

## Anxiety as the Felt Experience

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In human terms we are probably most familiar with anxiety by how it feels. It can be the discomfort in your gut. It can be the churn, the nausea, the butterflies, the tight chest, the dread, the fear, the guilt, the anger, etc.

It's interesting to note, however, that the *felt experience of anxiety*<sup>i</sup> is seen as a symptom of a mental illness. What is more, the illness theory does not actually explain how the felt-experience happens. There is nothing in the illness theory that explains the felt experience. We're supposed to just believe that the connection is there.

So, here's the thing. What if the felt experience is the starting point for understanding anxiety? Let's say that the *felt experience* is not a symptom. Instead, we can say that the felt experience *is* the anxiety. In other words, we deal with the felt experience rather than a theoretical illness.

We note the felt experience and ask, "How does that happen?" We don't need any theories when we ask the how-question. We can break the how-question down into a series of steps. We can understand our anxiety as an outcome from a process. In other words, there is a particular series of steps that leaves us feeling that way.

As a further point of interest, any felt experience isn't something that just appears in your body. If your felt experience has changed it's because the chemical structure of your body has changed.

### There's a chemical change

A chemical change in your body is not necessarily a chemical imbalance. There's nothing necessarily pathological about the chemical structure of your body changing. For

example, if your body goes into digestion mode, or healing mode, then the chemistry of your body will change to do the digesting or healing. The chemicals of your body will ebb and flow according to your challenges and needs.

### Example of a chemical change

Let's say that you're having a relaxing coffee in a café with a couple of friends in the mid-afternoon. Let's say that you glance down at your watch and you get a fright; your body chemistry changes; it changes how you feel.

You behave how you feel. You leap up from the table and quickly gather your stuff. As you're rushing off you explain to your friends that you didn't realise the time; and that the kids will be getting off the school bus in a few minutes; and that you have to be there to pick them up to take them home. You look a bit panicky as you say, "Bye!"

The glance at your watch had something to do with the chemical change in your body, i.e., the adrenaline release. There was the fright and the urgency in your manner. It wasn't just an arbitrary glance at a watch face that triggered the change in your body; it was the *realised threat* that got the adrenaline going.

If the word *threat* is a bit strong in the example above, then use the word *demand* instead. Any demand/threat will trigger a response in your autonomic nervous system. It was the *realised demand/threat* that did it. When we say "realised" we're talking about perception.

Mainly your body will remain in emergency mode up until the issue is resolved. Once the demand or threat has passed, or been resolved in some way, the emergency mode in your body will stop; and the chemical structure of your body will return to baseline. How you feel

will change.

For example, you get into your car; you start the engine; and you look at the dash-clock. On reassessment you realise (perceive) that you have plenty of time. Your adrenaline will return to baseline quickly, in good time; and if you have time to notice, you will feel different.

In our daily lives, all things being equal, the adrenaline comes and goes as is required. All things being equal, the normal ebbing and flowing of adrenaline in our body will not produce anxiety at all.

## How anxiety happens

When we talk about a chemical change, we can then describe how it happened. In the example above, the first point to notice is that the chemical change occurred to meet a demand/threat. There was the perceived urgency and there was the adrenaline release.

The chemical change is triggered. The chemical change was a response to what you believe is happening. The example above also demonstrates the ebbing and flowing of adrenaline. It comes and it goes as required. This is our body doing what it's told to do.

Most of the time, our mind and body interact in the background, subconsciously. A lot of the time our subconscious mind is dealing with the pre-programmed responses. Most of the time, our mind-body relationship works fine. Most of the time, we are not even aware of it happening.

Your felt experience changes when there is a shift or change in the chemical structure of your body. When you say that you feel something, that's right you are feeling *something*. You are feeling how it feels to have that chemical structure in your blood. As an example, get just enough alcohol into your body to see what I mean. When you feel a bit disinhibited that will be because that's how the alcohol feels.<sup>ii</sup>

From the felt experience of anxiety we can step back and ask, "*What do I need in my body to have this feeling?*" What you need is elevated

levels of adrenaline in your blood stream to have that feeling of anxiety.

*"How did the adrenaline get there?"* There was a *sympathetic response* in the *autonomic nervous system* (aka the emergency button).

*"Why was the emergency button activated?"* There was a recognised threat.

*"Where did the threat come from?"* It came from your reading (perception) of the triggering-event.

There is a series of steps and we are left feeling anxious. The process begins with an event; a threat is recognised; there is a whack on the emergency button (the sympathetic response in the autonomic nervous system); there is the release of adrenaline; and then there is the felt experience. We feel the adrenaline.

Now we can answer the question of what causes anxiety. It's the adrenaline. If the felt experience is the anxiety, then it is the adrenaline that mainly caused that felt experience.

