

Trauma linked to redundancy

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A year ago in this column, I raised the less-understood topic of "Survivor Guilt", about which I had been counselling many victims of the London bombings as well as training HR staff to do the same.

I explained that it was a branch of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and added, just in passing, that it could also apply to "slow motion" trauma, such as redundancy.

Well, today, it's the redundancy factor that is high profile in the news, and already I notice signs that many of those who have escaped the "axe" are feeling uncomfortable as they sometimes sadly bid goodbye to their former workmates.

Let us, just for a minute, re-visit survivor guilt - this little known condition that appear to fly in the face of all logic but is now seen as a highly complex moral response to the fate of what maybe your closest friends and colleagues. "Why wasn't it me?"... "Could I have done more for others?" are the type of questions that run around our minds. Therapists have described this response as a defence barrier that needs to be gently lowered and the damage slowly repaired through a practised routine of listening, prompting and guiding - perhaps combined with co-counselling or mutual evaluation.

Possible case for guilt?

Take the case of a particular industry which has been facing inevitable redundancies - big brand-name cameras still using film.

I had to counsel a longstanding employee, Nida, who worked at a service-centre for one of these brands, where her best friend Aliyah had just been made redundant, and still was in a state of shock. She had found a job working for a charity and claimed that she was doing fine, although she did not look very healthy or well-adjusted.

Nida was worried about her, and it made her feel painfully guilty for still being in her own well-paid job. To complicate matters further, there was actually a possible basis for genuine guilt. For it was Nida who had proposed a recent re-organisation of the department.

At our first counselling session, this guilt was affecting Nida so badly that she was not sleeping at night, not eating and almost wanting to quit and join Aliyah in her charity work. This was an indication that maybe she was getting things out of perspective. I told her to ask Aliyah, directly, whether she blamed her for the outcome.

At the second session, she was able to tell me that Aliyah's answer was that she understood that it was simply a matter of essential reorganisation in a declining market and that she attached no blame to anyone. So one big obstacle was removed. From there, it was easier for me to demonstrate that survivor guilt is a normal and natural reaction that does goes away in due course - but one that we can all experience at any time and at any moment in our lives.

- The writer is a BBC broadcaster and motivational speaker and was CEO of Carole Spiers Group, a London-based international stress consultancy.