



March 20-24, 2023  
San Francisco, CA

# OCCUPATIONAL BURNOUT IN GAMES: CAUSES, IMPACT & SOLUTIONS

Raffael Boccamazzo, PsyD  
Alicia Fortier  
Osama Dorias  
Anna Brandberg

#GDC23

# Overview



**Dr B:**

- ▶ **Definitions** of 'occupational burnout' and what causes it
- ▶ **Institutional responsibility** for:
  - ▷ burnout prevention
  - ▷ repairing harm caused



**Osama:**

- ▶ Personal story
- ▶ Career advice for industry **seniors**
- ▶ **Red flags and signs** to keep an eye out on for early burnout detection



**Alicia:**

- ▶ Career advice for industry **juniors**
- ▶ **Identifying bad habits** we learn before we even begin our careers



**Anna:**

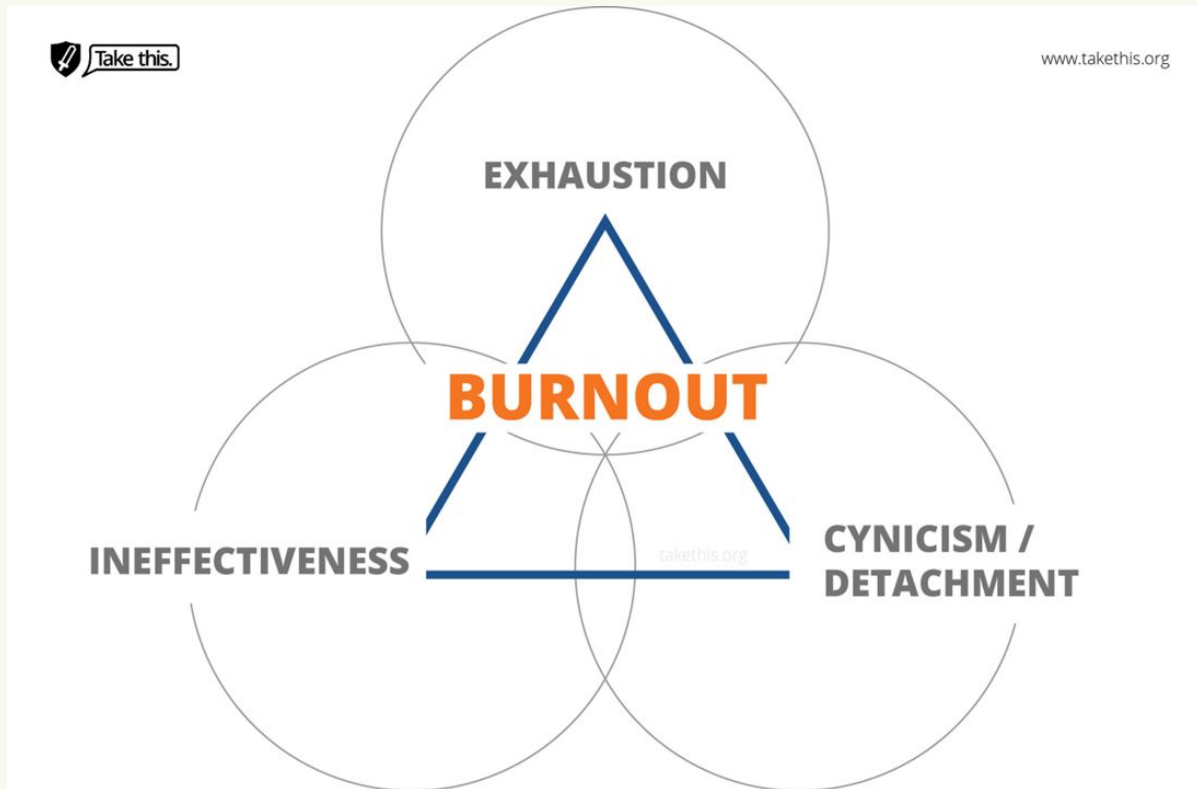
- ▶ Personal story
- ▶ **Coping mechanisms** for when you're already in the deep end
- ▶ **Tools for recovery**

# Content Warning




This talk contains frank discussions of mental health topics, including symptoms of depression, medical symptoms, and recovery processes.

Guard your own limits, and step out if you need to.

# Maslach's Model of Occupational Burnout



## 3 CAVEATS

-  Research limitations
-  Different models
-  Culture



## WORKLOAD

A mismatch between the amount of work required and your ability to do it sustainably



## REWARD

A mismatch between the effort you put into a job and what you get out of it



## CONTROL

Lacking control over setting your goals or how you achieve them



## COMMUNITY

Lacking a sense of community or belonging while in a workspace



## FAIRNESS

Perceived lack of trust, openness, and respect between you and the work environment



## VALUES

A mismatch between the things that are important to you and what is valued by the workplace



## 6 Major Factors Contributing to Burnout



# COST IMPACTS



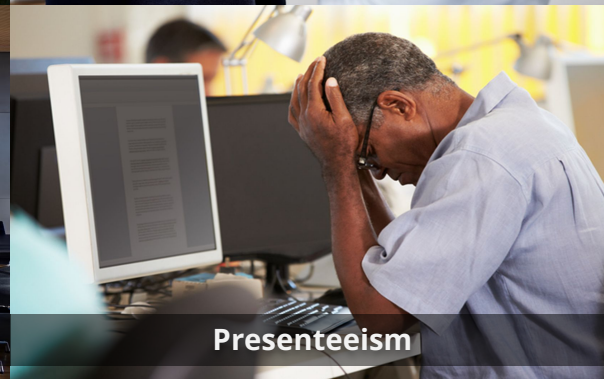
Turnover



Increased Medical Leave



Absenteeism



Presenteeism

# CREATIVITY AND BURNOUT





March 20-24, 2023  
San Francisco, CA

# Alicia Fortier

**Lead Game Designer**

Spry Fox, a Netflix Games Studio

#GDC23



# What I want to share



Let's unpack some unspoken pressures!

Reaching out to students & juniors

It's tough out there, take what works  
and leave the rest.

# Who am I?

## Alicia Fortier

### Lead Game Designer

- Currently working on Cozy Games at Spry Fox, a Netflix Games Studio
- Worked 7 years in AAA
- Taught game design & game production for 5 years



# My journey...



Full time student, all-nighters, game jams,  
high grades

I came into the industry eager, exuberant,  
and **exhausted**



I was eager to **LEARN**,  
to **GIVE**,  
to **PROVE myself...**

**I had absolutely no sense of  
self-preservation.**



# So let's contrast...

**Pressure**

**VS**

**Nuance**

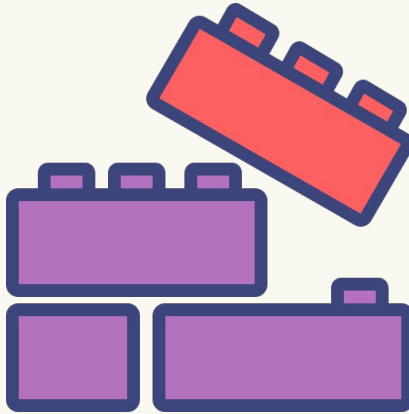
## Pressure

I need to prove myself constantly,  
anything I don't know is a flaw.

## Nuance

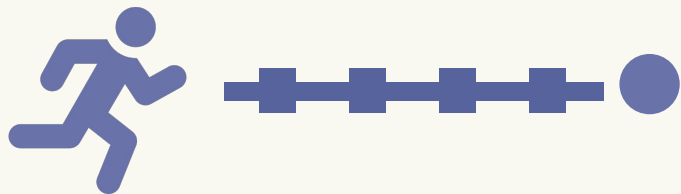
I will learn with time, practice,  
and experience.

