

# Title Slide

- Hello, everyone!
- I'm Kattni.
- Here's the most important thing to know about me:
- I am tolerated by a cat and three kittens...

## Kitten slide

- ... who continue to let me live with them.
- In 2017, I ended up starting a six-year career as, among other things, an open source community leader.
- The community I built over those six years was safe, welcoming, inclusive, and supportive.
- We had a thorough and evolving code of conduct, which was strictly enforced.
- We actively ensured new folks were welcomed, and encouraged appropriate behavior.
- We highlighted those who embodied our values by promoting them to official roles.
- Throughout the years, we continuously received feedback that people's experiences were significantly more positive than what they were used to.
- While this was excellent, it was deeply disappointing that the experience wasn't more common.
- Today I want to talk to you about the underlying problems with online communities, and how bringing about change within the system can begin with you.

## There is a serious problem.

- There is a serious problem with online communities, and open source is no exception.

## Pervasive antagonistic behavior, mistreatment, and abuse.

- The issue is pervasive antagonistic behavior, mistreatment, and abuse.

# Online Harassment

- Online harassment is now commonplace, and it's more widespread you might realise.
- **56% of adults in the US**
  - 56% of adults in the US report having experienced some form of harassment on the internet.
  - The 2024 survey split harassment into less severe forms including offensive name-calling, and purposeful embarrassment, and more severe including physical threats, stalking, doxing, swatting, and sustained or sexual harassment.
- **41% severely harassed**
  - 41% of adults surveyed reported being the target of at least one of the more severe forms of abuse.
- **Disproportionate effects**
  - While harassment can happen to anyone, it disproportionately affects marginalised and underrepresented people.
  - This group reports being harassed more for their identity, which can range from race or ethnicity, to physical appearance, disability, gender identity, or sexual orientation.
- **Severity increasing**
  - The research indicates that the severity and intensity of harassment is increasing.
  - More than ever it's critically important to focus on building safe, inclusive communities.
  - The broader topic of safety and inclusion is a much bigger one than I can fully do justice today, but I want to acknowledge that you cannot separate it from the conversation about harassment in online spaces.
- **91% see the problem**
  - A 2020 report indicates that 91% of Americans say people being harassed or bullied online is a problem.
  - That is nearly everyone.
  - And yet, it continues.

## Why does it continue?

- Why does it continue?
- **Distance and anonymity**
  - Some people are comfortable being horrible on the internet.
  - They distance themselves from the target being another person.
  - Or, they use the ability to remain anonymous to avoid facing consequences.

- ***Inevitability***
  - Many are resigned to people being terrible, and feel that the continuation is inevitable.
  - This feeling can lead to it seeming pointless to even try to initiate change.
- ***Priorities***
  - In general, people don't prioritise things that don't affect them directly.
  - Especially powerful people.
  - They're not the victims of harassment and abuse.
  - They instead prioritise things like money and growth over safety.
- ***Behavioral norms***
  - When people see someone being treated badly, it can be perceived as tacit permission to do the same.
  - Some may believe this is "just how it is", and choose to tolerate or engage in these behaviors.
- ***Ignored or encouraged***
  - Too often harmful behaviors are ignored or, even worse, encouraged.
  - The apathetic approach of ignoring harassment allows communities to fester and degrade over time, while active encouragement guarantees they will deteriorate quickly.
- ***Victims and advocates leave***
  - When it becomes clear that nothing is being done, victims and advocates are forced to continue dealing with abuse or leave.
  - This exodus disproportionately affects marginalised people.
  - This is the result of intentional behavior, designed to deliberately drive these groups out.
  - As they leave, community membership becomes only those engaging in or supporting harassment.
  - All of this is unacceptable.

## Fixing a Deeply Systemic Issue

- How can we fix such a deeply systemic issue?
- ***Pace yourself***
  - We can't fix the whole internet in one go, and trying would absolutely lead to failure.
  - We have to start somewhere.
  - Pacing yourself is necessary.
  - The following lays the groundwork for addressing the issue.
- ***Start small***

- Start small, or you'll feel overwhelmed and it'll feel impossible.
- Small changes create momentum, which carries effects beyond your actions.
- ***Begin where you are***
  - You can start by effecting change within the spaces you lead, maintain, or occupy, by engaging in purposeful actions.
- ***Break the pattern***
  - When leaders behave appropriately, communities follow.
  - When a community behaves appropriately, community members, and even leaders, follow.
  - Break the pattern and be a role model and the better person you want to see.
- ***Build inclusive, safe communities***
  - We must strive to build inclusive, safe communities.
  - This is fundamentally critical to the safety and well-being of those involved.
  - It's not enough to simply call a community safe.
- ***Prove it***
  - The safest assumption for those who are targets for harassment is that online spaces are inherently unsafe.
  - It's the responsibility of a community to prove that it is safe, through public, active, and continuing effort, and demonstrate a dedication to protecting everyone who participates.
- Now you have some concept of where to begin.
- However, for real change to happen, you need concrete, practical actions.
- Which leads to the question...

