

COMPASSION++: SOFT SKILLS FOR HARD PROBLEMS

CPPNORTH 2024

Compassionate
Coding 



@APRILWENSEL
@COMPASSIONCODE

A screenshot of a vintage-style C++ development environment. The interface is characterized by a dark blue background and light blue borders for windows. At the top is a menu bar with options: File, Edit, Search, Run, Compile, Debug, Project, Options, Window, and Help. Below the menu is a toolbar with icons for Save, Open, Compile, Make, and Menu. The main window displays a C++ program:

```
#include<iostream>

using namespace std;
main()
{
    cout<<"hello world c++";
```

The status bar at the bottom shows the time as 6:31. A keyboard overlay at the bottom of the screen displays function keys F1 through F10 and their corresponding actions: Help, Save, Open, Alt-F9, Compile, F9, Make, and F10 Menu.

WHAT DOES “TECHNICAL” EVEN MEAN?

"HE'S VERY TECHNICAL"

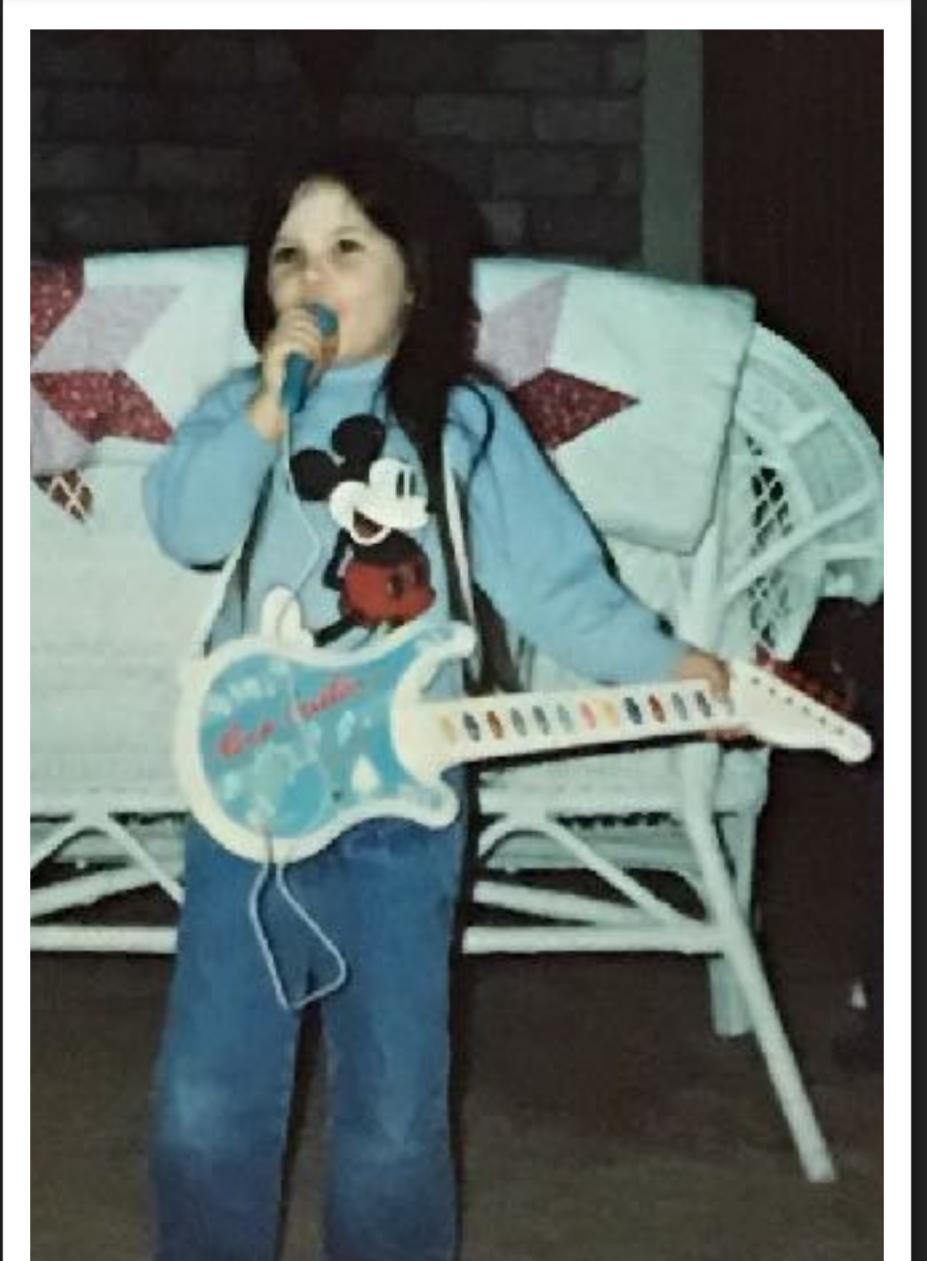
“I’M NOT TECHNICAL AT ALL,
SO I WON’T HAVE MUCH TO
CONTRIBUTE”

AM I TECHNICAL?



A photograph of a woman with long brown hair, wearing a green t-shirt, sitting at a desk in what appears to be a workshop or engineering environment. She is looking down at a yellow laptop. On the desk in front of her is another laptop, some papers, a red bull can, a water bottle, and various electronic components and cables. In the background, there are other people and equipment, suggesting a busy work environment.

15 YEARS AS SOFTWARE
ENGINEER & ENGINEERING
MANAGER



I DON'T FIT IN A BOX,
AND NEITHER DO YOU!

“TECHNICAL” VS. “NON-TECHNICAL”

- Subjective
- Vague
- Limiting
- False binary



**SET ASIDE
ASSUMPTIONS
AND LABELS**

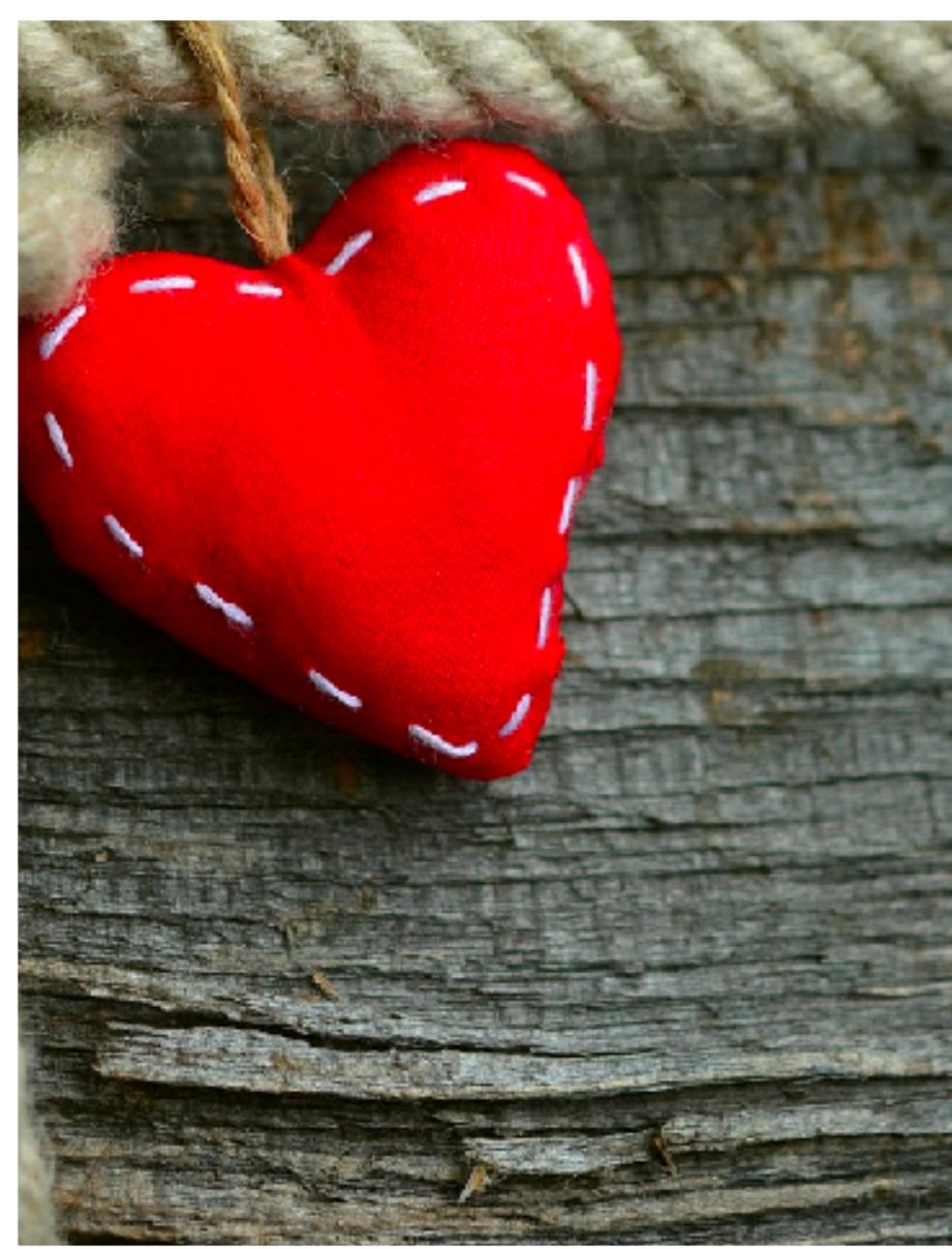
Past 8 years: Training software developers and leaders in emotional intelligence, aka “soft skills”



