



HOW TO SURVIVE WORK IN A RECESSION



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Do you ever get sick of people trying to sell you the formula for success? While it would be lovely if we were all leaders and innovators, in these tough times options are limited. The only choice you might have for the time being (at least) is to get through the day the best way you can.

Whether you actually are doing something you love or not, paid or unwaged, suited or booted, doing what's necessary to keep yourself in work is a survival skill. It's not as easy as it looks, either, especially given the social no-no's about openly admitting to struggling with work. And if you're suffering to the extent that it's actually affecting your mental health? Well, say the words "mental illness" out loud at work and it's like you just farted in a lift.

So let's just spell out some harsh realities: we're in the middle of a long recession, everyone's trying to get their head above water and learning a few new survival skills might come in handy...

Surviving Work offers free and confidential resources for people who want to become more resilient either in or out of work. Our free online Surviving Work Library has a huge catalogue of helpful stuff about how to do it. Learn from thousands of experts (defined as ‘anyone who is actually doing it’) on how they – and you – can survive work.

We are not purveyors of magic solutions. Nor do we promise to make you thinner or richer. But we will help you survive work.

Small Print Warning: You might possibly enjoy yourself.

BE RESILIENT NOT POSITIVE



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Policy debates about measuring happiness in the current climate sound like something from a bygone era when men didn't 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 most workplaces that talk about wellbeing mean "how-to-keep-a-lid-on-it", a positive psychology model which emphasises individual behaviours and self-regulation to promote optimism. The trouble with it is that nanny messaging often looks like a socialist realism poster – Eat fruit! Work harder!! Be happy!!! I love fruit but telling people not to get angry ignores workplace realities and just doesn't work. People are generally cynical about the Happiness Agenda and we are much heartened to tell you that most people don't buy it. It does mean that we have to find an alternative way to survive work that is realistic and actually helps.

There's a lot of debate amongst the gonks about what to call it. We call it resilience but you can just call it surviving work if you like. Resilience is the voice that wakes you up to at 4am shouting "How am I going to get through this?" Resilience doesn't give you a diagnosis of mad or sane, it puts you a long a spectrum where some days we can cope and adapt to difficult situations and then other days

we just can't. It's a pretty democratic idea that all of us are resilient until we're not.

The research around resilience says that there are in life both resilience risks and protective factors. Risks include factors such as facing redundancy, or numbing yourself by taking to the pop. Protective factors include learning and being good at your job. 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. But probably the thing that's always likely to get you through is love. Yes, call us hippies if you like, the key to resilience is other people. If you do one thing to help yourself it should be to learn how to rely on your own and other people's humanity. And that, dear survivor, is our modest mission in life to put the human back into work.

Being resilient means keeping your hands on the steering wheel of your own life. Sign up to the Survivors' Manifesto.

The Survivors' Manifesto

Resilience is the capacity to cope with and adapt to difficult situations. It is not a character trait or an aspect of personality, rather it's the capacity or state of mind that means we can keep our hands on the steering wheels of our own lives.

We, the Surviving Workers, believe that:

Resilience is democratic and does not discriminate between people who see themselves as mentally ill and those that don't. We are all vulnerable to losing our resilience when things get tough.

We are all able to influence our resilience, regardless of wealth, looks and luck in life.

Productive work is central to human happiness and it's the collective responsibility of gaffers and workers to build resilience in the face of the realities of the recession.

Resilience means being brave and taking on the stigma attached to struggling with life.

We are all in the driving seats of our own resilience but we need each other to really nail it.

We the undersigned commit to try and keep trying, to challenge the wilfully destructive internal and external voices that tell us otherwise.

Sign up comrade.

THE GROUND RULES



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So, before we start here are the ground rules.

