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Emotional Processing and Prevention of Panic

When I wrote the first edition of this book, I knew there was something missing in terms of understanding what sets off the first panic attack. Now that I have been asked to produce a new edition, I have the opportunity to bring things up to date by explaining the role of emotional processing in panic.

The dam theory

From the last two chapters, we can see that stress, often undetected by the person and occurring months before the first panic, can build up to a level where a panic attack is easily triggered. In explaining this to patients during psychological therapy, I compare it to water building up behind a dam. The water rises bit by bit over the months, and the pressure mounts all the time. At a certain point, the pressure becomes too much, and the dam suddenly gives way. Huge columns of water burst through the fractured dam, causing devastation to the land beyond. Panic is like this: sudden and devastating. Unknown to the sufferer, the pressure has been building up for weeks and months. The panic attack appears to be sudden, but it really is not. What makes me uneasy about this dramatic analogy, however, is that it suggests the sufferer, like the dam, is totally destroyed, which is incorrect. The person *can* recover.

Now the question is, why didn't the person realize the pressure was mounting? Why didn't they realize they were under stress, or notice the warning signs in their body: higher levels of arousal, poorer sleep, feeling anxious, poorer concentration? If these signs are read properly, they can offer the possibility of preventing a panic.

The problem with the dam theory is that many people experience stressful events during their lives, such as the death of someone close to them, redundancy and illness. If, as I have claimed in the previous two chapters, stress can set off panic attacks, why doesn't everybody who experiences stressful life events also experience panic attacks?

I was first put on the track to answering this by panic sufferers themselves. I was carrying out a series of research interviews with panic sufferers, as well as treating many patients, when I began to notice there was something about the way they described handling their emotions that did not sound quite right. One lady who was interviewed said:

'I feel butterflies in my tummy and feel I want to cry. Then I suppress my feelings. I take a great, big breath, hold it in, tense myself, or put my mind onto something else – take the dog out for a walk, do the housework. I say, "Don't be so b- stupid; pull yourself together.'"

Another man said:

'I allow myself to feel something in myself like sadness, crying. I go so far down. It's bubbling in my eyes, and I try to stop it and shake off what I am thinking. I don't like starting because I get really hysterical. The last time I did, then I ended up punching a wall.'

In both cases, these panic sufferers were highly uncomfortable with feelings of sadness, almost regarding them as abnormal or wrong.

I tried to categorize the different emotional problems described by patients. They seemed to include the following:

- Trying to suppress or bottle up any emotional feelings.
- Keeping quiet about feelings or not sharing them with others.
- Not expressing feelings in words or actions.
- Concentrating on the bodily sensations that made up an emotion rather than the emotion itself. For instance, noticing clenched teeth, hot face, sweating, trembling and arousal rather than the emotional meaning, which in this case is anger.
- Missing connections between events and emotions. An example of this is feeling rejected when a friend ignores you, but failing to connect the rejected feelings with the friend's behaviour.

Could it be that these problems in emotional processing relate to panic? Might it be that, faced with difficult or stressful life events, the

person who cries or rants, or talks openly to friends or relatives about them, deals with them in such a way that the complex emotions are properly processed and calmed? In this way, pressure may not build up to the level where the dam breaks. But what about the person who experiences a great loss or a painful event in their life, but keeps it to themselves, not sharing or talking about it, or expressing it in tears or anger? This, I think, is when the water starts rising and rising behind the dam.

At this stage, these were only observations and speculations. I wanted to test the theory out more thoroughly. I searched for ways of assessing emotional dimensions, and I eventually constructed a questionnaire to measure the most important aspects of emotional processing. I then asked fifty panic-disorder sufferers and 120 non-patient volunteers (who did not have panic attacks) to fill in and return the questionnaires.

The findings were a lot clearer than I had expected. Panic sufferers controlled their emotions to a far greater degree than the non-patient volunteers. It was not just that they were controlling anxious, fearful or worried feelings, which might seem logical for panic sufferers, but they were also highly over-controlling anger and sadness. Compared with the non-patient volunteers, they also had more problems labelling feelings and linking them to the events that caused them. They were much more likely to agree with the following statements:

- I bottle up my emotions.
- I suppress my feelings.
- I keep quiet about my feelings.
- I find it hard to label my emotions.

If panic sufferers are not processing difficult emotional events properly, this opens up possibilities for helping them. By learning better emotional-processing strategies, it might be possible to stop panic ever starting, or if it has begun, to assist recovery.*

*One exception to the dam theory is panic set off by drug taking (8 per cent of first panic attacks). There may have been pressure building up as well as taking the drug, but in some cases, the drug itself is sufficient to account for the first panic attack.