# We are all works in progress

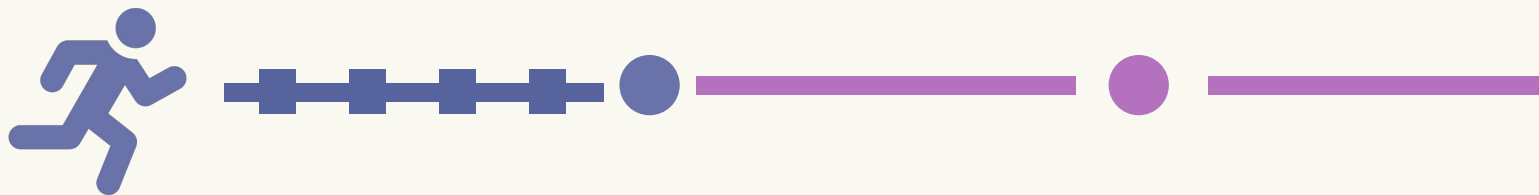


## When is 'enough for now'?

# Games are marathons



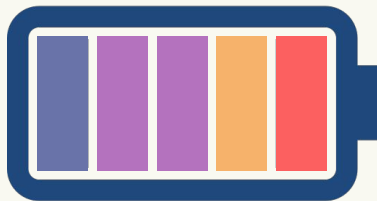
# Games are marathons



## Your career is a marathon



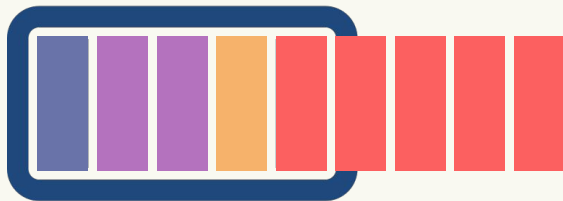
Think critically about how you invest your energy.



**What am I learning?**

How much work is another 10%?

Think critically about how you invest your energy.



**What am I learning?**

How much work is another 10%?

**What am I sacrificing?**

*Sleep? Friends? Family?*

**For how long?**

# Games thrive on iteration



Focus on delivering **what is essential** to **prove the goal** of your current iteration.

Trick of professionalism:  
identify the minimum necessary quality  
and learn to deliver it reliably



Minimum necessary quality  
Is not **bad**  
It is functional



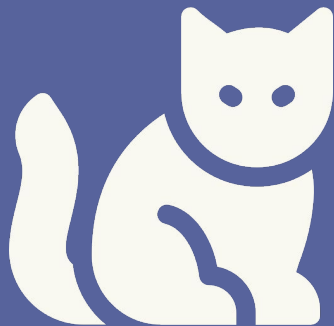
# Story About a Cat



# I got another chance







**You don't always get  
a second chance.**

## Pressure

If work is being assigned to me, I should be able to complete it all as requested.

## Nuance

Learning your limits, how to ask for help, when to say no are all important skills.

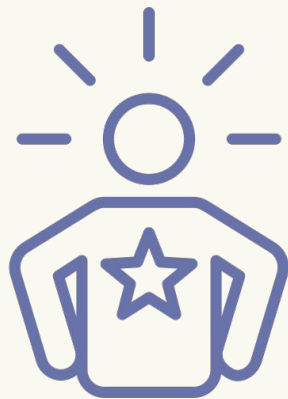


Over delivering quietly can create the expectation that that is your regular output.



If you give **everything**, what is left?

# Goal: Learn to advocate for yourself



## It will take practice, so practice!

This isn't always possible, it **requires a healthy and supportive leadership.**



# Unreasonable deadlines and expectations



do not a reflect your skill or merit.



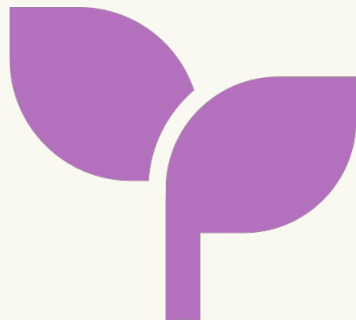
## Pressure

The way to advance in my career is by exceeding expectations **every time**

## Nuance

Each workplace has its own culture and criteria that I need to figure out.

# Is this the right place to grow?



**Connections Opportunities**  
**Visibility Mentorship Values**

## Pressure

Everyone else is fine, I am overreacting and just need to work harder.

## Nuance

I need to listen to my own emotions; they are valid and important.

# Put aside how you think others are coping.





**How are you?**



**How are you, really?**

## Pressure

If I don't finish this I won't be a team player and i will have failed.

## Nuance

I am allowed to leave.

# Take a step back from deliverables, expectations, promises, deadlines...





Take a step back from deliverables,  
expectations, promises, deadlines...

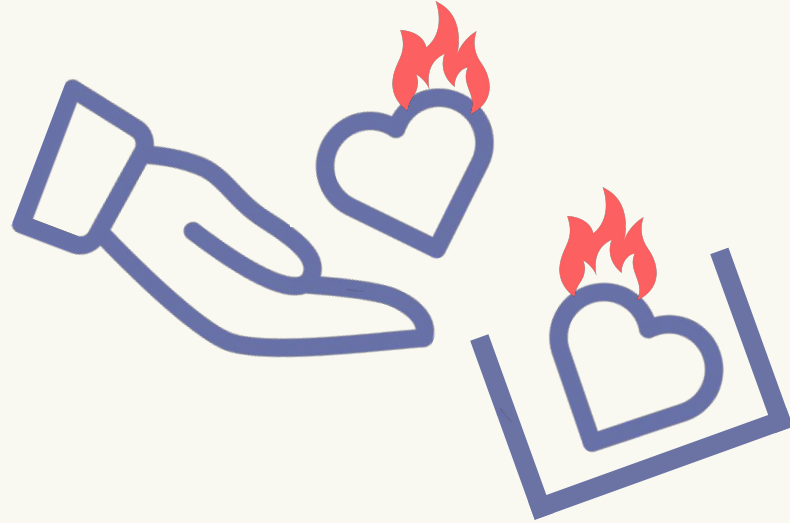


Is where you are **helping** or **hurting** you?

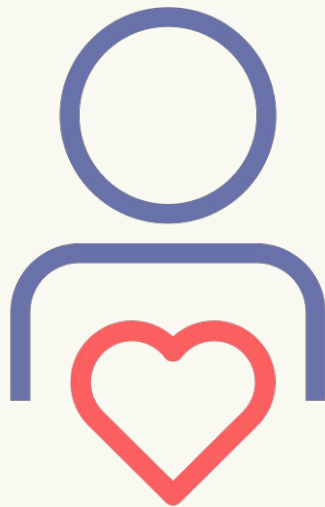
We are in a vibrant, ambitious, and  
*passionate* industry



# We care about our work



# It is very hard **NOT** to care



**Please, show yourself the same care**



March 20-24, 2023  
San Francisco, CA

# Osama Dorias

**Lead Content Designer**

Blizzard Entertainment

#GDC23

**DAWSON**  
C O L L E G E

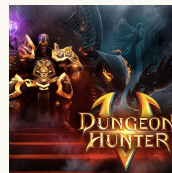
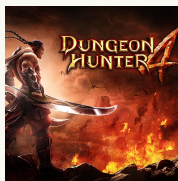
**BILZARD**<sup>®</sup>  
ENTERTAINMENT