Ground rule 1: Don't blame yourself

To expect people not to take things personally is usually ridiculously unrealistic. However, making sense of what's happening at work means you're less likely to think it's all your fault. It's stunning that when people are faced with redundancy a common feeling is shame and guilt – part of us thinks it's our fault rather than a sign of organisational failure. I find the knowledge that real wages haven't gone up in 30 years really helpful in addressing the bit of me that thinks I'm a loser for not being able to afford what I need by week two every month. For a current low down on what is happening to wages in the UK you can read [this report](#).

Ground rule 2: Don't stay calm and carry on

Telling people to calm down at work is pretty provocative in the current climate. It's good to know you can self-regulate but when you are angry, it's nigh on impossible to hold the lotus position. Learning to feel angry and to express it without it spilling out into violence and career suicide is an essential life skill and something we cover in a following section. Whatever it is, whether it's taking a leisurely scream on a railway bridge or punching the living day lights out of a king sized mattress you've got to find a way to get it out of your

system. Most of us are already angry about something, so rather than sucking it up and waiting for a family Christmas lunch, why not deal with it.

Ground rule 3: Don't be brilliant

Having a Jesus complex is a powerful driver for a lot of working people – if you are rich/ perfect/ fashionable/ young/ beautiful/ charming (tick at least six boxes) then you are obviously brilliant and therefore valuable. The problem with this logic is what happens if you are not brilliant just human. That sounds almost like failure, doesn't it? Admitting that you're not brilliant. Granted, it's not a great job interview strategy, but why is it so hard to ever admit to being ordinary? The facts of life are painful to accept because it hurts to lose our dreams, even if they are actually dangerous delusions that stop us from living in the real world. Unattractive as it might seem, the reality is that now the bubble has burst and we have our feet firmly on the ground again. We have lost our superpowers and now have to rely on our ordinary human powers.

Ground rule 4: Don't go over the psychic cliff

Look, only you know if you're on the edge of a psychic cliff so before you start, be honest about how you feel. If you are feeling that you can't cope then you have to talk to a pro. Go to your GP (with our [checklist](#) in hand) or just call the Samaritans on 08457909090. These people are genius, put their number in your phone right now. They

will not judge you or tell you you're making a fuss out of nothing. The NHS might well be in a sorry state right now but if you're in pain you've got to call in the professionals.

Now we've got the rules done we're now going to look at five essential stages of surviving work. Starting where you are, getting angry, confronting anxiety, finding your psychic sherpas and beating your bullies. This is not rocket science. None of this should surprise you. That's not because we are frauds, rather that when we get stressed we can turn into teenage chimps, missing the obvious and going a bit gonzo.

START WHERE YOU ARE



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That is technically just four words but this is the first step to building your resilience. Sometimes we all get lost up a psychic mountain and so locating yourself on the mental health map is the first step to finding the trail home.

One of the reasons why that is so important, honestly speaking, is that we are natural born liars. Secret Eaters, a Ch4 programme about overeating, is deep stuff. It should be wrong on every level – morbidly obese families and couples defiantly stating that they don't eat enough to feed a small kitten and can't figure out why they are having to order pants from the US. Crashing through our internal speakers we hear the lyrics 'you did it to yourself, you did' and the sound of a digital scaffold being set up. What follows is then 45 minutes of humiliating secret filming of what people are really shoving into their bodies. Sugar, lard, booze and car parts. Mechanical chomping in front of the telly makes a profound commentary on UK home life.

A mother responsible for feeding a massive family saw herself secretly filmed consuming enough fast food for four in one sitting, topped up with 12 - yes 12 - pints of cider a day. True, she looked devastated but then she just said 'Well, it's where I am and now I've got to get myself out of this. You'd better help me.' Sound of old fruit and fridges being hurled from the gallery? No my friend, that is the

sound of awe and the world giving her a cosmic high five. This queen amongst 5ft 2 women had taken it on the chin, swallowed hard and turned it round. And that's what we all have to do if we want to get on with life.

