

Creating a Roadmap for IT Mental Health

by Britten Devereux, Clinician & Change Management Expert



We're all proactive in IT. You think about how to avoid the next crash. You think about what you need in your storeroom in order to be proactive when a laptop doesn't work. Why not think about what you need in mental health proactively before the crash? Do it now. Feed it before it's a problem. Maybe something's there that you don't even know. Seek help. Use the resources that are in this, do it before you burn out.

– Zach Boewer, Former VP of IT & Startup Founder



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Please note: This guide is intended to be used as a powerful tool for self-reflection, and as inspiration for getting started on your own mental health journey. It is not a replacement for psychiatric or therapeutic care from a certified mental health professional. *If you or someone you know is experiencing a mental health crisis and needs immediate help, please refer to the resources listed below.*

Call 911

If you or someone you know is in immediate danger, go to the nearest emergency room.

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

Call 1-800-273-TALK (8255)

Crisis Text Line

Text “HELLO” to 741741

[National Helpline Resource Directory](#)
from the National Alliance on Mental Illness

Veterans Crisis Line

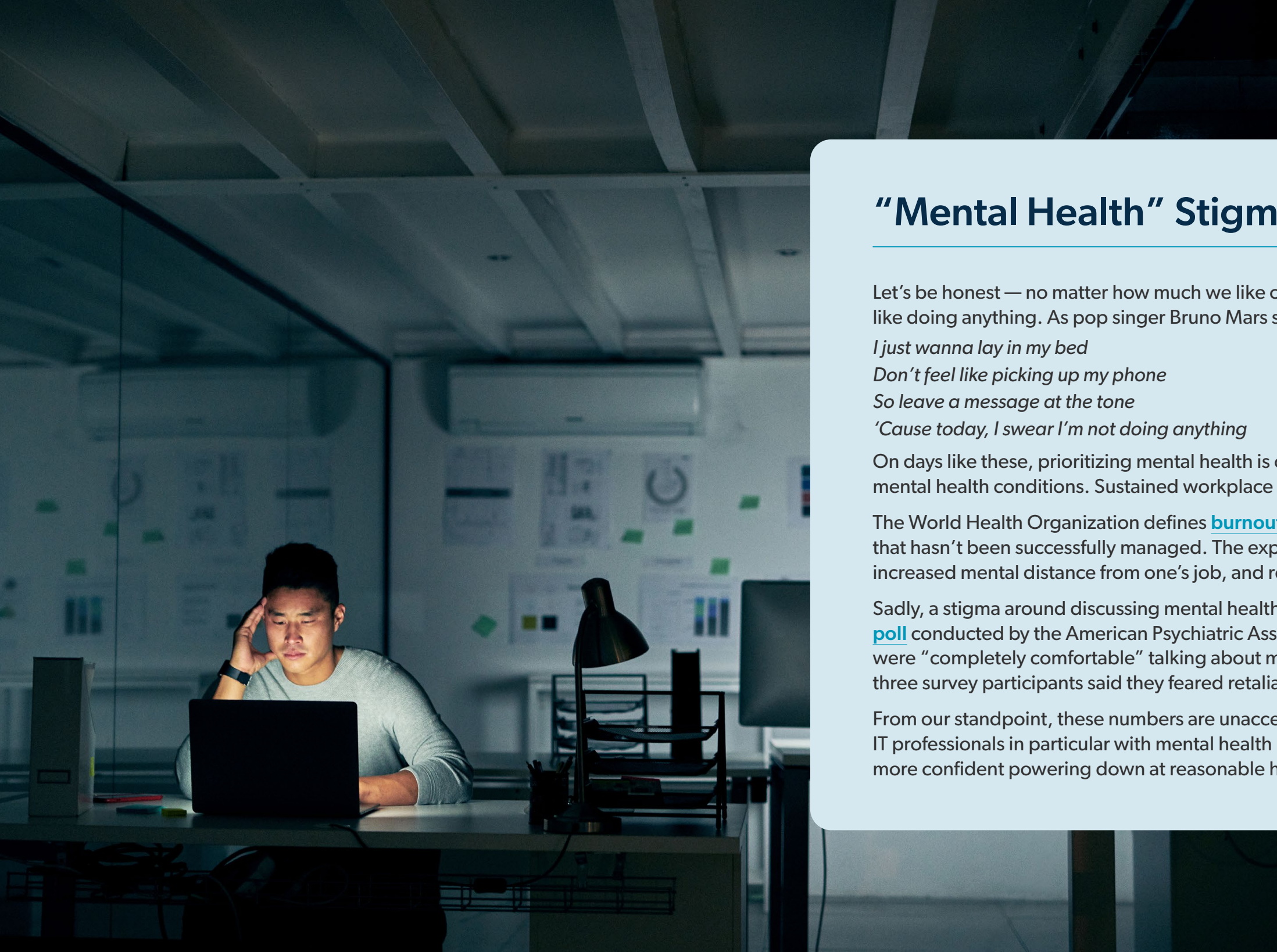
- Call 1-800-273-TALK (8255) and press 1
- Or text to 838255

