

My coming out story is my founding story

Jaron Soh cofounder of VODA, the LGBTQIA+ mental health app designed by leading LGBTQIA+ therapists, shares how his coming out story is also his founding story. VODA just raised a £270K pre-seed round with intersectional investors including Freiraum Ventures, ULTRA VC and Gaingels. VODA was recognised as “Most Inclusive Innovation” by PinkNews (2023), Attitude 101 Trailblazers (2024) and was featured by Google Play’s Pride Campaign last summer.

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Every startup has a story, and most founders have a personal connection to the company they build. My founding story in starting VODA, a LGBTQIA+ mental health app, is deeply linked to my coming out story.

I’m a third-time founder, having previously raised funding from venture capital firm Antler and angel investors. But after setting up two startups, I found myself drawn to building a venture that supported the LGBTQIA+ community with our mental health. Why? Because therapy had helped me tremendously, helping me understand how my chronic anxiety was linked to the years I spent hiding my identity.

I noticed that many of my queer friends experienced the same challenges. The chronic shame that we have internalised, combined with a lack of mental health support tailored to our lived experience, have left many of us feeling misunderstood and isolated. This is not just a trend among my peers, but something that is widely documented. Trans people in England are more likely to have long-term poor mental health, a 2024

paper led by the University of Manchester found. Meanwhile, more than half of LGBTQIA+ Britons (51%) said they experienced or were diagnosed with a mental health condition, compared to a third of the general population (32%), according to [*2022 YouGov research*](#).

I saw that there was a clear gap in accessible mental health resources for my community. While excellent apps like Headspace and Calm already exist, they often do not address the unique challenges faced by people like me, such as dealing with stigma, coming out, and shame.

I felt a desire to make an impact and direct my entrepreneurial passion towards building accessible mental health resources for my community. However, before I could start VODA and be the public face of a LGBTQIA+ startup, I needed to first come out to my parents.

The coming out journey

Even though I was out to my peers, I was still hiding my queer identity from my parents. The decision to come out to them was a crucial turning point in my personal and professional life. I knew that if I wanted to launch VODA, embodying my values of authenticity and transparency would be key. As much as I was afraid of familial rejection, because I knew that it was likely they would not take it well, and that from experience neither were they accepting of LGBTQIA+ people, I knew I had to proceed. I couldn't lead a LGBTQIA+ focused company without first being true to myself and my loved ones.

I understand that it might sound silly to some, but coming out was the toughest part of my founding journey for VODA by far.

The fear of coming out far exceeded any potential anxiety from raising funding, the disappointment from investor rejections, or the nerves from any public speaking. With work, there was little on the line; when one

door closes, I've learned to pick myself up and simply knock on another.

But with family there isn't another door to knock on.

The fear of rejection from my parents far exceeded challenges from building my previous startups. But while it was difficult to come out, it is precisely because of this difficulty that my personal drive to launch VODA is so strong; because I knew that there were so many other people like me out there; we are supposedly doing well professionally, but deeply struggling internally due to our queerness. Many of us are highly disciplined, diligent, and excel at work or in academia, but we are often eager to please those around us, or to gain a sense of external validation driven by an inherent sense of lack.

But I had something on my side. I had learned, through years of therapy: how to self-regulate, how to process and sit with my shame, but most importantly, I had figured out the actionable steps I needed to take to live a life authentic to myself. Now I just needed to take my first step.

Thankfully, while the coming out process was highly emotional, three years on from my coming out, I'm glad to have done so, and have never been happier with the alignment between my personal and professional lives than before.

Everyone's invisible battles

If there is one insight that you can draw from my personal story of coming out and founding VODA, it is that it reflects a broader narrative. Most people, LGBTQIA+ or not, struggle with invisible battles that others do not know of.

Particularly, this Pride month, I hope that you can be more visible with your allyship for the trans+ community, because the trans+ community is

currently facing unprecedented rollbacks in their human rights across all spheres of their lives: socially, professionally, in healthcare, in sports and at work.

By doing so, we'll be doing our part towards a more inclusive and compassionate society, and make a difference not just during Pride, but every single day.

Jaron Soh is the cofounder of [VODA](#).

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