Common belief in tech:
Hard skills > Soft skills



```
<a href="index.html">Home</a></li>
<a href="home-events.html">Home Events</a>
<a href="multi-col-menu.html">Multi Column Menu</a>
<ul>
  <li><a href="#">Tall Button Home</a>
  <li><a href="#">Image Logo Home</a>
  <li class="active"><a href="#">Active Home</a>
</ul>
<ul>
  <li><a href="#">Variable Width Home</a>
  <li><a href="#">Testimonials Home</a>
  <li><a href="#">Featured Work Home</a>
  <li><a href="#">Equal Column Home</a>
  <li><a href="#">Video Slideshow Home</a>
  <li><a href="#">Minimal Bootstrap Home</a>
</ul>
```



Eliminating the Human

We are beset by—and immersed in—apps and devices that are quietly reducing the amount of meaningful interaction we have with each other.

By David Byrne

August 15, 2017



andyriedman

"Human interaction is often perceived, from an engineer's mind-set, as complicated, inefficient, noisy, and slow. Part of making something 'frictionless' is getting the human part out of the way."

—David Byrne, 2017

PROBLEMS IN TECH



- Failed projects
- Unproductive conflict on teams
- Burnout and isolation
- Unwelcoming work environments
- Socially harmful products

WE ARE HUMANS
WORKING WITH HUMANS
TO CREATE PRODUCTS FOR HUMANS



COMPASSION

COMPASSION != BEING FAKE NICE



@APRILWENSEL

COMPASSION != IGNORING LOGIC

COMPASSION != IGNORING LOGIC

“I’m just a logical person.”

COMPASSION != BEING A DOORMAT



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COMPASSION != WALKING ON EGG SHELLS



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COMPASSION != CENSORSHIP



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Compassion

“The feeling that arises when you are confronted with...suffering and **feel motivated to relieve that suffering...**”

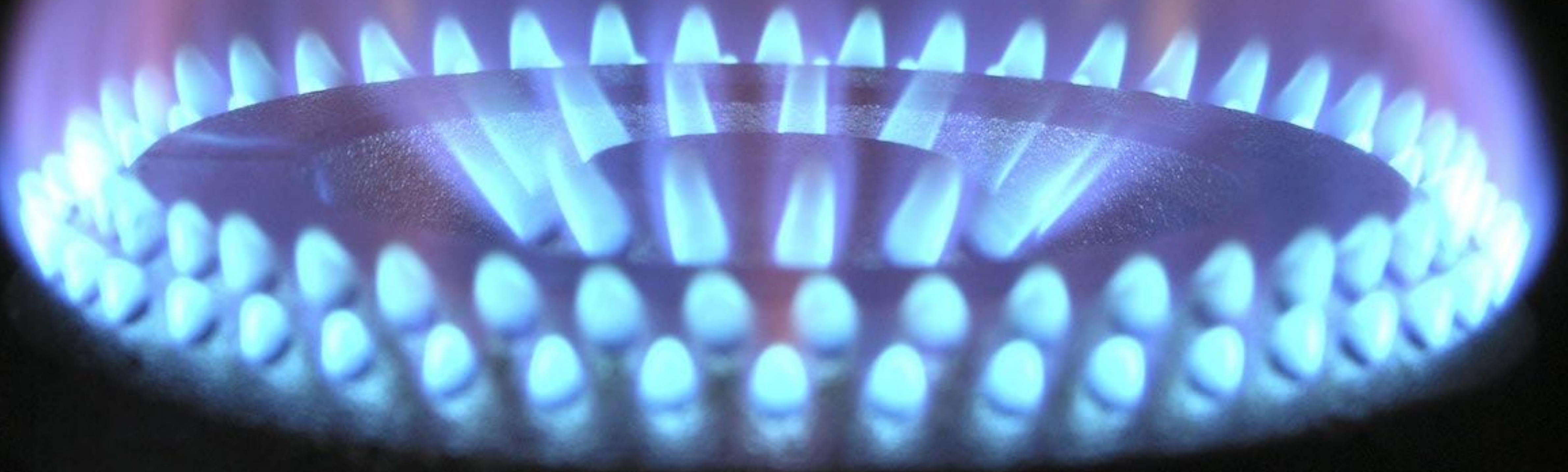
COMPASSION ≈
EMPATHY + DESIRE TO HELP

"[W]hile empathy for pain engages a network of brain areas...associated with negative affect, compassionate states have been associated with... feelings of warmth, concern, and positive affect."

G. Chierchia, T. Singer,
Chapter 20 - The Neuroscience of Compassion and Empathy and Their Link to
Prosocial Motivation and Behavior, *Decision Neuroscience*, 2017.

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Example: You see someone
burn their hand on a hot stove



Sympathy: "Aww, you poor thing."

