

# INTRODUCTION

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I've always been a dreamer. When I was four years old and had to put on my shoes before going to school, I often just sat on the bench and stared out into space, and completely forgot my shoes. My father would yell out “Dreamer, you’ve got to go to school!”

## **From dreamer to entrepreneur**

To this very day I am still a dreamer. When I was a kid, I was always reading. In the small-town public library, I started reading everything in the section for young people including all the comic books, then I moved on to more serious stuff. While majoring in business in Rotterdam, I sometimes thought about becoming a pastor of a church or a philosopher. In my college days I was not single for long. At the age of 23, I had already married. The ceremony took place on a Friday in February, and five days later my bride and I arrived in India. After going on an adventurous tour, we worked in an orphanage for four months. Once we returned home, I stumbled on my founder journey by accident. A side gig that got out of hand turned into setting up a company which specialized in glass walls and garden rooms for balconies and terraces. Together with a brilliant technician who invited me to be his business partner, we created a thriving business from scratch.

## **Stressful, hard growth**

I was fresh out of college and had no clue about the glass or aluminum business, let alone the whole market. We just used our common sense. The famous Brazilian entrepreneur Ricardo Semler once said: “A company is just four things: selling something, making it, sending an invoice, and making sure you get your money.” Based on that notion, we built a factory, an experience center, a marketing department, a sales department, a call center, a design department, and a service and installation facility. We had never heard of venture capital, so we just

made sure that we made (a little) profit and could grow without external money. In retrospect I would have preferred to do this differently; it was extremely stressful to grow so fast without any cash!

### **Extremely exhausted**

After about four years we moved into a large building and our dreams became ten times bigger than we initially thought. We continued to grow, but there were also problems that came with it. Unfortunately, the partnership between my business associate and myself ended abruptly. For a long time, we had been completely in sync with each other, but after a while, we just grew apart. I don't know exactly why our partnership ultimately ended. In any case, it caused a lot of stress to dissolve the partnership and negotiate price and terms while at the same time, the company was going through a rough patch. I had trouble sleeping. Finally, the buy-out was over and I was on my own. I didn't like doing it completely alone, although I was not doing it all alone, but it felt like it. At the age of twenty-eight, I was the 'boss' of sixty employees, responsible for a great brand and a company that sold and produced more than a thousand projects every year. Unfortunately, our business processes had not kept up with the company's rapid growth, which meant that many things went wrong, which I blamed myself for. Personally, I was exhausted and, honestly, felt traumatized by everything that had happened. I couldn't process it and relax anymore. I was exhausted.

### **Is he still breathing?**

In October that year (2014), I had a meeting with an advisor at the office. He thought I didn't look so well and gave fatherly advice: are you okay? Do you ever check your blood pressure? Take care of yourself, don't let yourself get knocked down! That very day, however, I had dragged myself back to work after taking a couple of tranquilizers. After an appointment with him that lasted far too long, I looked at my day planner and noticed I had another meeting but still hadn't eaten yet. I drove

down to McDonald's to pick up a quick hamburger in order to return to the office as quickly as possible. On arriving there, I got out of the car to get some fresh air, but I only felt worse. In a daze I paced back and forth in the parking lot, and then finally laid down in a vacant car space, unable to think or move. After several cars passed through the McDrive window, someone finally called an ambulance. I overheard a paramedic say on the phone to the lady hovering over me:

'Is he still breathing?'

'A little.'

'How does he look?'

'Gray.'

'Does he still have a pulse?'

'I don't feel anything.'

Okay, I thought. This is it. I'm dying. All the muscles in my chest were cramped, it felt like a heart attack. Fortunately, that was not the case. To make a long story short: I was completely exhausted. I had a serious burnout, including panic attacks and agoraphobia. For months I was in a dark place, stressed and overtired. As a result, I could no longer drive, and even having a short conversation with someone was impossible.

### **Retired at 31**

Meanwhile, my company slowly went downhill. The controller called me and asked if I still had a hundred thousand euros anywhere so that the salaries could be paid for the next month. I certainly didn't have that, but I eventually managed to borrow it from an acquaintance. Sales figures collapsed. Four employees also had burnouts. What a drama! Three months after the ambulance experience, I was forced to return to the office, fifteen minutes a day. An old college buddy sent me a message, asking if I happened to be looking for an investor. Well... That's how I managed to sell half of the company to a private equity party. On the way to the negotiations, I slept in the passenger seat while the recep-

tionist drove me. For a while, after the deal was realized, I remained CEO for three days a week. Very well paid I must say, but the fun was over. I also didn't really recover from the burnout. Too much had happened within the company that kept triggering me, and to which my body responded with all kinds of inexplicable stress reactions. Therefore, I looked for a successor and found one. In 2017, at the age of thirty-one, I was retired. However, I remained a shareholder for a few more years and then sold my remaining interest. I felt liberated! The company itself is still going strong, but not with me.

