

# co(p|d)ing with depression

Sean Moran-Richards

<https://grz.li>

@flying\_grizzly

Hi. I hope you're all doing well, and enjoying the conference.

I'm Sean. A little about me:

- from LA, but live in Bath
- Ruby and Rails dev at the University of Bath, working on our CMS applications
- I have been developing for a year or so now
- I used to be an actor, this is a second career (or third, or whatever)
- I play a lot of board and tabletop roleplaying games
  - if you need a reason to come talk to me later, I love talking about RPGs and AP podcasts
- I also really like baseball and cricket, but I cannot for the life of me hold a conversation about it
- I suffer from depression

## content warning

- personal disclosures
- depression
- (but no suicidal thoughts)
- little bits of profanity
- *\_Neverending Story\_* gifs

Quickly—if anyone isn't comfortable with

- personal disclosures on my part
- talking about depression (but no talk of suicide)
- bits of profanity
- really really rough *Neverending Story* gifs

you might want to make an exit right about now. No hard feelings. Come talk to me about RPGs later.

## also, not a doctor

- I'm not giving medical advice
- like, the \*opposite\* of Bones



Worth noting:

- not a medical professional
- this isn't medical advice
- I **do** hope it helps
- at least by normalizing talking about depression and mental health

If what I have to say does help you, that is amazing, and I am glad. But I'm not proposing this as a panacea or anything. I really just want to start this conversation.

## so... depression

*Mental health problems are all too common in the workplace and it is the leading cause of sickness absence.*

*A staggering 70 million work days are lost each year due to mental health problems in the UK, costing employers approximately £2.4 billion per year. [1]*

[1]: [Mental Health Foundation](<https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/our-work/mental-health-workplace>)

Let's talk about some stats for a second. This isn't a data driven talk, but it's good to have a little context.

Mostly right now I care about the first number. 2.4 billion is bad, but way less bad than that 70 million days people lose to mental health problems.

Let's do some quick calculations.

## so... depression

- population of the United Kingdom: 65,648,100 [1]
- working age population: ~43.2 million [1]
- working population: 32.25 million [2]

[1]: [Wikipedia UK demography]([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demography\\_of\\_the\\_United\\_Kingdom#Population](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demography_of_the_United_Kingdom#Population))

[2]: [ONS Labor market report March 2018](<https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/bulletins/uklabourmarket/march2018>)

Warning, I'm not a statistician, or sociologist, so some of this will be a little hack-handed. But I think it will illustrate a point.

Naive approach:

[CLICK]

UK's population is 65.6 million and change. So that's 1.06 days lost per person.

Except...

[CLICK]

Those are work days, so let's limit this to the population of working age \*(16-64). Naive still.  
So 43.2 million people, which is **1.6** days lost per person.

Except...

[CLICK]

We should adjust for employment rates and 'economic inactivity'. 32.25 million people in work.

## so... depression

- adults in contact with the NHS: 3 million [3]
- adults with open referrals with the NHS: 4 million [3]

[3]: [NHS Mental Health Data Hub](<https://digital.nhs.uk/data-tools-and-services/services/mental-health-data-hub/monthly-statistics>)

That gives an idea of the depth of the problem, but it's still pretty naive. Because not everyone does suffer from depression.

[CLICK]

[CLICK]

This means that 10.6% of the population is contacting the NHS about mental health.

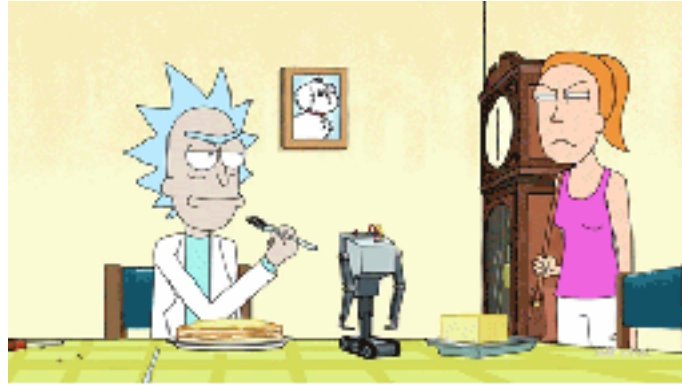
This is global across populations, which means 3 million people are accounting for 70 million days. So 23 days per person.