minority



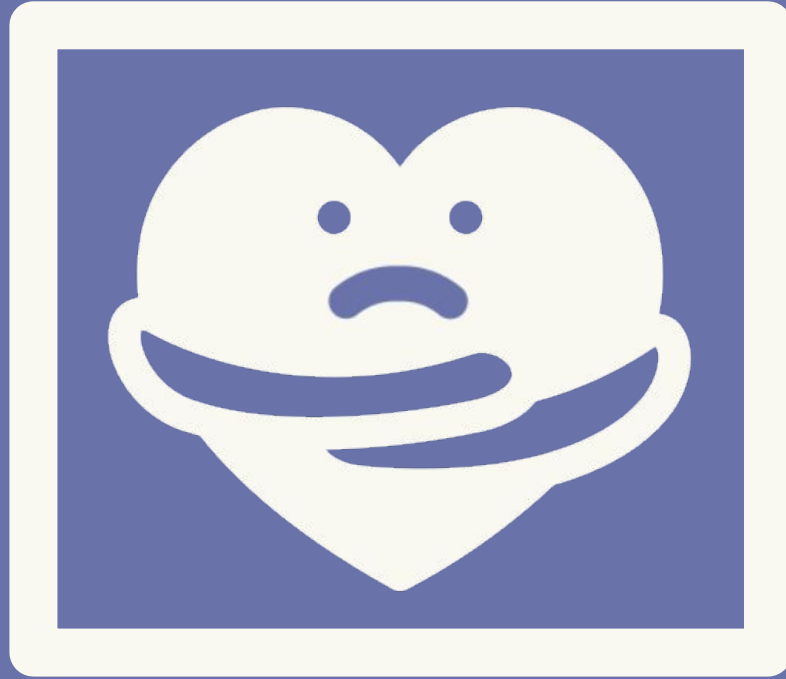




# How it started



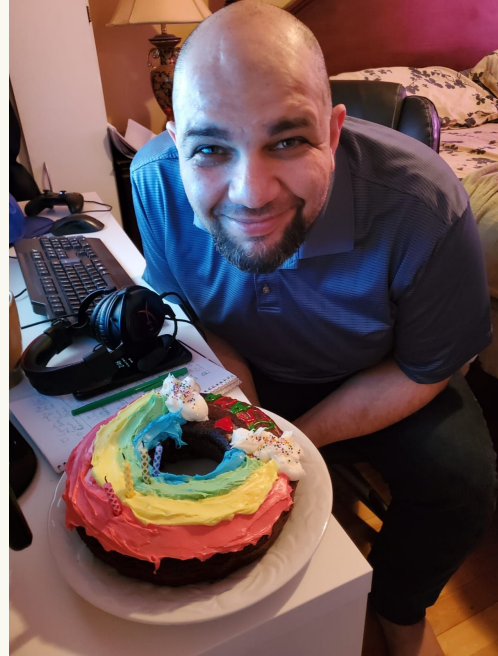
# How it started



# MY RED FLAGS



## UNHEALTHY LIFESTYLE CHOICES



INTRODUCTION: BUILDING A PSYCHOLOGICALLY HEALTHY WORKPLACE MATTHEW J. GRAWITCH AND DAVID W. BALLARD  
<https://www.apa.org/pubs/books/The-Psychologically-Healthy-Workplace-Intro-Sample.pdf>

# MY RED FLAGS

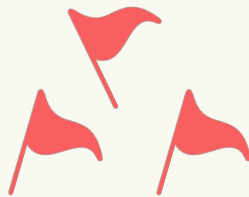


UNHEALTHY LIFESTYLE CHOICES

DIFFICULTY SLEEPING



# MY RED FLAGS



UNHEALTHY LIFESTYLE CHOICES

DIFFICULTY SLEEPING

LOSS OF ENJOYMENT IN DAILY ACTIVITIES



# MY RED FLAGS

UNHEALTHY LIFESTYLE CHOICES

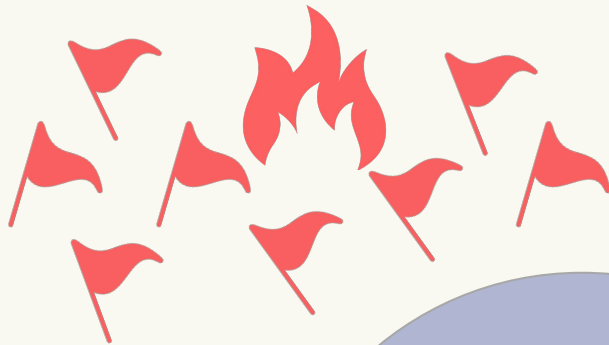
DIFFICULTY SLEEPING

LOSS OF ENJOYMENT IN DAILY ACTIVITIES

STRESS-RELATED HEALTH PROBLEMS



# MY RED FLAGS



UNHEALTHY LIFESTYLE CHOICES

DIFFICULTY SLEEPING

LOSS OF ENJOYMENT IN DAILY ACTIVITIES

STRESS-RELATED HEALTH PROBLEMS

INABILITY TO STOP THINKING ABOUT WORK



**TOO MUCH WORK?**  
**SOLUTION = WORK MORE!**



# MY RED FLAGS

UNHEALTHY LIFESTYLE CHOICES

DIFFICULTY SLEEPING

LOSS OF ENJOYMENT IN DAILY ACTIVITIES

STRESS-RELATED HEALTH PROBLEMS

INABILITY TO STOP THINKING ABOUT WORK

POOR JOB PERFORMANCE





# I STARTED GETTING ANGRY



**Osama Dorias** SOON **GDC**

@osamadorias

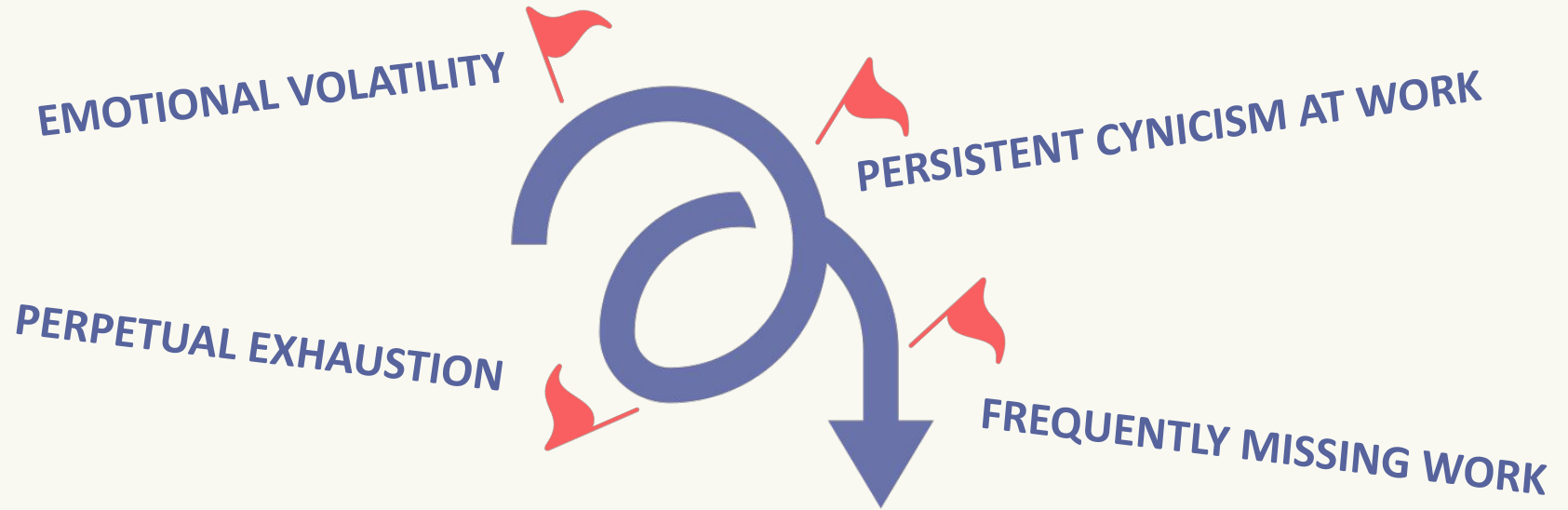
Do you ever just wake up angry? At nothing in particular?

It's such a strange, unfamiliar feeling.

What's worse is that I have a lot to be happy about and grateful for. I don't really get it.

