

Working in Colour

Coping with depression sometimes feels like a full-time job. Navigating through the working week on top of that can feel like you are repeatedly attempting to print in colour on a black and white printer: impossible and exhausting. The workplace often feels like the final frontier in terms of perceptions and fears about mental illness.

You are a smart and capable woman who is good at her job (on the good days you know this) but still the fear of your depression being 'found out' is overwhelming and it is important to you to be seen to be coping with work and actively contributing. You do not want to let the team down or be seen as lazy or malingering or creating excuses for poor performance. You have devised some rules that help maintain an appearance of normality outside when inside it is anything but normal. These will help you cope, to get through the week with some semblance of professionalism and to ensure that your supervisor and your colleagues remain in the dark about your depression.

The first rule is that you must not let anyone see you cry at work. So you find yourself once again in the office toilets. A private oasis amidst the sea of conforming cubicles out there in the working wilderness. Here is somewhere you can go, with four walls and a door with a lock, a place to sit and a ready supply of 'tissues'. Through the course of several jobs it has been your refuge. A place where you can come and fall apart without witnesses or consequences.

The second rule involves doing whatever you have to do in order to get things done perfectly, so your work performance does not suffer. Quite often you manage to do certain things – smiling, talking to senior executives, organising high level meetings and conferences, due to the strength of social expectations but sometimes the effort threatens to take you under. There is a fear of being sprung if you do not do what is expected of you, if you do not produce work of a high enough standard, so you do what is super-human under the circumstances. You stay back late to rewrite reports, collate briefing notes for your supervisors, reorganise your desk drawer according to paperclip size, all whilst you are so tired you can barely keep your eyes open.

You drift through Monday to Friday existing in a grey realm void of connection for the most part. You try to stay afloat. The sheer effort you devote to hiding, to the lies and the excuses is often enough to make you ill. Colds and sickness, family matters and PMT all become quite acceptable explanations for tiredness or for not being like yourself. You become an actor – sometimes you need to so you can look alert during a meeting when you can't concentrate on anything for more than a minute. You gratefully remove your work mask at night time and on weekends.

You think you are hiding your depression extremely well but your 'act' is taking its toll. On one occasion you are so woefully tired at a work conference that you consume four coffees in quick succession, which brings on a hitherto unexperienced manic episode. Whilst you are acting on a strong compulsion to run up and down stairs and do repeated star jumps for colleagues and you realise, finally, that your self-imposed rules are not helping. They are an added burden on top of what is an already full mental inbox. The energy that goes into hiding and acting fine, when you are not, is valuable effort you need to be directing towards helping yourself.

I realised just how grey and distorted the world I had been inhabiting had become when I finally opened up to a supervisor and found her to be incredibly understanding and, to my amazement, not very surprised. It was a colossal relief. Up to that point I had gone to enormous lengths to keep my illness in the dark and I was discovering that turning the lights on was a revelation. The relief that came from admitting that I had not been coping freed up more space to actually cope.

This revelation led to many others. Over time I discovered and employed different strategies which helped gradually bring the colour back into my life in the office, including – having a morning routine, limiting caffeine, walking to work, taking time off when needed, discussing the week's priorities, amongst others. When it came to my work I discovered that perfection was often for me the enemy of good. Getting things completed was more important than having the perfect report. Learning also to identify what was expected of me by others versus what I was expecting of myself was important.

I've changed jobs a few times now since I had that revealing talk with my supervisor and I still count on her as a friend. It is still hard to know if and how to broach the subject of depression with employers, however being more accepting of it in myself is a big step. These days I know my stress triggers better, so when I have a lot of work coming up I plan for it. I've also learned to identify the warning signs when I am not coping with the depression and to ask for and accept help. I have devised ways to live with and manage the depression at work and elsewhere rather than just existing, hiding or simply pretending it isn't there. Hiding in the toilets is not a long-term solution. It can be challenging living and working in the world of colour, when you've been operating in the grey for some time, but there are many different paths that can help you keep finding your way back there.