

All change



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Restructuring, redundancy and change are ever present in the workplace. With so much uncertainty, **Fiona Dunkley** and **Felicity Runchman** consider the impact on employees and the ways that employers can help

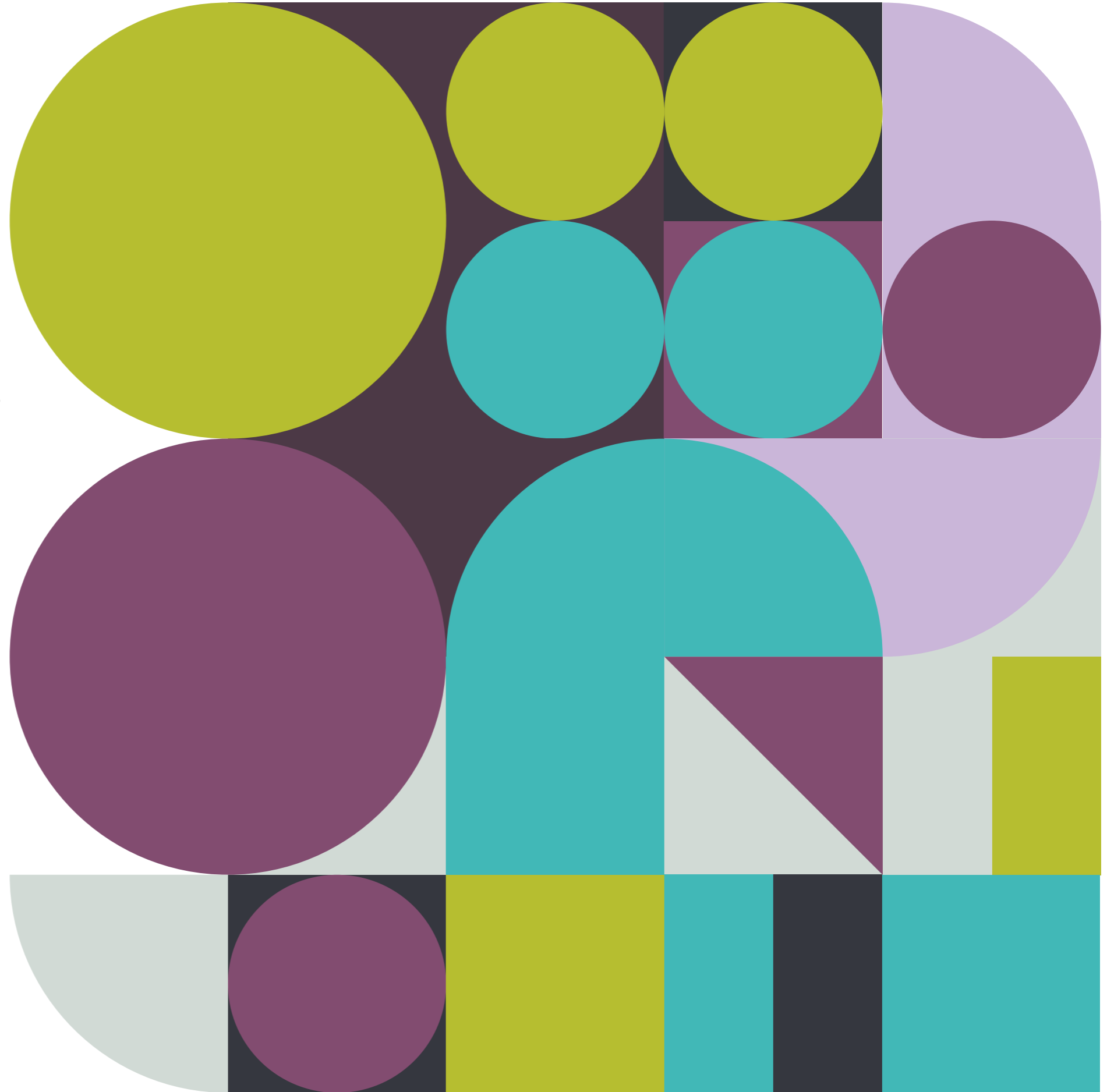
The push for organisations to cut costs and minimise their workforces has been an increasingly common consequence of the recent economic downturn. Concerns about Brexit have only served to heighten this – with many organisations viewing a reduction in staffing as one way of offsetting the increased costs and delays of Brexit.¹ In specific sectors, particular news stories can also raise public concerns, leading to funding reductions which have a knock-on effect on staff. FD Consultants offers psychosocial services to the humanitarian aid sector which, in this respect, has been affected by recent high-profile sexual exploitation cases. We have noticed an increase in the number of clients we are working with who appear to be impacted by the outcomes of these changes. This may be on account of learning their jobs are at risk or by having to endure the insecurity and other often unpleasant implications of restructuring within the workplace.