The thing about resilience is that it is profoundly political. Not just because of the fact that being vulnerable is the last taboo in our organised society (anyone who has had a breakdown at work can graphically walk you through any doubts you might have about that statement). It is political because it forces us to look at what is going on in the real brutal world of work (yes, I'm afraid it does matter if you're earning a living wage or if your boss is a corporate psychopath) as well as what's going on internally (cider, just saying). It's both true that being poor puts you at high risk and at the same time mental health problems are stunningly democratic. Turns out that there are no hard and fast rules to mental health and getting into psychic trouble really can happen to anyone.

For all of us, the research indicates that there is a broad range of internal and external factors that impact our resilience levels. To help you think about where you really are on the mental health map do a quick calculation where you are in the grand balance of things. Try to be honest, go on now, and at the end ask yourself to think of three things that you could do to either reduce your risks or increase your protections.

RISK FACTORS

anything that stops our capacity to adapt.

- **Precarious work:** income, job, career, temporal, skills, representation insecurity.
- **Being broke:** Debt and in-work poverty.
- **Feeling useless:** Inequality and exclusion from employment and education.
- **Feeling vulnerable:** Stigma and discrimination on the basis of unemployment, socio-economic status, mental health.
- **Loss:** end of relationships, redundancy, separation.
- **Bad health:** physical and mental illness and problems, obesity, anxiety, cancer.
- **Bad relationships:** isolation, bullying, abuse, violence.
- **Toxic neighbourhoods:** crime, violence, low public services.
- **Toxic coping strategies:** alcohol, drugs, gambling, risk taking, self harm.

PROTECTIVE FACTORS

anything that promotes adaptation.

- **Meaningful work:** creative and productive.
- **Good relationships:** being able to rely on people.
- **Feeling able:** self-efficacy.
- **Hopefulness.**
- **Community:** being part of a group.
- **Learning** something new
- **Expression:** being able to express your feelings.
- **Self-regulation:** being able to manage our feelings.
- **Healthy coping strategies:** reality testing, non-catastrophising, avoiding damaging coping strategies.

ADDRESSING YOUR COSMIC BALANCE

On the off-chance that your risks are looking bigger than your protective factors just off the top of your head write down three things you could do over the next few weeks to redress the resilience balance:

1.

2.

3.

It's in black and white what you have to do.