## Ok, but what can I actually do?

- What can you actually do?
- There are three categories I'll cover today, each with specific actions.
- Do what you are able, and remember, small changes amplify.

## Exhibit, emphasise, and encourage appropriate behaviors.

- First and foremost, exhibit, emphasise, and encourage the behaviors you expect to see in others.
- This is highly effective.

- The following will provide you a solid foundation.

## Protecting Online Spaces

- How can you outwardly show that you're doing your best to protect online spaces?
- ***Code of Conduct or Community Guidelines***
  - Implement a Code of Conduct or Community Guidelines, and display it prominently within your space, regardless of the size or type of community.
  - Guidelines don't need to be lengthy, however, they must be clear, and include explicit enforcement mechanisms.
  - You must demonstrate that you will carry out enforcement with consistency and follow-through.
- ***Be consistent***
  - Across the board, it's important to be consistent with your actions and treatment of others.
  - When it comes to enforcing community guidelines, people should know what to expect if they or someone else violates them.
  - That isn't to say that your guidelines can't evolve, but you should be transparent about changes.
- ***Follow through***
  - At its most basic, follow-through means doing what you say you'll do.
  - More critically, it means enforcing the guidelines, as outlined, regardless of who the offender is.
  - Keep in mind, by the time you are enforcing consequences, the victim has already gone through the incident, and the experience of reporting it.
  - This is the only way you can assure them that they can safely remain in the community.
- ***Obstacles***
  - If you're not hearing that there's a problem, it doesn't necessarily mean there isn't one.
  - If one person comes forward, you cannot write it off as it being "only one person", as mistreatment and abuse are rarely singular events.
  - Some communities choose to work around an issue by discretely warning newcomers of an offender's behaviors, instead of responding directly.
  - Sometimes when the offender is someone you know and like, it's easy to find ways to blame the victim.
  - Recognising the behavior and pattern of abuse is incredibly difficult, but it's imperative to the task of resolving it.

- **Outcomes**

- When follow-through and consistency are not maintained, people lose confidence in the community's ability to keep them safe.
- Upholding the promises you make to people can lead to successfully fostering a healthy, diverse community.
- A community that's home to diverse people, will lead to at-risk people feeling comfortable joining.
- However, for this to even begin, it must be abundantly clear that the community is willing and prepared to support and protect all of its members.
- But what if you're not the maintainer of a space? What can you do to help?

- **Support through action**

- Support, patronise, and promote only communities that have a Code of Conduct that they diligently and consistently uphold.
- Refuse to be a part of communities that do not meet these criteria, or allow people to be harassed.
- Your presence in safe, inclusive spaces helps reinforce them.
- You have the power to speak through your actions, even when you don't feel comfortable communicating directly.

## Fundamentals

- These are some fundamental things you can do.

- **Foster a welcoming, inclusive environment**

- You can help foster an appropriately welcoming and inclusive environment through your interactions and behavior.

- **Include deliberately**

- You must be deliberate and intentional about whom you welcome and include.
- Allowing even one offender to join and remain in your community is a signal to others that their presence and behavior will be tolerated.
- Growing a community that's welcoming to people who will encourage a safe, inclusive environment, results in that environment.
- Counterintuitively, growing a community that's welcoming to everyone and everything results in the opposite.

- **Engage in beneficial behaviors**

- Engage in the behaviors you want to see in others.
- New members of a community look to everyone there for what the culture is, and what behaviors are and are not tolerated.

- It's important to set a consistent, tangible example.
- ***Remain mindful***
  - Your actions affect everyone involved in a community.
  - You must remain mindful of your actions and their impact on those around you.
  - This is especially true when related to maintaining a safe community, as this has the biggest potential to cause the most harm.
- ***Human interaction***
  - Always remember that the entity on the other end is another human, like you, with feelings, emotions, and widely varying environments, cultures, and lived experiences.
  - Even if you might never intentionally do so, it's always easier to mistreat someone when you forget they're a person.
  - This is one of the most important things to keep in mind with all interactions.