Widespread organisational change and restructuring raises a range of issues that counsellors, especially those in EAP or workplace settings, are therefore increasingly likely to encounter through their client work.

A growing number of clients may fear, or actually experience, their roles being made redundant and have to deal with the shock and far-reaching implications of losing their jobs.² On the other hand, clients working in management or HR positions are likely to have to cope with the stressful challenge of implementing organisational change, and often face the unenviable task of telling team members their services are no longer required.

Encountering clients who are indirectly impacted by organisational change and/or redundancy is also something that, anecdotally, we hear that counsellors are experiencing more often. These could be the friends, partners and family members of people who have lost their jobs, or who face uncertainty and stressful change within the workplace. Wondering what to say and how to help someone whose world of work has been turned upside down, can be difficult.

It's important to acknowledge that, as a profession, counsellors are by no means immune to encountering similar challenges to their clients when it comes to change and insecurity at work, particularly so when working in organisational contexts. We have



both had experience of this. Felicity Runchman worked as a counsellor for an organisation which went into rapid administration, leaving the team of counsellors with little opportunity to bring their work with clients to a satisfactory ending and to adjust to the impact on their own livelihoods. Prior to founding FD Consultants, Fiona Dunkley worked as a psychotherapist and manager, and one of the organisations she worked for outsourced its in-house counselling service to a large EAP to help reduce costs. Such a move is concerning as there is often little vetting of these services, once they are outsourced. Most of the counsellor roles within the organisation Fiona worked for at the time, were made redundant and the few remaining roles, changed significantly, in that counsellors were left with a greater workload and more complex cases.

Reflecting on our experience, we will explore the impact of organisational change and consider what helps when such change is inevitable and underway. This article also offers insight and guidance to counsellors dealing with such themes in their client work, as well as those who are more directly affected by the consequences of redundancy.

Impact of organisational change

Uninvited change: With the exception of voluntary redundancy, which is often only offered at the end of lengthy periods of instability and negotiation at work, restructuring and redundancy represent major changes that have not usually been sought out by those who are most affected. These changes, which are often unwelcome, can leave individuals feeling powerless and stir up strong feelings connected to other enforced changes or losses that a person has experienced earlier or elsewhere in life.

Diane's redundancy came a couple of years after a series of miscarriages and the recognition that she was unlikely to be able to have children. She was becoming increasingly disenchanted with her role within an

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organisation undergoing significant restructuring, but was aware her work provided her with stability and focus at a time in her life when she was adjusting to these other losses. Acknowledging and tending anew to the matter of her pregnancy losses therefore became an important part of Diane's counselling, alongside addressing the impending change of losing her job.

Conflict and splitting: In an atmosphere of threat and uncertainty, it is often only natural for those involved to revert to more primitive 'survival' modes when viewing the world around them. In spite of the more nuanced reality, senior management and HR may suddenly be seen as the out-and-out 'villains' in the workplace when organisational change occurs. On the other hand, staff facing redundancy or changes to their roles may perceive themselves as 'victims' of an unfair process. Previously sound working relationships and friendships often sour and fracture in such environments, leaving both parties with the potential to feel painfully misunderstood. This is especially apparent when colleagues are left to compete against one another for a limited number of jobs, following a restructure. Again, such tensions make

it easy for any former experiences of conflict or injustice in an individual's personal history to resurface in an unsettling way.