Also, that's just the number of people reporting to the NHS. It doesn't account for private treatment.

And none of this covers the people who aren't reporting at all.

[CLICK]

## so... depression, in tech



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[CLICK]

## so... depression, in tech

Either we're really lucky, or really screwed.

I don't have stats specific to the tech industry. We should probably assume they match more or less.

But here's the thing—there's a lot of talk about mental health happening in our industry right now.

- is it because a lot of companies are forward thinking and care?
- or is it because there's a ton of burnout in Silicon Valley and we're forced to talk about it?

At the end of the day though... we are talking about it.



matz is nice, so we are nice



...or BINSWAN

I think the Ruby community, as far as I've found has it right though.

I've found people in Ruby tend to be more 'people-y' people.

We work with a language that's explicitly optimized for developer happiness, and in every job I've interviewed for, I wasn't the one leading the conversation about work life balance.

And those conversations, in the jobs I've taken, turned out not to be a load of bull.

I don't think that it's a coincidence that a language designed for developer happiness has a community that places an emphasis on being human with each other.

Which is good for those of us who suffer from depression and maybe distance ourselves from others as a reaction.

pay it forward y'all

*Thanks very much for your submission. I realise it's a very expansive topic, but have you considered how we programmers can also address depression and mental health in individuals outside our industry?*

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When I submitted this talk, I got a piece of feedback on the proposal from Alex [wave!]

[PAUSE TO READ SLIDE]

Here's the shitty thing: there's no magic answer to this.

I can't think of an app that will drastically shift things (though if you have an idea that will work, let me know and I will contribute like whoa).

Plus, an app runs dangerously close to cutting humans out of the picture, which at least for me, would make things worse.

What helped me was having peers who I could talk to, really.

It's not a technical solution. It's a human one.

- we're privileged to work in supportive communities
- with people who listen and care
- and what we can do is pay that forward

pay it forward y'all

```
Sean.present(intro_complete: true)
```

I've done this talk before at the University, and the majority of the team came up to me at some point later to talk about it.

The people who hadn't been open about their mental health started sharing things they hadn't felt comfortable talking about. Same thing happened to me at Bath Ruby a month ago. The number of people who came up to me was staggering.

An app is impersonal, and is dangerously close to losing the human connection that matters when you're down.

Another human sharing, on the other hand... we should encourage that behavior everywhere.

**Those of us who benefit from support within tech, should do the same for our friends, family peers outside of tech.**

So....

[CLICK]

# co(p|d)ing with depression

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So in that spirit, I'll start.

This is how I cope with depression.

I am lucky enough that I don't need to medicate (but I would if I needed it).

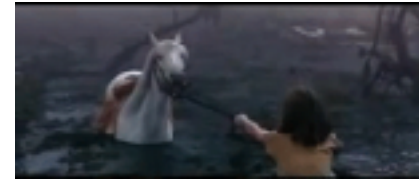
I don't see a therapist anymore, but I would again if I needed it.

These are just the ways that, when I start on a nosedive, I take care of myself and pull myself back through.

Also, this is where the Neverending Story gifs are going to start.

## depression makes me...

- avoid things that would be good for me
- terrified of ambiguity
- stagnate in inaction



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When I get depressed, these thoughts and self-perceptions are consistent:

- Feeling like I don't deserve good things
  - Including coming out of the depression
- Feeling like I don't deserve to connect with other people, including friends and family
- An *\*aversion\** to anything I think might improve my mood
- A lack of motivation to do things
- Anxiety, panic, and terror when presented with decisions
- Anxiety, panic, and terror when presented with ambiguity
- A razor's edge state of being where one thing not going my way can tailspin me further into the depression
- Lethargy and a will to completely stagnate
- A desire to punish myself

A big one is a desire to *\*prove\** I'm worthless by not allowing myself to do anything useful, worthwhile, productive, or even enjoyable.