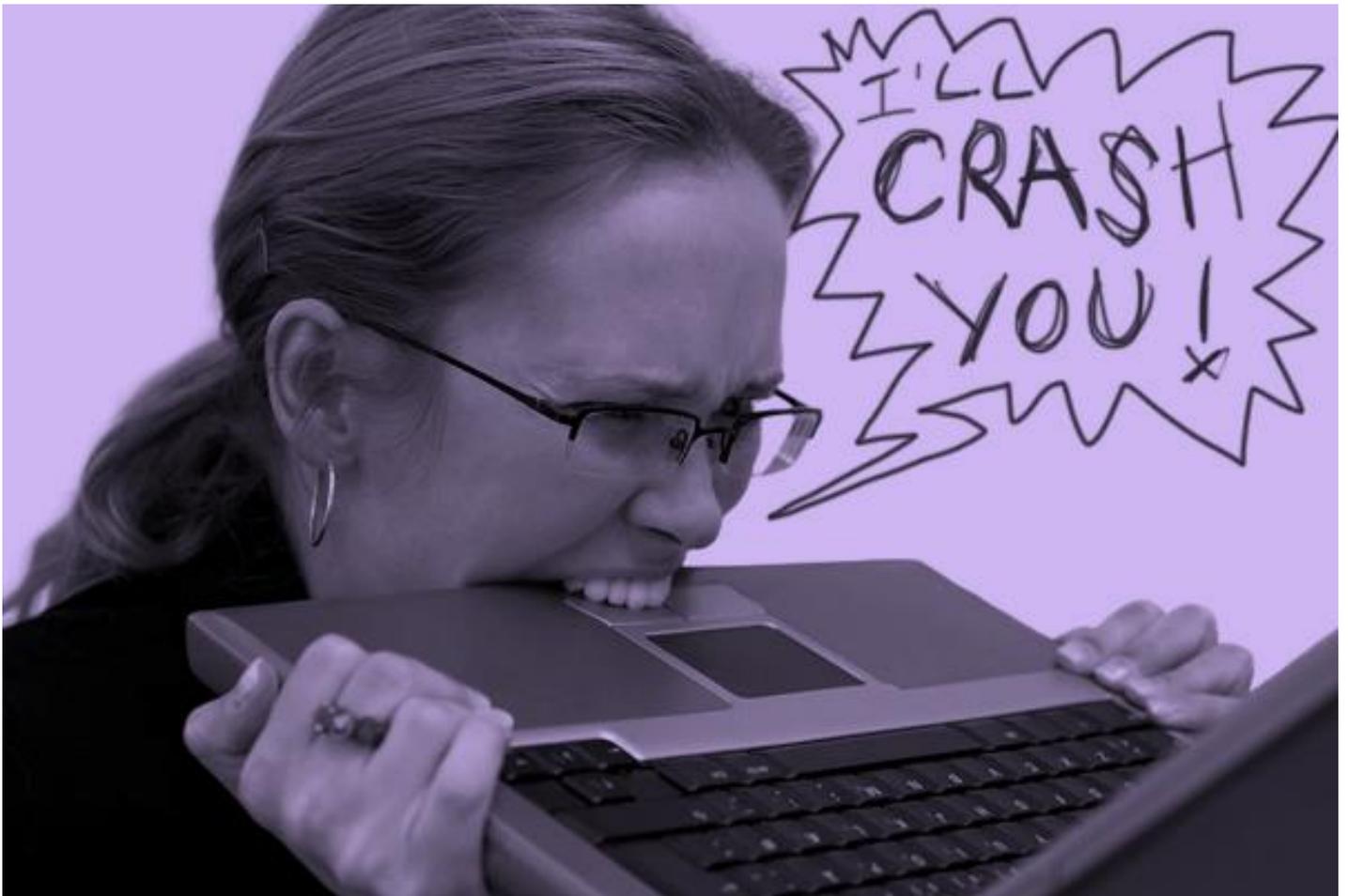
Awkward or what?

THE LISTENING SWAP

Before you give up in a huff, why don't you try just asking someone you like at work 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.

This should remind you that you are in fact surrounded by people who are experts in surviving work who possibly might be able to help you.

GET ANGRY



GET ANGRY

The trouble with anger is that it is an ugly emotion. When you are going through the process of redundancy probably the most consistent piece of “advice” offered is do not, whatever you do, get angry. When you are angry this is less helpful than you imagine, underlining the profound difference between advice and help, the latter being a rare thing and the former given in abundance especially from a position of relative security. The thing about telling an angry person not to get angry is that it is something of a vicious circle. You are angry, a demand is made that you CALM DOWN and regulate your feelings, you feel this denies the legitimacy of why you are angry, you get more angry, even harder to calm down.

We live in a demanding age of communication – with the focus firmly placed on how to communicate something positively rather than the ‘what’ we are trying to communicate. Anger is often misunderstood to be a character failing rather than an emotion linked closely to fear. Anger is a deeply physical experience making it hard to remember that just because someone is frightening you it does not mean that they themselves are not frightened. Most of us struggle to express our anger. Often we express our anger indirectly through what appear to be relatively benign behaviours such as withdrawal, passive aggression, aggressive humour, or gossiping. Sometimes we try to get rid of angry feelings by replacing them with other feelings, such as hunger, or redirecting them onto other things, such as phobias or

scapegoating. Other times we replace the feeling with an action, such as binge eating, working late, cleaning and tidying or picking an argument. Oh please, you know it.

