

SECURE360

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Patching the Psyche Against Cybersecurity Stress



Or: How I learned to stop worrying and love the job

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Expectations

- Interactive talk
 - Questions
 - Open discussion
 - Interrupt!
- No silver bullet

About the speaker

Nathan Larson, CISSP

- BA, CSci
- Developer: 20 years
 - C/C++/C#, Java, Python, Pascal, Assembler
 - Desktop, web, µ-processor (Zilog, Atmel, Intel)
- MS, software engineering
- Teacher/trainer: 14 years
 - University, grad school, corporate, conferences
- AppSec engineer: 13 years
 - Banks, IoT, medical devices
- Chapter lead, OWASP-MSP: 5 years

Disclaimer: I am not a doctor or other kind of health-care professional (but play one on stage).

Why this topic?

- Security is a stressful job
 - Unique pressures
 - Burnout
 - Unhealthy:
 - Behavior
 - Personalities
 - Expectations
 - Why put up with this?
 - How can we make it better?
- May is Mental Health Awareness Month

Why do I have insight?

- Top-10 banks, medical, industrial devices
- Surrounded by experts and posers
- Layers of bureaucracy, politics
- Some managers have been ... lacking
- Some contributors too



Quick poll

- Who has felt stress in security?
- Who has worked late nights or weekends?
- Who has been available on vacation?
- Who has burned out enough to take a break?



The problem

- High stakes
- Constant vigilance
- Health impacts of stress
- All work and no play



Cybersecurity Stressors

Threat landscape

- Attacker / defender inequality
- New threats
- Limited defense budget
- Impossible to catch everything

Backlog fatigue

- Arbitrary, shifting priorities
- Unrealistic expectations
- Velocity
- Need for long-term measures
in a short-term results-driven world

Weight of the world

- Feeling of responsibility
- Potential consequences
- Culture of blame
- Negative public perception

Can't find a problem

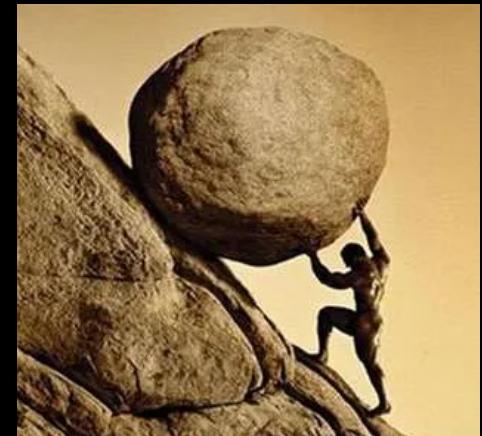
- Especially pen-testers/red teamers
- Even blue/purple teams
- How satisfying is a blank report?
- Implied worthlessness

Imposter Syndrome

- “I need to know everything”
- One mistake away from being exposed
- Guru complex
- Compare self to others

Standard stressors

- Interruptions, alert fatigue
- Crushing workload
- Lack of control
- Frequent context switching
- Reactive firefighting
- Pointless meetings
- Perfectionism



Quick poll

- Who is starting out in security?
- And still wants to?



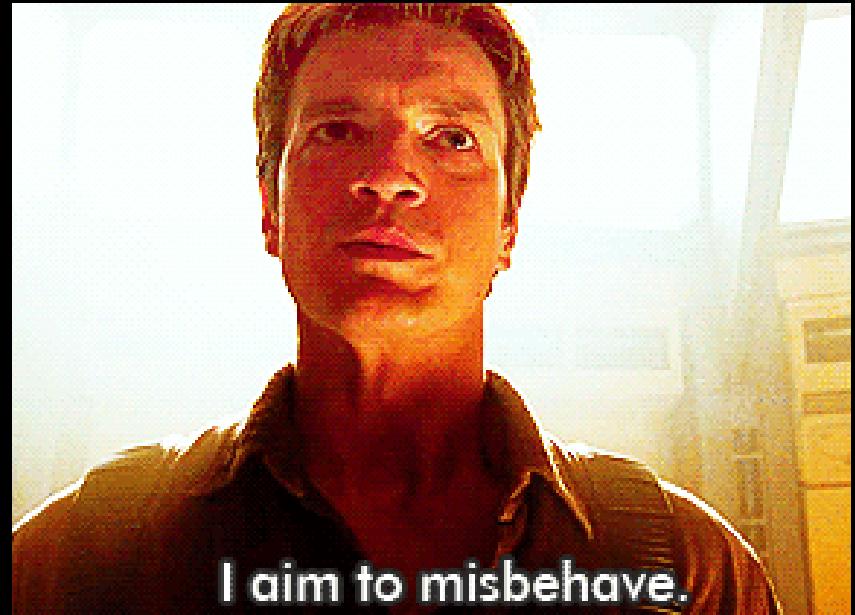
Mental Health Impacts

Common symptoms

- Low motivation / energy
- Disengagement
- Impatience
- Lack of focus
- Dissatisfaction
- Self-doubt

Effects on you

- Disgruntlement
- Withdrawal
- Self-medication
- Job hopping
- Desire to misbehave?



