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7 Mental Health Entrepreneurs Who Turned Their Own Pain Into Purpose

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Clockwise from top left: Mary Lemmer, Dr. Claire Green-Forde, Jen Burke, and Jessica Sikora YAUHENIYA PIRAHOVA

In my five-part series on mental health and entrepreneurship, I'm sharing the personal stories of women managing diagnoses like anxiety, depression, ADHD, and PTSD while building their businesses. Over the last four articles, I've explored why those of us with mental health diagnoses often turn to entrepreneurship, how the demands of the job can intensify mental health struggles, the strategies used to maintain well-being and

achieve success, and the surprising silver linings that some have found along their journeys.

Sometimes the hardest chapters of our lives become the foundation of the most meaningful work we'll ever do. [As a therapist and coach](#) who spent years battling eating disorders, depression, and anxiety, I've learned this truth firsthand. Healing doesn't necessarily mean eliminating pain; it can also mean using that pain to fuel purpose, compassion, and the change we want to see.

The seven entrepreneurs in this article have lived that experience, too. For them, mental health diagnoses that once felt overwhelming became the driving force behind businesses that empower others to heal, grow, and thrive today. Their stories are a powerful reminder that our journeys, though often challenging, can also become a source of connection and transformation.

'I Channeled My Experience Into Something Positive'

[Jessica Sikora](#) says that while living with anxiety and depression has presented obstacles, they've led her to where she is today: building [Superbands](#), a nonprofit that connects young people through music to create a sense of support and belonging.



Jessica Sikora JONATHAN VILLA

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"My mental health journey has given me an invaluable superpower: empathy," she shares. "Having walked through my own struggles, I can better understand and connect with the young people I work with."

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Sikora acknowledges that running a mission-driven nonprofit while navigating her mental health hasn't been easy. "One of my greatest challenges has been balancing the intense pressure I place on myself with the vulnerability required to share my story openly," she says. But through that vulnerability, she's built a community that reminds young people they aren't alone.

Her work has also been a source of healing for Sikora herself. "Creating Superbands felt like a way to turn my challenges into a source of hope," she explains. "It's been as much about personal healing as it has been about helping others, offering me a way to reclaim my experiences and give them meaning."

'We Can Transform Wounds Into Gifts That Serve Others'

[Dr. Melissa Barker](#) turned her experience of living with Complex Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (CPTSD) into a purpose-driven business designed to transform how women heal from trauma. Through [The Phoenix](#)



Dr. Melissa Barker MELISSA BARKER

[Project](#), she's built an AI-powered platform that blends technology and psychedelic-assisted healing to provide accessible, community-based care for survivors.

“My path to entrepreneurship came from living through significant systemic failures,” Barker says. “Building Phoenix allowed me to transform my trauma into service and create the resource I wished existed during my darkest moments.”

Barker says her mission is rooted in the belief that healing is both personal and collective. “While the work of supporting survivors is challenging, witnessing others reclaim their power and agency makes it deeply meaningful,” she explains. “My journey has taught me that we can transform our deepest wounds into gifts that serve others.”

‘My Journey Of Healing Led Me Here’

[Sarah Baldwin](#)'s history of complex trauma and 15-year journey of healing inspired dedicating her career to helping others. As a somatic experiencing practitioner, she combines tools like parts work, somatic attachment, and polyvagal interventions to help people reconnect with themselves and their sense of safety. “As someone who felt deeply stuck in my life and didn't have access to proper support, it is deeply important to me that this work is as accessible as possible,” she explains.



Sarah Baldwin LAUREN ALEXANDRA

Baldwin recognizes that trauma often drives us to develop protective patterns, such as overachieving, that can eventually lead to exhaustion and burnout. “It took time for me to comfort those parts of myself and show them it’s safe to slow down,” she shares. Now, she helps others regulate their nervous systems and create balance in their lives.

“Our autonomic nervous system creates our entire experience, so nervous system regulation and health is absolutely non-negotiable,” Baldwin adds. “It is truly something that everyone in the world could benefit from. It’s the answer to feeling good in our bodies and good in our lives.”

