

A freelancer recounts how work problems triggered severe depression and how he turned things round

Earlier this year, I admitted myself to psychiatric hospital. I went in voluntarily, only to watch nurses search through my possessions to remove anything I could harm myself with: razor, pills, iPhone cable. I was put on watch, and for days I was not allowed outside unaccompanied.

I shared a ward with people in financial services, law, advertising, the drinks industry, commercial aviation, the military, and more. Men and women diagnosed with depression, anxiety, bulimia, anorexia, self-harming, personality disorders, and chronic addiction to drink, drugs and gambling.

The UK government's Thriving at Work review, published late last year, stated that poor mental health costs the UK economy up to £99bn a year. Of this, up to £42bn is a direct cost to employers, lost through sickness absence, presenteeism, and staff turnover.

But I was self-employed, a patient in this private hospital only thanks to my wife's workplace health insurance.

My breakdown was mainly related to work. A decade ago, I took voluntary redundancy from the best job I ever had, in publishing. I moved elsewhere to do similar work on a lucrative freelance contract, though without pension or holidays. I felt this was OK because I could be at home more for our daughter.

I could not have imagined how bad it would be for my self-esteem to be the only man in the school parents' groups – recipient of emails routinely addressed to "Girls!". Nor, when our daughter became a teenager and turned increasingly towards her mother, how useless I would feel.

My lucrative freelance contract ended after five years. To keep up my income, I diversified: training others and doing public speaking, which I enjoyed.

My accountant suggested I work through a limited company, and I consented to the additional financial complexity. Accountancy bills shot up, so I subscribed to Xero, an online bookkeeping platform. I devoted hours to fathoming its mysteries, and inputting data.

I got a new accountant, who said I could be earning significantly more. He had not used Xero, but was keen to start.

Outside work, 2015 was a difficult year. We lost a close friend, then a close relative within a month of each other. Soon after, my daughter became gravely ill, and then my wife found a lump that needed investigation. I felt numb, but did not share my feelings with anybody.

The new accountant sent an invoice for more than £4,000 but, increasingly unfocused, I did nothing. A month later, I received what I took to be a reminder.

It was around then I started to "file" correspondence by dropping it on the floor beside my desk. This partly explains how I failed to pay insurance premiums, so that when I went into hospital and for months after, there would



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FT illustration

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be no emergency cover for my mortgage payments. But that came later.

When the accountant's third invoice arrived, I noticed that the figure was slightly different. It was not a reminder but a third monthly bill, each for more than £4,000.

I panicked. My wife was facing surgery; I could not bring myself to tell her I had amassed bills of £12,500. I felt ashamed at what I assumed to be my own incompetence. I never imagined I would be one of those men who felt uncomfortable to rely on a wife's income – but I was. When I did tell her, she was furious. How could it be so much? She asked why I did not challenge the bills. I could not explain, but looking back I see that I had lost all confidence in myself.

Nervously, I phoned the accountant. He said he had done work worth £25,000, but had written off 50 per cent. This made me feel guilty. I can only imagine I was charged, wrongly, for every minute his team spent learning Xero. He wrote off all but £4,000 and I found yet another accountant.

By now, my confidence was in ruins, and work was drying up. Three times in a row, speaking events were cancelled. I became convinced that nobody wanted me, nor my work. I spent long hours at my desk without ever achieving much.

I took no exercise, neglected pastimes and rarely saw anyone. When I did, one evening, an old friend joked that he did

not really know what I did for a living any more – and I realised in horror that I did not know either. I had lost my sense of purpose.

Falling behind on payroll, VAT, corporation tax and Companies House returns, and up to my limit on credit cards, I became intensely fearful. Every brown envelope made my heart race.

I phoned my parents, saying I felt worthless, and before Christmas I told my wife I wished I was not alive. She sent me to a psychiatrist.

Checking into hospital, I sent a message to some old friends, saying I felt like a failure, and deeply ashamed. I feared they would be repelled. I was so wrong. I got replies congratulating me on having the courage to share what I was going through, and requests to visit.

Nobody had seen this coming, because I had hidden my struggles from everyone. A friend who had a breakdown years before phoned me in hospital: "I hear you are in my alma mater." I can't tell you how much that helped to normalise what I was going through.

I resolved to do everything possible to get better: group therapy, cognitive behavioural therapy, drama therapy and art therapy, yoga and qigong. I bought running shoes and a Fitbit for when I was allowed outside. I monitored my food and water intake, meditated, went to bed early, and took my medication. In therapy, I shared things I had

never spoken about. And I heard others do the same.

A military officer, responsible for overseeing the wellbeing of thousands, admitted to a history of self-harm. A commercial pilot talked about his anxiety, how he drank excessively to manage it, and how that affected his family.

Leaving hospital, I joined support groups and I continue to see my therapist. I meet old friends and former colleagues, and am rebuilding a sense of who I am and what to prioritise.

Being self-employed had been wonderful for several years, but in adversity I lost focus and felt alone. I am sure many others have found the same.

Sharing financial difficulties was excruciating, but I have learnt that if I need help I should have the humility to ask for it. My father took over my credit card debts, and my father-in-law took care of my accounts and correspondence with HMRC.

With incredible generosity, friends offered to lend me money, and one paid me to do a day a week at his media company in a role that could only be done by me. I have done a little public speaking, mostly about mental health, but I am focusing on the work I love best.

Writing this, I feel like I am describing somebody else entirely. I have come a long way, and I am grateful to be alive.

The author wishes to remain anonymous



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