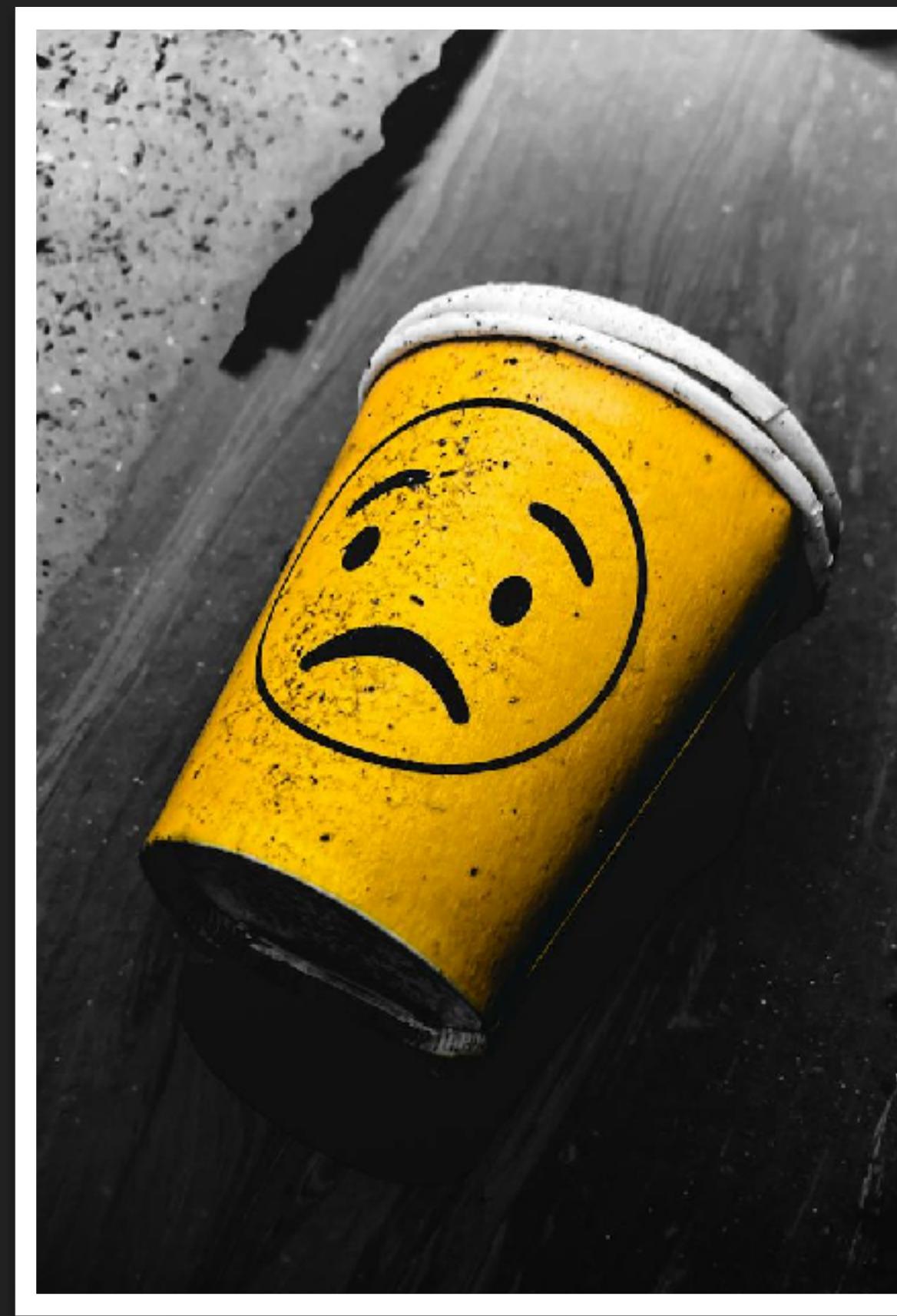
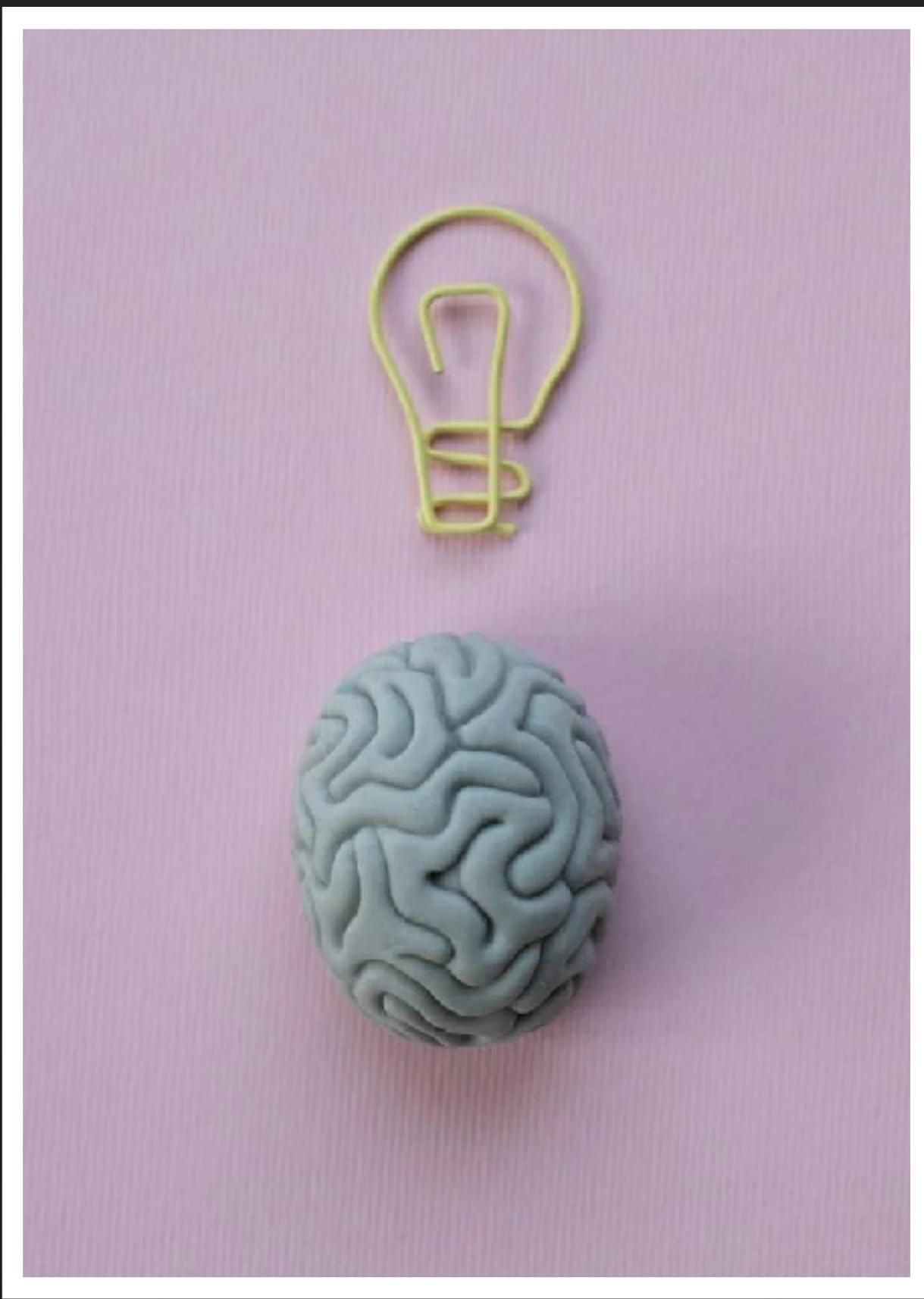
Empathy: "Ouch! I feel your pain."

Compassion: "Can I can bandage that up for you?"



IT'S A LITTLE MORE
COMPLICATED...

COGNITIVE VS. AFFECTIVE EMPATHY



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**"BUT I'M NOT A PEOPLE
PERSON..."**

EMPATHY AND
COMPASSION ARE
SKILLS

PERSONAL BENEFITS OF COMPASSION

- Reduced stress and anxiety
- More satisfying relationships
- More job satisfaction
- Increased resilience

See references at <https://positivepsychology.com/compassion-at-work-leadership/>

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RESISTANCE

THE REDDIT RESPONSE:

