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A charming first novel from Joanna Cannon

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Cinema

The Big Short is a tense morality tale about the economic crash

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Travel

Slowing things right down in Catalonia, Spain

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LIVING THE LIFE: Maria Lynch, opposite page, uses her background in marketing to navigate the corporate world. Photo: John Hyland. Above, Liadan says that 'Many of the techniques Maria gave me are aimed at creating an overall calmer persona in the workplace.' Photo: Kip Carroll

If someone behaves in a manner I'm not happy with, I find it hard to tell them in a non-emotional manner. Dislike of confrontation and a tendency to bring too much emotion into these things are fairly common, Maria reassures me. But assertiveness is a skill anyone can learn. It is based on logic, not emotion. It's not going to be a personality transplant, she says, but rather like having a button that you can switch on when needed.

"You may not be energised by that skill, however you're going to be able to deal with confrontation efficiently," she explains. Does anyone actually enjoy it, I wonder? Apparently yes. Whilst most of us tend to be around the 5-6 mark on a 1-10 scale of assertiveness, Maria explains, aggressors tend to be around 7+, jumping to past 10 (into aggression rather than assertion) easily when angered.

Essentially, assertiveness should be viewed as a form of negotiation. The bottom line is what do you want out of the situation. Follow the three Fs: Feedback; when you do this, it bothers me; Feeling: I get angry/upset/worried, and (moving) Forward: the solution, i.e. please stop this behaviour in the future. Respond to any situation that requires assertiveness within 24 hours; reacting straight away means you will tend to be aggressive or emotional, any longer and you're wallowing.

This surprised me into realising I might have more victim tendencies than I care to admit, hanging onto times I was wronged by the behaviour of a friend. Conflict will always arise in life. How to move forward is the point. It's incredible how empowering this simple shift in perspective is.

Maria's training was nothing if not practical. Being grounded, physically and mentally, is the basis of her teaching. During confrontation, a grounded posture is feet flat on the floor, back straight, legs slightly apart, serious face. We practised mine with somewhat limited success, so compromised, coming up with a subtle gesture of adjusting my glasses; be warned, if I begin to fidget with my glasses I mean business.

Appearance is crucial. Use clothes to contribute to the presence you create. My hair in a ponytail makes me look younger (I'm 36), and I risk being taken less seriously. Girly clothes are the same — cosy knits, ballet pumps or spindly stilettos are all no-nos for work meetings. Economy of words is essential. Don't over explain, get too emotional, or try to soften

TOP FIVE TIPS

THE 24-HOUR WINDOW — deal with things within 24 hours. Not immediately, as you're reacting out of emotion, any later and you're wallowing and being a victim.

THE BOTTOM LINE — assertiveness is a form of negotiation. Know how you want to move forward and focus on that rather than the emotions of the situation.

DRESS TO IMPRESS — your appearance helps you make a good impact so don't neglect it. Avoid anything too girly or cutesy if you want to make a strong impression.

GROUNDING — posture should be strong and grounded; feet flat on floor, knees apart, back straight. Identify your physical tics; waffling, smiling too much, fiddling with your hair, and practise not doing them.

WONDER WOMAN — the classic hands on hips Wonder Woman pose is known as an extreme power pose. Do it for two minutes before a big meeting to take the edge off the nervous energy for the next two hours.

the blow. In the face of shouting, try lowering your voice, and being in the emotional state you want the other person to be in.

What I found most useful were the many small practical techniques Maria gave me; easy to remember and short enough to fit into your daily routine. In terms of assertiveness, the Wonder Woman pose, a power pose featured by Amy Cuddy in one of the most viewed TED Talks ever, was one. Aimed at taking away nervous energy, two minutes in the classic Lynda Carter stance, legs firmly planted apart, hands on hips, can have an affect that lasts for two hours. Nip into the bathrooms before a meeting and try it.

Assertiveness isn't the sort of stuff that can be summoned up in the heat of the moment. Many of the techniques Maria gave me are aimed at creating an overall calmer persona. They require daily practice. It's called a wellness plan, she explains.

"It's part of building resilience, to get you to manage your emotions better under stressful situations," she explains. Boundaries are crucial. At our second meeting, I describe a rather nasty text I've received from a distant work acquaintance. It's not someone I work with regularly or closely, and yet it disturbs

my equanimity for an entire weekend. Out for dinner with my husband and daughter, I had seen the text, got that lurching sick stomach feeling I get when confrontation brews, and immediately shot back a vague, pleasant reply in order to nip matters in the bud. I was making two errors, Maria told me. Being reactive by responding immediately, and ignoring boundaries I should have set for myself; embarrassingly, Maria's suggestion of turning my phone off during family time was a completely novel concept. She shows me a diagram of concentric circles. The inner circle is the core, which is sacred and contains only those absolutely closest to you, in my case my husband, daughter, parents and brother.

