

## We need to accept that work and society make a huge difference to our mental health. Improvements to social policy and workplaces can make real and profound improvements to people's external and internal lives.

*What is the impact of public policy on our individual and collective states of mind? In the first article of a series, [Elizabeth Cotton](#) looks specifically at the impact of job-insecurity and how we can stop this crisis-of-work turning into a catastrophe-of-mind.*



In the UK there are an estimated 2.43 million unemployed and a further 2.4 million adults outside of the labour force. The ONS estimated that between February-April 2011 there was one job available for every ten jobseekers. Lack of jobs and skills are largely responsible for the staggering drop in optimism of young people about successfully finding their way into the world of work. This year's [O2 Think Big](#) project researched young people's attitudes towards work, finding that 72% of young people think that there are not enough secure jobs and a staggering 23% of young people feel depressed about their future.

Those of us who still have jobs are supposed to feel like the lucky ones, but in these deregulated times, it might not feel that way. An increasing percentage of working people now work under precarious work conditions, a term recently characterised in Guy Standing's book, [The Precariat](#), describing the fragmented and angry majority of people who no longer benefit from any job security and fall outside traditional forms of regulation. The concept of employment relations had undergone a radical change in the last 30 years to the extent that national and international structures struggle to influence how work is done and how workers are treated.

Precarious work has been around for so long in this country the last time I used the term "permanent work" in conversation, I was sprayed with coffee as the person I was talking to sputtered that it was preposterous that I should expect any guarantee of work. I had to explain the difference between having a permanent contract and a lifetime guarantee of work. The delusion of safety of employment has truly been bred out of us, along with expectations of social and employment protections, pensions, training or career progression.

This de-regulation of working life is directly linked to a de-regulation of our internal lives. With the loss of work security, we are likely to experience an internal insecurity, and along with it fear, anger and a recurring sense of uselessness. This is hard to manage at the best of times, but in the face of unemployment it is hard to self-regulate. Under enough pressure we lose our perspective and capacity to think past these overwhelming feelings. Failure to self-regulate, when you are afraid and angry, is familiar territory for anyone who has experienced mental illness. This is the nature of it – you feel you have no value and your experience of the world reflects that.

It is estimated that the cost of poor mental health to the UK economy is £105 billion every year. The most recent injection of cash into mental health services has been the Increased Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) scheme, using cognitive and behavioural techniques, with the express objective of getting people back into work. The scheme is quick and cheap and often delivers the results you would expect from such characteristics. In the context of a comprehensive spending review and the manic call for cuts-cuts-cuts there is something of the bipolar about the current approach to mental health. The most recent government policy on mental health – [No Health Without Good Mental Health](#) – recognises the importance of mental health and there have been calls for early intervention approaches to resilience and wellbeing. This is all well and good until we look at the impact of ongoing welfare and benefit reform, particularly housing benefits, and the [Health and Social Care Bill](#).

Therapy does many things, but importantly here it helps us to try to live in the real world, as it really is (dependency, death, exclusion and, on a brighter note, love). To see the world as it really is requires us breaking a complex set of denials. An important one is the denial that mental health is not a social issue. The poorest fifth of adults are significantly more at risk of developing a mental illness than those on average incomes; 20% compared with eight per cent for men and 24% compared with 15% for women. The 2011 [Count Me In census](#) revealed that BME groups are six times more likely to be admitted to hospital with mental health issues. An appeal for tough love in this climate feels more like being in an abusive relationship, where the problem is transformed from a society in crisis to one of individual morality and character.

Another denial is that mental health is not a workplace issue. Actually work is crucially important to mental health – something that becomes evident within days of unemployment. At its best work offers us a productive way of being in the world that allows for learning, care, laughter and a deeper sense of being human. But unhealthy workplaces can be disastrous. Mental illness does not always evoke entirely benevolent or humane feelings in others and showing vulnerability at work can often be interpreted as an invitation for a good beating. Stigma exists in many workplaces, which denies the humbling fact that the line between dealing with an external crisis and falling into a personal one is very thin, and none of us live with the security of knowing which side we will fall.

If we accept that work and society make a difference to our mental health then it opens us up to the possibility that social policy and workplaces can make real and profound improvements both to people's external and internal lives. Most workplaces are under enormous strain, but it's not inevitable that there is a decline into what Freud calls the "primal hoard". Rather, by understanding how the workplace influences our states of mind, we can make some choices that might just make us a bit happier.