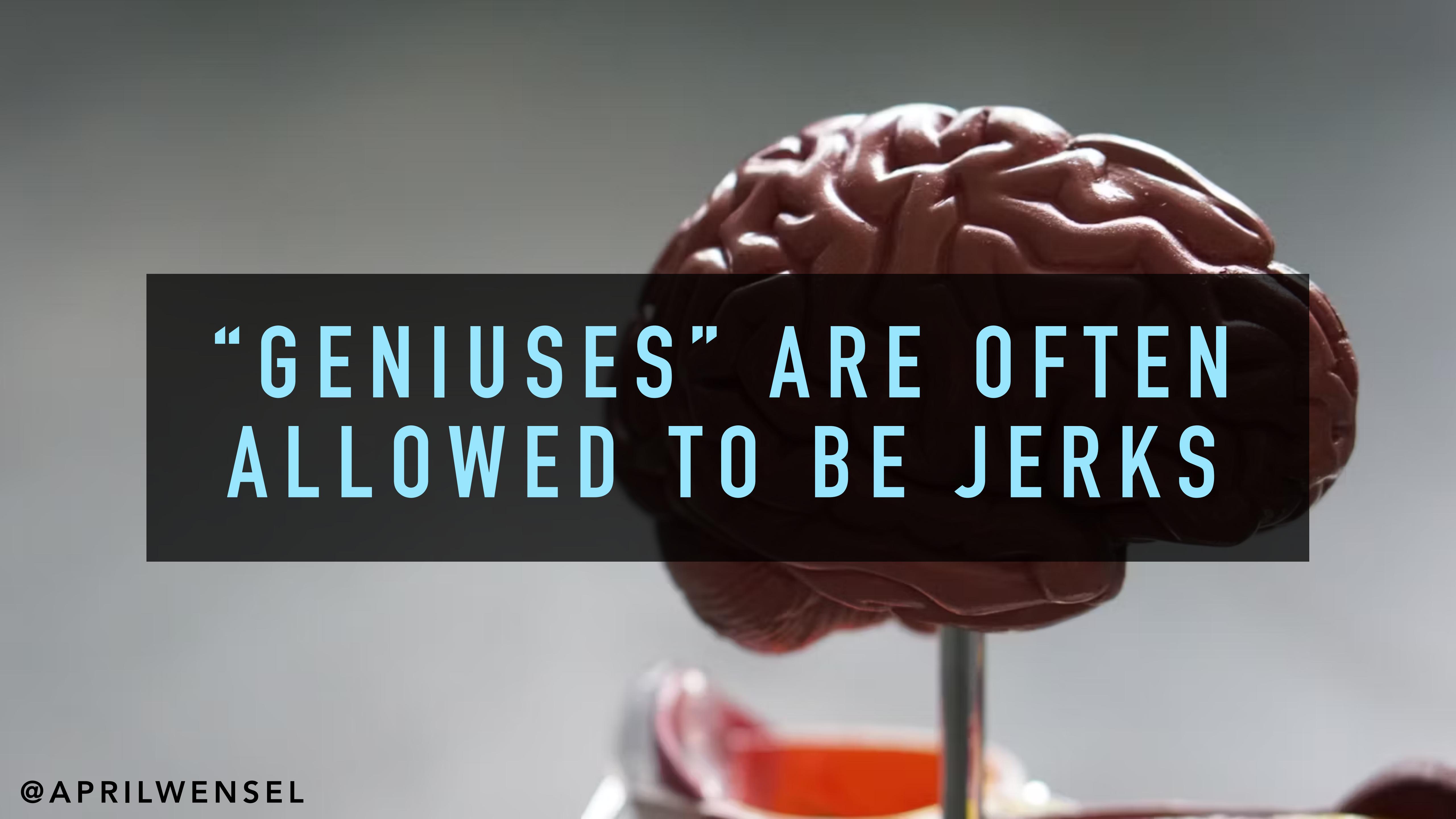


It's a girly title so ...

I also don't understand why coding has to be "compassionate"?



I like the post, but 'Compassionate Coding' still sounds like self help nonsense :P



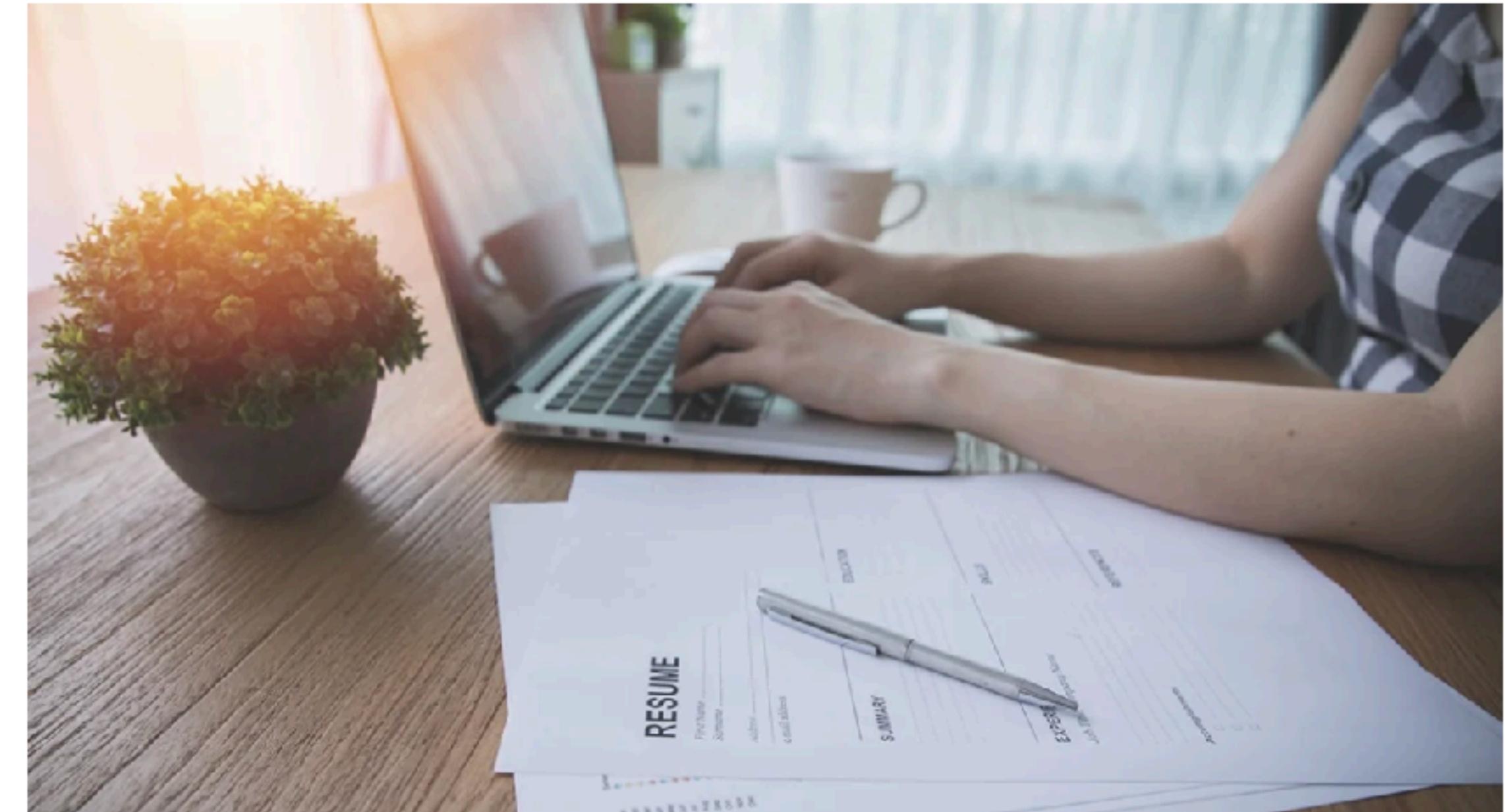
"GENIUSES" ARE OFTEN
ALLOWED TO BE JERKS

“Listen, I'm not the nicest guy in the universe...because I'm the smartest, and **being nice is something [not smart] people do to hedge their bets.**”



–Rick in *Rick and Morty*

Women face 'double-bind' when applying for jobs in male-dominated fields, U of T researchers find



<https://www.utoronto.ca/news/women-face-double-bind-when-applying-jobs-male-dominated-fields-u-t-researchers-find>

