

Working Well

Good Mental Health
and Creative Freelancers



Why are we writing this?

At least one in six workers experience mental health problems, including anxiety and depression. Awareness and support to retain and grow [good mental health in the workplace](#) is increasing. However, despite some [fantastic resources](#) there is still a gap in awareness and provision for creative freelancers.

This resource has been developed by the AOI, Society of Authors and Association of Photographers. Our organisations work with a wide range of creative freelancers including writers, illustrators, photographers, animators. From our conversations and research we know that there can be situations and issues that can impact on our members' mental wellbeing and in some cases can lead to them experiencing poor mental health.

This resource aims to throw a light on some common issues encountered by creative freelancers. It suggests some practical strategies if you are concerned that your wellbeing is slipping. It's not the solution but it's the start of the conversation.

NOTE: This document was developed before the Covid-19 pandemic. We are releasing it in draft format and welcome feedback (info@theaoi.com) on how we can develop it over the coming months to make it as helpful as possible.

We know it's important

Just like our physical health, our mental health will ebb and flow. There may be times when we will get ill, but in most cases, we will get better if we identify the problem and get help.

If you are concerned about how you're feeling, speak to your GP. This should always be your first point of call, just as it would be with concerns about your physical health.

If you think you're in a crisis, contact one of the following or reach out immediately to someone you trust:

- Call the Samaritans 24-hour support service on 116 123 or text 07725 90 90 90 so that a crisis worker can text with you.
- Go to your nearest accident and emergency (A&E) department and tell the staff how you are feeling.
- Contact NHS 111.

When bad things happen, resilience is what helps us through. Being resilient is about coping and thriving when times are tough. Your professional organisation may offer resilience workshops. If not, [this video](#) is a useful place to start.

Whatever you take away from this guide, remember that you are not alone – help is out there. The list of resources below are many and varied. Take a look and see what you need at the moment. If you can't find the help you need, give your professional organisation a call to see if they can help.



Common Challenges

Money

We all worry about money. Concerns about money can have an impact on our mental health. If we are worried, it will make it hard for us to be positive and potentially make us feel unhappy. Freelance income is erratic and hard to predict. As a creative freelancer you are running a small business and any small business can take time to turn a profit. Even then, some years will be more profitable than others.

Then there are the unforeseen factors and long-term planning. A bill will appear from nowhere, for example, or you'll get sick and won't be able to work. At some point you might want or need to retire: how will you fund a pension?

Financial challenges can present themselves at any stages of your career. You might be lucky to have financial support from family but, even so, not having a financial safety net can be stress-inducing.

Tips for resilience

- Don't put your head in the sand. Check your bank balance regularly and make a financial plan.
- Forecast your finances. Work out what you will spend each month and what you can expect to come in.
- Look into getting insurance that will cover you if you're sick.
- Speak with an accountant about managing your finances and planning for the future – your professional organisation may have some suggestions of who to speak to.
- You may be able to get some grants and other funding that can help you through the rough times. Again, ask your professional organisation for guidance.
- Talk to and network with people with the same struggles to earn a living. They can be reassuring and supportive and may have great practical ideas, too.
- Don't think that most other creatives are earning a lot of money: remember that people often talk about their successes more than their struggles

Common Challenges

Imposter Syndrome

Do you feel as if you shouldn't really be doing the job, that you're not a 'proper' artist? That other people know far more, and are far more skilled than you, and that last commission was just luck? Well, that's only human, but that's also Imposter Syndrome. And it's something that is amazingly common, with high profile creatives like Maya Angelou, Neil Gaiman and Chris Martin all talking about their experiences of it.

The challenge of Imposter Syndrome is how real it feels. Great success certainly doesn't make you immune and can even make this feeling stronger. Keep in mind that most other creative freelancers will also have doubts about themselves and their work. This may help you feel more human, less depressed and more connected.

There are lots of mind management books out there that can inspire you and help to address Imposter Syndrome. Do some research online and find some support from your professional community.

Tips for resilience

- Measure your success impartially – write down what you've achieved each week. This will help you to focus on what's going well and that you are making progress, even when it doesn't feel that way. There are many journals online that can help you – for example [here](#) or a mood journal such as [Moon Turtle](#).
- Report to friends – share your successes and let them know where things haven't gone so well. Staying connected with the outside world, your friends, family and communities will help to keep perspective and a sense of proportion. People in your network can help to encourage you but also to help regain your sense of balance. Let them help to celebrate your successes and be there for you during the inevitable rejections.

