MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLNESS IN IT: LET'S STOP THE STIGMA

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Quick introduction to me. I am not a mental health professional, I'm just a SQL Server DBA who has experienced work-related issues that have lead to me having mental health issues, and personal issues that have lead to me having mental health issues that have both effected my ability to work.
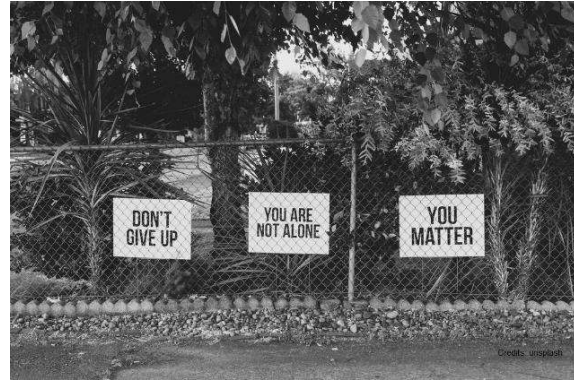
One thing I would like for everyone to remember is "Mental health isn't just mental illness – it's part of being human." – Anonymous. See mental health is just important as your physical health. The stigma around mental health is staggering. If you had diabetes, you would seek treatment and take you insulin. While most people with mental health issues do not seek help and refuse to take medicine because they see it as a weakness. Seeking help is not a weakness, it actually the opposite, it's one the strongest things you can do. Instead, people self-medicate with food, drugs, alcohol, etc. including myself at one point in my life. It's hard to accept a mental health diagnosis with the stigma that exists, but 15 years ago I was diagnosed with bipolar II, complex PTSD, and generalized anxiety. I found these hard to accept and did not want to stick to medication regimen or even go see the doctor, luckily I stuck with and I'm stable now more so than then. I personally think everyone could use therapist to help with the bumps in life, and there is no shame in that or seeing a psychiatrist.

In the United States each year one out four[1] people seek mental health help in a given year, that is 25%[2], a survey of IT people reveals that is 42%[3] in the US, and 48% in the United Kingdom. More stats from the OSMI survey reveal that IT professionals do not feel comfortable about talking about issues with their managers or colleagues. Mental health should be just as important of apart of conversations as your physical health, they are intertwined and it's so important to your well-being and how you live, work, and create.

For IT professionals there are four things that will cause an individual to possibly develop anxiety or depression around their job: burnout, stress, harassment, and bullying. Burnout comes from working on the same thing all the time and working extralong hours, I have been known to do this and take on extra projects outside of work and just crumble with overwhelm when looking at my calendar. I would personally take the quiz at http://burnoutindex.org and gauge how burnt out you might be. You might

be and not aware of it like I was when I first took the quiz. We experience stress from being on call and having to get systems up 24x7 and not being able to make mistakes without dire consequences in production. We also stress ourselves out staying connected all times to our cellphones even when are not on call. Then comes in harassment of any type not just sexual harassment. I've been sexually harassed at work but also picked on for the clothes I wear. I have seen a male manager at my workplace be constantly picked for being short, he was 5 foot 2 inches and most of the other managers where 6 feet tall. Picking on colleagues as work is not accepted. I have had a coworker get away with hanging a Playboy calendar in is cubicle with just a sticky note over the sensitive areas to see. All these things can cause people to become anxious about going to work or even depressed about it.

Now that we have talked about all the bad stuff what can we do about it. One talk more openly in the workplace about your struggles with mental health. **Let us break the stigma**. First, seek in medical help you may need to treat your mental health while you get the situation under control. See a psychiatrist, or your primary care doctor or talk to a therapist. Stop any self-medicating you are doing and let the professional's help. Remember on this matter it may take several tries at different medications to get one that works for you so don't give up on the doctors. Talk to your boss about anything over stressing you about your job and see what can be changed if nothing it is probably time to find a new job. **Put down your cell phones** and work computers when it is outside your office hours. Let the on-call person deal with it and you relax and work on your hobbies or other projects. If the stress if coming from harassment or bullying, you may need to go to your human resources department to file a formal complaint.

Other things you can do for yourself is to make sure you are eating well, exercising, and sleeping well. These are fundamental to physical and mental health. Develop some hobbies away from the computer (right here is me calling the kettle black, so feel free to follow up with me to make sure I am taking my own advice in a couple of months). Right now, with the news and negativity get away from social media or if you like Twitter use muted works. Chrissy Lemaire has a great list in GitHub that can get you started and save your sanity.

Also, especially with is being a pandemic we need to look for our friends and colleagues. The #SQLFamily is mighty and caring. If you have not heard from someone in while or noticed they have disappeared reach out to check on them. Several people check on me and honestly it helps tremendously and appreciate every one of those people that help me maintain my mental health. Make sure to listen to what the person has to say with judging them, remember we all are getting use to talking about mental health and reducing the stigma.

Seek help from your employer if needed. I know in America there is the ability to take family medical leave if you need it. Use your vacation days as mental health days and take a day here and there for just you. Also, advertise to your co-workers that is what you are doing so they might start feeling comfortable doing the same thing. If you are manager, it would be helpful if you would do this to start the trend among your employees. Don't be afraid to use your time off just to do nothing but let you mind rest, and you get mentally healthy.

Finally, I will sum up with more of my story. In 2018, I switched jobs and had half the company laid off which cause me two stressors. Then I got in a wreck at SQL Saturday LA in my rental car. Then I switched therapist. Then I help a friend through a crisis. I was travelling to two SQL Saturdays a month. Then I started a different job because the first one scared me after they laid off half the people. Do you see the stress adding up here? Meanwhile I was doing nothing to take care of myself besides taking my meds and trying to contact my doctor when I went into full blown mania from the bipolar II. Because of this I landed in psychiatric hospital and it took me a year to fully recover back to normal. Don't be me seek help earlier, don't keep adding to your stress, talk to someone before it gets out of control. But do help me **STOP THE STIGMA! Image Credits: Unsplash**

Questions? Comments? Talk to the author today. Tracy Boggiano on Twitter.

About Tracy Boggiano

Tracy is a Database Superhero and Microsoft Data Platform MVP. She has spent over 20 years in IT and has used SQL Server since 1999.

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During her free times; Tracy can be found make a difference somewhere.

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