

# **‘I quit finance at 45 to be a psychotherapist’**

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By  
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When sports tycoon Malcolm Glazer gained control of Manchester United in 2005, M&A lawyer Jon Coppin knew it would be one of the last takeovers he would ever work on.

Having decided to call it a day in the City by his 45th birthday, he had just a few years left before fulfilling his promise. He made those last years count, advising on the €15.8 billion

merger between Nokia and Siemens and Ford's \$2.3 billion sale of Jaguar and Land Rover to Tata.

Quite a swansong.

"I knew I didn't want to spend the rest of my life doing M&A deals," said Coppin, explaining his decision to quit the daily grind.

At first, he spent a year dog-walking and fishing. But then – maybe inevitably – boredom hit.

"I was sitting in my study with a blank piece of paper, thinking [about what to do next]. Then a light-bulb went on," he recalled. That light-bulb moment – sparked by the realisation that he could follow his BA in psychology with an MSc in psychodynamic counselling and psychotherapy – eventually took him to east London's Homerton University Hospital, where he began training to be a psychotherapist.

Having entered an entirely different world to the one in which he had spent most of his adult life, Coppin remembers feeling at a disadvantage to those with whom he was studying. Unlike his background of hard and fast finance, most of his new colleagues had some experience in a caring profession.

"There were a few times I thought why am I doing this – it was quite difficult to retool," he said.

But after a difficult start, his City background has become a benefit. All Coppin's clients work in business and finance, a sector where staff are reporting dwindling levels of job satisfaction and growing levels of stress. Of his 20-odd years as an M&A lawyer, Coppin said "routinely and at times I absolutely felt stretched beyond my limits" and he had poor coping mechanisms.

He was not alone and for those he left in the City, the problems have not gone away. "People in the City tend to be driven and part of drive comes from the need to achieve in order to feel OK. That's usually to do with an underlying anxiety," he said.

Add to this a certain inevitability about high-achievers going for high-stress jobs, said Coppin, and it can quickly lead to problems. "Combine that emotional pre-disposition with unremitting stress and fatigue and you've got quite a potent cocktail."

In that potent cocktail is a desire to achieve something others can't or won't do – jobs that tend to lend themselves to more difficulty and stress, according to Coppin.

"Achievement is relative. It only works if we're doing something better than someone else," he said, adding that not achieving is not an option for many in the Square Mile.

However, Coppin said learning to not be on top 100% of the time could be a benefit for City workers: "If people can learn to accept failure it will make them more effective in most situations and spare them a lot of unhappiness. But it's hard to reconcile it with the drive to succeed that you need in the first place."

That's not to say that everyone who goes for these jobs will get overwhelmed by stress and Coppin doesn't think the City itself is bad for you. A lot of the work is stimulating and "there's a great deal more mental health issues associated with poverty than with stress at work".

"Stress and anxiety are the same thing," Coppin said. "It can come out in all sorts of ways but the underlying emotion is fear."

The pre-frontal cortex, which regulates impulse and emotion, is the hungriest part of the brain in terms of nutrition and blood supply, he said. "If we're tired, [this part of the brain] shuts down and it's easier for us to feel overwhelmed by our emotions," Coppin explains.

While some anxiety is normal, according to Coppin, the things to look out for are a difficulty in finding pleasure in anything, persistent resentment towards people and an overwhelming feeling of anxiety.

"Try to get sleep, exercise, eat well. Watch out for booze; mood takes a much longer lasting hit for that short-term lift. You're not giving yourself a chance if you're spending half your life poisoned with alcohol."

Finally, Coppin advises opening up – however alien it may feel. "Talk to friends and family. If they don't know how you're feeling, you're not giving them a chance."