“The reason we struggle with insecurity is because we compare our behind-the-scenes with everyone else's highlight reel.”

Steven Furtick
Pastor, Songwriter and Author

Common Challenges

Rejection

It's realistic to expect to have to apply for five times as many jobs as you will get. That might be basic business for creatives, but it doesn't make each rejection any easier. When you submit your work, your folio or your samples it can feel personal when you don't get the commission.

For those who share personal creative work, it's crucial to build resilience to withstand the criticism and rejection, as well as the praise and success that comes with it. Remember that although you control the amount of effort you put into a submission, you cannot control how it lands at the other end.

Tips for resilience

- If your work involves applying for commissions set yourself a goal of applying for five times as many jobs as you need to make your finances work. You are not going to secure every commission, and this will help you to get used to the unavoidable process of rejection.
- If you are working on a longer project, for example a novel, you might want to consider a part-time job, which can also be inspiring, grounding and help with resilience, as well as being financially supportive.
- Keep professional boundaries: it's easier to manage difficult conversations when they're kept within the confines of your business life. These conversations should be constructive and aimed at you-as-an-artist, not you-as-an-individual. This might help the rejections to feel less personal.
- Stay grounded by remembering how this area of creative business works: that rejections involve personal response not objective truth, for example, and that most creatives are rejected many times.
- Get involved with a peer group so that you can hear about other people's struggles, too.
- Remember that people in all businesses have rejections or fail to get a piece of work: it is much harder and more painful for an individual, because it feels so much more personal, but it is in the nature of competitive industry
- The only certain way not to succeed is not to try: give yourself every chance of success by persisting through the rejections and continuing to find ways to improve. Hard work is the most common and also the most rewarding way to success, and when you get there, you might even be glad of the knocks you took along the way.

Common Challenges Social Media

Social media is a great opportunity to build your online brand, reach new audiences, and get your name out there with agents, commissioners and publishers in real-time. But social media is also well known for perpetuating 'Insta-perfect' lives, edited so much that they bear no resemblance to reality. Be reassured that no-one is as elegant, successful or witty as their social media feed – and just like you, they're probably doing it in their PJs and a dressing gown, hopefully waiting for some likes.

Yes, social media is a fantastic business resource for your marketing toolkit, but it should be used as that. Use it strategically and analytically to build your professional network, find and be seen by commissioners and your target audiences. Promoting yourself and your work on social media and gauging success by the number of likes is not very helpful – as [this article](#) examines.

Make sure your use of social media serves you in a positive way. Twitter can be an excellent place to find a peer community that will support you. When you find your tribe online, it can provide a wealth of support and community.

Tips for resilience

- Try not to compare yourself to others – you don't know the true reality that you are comparing yourself with anyway. Remember that most people only or mostly put their best news out there so you are not seeing their bruises.
- Be strategic and analytical, not emotional. You can find social media strategies online and there are regular training events and workshops run by your professional association that can help.
- Try not to let your online presence intrude too much into your personal life. Think carefully before you share personal stories or details about children or relationships. This doesn't mean don't do it, but it does mean do it carefully and thinking ahead. You ARE allowed your private life.
- Only use platforms which you feel comfortable using. Some find it useful to have a personal account and a professional account. For example, Facebook for family and friends but Twitter and Instagram for professional networking.
- Be careful about posting when your mental health isn't good, when feeling vulnerable, or in the heat of the moment. Share your feelings with a genuine friend first, as another pair of eyes could help with more objective advice.
- Learn to spot the signs that you're feeling undermined or overwhelmed by what you see online and take a social media break. If you are required to be online, for example, by your publisher or commissioner, share your concerns and ask them to support you in taking a break from social media.
- Again, if a publisher or other creative partner says you have to be online or do certain promotional activities, make sure that you are supported, and where appropriate, paid. You do not have to do this alone.

Common Challenges

Working Alone



For a lot of creative freelancers, working alone is a reality of the job. You might work from home, a studio or a shed, but chances are, you'll have days (and possibly weeks) where you could easily not speak to another person unless you make it part of your daily routine.

There are freedoms that come with working alone, in terms of flexibility and work/life integration, but not only can it throw up issues of loneliness and isolation, it can also mean that you don't have anyone to brainstorm ideas with or to act as a sounding board.

