HOW ENTREPRENEURS COPE WITH EXHAUSTION: THE INFLUENCE OF PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND MINDFULNESS (INTERACTIVE PAPER)

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THE ENTREPRENEUR AND CHARACTERISTICS

INTERACTIVE PAPER

HOW ENTREPRENEURS COPE WITH EXHAUSTION: THE INFLUENCE OF PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND MINDFULNESS

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Principal Topic

Although entrepreneurship can be an exhilarating experience, it is also often a stressful one (Buttner, 1992; Schindehutte, Morris & Allen, 2006). Dealing with high levels of uncertainty and intense competition can exhaust entrepreneurs and leave them susceptible to mental health ailments (Freeman et al., 2015). Surprisingly, few studies examine how entrepreneurs cope with the pressure and exhaustion experienced in founding and developing ventures (Uy, Foo & Song, 2013). Herein, we draw from physiology and management research to examine how founders might use sleep, physical activity (PA) and mindfulness exercises (ME) to cope with the exhaustion associated with the process of entrepreneurship. PA refers to exertion activities such as jogging or working out whereas ME refers to mental activities that focus attention on the present in nonjudgmental ways, such as meditation. Evidence from physiology research suggests that sleep, PA and ME can all reduce exhaustion and burnout among individuals, but little is known whether founders have the time or proclivity to engage in these practices, and what their effects might be.

Method

We examine the efficacy of sleep, PA and ME in two studies. Study #1 is a longitudinal field study of 104 entrepreneurs sampled at two different points in time, six months apart. At time 1, entrepreneurs self-report average levels of PA, ME, sleep and feelings of exhaustion, followed again by exhaustion at time 2. Study #2 is an experimental study with 132 entrepreneurship students designed to build on the results in Study #1, targeting mindfulness exercises specifically.

Results and Implications

Study #1 shows that increased sleep and usage of ME result in lower levels of exhaustion, whereas PA shows no significant effect. Interestingly, sleep and ME interact negatively, indicating a possible compensating effect where one or the other, but not both, helps reduce exhaustion. Study #2 demonstrates that introducing entrepreneurship students to a simple series of mindfulness exercises, practiced for 15 minutes per day for one week, reduces feelings of exhaustion by 20% compared to a control group. This indicates ME may offer an efficient way for busy entrepreneurs to mitigate the deleterious effects of stress on a daily basis.

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