Disaster Distress Helpline

Call or text 1-800-985-5990

[Pacific Solstice Integrative Psychiatric Clinic](#)

- Call us at 949.200.7929
- Email us at info@pacificsolstice.com
- Text us at 949.328.5518



“Mental Health” Stigma in the Workplace

Let’s be honest — no matter how much we like our jobs, we all have days where we don’t feel like doing anything. As pop singer Bruno Mars sings in his hit “The Lazy Song:”

*I just wanna lay in my bed
Don’t feel like picking up my phone
So leave a message at the tone
‘Cause today, I swear I’m not doing anything*

On days like these, prioritizing mental health is crucial, and not just for those with diagnosed mental health conditions. Sustained workplace tension often leads to “burnout.”

The World Health Organization defines [burnout](#) as a syndrome resulting from workplace stress that hasn’t been successfully managed. The experience includes feelings of energy depletion, increased mental distance from one’s job, and reduced professional efficacy.

Sadly, a stigma around discussing mental health in the workplace abounds. A [2019 national poll](#) conducted by the American Psychiatric Association (APA), found only one in five workers were “completely comfortable” talking about mental health issues at work. Further, one in three survey participants said they feared retaliation for seeking mental health care.

From our standpoint, these numbers are unacceptable. We’ve created this guide to support IT professionals in particular with mental health prioritization. After reading, we hope you feel more confident powering down at reasonable hours and communicating your needs to others.

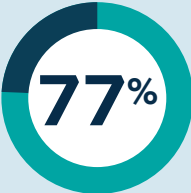
Mental Health for IT Professionals

No profession is without its own time-based stressors: journalists deal with daily deadlines, manufacturers deal with supply chain issues, and some doctors literally have hearts in their hands. But IT professionals confront a unique type of daily pressure.

In most organizations, knowledge workers are completely dependent on devices, apps, and Internet servers to get work done. In addition to staying up to date with security patches, compliance mandates, and routine monitoring, admins often find themselves responding to unexpected user requests.

Put simply, it's a lot of shifting gears! Couple [conflicting IT priorities](#) with tool sprawl, and you've got a recipe for multi-tasking overwhelm on an already over-taxed brain.

Below are some shocking statistics about IT admins from the [2021 CIO Insights Report](#):



described their jobs as stressful.



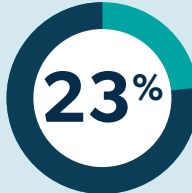
cited their managers as their biggest stressor.



cited a lack of budget and staff as their biggest stressor.



have experienced a stress-related illness because of work.



clock eight to 12 hours of unpaid overtime weekly.

The challenge to keep everything running smoothly is a continual double-edged sword: plan to tackle necessary security and infrastructure improvements, but respond to daily interruptions based on unexpected user and business needs.

For the remainder of this guide, we'll discuss how microshifting small habits can yield big dividends in long-term mental health for IT pros. And we'll keep reminding you — until it *really* sinks in — that self-care is not selfish, not optional, and not a luxury!

Changing Your Mindset Around Mental Health

Think of your mind as an operating system. It's been trying its best to keep you safe, achieve your objectives, and automate thousands of processes for decades.

All things considered, it's done a fantastic job! But, if you're like most of us, you've probably installed some ineffective programs throughout the years. Sometimes, you did this willingly. Other times you unwittingly picked up information, assumptions, and coping mechanisms from your early environment. Regardless, awareness is the first step to a software upgrade.

