About me

● Site Reliability Engineer at Quantopian
● Organizer at DevOpsDays Boston
● Formerly:
  ○ Site Reliability Engineer, Harvard
  ○ Developer Evangelist, AppNeta
  ○ Release Engineer, Romney 2012
● My life before tech:
  ○ Psychology
  ○ Political science
  ○ Public policy

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Content warnings

- Mental illness
- Medication and the medical system
- Coercive treatment
- Crisis
- Legal system

It’s OK to leave and watch/read this talk later!
Disclaimers

- I'm here as an activist
- I am not a mental health professional.
- I am not a lawyer or an expert on employment law.
- Recommendations are US-centric (what I know best)
I'm not taking questions on stage, but you can find me after the talk!

(or on Twitter/Slack)
Engineering problems are usually people problems

- Competing goals and incentives
- Communication and coordination
- Setting expectations
- Managing stress and mental health
Ops best practice: reduce mental health burden

- Blameless postmortems
- Empathy
- Impostor syndrome
- Hero/martyr culture
- Burnout
- #hugops
Mental health: the overall state of our system

- General condition of well-being
- Influenced by stress, coping strategies, etc.
- Can have poor mental health without anything specific being wrong
- Direct parallel to physical health
Mental health matters for everyone, but...
Mental health matters for everyone, but...

It's much harder with a mental disorder.
~25% of people have a mental disorder at any one time
~50% of people will have a mental disorder during their life
Mental illnesses

"Health conditions involving changes in thinking, emotion or behavior"

"Associated with distress and/or problems functioning in social, work or family activities"

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Bipolar disorder
- Schizophrenia
- Eating disorders
- And dozens more.

@jmeickle
What ISN'T a mental illness?

- Grief
- Burnout
- Political views
- Having emotions
- Being upset
Neurodevelopmental disorders

Neurodevelopmental disorders are disabilities associated primarily with the functioning of the neurological system and brain.

...can experience difficulties with language and speech, motor skills, behavior, memory, learning, or other neurological functions

- Learning disorders
- Autism
- Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder
- Traumatic brain injuries
- Face blindness
- Childhood lead exposure
Medical model vs. Neurodiversity

Medical model:
- Disorders cause deficits
- We should treat them

Neurodiversity:
- Everyone’s mind is different
- Everyone is valuable regardless of how their mind works
- Being different is something to be happy about!

"...neurological differences are to be recognized and respected as any other human variation..."
Mental disorders are a hidden diversity problem

- A distinct group with horrible statistics on employment, happiness, etc.
- One of the few legally protected groups where discrimination is not only accepted but encouraged in mainstream representation
Mental disorders aren't evenly distributed

- Race, gender, and sexuality impact rates of diagnosis
- They also impact *what* diagnoses you receive
- Poverty impacts diagnosis, too

And they also impact access to treatment.
Mental health and mental disorders are orthogonal...
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Good mental health</th>
<th>Poor mental health</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No Disorder</td>
<td>Yes Disorder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m occasionally sad or frustrated, but I don’t have any psychiatric diagnosis or symptoms.</td>
<td>These on-call shifts are killing me. I’m not getting enough sleep and I can’t concentrate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have a learning disorder, but it doesn’t come up much at work, so it’s not causing me stress.</td>
<td>My depression makes everything feel pointless, and lately I can’t even enjoy my friends.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
...but mental disorders are strongly correlated with poor mental health
Mental disorders can harm mental health directly

- Intrusive thoughts
- Uncontrollable behaviors
- Emotional dysregulation
- Difficulties with sleep, memory, attention
- Panic attacks, psychosis, and crisis
Mental disorder stigma can harm mental health

- Trouble making or maintaining friends
- Trouble maintaining employment
- Trouble explaining resume gaps
- Lack of professional credibility
- Having to stay "closeted"
- Lack of treatment
Treating mental disorders can harm mental health

- Time lost to managing condition
- Stress of dealing with insurance and appointments
- Side effects of medication and therapy
- Trauma from previous crises
- Trauma from previous treatment
SREs already make reliable systems from unreliable components

Any "unreliability" from a mental disorder is much smaller in scale than the unreliability inherent in all humans
How do we care for engineers with mental disorders?
Engineers are...

- Anxious
- Depressed
- Overworked
- Stressed
- Perfectionist
- Isolated
- Caffeine addicted
- Misanthropic

@jmeickle
Engineers are doing just fine (on average)

- Anxious
- Depressed
- Overworked
- Stressed
- Perfectionist
- Isolated
- Caffeine addicted?
- Misanthropic

The most stressful occupations are low responsibility, low prestige, low pay, and low control.

None of those apply to engineering as an industry.
There isn't a widespread mental health crisis among engineers.
There isn't a widespread mental health crisis among engineers.

There *is* a crisis in inclusivity for Americans with mental disorders, and engineers can fix our part of it.
Thoughts and prayers aren't scalable

- Attention and awareness always come at the cost of something else
- Personal experience doesn’t transfer well to others
- Ending stigma doesn’t address tangible barriers
Caring a lot about people with mental disorders isn’t inclusive.

Evaluating your organization’s systems to remove exclusionary policies and unintentional discrimination is inclusive.
How do we care for engineers with mental disorders?

How can we make engineering workplaces more inclusive for people with mental disorders?
The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990

- Defines disability and accommodations
- Tells employers how to handle accommodation requests
- Thousands of pages of documentation
  - Advisory rulings
  - Court briefs
  - Handbooks for managers
  - Handbooks for HR
  - Handbooks for employees

This includes mental disorders!