And all of these make me ISOLATE MYSELF. Which is funny, because that's one thing that would probably help.

As a side note, my wife is amazing.

It is *\*really\** hard to deal with this.

## how I deal with it...

- brushing my teeth 2x a day
- showering every day
- going outside
- making random small decisions with no stakes



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I have to be really careful not to get caught in that when I see it coming.

Little bits of self-care make a big difference. Brushing at night, instead of just the morning because that's when it matters for the people I'll meet in the day.

Or showering—you can get away with one every other day if you're not a \*super\* stinky person—doing that every day makes a big psychological difference for me and my perception of my body and self.

And forcing myself to make tiny decisions, like which way to turn at a random corner, can help a lot.

These things force me to:

- Take care of myself
- Change my scenery, and hopefully perspective
- Or at least just get some fresh air
- Exercise my will on something with \*no\* stakes

[CLICK]

They sound silly, but it really is the small things that keep me on keel. And even still sometimes I'm Artax and not Atreyu.

# coding to cope with depression...

I also write code to help myself get through it.



Sneaky little vim/tmux setup showing off. You thought this was a non-technical talk didn't you?

I've also found that writing code helps me. And I've been puzzled as to why, because in a lot of ways, writing code represents a lot of the things that I typically don't want to do when I'm depressed:

- It's self-improving, practice
- It's constructive
- I enjoy it
- I have to make decisions, and it's full of ambiguity

# hello brb world

```
11   @client_params = client_params
12   @s3              = s3_client
13   @cloudfront      = cloudfront_client unless @distro_id.nil?
14   end
15
16   # Convenience constructor for creating a test object that uses the AWS SDK response stubs
17   def self.new_with_stubbed_responses
18     new(stub_responses: true)
19   end
20
21   def define_bucket_redirect_rules_for(short_urls)
22     config = s3_bucket_site_config_with(short_urls)
23     @s3.put_bucket_website(
24       bucket: @bucket,
25       website_configuration: config
26     )
27   end
28   alias publish_redirects_for define_bucket_redirect_rules_for
29
30   def create_cloudfront_invalidation_for(slug)
31     return unless @distro_id
32     path = object_path(slug)
33     uri_reference = "#{slug}-#{Time.now.iso8601}"
34     @cloudfront.create_invalidation(distribution_id: @distro_id,
```

Disappearing into a code problem also \*indulges\* a lot of my impulses when I'm depressed. And... while I wouldn't recommend indulging depressive impulses to everyone, it is what I do, and it helps \*me\*.

I use code to redirect a lot of my self-destructive impulses into being helpful.

[PAUSE]

I give in to my myopathy, tunnel vision, need to block out the rest of the world.

I put on headphones, and I let myself give in to the desire to be isolated. This lets me stop worrying about 'feeling better for others', which is a big thing for me—the guilt of being an emotional burden.



```

@s3      = s3_client
@cloudfront = cloudfront_client unless @distro_id.nil?
end

  Convenience constructor for creating a test object that uses the AWS SDK response stubs
  ef self.new_with_stubbed_responses
  new(stub_responses: true)
end

  ef define_bucket_redirect_rules_for(short_urls)
  config = s3_bucket_site_config_with(short_urls)
  @s3.put_bucket_website(
    bucket: @bucket,
    website_configuration: config
  )
end
  alias publish_redirects_for define_bucket_redirect_rules_for

  ef create_cloudfront_invalidation_for(slug)
  return unless @distro_id
  path = object_path(slug)
  txn_reference = "#{slug}-#{Time.now.iso8601}"
  @cloudfront.create_invalidation_for(distribution_id: @distro_id,

```

When I stop badgering myself to feel better, I free up a lot of my mental faculties again, and I can devote my full attention to the code.

