

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



Let's Redefine What it Means To Be a Hero in IT

Before COVID, working in IT was already a stressful job, where the notion of 'soldier on' prevailed. For most of 2020 and beyond, IT teams have been the ones responsible for leading the migration to remote work, and there hasn't been a ton of recognition of the added challenges and anxiety this has produced for IT.

We lift up the idea of the warrior, of the hero who puts work first, of the soldier who's honored for always being available. In a service-centered role that's 'always on', IT people are often unintentionally rewarded for working themselves out of well-being.

The goal of this guide is to orient those of us in the IT community towards a healthier future state. One where the new hero is the person who understands that self-care is not optional, who now balances work responsibilities with their mental well-being, who is rewarded for compassionate action towards both themselves and others.

Every person is a human before they're an employee. When we limit human potential by brushing past human needs, we limit health, personal success, and organizational success. Let's create a sea change by practicing and rewarding small habits of mental well-being.

A Primer On Cultivating Better Mental Health Habits

Mental health habits are simple microshifts, not big events, because that's what will last. Think of an operating system. The upgrades are not made from version 1.5 to version 4.8 in one fell swoop. The improvements are made incrementally. But only because we listened to the feedback and applied systemic, mindful action to create tiny adjustments.

As you get started on your mental health journey, there 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

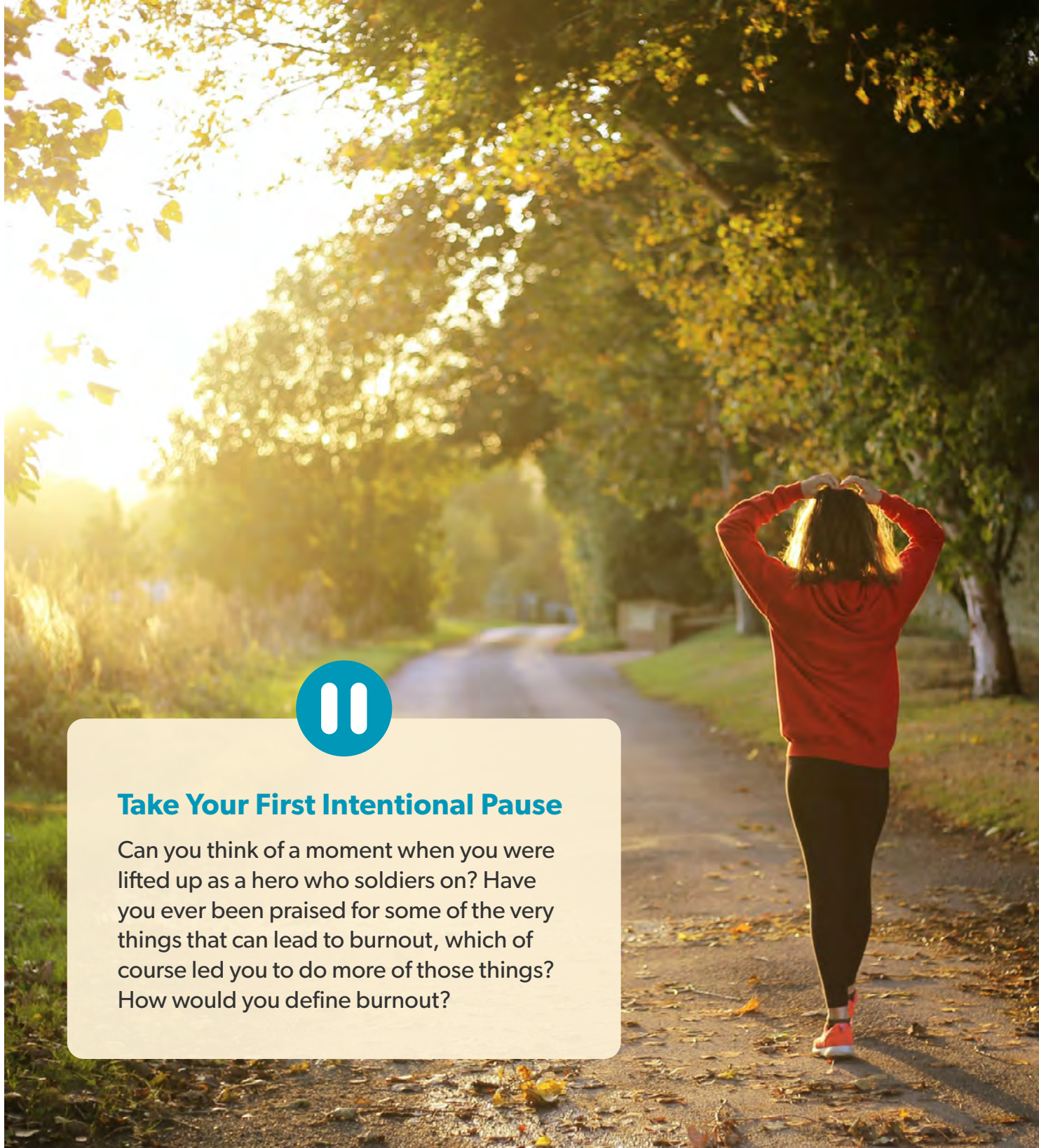
3

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?

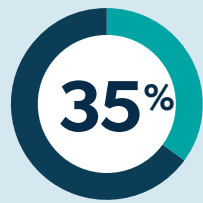
Raising Awareness: Burnout, Depression & Disorder

Untreated stress not only creates mental clutter but mental health disorders. Quite literally, disorder looks like a lack of order. And if you think about it, a 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.

Before we get into addressing burnout so it doesn't get to the point of disorder, there are some health risks related to depression to be aware of:



Depression interferes with a person's ability to complete physical job tasks about 20% of the time



Depression reduces cognitive performance about 35% of the time



Once depression is addressed, it takes an additional three years for there to be relief that people are looking for

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.

The symptoms of burnout can look like:

- 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
- Harder to stay asleep
