

The Great Resignation

With more people begin to prioritise their mental health over steady but unfulfilling careers, especially in the wake of Covid-19, *Kindred*. speaks to three entrepreneurs who left their jobs in order to find peace in self-employment.

The seismic shift that the dawn of the 2020s brought to our personal and professional lives has been a wake up call for many.

During the lockdowns that followed from the virus, many workers began to reevaluate their lives and professions, which is now being reflected in the ongoing economic trend that has been dubbed: "The Big Quit" or "The Great Resignation".

Coined by Anthony Klotz, professor of management at Texas A&M University, it refers to the increase in employees who have voluntarily resigned from their jobs, due to deep-rooted job dissatisfaction and not wanting to return to a typical nine to five after developing a taste for flexible working.

With terms like "work-life balance" and "mental wellbeing" becoming increasingly part of the conversation when it comes to our career goals, more and more people have decided to pursue these through freelance work or starting their own business rather than be at the mercy of an employer.

WORDS BY EMMA GREEN

Below are three incredible stories of enterprises born of a need to improve the mental health of their owners.

Comic Art Addict

After 20 years of working in the bar industry, Rich Barker quit his lucrative management job to pursue his calling as a freelance comic book illustrator. Although, the path that had led him to follow his lifelong passion had not come easy.

From a very young age, Barker had been considered a type of child prodigy, with a natural talent for art which had won him awards and praise from various teachers and it was the comic strip format that he particularly excelled at. "I always wanted to emulate the story-telling and level of drawing of the heroes that I idolised in comic books," he says. "It was the superhero stuff that became my form of escapism."

However, once he reached his teens, he struggled under the weight of pressure and expectation being pushed onto him by his parents and tutors. He slowly lost all enjoyment for his craft, as he was forced to practise his artwork during any spare time he had and was expected to master many other art mediums including watercolour, oil, acrylic, and textiles.

By the time Barker was 16, he was juggling two part-time jobs, a career in semi-professional football, and art training. Instead of receiving support, he says he would face threats and intimidation from his parents and it had all become too stressful for him. After a huge row with his dad, he left home, dropped out of his course, and was no longer playing football to the level he had been. Instead, he was forced to take up a job in a bar in order to keep a roof over his head. It was during this time that Barker would experience his first encounter with depression, going from 12 and a half stone down to just nine, and faced the devastation of his father cutting him out of his life.

With his entry into the hospitality industry, Barker built himself up from a mere bartender to the realms of senior management, making millions of pounds for companies and gaining a reputation of revitalising struggling bars and restaurants on a shoestring budget. But his expertise and talent in his field came with a hefty price, since he was constantly exploited for very little in return.

"It takes away your life, working in the hospitality industry, especially if you work at the top levels," says Barker. "On top of the anti-social, lengthy hours and the type of work you are required to do, you get used. Instead of my achievements being rewarded, I was being squeezed right to the point where I would be unable to walk home at times or stand up at the end of a shift."

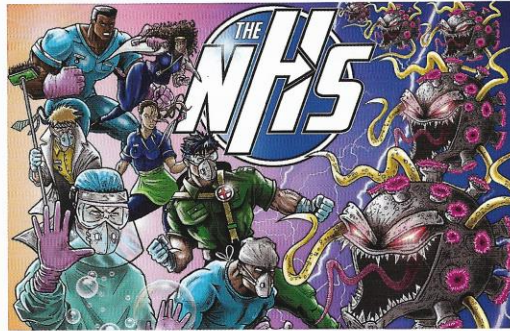
Things would only escalate once he moved to The Big Smoke to continue his profession there. "In that industry, everything in London is amplified in terms of pressure, speed, expenses, and demand," he says.

He went from working 60 hours a week to a gruelling 80 hours, often working so late into the night that he was able to catch the first tube home. His demanding career was starting to take a toll on his mental health and relationships.

"My family would wake up sometimes and find me crying in the chair because I was so exhausted," he admits.

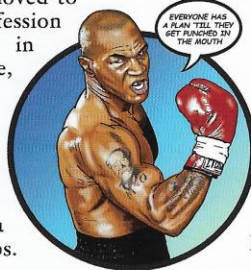
After 15 years of trying to maintain a career in London and dealing with a toxic relationship with the mother of his children, Barker ended up having a nervous breakdown and moving back to the West Midlands. He was picked up several times by police for various suicide attempts and was put on antidepressants, Diazepam, sleeping pills, and CBT therapy. The largest contributing factor to his poor mental health at the time was being unable to see his three children.

Barker's preferred method of coping with his depression was to rely on distraction techniques. This would eventually lead him to rekindle his love for art.



"For the last four years, what I've kind of leaned on without realising it is my artwork," he says. "I've found that if the pain is overwhelming, and I do my art, it allows me to be present and go within myself, instead of just handling my emotions by walking around, ignoring everybody or going back to bed."

His artwork has become a two-pronged therapeutic approach all on its own. "If you're doing something quite complicated or difficult, it takes all of your focus and you channel everything into what you're doing," he says. "Then there's a stage during that creative process, such as colouring in, which goes from being very focused to then being very relaxing. It's like two forms of therapy when you're doing art. And then when you finally finish it, there's this sense of achievement and you get a bit of a positive kick out of it."



It was Barker's partner and now wife, Lina that encouraged him to turn his life-long hobby into a potential new career. She created an Instagram account and began uploading photos of his finished pieces which has slowly built up a steady following. Lina also offered to become the breadwinner for them both so that Rich could focus on building up his skills and new business without the pressure of having to generate revenue.

