



How do I break free from my bullying brother? Lesley Garner advises a man desperate to seek a job away from the family business

What would you do?

Each week, Lesley Garner tackles the dilemmas and anxieties that beset modern life. Here, she advises a man desperate to seek a job away from the family business.

Dear Lesley,

Where to start? A lot of my problems go back to my childhood and even my dad's childhood, which was a hard one. In his eyes I feel I am still an incapable 16-year-old. I do not consider myself successful even though I have run the family business with my brothers for more than 15 years. I feel my life is wasting away.

My main problem is that one of my brothers is a great bully and my family won't intervene. Friends have told me to get another job but I can't tell them that I am terrified of being bullied by another employer, too. I long to change but I am quite incapable of expressing any negative feelings and I feel trapped in a vicious circle. You may be surprised to learn that I am a calm type of person, not prone to losing my temper - but maybe it is time that I did.

– Paul

Dear Paul,

Well, yes, perhaps it is time that you did. You may be surprised to learn that I am not at all surprised that you are a very calm person. It is often the outwardly calm people who are sitting on a boiling volcano of

unexpressed anger and resentment. It is much better to learn how to express anger than to succumb to a nervous breakdown or a heart attack further down the line. Many, many people struggle along trying to lead a life that is not really their own, only to have the changes they are resisting made for them by illness, redundancy or death. If you learn how to take some control of your life you could also be saving it.

Only you know how much I have practised your long letter and then, right at the very end, you wonder if you should lose your temper. Losing one's temper rarely achieves anything, but getting angry in a focused way does. However, getting angry in a way that creates the change you want is an art, so before you go off and throw a pointless tantrum, let's have a look at your situation.

I felt increasingly angry myself as I read your letter and my frustration was at the complete waste of a life. To be brutal, I was frustrated with you. Who is going to inhabit your life if you won't? None of the characters in the family drama you describe has your interests at heart. None of them lives inside your head, though you seem to think that they should be skilled at reading your mind. Your parents, rightly and, I imagine, wearily, would like you and your brothers to sort yourselves out. I expect they wonder when the sibling rivalry that began in childhood will ever end.

You and your brothers are locked in a completely unwinnable struggle so there is no point in hoarding the evidence of wounds and slightings for some day of reckoning that may never come. And what is your role in this long-playing soap? You have been cast in the role of victim but it doesn't matter whether this was the part you were given or whether you chose it for yourself. The point is that it is the role you have willingly accepted, the role in which you are word and thought perfect and which you go on refining and consolidating until it is so thoroughly yours that nobody - not your family and not even you - can imagine yourself in any other part.

There are a few bit part players who have not bought into your script. You say you have friends who, probably weary of your complaints, have told you to get another job. Good for them. Hang on to the friends who suggest you find another job and get them to expand on what your good points are and what they think you could do. You don't have to tell them

how much the thought of change terrifies you. Just notice that you are scared, take a few deep breaths and carry on listening to them anyway. Take them seriously because it is time for drastic action.

Do some research into the future. This isn't about re-writing the script, it's about getting a better part in a completely different play before it's too late. I realise how very difficult this is going to be for you because it's not just about changing your job, it's about challenging your family, constructing a new identity and upending your whole life.

But if you manage to do it the world might not come to an end. Your relationship with your family might actually improve. You might find you have gained something that I don't think you have at all at the moment: their respect. And you would have self-respect, too.

I think you have a choice between the high-risk business of making a major change or dwindling slowly towards old age in a perpetual simmer of resentment and unfulfilment, unhappy in yourself and a cause of unhappiness to others. Please don't do that.

There are many things you could do to help yourself and to find essential support in your long overdue rebellion.

Assertiveness training would give you the skills to express yourself clearly and confidently without resorting either to aggression or the kind of passive-aggressive silent treatment that I suspect you use at the moment. It would also help you to deal with your family and your job and it would give you the skills to protect you from bullying in your next job. I typed assertiveness training and the name of your county into Google and there are people in your area you could talk to. Your county council even offers assertiveness training to people looking for employment.

If you really wanted to go for broke in confronting your entire relationship with your family in a way that would put you back in touch with the person you'd really like to be, as well as increasing your understanding of them, then, from personal experience, I recommend a course called the Hoffman Process. It is - in the words of those who teach it - 'an eight-

day intensive residential course in which you're skilfully and compassionately shown how to let go of the past, release pent-up stress, self-limiting behaviours and resentments and start creating the future you desire.'

I somehow suspect this would be way outside your comfort zone at the moment but one day it might not be, and it could make all the difference in breaking the logjam of your life. You can find out more about it at www.hoffmaninstitute.co.uk, or by reading Tim Laurence's book, *You Can Change Your Life* (Hodder & Stoughton).

And in the meantime, do something simple because small, simple changes can trigger big, profound ones. Widen your musical repertoire. Don't ditch the classics but start listening to unfamiliar music, music that expresses the difficult emotions of life, music that gets your blood racing and expands your brain. I think the song for you to kick start your day is Chumbawamba's *I Get Knocked Down But I Get Up Again*. It's the perfect anthem for turning worms.

Write to Lesley Garner, c/o Features, The Daily Telegraph, 1 Canada Square, London E14 5DT or e-mail: lesley.garner@telegraph.co.uk

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Hoffman Institute UK
Call us on: +44 (0)1903 88 99 90