10:52 AM · Apr 19, 2021 from Montréal, Québec

# SPIRALING DOWN



# A BURST OF ENERGY



**BEFORE A COLLAPSE**

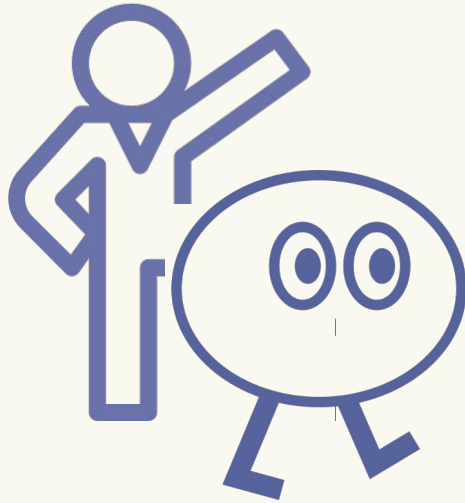


# OVER-ENGAGEMENT BEFORE DISENGAGEMENT

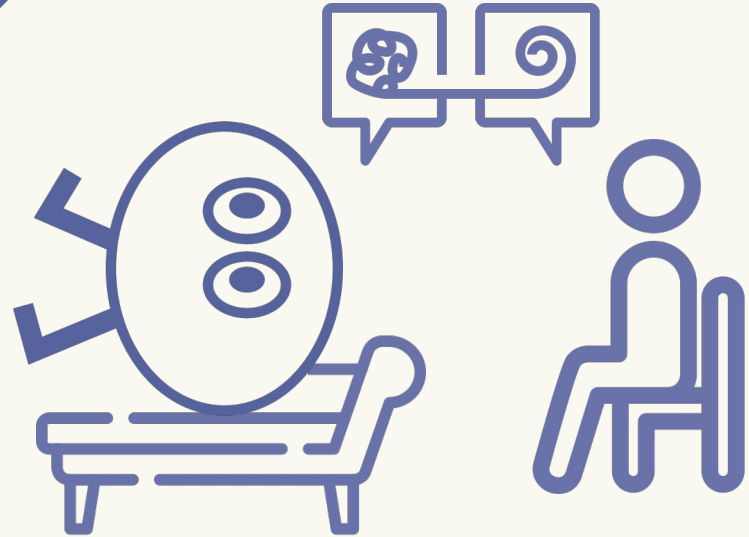


# REBUILDING

PHYSICALLY



MENTALLY



# REBUILDING PERSONAL SPACE







# ACCEPTING SUPPORT



**FAMILY**

**INDUSTRY FRIENDS**

**NON INDUSTRY FRIENDS**

# REST & RESET



# STILL RECOVERING...





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# Anna Brandberg

**Lead UX Designer**

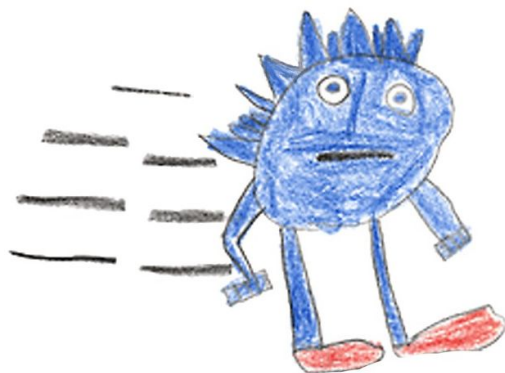
The Outsiders (Funcom Stockholm)

#GDC23

# Before I begin...

- ▶ I have a LOT to cover!
- ▶ Don't stress about taking notes — there's a link to everything at the end.

Gotta go  
Fast



Board games

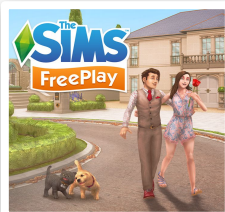


2011 - 2013

**Graphic Designer**

WTTG  
Sweden

The Sims



2014 - 2019

**UI Artist (UI/UX)**

EA  
Australia

Need For Speed

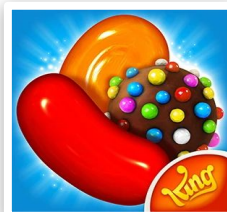


2019 - 2021

**Sr UX Designer**

King  
Sweden

Candy Crush Saga



2021-2022

**UX Lead**

The Outsiders (Funcom)  
Sweden

Metal: Hellsinger



Conan Exiles

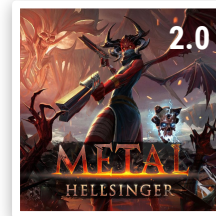


2022

**UX Lead**

Funcom  
Sweden

Metal: Hellsinger



2022 -

**UX Lead**

The Outsiders (Funcom)  
Sweden

# "Utmattningssyndrom" (aka. "Exhaustion Syndrome")

Diagnostic code F43.8A



## Diagnostic criteria:

### Fatigue & sleep problems

- ✓ Immense exhaustion that can't be "rested away"
- ✓ Difficulties sleeping

### Psychological symptoms

- ✓ Difficulties with concentration and memory
- ✓ Unable to cope with demands / time pressure

### Physical symptoms

- ✓ Noticeable physical weakness
- ✓ Physical symptoms  
(e.g. pain, heart palpitations, digestive problems, dizziness, sound sensitivity)

### Emotional symptoms

- ✓ Relentless anxiety
- ✓ Emotional lability / irritability

- ✓ Symptoms daily for 2+ weeks
- ✓ Caused by identifiable stressors, present for 6+ months
- ✓ Significantly impairs work or personal life