Work soon started coming in and so far, he has had about 10 pieces commissioned where he has transformed portraits of family members into different superhero characters. He had just finished working on the first issue of a comic book project which comes out later this year, as well as designing the cover for a crime thriller novel.

The 43-year-old who is now based in Staffordshire, hasn't ruled out eventually returning to a staff job, that is, if it happened to be within the comic book industry. "If Marvel called me up tomorrow and said, 'We want you to work on one of the films or a comic book', I'd be all over it!" he says laughing.

To see more of Rich Barker's work, follow him on Instagram at [@comcartaddict](#).

Bare Kind

Lucy Jeffrey started her bamboo sock company, Bare Kind, in 2018 while she was working at HSBC bank.

"I wanted to do more with my life, and it was just a bit of a side project for a while, but the business gave me some purpose," she says.

Jeffrey originally studied Biology but found herself on the corporate path after taking up a graduate scheme with the bank straight out of university. It was during this time that she first noticed the signs that something was not quite right.

"I started getting this shortness of breath and feeling dizzy," she says. "I almost felt like I was having an allergic reaction." It was only after being physically examined by her GP that she would discover that her symptoms were being caused by onset anxiety.

Her mental health would deteriorate further when Jeffrey began travelling between London and Birmingham three-days-a-week for work. "My commute was two and a half hours each way," she says. "I would get up at 5am and then when I got home, it would be dark. I was miserable and exhausted all the time, and I wasn't able to have the lifestyle that I needed to make myself happy, such as playing team sports or working out."

When Covid-19 hit, Jeffrey was almost relieved since it meant that she could now work from home instead. It was during the subsequent lockdowns that she realised that she couldn't face returning to her Birmingham office ever again. Taking a leap of faith, in November of 2020, she quit her job in order to run her company, Bare Kind full-time.

The premise behind Bare Kind is that each pair of sock available for purchase has an endangered animal design on them, ranging from orangutans and gorillas to bees, and every time a pair is sold, 10 percent of the profit is donated to that animal's related charity. Why did she choose socks as her product? "They're my favourite present during Christmas," she says. "And I didn't want to add more things into the world that you could already buy second-hand, but people generally don't buy used socks." Out of the 21 designs currently live on her website, it is the humble hedgehog that is her prevailing bestseller, but the budding 27-year-old entrepreneur hopes to have around 100 up and running by the end of the year.

For now, Jeffrey is simply enjoying the newfound perks that come with being her own boss. "I feel like a completely different person," she says.

"Now I am asking for what I want rather than accepting the current state of things." Running her own company has given her more flexibility and purpose, but she does acknowledge that there are different challenges that come with being self-employed. "There is that added pressure because it's your business and you're at the forefront of it and it's on me to push things forward," she adds. "I've got people to pay now, but I almost kind of thrive on that."

You can find out more about Lucy Jeffrey's business at barekind.co.uk or give Bare Kind's Instagram page a follow [@barekind](https://www.instagram.com/barekind)



Crafty Kilner

Martha Kilner qualified as a primary school teacher in 2002 and had loved her job for the first 10 years. She then took some time off from teaching whilst she raised her three young children; during that time she also learned to crochet. This eventually snowballed into Kilner making hats, booties, and blankets to sell at craft fairs, and that was how the first incarnation of Crafty Kilner came about.

She initially ran the business from 2014 until her youngest child reached reception age and she returned to full-time teaching in 2018. However, Kilner quickly realised how much her profession had changed. "The teaching was very different twenty years ago, lots of accountability and scrutiny," she explains. "You gave your all and just felt battered down and destroyed. I went from a confident teacher to feeling inadequate."

Kilner, who is based in North-East London, describes the constant treadmill that teachers face on a day-to-day basis. "You're just living on this hamster wheel," she says. "So, if somebody sees you in the corridor, there's no time to have a conversation, because you need to collect the kids from the playground, go to the toilet, get a cup of tea, then run back to the classroom to print something off, and then head to a meeting."

Gradually, the stress from her job began taking its toll on both her physical and mental health. Her hair started falling out, she gained weight, and she turned to food and alcohol as a means of coping. Most concerning were the insidious thoughts she was having about how she could avoid going into work. "I would wish illness upon myself, or that I would accidentally crash into a tree so I could be signed off for a while," she says. "I recognised that these thoughts were unhealthy and that I was heading towards a breakdown."

Kilner conceded to take a 50 percent paycut from her teaching salary to do social media marketing instead for two schools. She also worked with a business coach who encouraged her to re-establish Crafty Kilner and to focus on offering crochet courses online as a more profitable alternative to selling handmade products.

For the 41-year-old mum, crocheting had always been a form of meditation and relaxation. "Crochet is like the new yoga," Kilner declares. "Because you're busy with your hands, your mind kind of switches off, and everything drifts away."

It was once she began running crochet classes that she realised just how powerful the hobby could be on mental health. "The first person who bought my online course was signed off work and having therapy," Kilner says. "She did my course for six weeks and said it was having a bigger impact on her depression and anxiety than her weekly therapy sessions! I thought 'Wow, this is life-changing stuff.'"

Kilner is now flourishing working as her own boss. "Although we have a lot less money, I am a million, billion times happier," she says confidently. "My mind is now booming with positivity as I know what I do helps others and I get to set my own agenda and my own goals."

It's not only Kilner who has noticed the positive changes in herself.

"Because I still do marketing at the school where I used to work at, people are like 'Wow, you're smiling and happy all the time and you've now got time to stop and have a conversation,'" she says.

Find out more about Martha's courses at craftykilner.co.uk or via Instagram at [@craftykilner](https://www.instagram.com/craftykilner).