### **Angry, overweight man**

For a dreamer who easily got distracted when putting on his shoes, establishing a big, tangible, and capital-intensive company is a rather unconventional challenge, to say the least. The outside world had always said: what a great company! How smart! Everything looks fantastic! The danger then is that as an entrepreneur, you might start to believe in your own fairy tale. But what did I really think? Why didn't I ever stop to think about it myself? And then another thing: why didn't I ever exercise? Why did I even go to McDonald's for lunch? When I look back at pictures of myself when I was twenty-eight, I see an old, angry, overweight man. After this revelation, I started to think. I tried to regain my energy. I started going for long walks, exercising, and reading up on nutrition. I was finally reading books again. I enrolled at the university and started studying philosophy part-time and went into therapy. I needed to figure myself out. What had made me put myself through all that stress? I walked the Santiago di Compostella route and pilgrimaged through Portugal and Spain, and slowly rediscovered myself...

### **Awakening volcano**

Professionally, I decided to only do things that I really wanted to do. They had to be meaningful, something that I enjoyed and that I believed in. For a year, I took a coaching course and started writing blogs, that attracted a lot of readers. Several businesspeople wanted to talk with

me. For a few years I ran a coaching and consultancy office for businessmen and growth founders.

Many of the stories these founders shared with me struck a nerve. I slowly realized that my own experiences were not as unique as I thought. I started doing interim assignments and discovered that other companies were encountering the same problems as I had had with my company at the time. I started investing in startups and witnessed founders going through the same phases that I had encountered. Gradually, it started to dawn on me. The insights I gained, the experiences I had had, the patterns I had witnessed – it was like a dormant volcano starting to awaken. It had to erupt.

That's the reason for this book.

### **My dream**

My dream is that entrepreneurs do not get destroyed by following their dreams, nor by their success, or lack thereof. My hope is that this book will wind up on the nightstand of entrepreneurs and founders, to help them when they need it. Mental health is something that you can and should actively invest in. Finally: I would love it if you would share your experiences, feedback, or own mental challenges with me. I cannot promise that I will be able to respond at length to all emails, but I will certainly read them with great interest. Feel free to send an email to [livinghopevcfund@gmail.com](mailto:livinghopevcfund@gmail.com)

Leen de Bruyne, Rotterdam

# FOREWORD

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Dear fellow entrepreneurs,

Having had the opportunity to co-found companies like Startup-bootcamp, Innoleaps, CNBC Europe, The Talent Institute, I know how it is: entrepreneurship is about going through euphoria and deep misery at all stages.

As an investor in more than 1,200 startups, I have also experienced the highs and lows of entrepreneurship up close. As a result, I can attest firsthand that this book is not a theoretical tale, but a real-life account of the mental challenges involved.

Getting a startup off the ground is a journey sorely underestimated by many. It requires more of you than you think. You will be tested, professionally and personally. I've seen up close how pressure can be too much for even the strongest among us.

My companion and buddy Patrick de Zeeuw, co-founder of Startup-bootcamp, could relate. The mental pressure of entrepreneurship has also affected him deeply.

We all know that in this game you have the freedom to set your own hours. But let's face it: the number of hours you're working is often twice as much than in a normal job. And when you close your laptop, your head just keeps spinning. Solving problems, exploring new markets - it never really stops. It takes a toll, not just on you, but on your loved ones.

What I've learned, and what I want to share with you, is the importance of balance. I myself have had to find it between being an entrepreneur and being a partner, a father, a friend and a human being. And yes, sometimes that means setting hard boundaries and really unplugging for a while. Because in this day and age, “technostress”, that creeping beast, is always lurking.

This book is more than a business success manual. It is a plea for a healthy entrepreneurial life. So don't just read it as a guide to your business, read it as a guide to yourself. Let's take this journey together. One where we build great businesses without losing ourselves.

Ruud Hendriks, Amsterdam

Who is the book for and how should you read it?