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REASONS FOR HOPE

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CONFERENCES LIKE THIS



CppNorth
The Canadian C++ Conference

July 21-24, 2024 • Toronto, Canada

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THE COMMUNITY

NEW
COMPASSIONATE
TECH VALUES

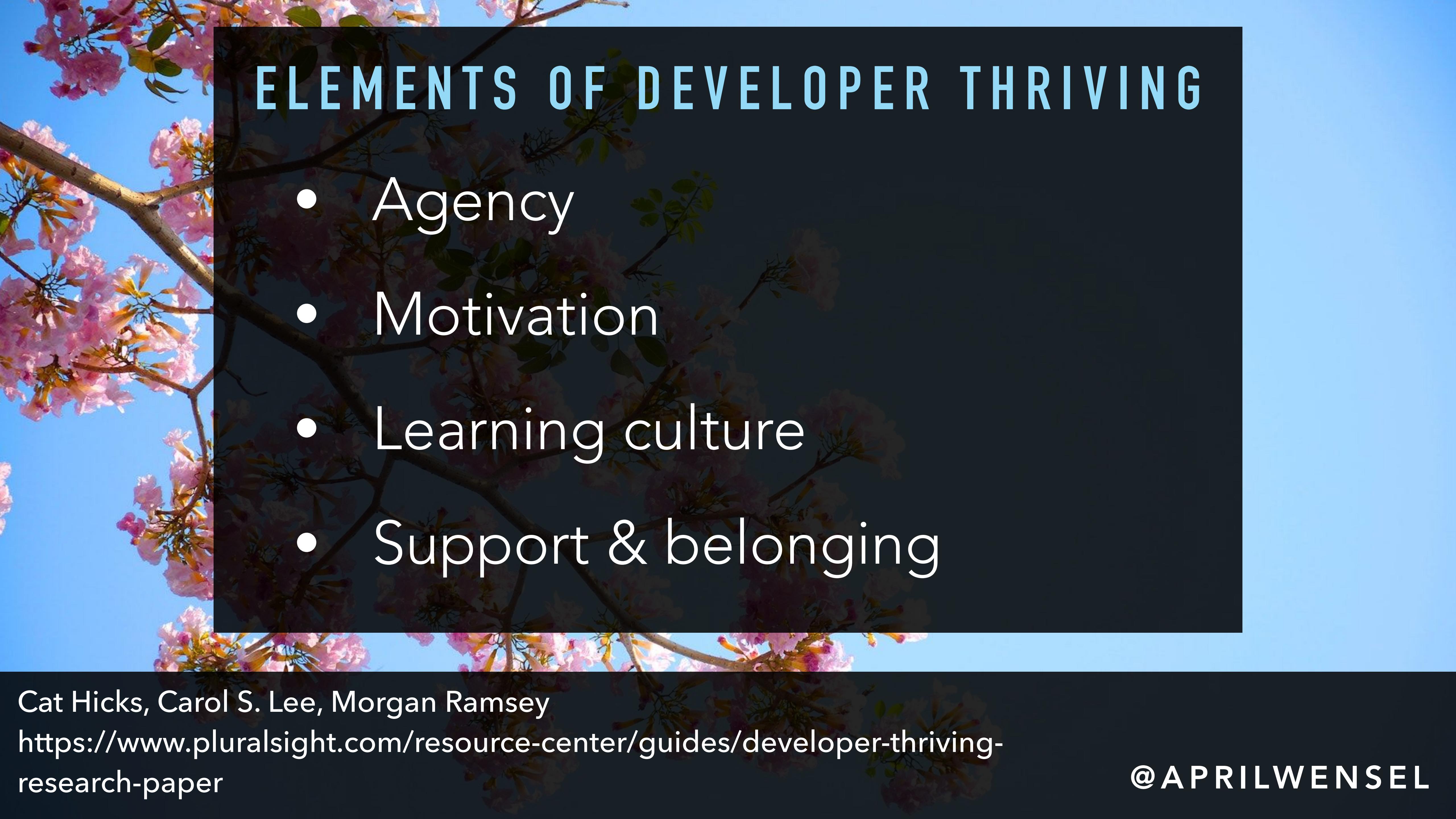
- ▶ ~~EGO~~ HUMILITY
- ▶ ~~ELITISM~~ INCLUSION
- ▶ ~~COMPETITION~~ COOPERATION
- ▶ ~~BEING “SMART”~~ LEARNING
- ▶ ~~BEING A “ROCKSTAR”~~ BEING A MENTOR

COMPASSIONATECODING.COM
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If every programmer woke up tomorrow with a new habit, what would you want it to be?

Compassion. It's a learnable skill. I didn't have it naturally. I had to learn it, and I exercise it most of the time now.

—Kent Beck



ELEMENTS OF DEVELOPER THRIVING

- Agency
- Motivation
- Learning culture
- Support & belonging

Cat Hicks, Carol S. Lee, Morgan Ramsey

<https://www.pluralsight.com/resource-center/guides/developer-thriving-research-paper>

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HOW CAN WE
APPLY
COMPASSION
TO TECH
PROBLEMS?



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PROBLEM: TECHNICAL DEBT



- UNMAINTAINABLE CODE
- POOR DOCUMENTATION
- MANUAL WORKAROUNDS



UNRELIABLE ERROR MESSAGES

WHO SUFFERS?

- CURRENT DEVELOPERS
- NEW DEVELOPERS
- BUSINESS PEOPLE
- USERS

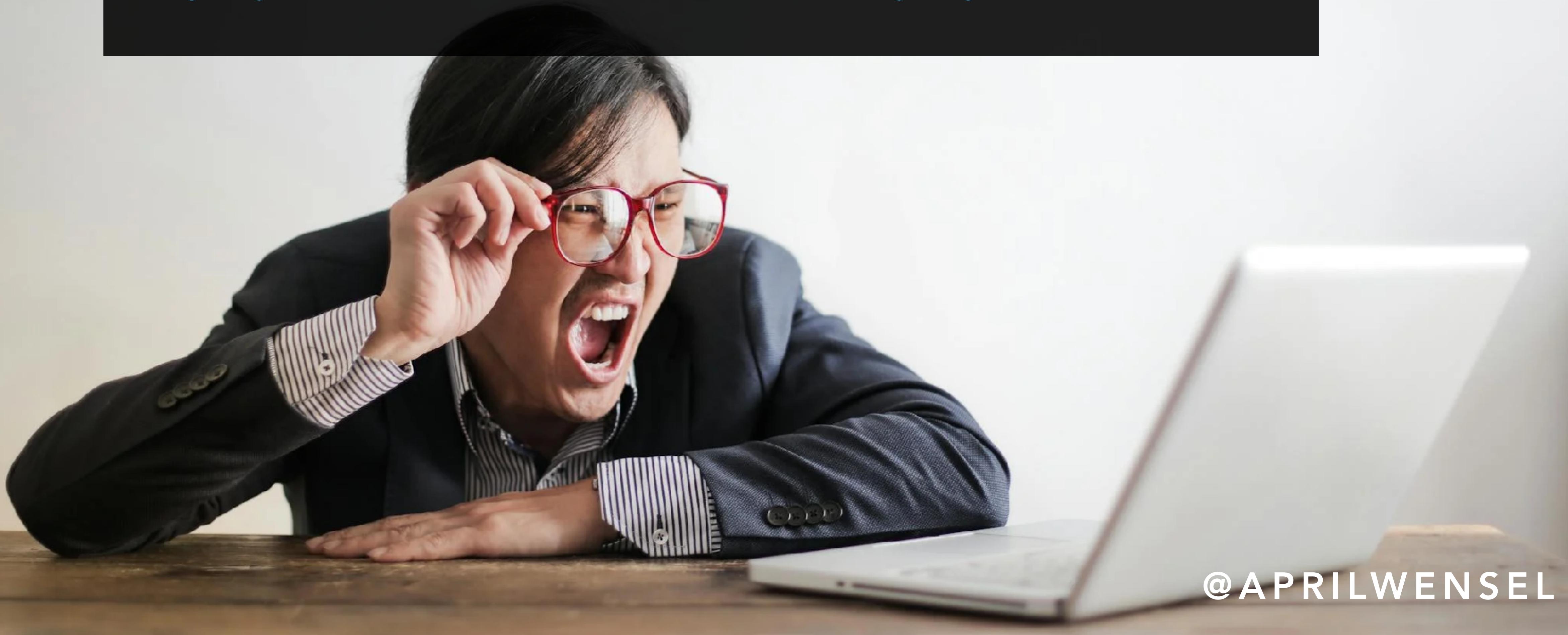
WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT IT?

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IGNORE IT?

COMPLAIN ABOUT IT?



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CURSE THE PEOPLE WHO CREATED IT?

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HOW CAN WE APPLY COMPASSION?



Prime Directive

“Regardless of what we discover, we understand and truly believe that **everyone did the best job they could**, given what they knew at the time, their skills and abilities, the resources available, and the situation at hand.”

