

## Anxiety - The Nature of the Beast - a Personal Account

Written by Alex

Friday, 24 April 2009 00:38 - Last Updated Friday, 02 August 2013 13:58

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(This article is complementary material for all tutorials)

Q –What do the following all have in common?

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Anxiety

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Antarctica

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Deep sea diving

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The Sahara desert

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“Stay awake for charity” competitions

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Concussion

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Schizophrenia

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2 pints of Moonshine

A –They can all trick consciousness into THINKING it knows what its doing when in fact it doesn't.

In a state of hypothermia, heatstroke, fever or anxiety, consciousness creates a false reality complete with false memories based on faulty perception. This is the problem with anxiety –when you've got it, you're unaware of the huge effect it's having on your cognition.

Because I've studied this stuff a lot I knew a lot technically about anxiety before I really understood it, in the same way you can read about white water canoeing or sex and not really understand it until you've actually got in the canoe and done the business. You need the experience in order to recognise it, and I first got there by analogy, in experiencing some things very similar. In the late 70s I was involved with some experiments studying the effect on

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cognition of (1) extreme cold and (2) sleep deprivation. During both of these I did some very ridiculous things, despite being consciously convinced that I was reasonably 'on the case' all the time and having clear coherent memories of events that never took place.

The camera didn't lie –watching videos of yourself trying to rip your own clothes off in a freezer or casually peeing on the carpet after three days without sleep really rubs in the 'know yourself' dilemma –we never really can!- but I did learn from this sort of experience that I am capable of being fooled by my own consciousness so completely that the false world my perception creates is absolutely convincing as reality. I even created false memories within it and false logic which accepted things that didn't make sense. In the sleep deprivation experiment, I clearly 'remembered' going to the bathroom (and had responded to an onlooker's laughter and question, 'What the bloody hell are you doing?' with: 'I'm in the bathroom you idiot, what do you think I'm doing?') In the extreme cold situation I had quite logically explained that I had to get my kit off because it had suddenly become very hot in there. Clearly my senses and perception were not representing reality, and I had no idea there was a problem.

Once I knew how convincing this illusion could be, I explored it further with hallucinogenics. And I started to 'recognize' anxiety as being a drug that has similar effects, affecting my cognition in exactly this same, 'undetectable from the inside' kind of way.

Anxiety is like heatstroke, or hypothermia, or Co2 poisoning, or the diver's 'bends'. You THINK you are thinking clearly and experiencing 'normal' reality and making sensible decisions in context and are unable to see that you're really going round in circles, standing still staring at a mirage or lying down to sleep in the snow. Your judgement is offline, but thinks it isn't.

Your mind cannot show you a true perception of reality when it is filled with anxiety any more than it can when it is filled with LSD. It doesn't have the right chemical tools to perceive things properly. It's an odd experience to think that our perception could be this fundamentally distorted right here and now and there's nothing immediate that we could do about it, but having got that far I started thinking of anxiety as a really strong drug that I was getting off, or a serious illness that I was recovering from. I could keep in mind the idea that my mind would continue to be under its influence until it was right out of my system and I was fully recovered, and I couldn't trust my cognition until it was.

Trying to address problems in anxiety is like trying to think things through when you have heatstroke or concussion or have taken huge amounts of acid. Even the things you perceive as

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the 'problems' may not be valid -they could just be a side effect of the drug! The refusal of the anxious person to accept that they are not seeing things clearly IS anxiety, because considering this possibility is scary. It's a lot less scary when we face it as the temporary thing it can be, once we resolve to get rid of it.

Avoiding the reality is as unconscious as the insistence of a drunk that he is totally sober -in that space we are totally convinced that we ARE totally sober, and are just as difficult to convince. In reality we are a danger to ourselves and others when under the influence of either on a chronic basis.

The way anxiety does give way to clarity is also like coming off a drug. With ordinary health problems we are used to either slow or sudden changes; the rapid recovery or the slow healing, the 'sudden decline', the 'gradual improvement', that I can write on medical charts as general descriptive cliches. Anxiety is tidal -it comes and goes in waves of varying intensity and timing, at first apparently at random, then noticeably correlating with events (that you then learn to recognise as 'triggers'). Shortly after this point I would explain the experience as 'becoming aware' -I became aware that the brain &quot;only hears one voice&quot;, I'll explain:

The brain hears the voice that we allow it to hear. Who or what is the source is irrelevant to it; biology expects us to be highly intelligent beings, so also assumes that whatever we are surrounded by and what we pay most attention to has a place of importance in our lives. Every thought that we think in words, it not only listens to but takes seriously; assuming we're the expert and trying to mold the mind to our apparent expectations. It needs this input to continue making sense of the world, of course. This is when I sussed out the real fine-tuner of input control is what we are 'saying to' our own brain. When we read or speak or think in words, we listen to them too.

So all I had to do was make sure most of what my eyes saw and my ears heard was aligned with what I wanted to be -free from anxiety. All I had to do was watch examples of people who were free and copy them. And now I was free enough of anxiety to be able to recognize them, it got much easier from there. But I had to get this far alone because I couldn't recognize whom to trust before that -my own anxiety and paranoia made me 'take things the wrong way' and think people were taking the piss or being sarcastic, and in reality they weren't, and that's how misunderstanding happens -perception of what's really going on isn't clear.

Snapback is the last hurdle. I think I brought on snapback because I tried to do too much too

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soon. I thought well I'm calm, I feel together, I'll try to assess my problems now -no mistake there; it was when I got caught up in worrying about not knowing what to do because they didn't seem any different and I didn't seem any more aware, that I erred. Instead of shrugging and saying, &quot;Well, I must still be under the influence&quot;;, and trusting biology to know what it was doing and being patient, I doubted it, and I slipped into the idea of &quot;What if it never changes despite all this?&quot;; -and up came the anxiety levels again and set me back a couple of months wasting time feeling guilty instead of getting on with improving.

At some indefinable point, 'bad' things started not mattering. I crashed a second time there, because I worried that some things really should matter and maybe I'd end up fooling myself that there were 'no problems' because I'd stopped caring about anything. I later learned that things all slot back into place as the new perspective kicks in, with the realisation that we weight everything with meaning and only understand what's really going on what we are able to tell where relevant meaning lies; when we can see clearly what's going on. Anxiety exacerbates every kind of pain to an enormous extent; consequently it makes problems look and feel way more serious and traumatic than they are in reality. We have to get off it ASAP if we're even going to see what the problems ARE.

What we are doing on the forums here, and it's great, is learning when we get misunderstood and when we misunderstand. We've actually got the patience and wisdom to explore it and learn a bit more about how to avoid it.

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