It is for entrepreneurs and founders and those who love to:

- share fascinating stories
- build great technology
- grow business fast
- push for 100x more turnover within 5 years
- have an exit strategy in which valuation will multiply by 100x

Why not enjoy fascinating stories and realize the following all at the same time:

- 100x investment in your personal development
- 100x improvement in physical, mental, and emotional health
- 100x better life-work balance and manifest your goals with less stress

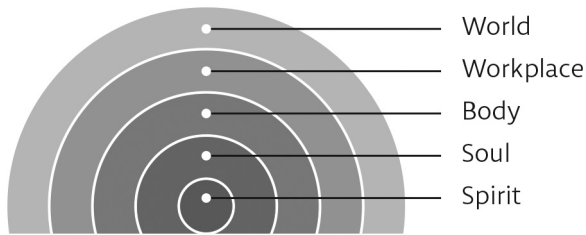
As an individual entrepreneur, investing in good health is crucial for long-term technological, commercial, and financial success. That's why I've written a hundred personal stories which can aid the mental health of entrepreneurs in various ways.

My goal has been to link my personal experiences, insights, and observations with larger issues in society, the workplace, physiology, philosophy, psychology and the spiritual. I try to keep it accessible, avoid big words, but use the small and mundane as an entrance to insight and awareness.

This book is written by a founder, for a founder. There are plenty of examples from startup situations, which makes this book ideal for founders. But I am sure that every entrepreneur will benefit from this book.



To structure the hundred insights, I started from five concentric circles that increasingly move towards the core of the matter. Initially, there will be plenty of insights taken from the immediate world around us and then we will proceed to the workplace where you work as a founder. Then I will zoom in on the body, then the soul (the domain of our personality), and finally on the mind, where we will address matters that are related to our identity, mission, and spirituality.



Each section ends with a question, tip, or assignment. This way you, you will actively start working on yourself. Of course you don't have to. You can also just continue reading. If you want to read it from the beginning until the end or the other way around, it doesn't matter. It's all good, just as long as your health improves. I have also added some suggestions for further reading while you are on vacation, which after reading this book, I hope you will have time for.

Did you finish the book already? Then consider lending it out to another founder. This way you also help someone else with their own mental health, and food for a good conversation the next time you meet them.

### **Disclaimer**

*Although the presented experiences in this book are primarily based on my own, I have included and adapted the hundred stories in such a way that the alleged recognition of persons or situations is purely coincidental. Furthermore, this book is written for every entrepreneur. I have chosen to always use the male pronoun 'he' instead of the female 'she' as otherwise it would*

*become a linguistic mess, and the reader would lose the flow of the story. Nevertheless, while writing this book, I was thinking of all founders!*

*And one more thing: you might not be familiar with all the startup jargon. That's alright. This is a book for all founders. Only in the second 'circle' I, specifically, included more about startups and that's why that chapter begins with a glossary.*

"The mystery of human existence lies not in just staying alive, but in finding something to live for."

Fjodor Dostojevski

# THE WORLD ALL AROUND YOU

You all know how it happens. After a wonderful, sunny vacation, you are completely relaxed. You look at your partner and say: I want this feeling to last after we are at home! I want more balance in my life. I don't want to worry about the small stuff anymore. And while watching the sun set in the blue sea, you both toast to a new start.

I totally get that. However, every time I returned home from vacation and drove into my small town, a heavy blanket of stress came over me. It usually started at the highway exit. It was that feeling of stress, of 'having to do something', crept over me. I felt like I was trapped and there was no escape.

Have you ever had that? Returning from vacation and then being overwhelmed with stress? Sometimes I hear people say, "that's the way it is these days". I prefer to see it as the outer circle of influence on your mental health. I called that circle 'the world'. The outer world determines what is normal and sensible. What should and shouldn't be done. By 'world' I mean: a wider system of values and ideas which we all are

part of, the society which we are part of. Unfortunately, we can't choose the air we breathe, but we can become more aware of it.

In 2022, after my family and I lived and worked in the serenity of Tuscany, Italy for six months, we discovered how different life could be in another place.

## WORK

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Words can have a completely different meaning and connotation for one person to another. So does the word 'work'. What exactly is work? In my mind, for years I had associated work with sitting at a desk in an office from eight to five, having to work hard, having to do unpleasant tasks, getting tired, and once in a while, of having to kick yourself in the butt, to get things done.

However, I did not always stick to that self-invented definition of work. On Monday afternoons, for example, sometimes I would go for a walk in the park while thinking about how I could improve my business. My walks turned out to be more effective than sitting in the office and watching the clock to leave for home. As an entrepreneur, I did exactly the right things for my company. But I was not conscious of it. That's why when I was walking in that park, I was hoping that I wouldn't run into anyone I knew. What would they think if they saw me going for a walk, in the middle of the day? Shouldn't he be at work right now? What's going on if he is off on a Monday afternoon?