- Norm Kerth

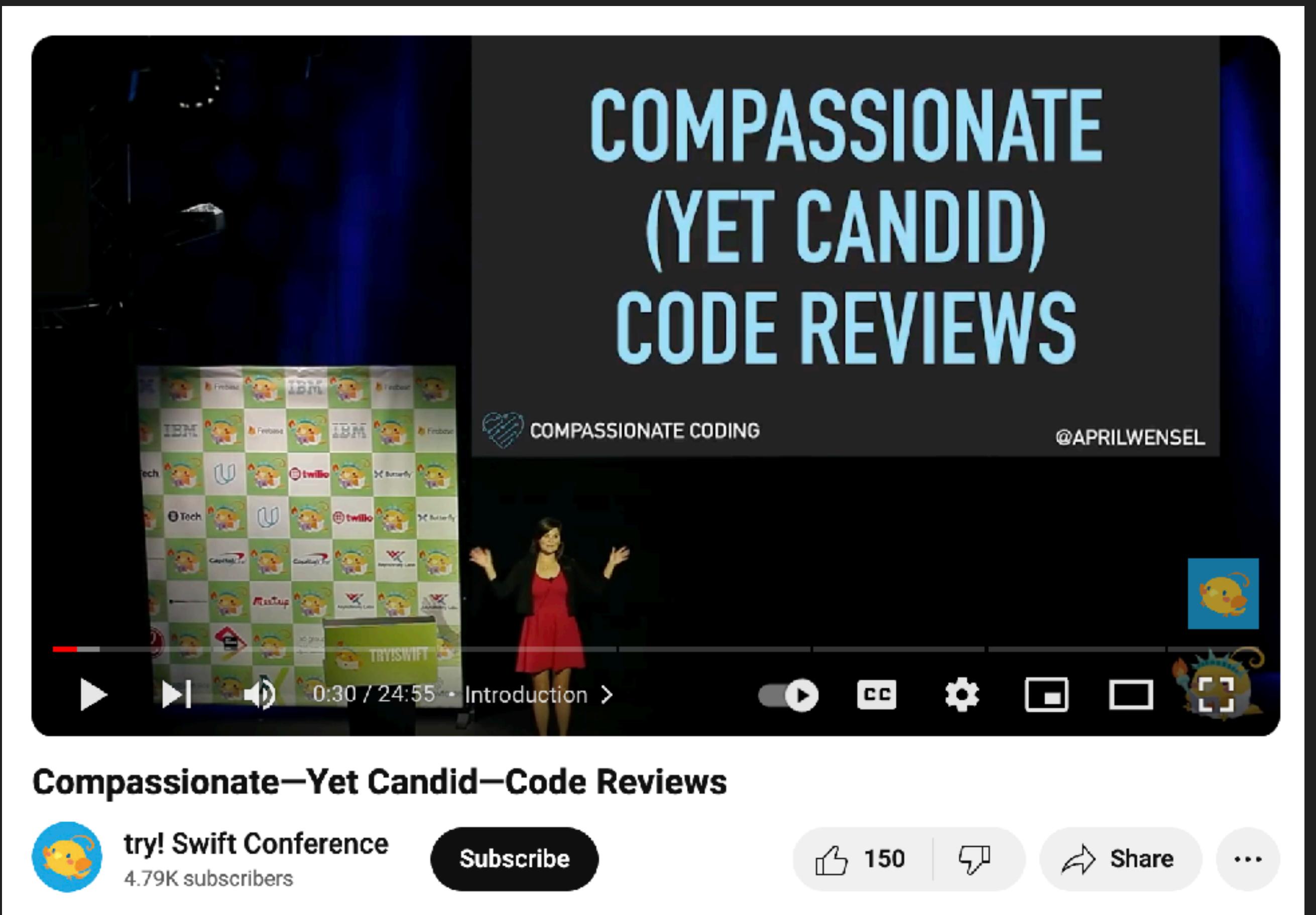


Compassion for yourself, teammates,
and clients can motivate you to clean
up code

HOW DO WE PREVENT TECH DEBT?

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ASK: HOW CAN I MAKE LIFE
EASIER FOR PEOPLE READING
OR MAINTAINING THIS CODE?



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ea8EiPZvh0>

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April Wensel ✅

@aprilwensel

...

Product owner: “We don’t have time to address technical debt.”

Same product owner: “Why does making a small change to the site take so much longer than it used to?!”



11:16 AM · Jul 8, 2024 · 63.1K Views

[View post engagements](#)

30

107

617

41



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EXPERIENCES
EMOTIONS
VALUES
NEEDS
FEARS
HOPES

EXPERIENCES
EMOTIONS
VALUES
NEEDS
FEARS
HOPES

WHAT DOES THE PRODUCT
OWNER NEED AND VALUE?

WHAT DO I NEED AND VALUE?

WHAT IS THE COMMON GROUND?



<https://tfthacker.medium.com/no-shame-in-self-care-reframe-your-lifes-journey-with-the-bike-analogy-8dc63a1763f6>

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STOP TO FIX THE BIKE



<https://tfthacker.medium.com/no-shame-in-self-care-reframe-your-lifes-journey-with-the-bike-analogy-8dc63a1763f6>

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SOMETIMES COMPASSION
MEANS ACCEPTANCE

PROBLEM: HIRING



Why It's Difficult To Hire (And Retain) Quality Tech Talent



Nik Froehlich Forbes Councils Member
Forbes Technology Council
COUNCIL POST | Membership (Fee-Based)



Jan 22, 2024, 07:30am EST

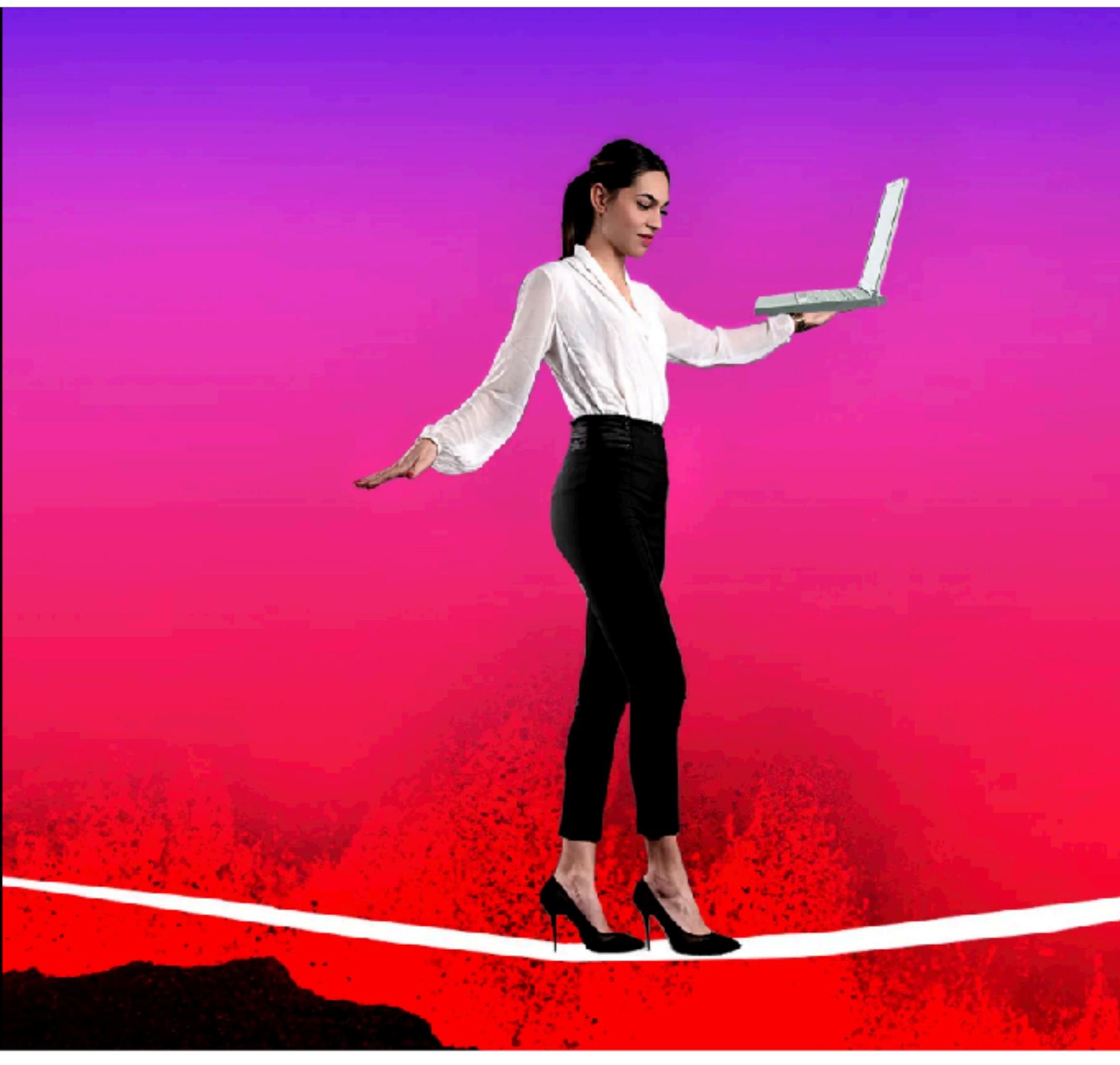
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbestechcouncil/2024/01/22/why-its-difficult-to-hire-and-retain-quality-tech-talent/>

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BY LAUREN GOODE BUSINESS MAR 4, 2024 5:00 AM

Why Tech Job Interviews Became Such a Nightmare

Rising interest rates led tech companies to become more demanding of potential hires. From lowball offers to endless interviews, it's tough out there for coders seeking jobs.



