

SURVIVE, THRIVE AND BE HAPPY



Each day the news can send us spiralling into panic – economic cuts, job losses, unrest, doom and disaster. But uncertain times can also be a positive force and personal challenge: you just need to know how to handle them to live a happy life, argues Sarah Drew Jones

At times this past winter, simply surviving through to the end of the 10 o'clock news felt like a spectacular – if a little grisly – achievement: the ongoing losses in Iraq, bloody uprisings in Egypt and Libya, public sector cuts, job losses, floods in Australia, a devastating earthquake in New Zealand and even freak snowstorms causing chaos all over the UK. As we enter our fourth year of global economic depression, it can seem like these are the darkest of days.

Dr Cheryl Rezek, a Consultant Clinical Psychologist and author of *Life Happens*, says that the constant barrage of shocking images and the frightening, emotive language that the media uses ('meltdowns', 'crashes', 'crunches', 'time-bombs', 'burn-outs') can affect our sense of what's real. "It sometimes feels as if the world is struggling to stay afloat," she says. "There is a daily diet of disaster fed to us about the state of the

world and one can sometimes wonder how it will end. These situations are real but we also need to remember that some of them are reported in a manner that will attract an audience. The better, more positive stories tend to be overlooked. This dramatic reporting has a direct effect on our quality of life and mental health."

Absorbing these enormous, far-reaching fears about the world can be damaging, and make us feel that we have no control over our lives. We feel small, lost and insignificant. Cheryl explains, "Many people are really struggling to feel that they have a reasonable future ahead of them. This can develop into feelings of depression, despair, worthlessness, anger and stress, and when that happens, we're in danger of losing perspective: becoming withdrawn, isolated and losing hope. Facing what we feel is important, but the central issue is then how we manage those feelings and our lives. This is where we do have some control."

Acknowledging that uncertainty is a fact of life right now is a good start. Embrace the idea that we are all living through an era of uncertainty and that will help take the fear out of it, forcing us to take stock of this new challenge. The secret is to regard this as a positive thing: a chance to think inventively, try new things, find creative solutions and flex a little mental agility.

Begin by taking time out to reflect on the negative thoughts that trouble you, whether it's worries for the future or the need for a new career. Psychologist Anna Bel Shaw, co-author of *The Real Secret* (www.therealsecret.net), believes that we have a fantastic opportunity to stop, take a moment and re-think our paths in life. "Many people under pressure feel they need to 'do' something – anything – to get over the uncomfortable feelings of uncertainty and worry," she counsels. "But this is not always the best method. When things have gone awry or there is a feeling of mild panic it is a good idea to take a week or two to quietly assess your situation and think creatively about your future options. Panic will only cloud your judgement."

Next step is to open your mind to new possibilities. "Once you have had a chance to absorb the fact that things have not turned out as you expected, give yourself time to think about how you feel about it all," says Anna. Suppressing our feelings – whether it's an unwanted house downsize, business problems or wondering where the recession will bite next – will stop you achieving any peace of mind. As Anna explains, "Understanding how you feel about the situation is the first necessary step, because, whether you recognise your feelings or not, they will have an effect on whatever it is you decide to do. Feelings that go unrecognised are brilliant at sabotaging actions, so it's best to give them a voice early on and you can only do that by paying them some attention."

In her inspiring book *Life Happens*, Cheryl Rezek makes the connection that accepting change and uncertainty can be liberating. It can make us take risks and test what we're really capable of. She believes that "Life is transient. It shifts and changes with or without us. If we dislike this idea and fight against it then we are left with feelings of fear, anxiety, resentment and a need to try and control everything around us in an attempt to prevent change. We are then in a constant state of stress and fear, believing that something has, or will be, taken from us. If we can accept that that's the way life is, we can then use what we have in the present and engage with it. Rather than being overwhelmed by a sense of impending doom we can get involved with our lives, right here, right now."

A life lived without challenge is dull and stagnant, and there are true positives we can take from these worrying times. Psychotherapist Jules McClean, Clinical Advisor to www.counselling-directory.org.uk, argues that we were overdue for a lesson in what really matters: family, friends and our community. "We have no control over world events so we need to concentrate on the detail of our own lives and connect with those we love and who we can support. We should remember that helping others, for example, is a very uplifting experience. There's little point wallowing in worry when we can be focused on the here and now and look for what's good in our lives, not what's bad. This is how we avoid the spirals of despair."

It's certainly true that, amidst the doom, gloom and devastation in the media, there are signs that we're fighting back in true British fashion. The resurrection of the wartime 'Keep Calm and Carry On' message (on posters, t-shirts and mugs everywhere), the renewed love for handicrafts and 'make do and mend', even the fact that the most popular TV shows last year were gentle, uplifting *Downton Abbey*, *Upstairs Downstairs* and *Strictly Come Dancing* (and much-loved Brit film *The King's Speech*, set in the 1930s, just swept the board at awards season),

all prove that we're not just coping in these times of crisis but rallying with humour and fortitude.

Keeping faith that things will be ok is a simple but effective idea. "In the bleakest moments of a freezing winter it's impossible to think that you'll ever be outside in the warmth of the sun surrounded by trees in blossom," says Cheryl. "But come spring and somehow the harshness of the biting cold seems to have passed. Nature renews itself and so does life. When we recognise that life happens for better *and* for worse, then we no longer have to either be in the better half or the worse half. For whatever there is, there is always a bit of both. Life may not always be as we want it to be but we have a choice as to how we wish to be within it."

How to turn a negative into a positive

Andy Edwards, MD of Nine 5 Three life-coaching company, has these fast-fixes:

- **Stop using the language of powerlessness** ('I can't give up my miserable job because it pays well') and start using only powerful statements ('I can find other well-paid jobs and I'll start looking now').
- **Accept that you can't eradicate risk and uncertainty in your life**, so decide to embrace and manage it instead. You can't control everything.
- **If it is within your power to change something: change it!** Don't um and ah, just take action.
- **If it is NOT within your power to change something** – the global economy, for example – then change your attitude towards it. You'll feel happier if you realise we're all in this together.
- **Don't be beaten by things going wrong: improvise!** Rain on the barbecue becomes a carpet picnic indoors, losing your way to a location becomes an exploration and adventure, losing your temper with your partner becomes an opportunity to re-connect and say sorry.