## MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

As more startup founders in the region continue to place mental wellness among the central factors of their business success, with the average of startups placing it a top priority, there needs to be more initiatives to address the growing demand as only 13 per cent of all founders are able to give their mental health a score of 10.

### How do you rate your mental health



### How much priority is given to mental health / wellbeing within your company's culture?





**Dr Naif Al-Mutawa** is an entrepreneur, clinical psychologist and clinical hypnotherapist who is the founder of The Soor Center in Kuwait. He is currently developing a tech startup that would allow for mass scale of mental health services in the region.

### **1. Do entrepreneurs have a unique set of challenges that may lead to mental health problems?**

First of all you can't be an entrepreneur without being able to shift your attention to a million things at the same time. Front and centre for a lot of entrepreneurs is the idea of having ADD [attention deficit disorder], Steve Jobs apparently had it, it's important to embrace it and not fight it. When you sit there fighting yourself for having certain symptoms that are

indicative of a larger syndrome, you end up occupying your time and space worrying about things that could actually be an asset versus a liability. For me, I see my attention deficit has helped me a lot when I stopped fighting it.

The other thing is with entrepreneurs there's a lot of risk, you have to take the risk, understand what it means, it has to be calculated, not everything is going to go the way you want it to go. You have to know from day one that 90 per cent of businesses won't get funded and the ones that do get funded, 90 per cent of them will fail - and you must still feel like you can take this on.

### **2. What is one thing entrepreneurs should be doing more of?**

Sleep. One thing that is holy to me is sleep. A lot of entrepreneurs can be up at night burning the candle at both ends, the issue with sleep is that sometimes your mental health issues will lead to a sleep issue. If you feel you need to be up all night doing stuff, that will end up causing you mental health issues. If I don't sleep properly, I will be irritable, I will



eat anything in front of me, I won't feel like doing things, I won't feel like going to the gym and these are symptoms of depression, even though I'm not depressed. If you sleep six hours a night for 10 days in a row, that's like being up for 24 hours.

You can do the work and sleep, it's possible, you can get more out of those [waking] hours if you sleep. It's not about how much time you spend, it's about how smart you invest that time.

### **3. What are the most common symptoms you see among your clients?**

My clients are 65 per cent women, 35 per cent men and a lot of them suffer from sleep issues and social phobia - you get a lot of people who end up suffering from a bullying culture. Typically one in seven people are always anxious, it's now one out of two because of corona, I hadn't seen 20-30 per cent of my clients for years, they were fine, but corona brought a lot of stuff to the forefront. Depression is common.

### **4. Why did you decide to launch your own mental health startup?**

There are only so many hours in the day and I'm maxed out. I'm not scalable, so initially my idea was to build a platform to connect. One thing I learned from my own experience in my clinics is even though I have 10 psychologists who work for me and my price point is the highest in the region, I'm still fully booked and my other clinicians aren't. So I launched an application with some uni-directional content using Islamic content and hypnosis.

Mental health startups should be encouraged, it might be putting the carriage in front of the horse, but that's ok, you need both the carriage and horse to get there. They can be very helpful for two stages - pre-mental illness and the stress part and maintenance at the end. The middle part depends on who's involved so it doesn't become about the voice of the person, it's the training and that's very very important. The sector will go through iterations of different business models to figure out what works in the region.

## DR NAIF'S TOP TIPS FOR FOUNDERS:




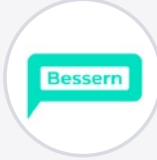









1. Stick to a schedule and get at least eight hours of sleep.
2. Focus on things under your control, do not focus on things outside of your control because that's where mental stress comes from. People who try to control the future become anxious. People who try to control the past are depressed - neither are controllable, all you can control is the way you think about things.
3. Have "me time" whether it is going to the gym or for walks, they're very important.
4. Understand your place, your friendships, your relationships. If you end up starving yourself, you die of hunger. Yes you have your spouse there but if you don't give them attention, that will cause conflict down the line. It's a balance and you need to figure that out from the beginning.
5. Don't think about making money - be passionate about your startup.
6. Put things into perspective. Even if it fails, be happy that you tried.

*Invest in yourself - in your health, sleep, fitness, in your relationships - that's what pays off in the end.*

# Mental Health Startups Mapping in Mena

Legend: 🚀 Year founded    ⬆️ Stage / money raised

## UAE

	<b>AQR mena</b> 🚀 2021		<b>Bessern</b> ⬆️ Seed 🚀 2019		<b>LVL</b> 🚀 2017
	<b>Mindi</b> 🚀 2021		<b>Mindtales</b> 🚀 2020		<b>My Wellbeing Lab</b> 🚀 2021
	<b>Safe Space</b> 🚀 2018		<b>Sakeenah</b> ⬆️ Pre-seed 🚀 2018		<b>Shala Online</b> ⬆️ Seed / \$10,000 🚀 2017
	<b>Takalam</b> 🚀 2021		<b>Bessern</b> ⬆️ Seed 🚀 2019		

## KSA

	<b>Labayh</b> 🚀 2018		<b>Sanctuary KSA</b> 🚀 2019
	<b>Sangha "Estidama Hub"</b> 🚀 2020		<b>Shadana Yoga</b> 🚀 2017

## Egypt



**Merakido**

↑ Pre-seed / \$30,000  
🚀 2018



**o7 Therapy**

🚀 2019



**Shezlong**

↑ Series A / \$766,000  
🚀 2014

## Oman



**Al Samer**

Inactive



**Nafas**

🚀 2019

## Lebanon



**Sfearia**

🚀 2017  
Inactive



**Sympaticus**

🚀 2015  
Inactive

## Jordan



**Sukoon**

## Kuwait



**Ayadi**

🚀 2020

## Palestine



**Tawazon**

↑ Seed  
🚀 2018

## Tunisia



**Ahkili**

↑ Seed / \$73,300  
🚀 2020

## Bahrain



**Saaya Health**

↑ Pre-seed  
🚀 2018

## UK



**Nur**

🚀 2021



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