Effects on team

- Impatience
- Little teamwork
- Frequent turnover
- Just plain no fun



What Can I Do?

Resiliency

The capability of a strained body to recover its size and shape after deformation caused especially by compressive stress

Wait... what?

Resilience strategies

- Shift mindset
- Manage expectations
- Support network
- Manage stress
- Jump to a better environment?



“Free your mind”

Quick remedies

- 7-minute workout
- Deep breathing
- Silence / meditation
- Take a walk
- Primal scream / Barbaric yawlp
- Stretch
- AMSR
- Quick nap
- Bathroom break
- Snack
- 15 mins anything else

Long-term solutions

- Therapy
- Friendships
- Yoga practice
- Sports
- Play
- Unclutter / simplify
- Hobbies
- Art
- Volunteering
- Classes

What else can help?

- Acceptance, agency, and discernment
- Know your spheres of influence
 - Act on what you can
 - Accept what you can't

What Can Managers Do?

The burden of leadership

- Pressures from above
- Needs of the team
- Org chart over the work
- Disconnected execs
- Team-straining directives
- Hero culture / overwork



Things we try

- Planning
- Agile
- Rewards
- Acknowledgment

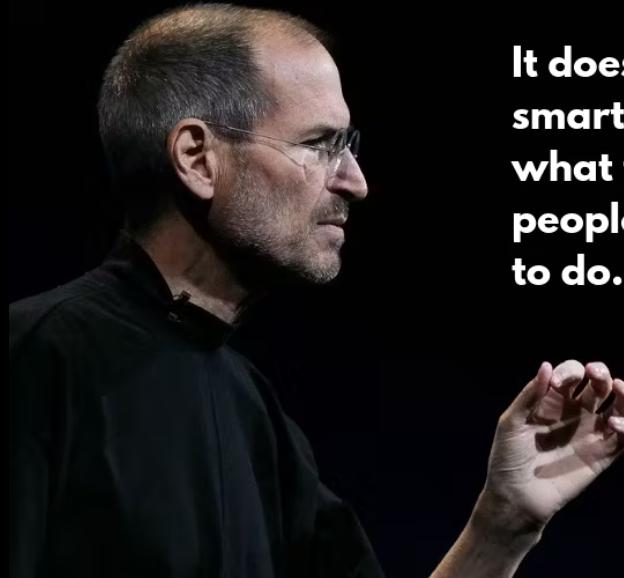
Work for your team

- Consistent message, goals
- Let the team decide *how*
- Realistic workloads
- Defend the team's work
- Allow for failure
- Be flexible



Help your team grow

- Develop
- Listen
- Autonomy



It doesn't make sense to hire smart people and tell them what to do; we hire smart people so they can tell us what to do.

- Steve Jobs

Wrapping it Up

Key takeaways

- Cyberstress is real, has real consequences
- Individuals:
 - Self-care
 - Boundaries
 - Support network
- Leaders:
 - Build healthy teams



Finally...

We defend best when we take care of ourselves.

Remember airline pre-flight safety instructions.

Thank you!

Support your local OWASP chapter

Take in a talk



These
slides on
GitHub

Resources

- Websites
 - National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI): <https://www.nami.org>
 - Mayo Clinic: <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/adult-health/in-depth/burnout/art-20046642>
 - Mental Health Minnesota: <https://mentalhealthmn.org>
 - American Psychological Association <https://www.apa.org/topics/healthy-workplaces>
- Meditation apps (free, open-source, minimal permissions)
(Search in app store or get from F-Droid store)
 - Pausing Healthily (Security Usability Society)
 - Soothing Noise Player (ljmc2000)
 - Bodhi Timer (Yuttadhammo Bhikkhu)
 - Inner Breeze (NaoX)
 - Brethap
 - Soft Sound (Zoe)

Sources

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- Slide 30: <https://hackernoon.com/hire-smart-people-and-let-them-tell-you-what-to-do-just-like-steve-jobs-did-c38d92d11213>. (Origin unknown; many sources.)
- Other images: DeepAI, publicdomainpictures.net, personal screen shots.