There is one glaring apparent contradiction here. If the felt experience of anxiety is caused by elevated levels of adrenaline, then how do you explain excitement? The felt experience of excitement is also caused by elevated levels of adrenaline.

## Excitement

As an illustration, imagine that you're on your surfboard and that you're paddling out through the breakers. You battle your way to the back of the waves. That tingle of anticipation is the first sign of the adrenaline.

From behind the waves, you slowly edge toward the break and at the right moment you paddle like crazy. You stand up. Everything hinges on your ability to pull it off.

You steer the board down and along the face of the wave. As the wave develops it curls over you. You experience that rush. You're now travelling fast in a tube of water. You need to crouch on the board. Now the adrenaline is palpable. You can't believe your luck.

Finally, the wave dissolves and breaks down. The adrenaline is there for a short while. By the time you get out of the water and get to your towel, the adrenaline has all but subsided. You are left with a memory of the thrill.

So, the question is: how did you get to feel that excitement? Interestingly you don't have to say anything about surfing to answer the question.

In terms of the process, there is the event: there is a perceived challenge, demand or threat; then a whack on the emergency button; adrenaline is released and there is the felt experience. You don't need to know anything about surfing to understand excitement.

Some of us actually get on those crazy rides at places like Dream World. You take your seat on the Tower of Terror knowing full well that failure will mean your death. You would fully understand that people do actually get killed in these places. It's on the news. It's in the media. Yet you take the seat; you are cranked up to 119 metres; and then you are dropped.

You challenge the odds and you slam down on your emergency button as you plummet to the ground screaming. When the ride is over, by the time it takes you to climb out of the seat and make your way off the ride, the adrenaline will subside. The excitement will become a memory of the thrill.

In a change of scene just how exciting is it to nearly get flattened by a bus? There you are crossing the road. You look up and there's the 6-40 bus bearing down on you. You see it just in time. Instantly your body is flooded with adrenaline. You leap out of the way.

By the time you've landed on the footpath, dusted yourself off and looked around, the adrenaline would have subsided. You're left with a memory of the close call.

The point in these illustrations is that adrenaline doesn't linger for long. It disburses fairly quickly. Even if you were to be injected with a large dose of adrenaline the effect and the feeling would last for minutes<sup>iii</sup>. Adrenaline will not lurk in our bloodstream for an

extended period of time.

But hang on a second. Anxiety lurks and lingers for hours, days or even weeks, or longer. So, if adrenaline is quick to disperse then how can it be responsible for the felt experience that we label anxiety?

Anxiety and excitement, as different outcomes, each come out of different processes. The activation of the emergency button is a step in both processes.

In spite of the adrenaline in common, there are two important differences between the processes that produce excitement or anxiety. Firstly, with excitement there is usually an intention or an expectation for excitement. Secondly, and most importantly, excitement is something that happens during events that finish or conclude. The anxiety outcome, in contrast, is from ongoing triggering.

For the excitement experience the emergency button is disengaged at a closing point. For example, the demand is resolved. The ride is over. The race is run. The risk paid off. The challenge is achieved. Under such resolvable conditions the chemical structures of your body will quickly return to baseline. Under the ideal conditions your adrenaline ebbs and flows; it comes and goes as is required. By nature, it is quick in and quick out.

For anxiety the threat is not resolved. The emergency button is repeatedly activated to keep the adrenaline levels elevated. How does that happen? You'd want to know, wouldn't you?

### **It's the head-chatter**

What's your head-chatter about? What stories do you have going around in your head? What particular scenarios and theories do you play-out in your mind?

It's important to understand that the head-chatter's content is different for everyone. At the same time, the process for producing anxiety is the same for everyone; and the head-chatter is very much part of that process.

The content of the head-chatter is not the

issue here. This is because the head-chatter is continuously banging away on your emergency button regardless of the content.

We'll go back to the bus scenario to develop the illustration. On face value the whole event involves one good whack on the emergency button. Let's estimate that a single whack is a sufficient amount of adrenaline to launch you from in front of the bus to the footpath.

There you are on the footpath. The bus's exhaust fumes are still in your nostrils. The head-chatter fires up; you're not going to take it lying down. *'How dare he where did he get his licence out of a Wheaties packet!'* You continue as you walk off down the footpath. *'He tried to kill me I'm going to call the cops he did it on purpose what's the bus company's number he won't get away with it if I can help it I'm going to phone them up I'll have him sacked maybe he's just blind that makes it worse...'*

The trigger activates the emergency button and then the head-chatter keeps it going. Head-chatter that continues *in this way* will continuously activate your emergency button. The head-chatter that continues in this way will keep your adrenaline level elevated.

To have anxiety you need to keep the levels of adrenaline elevated. The head-chatter, regardless of its content, does that for you. The head-chatter is the relentless expression of the unresolved threat or threats.

