

Be resilient not positive

Policy debates about measuring happiness in the current climate sound like something from a bygone era when men did not cry and women wore matching gloves. But the gloves are firmly off and we are now facing the harsh realities of work and the lack of it. With the longest recession in history predicted in the UK we are asking ourselves a very real question about how to survive it.

In the UK there are an estimated 2.9 million unemployed and a further 2.4 million adults outside of the labour force. The ONS estimates that there is one job available for every ten jobseekers. Lack of jobs and skills are largely responsible for the staggering drop in optimism of young people about successfully finding their way into the world of work with 72% of young people not believing they will find secure work. People who still have jobs are supposed to feel like the lucky ones, but in these deregulated precarious times, it might not feel that way.

Resilience responds to the voice that many of us wake bolt upright to at 4am asking 'how am I going to get through this?' Resilience can be defined as the

ability to cope with and adapt to difficult situations, a squaring up to life. The term comes from infant development research about why some children who have experienced trauma seem to get through it and others are subsequently unable to flourish.

Resilience is a fundamentally realistic concept that acknowledges the world as it is and the proposal that we have to adapt in order to survive it. Adaptation is quite literally my favourite word in the English language. It reflects our real beauty as human beings, that we are driven to get on with life despite its horrors, loves, hates, losses and betrayals. It is essentially iterative and not a character trait that people either possess or not - the 'Resilience-Tick' model. Rather it is something that is revealed and lost at various points in life, a life-long struggle and journey.

Do not be positive

Much of the research around wellbeing and resilience at work is based on positive psychology, particularly the work of Martin Seligman and the PENN resilience programme. This approach has found its way into larger workplaces – promoting the idea that optimism is an essential and learned behaviour that promotes wellbeing and resilience. There is much debate about the value of this approach, specifically whether it denies the realities of people's experience of work. In a context of job insecurity, victimisation and workplace bullying being

told to focus on positive thoughts and breathing exercises can be highly provocative in that it denies the significance of what can go wrong at work. In this context optimism and positive thinking are a poor response to feelings of anger and hopelessness.

One of the problems with workplaces resilience schemes is that they can easily look like a poster campaign for socialist realism. Your workplace needs you! Eat breakfast and you can produce twice as many widgets for the empire! I am not against breakfast, but what we do know is that “nanny” messaging by employers has at best no impact and at worst a negative effect. That is because it removes individuals from being in the driving seat of their own resilience.

Keep your hands on the steering wheel

Being resilient is fundamentally about agency, knowing that what you are is enough to solve your own problems. It is not about lacking anything, rather liberating something from within. I am tempted to call this Radical Resilience TM but the use of cheap labelling might actually undermine the very political point I want to make here. The methods used in workplace schemes need to be consistent with this central objective of empowerment of the individual, what is sometimes called agency or self-efficacy, and increase capacity to take control over one’s life and mental states. This means that if workplace resilience

schemes do not help to address the internal soundtrack that says 'I'm not enough' then they provide a false sanctuary where following doctor's orders means you will be OK. An apple a day. Although we know that having a fruit bowl at work might improve concentration it is unlikely to empower people enough to recognise that they can make really good decisions about how to live.

The trick to building your resilience is to give yourself a break for not being the very model of resilience, but rather a genuine piece of human-work-in-progress.

Ask the survivors

The best way to work out how you are going to survive work is to ask someone else how they did it. You have a look at the Surviving Work Library at www.survivingwork.org and learn from the experts. You could also ask someone to tell you about their worst job and how they survived it. Spend five minutes just listening, without any interruption or questions. When the five minutes are up thank them. Bet you learned something.