Mental health and free software — FOSDEM 2021

Brendan Abolivier · FOSDEM 2021, Community

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Mental health and free software

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

Brendan Abolivier

D.community
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Mental health and FOSS

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



//About me

Brendan Abolivier

Backend dev @ Matrix
Software engineer @ Element





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Brendan Abolivier

Backend dev @ Matrix
Software engineer @ Element





//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



//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.



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//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



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//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



//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



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... 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!



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... 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)



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... 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)



//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



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