(Full criteria in linked doc) *Source: 1177.se & socialstyrelsen.se*



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haha brain go brrrrr

(Full criteria in linked doc) Source: 1177.se & socialstyrelsen.se

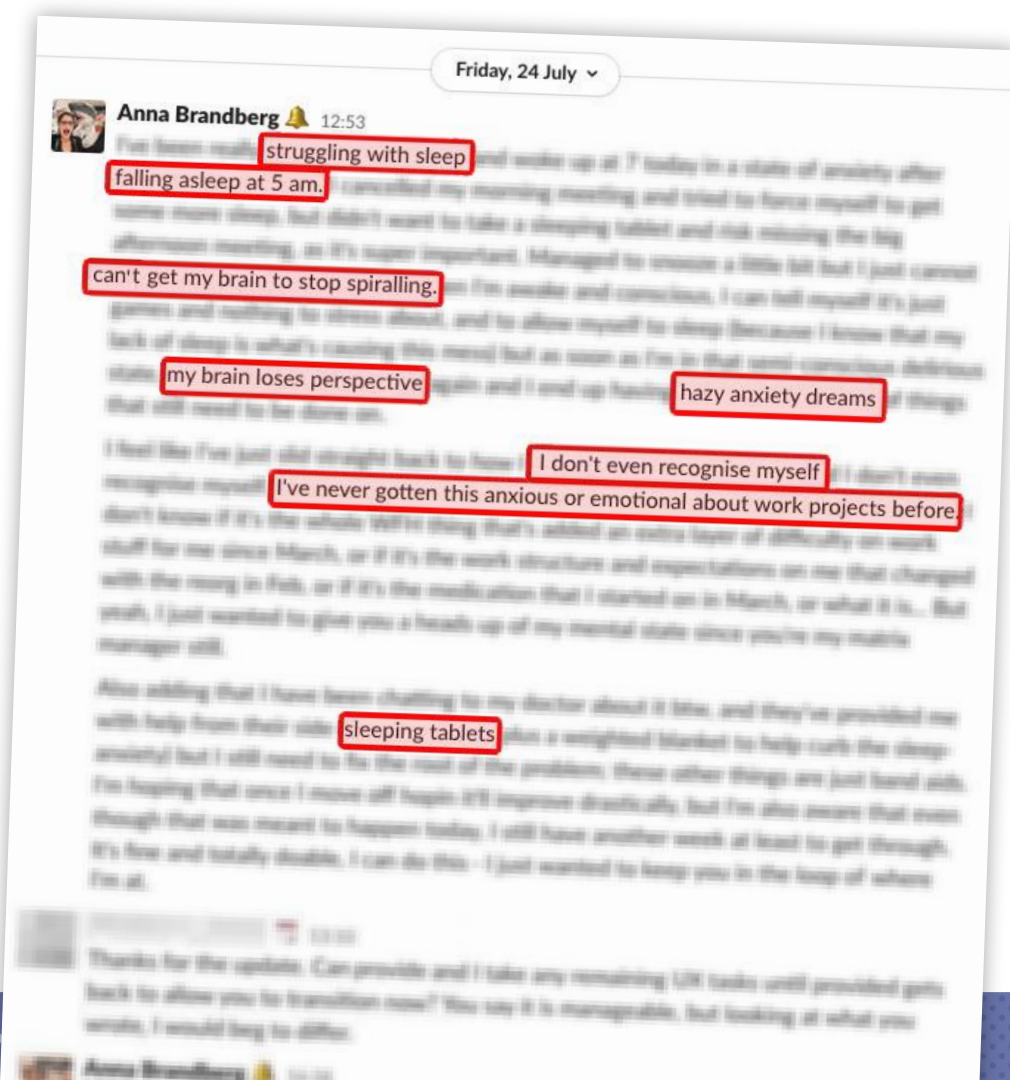




© KC Green

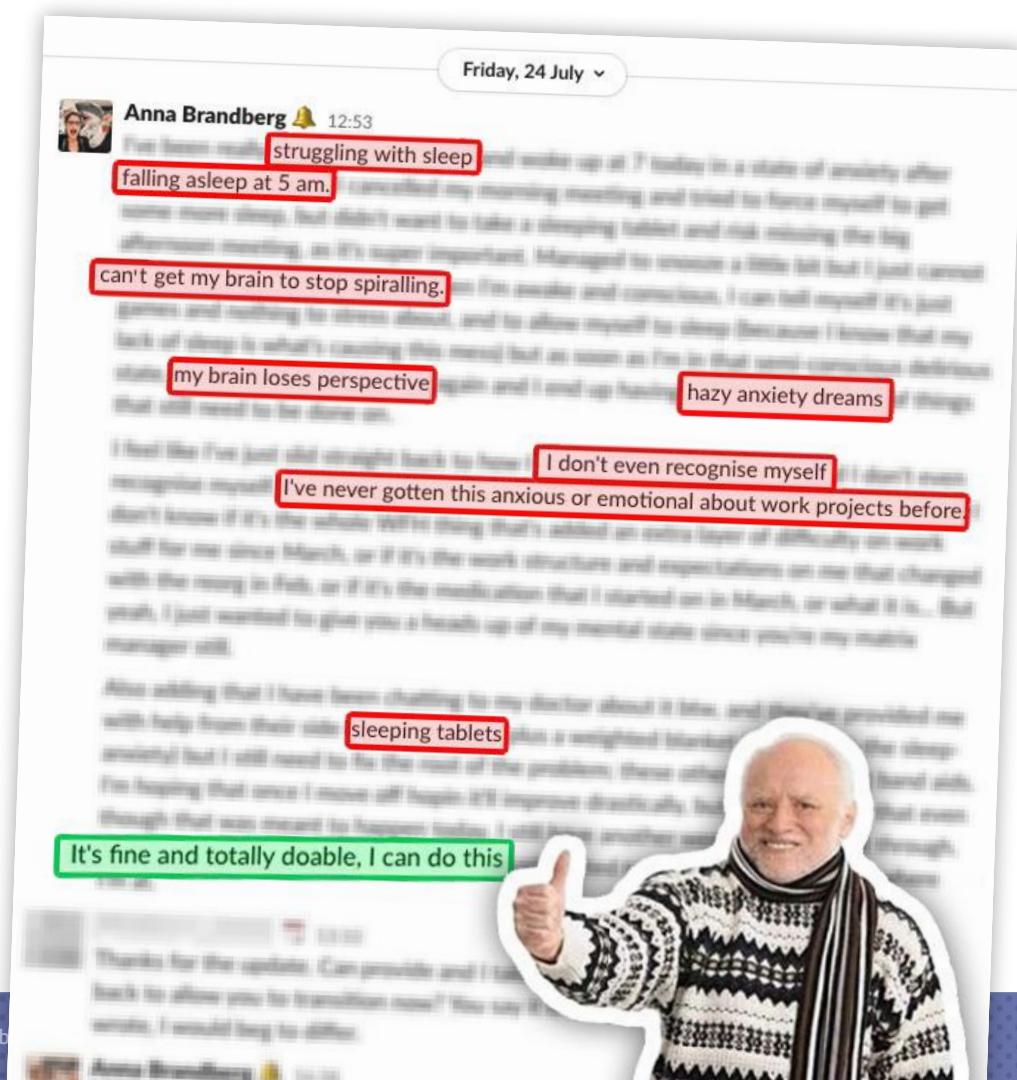
# Spoiler...

I was not fine.



# Spoiler...

I was not fine.



# First steps

- ▶ Help was available once I asked for it!
- ▶ At the doctor:
  - ▶ Verbal assessment
  - ▶ Physical examination & blood test  
(to rule out the possibility of other illnesses  
or conditions causing the symptoms)
- ▶ And then I was sent on to...



# Stress Rehab

- ▶ Public healthcare system
- ▶ Assigned a Social Insurance Agency caseworker
- ▶ I wanted to be the **BEST REHABER EVER** and get back to work ASAP!
- ▶ However...

“A **gradual** return to work is needed. An immediate return to full employment is often **counterproductive.**”

— The National Board of Health and Welfare, Sweden

- ▶ There are no awards for being “A Good Burnouter”





# Things I learnt at Stress Rehab!



# "Utmattningssyndrom" (aka. "Exhaustion Syndrome")

*Diagnosis code F43.8A*

## BUILD-UP PHASE

- ▶ Can last several years.

## ACUTE ONSET PHASE

- ▶ More severe stages of exhaustion, with escalating symptoms.

## CRISIS PHASE

- ▶ Extensive and debilitating symptoms.
- ▶ Usually subsides within a few weeks.

## RECOVERY PHASE

- ▶ Can last for many years.
- ▶ Lingering symptoms and pronounced intolerance for stress.

