



## Tania Garstang

Associate Director,  
MP Human Resources

Hands up, I was one of those people, you know the ones... if a candidate talked about being off with stress or anxiety I would nod sympathetically but internally be thinking 'here we go'. Anyone who has ever managed me, my friends, family, even my husband all would have said similar; I'm very practical often giving a logical response to any crisis rather than an emotional one. It's just my makeup and throughout the years has helped me to give a practical approach to problem solving, especially in highly charged or emotional situations.

So it shouldn't have been a surprise that when my mum was diagnosed with incurable stage 4 breast cancer in May 2015 that I would have a similar pragmatic approach. As a family we were obviously devastated, she was 54 years old and had been cancer free for 17 years, to then be told she had only a 20% chance of surviving five years, we were all heartbroken.

The business was brilliant and I had a plan; I would work from Reading for three days every three weeks whilst mum underwent chemo, and I would spend every other weekend down south. I researched and researched, buying her a NutriBullet, getting on a variety of homeopathic therapies, and keeping a watchful eye on any new experimental treatments. I was determined that

we would make memories in the time we had, with milestones for her to work towards, the first being my wedding in September...practical... logical.

She was very poorly but remained stable, my appraisal came and went. Leeds was up YOY and tracking in the right direction, I was given objectives for senior manager and the opportunity to set up HR in Nottingham. Feeling that I was coping with my new personal situation I jumped at the chance to do a bigger role, without the self-awareness that I wasn't actually coping as well as I thought.

That is how it crept up on me. It started small. I cancelled on social situations with friends, telling myself I didn't want them to ask me how I was, or how mum was initially, but then I just didn't feel like I wanted to socialise. I was tired. I was putting a lot into work and I didn't need the extra pressure of being sociable.

Then I began to struggle with small decisions; work was still going well but I couldn't decide what to have for tea! Every time my new husband would text to ask (he is the cook), I would snap back that he needed to choose. Realisation dawned on me one evening that all was not well when after another night of not deciding what I wanted for tea, Alex came into the living room to find me

in tears with the remote control in my hand. Obviously worried, he asked me what was wrong and what had upset me, and the answer was that I couldn't decide what to watch on TV...clearly not the behaviour he was used to from me and rightfully so, he was worried.

From that point on more and more odd behaviours crept in, I would get anxious and a nervous feeling in my stomach before going on client visits. I would get heart palpitations when dealing with conflicting situations in my team or with clients. Everyday stuff that I had dealt with time and time again was starting to make me feel a bit sick. I had no idea what was happening to me and no one knew. My director was pleased with how we were tracking, my team was doing well, and I continued to strive towards my promotion. My friends thought I was just balancing a lot, it was only my husband, who saw me every day, who knew that something was very wrong.

About three months after 'remote control gate' I was in my car ready to drive to Manchester to see my oldest and dearest uni friends and I had a full blown panic attack. I couldn't control my heart rate or breathing, I felt complete terror at the thought of seeing three girls I have grown up with and adore, and I had no idea why.

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## Tania Garstang ...Continued

The Monday after I picked up the phone to our healthcare provider, they assessed me as having high levels of anxiety and symptoms of depression. I was offered 12 CBT sessions. It took me another two weeks to contact and meet a CBT therapist, still not convinced there was anything really wrong with me. I had an objective (obviously) - I was feeling overwhelmed and physically anxious and these feelings needed to stop so I could crack on. I talked to my director about it and his encouragement and the spotlight the business was shining on mental health gave me the push I needed.

I was very sceptical, and after the first two sessions was borderline whether I would continue. Thinking that I would just shake it off having had a lot on my plate for the last 12 months, but I carried on – only after giving my therapist some feedback that I wasn't into 'fluffy' and that I wanted some structured outcomes!

We discussed my coping mechanisms, my outlook pre and post Mum's diagnosis, and my need to control situations - something that is crucial in recruitment! He gave me insights to my triggers and alternative coping options which often involved giving myself time to feel before thinking and reacting. To stop racing around and give myself some time to look after my mental wellbeing. He described my brain like an old computer with far too many windows open, so it had stopped working efficiently and I wasn't processing situations as I would have previously. Brexit nearly tipped me over the edge, I had to text him in a blind panic but it was just another thing in

my life that I couldn't control and as such my reaction was severe!

At the end of the 12 sessions I was beginning to see how differently I had been behaving and I hadn't really noticed it. I started talking to my friends and my husband about my anxiety. At that time I couldn't articulate myself very well as I was still not good at recognising my own feelings but through the work with my therapist I was starting to.

Actually what I had experienced as physical feelings of anxiety was really a reaction to the fact that I was frightened of losing Mum too soon. That I was sad and was mourning all the time that I wouldn't get with her, as well as trying to prepare myself mentally for her not being around. Prior to this experience I hadn't given myself the opportunity to feel these things as I thought that if I did I would fall to pieces, and I couldn't afford to do that. Little did I know that carrying on as normal and not acknowledging the impact it was having on me was the thing that very nearly broke me into those little pieces I was trying to avoid in the first place!

Twelve months later I was still seeing Dr Andy once a month or every other month. He gave me homework and steadily, through being more open with my nearest and dearest and taking care of my mental health proactively rather than ignoring it, I felt like myself again. All those day to day things that seemed so overwhelming were back to being completely manageable.

I haven't seen Dr A for about eight months now and feel that the tools

he gave me have been an anchor during times of uncertainty with Mum's diagnosis. I know that if the situation with Mum changes, or if I have a different life event that triggers feeling mentally unwell, I will be back in his office like a shot as I don't want to get to that point again where I feel so overwhelmed.

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It's been three years since we got the news that triggered my period of poor mental health. During that time I have been promoted twice, changed directors, changed regions and am pleased to say that the doctors have changed their prognosis on Mum's condition; re-diagnosing her to give her the possibility of 10+ years and even the long shot of full recovery! I would encourage anyone who is going through a significant life event to talk about it and not to self-stigmatise like I did. Everyone has periods of feeling mentally unwell and sometimes it just takes a bit of outside help to get you back on an even keel!

### Employee Assistance Programme

For free and confidential support and counselling services call **0800 048 2702** or visit the [website](#) and use the following login details  
**User ID:** unum **Password:** lifeworks