Loss: It goes without saying that experiencing redundancy (or watching colleagues losing their jobs through redundancy) is a major loss. In losing their job, an individual may not only be losing a means of financial security, they are also likely to feel as if they are losing a central aspect of their identity and part of their professional pride. This is alongside the loss of their daily routine and contact with colleagues, who they may have become close to. As with other forms of loss, such as bereavement, no matter how much it has been anticipated, the news that a person will be losing their job is likely to come as a shock. While by no means a 'blueprint' or linear process that all clients will follow in the same way, Elizabeth Kubler-Ross's 'Five stages of grief': denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance, highlight some of the emotional phases that clients dealing with job loss may pass through.³ They may notice different, and sometimes conflicting, emotions, such as sadness, anger, relief, excitement, fear and disbelief, and the emotions may come in phases. Feeling things in this way is usually very normal, although some clients may struggle to accept certain emotions or the totality of their experience. This may be due to an inbuilt sense of how they 'should' feel, alongside concerns about how others



will perceive their situation.

Faehe had been unhappy in his managerial position within a large educational establishment for some time. He acknowledged in counselling that, while scared and uncertain about the future, he actually felt relief and some excitement about the prospect of redundancy, due to the new opportunities it might present. However, he was worried about what his parents would think, as he had been born and raised in a country and culture where economic scarcity and the political landscape meant a job was seen to be 'for life', and the thought of losing one's job calamitous.

Cultural/generational differences: Faehe's story illustrates how cultural and generational

differences can come into play when working with themes of organisational change and redundancy. Millennials and younger clients may, for example, be more accustomed and open to several job changes within their lifetimes than their parents' generation, where a role or career might have been seen to be more permanent.

Potential for stigma and shame:

From a legal perspective, it is not permissible to make a person's role redundant on account of performance issues, the fact they may have been involved in conflict or have made a complaint at work, nor on the grounds of anything such as their gender, ethnicity, sexuality, disability or parental status.⁴ Both ACAS and www.gov.uk⁵ provide information and guidance on the legal aspects of redundancy and employees' rights,

explaining that there must be a valid organisational reason, eg a financial need to downscale operations or relocate premises. Despite this, in experiencing redundancy, many individuals fear they may be at fault or 'to blame' in some way or they worry that others may believe this to be the case. This can lead to difficulties when it comes to employees sharing the

news of their situation, as illustrated in anecdotes regarding people who pretend to go to work for months after being 'laid off' as they feel unable to tell their families the truth.

For obvious reasons, sitting with feelings of shame and self-blame for long periods of time can have a corrosive effect on a person's mental health. Unfortunately, this is sometimes

compounded by the language used, and the general reactions of others, in response to the subject of redundancy. Being sensitive to and mindful of the terminology used when discussing restructuring and redundancy can make a significant difference in terms of mitigating against shame and helping to preserve the self-worth of anyone affected. An example of this would be referring to the fact that it is the 'role', as opposed to the 'person', that is being made redundant.

Worries about the future: It goes without saying that redundancy raises very real worries for people. For those whose roles are being made redundant, questions about how they will 'survive' financially, and possibly support dependents, are likely to arise, alongside concerns about their skills, experience and the likelihood of

finding alternative employment. On the other hand, for those who are having to implement redundancies, fears may emerge in relation to how they will keep their teams functioning with reduced staffing levels, and whether they will be able to continue to meet the expectations of senior management. Aside from these immediate and practical concerns, deeper psychological ones will often surface in counselling; questions along the lines of, 'am I good enough?', and 'will I be OK?' that may be rooted far back in an individual's personal history. Such concerns can be deeply unsettling, but for clients with a predisposition to anxiety or high levels of worry, the impact can be profound.

What helps when change is underway?