Meanwhile, I'm not being confronted with the social world as much and so I'm not berating myself as much for failing at an imagined everything.

I'm not feeding the fire of self-loathing.

## a sense of flow...

- ecstasy
- serenity
- motivation

[Flow, from Wikipedia]([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flow\\_\(psychology\)#Positive\\_experiences](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flow_(psychology)#Positive_experiences))

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With mental energy to focus on my code, I will usually get into a sense of flow.

Write tests => Fail tests => Write code => (Check Stack Overflow =>) Pass tests => ...

(more on this in a second)

Flow: technical term.

It gets used a lot in performance theory.

Also, ecstasy, literally, out of time and space or body.

And motivation—whatever provides flow becomes its own motivation.

## about that flow...

Writing code is more than just a  
single sentence in the speaker  
notes on that last slide.

But... coming back to the 'step' of writing code.

This is more than just a step or a single slide in a deck

It's hours. It's days. It can also be kind of grueling sometimes, and it's not always easy to keep going without something to pull you through.

This is the core of my whole approach here. I hook into my addiction to seeing the test suite turn green when practicing TDD to keep me moving

# about that flow...

This is my own test suite. So it's extra special to me.

So how does this work with my desire to punish myself?

Starting with red tests almost perversely engages my desire to make my life difficult, but in a productive and (for me) healthy way.

Sometimes I run the test suite just to see it go green.

This always feels a little like I'm playing with fire, indulging what is effectively an addiction. It's benign yea, but...

Solving the problems required to make those tests green also is difficult and satisfies the same desire to make my life difficult.

Very importantly, that difficulty can't get overwhelming.

## flow leads to myopathy...

```
25 let(:aws_publisher) { described_class.new }
26 it 'sends a PUT request to configure the bucket with redirects and index and error documents' do
27   WebMock.stub_request(:put, "https://#{ENV['AWS_S3_BUCKET_NAME']}.s3.amazonaws.com/?website")
28   aws_publisher.publish_redirects_for([ShortUrl.new(slug: 'da-slug', redirect: 'http://www.example.com'),
29   ShortUrl.new(slug: 'da-slug-2', redirect: 'http://www.example.com')])
30   expect(WebMock).to have_requested(:put, "https://#{ENV['AWS_S3_BUCKET_NAME']}.s3.amazonaws.com/?website")
31   .with { |req| req.body == bucket_config_update_request_body }
32 end
33 end
34
35 describe '#create_cloudfront_invalidation_for' do
36   let(:aws_publisher) { described_class.new }
37   it 'sends a create_invalidation request to Cloudfront' do
38     WebMock.stub_request(:post, cloudfront_url)
39     aws_publisher.create_cloudfront_invalidation_for 'foo'
40     expect(WebMock).to have_requested(:post, cloudfront_url)
41     .with { |req|
42       Nokogiri::XML(req.body).at_css('InvalidationBatch Paths Items Path')
43       .text.eql?('/foo')
44     }
45   end
46 end
47
48 describe '#cloudfront_invalidate_all' do
49   let(:aws_publisher) { described_class.new_with_stubbed_responses }
50   it 'calls #cloudfront_invalidate with a wildcard parameter' do
51     expect(aws_publisher).to receive(:create_cloudfront_invalidation_for).with('*')
```

Also, Tests provide structure--they give me the luxury of myopathy again, to focus on only one thing at a time (unit tests are especially great when I'm like this).

Which is such a gods-send, because honestly, I still can barely function when I've got to make complex decisions.