All the rest come with terms and conditions. A distant work acquaintance barely makes it on the diagram. In this light, the ridiculousness of allowing them to disturb my peace of mind is abundantly clear. In coming weeks I find the diagram regularly pops into mind, a handy little reminder. Another technique is HeartMath breathing, a simple deep breathing routine, which I now do almost every day. I always plan to meditate but am relieved when Maria acknowledges the impracticality for many of finding 20 minutes a day to fit it in. HeartMath breathing takes two-three minutes and can be done anywhere, eyes open. Essentially it's a form of mindfulness. Taking time out for yourself is crucial, something as a self-employed mother of a toddler I find can be tricky. Maria advises establishing a place of calm within your home, where you can withdraw regularly for at least five minutes.

We try a form of tapping, more formally known as positive Emotional Freedom Technique, a type of psychological acupressure. I was highly sceptical, but found it almost like meditation; it forces you out of a stressed mindset, acting almost like an emotional punctuation.

There's a practicality to Maria's method that is truly effective. By the end of the course I felt hugely changed. More positive, less likely to be bothered by free-floating anxiety or waste time having arguments in my head. I catch myself in behavioural bad habits; running off a million miles in my mind, reacting in the moment.

"To the best of my ability I want to give people resources so they can empower themselves," Maria says of her method. "Once they get to me they already have an awareness of what's going on, some idea of what caused it. So it's let's move forward, 'I know exactly why I'm stuck'. We don't need to relive trauma in order to go forward. This is the realisation that you're not a victim anymore, you're empowered."

I would describe it as mind maintenance. We obsess over our diets and fitness regimes, but largely neglect the health of our minds unless things reach a crisis. I'm not religious, but I believe in the tribe. Having your people, who support you through daily life. Whether that is friends, family and colleagues, or the less obvious types, professional or otherwise. Mine include my hairdresser, who has a particularly peaceful manner. My trainer in the gym who keeps me motivated. My childminder who treats my daughter like her own and makes us dinner unasked. Our cleaner and I have regular sympathetic chats when either of us feels overwhelmed.

Take support where you can get it, and look after all aspects of yourself, mind, body and heart, I say. Needless to say, I have adopted Maria into this tribe.

www.confidencebuilding.ie. One-to-one session fee €100, up to 1 hour 15 minutes. Maria's next Confidence & Assertiveness workshop for women takes place on Saturday January 30th 2016 in Emmaus Retreat Centre. From 10:30am to 4:30pm; €65 p/p

IF YOU DO ONE THING THIS WEEK

JOIN JULIE



TRADFEST Temple Bar is Dublin's premier celebration of Irish trad and folk music and runs from Wednesday 27 to Sunday 31 January, and highlights include Martin Hayes, Dervish and

Lunasa, Julie Fowles is a multi-award winning Gaelic singer who will perform on Thursday January 28 in St. Patrick's Cathedral, 8.30pm. www.templebartrad.com

TALK TURNER

SUNDAY Talk: 'JMW Turner, master of 19th century British painting' with Dr Philip MacEvansoneya, Trinity College, today at the National Gallery of Ireland, Merrion Square West, at 3pm. Free public lecture.



OBSERVE OLWEN



OLWEN Fouéré returns to Project Arts Centre, Temple Bar, with a new exploration of the evocative Beckett text, *Lesser*, from Tuesday January 26 to Saturday January 30, 8pm. Fouéré, a

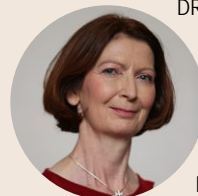
beguiling physical presence with a phenomenal vocal technique, invites us to reflect on the refractions of Beckett's words. www.projectartscentre.ie

TWIRL TO TRAD

THE Ark in Temple Bar will celebrate TradFest with a jam-packed programme of concerts, workshops and sessions for all the family, running from Thursday 28 January to Sunday 31. The TradFest Family Hub will have Children's Open Trad Sessions on Saturday 30 and Sunday 31, at 12pm and 2.30pm. www.ark.ie



SING AT SIXTIETH



DR Ite O'Donovan has long been to the forefront of choral music in Ireland, working with the Palestrina Choir at St. Mary's Pro-Cathedral, Piccolo Lasso, and The Lassus Scholars. A special

birthday concert to celebrate her 60th birthday will take place in the National Concert Hall, on Wednesday January 27, 8pm. The main work will be Mozart's Requiem K626. www.nch.ie