Gradually I realized that I had my best ideas and insights while walking in the park. Outside, solutions to problems that I had been struggling with for weeks, just came to me, and I had better insight into solving

personnel issues. In that park I had the peace of mind to call someone and say sorry for something that had gone wrong.

I was the most effective for my company while strolling in the park and taking walks.

How do I think about work now? Work is primarily:

- adding-value;
- focused on the long-term;
- a means to becoming a more complete person;
- creating space instead of taking up space.

**Question: what is your definition of work?**

## MISSION

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In the past, people in the West used to be more religious. Nowadays they are more activists for individual causes. Apparently, we are wired in such a way that we like to fight for something that is greater than ourselves. While one commits themselves to a strict religion, another might follow a tight nutritional diet or fight to save the planet by trying to reduce their carbon footprint as much as possible.

The more prosperous a country is, the more activism. If you are hungry, you couldn't care less about sticking to your carbon-free, vegan diet. You want to eat, that's all! To quote Bertolt Brecht: Erst kommt das fressen, dann die Moral. First comes food, then morality. I don't mean

it cynically. I'm just stating the obvious. People seek purpose in life and as they climb Maslow's pyramid, they become more demanding. The higher they move up, the more 'space' they need to figure out things for themselves. How does that work? Perhaps, in hindsight, we are not as special as we often think we are...

As an entrepreneur it is important to be aware of it. For decades, Milton Friedman's *The business of business is business* was the mantra of Wall Street. But not anymore. If your company has a loftier mission or goal, and your employees support it wholeheartedly, then your team will be even more motivated. In the long run, that equates to less staff turnover, more fun, more determination (when the chips are down), and ultimately more profit.

It is essential that your formulated mission is authentic. It must be based on your values. Is it important for you to have fun together and make the customer smile? Great! Just as long as, you and your team are excited about it. Moreover, people can smell inauthenticity and hypocrisy a mile away, so: practice what you preach.

**Question: do your employees feel that – by working for you – they are contributing to something greater than themselves?**

## GRATITUDE

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The sources of spreading information around the world are geared towards bad news. Spreading bad news apparently sells better than

delivering good news. The newspapers are full of it, but people are also quick to share it, especially when it concerns accidents, disasters, and gossip. It's the same in the business world: lower returns, targets not achieved, Dan is sick again, the car doesn't work, the union is not cooperating, the product is worthless, customers are dissatisfied with our brand.

Of course, sensationalism sells. But it is more than that. I suspect that spreading bad news is also a kind of warning, meant to protect people. We think it mentally prepares us to cope when a real disaster happens. Someone once told me that our brain is equipped with a 'sh\*t radar'. It is constantly scanning for things that might - and could - go wrong. I recognize that. My brain is a faithful servant when it comes to providing me with every kind of doomsday scenario.

## FOCUS ON THE POSITIVE





### **What can you do about it?**

Firstly, know how bad news works, in your own head but also for the outside world. Ask yourself if what you are being told is true, and if it works for your best interests. And secondly: be grateful! That is a powerful antidote. Focusing on the good and worthy things in life. How often do we take all the good and wonderful things in our life for granted? Only after it's gone, do we realize how much we valued it, and nostalgically look back and realize we took it for granted.

### **How can you be grateful?**

Taking action. For example, every morning at breakfast – or in the evening before you go to bed – write down three things you are grateful for that day. By the end of the month, you will see that you will have a long list. This relays a power message to your brain, and you will become more balanced. Is gratitude purely a mind trick? Personally, I like to be grateful for someone: my wife, my parents, my friends, my children, my community, and my creator.

**Question: for one week draft a list of things you are grateful for and see how long you can make the list.**

## **DECISION FATIGUE** \_\_\_\_\_

In the marketing world, there is an expression “everyone wants choices, but no one wants to choose”. In a free market – with supply and demand and competing alternatives – for a company to remain relevant and successful it must distinguish itself and offer choices.



In the supermarket nowadays, there are 20 types of apple sauce to choose from. With sugar, without sugar, without added sugar, without artificial flavors, with fresh apples, large chunks of apple pieces, large jars, small jars, A-brand, store-brands ...you name it! Before you know it, you're standing in front of the shelf for five minutes and can't make a simple decision. Eventually you grab the jar that looks the most familiar and return home with a slightly unsatisfactory feeling that one of those other nineteen jars would have been better.

That's called decision fatigue: it ultimately makes you unhappy. Unfortunately, this phenomenon is not limited to the supermarket. Many people experience decision fatigue in various facets of their lives. It can be so paralyzing that some people don't make a choice at all and just remain on the couch with a bag of potato chips and watch Netflix.