## Communication Has Its Limits

- Online communication has its limits.
- ***Disadvantages of text***
  - Textual communication has serious limitations, including a complete lack of body language, intonation, and facial expressions.
  - If something is unclear, ask the person to clarify.
  - For example, you can say: "I think I'm hearing you say that you feel (blank) because of (blank)."
  - When people see you reaching for an empathetic connection, they'll correct your guess if needed.
- ***Language barriers***
  - People for whom a given language is not their first, second, or beyond, language can struggle with that language, which can result in seeming short or rude.
  - Humor, idioms and colloquialisms are different in every language, and are sometimes one of the last things someone learns.
  - Choosing simpler words and straightforward phrasing helps maintain accessible communication.
- ***Age and generational differences***
  - People of different age and generational groups communicate in vastly different ways.
  - There are endless examples of this.
  - Punctuation, shortened words, emojis and slang all lead to different interpretations.
  - Try to be clear, and remain objective.
- ***Context***

- You have no idea whether the person you're dealing with is someone aiming to troll, or a good person having a wildly terrible day.
- Assume positive intent until you are given a reason to reevaluate.
- This will help provide context, and make the situation clearer.
- Doing your best to avoid biases, and keep these limitations in mind, will help you better understand those you are communicating with.

## Send a Better Message

- It's also important to practise more effective communication.
- ***Consider phrasing***
  - There are always multiple ways to phrase something, and your choice has a huge effect on how it is received.
  - To ensure understanding across various barriers, it is important to be direct and unambiguous.
  - This doesn't mean limiting what you say, but it does mean considering how you're saying it.
- ***Respond thoughtfully***
  - There's often an immediate reaction to communication.
  - Written communication provides you with more time to think about how to reply.
  - Thoughtful responses can mean the difference between escalating a situation or diffusing it.
  - It's okay to take the time to get back to someone later, as long as you communicate when, and follow through with your response.
- ***Infer intent***
  - Choosing to perceive a message as neutral or positive, gives the person the benefit of the doubt, and keeps the tone of the whole conversation moving in that direction.
  - It also allows you to reply more effectively, by addressing the message content, instead of the perceived tone.
- ***Choose your words***
  - Most languages have many series of words that have essentially the same meaning, but can have very different implications.
  - Unnecessarily using complicated, or unusual words can lead to confusion, and there are almost always more obvious or common words available.
  - This is especially relevant with cultural and language barriers, as people may be relying on translations or dictionary definitions.
- ***"Easy" vs. "straightforward"***



- For example, consider the words "easy" and "straightforward".
- When you state that a task is "easy", you set the expectation that it should be effortless.
- When someone tries and finds it difficult or fails, they may blame themselves.
- The word "straightforward" speaks to the nature of the task, instead setting the expectation that it should be clearly outlined, which is often what was meant to begin with.
- These concepts are important with all communication...

## Feedback

- ... and providing feedback is no exception.
- ***Constructive is a positive***
  - Maintaining a welcoming, inclusive environment doesn't mean that you can't point out issues.
  - Constructive feedback can help people grow and improve, and if this is your goal, you need to be willing to provide it.
- ***Choose a supportive approach***
  - Choosing a supportive approach to feedback positively affects how it is received.
  - This approach to behavioral feedback is far more likely to result in the person being willing to consider change, and continuing support reinforces improved behaviors.
  - When it comes to reviewing a contribution, you often have no idea who you're working with.
  - A new contributor would clearly benefit from your support, and a seasoned expert definitely isn't likely to mind it.
  - Instead of jumping right into your feedback, start with something like "I appreciate your contribution!"
  - This can help set a positive tone from the beginning.
- ***Suggest alternatives***
  - When changes are needed, it is important to suggest alternatives, and provide an explanation for why.
  - This empowers the person, giving them somewhere to start, and enables them to not feel like they're simply being told what to do.
  - When someone is acting in good faith and makes a mistake, this may be an appropriate response.
  - Instead of saying, "The comment you made was wrong.", you could say, "This word was inappropriate. Please consider this word instead."

