Mental Health Isn't What You Think It Is

8 min read • 1,774 words

Themes: Consciousness Technology Mental Health Programming Human Centered Spiritual Mindful Contemplative

Part of the Mental Health and Technology series exploring human consciousness in the digital age.

The phrase "mental health" has been so thoroughly sanitized and corporatized that it no longer describes what it's supposed to describe. When people say "mental health awareness" or "prioritizing mental health," they usually mean something like self-care, work-life balance, maybe therapy if you're having a tough time. The Instagram version with bubble baths and yoga poses.

That's not what mental health actually is.

Mental health is the messier, more frightening reality of consciousness itself—how your brain processes reality, makes decisions, regulates emotions, and maintains some coherent sense of self while navigating a world that often doesn't make sense

> As I explored in Programming as Spiritual Practice, consciousness is fundamentally mysterious—we build systems to understand it while being embedded within it.

. It's the difference between having a bad day and having a brain that systematically lies to you about reality.

I've been writing about this intersection of technology, consciousness, and human experience for years now, and I keep coming back to the same realization: we've turned "mental health" into a euphemism that obscures rather than illuminates what's actually happening in human minds.

The Sanitized Version

The mainstream mental health conversation focuses on things like:

- "Self-care" (usually meaning consumption of products marketed as wellness)
- Work-life balance (as if life were a time management problem)
- Stress reduction (treating symptoms, not causes)
- Positive thinking (ignoring the reality of how brains actually work)
- "Reaching out" when you need help (without acknowledging how difficult this is when your brain is actively sabotaging you)

This version treats mental health like physical fitness—something you can optimize through the right techniques and sufficient willpower. It's the LinkedIn version of psychological reality.

Why This Is a Problem

This sanitized approach to mental health creates real harm in workplace and professional contexts. When organizations talk about "supporting mental health," they usually mean offering wellness apps, meditation rooms, or Employee Assistance Programs—band-aid solutions that don't address the fundamental ways work environments can undermine psychological functioning.

In tech specifically, I've seen how this plays out

> As documented in The Inclusion Illusion and The Cost of Transparency, the gap between stated mental health support and actual accommodation can be devastating.

:

- **Performance reviews** that penalize the attention fragmentation caused by anxiety or depression, while offering mindfulness apps as a solution.
- **"Open door" policies** for mental health discussions that become grounds for questioning someone's ability to handle responsibility.
- **Wellness initiatives** that focus on stress management while maintaining work environments that systematically generate psychological distress.
- **Mandatory meditation or wellness team-building** that can trigger manic episodes or dissociative states in certain individuals, with no consideration for how these practices affect different neurological conditions.
- **Accommodation requests** treated as personal failings rather than necessary adjustments for neurological differences.

The meditation issue is particularly insidious

> As I documented in MentalHealthError, intensive meditation and spiritual practices triggered my first manic episode with psychosis—something the "spiritual community" interpreted as progress rather than psychiatric emergency.

.

The wellness version of mental health allows organizations to claim they're supportive while avoiding the harder work of creating environments that don't actively undermine psychological functioning. It's much easier to offer meditation apps than to examine whether your sprint planning process creates artificial urgency that triggers anxiety disorders.

The broader cultural problem: When "mental health" means self-care and positive thinking, people struggling with actual mental health conditions—reality testing issues, emotional dysregulation, decision-making impairments—get told their problems would be solved by better boundaries and bubble baths. This isn't just unhelpful; it's actively harmful, suggesting that serious psychological challenges are lifestyle choices rather than complex medical conditions.

The Messier Reality

Actual mental health involves **reality testing**—can you distinguish between what's actually happening and what your anxiety is telling you is happening? This is harder than it sounds when your brain is optimized for threat detection rather than accuracy.

It involves **emotional regulation**—not "staying positive," but learning to work with emotional systems that often operate independently of rational thought. Sometimes you feel terrible for no reason your conscious mind can identify.

It requires **identity coherence**—maintaining some stable sense of who you are across different contexts, moods, and time periods. This is particularly challenging when your brain chemistry changes or when external circumstances shift rapidly.

Mental health means **decision-making under uncertainty**—making choices when your brain is providing unreliable information about risks, rewards, and consequences. Depression makes everything seem pointless; anxiety makes everything seem dangerous.

And it involves **social functioning**—navigating relationships when your internal experience doesn't match what others can observe. Learning to communicate about internal states that have no direct external correlates.

The real version is about debugging human consciousness in real-time, often with incomplete information and unreliable internal feedback systems.

Why the Narrow Focus Matters

The sanitized version of mental health awareness has created a massive blind spot: it focuses almost exclusively on what individuals can do to feel better, while ignoring the systematic ways our technological and social environment undermines mental health.

As I've documented in [my writing about algorithmic systems](), we've built an information environment that deliberately exploits psychological vulnerabilities. [The Algorithm Eats Virtue](), systematically rewards behaviors that worsen mental health, [fragments our attention](), [commodifies our relationships](), and [manufactures artificial realities]() that make reality-testing nearly impossible.

