Depressed tech workers can't stop talking about evil sick Zuck and Musk, therapists say

By [Zara Stone](#)

Even those who don't work for Zuckerberg see him, along with Elon Musk, as a figurehead for the vibe shift in tech that is stressing them out.

Aaron Smith, a psychologist at [Thriving Center of Psychology](#), a national platform that offers in-person appointments and telehealth, said he hears about Zuckerberg constantly during sessions, even from patients who don't work in social media. "[Zuckerberg] comes up because we're steeped in tech here," he said. "It trickles down into the culture of the workplace."

Smith's clients say a new pro-masculinity emphasis in Big Tech is reshaping workplace culture, with managers being told to crack the whip and take a more authoritarian direction with their reports. "We see a lot of aggression come across in the messaging from leadership," he said.

This, plus the cozy relationship between tech leaders and the second Trump administration, as well as the past few years of layoffs in the sector, means heightened anxiety, disillusionment, and a veil of silence now pervades tech. Employees are afraid — of speaking up, of getting noticed, of being the next one cut.

So who can they vent to? Their therapists.

The techies are not all right

Therapists say their tech-worker patients are extremely stressed over the changes in their industry and feeling a measure of guilt about their perceived complicity.

[Alex Oliver-Gans](#), a San Francisco-based psychotherapist specializing in men's mental health, said many of his tech clients feel their values are at odds with their workplace. "Companies that previously felt exciting and fresh are now donating money to initiatives that go against [patients'] beliefs," he said. "They say their work doesn't feel as rewarding and have expressed existential questions of what am I working for, who is it benefitting? … They feel stuck."

Peninsula-based psychotherapist [Sally Scheidlinger](#) says the entanglement between tech leaders and the Trump administration is a major source of angst for rank-and-file workers. Many got into tech to do good — to make the world a better place — and have watched in horror as their leaders have seemed to abandon their values to rail against wokeness.

"The involvement of these tech billionaires has been really disheartening to folks," Scheidlinger said, referring in particular to Musk's work with the Department of Government Efficiency and the Trump administration's vendettas against liberal governance. "There's this sense that living in California is no protection anymore."

One of Scheidlinger's clients, a 30-something engineer at a Big Tech company, will "absolutely not share his opinions at work," she said. "He was very, very careful because of the surveillance culture at his company. There's a sense of hyper-vigilance and that there's nothing we can do about it."

Daniel, a 27-year-old software engineer at a Big Tech firm, has seen two work friends get axed in the last three months. "They had great performance reviews, they were meeting all their targets," he said. "But their manager said they weren't performing, which is bullshit." Daniel believes it was their politics that put them on the chopping block: They'd challenged changes in diversity, equity, and inclusion policies, and the managers hadn't liked that. The message from the firings was clear: Get in line with our policies, or get out. (Like other tech workers interviewed for this story, Daniel spoke under the condition of anonymity out of fear of being fired.)

Daniel misses his friends, but he also misses how he used to *feel* about his company. "It doesn't feel like a safe space anymore," he said. He is not sure if he wants to stay, but isn't looking elsewhere for at least six months because he'd be leaving money on the table. "I have lots of shares that are vesting," he said. "I might consider working somewhere else when they do."

"'I feel so betrayed.' That's something that I hear over and over again," said [Ling Lam](#), an engineer turned psychologist who lectures at Santa Clara University and provided on-site counseling at Google

for 14 years. "This all creates uncertainty, which is a huge stressor for the body. It creates a sense of loss of autonomy. [Employees] are in survival mode."

> "Company culture was really important to me, but I can't be as picky, because I've only got so much savings."

Some have turned to [Blind](), an anonymous messaging board for workers, to vent. In the last three months, there's been "an increase in posts mentioning layoffs and stress-related concerns among Big Tech employees," said Jaekyung Bae, Blind's head of public relations. A survey of 3,325 Blind users found that 40% believe software engineers are the most [vulnerable]() to layoffs.

This constant worry over the industry manifests in a variety of ways, therapists say. Common complaints are sleep disturbances, pain, weight loss, lack of interest, irritability, sickness, and erectile dysfunction. Relationships often suffer. "When people are stressed, we just have less capacity to love each other and to tolerate discomfort in a relationship," Lam said.

To compensate for the stress, therapists report, tech workers are embracing meditation, THC, alcohol, and ketamine. (Patients also seem to be doing a lot of karaoke, say therapists.)

"We see more occurrences of suffering in silence," said Smith. "There's a narrative of hopelessness and feeling that things won't change."

"There isn't a high level of comfort or trust [that they] can vocalize their thoughts and not feel like retribution would occur," Smith said of his tech clients.

Bring your whole self to work no more

Sam, a 33-year-old software engineer, thinks he was the victim of such retribution. He was let go from his San Francisco-based job after giving direct feedback about his company's changed direction.

"This was a real learning experience about how much of myself I will bring to work in the future," he said. "My parents always stressed to me that you can't share everything with your manager, but I thought that was a generational thing. … It's sad I've been proven wrong in this respect." Now on the job market, he's considering companies that in the past he would have ignored because they don't align with his values. "Company culture was really important to me, but I can't be as picky, because I've only got so much savings."

Some veterans say the tech industry feels unrecognizable from when they started. Billy, a 37-year-old software designer who lives in SoMa, is jarred by what he describes as a shift away from embracing employees' values. "Every Bay Area company acts like they want to promote bringing your full self to

work, but they don't," said Billy, who is gay. "They tell us we're important when it helps their recruiting efforts, but they don't support us when the government says we should have less than equal rights. … It's kind of a slap in the dick."

Billy has a decade of experience at blue-chip companies but said he's been job hunting for a year. Last month he interviewed at Uber, only to be rejected and find the role relisted at a lower pay bracket. "It was a bitter pill to even apply there because of their labor practices and wage discrimination," he said, referring to accusations against the company. He has tried to "avoid companies that don't align with me morally," but he's getting desperate.

It doesn't help that many people assume that privileged techies have it easy. "A lot of tech people are shitheads, and their problems are absolutely first-world. … If they ended up jobless tomorrow, [they] would land on their feet," said Billy. "But I'm from the middle of nowhere, West Virginia. I have six figures of student loan debt. If I run out of savings, I'm on the street. I hope that we can find some common empathy for everybody."

Therapists treating a desperate and demoralized workforce have grappled with how to address such woes. "It's hard," said Scheidlinger, "because a lot of what folks talk about is catastrophizing, but in this political climate, they're not wrong."