- In a review, this is one of the best ways to successfully guide a contributor through the process.
- Consider the difference between saying "Your code is wrong.", or saying, "I see what you're trying to do here. I have a suggestion for line 34 that would shorten up your code."
- In both cases, the second one isn't only clearer and more productive, it better helps them accomplish your expectations, and increases the likelihood of feedback being implemented successfully.
- ***Respect time and effort***
  - You should always respect people's time and effort, especially when they are volunteering.
  - Participating in a community in any way takes time and energy, and acknowledgement goes a long way.
  - Even if a contribution not what you initially expect, you can still show appreciation.
  - This last thing might seem simple, and the most obvious, but it is routinely overlooked.
  - Thank people for their work.
  - Taking the time to clearly express thanks is one of the most clear ways that you can validate someone.
- ***Appreciate others' feedback***
  - You will almost certainly do or say something harmful at some point, unintentionally or otherwise.
  - When you receive feedback, resist the urge to get defensive.
  - Acknowledge what you did, how it may have impacted others, and explain how you'll improve.
  - Everyone makes mistakes.
  - The important thing is how you handle what comes next.

## For those who are able, there is another action you can take.

- There is another piece to this, however, not everyone is in a position to take it on.
- It is important to know your position, and doubly important to know that it's okay if you can't.

# Actively challenge harassment and antagonistic behavior.

- Actively challenge mistreatment, abuse, and antagonistic behavior where and when it is happening.
- This means deliberately confronting those engaging in harassment.

## Protecting Others

- If you have the capacity, you must protect others.
- ***Only for those who can***
  - This is absolutely not something everyone can do.
  - For some, doing this could be outright dangerous, and should be avoided.
  - Others simply won't have the bandwidth or capacity.
- ***Understand your role***
  - There are those, however, for whom this is a safe and realistic possibility.
  - Even so, there are still important considerations.
  - Most critically, are you prepared to potentially become a target?
  - If yes, then you're likely in a position to take these actions.
  - If not, there are still ways you can help.
  - This first part can be done by anyone.
- ***Report these behaviors***
  - When you witness someone being mistreated or abused, report it.
  - Know that if you're uncomfortable, others almost certainly are too.
  - Most reporting situations allow for you to remain anonymous.
  - This enables you to stand up for someone without risking becoming a target yourself.
  - The steps that follow do not protect you from this.
- ***Use your privilege***
  - If you are someone that has enough privilege that people in a community will listen to you, you have an obligation to use that privilege to speak out in support of those who aren't being listened to.
  - As someone with influence, choosing to remain silent can be actively harmful.
  - You are in one of the best positions to make a positive difference in the worst situations.
  - Privilege is a tremendously effective tool to leverage against harassment.
  - It's up to everyone to use the tools at their disposal to contribute to this effort.

- ***Confront perpetrators***

- Those in a position to must directly confront harassers.
- Challenge abusive behavior directly.
- Tell the person to stop.
- Do not validate defensive responses.
- As a community leader, it's your responsibility follow up with an appropriate response.
- Confrontation is often enough to disengage an active situation.
- However, when perpetrators are acting with intent to harm, they have likely done so before, and are likely to do so again.
- Therefore, you should be prepared to engage more than once.

- ***Recognise collaborators***

- Anytime harassment is happening, there are almost always collaborators, who make apologies and excuses.
- Perpetrators depend on collaborators to legitimise them and provide plausible deniability.
- You must challenge and confront the collaborators as well to address the problem as a whole.
- Removing only the perpetrator will leave a perpetrator-shaped-void that will quickly be filled.

## Finally, there is the most important action... for everyone.

- I want to leave you with the most important thing any of us can do.
- This applies to everyone.

## Take care of yourself.

- Take care of yourself.

## Protecting Yourself

- Protecting yourself is necessary and non-negotiable.
- ***Mistreatment will happen***
  - When venturing into online spaces, you'll almost certainly encounter mistreatment.

- There are communities that are safe.
- However, it can take time and energy to find them, and there's the potential to experience harassment along the way.
- As it's essentially impossible to avoid, you need to take steps to protect and take care of yourself.

- ***Focus within your control***

- It's incredibly important to focus on what you can control, which, to be clear, is really only yourself.
- You control who and what you give your time and energy to, and where and how you engage.
- There's an endless list of things you can't control.
- It can be a lot of work to truly internalise the difference.
- However, it empowers you to focus on the things within your control.