‘With Lived Experiences, I Understand The Nuances Of Mental Health’



Dr. Claire Green NICOLE MONDESTIN
PHOTOGRAPHY

As someone with intersecting identities, [Dr. Claire Green-Forde](#) navigated systemic harm and discrimination in traditional workplaces. “Throughout my career in healthcare, social impact, and government, I rarely felt my humanity was valued, my curiosity encouraged, or my gifts celebrated,” she explains. “This took a toll on my mental and physical health.”

She founded her consultancy, [Dr. Claire SPEAKS! LLC](#), which works to advance health equity, mental health, and organizational wellness, as both a necessity and a path to healing. “My work now focuses on equity-centered leadership and creating inclusive, mentally healthy environments where everyone’s dignity and worth are honored.”

As a practitioner with lived experience, Green-Forde understands the nuances of mental health—which enhances her empathy but also challenges her. “I’m acutely aware of struggles I can’t fully resolve for myself or others,”

she says. “Ultimately, I am grateful because these experiences ground my authenticity and guide me as a compassionate and empathy-centered leader.”

‘I Wanted To Create The Support System That Was Missing’

[Jen Burke](#)’s experience with anxiety, depression, and fertility struggles inspired her to create two businesses that address gaps in perinatal mental health.

[Rise Wellness Collaborative](#) is an Ann Arbor, MI-based clinic offering mental health services for parents, and [Bloom and Rise](#) provides curated resources to support the transition to motherhood.



Jen Burke KATIE HOLM - KATHERINE LUISA
PHOTOGRAPHY

“My own experiences with mental health fueled a desire to create resources and support systems that I felt were missing, and running my own business gave me the control to shape these initiatives in meaningful ways,” Burke says.

Balancing her diagnoses and the emotional ups and downs of her fertility journey has been her greatest challenge while running her two businesses, but she says they also deepen her empathy for her clients. “They remind me of the courage it takes to seek support, helping me create a more genuine, supportive space for the families we serve,” she adds. “Balancing personal mental health with business hasn’t been easy, but it’s strengthened my resilience and purpose.”

‘I Want The Technique That Helped Me To Help Others’



Mary Lemmer RYAN LASH (TED)

[Mary Lemmer](#)'s anxiety once left her feeling overwhelmed. "My anxiety was so intense it triggered panic attacks, and the fear of the unknown made my world feel rigid and out of control," she explains.

But a spontaneous decision to take an improv class changed everything. "The moment I stepped into that room, I felt something I hadn't in ages: relaxed and free," Lemmer says. "There was no right or wrong. Anything and everything was okay."

Inspired by how improv transformed her relationship with anxiety, Lemmer built [Improve](#), a consultancy that uses improvisation techniques to help people and companies handle uncertainty and change. "Today, I help others find the same freedom," she shares. "Improv didn't just relieve my anxiety—it gave me a new, more joyful way to live. It taught me to embrace uncertainty, trust myself in the face of the unknown, and turn 'mistakes' into moments of laughter and discovery."

'Setbacks Shaped My Mission To Help Heal and Empower Others'

[Dr. Natanya Wachtel](#)'s life and businesses are a testament to resilience. "Years ago, I faced unimaginable hardships, from clinical death and paralysis to the struggle of reclaiming my life at nearly 300 pounds. I lost my first husband, my mother, and others close to me, all while enduring the trials of running businesses on my own and navigating the chaos and



Dr. Natanya Wachtel THE NEW SOLUTIONS NETWORK

damage that seemed constant,” she explains.

Those experiences have shaped her mission to create platforms that support healing and mental wellness. Through ventures like AI-powered app [evrmore](#) and media platform [The Natanya Experience](#), Wachtel channels her pain into creating resources that help others thrive.

“In my role as a behavioral scientist, advisor, and founder, I’ve worked to bring this hard-won knowledge forward,” she says. “Each setback forced me to summon resilience, and each loss deepened my understanding of others’ struggles, shaping my mission of creating spaces where others can find healing and empowerment.”

If there’s one thing these stories make clear, it’s that struggle is oftentimes the beginning of the story. Pain, loss, and mental health diagnoses can feel isolating, even insurmountable—but they can also become catalysts for purpose, empathy, and change. The entrepreneurs you’ve just met didn’t just survive their experiences; they used them to build something that makes life better for others.

That doesn’t mean the journey is easy or that healing follows a linear path. But it does mean that our hardest moments might one day help someone else feel less alone.

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