Accommodations are a legal obligation, not just a moral one!
Sanity isn't a business requirement, so let's refactor and drop that dependency.
Let’s talk SDLC:

Software Developer Life Cycle
Software Developer Life Cycle

- Application
- Interviewing
- Onboarding
- Compensation
- Benefits
- Job duties
- Working conditions
- Training
- Promotion
SDLC: Application

- Clearly identify essential functions
- Set expectations for hours worked and vacation schedule
- Describe the specifics of insurance and other benefits
- Use `joblint` on all postings
Antipattern: Cognitive and emotional requirements

- full stack developers
- with years of experience
- systems thinking and a security mindset
- and amazing communication skills
- who can deal with lots of internal customers
- in a way that demonstrates empathy
- while having lots of team cohesion
- even while everything is going wrong
- and also it's 2 AM

If you're wondering why SREs are hard to recruit - it’s not just tech skills!

We need to draw boundaries between requirements for an SRE team vs. requirements for an individual SRE.
SDLC: Interviewing

- Minimize whiteboarding or other "exams"
- Avoid "puzzles" or artificially stressful situations
- Determine interview questions and success criteria in advance, and consistently apply them
- Avoid evaluations on “culture fit”, awkwardness of social interactions, etc.
- Professional anti-bias training for hiring managers
SDLC: Onboarding

- Provide mental health rights and resource documents
- Maintain social aids: org/seat charts, lunch recs, in-jokes.
- Conduct post-hiring interviews and actively ask about needs and accommodations
- Avoid “exceptions” in accommodations by rewriting company policies to cover anyone in that situation
SDLC: Compensation

- Base salaries on objective criteria, not negotiation
- Don't base salaries on prior compensation
- Set compensation expectations for yearly reviews and bonuses in advance
- For large companies: create and publish reports on how mental disorders affect compensation
SDLC: Benefits

- Provide comprehensive mental health coverage
  - Including trans inclusive coverage!
- Switch from "unlimited vacation" to mandatory vacation
- Document sick days for mental health
- "Health benefits" should include mental health
- Hire professionals to help navigate benefits with employees, rather than expecting “professional patients”
Antipattern: Expectation of getting better

There are many legitimate reasons to avoid any kind of treatment, including therapy

- Expensive
- Time-consuming
- Limited efficacy
- Side effects
- Traumatic
SDLC: Job Duties

- Make most meetings and presentations optional
  - Preferably stream/record them
- Find alternatives to adversarial decision-making
- Value and promote many forms of contribution
- Don’t expect every SRE to perform every SRE team duty
SDLC: Working Conditions

- Minimize unnecessary noise and distractions
- Have private offices available
- Have a formal flexible scheduling and remote work policy
- Don’t require socializing on the company’s terms
- Don't tolerate jokes about mental disorders
  - except from people who have them, because they're an important coping mechanism
SDLC: Training

- Provide training material in multiple formats
  - Consider a site-wide subscription service
- Establish a mentorship program
- Provide mental health education for managers, or an alternate way to regularly check in
Antipattern: Have you tried yoga?

- My aunt’s friend’s brother’s niece says that it was great for her depression.
- Dr. Phil had a great episode about it.
- I think I read about it in a book, can’t remember the name though. But it was really good! You should totally read it.
- Actually, I did a detox cleanse once, and I felt sooo much better after.
- I feel great after I exercise.
- I bet you’d feel happier with a sun lamp!
SDLC: Promotion

- Don't require increasing responsibility over time
- Have multiple promotion tracks for different skillsets
- Examine whether the criteria for advancement have implicit ability requirements
  - Coordinating or managing people
  - Presenting at conferences or traveling
  - Long hours or on-call shifts
- Don’t “protect” people from career-enhancing work
Antipattern: Paternalism

- Don’t try to protect people from themselves
- At best, it’s humiliating
- At worst, it can reduce someone’s capabilities

trying to be honest with my therapist but not so honest that get involuntarily hospitalized
Pattern: Consent Culture

- People should decide what happens to them
- Find out their goals and constraints
- Make offers, not impositions
- Avoid coercion

"Don't assume when you can ask!"
...and if it's not safe to ask, how can you change that?

“Do you want suggestions or do you want sympathy?”
A final note on crisis

- Provide training to managers on mental health crisis
- Regularly provide phone and digital help lines
- Ask about emergency mental health contacts in advance
- Weigh all of your options before coercing someone into leave or treatment
- Don't call the police unless you are comfortable with the consequences, up to and including death.
Always keep consent and autonomy in mind, even when it's not convenient.
If we all become inclusive, we all benefit!

- Remote workers
- People experiencing grief
- New parents
- Disabled employees
- Junior employees
- Women in engineering
- Hiring managers
- You!
Next steps

- Get your boss to watch this talk. (Apply recursively.)
- Have them get your HR department to watch this talk.
- Buy them copies of OSMI’s books: https://osmihelp.org
- Let's build inclusive systems together!
Organizations to follow

- Open Sourcing Mental Illness: https://osmihelp.org
- mhprompt: http://mhprompt.org
- Trans Lifeline: https://www.translifeline.org
- NAMI: https://www.nami.org
- National Institutes of Mental Health: https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/index.shtml

@jmeickle
April is Autism Awareness Month!
TBD about Autism Speaks
Thank you!

(Find me later for questions!)