# The Burnout Curve

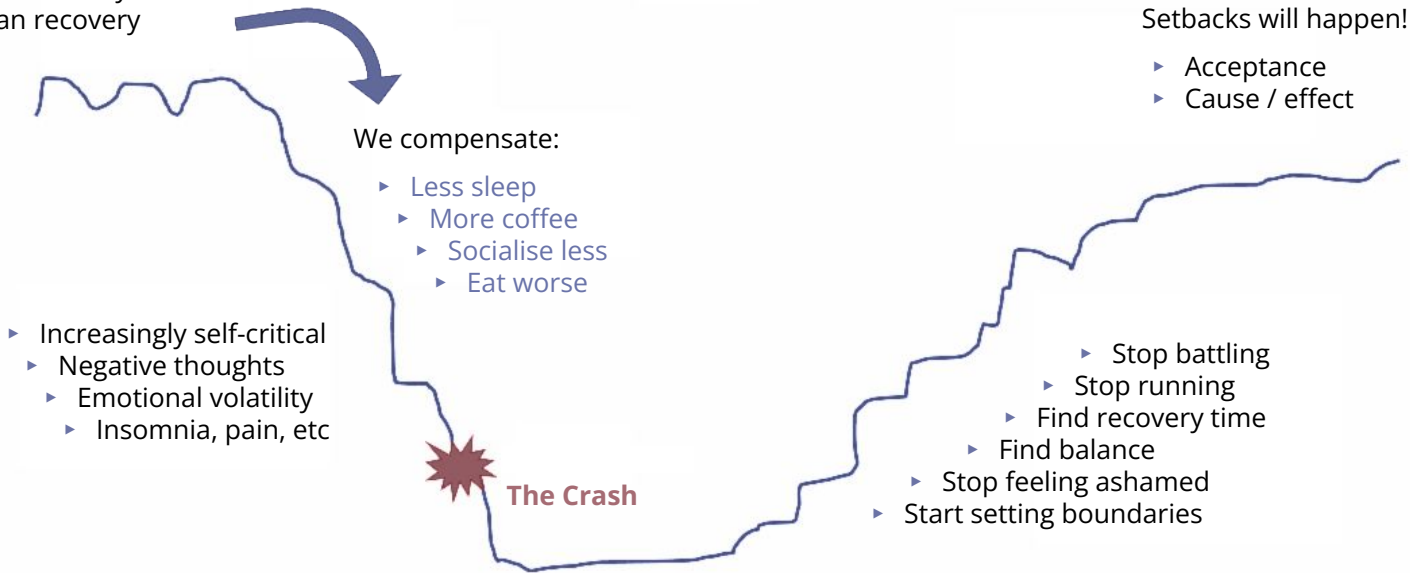
BUILD-UP PHASE

ACUTE ONSET PHASE

CRISIS PHASE

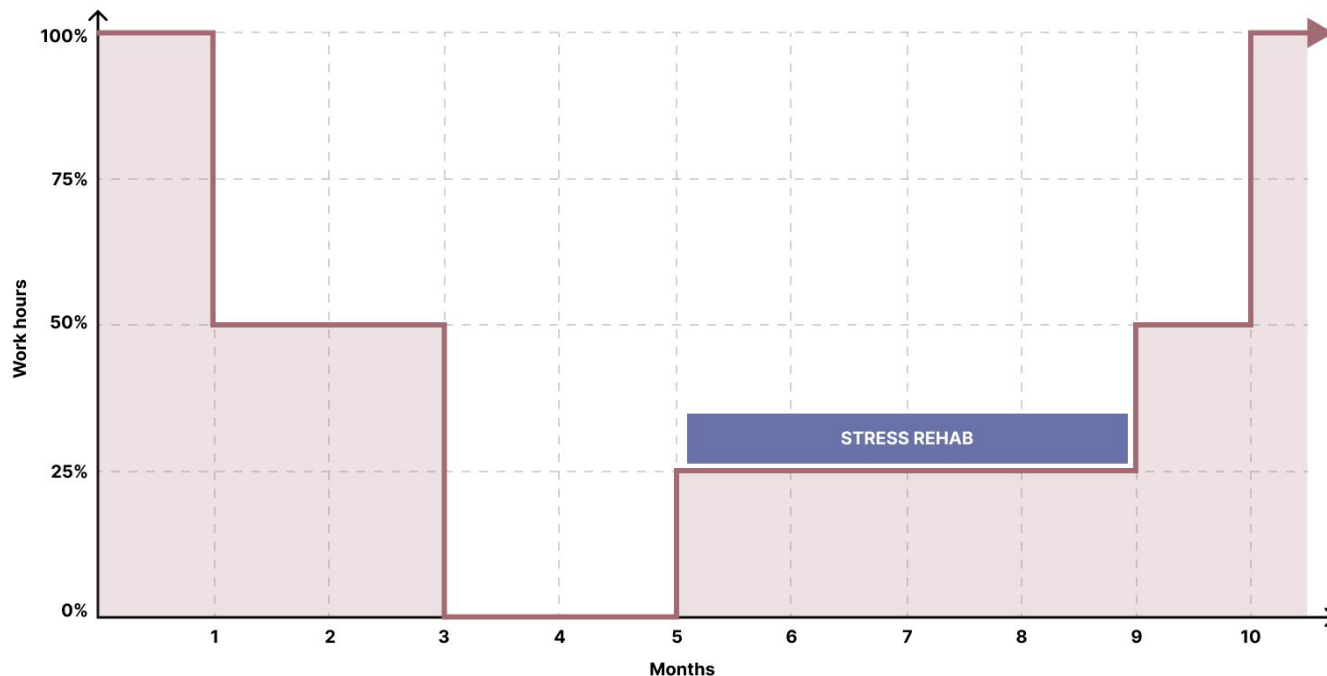
RECOVERY PHASE

More activity  
than recovery





# Time on stress leave

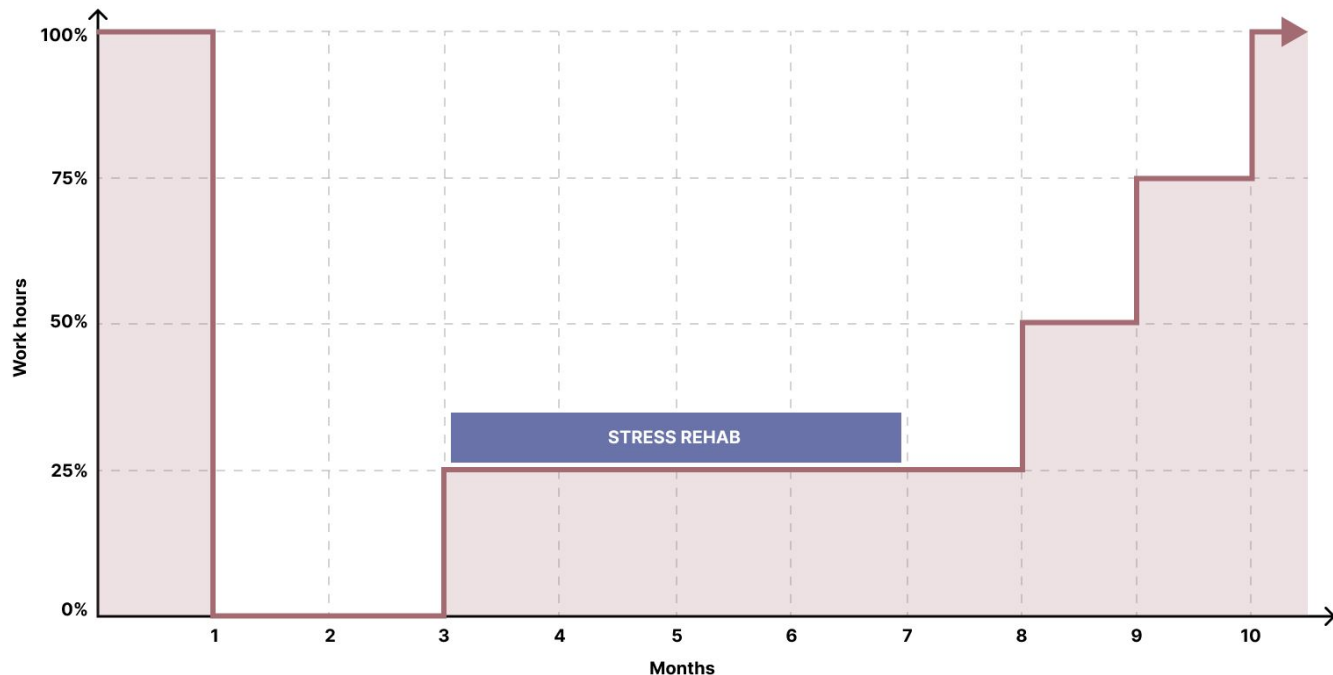


# How I wish I'd done

BUILD-UP  
PHASE

ACUTE ONSET  
PHASE

RECOVERY PHASE



# What to do if you're already burning out?

- ▶ Remember:
  - ▷ **Burnout is a SYSTEMIC failing.**  
**Not an individual one.**
  - ▷ **It is your workplace that has failed YOU —**  
**not the other way around.**
- ▶ That said, if you're currently in the thick of it...  
here are some things to keep you from drowning.



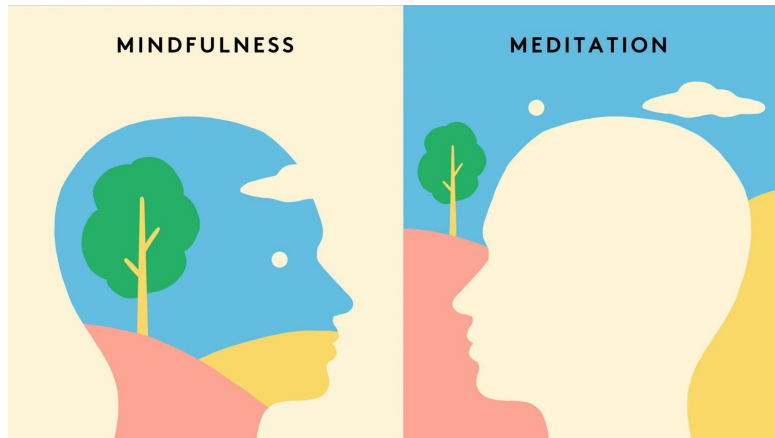
# The Recovery Plan

- ▶ Putting a plan together with your manager:
  - ▷ Are you able to take a leave of absence?
  - ▷ How is your workplace going to adjust your workload & responsibilities afterwards?
- ▶ **As an employee:**  
Should you even stay in your current job?
- ▶ **As a manager:**  
What options do you provide for your employees?