So given that there is a lot of anger around at work, what could be a healthy attitude towards it? It might lie in the understanding that anger is necessary to the process of change. The energy and focus that you have when you are angry is an important motivator in challenging things that we think are wrong. Not being able to direct our anger at the right things is one of the most important reasons why some people experience depression and others do not. If you can get angry you are really living, really experiencing and reacting to what is going on around you. Depression is a numbing and dumbing process, to try to avoid feelings of sadness and anger. And it is precisely this that makes depression essentially an experience of hopelessness.

So this is why we are all in favour of anger, because of its relationship to the future. If you are angry you are also hopeful that things should and could change.

You've got to let it out man. Firstly you have to work your way up to admitting that you might be angry about something, anything really. Just in case you needed help in getting in touch with your inner rage:

Redundancy, 5 million working people on less than the minimum wage, poverty on my doorstep, London transport, teenagers on the Central line, unpaid corporate tax, Serco, internships, being unwaged,

precarious, vulnerable, dying pensions, welfare reform, death of the NHS, the end of protest, gimps in control, the price of FOOD, Atos healthcare, Boris with a microphone, Work Programme, punishment of human frailty, implosion of every institution I believed in and the death of compassion. G4S.

Then you need to let it out. I mean it man, let it out. You could find a remote location and practice screaming, build a padded cell or just use a cushion to smother your primal screaming. If you're upwardly mobile you could just take up jogging or spinning, the only possible explanation for volunteering for that degree of physical pain. We have constructed [Angerland](#), the theme park for getting angry. It has Olympic standard spitting tracks, and holds master classes on Spitting with Confidence, International Swearing, Nutting for Beginners and Harmonic Screaming. Big sticks, fridge diving and bungee jumping minus the bungee. Services include an authentic anorexic canteen and individual padded booths for the anger novice. Throughout Angerland there is be piped music that you can only scream to and my personal favourite the Passive Aggressive Obstacle Course where you are the obstacle.

In preparation for getting angry we like people to fill in an Anger Crisis Card. Fill it in and carry it around with you. Hopefully you will need this for work.

CRISIS CARD

Sometimes people don't know how to help us, particularly when we're in a crisis and feeling angry. That can even include ourselves. In preparation for any crisis at work fill in the card below:

What to call me:

What I am likely to do when I'm feeling angry:

Worst case scenario:

What you must not do:

What you can do to help me:

Who to call:

When you have done this print it out for emergencies

HOW TO BE ANXIOUS



HOW TO BE ANXIOUS

Workplaces are really stressful. The deregulation of work is also a deregulation of our states of mind, sending an open house invitation to chaos, fear, anger and their BFF, anxiety. Only rich people still hold the sentimental idea that we are not suffering a mental health crisis at work. That is why it is sometimes so hard to work out the difference between privilege and low IQ.

An increasing percentage of working people now work under precarious work conditions and expectations of a living wage, social and employment protections, pensions, training or career progression are being bred out of our culture. Precarious work makes precarious workers. There's a reported massive rise in anxiety and depression in the UK with mental illness being the number one cause for sickness absence. But as the recession kicks in more people are reluctant to take absence from work for fear of losing their jobs. Pills get popped, lips get stiffened. It's really sick.

Although everyone experiences anxiety as an ordinary part of daily life, sometimes we develop difficulties keeping them in their place. An anxiety disorder is when the feeling of being anxious is hard to control and not obviously linked to what is happening around us. Anxiety here is not based on a real threat, rather a fear of what may happen. It is estimated that 5% of the UK population will have a

generalized anxiety disorder at any point in time and 1 in 100 people suffer from recurring anxiety attacks.

Now, this might feel like I'm punching a kitten here but there's no way round having to accept that life is just ordinarily full of anxiety. We can't change that, but we can build our capacity to reduce our anxiety by nipping it in the bud before it takes on catastrophic proportions. Remember, an anxiety disorder is where our sense of threat is significantly larger than the actual size of the threat. That's not to say that we're not talking corporate mountains rather than molehills but before we crack open the Kendal mint cake lets work out how big the challenge actually is.