But unlike an operating system, you can't simply reformat your mind to the latest version within minutes. Nor can you buy a new one. Instead, positive change comes through iterative adjustments to behavior and mindset. If you're unsure where to start, here are three primary microshifts you can think about:

1

EMPATHY

The empathy that you have as a choice to yourself, so that you may have it towards others as well

2

CHOICE

The choices we have in work or livelihood, in attitude, in creating resilience, and in mental health

3

ROUTINE

The routines a lot of us need, that can nourish our bodies and help us in our relationships

The way we maintain motivation across empathy, choice, and routine as we're making these shifts in our lives is through:

- **AWARENESS** – *can we cultivate an awareness and pause that's different than in the past?*
- **ACCEPTANCE** – *can we accept the new landscape in our work life and in our homes?*
- **COMPASSIONATE ACTION** – *can we take compassionate action at small, short intervals differently than how we did in the past?*



Take Your First Intentional Pause

Can you think of a moment when you were lifted up as a hero who soldiers on? Have you ever been praised for some of the very things that can lead to burnout, which of course led you to do more of those things? How would you define burnout?



Raising Awareness: Burnout, Depression & Disorder

As previously mentioned, untreated stress can lead to burnout, mental health disorders, and even physical ailments. The term “mental disorder” accurately describes what is happening in the mind during such situations. Another way of saying “mental disorder” is “lack of order.”

Thus, mental illness is just a representation of needs that are either lacking or need more attention. Attending to these needs should happen sooner rather than later.

When we think about burnout, it’s important to recognize that it’s going to take a while to heal, just like the person who may have ignored depression symptoms for a while.

Symptoms of burnout:

- Shorter attention span
- Numbness
- Tearfulness
- Feeling more agitated than usual
- Harder and harder to experience pleasure or fun
- Craving alcohol or sugar
- Harder to sleep
- Feeling as though you’re not heard or understood
- Emotional exhaustion
- Superficial interactions
- Impaired productivity
- Cynicism and skepticism

Chances are, you didn’t need to look at that list to understand what burnout is. Most of us have experienced it at one point or another. Burnout affects our gastrointestinal processes, our skin, our hormones, hair loss, and the way our brains process information. It affects everything from the way we crave food to how quickly we’re triggered. Burnout also affects our self-worth.

So what can we do about it? The first step is to know how to recognize it better. While we associate burnout with the workplace, we also know it can show up anywhere busy-ness is worn as a badge of honor or the warrior spirit of push, push, push through is encouraged. Think parenting, going back to school, or demanding extracurricular activities.

Once burnout is acknowledged and brought into awareness, then and only then can it be compassionately acted upon with microshifts in empathy, choice, and routine.



Take A Second Intentional Pause

Human beings have feelings, no matter how much we’re conditioned to ignore them. How did you feel about work and life before the pandemic? How has the pandemic transformed those feelings? How do you feel right now?

Emotions and pain are often messengers from the mind and body. They provide feedback that we need to tune into more. As you create new space for awareness and acceptance, one of the compassionate actions you can take right now is to call some of those feelings what they are.



Practical Building Blocks For a Mental Health Roadmap

Keep in mind that mental health is an integrative process. The physical, professional, spiritual, social, mental, and environmental aspects of our lives all play a role.

In other words, the routines we hold, the choices we make, and the empathy we apply across that spectrum are all relevant. Consistent pauses of awareness are crucial to making incremental thought and behavior changes backed by compassion.

The following is a list of simple building blocks for cultivating awareness and acceptance—things are what they are—and compassionate action. As you read, pay attention to the parts that resonate with you or sound doable. Make note of one two ideas you could integrate into your daily routine as soon as today.



Focus on nutrition and sleep. Food is medicine and plays a bigger role than we think. Sleep is where our brain slows down to process information from the day and reset. The brain literally heats up during waking hours and cools down at rest, and it absolutely needs that neuromechanical process to function properly.