# Tools for the brain

- ▶ **ACT:**
  - ▷ Acceptance & Commitment Therapy
- ▶ **Mindfulness:**
  - ▷ Learning to listen to my body
  - ▷ Learning to stop self-flagellating and start being \*\*\*\*ing kind to myself



*"Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) combines mindfulness skills with the practice of self-acceptance.*

*It encourages people to embrace their thoughts and feelings rather than fighting them, or feeling guilty for them."*

*— Courtney E. Ackerman, MA.*

# The three circles of emotional regulation



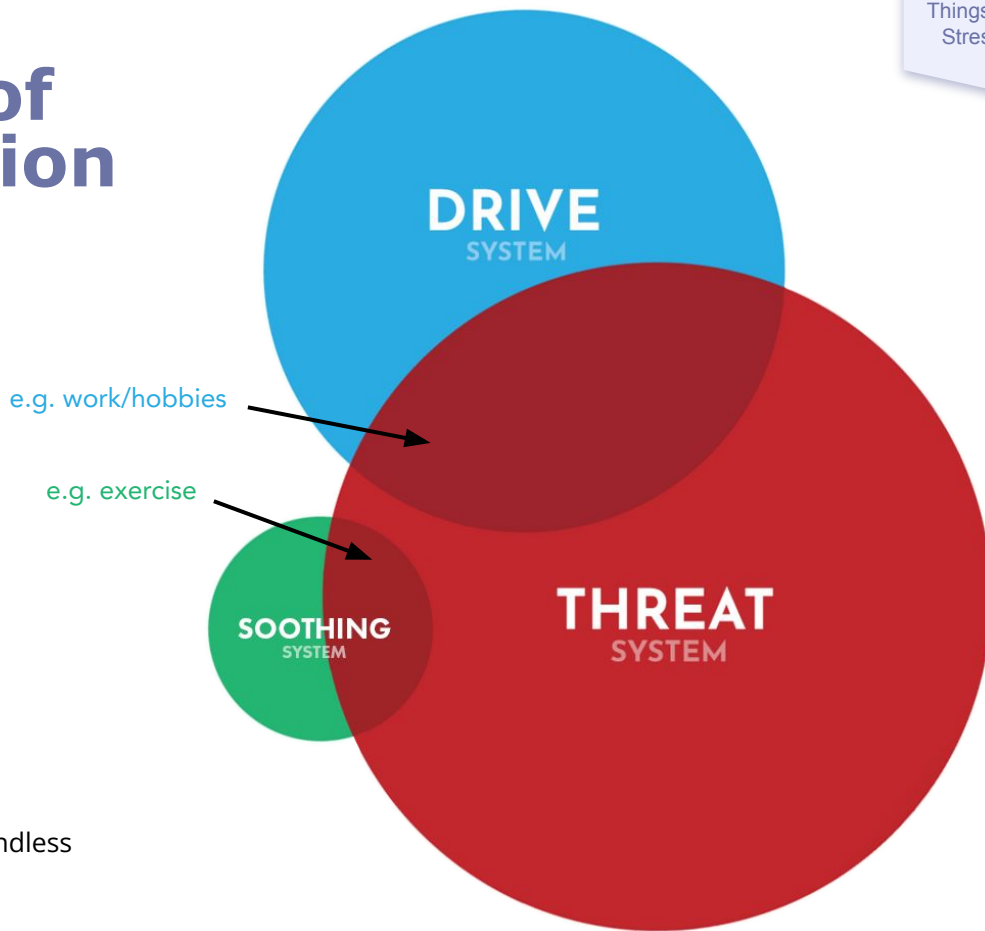
All three are equally important for human survival, but they **have** to be in balance.

# The three circles of emotional regulation



All three are equally important for human survival, but they **have** to be in balance.

# The three circles of emotional regulation



When things that used to be “I want to...” turn into an endless (guilt-driven) list of “I have to...” and “I should...”

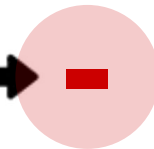


# Ok, so... recharge how?

People are not batteries



Activities that  
**restore** energy



Activities that  
**cost** energy

# Activity Tracker

Print it out  
and monitor  
what you do  
for a full week.

	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
00 - 01							
01 - 02							
02 - 03							
03 - 04							
04 - 05							
05 - 06							
06 - 07							
07 - 08							
08 - 09							
09 - 10							
10 - 11							
11 - 12							
12 - 13							
13 - 14							

# Activity Tracker



- ▶ Identify what colour each activity is and highlight it.
- ▶ Is your week balanced?
- ▶ How can you adjust it?

	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
00 - 01	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE
01 - 02	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE
02 - 03	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE
03 - 04	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE
04 - 05	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE
05 - 06	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE
06 - 07	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE
07 - 08	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE
08 - 09	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE
09 - 10	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE
10 - 11	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE
11 - 12	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE
12 - 13	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE
13 - 14	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE
14 - 15	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE
15 - 16	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE
16 - 17	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE
17 - 18	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE
18 - 19	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE
19 - 20	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE
20 - 21	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE
21 - 22	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE
22 - 23	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE
23 - 24	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE

# Activity Tracker

DRIVE
SOOTHING
THREAT

- ▶ Identify what colour each activity is and highlight it.
- ▶ Is your week balanced?
- ▶ How can you adjust it?

	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
00 - 01	DRIVE	DRIVE	THREAT	DRIVE	THREAT	DRIVE	DRIVE
01 - 02	DRIVE	THREAT	THREAT	DRIVE	THREAT	DRIVE	DRIVE
02 - 03	DRIVE	THREAT	DRIVE	DRIVE	THREAT	DRIVE	DRIVE
03 - 04	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	THREAT	DRIVE	DRIVE
04 - 05	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE
05 - 06	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE
06 - 07	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE
07 - 08	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE
08 - 09	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE
09 - 10	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE
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13 - 14	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE
14 - 15	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE
15 - 16	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE
16 - 17	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE
17 - 18	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE
18 - 19	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE
19 - 20	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE
20 - 21	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE
21 - 22	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE
22 - 23	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE
23 - 24	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE	DRIVE

# Explicitly make time for recovery

- ▶ Your free time is **ONLY** for “green” activities!
- ▶ Identify your daily stressors —
  - ▷ Does <Thing™> *need* to be done? *Perfectly*?
  - ▷ What can be outsourced?
- ▶ Identify your support network —
  - ▷ At work / outside of work
    - ▶ Ask them to help you do things!

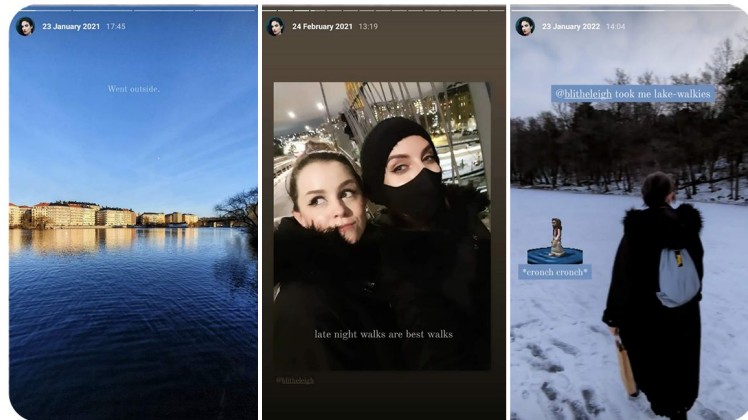
Me going on a stupid little walk  
for my stupid little physical and mental health



# Explicitly make time for recovery

- ▶ Your free time is **ONLY** for “green” activities!
- ▶ Identify your daily stressors —
  - ▷ Does <Thing™> *need* to be done? *Perfectly*?
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    - ▶ Ask them to help you do things!
    - ▶ Ask them to hold you accountable!

