

Mental health and FOSS

What I wish I'd been told before I got into free software, and more

//About me

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//Background

- Joined Matrix/Element a couple of years ago, right after graduating
- Had a few professional experiences before joining, both within and outside of the team
- Experienced a burnout in one of them
- Long-standing issues with anxiety and self-esteem/confidence

//Why this talk?

- Mental health is as important as physical health
- Mental health should not be a taboo

//Who is it for?

- **Maintainers**
Who interact with their community
- **Contributors**
Who get involved in the project and its community
- **Employers**
Who pay people to maintain FOSS projects

//A couple of disclaimers

- This talk is based off my own experience

You might have a different opinion on the matters it mentions based on yours, please come talk to me if so!

- This talk isn't exclusive to FOSS

FOSS is a special area of the tech industry in terms of mental health, but the points and advice mentioned here apply to the whole industry.

I got into FOSS for its philosophy

//Why?

- I like the idea of sharing knowledge
- I like the idea of giving control back to users
- I like the idea of working on software that aligns with my ethics

//But also...

- I like interacting with, and giving to communities
- I like communities being able to introduce new insights into my projects
- I like communities sharing how they use my projects in a meaningful way
- I like communities encouraging me and pushing me forward

I involve myself emotionally
into my projects

... which tends to emphasise
already existing issues

//Some examples

- Staying up late to pursue a debate or an argument, or to finish up a PR
- Getting into a panic attack because an argument on a PR isn't going where I want it to
- Putting a lot of pressure from myself because of an important project that needs to be released

And again, these issues exist
in the whole tech industry

//And are made worse in FOSS because...

- The emotional aspect is much more important
- Things are mostly happening in public places
- It's easy to confuse work and personal projects

//Self-esteem and anxiety

- Joining a big FOSS project is real scary (especially as a junior)
- It's an even bigger (and scarier) public space
- It gets difficult to take initiative and get involved

//Impostor syndrome

- “I’m not qualified to be that involved in this project”
- Turns into “I’m not qualified to be involved in this project”

//Impostor syndrome

- Makes interacting with the community and the rest of the team more difficult
- Makes keeping involved in the project more difficult
- Or causes excessive involvement in the project

//The risks

- Increased stress and pressure
- Letting these issues feed themselves
- Burnout
- Depression

Mitigating if you are...

... a maintainer

- Make sure you provide an inclusive, safe and friction-less environment for the contributors that want to reach out to you
- Be patient and understanding when reacting to criticism; contributors almost always have good intentions in mind, but often lack the insight to make it clear or relevant

... a maintainer

- Make sure you don't overwork yourself; **you're more important than any project**
 - Keep track of time and try to timebox work
 - Remember to take breaks and time off
 - Keep to office hours as much as possible if doing it full time
 - Make time for activities that will keep your mind off the project when you're not actively working on it (meditation, exercising, music, etc.)

... a contributor

- Try to engage with the project's community and maintainers early on
- Be mindful of how you're engaging into debates: maintainers and other contributors are also humans with their own invisible issues
- Try to understand the project's constraints and design choices
- Make sure you show respect and gratitude to maintainers and community members when it's due; mentoring or reviewing a PR takes time and isn't always trivial, a thanks is always appreciated!

... a contributor

- Don't overwork yourself on a contribution; you are not expected to have the knowledge and commitment of maintainers or more experienced community members
- Don't hesitate to argue your opinions and ideas; **your input matters!**
- There's no dumb questions, don't hesitate to ask any question as you familiarise yourself with various bits of the project

... an employer (or a manager)

- Set up regular 1:1 meetings with each employee
- Try to follow how your employees are coping with their current work, especially after joining the company, or during incidents or high-stake projects
- Organise regular retrospective meetings to check how the team is coping as a whole

... an employer (or a manager)

- Support mental health therapy as part of the company's healthcare plan
- Contract a counselor that employees can discuss mental health matters anonymously with
- Provide employees with self-care solutions (e.g. Calm subscription)

... anyone

- Try out self-care activities, such as meditation, yoga, etc. (Calm is a great resource for that)
- Carve out as much personal time as you can

... anyone

- Be gentle and compassionate with yourself
- Reach out to a certified therapist whenever you feel like external input might help (Psychology Today has a great repository of qualified and competent therapists in several countries)

“The same boiling water that
softens the potato hardens
the egg”

- Mel Robbins (I think)

Let's talk!

//It's OK to not be OK

- Let's create an interest in mental health and self-care in FOSS
- #mental-health-foss:matrix.org on Matrix
- If you disagree with things I've said or have ideas to improve the talk, please come and chat!
- If you'd rather reach out in private:
 - On Matrix: @brendan:abolivier.bzh
 - Via email: hello@brendanabolivier.com

//Moar talks

- Supporting FOSS Community Members with Impostor Syndrome

https://archive.fosdem.org/2019/schedule/event/community_supporting_foss_community_members_imposter_syndrome/

- Depression and Burnout: the Hardest Refactor I've ever done

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m20KBFUuw-w>

- Setting expectations for Open Source participation

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?t=48m55s&v=tzFWz5fiVKU>

Thanks for attending, take
care of yourselves!