... and yea, that slide title is a reference to the path to the Dark Side. Because this is absolutely a weird and hairy place for me. But it also works. Just a friendly reminder that just because it works for me, it doesn't mean it will for you. Or that it will continue to work for me. Doesn't mean it won't either... just know what you're playing with. And see a doctor if you need to. Please. Doctors are amazing humans who deserve all of our gratitude.

when things are really bad...

I do code tutorials.

Sometimes, making my own decisions about tests is too much.

Sometimes, having to even decide which test to write first is too much.

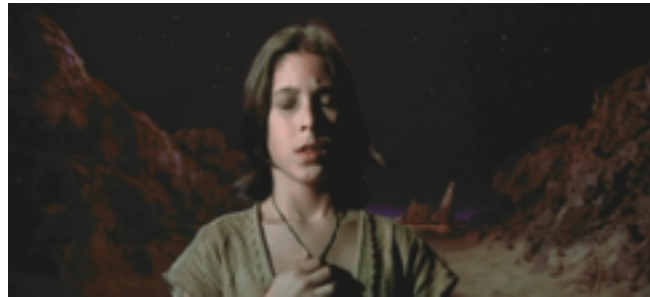
At this point, I pick up tutorials.

Someone has done all the work, has abstracted away all the ambiguity.

And I still feel like I've done something cool.

I've got the Rust Book's intro to Rust on the back burner right now (it's great, go check it out).

after a while..



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This loops back on itself over and over.

And eventually I can start dealing with more complexity.

[CLICK]

Luckily for me more often than not this continues until either the momentum itself makes me feel productive and saner, or until I've got something I can show others that I'm actually a little bit proud of

after a while...

I'll have made something.

That I want to share.

<https://grz.li/s301>

After a while, I'll have **made** something.

And I often want to share it.

That sense of accomplishment is often enough to snap me out of depression, and I'll go find my Ruby friends in Bath and badger them to look at the cool thing I did (and ask for feedback maybe, depending on how fragile I'm still feeling).

But this is the point. I use code to get me through the really shitty days, back to a place where I want to talk with other humans again.

[CLICK]

That short URL points to a Github repo with a URL shortener (not yet the one handling that short URL, but soon...), which is a project I work on when I'm depressed (and not).

I try to keep a good issue back log for me to pick up when I can't make decisions (though I will always welcome others' contributions too—it's also there for them).

Turns out it won't work the way I thought it would... but still



## coping



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I like coping. It's good when I'm coping.

## concluding things...

- we are lucky to work in the community we work in
- depression is normal; we should make people feel it's normal. And OK
- share if you can; or listen to someone who needs it. Pay it forward

We are very lucky to work in a community that pays as much attention to our mental health as it does

For me, the first time I heard someone openly talk about their own experiences had a very big impact. It made me feel normal—we should share that with everyone

We have an advantage because the tech community talks about mental health, and is paying attention.

I don't want to issue a challenge to everyone that "next time you're in the pub tell your non-tech friends about your depression", because everyone's in a different place, and that feels bullshit and exploitative. But if you see some way you can share our good luck with others, go for it.

Mental health is hard--I'm not a doctor, and sometimes what I've talked about here isn't enough for me. I'm lucky enough that it usually is. But I'm always careful to say that this is what works for me, and I don't want to push this on anyone else as a simple solution

## resources

- [Get help now](<https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/your-mental-health/getting-help>)
- [Mental Health Foundation publications](<https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications>)
- [Managing (founder) stress](<https://stripe.com/atlas/guides/founder-stress>)
- the NHS (seriously. These people are lovely, if a tad overworked and under resourced)
- your company

Companies have tax incentives to offer welfare counselling. Find out if they do it.

```
class Presentation; end
```

Sean Moran-Richards

<https://grz.li>

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slides are available at [grz.li/coding-depression](https://grz.li/coding-depression)

Anyway, this is me.

Thank you all for listening, and I hope you enjoy the rest of the conference.

Come find me in breaks to talk about whatever.

And now to mix my gif metaphors, I'm off to be an audience person like

[CLICK]