For many people, working alone is a distinct advantage as not everyone feels the need for daily social interaction. While some find it useful to bounce ideas around with frequent face-to-face interaction, think about what works best for you. There is no need to feel undermined by the narrative that collaboration is somehow better, more effective or more virtuous, than working alone.

However, everyone does need to know who to turn to, both for support and to share fun times and success. And those support networks don't grow in a vacuum. We have to work at it.

Tips for resilience

- Go outside every day. Going for a walk will help keep you connected to the world outside your office or studio. The outdoors, particularly if you can find greenery or big open skies, can help boost mental health and spark ideas, too. You could consider taking a dog for a walk. [The Cinnamon Trust](#) is just one example of a dog matching service if you don't have your own.
- Find a group of peers you can meet up with regularly, if you want to. It might be online or in a coffee shop. Regular connection with others in the same field will help you to realise that everyone is facing (or has faced) similar challenges and they can offer valuable support about how to overcome these. Don't underestimate how vital this seemingly inconsequential chat is to your mental wellbeing.
- Network. Perhaps have a meeting with an agent, commissioner or project-funder – it might be just to introduce yourself and say hi, or to understand more about what they are looking for. You might attend a conference or seminar in your field – or a different one. You might not have a specific intention but you open yourself to the chance of a serendipitous encounter or idea.

Common Challenges

Work/Life Balance

For a creative freelancer there is often the temptation to work all-hours, to earn more money, finish the project, make it just that bit better.

The 'sleep when you're dead' ethos, often seen in the creative industries, is not healthy. Creatives, perhaps more than others, need space and time to just BE. To let creativity, your most important asset, do its thing, percolate ideas, digest concepts and generally flourish. You need to have a proper work/life balance.

Tips for resilience

- Keep strict working times or targets, such as a word count. Sometimes knowing you have a limited amount of time, or goal, each day can make you more productive.
- Don't beat yourself up when you miss a self-imposed target. You might have set the wrong target. Creativity doesn't always dance to a tune. And life can get in the way.
- If you are anxious about a deadline imposed from elsewhere (such as a publisher) contact them early on to say that you may need extra time. Doing this well in advance takes the pressure off you and is a professional act which will gain you respect.
- Is it possible to have a completely separate work-space? Ideally a separate room or garden office or, if not, a desk which is only used for work. When you enter that space, only do work-related activities; have certain triggers for work, such as music or a candle or a particular coffee mug. And when you leave your work-space, treat it like leaving a traditional office or work-place – leave your work there, physically and mentally.
- Structure your working time using a system such as the [Pomodoro Technique](#) in order to minimise procrastination.
- Make non-work plans each week: see friends, go to galleries, gigs, shows – feed your creativity and balance your life at the same time.
- Online groups can be great ways to keep the motivation up. You can do this with a small group of friends in the same kind of creative area as you. Some writers join the November Nanowrimo (National Novel-Writing Month), or some illustrators enjoy Inktober but you can equally create your own motivational group at any time of year and for any length of time.
- Be kind to yourself. Looking after yourself is easy to put to the bottom of the pile of priorities when you're faced with multiple deadlines. Treat yourself to a daily kindness – however small that may be.

Common Challenges

Feeling Overwhelmed

The often-sporadic nature of commissions and the multi-disciplinary reality of freelance work can mean that we accept everything and take on too much work. The fear of saying no in case work doesn't come our way again can lead to taking on too much, becoming overwhelmed and this cycle of overworking can have a negative impact on our wellbeing.

Balancing our work, which often includes creative work, self promotion, business planning and accounts, as well as life priorities such as families and relationships is not easy, and sometimes it can feel harder than others.

Tips for resilience

- Plan your working week and allow time to tackle a little bit of business, promotion, family and creative work. If you need a lot of time to focus on one area – plan it in.
- Think about how you can work smarter, not harder. Your professional organisation may hold training workshops to help you hone your productivity skills.
- Talk through offers of work and your current work schedule with someone else whenever you need to. Ask people around you to tell you when they feel you're taking on too much.
- Create your own Wellness Action Plan to remind yourself what you need to do to stay well whilst working. Include details about what your family, friends and colleagues can do to support you. Even if you don't share it with anyone, it will help you to develop an awareness of your working style, stress triggers and responses, and will help you to communicate these to people. You may be self-employed, but you still need people looking out for you. See the MIND website [here](#) for a template or contact your professional organisation for more information.
- If that feels too much you could consider using the NHS's [Five Ways to Wellbeing](#) and thread them into your everyday life. It's as simple and as positive as eating five-a-day, and it can make you happier.
- Review your work/life plan and be honest with yourself. Is it achievable, realistic and time-based. Your professional organisation may be able to help with training in this area.