<https://www.wired.com/story/why-tech-job-interviews-became-such-a-nightmare/>

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WHO SUFFERS?

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HOW CAN WE BRING MORE
COMPASSION TO HIRING?

A photograph of a woman with long brown hair, seen from the back and side. She is wearing a dark, ribbed sweater. Her head is bowed, and she is covering her eyes with her hands, appearing to be crying or very upset. She is seated on a couch with a colorful, geometric-patterned throw pillow. In the background, there are some green plants and a window. The overall mood is one of distress or emotional pain.

AVOID ADVERSARIAL INTERVIEWS

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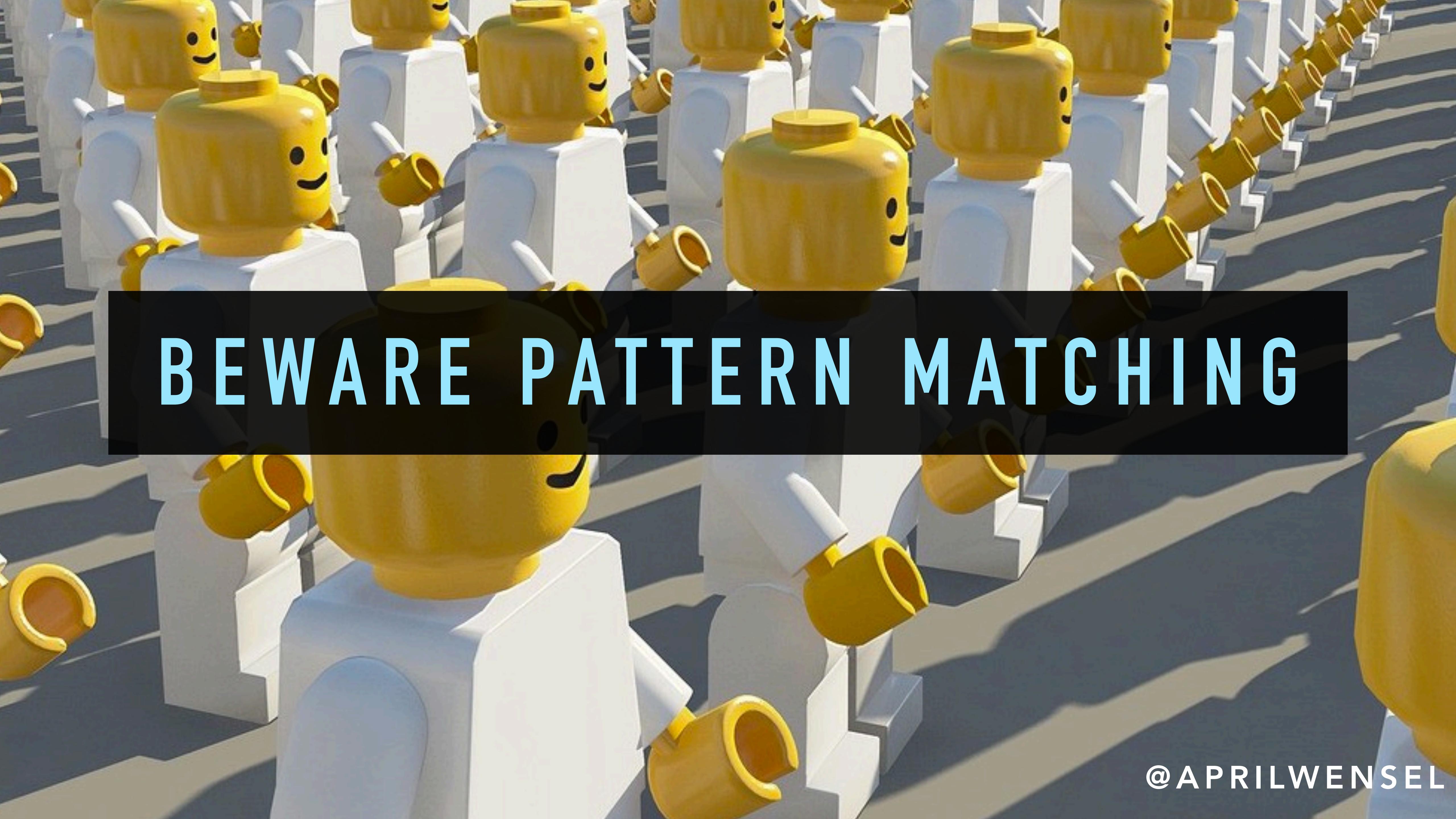


GIVE PEOPLE A VARIETY OF
OPPORTUNITIES TO SHINE



“MIRROR-TOCRACY”

-Kara Swisher



BEWARE PATTERN MATCHING



HIRE FOR MINDSET AND MOTIVATION
RATHER THAN SPECIFIC TECHNOLOGIES

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CONSIDER ANXIETY AND
STEREOTYPE THREAT

“...a 2010 study at the University of Waterloo in Ontario, Canada, found that people who **feel anxious** while doing math problems can have trouble completing a task as simple as **counting past five**...emotion can interfere with rudimentary brain processes.”

—Paul Hammerness and Margaret Moore, *Train Your Brain*

Maloney EA, Risko EF, Ansari D, Fugelsang J. Mathematics anxiety affects counting but not subitizing during visual enumeration. *Cognition*. 2010 Feb;114(2):293

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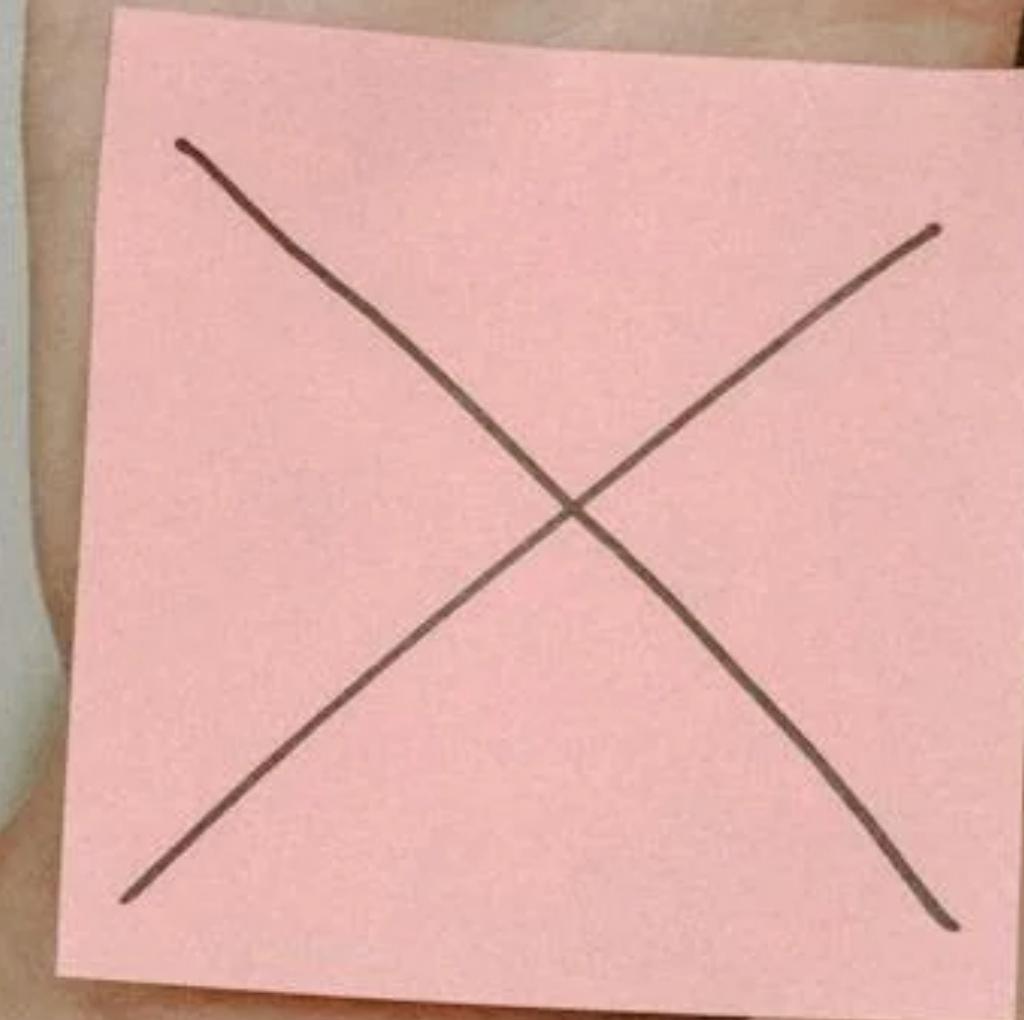
AVOID PUZZLES