Toning up our emotional processing

Emotional processing is a bit like our immune system. It needs to be in good working order to protect us from the strains and stresses of life. We keep our immune system in shape with a good diet and proper sleep and relaxation – but how do we ensure our ‘emotional immune system’ is working properly?

ATTITUDE

First, it is important to have the right attitude to emotions. This may seem a bit rich coming from an Englishman, renowned as we are for our ‘stiff upper lip’! In our upbringing, we usually pick up unspoken attitudes about emotion: whether it is right to have feelings, how to express them, what is ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’. These attitudes or ‘rules’ may come from our culture, the community we were brought up in, or our own family, with its individual set of ‘rules’ about emotion. I was first made aware of this when I married my wife. In my family, it was normal to tell others what we were doing, even for quite small things like leaving a room. In my wife’s family, it was normal for everyone to ‘do their own thing’ and not inform others. Consequently, I would get upset when she left the room without explanation, and she would be annoyed by me supplying unnecessary information about my whereabouts. We solved it fairly easily, understanding that this was the result of two different sets of family ‘rules’.

In some families, the unspoken rules say that emotions should be kept firmly in check; that it is weak or wrong to show emotions. In other families, the rule is that emotions are OK but there is something unhealthy about having negative feelings. Some families do not acknowledge or discuss feelings at all. Whatever your background was – and there are many different ‘rules’ – we all have unspoken attitudes about emotions.

So what is a healthy attitude?

- Having feelings and emotions is normal and healthy.
- Having both positive and negative emotions is normal and healthy. At the end of a course of psychological therapy, one patient said to me:

‘Before, I wanted everything to be perfect – nearly every day, I was wanting to stay on this happy level all the time. I didn’t

want to appear out of control to anyone else – angry, unhappy. I’m not going to let this bother me – this “nothing bothers me” exterior. Now I’ve come to the regrettable conclusion that ups and downs are normal.’

She recovered well, and some months later she sent me a postcard of a jet plane, saying she had finally been able to fly without panicking – her ultimate goal for treatment.

- Experiencing emotions is not usually a matter of conscious control. Rational thinking can be controlled and steered in certain directions, but emotions do not work in the same way and cannot be expected to ‘obey’ us.
- Emotions are part of our humanity. If only positive feelings existed, we could not respond appropriately to the ups and downs of life. We would have a fixed grin and be happy whether we won the lottery or our best friend died. The existence of positive feelings requires the possibility of negative feelings too.
- Emotions cannot harm us. They are part of a normal, healthy body.
- Emotions are not primitive or inferior to logic or reason. The renowned psychologist Richard S. Lazarus puts it like this: ‘We have one mind, and it contains both thoughts and feelings. Passion and reason combine in our mind. There is nothing more human than our reason *and* emotion.’²⁴ What is needed is the right balance between the two.
- Having emotions is not the same as acting on them. *Feeling* anger is not the same as *taking action*, for instance, shouting at, blaming or hitting someone else. There are some situations when action is right and others when it is not. It is not particularly harmful to control our actions, but it is harmful to control the feeling state.

ALLOWING EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE TO HAPPEN

Generally, it is best not to suppress or control feelings too much, or to switch off or detach oneself from feelings. However, it is understandable that those with persistent, unpleasant panicky feelings would wish to keep their feelings under control. Unfortunately, the habit runs deep, and you can end up trying to control any feeling that stirs, even a positive one. The result is that

your whole emotional life gets clogged up. Unfortunately for panic sufferers, any feeling can signify danger. It is as if the whole world is interpreted as dangerous. So for them, something more is necessary: they have to learn not to interpret every sensation, every stirring, every feeling, every emotion as threatening. Feelings may not be pleasant, but they are safe enough.