In business, it won't get you very far. Especially if you have a startup, and there are numerous choices like: who do I hire? Who am I going to pay first? What am I going to sell? What am I going to ask for that? Who is a good investor? Who is my ideal customer?

### **Is there a simple cure for decision fatigue?**

Good news: yes. When my children can't decide between two kinds of sweets from the candy jar, I always say: 'If you don't know, it won't make a difference' Then it's always good, otherwise you would have known. In *Refuse to Choose!*, the highly gifted author Barbara Sher recommends that people should not have to choose and just do whatever they want. It was so simple, but it helped me.

This simple advice has worked for me for years and I abide by it regularly. Nothing is more annoying than overthinking and endless contemplation! It's like being stuck in the mud. Cut the cord and move on with your life!

**Question: are you good at making decisions? What helps you the most in making decisions?**

## **PROVOKING**

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One of my classes in a course about becoming a coach was called 'provocation'. Provoking is a very effective way of coaching, although it is quite averse to the way most people nowadays think. People can easily get offended, before you know it, you've been cancelled.

However, on the downside, if you no longer can be honest, then you maintain unhealthy situations with people unnecessarily longer. People may start thinking that playing the victim pays off. After all, you will be heard and get attention. However, your victim role will be played out and you will not get any further. If you want to get ahead, then you've got to take responsibility. You must make choices, reflect, start over

again. That kind of mindset is essential for good mental health. Provocative coaching is an effective means of cultivating such an attitude.

### **How does it work?**

A co-worker tells you a story filled with loose ends. Everything is complicated and uncertain. The problem is gigantic. You reply by saying: 'Okay, it's clear to me: your problem is simply X, or Y.' You consciously draw a completely wrong conclusion about the story. *That's the provocation.*

Then the co-worker probably gets upset and replies: 'No, you've got it all wrong!' Now your co-worker is no longer vague, and you can simply ask them: 'Well, what is the solution then?' That's when they will surprisingly reply with a crystal clean answer, and they know exactly what they need to do.

First, try it out on a good friend. If you think you have mastered the art of provocative coaching, then you've acquired a great tool for getting clarity in a fun way. It's a cool way to challenge each other without insulting or offending the other person. Can it go wrong? Well, maybe. But then you ask your co-worker to grab a cup of coffee with you and apologize.

**Question: as an entrepreneur, can you still provoke and inspire people around you?**

# ATTENTIVENESS

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Sometimes I really feel like a boorish Dutchman. Efficient, goal-oriented, cut to the chase.

I recall an encounter with an Iranian friend. The three of us had a meeting at church, which we were all members of. It took place in a school auditorium at 3:00 PM. When we parked next to each other in the garage, she asked me if I could carry a few boxes upstairs. She also carried one. Naturally I wanted to help, but what was in those boxes?

Once we got upstairs, I was somewhat surprised when I saw her open the box and lay a beautiful cloth out on the table. This was followed by a few plates, glasses, candles, napkins, and all kinds of delicious snacks. "There," she said, "now we can have our meeting."

What had my Iranian friend brought to this meeting? ATTENTIVENESS. She paid close attention to us and the mutual meeting. She transformed a simple meeting into an unforgettable moment. Now for me, a northern European, a westerner, everything is supposed to be efficient. It's basically about content, speed, action. My Iranian friend is a warm, Middle Easterner whose primary concern is about hospitality, the relationship, the meeting, the moment.

Unbelievable, what a difference genuine attentiveness can make!

The meeting was not only enjoyable, but also very effective. I learned something again...

**Question: what do you want to pay more real attention to?**

As an entrepreneur of a promising startup, the only thing you want is to expand, grow your value, turnover and profit 100-fold, and open offices in London, New York, and Singapore? Right? **Go big or go home!**

Leen de Bruyne used to be that kind of guy. He was a successful founder of a startup. After seven years of hard work, he ended up collapsing in McDonald's parking lot. An ambulance whisked his exhausted body off to the hospital. It took him six years to fully recover from a burnout and an anxiety disorder.

His personal crisis launched the beginning of an intriguing personal journey which provided him with many valuable insights about being a healthy entrepreneur, both in mind and body. In this book, he shares one hundred personal experiences, tips, and anecdotes that will positively improve your mental health as a founder and entrepreneur.



*Leen de Bruyne (1985) is a Dutch entrepreneur and investor. After he sold his startup to a private equity fund in 2019, he became an angel investor and started mentoring other founders. In 2022, he founded Living Hope VC, which is an investment fund for European startups and scale-ups.*



HAYSTACK