Me: \*asks team to hold me accountable\*

Team: \*holds me accountable\*

Me:

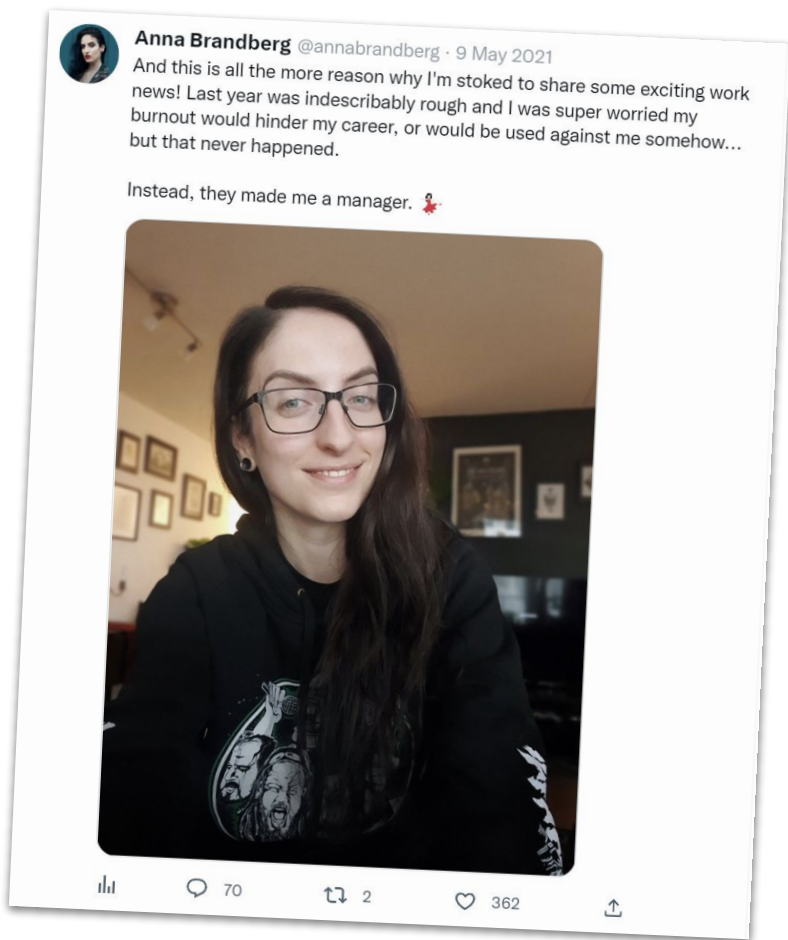




# So what about your job?

They, uhh...

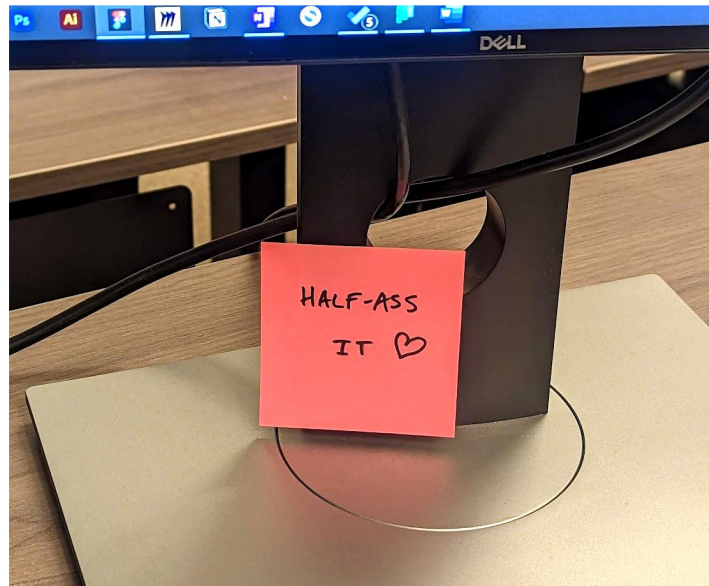
...promoted me. 🤔





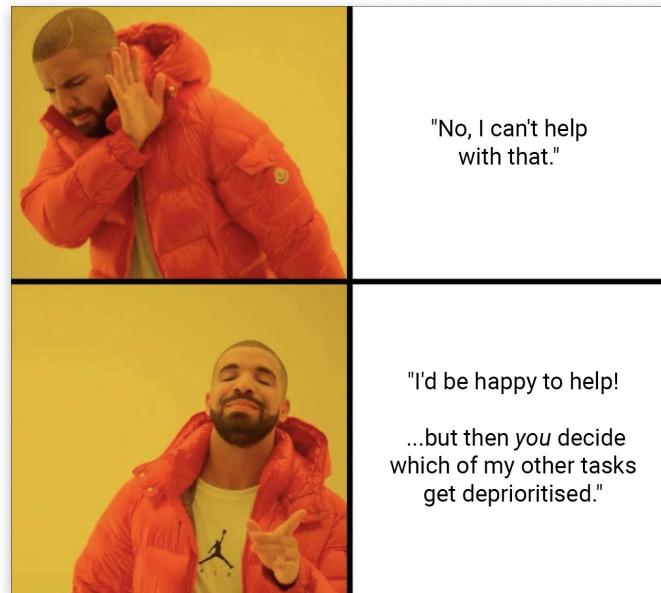
# Today & onwards...

- ▶ New mantra:  
    **"Half-ass it."**
- ▶ Challenge from my psych:  
    **"Be mediocre for a week."**
- ▶ Neutralise your inner critic:  
    **Ask for regular feedback.**



# Today & onwards...

- ▶ New mantra:  
"Half-ass it."
- ▶ Challenge from my psych:  
"Be mediocre for a week."
- ▶ Neutralise your inner critic:  
Ask for regular feedback.
- ▶ Saying no is hard.  
Find better responses.



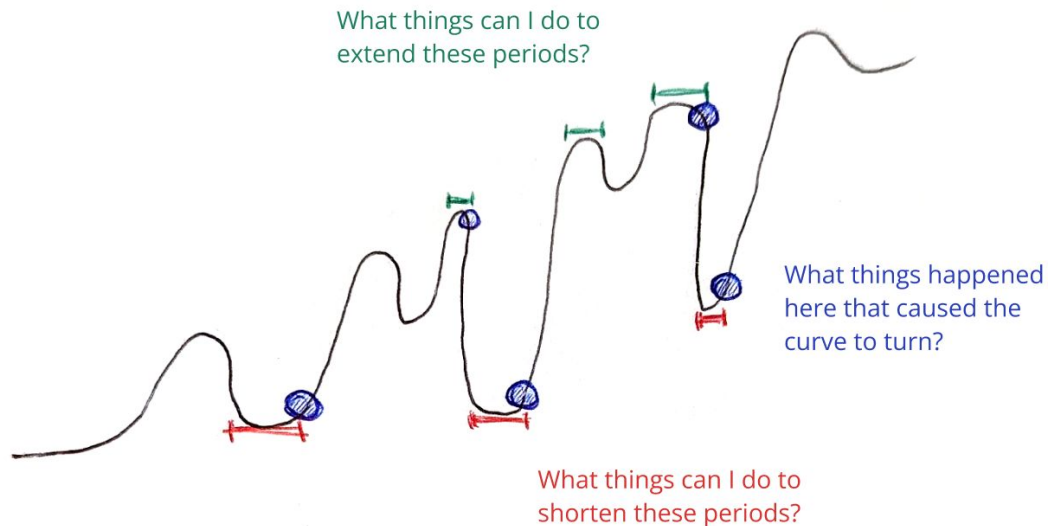
# Recovery is never linear

- ▶ **The goal:**

- ▷ Longer/better **good** periods
- ▷ Shorter/less severe **bad** periods

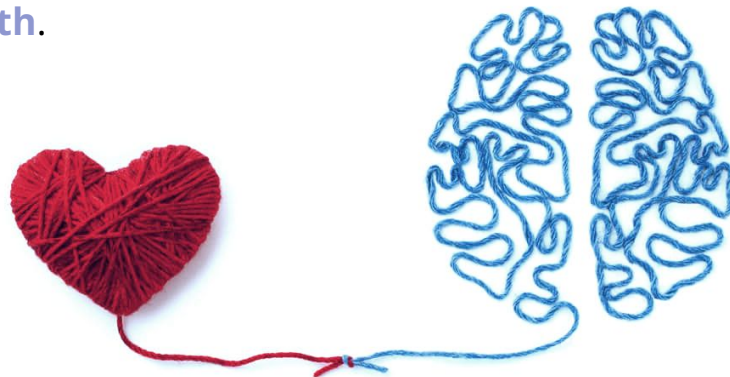
- ▶ Focus on **why** things happened —
  - ▷ Turn criticism into curiosity

- ▶ Be kind to yourself. **Be patient.**
  - ▷ Recovery can take years!



# A gentle, but firm reminder...

- ▶ Overworking is a **fast** way to have a **short** career.
- ▶ There's **nothing** cool about burning out.
- ▶ No game / company / project is worth **your health**.





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# Thank you!



@theedoctorb



@totallynotbot



@osamadorias



@annabrandberg

[Link to all the resources:](#)