PEARLS OF WISDOM

Each emotion contains important information; it is a 'pearl of wisdom'. This sounds quite wrong, especially for persistent feelings of panic. In general, our emotions contain information about the world around us, our relationship with others and our own inner state. Eugene Gendlin, Professor of Psychology at the University of Chicago, has spent much of his career trying to understand how to access the information contained in emotions. He has developed an approach called 'emotional focusing', which helps individuals 'listen to their emotions'.²⁵ Other psychologists, such as L. Greenberg,²⁶ have produced similar approaches. Here, I will present my version of what needs to be done. It is called 'The Three Ls': Looking, Labelling and Linking. To make the most of the pearls of wisdom contained in your emotions, here are some simple steps:

Step 1: Looking at your feelings and emotions

The first step is trying to look at your feelings and emotions. You could ask yourself, 'How do I feel right now?' or 'How is life going for me?' What bodily sensations or feelings are you aware of? Do not be in a hurry to make any judgments, or to understand the feelings. Just stick with them and focus on them. It is rather like a surveyor conducting a survey on a house, except that you are an emotional surveyor. The surveyor checks the house over, noting particular key points, but they are not emotionally involved with the house. They stand back and try to see it objectively. So for step 1, you just observe the feelings, noting their dimensions, how severe they are, where they are located in the body, how big they are and what their features are. This should be done without getting involved in the emotion, and is what I call 'Looking'.

Step 2: Labelling your emotions

The second step is to begin to put a label on the emotion. Is it anger, or frustration about not being able to speak, or frustration that my brother always cuts me short when I try to say something important? Each label

is tested alongside the feeling to see how well it fits. As you take the label back to the feeling, you are trying to make it more and more accurate. Gendlin points out that simply being able to label feelings correctly can be quite releasing in its own right. This is 'Labelling'.

Step 3: Linking emotions with causes

The third step naturally follows on from correct labelling. Once a feeling is correctly labelled, it should be possible to link it with the event that has caused it. The event may be someone continually criticizing you, undermining you or controlling you, or it could be a realization of how unhappy you are with your job. The emotional feeling provides the clue about the cause. This is 'Linking'.

For panic sufferers, it may be better to start with emotions other than fear or panic, because it is hard to be objective about something so overwhelming. Perhaps you could begin by concentrating on situations that make you angry or sad. The basic idea is impartial looking, labelling and linking.

A PROBLEM SHARED IS A PROBLEM HALVED

Looking at emotions works for some but not for others. Another useful way to aid the processing of emotions is to talk to someone. Talking to a trusted friend, relative or counsellor can help tremendously, and it allows two things to happen. First, it enables you to get your feelings 'off your chest', and secondly, it helps you to see things in a different light. The other person might suggest thoughts or avenues that you have not considered.

RESOLVING ISSUES

Once you understand the source of emotional distress, it may be possible to resolve it. For instance, one lady I was seeing for panic-attack therapy realized she had always acted out the role of a subservient child with her father, and her recent bout of panic attacks was related to his attempts to dominate her life again. When she stood up to him, all hell seemed to break loose: he ranted and raved, but she stood her ground. As she learned to assert herself appropriately, she found a more empowering sense of identity, and the panics started to subside. Her father backed down too!

TO SLEEP, PERCHANCE TO DREAM

Emotional processing is in great part unconscious and natural. It all works pretty well when left to its own devices. For many years, people have known of the healing role of sleep. Edward Young (c. 1700) called it 'tired nature's sweet restorer, balmy sleep'. Freud suggested that sleep is not a passive activity but active in one way. In dreams, the person is unconsciously attempting to work out and resolve problems from the waking hours, like putting together pieces of a jigsaw that have been jumbled up. Not everyone accepts this idea, and it is difficult to prove, but I think it is likely that dreams are nature's way of processing difficult events in our lives.

WORDS, WORDS, WORDS

Panic can involve a treadmill of trying to understand or analyse what is happening. In a way, it can cause a person to *think* too much. Some Chinese philosophy suggests that a person's life can get out of balance by thinking too much, by being too cognitive, too analytical. It is important to spend time doing things that involve other parts of the brain, such as going to a concert, the ballet or an art gallery, or spending time in the countryside – preferably things not involving words.

A CHEERFUL HEART IS GOOD MEDICINE

It sounds rather obvious, but there is a solid body of research to show that doing pleasurable things, focusing on fun and humour, having good times, helps in the processing of negative events. Whether it works by distracting us from our plight, or by actively eroding negative thoughts, I don't know. I am not suggesting going around purposely laughing, which is a bit fake, and I am certainly not suggesting *trying* to be happy, or to keep telling yourself, 'I'm happy.' It is important to be honest about your emotions. The best way to approach this is to get involved in the activities that make you laugh or give you pleasure, to do happy things and let the emotions take care of themselves. I know this is hard when you are in a pit of despair, but it is a start.

All these suggestions can help us to deal with, understand and connect with the negative events that might be causing our distress, rather than hiding from, denying or suppressing them.