Common Challenges

Creativity & Emotion

The cliché of the tortured artist is an unhelpful label that creatives have to deal with. Artists (in any discipline) often find themselves tackling raw and often challenging emotions head on – and that ability is what can make work powerful because it helps people to see and understand what they only feel and cannot explain.

Doing this well requires an emotional fluency, and an ability to disassociate yourself from the emotion. This can be very hard, and it can be easy to inhabit the vast emotions you are looking to reflect.

Creative professionals often focus too much on the commercial aspect of their work. If you are struggling with negative emotions, perhaps take the pressure off and do something creative that is just for you. Sometimes the purpose of your writing/illustrating/creating might not have commercial value but might be a therapeutic process. If you get a commission out of it, then great, but don't put pressure on yourself to sell the products of your negative emotions.

Many people notice that a major emotional shock, such as bereavement or relationship break-up, makes it incredibly hard to be creative, get new ideas or settle to a big project. You may feel you'll never get this creativity back again.

Be kind to yourself – creativity is emotional and sometimes your emotional well will be full. Feelings and reactions change over time but creativity is hard or impossible to force. You may need to give yourself a break.

Some people with mental health problems such as depression find that they can't work when they are experiencing symptoms, but others can. There is no right or wrong.

Tips for resilience

- Recognise what 'pulls your triggers'. If there are emotions you find hard to manage, rather than relying on them to fuel your creativity, consider [finding a therapist](#) who may help you with these.
- Be aware of tendencies or practices which are detrimental to your health and wellbeing and develop strategies for dealing with these.
- Be aware of any circumstances that may harm your mental health: look out for signs of self-neglect, self-harm or self-sabotage, however small. Seek help if you notice these signals. The resources at the end offer suggested organisations.
- If you have one, check your Wellness Action Plan occasionally to remind yourself about what keeps you on the right track.
- Sleep is known to positively affect every area of health and wellbeing, including emotional health. It is worth prioritising sleep if you can and you'll find lots of good advice online. You could be pleasantly surprised at the effect of improving your sleep by even a small amount of time. We also now know that sleep deprivation and depression are bi-directionally linked: not only does depression impact sleep negatively but poor sleep impacts and can even trigger depressive episodes.
- If you need some counselling – ask your GP for advice on this.

Common Challenges

Performance Anxiety

The perception of an artist's life is often idealised and seen as glamorous and enviable. But creative professionals can also be highly vulnerable to symptoms of anxiety around giving public performances, whether that's performing on stage, appearing at an event or giving a talk or a reading.

Artists can have the added pressure that 'the show must go on' and if you don't go on (unless you are in the position of having an understudy or contingency speaker), you are acutely aware of how much your non-appearance will cost financially.

If you are feeling anxious (and you know it's more the performance nerves) then you might want to consider getting some help and support. Don't wait until you are broken before seeking help: learn to spot the early signs and symptoms of your negative emotions, and if you're feeling anxious most of the time, try to break through these feelings and get help, before you break down.

Tips for resilience

- Be aware of how you are feeling. Accept these feelings as being 'normal' and do something positive to help work through them.
- Try to avoid self-medicating with alcohol or other drugs that will create a dependency. Explore healthier ways to manage these feelings.

- Talk to someone, reach out – you will be amazed by the support that comes back when you are open about your vulnerabilities. Anxiety about public-speaking is very common and it will be reassuring to see how many apparently confident people suffer from it or have overcome it.
- Get professional support: investigate what is out there to help how you're feeling. You may want to explore a therapy route (for example Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), or media training such as public speaking classes.
- Help others by speaking out, if you feel strong enough to do so.
- Generally, anxiety about public performance reduces the more you do it. If you are very anxious right now, this may be a hard message to hear because the idea of doing it lots of times before you feel better could be daunting. But try to hold onto this belief, as it is largely true.
- When you are required to perform in public, discuss with someone else (publisher, agent, fellow creative) ways to make the event less worrying. For example, you could ask to perform as part of a panel, or be "in conversation" rather than doing a solo performance. Talk through with someone who has done this a lot what the main pressure points might be and what the strategies are for dealing with them. For example, seeing the stage beforehand and practising standing on it can be immensely helpful when you arrive on it to perform. Admit that you are very anxious and the organisers will want to help because they know that you being comfortable will help everyone.
- If you are someone who needs time alone before performing, ask for it! Don't be forced to engage in small talk when you are trying to go over your first lines in your head.
- You may find that you are increasingly asked to perform or give a talk or reading as you become more successful. If you absolutely can't bring yourself to do it, you can always say no.