- ***Track your mental health status***

- Your mental health status is constantly changing in response to both internal and external factors.
- You must check in with yourself regularly.
- As you start participating more in various things, it's especially important to create a checkpoint and establish a baseline, so you have a state to compare to moving forward.
- Try to set a reasonable expectation for your available capacity.
- It takes a lot of work to remain aware of how much you can give, and even more to admit when you are becoming overwhelmed.
- Responding appropriately to your needs is the most important thing you can do.

- ***Recognise the risk of burnout***

- Pushing for change in a sea of toxicity can be a thankless and exhausting experience.
- There's a very real risk of burnout.
- Burnout is incredibly difficult to identify before it fully sets in, but knowing the signs can help.
- It's different for everyone, and it can affect you physically, mentally and emotionally.
- It's often marked by fatigue, decreased motivation or performance, and negative feelings towards yourself or others.
- It leaves you unable to continue the pace you once kept, and comes with an extraordinary level of frustration.
- Recovering from burnout can take years.
- This is why it's so crucial to do your best to recognise it before it starts.
- Preventing it goes hand in hand with keeping track of your mental health.
- Check in regularly, and trust yourself when you feel something isn't right.

- As soon as you realise burnout is happening or happened, you need to take action.
- ***Make choices right for you***
  - Asking for help or support can make a huge difference, but sometimes it's not enough.
  - If the time comes, you can and should choose to step back from the situations that are pushing you beyond your healthy state, even if that means stepping back completely.
  - Stepping away can feel like abandonment, or giving up, but I assure you, it's not.
  - Your health and well-being should be your first priority.
  - Everything else can wait.
  - You cannot continue to put yourself and your energy into anything if you have neither left to give.
  - Step away, and let yourself rebuild before returning.

## Why does all of this matter?

- So...
- Why does all of this matter?
- Why should you care about how you act in the face of many who don't?

## Every action has an impact.

- Every action, negative or positive, has an impact.
- You can influence the impact you have... and...

## The Ongoing Effects

- ... the enduring effects that follow.
- ***Everything extends beyond***
  - The effects of any experience can extend far beyond the scope of the interaction, communication platform, or community.
  - The damage done by harassment doesn't stop when the person steps away from their device.
  - Directly or indirectly, it bleeds into every other part of their lives.
  - When we experience joy or positivity, we're more able to approach the next situation from a joyous or positive perspective.
  - In every situation, our brains are primed for how to handle the next.
  - Deliberately create positive experiences for others.

- ***Mitigating harm***

- Online harassment isn't simply an inconvenience.
- It results in real, quantifiable harm, emotionally, mentally, and physically.
- The effects of supporting someone who is experiencing abuse can be incredibly significant.
- Being validated and supported can begin to alleviate the feelings of fear, isolation, and helplessness that almost always accompany abuse.
- Never underestimate the lasting positive effects of building people up.

- ***Cultivating safety***

- Put bluntly: building safer communities saves lives.
- It is not optional.
- It's our obligation to prioritise safety within every community we choose to participate.
- Cultivating safe communities actively and visibly demonstrates a commitment to accomplishing change on a grand scale.

- ***Nurturing persistent involvement***

- The continued involvement of participants in a community is directly tied to their experience within it.
- People who feel safe and supported are far more likely to continue engaging with a community, and feel comfortable becoming a bigger part of it.
- Every community benefits from sustained involvement.

- ***Lasting reform***

- When appropriate behaviors become the norm, communities may begin to regulate themselves, pushing out those who act otherwise.
- It leads to change on a bigger scale, where the difference you made in one person's life, spreads to many others.
- It sets an expectation for how online communities can and should be.
- This fundamental shift in perspective and outlook the biggest key to bringing about lasting change.

## **This is a long term endeavor.**

- Things will not change overnight.
- This is a long-term endeavor that will take dedication, and requires support from many people to succeed.
- We have to start somewhere.

# It begins with you.

- You can be the source of change.
- It begins with you.
- Walt Whitman wrote a poem that begins by asking about the point of existing amidst so much struggle and sadness, and ends with his answer.

## Quote slide

- "That you are here -- that life exists and identity, that the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse."
- What will be your verse?
- Thank you.

## Thank you!

- Here's where you can find me. If you're interested in my slides or speaker notes, you can find both at the last link. If you have any questions about the statistics, that is also where you can find the resources and studies.
- Thank you for having me and pet a cat on the way out.