

## Make use of the 'survival smile'

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A smile costs you nothing, they say.

As an international stress-counsellor who has worked in a vast range of environments, I have found that this does not hold good at the lowest levels of existence - where some recession victims may be heading at this moment. For them, if no-one else, I am keen to demonstrate that under any conditions, the cost of that smile is well worth paying.

I first questioned this too-glib statement when visiting one of London's biggest prisons, a place where you might never see a smile all day. I would see grim, hard faces, glowering at the system that had beaten them. They were at the bottom rung of life. Their dignity had been totally stripped down. Their smile was the only thing left to withhold. It would have been an act of appeasement to smile at any of the prison officials. Even smiling at other inmates would somehow look like weakness.

Later I worked in the Serbian war-zone, counselling traumatised soldiers of many nationalities. One American boy of nineteen had terrible burns at the back of his head, with half his hair gone. He told me something interesting about smiles.

He said that when you had come through enemy fire with a comrade whom you disliked, the two of you would exchange a curious kind of smile - not friendly, rather hard - a smile that celebrated your survival as being more important than your own petty feuding. He called it the "survival smile".

That little piece of philosophy from a very young fellow of quite humble background touched me deeply - in particular its suggestion of rising above pettiness, and grasping what was important. I made a point of remembering his message, and I felt sure that one day I could replicate it elsewhere than in a military context.

Well, sure enough, today we have got the widespread trauma of recession and redundancy, with its long casualty-lists, its shocked victims, its walking wounded, its low morale - and no doubt, much bitter rivalry and suspicion as well.

So now, under the test of this long and desperate recession, you can choose who you want to be.

If you want, you can be one of those prisoners, with their minds permanently stuck at jail level, where they may never rise above the feuds and the jealousies. But that is failure and denial. Notice how these ones may claim to have been falsely imprisoned, seeking victim status. I have long since concluded that many of them are sometimes angry and ashamed at themselves.

But then think of that young soldier who had been through a much harder test, forcing himself to smile through it all, and formulating a brilliant and inspiring philosophy on the strength of it.

"How did you cope in the recession?" may become a standard test question in the coming years, with tomorrow's leaders routinely describing their survival strategies.

And I think the "survival smile" will have a lot to do with it. Under desperate conditions, you may have to fight through an emergency with people you would not normally choose to work with. But if you can forge yourselves into a team and win through, then you have triumphed.

And the ones who are still thinking negatively, because they were unprepared for change, will lose out,

and probably continue to blame everyone but themselves.

The writer is a BBC broadcaster and motivational speaker, with 20 years experience as CEO of Carole Spiers Group, an international stress consultancy based in London.

*Optimism Key points n "A smile costs you nothing" can apply in most circumstances. n In life-and-death situations, a smile may reflect spiritual triumph. n In a recession, optimism and a resolve to fight is essential.*