Find out the facts: An absence of clear information about how, when and why organisational change and redundancy are occurring can give rise to unhelpful speculation and fantasy among employees, particularly in workplaces where there is already a high level of tension in the air. Staff in such situations will often envisage 'worst case scenarios', which rapidly disseminate through gossip and chat. HR professionals and senior managers, in an ideal world, will communicate clearly with staff about proposed changes. When this doesn't happen, encouraging staff to seek out background knowledge about the legal and practical issues concerning redundancy, or through seeking support from any union they might belong to, can help empower and reassure them.

Farida learned with less than a week's notice that the charity whose counselling service she worked for was going into liquidation and all staff would lose their jobs. Not only did she have her own financial situation and security to feel concerned about, she also felt a high level of responsibility towards addressing the wellbeing of the service's clients, many of whom were in the middle of treatment. 'The speed and oversight from senior

management on the impact of staff and clients was overwhelming and deeply distressing', said Farida. 'It is fundamental that organisations carry out a consultancy period so these types of issues can be discussed and managed well, not just for the staff, but also the beneficiaries.'

Considering the delivery of news:

When it comes to delivering news about redundancies, group email may be an efficient way of quickly sharing factual information about restructuring with staff. However, the ongoing opportunity for face-to-face discussion in team meetings and one-to-ones remains vital if staff are to feel valued and consulted. It is always best to break the potentially devastating news of actual redundancy to a staff member in a confidential and individual face-to-face context. This unfortunately doesn't always happen, though, often 'adding insult to injury'.

James worked for a large organisation that had gradually been making staff roles redundant over recent years. He therefore felt anxious and uncertain as to when 'his time' would come. James first found out in a large meeting, and in a way that felt deeply impersonal. He said: 'During the presentation, they showed an organisational chart for my department, and I noticed that my role was no longer on this chart. I felt a surge of anger rise up from deep in my belly. How dare they inform me in this way? I felt humiliated.'

Accepting a range of emotions:

Clients facing redundancy or significant change in the workplace may well need to 'vent' and express a wide range of emotions. Even if their anger at times seems exaggerated, or their sense of blame unjust, it will feel important for them to express it. In the first instance, their emotions are likely to be arising in response to substantial loss and change that feel beyond their control. Normalising and accepting a client's emotional presentation contributes to forging a good therapeutic bond. Once this has been

established, however, it may be helpful to explore with clients which of their emotions 'belong' with their redundancy or the organisational change they're encountering, and which may be linked to other life experiences, a process that can help in terms of the settling and 'working through' of their experience.

'Might your client be avoiding the pain and "work" of processing their loss if they move on to something new too soon? If your client has a partner or dependents, how would the change affect them, and has this been properly discussed?'

A 'good-enough' ending: Leaving a job early, or against one's wishes, is unlikely to result in the type of ending anyone would want when they envisage moving on from their workplace. That's not to say such endings can't be marked in a way that's meaningful, though, and in a way that helps individuals to process their redundancy. Helping a client to envisage and prepare for their last day at work can restore their sense of agency. Who from their workplace might they want to stay in touch with,

and what might they want to say in a 'farewell speech' or exit interview? Different individuals will have different preferences. Some people hate big parties and being the centre of attention, so may want a quiet and discreet exit. Others, however, may enjoy the opportunity to be in the spotlight for a while, and will want to make an 'event' of their leaving. Where the theme of 'endings' is running strongly through therapeutic work, as it is likely to be for any counsellors working with clients experiencing job redundancy, it is also, of course, important to plan any therapeutic ending carefully. In time-limited work, this means giving clients advance notice of when their final sessions are on the horizon and inviting their thoughts and feelings on this.