UNDERSTAND DIFFERENT COMMUNICATION STYLES

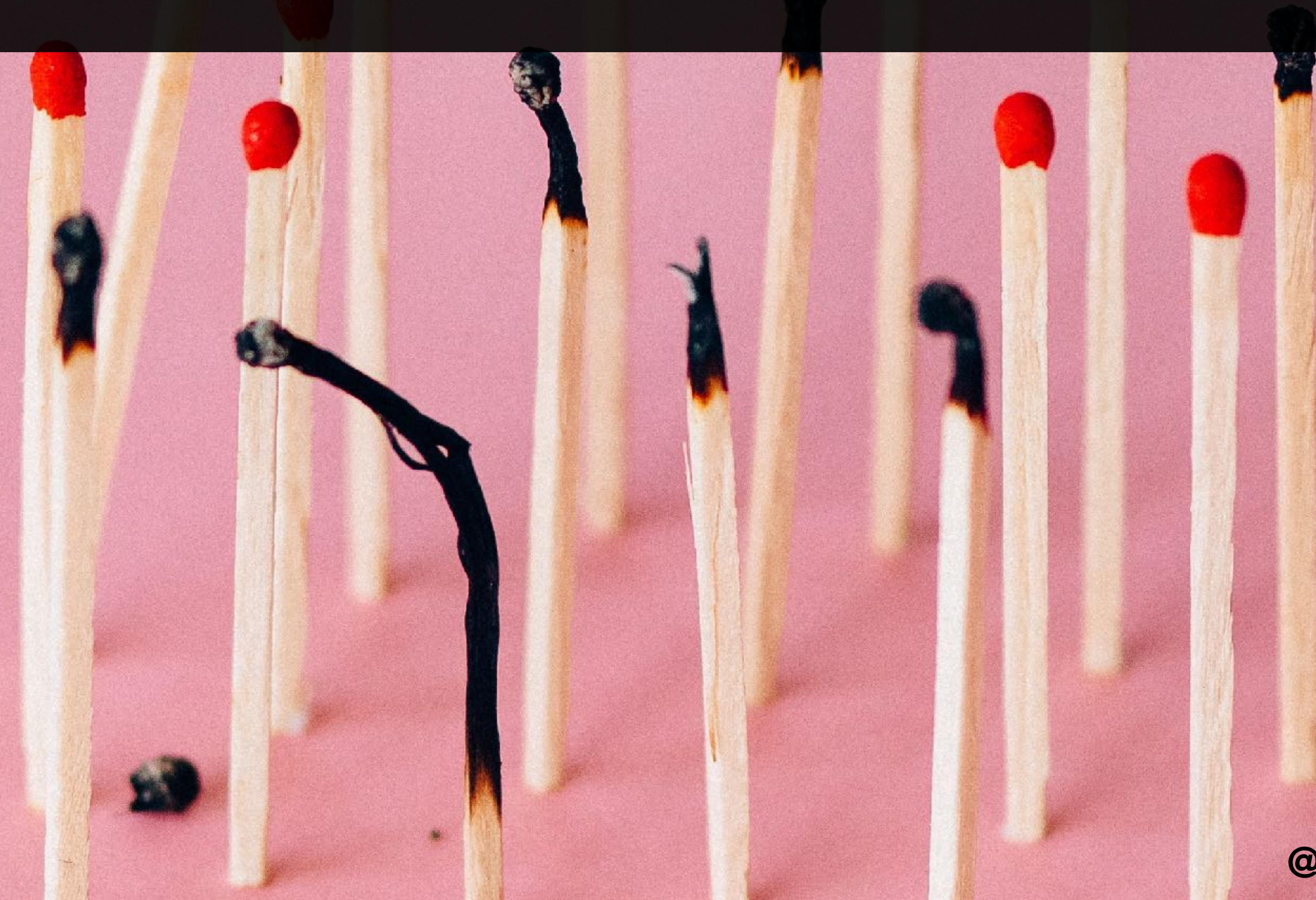


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DON'T PUNISH CANDIDATES BECAUSE
YOU DON'T LIKE INTERVIEWING



PROBLEM: BURNOUT



FROM MACHINES WE EXPECT...

VELOCITY
EFFICIENCY
PRODUCTIVITY



HUMANS NEED REST

From ‘quiet quitting’ to ‘coffee badging’ — why employees are less interested in work

PUBLISHED TUE, JUL 16 2024 9:52 AM EDT



Jessica Dickler
@JDICKLER

SHARE

<https://www.cnbc.com/2024/07/16/quiet-quitting-and-coffee-badging-why-employees-dont-want-to-work.html>

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HOW CAN WE APPLY COMPASSION?



“When we grow a lemon tree, we want it to be vigorous and beautiful. But, if it isn't...**we don't blame the tree.** We observe it... Perhaps we have not taken good care of it... **[H]uman beings are not very different from lemon trees.”**

—Thich Nhat Hanh, Interbeing

EXAMPLE: WHY DOES THIS
PROJECT KEEP GETTING
DELAYED?



BLOCKER: “TIRED”

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SLOW DOWN

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STOP TO FIX THE BIKE



<https://tfthacker.medium.com/no-shame-in-self-care-reframe-your-lifes-journey-with-the-bike-analogy-8dc63a1763f6>

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STOP TO DO NOTHING



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A wide-angle photograph of a natural landscape. In the foreground, there's a body of water with some ripples. To the left, there are green bushes and trees. On the right, there's a rocky shoreline. In the background, there are several green hills and mountains under a blue sky with white, scattered clouds.

“The more **high-tech** we become, the
more **nature** we need.”

—Richard Louv, *The Nature Principle*

BE GENTLE WITH
YOURSELF

THE PROVEN
POWER OF BEING KIND
TO YOURSELF

Self- Compassion



KRISTIN NEFF, PH.D.

“Instead of mercilessly judging and criticizing yourself for various inadequacies or shortcomings, self-compassion means you are **kind** and **understanding** when confronted with personal failings...”

—Kristin Neff

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A photograph of a person from the waist up, wearing a light grey ribbed sweater. Their arms are raised in front of them, palms facing forward. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

SET BOUNDARIES



FIND COMMUNITY

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FIND MEANING



<https://alltechishuman.org/>

Welcome to The Dev Health OS

A guide to supporting health in tech and finding restful work

[Read the OS](#)

[Start the Workbook](#)



<https://www.devhealthos.com/>

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COMPASSION ≈
EMPATHY +
DESIRE TO HELP



A photograph of a person with dark hair and glasses, wearing a red and black plaid shirt and orange headphones, sitting at a desk and working on a computer. The computer setup includes a large monitor displaying code and two smaller screens. The person is looking down at the keyboard. The background shows a window with a view of a city skyline.

COMPASSION IS A SKILL

COMPASSION IS A LENS



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TECHNICAL DEBT



HIRING



BURNOUT



"SOFT" CAN BE POWERFUL

The background of the image is a high-angle, nighttime aerial photograph of a city. The city lights create a complex pattern of orange, yellow, and white streaks against the dark sky and terrain. In the foreground, there's a large, solid black rectangular area that serves as a backdrop for the text.

BUT THESE ARE SYSTEMIC
ISSUES...

“When people speak of ‘political,’ ‘social,’ or ‘international’ problems, they often do not realize that these conditions are nothing more than the accumulated thoughts and actions of millions of individuals. And the only way to change world conditions is to change ourselves.”

—Encinitas SRF Meditation Gardens booklet



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THANK YOU!

Please stay in touch!



Free newsletter: compassionatecoding.com/signup

✉️ april@compassionatecoding.com

🐦 [@aprilwensel](https://twitter.com/aprilwensel)

Come get a sticker!

