

5 DATING SHAKE-UPS FOR SINGLES



# Psychology Today

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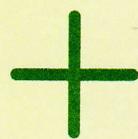
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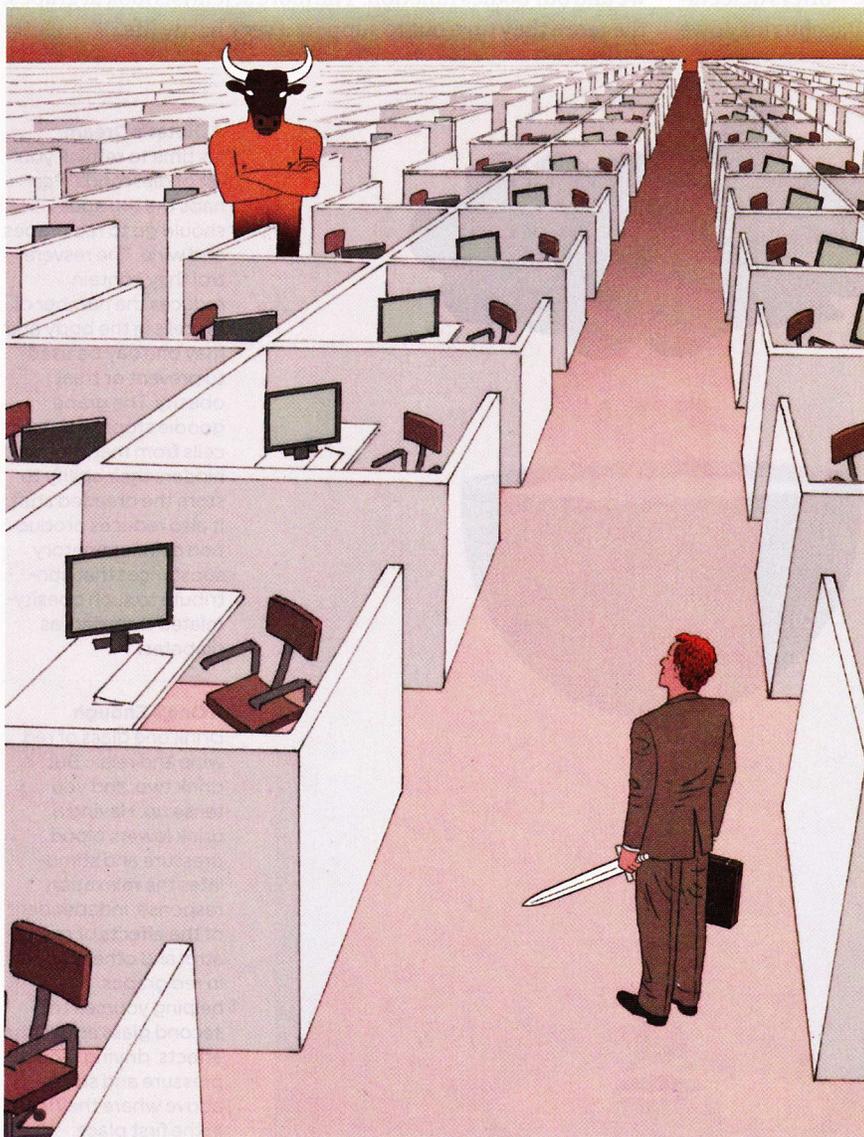
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# Solutions

[ WORKWISE ]

## Working Through Fear

From mild uncertainty to impending doom, the mood at your workplace is likely darker than usual. How is anxiety affecting you and your coworkers? **Judith Sills, Ph.D.**



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EAR IS STALKING US at work. It's a nameless dread slithering through the vents. The whiff of flop sweat has spread well beyond those sectors openly marked as bruised and bleeding: car dealerships, newspapers, real estate fiefdoms. These days, fear taints us all. Whether reasonably or irrationally, we find ourselves looking around and asking each other, "What's going to happen here?" And then, for want of any information, we make up a scary answer.

Certainly fear was never completely unknown at the workplace. It has always sullied the pure atmosphere of productivity to one degree or another. A pension-benefits manager describes feeling personal fear when her boss wanted her fired after a costly professional mistake. She kept her job, but "he promised to keep a file of all my mistakes and I felt afraid for my job every day after that."

These days, though, fear is more of a collective experience and its consequences are of a different order. We witness layoffs and budget cuts, with no clear sense of where the ax might fall next; we breathe in the contagious tension of owners and managers, who do not necessarily share specific information yet can't help but broadcast their deep concerns.