Practical support: Clients anxious about their futures on account of redundancy or organisational change, may be in need of practical as well as psychological support. While addressing overriding themes such as 'developing confidence' or 'managing anxiety' may have a place in counselling, clients will likely benefit from signposting towards more specialised support with issues such as rewriting CVs, applying for new positions, claiming benefit, and managing their finances. Organisations making large numbers of roles redundant will often offer such support to their staff, or it can be sought through job-centres, Citizen's Advice Bureaus and employment agencies. Blogs and books on 'surviving' redundancy, such as *Redundancy Sucks*,⁴ by Elaine Hopkins,⁴ can also be a helpful read for those seeking practical advice – also offering encouragement and ideas around rebuilding self-esteem and overcoming psychological blocks to do with seeking new employment. With any client grappling with the unwieldy challenges posed by restructure and redundancy, it is also worth exploring and reminding them of the small day-to-day things that they can hopefully retain some control over

that will contribute to their overall resilience and psychological wellbeing. Maintaining a healthy diet and sleeping regime, engaging in exercise and fulfilling leisure activities outside of work, and making time for meaningful contact with family and friends, all fall into this category.

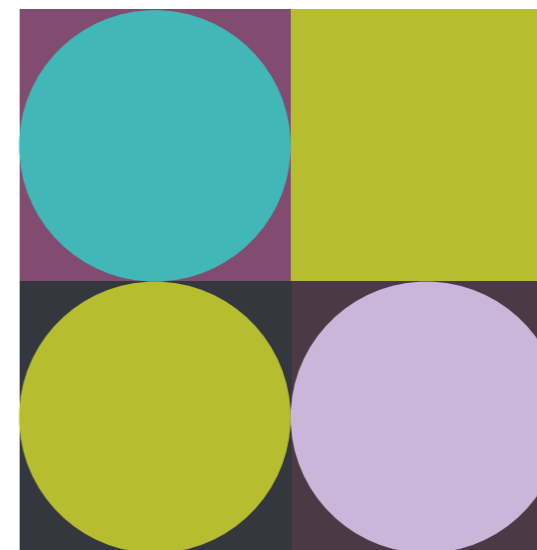
Going slow with big changes:

Redundancy can often bring about new opportunities. It might awaken a desire to pursue long-forsaken dreams and prompt a person into considering significant life changes, such as travelling, moving to a new location, or retraining in order to take up a completely different career. Exciting and progressive as these moves might ultimately prove to be, timing, motive and communication with others count for a lot here. Might your client be avoiding the pain and 'work' of processing their loss if they move on to something new too soon? If your client has a partner or dependents, how would the change affect them, and has this been properly discussed? The counselling room can create a useful space in which 'next steps' can begin to be weighed up and considered.

Conclusion

While it may initially feel shocking and destabilising, a significant change like redundancy can bring about the chance for a person to reprioritise and evaluate what's important in their life, eventually making changes of their own volition, or taking a new direction with regards to their work or lifestyle. Although telling a client 'it may be for the best' might not be the most appropriate intervention in counselling, at least in the early stages of working with someone facing redundancy, it's true that many people whose roles have been made redundant come to look back on the situation with a sense of pride in their own resilience and adaptability, or as a pleasant surprise when they consider where it took them.

Similarly, although it will no doubt at points be difficult for managers and HR professionals having to implement



a restructure within the workplace, including the task of managing staff redundancies, it does also have the potential to feel like a significant and meaningful piece of work. It is likely to bring valuable learning and experience to anyone within such a role – and perhaps a sense that, in the face of tough circumstances, they did their best to be fair, supportive, and to maintain a constructive future focus within their team or organisation.

Having raised these potential positive outcomes of redundancy and restructure, though, the reality is that – in the short term especially – they are issues that contribute greatly to stress, anxiety, depression, substance misuse, suicidal ideation and, tragically, sometimes suicide itself. This is not to mention the 'ripple effect' that they can also have within the partnerships and family relationships of those affected. For this reason, the provision of psychosocial support to staff impacted by organisational change is the responsible choice of all those enforcing it. ●

This article includes extracts from FD Consultants' redundancy guidance sheet to support organisations through organisational restructuring. FD Consultants is a global psychosocial support and trauma specialist service for the humanitarian sector.

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