- 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. All of us have experienced it, especially over the last year. 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

Heroes 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 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.



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, for play, it's helpful to have time outside of that. Time off of screens could look like reading or cooking or coloring or time spent outside grounding. The options are numerous, but it takes an intentional effort for us to think about what those screen-free activities could be.



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 that look like us scrolling more.



Say no to the myth of multitasking. There's no opportunity to multitask. The opportunity and the option is for us to speak the truth to ourselves and to 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. Mindfulness doesn't have to look like meditation. It can be as simple as standing in the grass barefoot and looking up at the sky, or pausing before a meal to sit in gratitude. As we practice mindfulness, the idea is that we take a moment to focus on breathing and being in our bodies. When we're behind screens, we don't realize how shallow our breaths become due to our sense of urgency, our sense that there's a lack of time and scarcity of resources. Mindfulness helps us let go and invite inhale and exhale.

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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.



Protect your sleep. Yes, sleep made the list twice. Most of us limit it. Most of us cut it out when we think we have a more pressing task. But as many of us have experienced, without sleep, we're wandering around as though we're intoxicated by a mood or a mind-altering substance. Protect your sleep. It will serve you for years to come as you prevent chronic illness or the advancement and worsening of symptoms in process addiction, addiction, mental illness, anything. 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 connection.



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.



As you sit for a moment with the practical takeaways listed on the previous pages, 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 the solution must be multifaceted. It cannot just be a medication. It cannot just be getting more sunshine or scrolling on Instagram five minutes less. It's a multifaceted solution that we all deserve, not just need, but deserve as part of our inherent human dignity.



Take Your Final Intentional Pause

How will we make the future state of a hero who prioritizes self-care a reality? What will empathy look like? What does empathy to yourself look like in this new routine, and in these options and choices you have as a professional and as a person?

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 Doneya 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.