Notice screen fatigue. Sitting and staring at our screens for long periods of time leads to physical exhaustion, just as if we were running a track meet or preparing as a hunter or a gatherer. Our body gets so amped up with stress hormones, norepinephrine and epinephrine adrenaline, we're left with an excess hormonal imbalance. So notice screen fatigue, because it's going to be there and it needs to be balanced. A simple solution is a gaze reset. Try changing your gaze from the computer to something 20 feet away for 20 seconds, or simply look up at someone. This can help protect our eyes, our moods, and our ability to process information, which helps our attention spans in general.



Schedule digital quiet time. Since so many of us rely on the screens for work, for school, and for play. Time off screens could look like reading, cooking, coloring or "grounding" your barefeet in the grass. The options are numerous, but it takes intentional effort to prioritize such activities outside of your routine.



Read more. Reading rebalances a dysregulated central nervous system and it helps us use an adaptive behavior as opposed to some of the maladaptive ones like scrolling on social media platforms.



Say no to multitasking. Multitasking is a myth. Engage in effective work by saying, "I can do one task at a time with my one full heart." Closing out the number of browser tabs you have open could be a good place to start.



Practice mindfulness. Have you ever heard the saying, "If you're depressed you're living in the past, and if you're anxious you're living in the future?" Mindfulness is the practice of staying in the present moment by observing inner and outer states without judgment or resistance. It can be as simple as taking a moment to notice five objects and five sounds in your current surroundings. It could also look like closing your eyes to focus on the inhalation and exhalation of your breath. The less you identify with habitual anxious or depressive thoughts the better you will feel.

Practical Building Blocks For a Mental Health Roadmap

Keep in mind that mental health is an integrative process. The physical, professional, spiritual, social, mental, and environmental aspects of our lives all play a role. In other words, the routine and the choices and the empathy we apply across that spectrum all require pause for awareness, all require us to grapple with why it's so hard to accept new circumstances of change, and all require compassionate action.

The following is a list of simple building blocks for cultivating awareness and acceptance—things are what they are—and compassionate action. As you read through this list, pay attention to the parts that resonate with you or sound doable. Make note of one or maybe two ideas you could choose to integrate into your daily routine as soon as today.



Listen to classical music. This rebalances the central nervous system, and just tuning in for a two or three minute song can make a big difference.



Smile. Seriously. Smile at a stranger or smile at someone you work with. This solution may elude us sometimes because we're so affected by our own anxiety or sadness or sense of loneliness. We forget how valuable a smile is, but it's our body telling our brain a message. Endorphins or dopamine can be released when our face muscles shift.



Use your resources. We all deserve the benefits that are at our fingertips. One of those could be using an employee assistance program to talk. Another may be a mindfulness app that can help get us started. Other resources look like our healthcare benefits. Let's use them. There is counseling at church, recovery groups, and countless coaches or therapists available. But we have to take one of those actions, just one.



Protect your sleep. Yes, sleep made the list twice! Most of us reduce it or cut it out when we think we have a more pressing task. But without enough sleep we're wandering around as though intoxicated by a mood or a mind-altering substance. Not only does sleep affect our immune system, but it helps us have more positive relationships. At the end of the day, that's what we all want: meaningful, lasting connections.



As you sit for a moment with the practical takeaways listed above, remember that microshifts are what create sustainable change. Also remember that the path to well-being is integrative.

Anxiety not only exists in the brain, it exists in the body, so your strategies for dealing with stress should be multifaceted. It cannot just be a medication. It cannot just be getting more sunshine or scrolling on Instagram five minutes less.

“Remember that microshifts are what create sustainable change.”



Take Your Final Intentional Pause

How can I embody the state of someone who prioritizes self-care daily? Which changes in my routine would make the biggest difference to my sense of well being? What does demonstrating greater empathy to myself as I make changes look like?

Visualize yourself coping before you even start coping in new ways. Just imagine what that picture would look like. You are coping and you're going to cope in even better ways as you say what your needs are and you ask people to help you meet those needs.

Tips for Applying These Strategies in an IT-Specific Setting

This resource arose from a JumpCloud webinar led by Clinician & Change Management Expert Britten Devereux, Former VP of IT & Startup Founder Zachary Boewer, and IT Support Technician Donyea Foster. [Watch the full recording of their discussion](#) for additional insight and concrete ideas on applying the above mental health principles to your daily life as an IT professional.