The first stage in dealing with anxiety is to try to stop the anxiety going crazy. Although it might not feel as if you have any control over it, it is important to take some initial steps to talk yourself down, before trying to work out what to do next.

ANXIETY FIRST AID

First aid takes a very simple and useful approach to take some immediate control over your anxiety, and we have developed a five stage approach to this which we are calling **CABIN** (nice mental picture of a safe place in a wood, birds and Bambi).

Contain: remove yourself from whatever is making you anxious and find somewhere where you feel safe. If you can, call a friend or find someone at work you trust to help you.

Acknowledge: don't try to ignore what has just happened and acknowledge the anxiety.

Body: try to control your breathing, lengthening your breath and, if it helps, count one-two-three slowly in your head. Keep going until your breathing has normalized. If you're around someone you actually like ask them to give you a hug or merely a little squeeze. Human contact really works.

Identify: work out what you are worried about right now. The immediate real source of the anxiety rather than the nameless dread that sometimes creeps up on us

Next steps: work out what the next steps should be. Find at least one concrete thing that you're going to do right now to make sure the fear doesn't pop back. This stage is always better if you can find a friend to do this with.

Do this until you don't need to. Do not go back to work until you are really sure you can handle it, man.

Probably the most effective way of reducing anxiety is to contact a friend or someone you trust at work and ask them to help you. When you are anxious you are unlikely to be thinking straight so find a time when you are relatively relaxed and think through who you would call and make sure you have their number on your phone. It also helps to think through what is likely to happen when you are anxious and let them know.

This seamlessly brings us to the fourth and most important stage in building your resilience, finding your own psychic sherpa.

FIND YOUR PSYCHIC SHERPA



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There is something deeply anti-relationship about many people's reactions to threat, often a very real sense of 'fight or flight'. Adrenaline shoots through our veins and fists start forming. At this point if your sense of being rooted in your workplace or your relationships is weak, the obvious reaction is to run. This retreat into flight is fundamentally rejecting, leaving behind people, organisations and careers that have often been built up over entire lifetimes.

The majority of these flights though are internal, resulting in a retreat from contact with others. We are more than capable of resentfully wheeling out the statement 'I stayed didn't I?' but actually living in a mental bunker that cuts us off from others and, therefore, reality. This predictable, assured and relatively secure psychic reality is a delusion because it says that only I can sort out my own problems. Because it is a delusion, it comes at the expense of living in the real world where we are dependent on the care of other people and, if you want to get hippy about it, a benevolent universe.

It also denies the reality that human beings get lonely. Sharp in-take of breath. Yes, I did just suggest that being LONELY is part of the human condition. Sometimes, when we try to avoid the pain of being alone we create a marriage with something that is entirely under our control. This can be drugs, booze, a fetish or two, a career, fashion, religion, politics, dog homes, anything at all that we can tie ourselves

to with complete abandon precisely because it is essentially a relationship with ourselves. Yup, narcissism is on the up but don't worry, RiRi's been diagnosed and she's still rocking the look.

The good news is that there is a one way ticket out of this psychic predicament, which is to fess up to being lonely. Being lonely means an acceptance that you need other people to introduce the very real prospect of having half decent relationships with the people that you work with. Although it might feel extraordinarily difficult to face up to the pain of loneliness, that is a good deal if you think about it. Humbling human disclosure in exchange for actually liking the people you work with.

Agreeably it is the hardest thing in the world for us to look at ourselves as we actually are, including those situations when we realise we are in a fix and can't do something on our own. Freud was a bit brutal about this, saying that it's a fundamental fact of life that we are dependent on other people for our survival. Urgh.

If you are struggling to survive work this week and you feel like packing your psychic bags, don't. Instead, take the risk and tell someone that you need their help.

Whatever is going wrong at work don't, whatever you do, try to go it alone. 99% of survivors say that they wouldn't have coped without telling someone what was going wrong. Not wishing to pop your romantic bubble but sometimes the people that we like, love or fancy just don't seem to hit the button when we have trouble at work. Sometimes you literally have to ask someone you trust to be your Phone a Friend.