And many of us confront visible signs of loss every day. "To get to my office, I have to walk through rooms where people used to be working," says a banking specialist. "It's like walking through a wasteland." Hear it, sense it, or see it face-to-face—it all adds up to fear in the workplace.

Your personality has a lot to do with

# Resist the office rumor mill, which can lead to hours of anxiety-generating speculation.

how you will process this group experience of generalized ambient fear. Worriers, for example, will likely be beside themselves: distracted, preoccupied, and potentially provoked into more serious hopelessness or depression. They should resist the office rumor mill, which can lead to hours of anxiety-generating speculation.

Deniers will ride through the anxiety more smoothly, though as always their denial may prevent them from taking reasonable measures of self-protection.

Whatever our personality bent, fear tends to make us more self-conscious about our job performances. We worry about them more, criticize ourselves more, and therefore enjoy work less.

Still, even as it makes us more self-conscious, fear also makes many people more alert. It sharpens your focus and rededicates your job performance. Way too much fear will paralyze you, but a sudden and tolerable jolt might wake you up and turn on productive juices that were lulled into complacency by job stability. Fear may be the enemy of fun, but it is also an antidote to whining because it whisks one's priorities into fresh order.

Fear has an impact on teamwork, albeit an unpredictable one. By and large, it hurts the sense of collegiality. When your manager is urged to use a budget hatchet or risk her own head, an "every-man-for-himself" reaction is to be expected. And it seems there has been, as a marketing consultant to a public company observes, "a quantum leap in backstabbing, sniping at colleagues, and rumor mongering. Ugh."

But fear also, oddly, makes some of us more cooperative. True, there may have been an upswing in ugly competition. But one is also more likely these days to hear a direct request for support. "Oh, you're having lunch with Neil? Put

in a good word for me, would you?"

A collegial willingness to share the pain, a productive alliance with people whose last names you might not have known otherwise, a warm moment in the halls ("Hey, you're still here. Awesome!") with a colleague whom you had

only nodded at before—these are the bonds that fear builds.

Our fears are best eased by that most powerful balm: We are in it together.

**JUDITH SILLS, PH.D.**, is a Philadelphia-based clinical psychologist.

## HOW TO BECOME INDISPENSABLE IN SCARY TIMES

Take a deep breath and put yourself to use.

■ **UNDERSTAND YOUR BRAIN ON FEAR:** When we are overwhelmed with thoughts about the failing economy, our brain's fear center, the amygdala, effectively hijacks the executive functioning center (the prefrontal cortex), making it difficult to think through new ideas, which is exactly what one must do to adapt and survive in a recession. "It's as though fear is the bottom floor of the brain, and when that floor lights up, the rest of the house goes dark," says Judith E. Glaser, CEO of Benchmark Communications, Inc. and author of *Creating We* and *The DNA of Leadership*.

■ **EMBRACE OPPORTUNITIES:** If you're the boss or an informal leader at work, deal with your fear by reframing the situation for everyone else. Talk about how instead of focusing on potential losses and terror, you want to see the situation as an opportunity to figure out ways to improve your organization. Your underlings will breathe a collective sigh of relief and will be motivated to work harder.

■ **GENERATE SOLUTIONS:** If you're an employee, here's your chance to step into a supportive role that could ultimately save you from losing your job. Glaser has interviewed hundreds of bosses about which employees they value most and why. She's found that favored workers are "idea harvesters" who come to the boss with suggestions for what could be done differently. Employees who are overwhelmingly *not* valued are those who are compliant but who expect the boss to always be the fountain of wisdom.

■ **GATHER INFORMATION:** Start by informally interviewing someone a level or two above you. Ask them what challenges they are facing and how they think those could be met. Put their answers together with other colleagues' concerns, and you should have a clear idea of where to direct your brainstorming.

■ **FILL IN THE GAPS:** Take note of your boss's weaknesses. Is she a big-picture person who's not so good with the details? Come up with a way to help her handle organizational tasks. She'll be so much more appreciative than if you were to volunteer for a project that didn't meet her most pressing needs.

■ **GIVE COMPLIMENTS:** Consumed with worry, everyone around you is quick to berate themselves and each other. Lift the gloom by casually pointing out your coworkers' contributions and strengths. It will not only make them like you more, it will also turn off the lights on their fear floors and help them to be better problem-solvers—a good side effect for the whole company. —Carlin Flora