When the conversation stays focused on individual self-care, we miss the bigger picture: many mental health struggles aren't individual failings but predictable responses to environments designed to create psychological distress

> This connects to themes I explore in [The Unexpected Negative](), where individual psychological patterns reflect larger systemic issues.

.

You can't self-care your way out of an attention economy designed to fragment your consciousness. You can't yoga your way out of algorithmic systems that profit from keeping you anxious and disconnected.

What Real Support Actually Looks Like

Having lived with and worked through significant mental health challenges—depression, anxiety, attention regulation issues—I've learned that effective mental health support looks very different from the mainstream narrative.

It's collaborative, not individual: The most helpful approach I've found involves treating mental health as a collaborative debugging process

> As I wrote in [Building rapport with AI](), my most effective mental health support now includes AI collaboration for reality-checking and pattern recognition.

. Friends, family, therapists, and yes, AI systems that can provide perspective when your internal feedback systems are compromised.

It's technical, not mystical: Treating mental health like debugging has been far more effective than treating it like a spiritual failing. When your brain isn't working correctly, you need technical solutions: medication, cognitive techniques, environmental modifications, social support systems. The same systematic approach I use for fixing broken code

> This shift from mystical to technical came from hard experience. As I wrote in MentalHealthError, spiritual approaches initially worsened my condition: "I now believe that a great number of people within the ambiguously self-described 'spiritual community' experience symptoms of mental illness."

.

It's environmental, not just personal: Real mental health improvement often requires changing your environment—the people you spend time with, the information you consume, the physical spaces you inhabit, the work you do. Sometimes the problem isn't your coping skills; it's that you're trying to cope with genuinely harmful situations.

It acknowledges the reality of brain chemistry: Sometimes your brain chemistry is just wrong, and no amount of positive thinking or lifestyle changes will fix it. Medication, when it works, isn't a failure of willpower—it's a technical solution to a technical problem

> In MentalHealthError, I described the moment of clarity: "I finally realized that the simplest way to leave the hospital was to take the medicine the staff had been offering me the entire time and get some sleep." Sometimes the technical solution is that straightforward.

.

It's ongoing, not fixed: Mental health isn't a problem you solve once. It's an ongoing maintenance process, like keeping software updated or maintaining physical fitness. Some days are better than others, and that's normal rather than a sign of failure.

The Stakes

This distinction matters because the sanitized version of mental health often makes people feel worse when individual interventions don't work. If mental health is just about self-care and positive thinking, then continued struggling means personal failure.

The reality is that mental health involves complex interactions between brain chemistry, social environment, information diet, economic circumstances, relationship quality, and technological context. Individual techniques help, but they're not sufficient when the broader context is actively undermining psychological well-being.

As I've explored throughout my writing on consciousness and technology, we're living through unprecedented challenges to human mental health. The same algorithmic systems that connect us also isolate us. The same technologies that provide information also overwhelm us with more than we can process. The same platforms that promise community often deliver commodified interaction instead of genuine relationship.

Understanding mental health accurately—as the complex, ongoing, collaborative process of maintaining functional consciousness in challenging environments—is essential for developing effective responses both individually and collectively.

A Different Conversation

Mental health isn't wellness culture. It's not self-optimization. It's not something you achieve and maintain through sufficient effort and the right techniques.

It's the ongoing reality of being conscious in a world that often doesn't support consciousness well. It's learning to work with brains that evolved for different environments than the ones we now inhabit. It's developing technical solutions to technical problems while acknowledging that some problems require environmental changes rather than individual adaptation.

The conversation we need isn't about mental health awareness in the abstract. It's about creating technological, social, and economic environments that support rather than undermine human consciousness

> This is central to what I call the "For Humans" philosophy—designing systems that serve human flourishing rather than exploit human psychology.

.

That's a much more interesting and useful conversation than whether you're practicing enough self-care.

This essay challenges sanitized mental health discourse, arguing for technical and systemic approaches to consciousness maintenance. It connects to themes of AI-assisted reality-checking, contemplative programming, systemic healing patterns, and algorithmic psychological harm.

See the Mental Health and Technology, For Humans Philosophy, and Consciousness and AI collections for deeper exploration.

External perspectives include The Body Keeps the Score by Bessel van der Kolk on trauma's impact on consciousness, Feeling Good by David Burns for cognitive behavioral techniques, The Upward Spiral by Alex Korb on depression neuroscience, Lost Connections by Johann Hari on environmental factors, and The Noonday Demon by Andrew Solomon on depression as both individual and cultural phenomenon.

"Mental health isn't about feeling good all the time. It's about developing reliable systems for working with consciousness when it's not functioning optimally."

"The most radical thing you can do for your mental health is recognize that some of your struggles are appropriate responses to inappropriate circumstances."

"Debugging consciousness requires the same systematic approach as debugging code: reproduce the problem, isolate the variables, test solutions incrementally."