Write down on your 'Phone A Friend' card the name of someone that you think you could rely on if you had a work crisis. If you can't think of someone right now, set yourself a deadline for finding them. You need them, even if you don't really like em.

'Phone a Friend' Card

Their name

Why you chose them

Their phone number

Their email

Go to www.survivingwork.org to listen to stories about other people's psychic sherpas.

THE SURVIVORS' TWELVE STEPS



THE SURVIVORS' TWELVE STEPS

This is not very PC but there is a psychic fascist living inside me. He is called Gary and wears tight squeaky shoes and has a throat-clenched voice. He is the one that pipes up at 3am asking faux-naïve questions like 'Are you sure you didn't mean to alienate your entire office today with your ill-timed sarcasm?' or 'Are you angry? You seem angry?' Cue wake up sweating.

For any of us that have been on the receiving end of a redundancy it is often not the fact that an employer undervalues our work. Rather that an impending redundancy seems to trigger a Tourette of criticism and reflections on how we came to this point. Facing redundancy taught me a great deal. That I am really OK living without eye cream and I do not really like sashimi. But profoundly it taught me that the attack from my employer only felt so bad because I agreed with them. There is nothing that has been done to me that comes anywhere near the impact of this cheese-grate-my-soul internal commentary about who was to blame for the shame and violence of losing my job.

There is a lot we can do to protect ourselves and the people we work with during a recession. We can learn our rights, join a union and go back into the playground to learn how to stand up to corporate bullies. We can even work on being kind and generous to the people we work with. Whether you're a monkey or an organ grinder we all need to put the human back into human being management. Whatever

we do though there is always a major battle to be had internally, to evict this the voice inside our own heads that says we don't cut the mustard. I am not doing a CBT on you, nor do I put much store in positive thinking in the wee hours, but I am up for an argument with the part of me that threatens my chances of surviving work.

Sometimes Gary needs a good talking to. His vocabulary is more limited than a chimp's and some days this has to be met with a firm hand. And that is why the 12 steps seem to work, because they speak directly and clearly to the crazed adolescent inside intent on lying in bed dramatically depressed for a decade. The 12 steps are actually based on some sound and profound understandings of emancipation from self-destruction, whether it is self-harm, booze, fags, drugs, sex, food, work or feeling bad about yourself. We think everyone should take the 12 steps, not just those who need a white spirit to get through a staff meeting. Working life is painful and riddled with anxiety so the fact is, we all need to tackle any bully, whether they are internal or external, who says we can't handle it.

THE SURVIVORS' TWELVE STEPS

Step one: start where you are. Really where you really are in life rather than where you'd like to be.

Step two: swallow the fact that you can't do these steps on your own. Don't bother fighting against the entire history of human experience on this, it's a fact.

Step three: acknowledge there are some familiar patterns in your life that you would not put on your CV and that you might have something to do with them.

Step four: try not to beat yourself up about it not being entirely someone else's fault.

Step five: have a good cry, a really big howler. It's called remorse.

Step six: say sorry to yourself for anything that you think you could have done differently.

Step seven: say sorry to the people that matter to you for anything that you think you could have done differently.

Step eight: ask for help from someone that you think will understand. If you skip this step you may as well give up now.

Step nine: Don't hate yourself or other people if the person you ask is not your parent/lover/friend/sibling.

Step ten: Put your drug of choice down. Put it down right now and walk away. Then mark the occasion with another good cry or a street party.

Step eleven: start your daily campaign to stick up for yourself, damn it.

Step twelve: start your global campaign to stick up for anyone else that is part of your life.

**NOW SWITCH OFF YOUR
COMPUTER AND YOUR
PHONE AND GO AND DO IT**



The Resilience Space

HELPFUL STUFF FOR HUMAN BEINGS

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