Common Challenges

Creative Block

The blank piece of paper (metaphorical or startlingly real) stares back at you. Many artists have it – the creative block that dries everything up and stultifies you. It's perfectly normal but can be stressful, and make you consider your worth.



Tips for resilience

- Acknowledge that creative blocks are a common part of the process. You have two choices and either might work: either a) fight the blocks and work on through or b) don't fight them – try to do something else and come back to it later.
- Try playful techniques to loosen yourself up and regain your creative flow by another means – that might be as simple as [The Shape Game](#), or [Exquisite Corpse](#).
- Go for a walk or run, do the housework or gardening, or something creatively different from the thing you're trying to do. Sometimes, doing something that uses only a small amount of bandwidth allows your brain to “compost” the work you're engaged on and you'll come back to it with new ideas.
- Sleep also helps creativity when you can't find the answer during your logical waking states. But this only happens (or is most likely to happen) when you consciously struggle on the problem while awake. So, struggling and failing during the day is not all bad, as it can prompt your sleeping brain to work through the problem overnight, leading to insight. Keep a notebook by your bed to capture the solution!

Resources

Advice UK maintains a list of charity, government and other resources to help you navigate the welfare system – adviceuk.org.uk.

CALM the [Campaign Against Living Miserably](https://www.calm.org.uk) is leading a movement against suicide, the single biggest killer of men under 45 in the UK and the cause of 18 deaths every day. They have a dedicated support line and online webchat for men who are experiencing emotional distress or who are in crisis.

Citizens Advice (citizensadvice.org.uk) offers free, independent, confidential and impartial advice to everyone on their rights and responsibilities in relation to money and other issues

Side by Side Forum – Mind’s online community. It’s a powerful thing to connect with someone else over shared experiences. Side by Side is an online community where you can listen, share and be heard – sidebyside.mind.org.uk

HOPELineUK for the prevention of young suicide – 0800 068 41 41. Specialist telephone service run by suicide prevention charity [Papyrus](https://www.papyrus.org.uk), staffed by trained professionals who give non-judgemental support, practical advice and information to children, teenagers and young people up to the age of 35 who are worried about how they are feeling, and to anyone who is concerned about a young person.

Mind Infoline 0300 123 3393 or text 86463. [Mind Infoline](https://www.mind.org.uk) can talk to you about where you can find help, and about medication and treatments, and more. They can also provide legal information and general advice on mental health-related law. The line is open 9am to 6pm Monday to Friday.

Refuge 0808 2000 247. Provider of specialist domestic violence services – supporting more than 4,600 women, children and men each day – refuge.org.uk.

Relate 0300 100 1234. Provider of relationship support, supporting more than a million people each year of all ages, backgrounds and sexual orientations to strengthen their relationships – relate.org.uk.

StepChange is the UK’s leading debt management charity. They offer help, resources and information about services that can directly help you manage problem debt. More at stepchange.org.

Shelterline 0808 800 4444. If you are homeless or at risk of losing your home. Run by housing charity Shelter, their housing experts can advise you, no matter what your housing situation. Shelterline is open 365 days of the year from 8am to 8pm throughout the week and 8am to 5pm at weekends.

StreetLink Visit streetlink.org.uk if you are facing homelessness or if you or someone you know is sleeping rough in England or Wales. There is also an app. Provide as much information as you can and StreetLink’s national team will put you in touch with local support services.

Support for the Film & TV industry 0800 054 0000. If you work in film or TV, you can call the Film and TV Charity Support Line on 0800 054 0000 or send an email support@filmtvcharity.co.uk

The Samaritans 116 123. The free [Samaritans](https://www.samaritans.org) phone line is available 24 hours a day throughout the year. They’re there to give you the time and space to talk things through, to try and find a way through your problems, and to explore the options so you can make decisions that are right for you.

Toastmasters do you want to practice public speaking, improve your communication and build leadership skills? With [Toastmasters](https://www.toastmasters.org), you can break barriers, not your budget.

Turn2us helps people in financial hardship gain access to welfare benefits, charitable grants and support services. They also maintain a list of organisations offering grants to help pay for household appliances etc. More at turn2us.org.uk.