Suppose another illustration. There you are brushing your teeth in the morning, before you head out into the world. As you brush, your mind wanders. Next thing you know you feel a bit ill. Your body chemistry has changed. Your gut is feeling somewhat nauseous. There's an uncomfortable warmth or tingle in your solar plexus (the area of your guts just under your diaphragm). You then notice the discomfort that you call anxiety.

A lot of the time when we have those moments, like in the teeth brushing scenario, we just ignore it and launch ourselves into the day regardless. All the same, the scenario still represents an adrenaline releasing event. So,

what is the threat?

There is adrenaline, so what is the threat? Whatever the threat, whilst brushing your teeth, it is not an actual threat. In other words, there was nothing to conquer, endure or escape from there in your bathroom. Here's the thing; your emergency button will be activated by actual or apparent threats.

In the teeth brushing scenario you may not have noticed the head-chatter. At the very least you may not have given much thought to the head-chatter. The head-chatter might have been something that you dismissed as nonsense.

Let's say that whilst brushing your teeth a memory had popped into your head about the social event the night before. As you wander in your mind you latch on to the idea, *'God I made a fool of myself.'* Here is the initial hit on the emergency button and the initial adrenaline release.

The head-chatter can then develop from there. *'Why do I do that they must think that I'm an idiot there must be something wrong with me I should keep away from those situations you'd think that I'd know better by now but I just keep on falling into the same trap...'*

Your head-chatter is the unrelenting expression of the apparent threat. The threat is expressed thematically, like a story, in the head-chatter. Your body does not check to see if the adrenaline is necessary or not. Your body responds and does its job. Whilst the head-chatter continues the adrenaline production continues and you end up feeling ill or anxious.

## Triggers

Your adrenaline is triggered. In the teeth brushing scenario, objectively speaking there is no reason for the adrenaline. There is nothing about the bathroom or teeth-brushing that requires adrenaline as a response. Adrenaline is not part of the solution. Yet there it is.

The trigger for the teeth brushing scenario is contained in a memory of an event from the night before. Memories are not a threat; but

that memory did contain representations of the threat. In this example, at this stage, we could suppose that the head-chatter expresses the threat of *shame* (see *Threat Thesaurus*, Appendix A).

As a further example, you glance across your workplace office space and you see two colleagues having an earnest discussion. In that instance your body chemistry changes. You may or may not notice the butterflies in your gut. You may or you may not notice the head-chatter that begins, '*Oh god what are they up to now I bet it's not good for me...*' etc. Then for the rest of the day you're stuck with a queasy feeling in your gut as you mull it over. In this example, the head-chatter could be an expression of *abuse* (persecution) as the threat (see *Threat Thesaurus*, Appendix A).

Take another example. A man walks into the bedroom and there's his wife sitting on the side of their bed giggling into her mobile phone. The chemistry of his body instantly changes. He is flooded with adrenaline. He is threatened by what he sees (perceives) as *abandonment* (see *Threat Thesaurus*, Appendix A). He spins on his heels, stomps out of the room slamming the door behind him. His head-chatter starts, '*You know there needs to be a rule in this house no mobile phones after six thirty...*' In this example he feels the adrenaline as outrage and anger that seems to last for weeks as he continues to churn on it.

Or there you are on a country road where the speed limit is 80kph. There are no overtaking opportunities and you are fourth in line behind a small bus doing 60kph. The head-chatter fires up '*Come on what's the matter with you surely you can get that thing to go faster you're a power-tripping time waster I've better things to do...*' The chemistry of your body changes and your adrenaline levels increase as the head-chatter develops. Here we are illustrating the threat of *deprivation* (see *Threat Thesaurus*, Appendix A).

In the bathroom, office, bedroom, country road scenarios, quite likely the trigger is not noticed as a trigger. This could be true for any head-chatter on any issue.

The head-chatter is most likely subconscious at least initially; we find ourselves doing it. What is more the head-chatter is not noticed as an expression of a threat. What is noticed is the bad feeling. The felt experience is noticed.

Different examples are provided to get away from the idea that anxiety comes out of the specific circumstances. You need to pull away from the alluring content of your head-chatter.

This is not a discussion about watches, surfing, theme-park rides, buses, tooth brushing, workplace politics, and the use of mobile phones or overtaking opportunities. The point is that the threat is triggered by an endless array of content. We can easily get bogged down in the content. You can bypass the content to change the way you feel.

For sure the head-chatter's content contains the trigger. The trigger is a symbolic representation of the threat. In other words, the trigger resembles the threat in some way. There is an apparent threat. Most importantly the threat is in the eye of the beholder.

To illustrate the point, it is fair to say that a trigger can be anything; literally anything. Okay, what about the cupboard doors in my office? Yes, even the cupboard doors could be a trigger for someone for their particular threat.

Of course, cupboard doors in a psychologist's office could symbolically represent a threat of one sort or another. It could be the threat of *abuse*. The head-chatter could be, '*Whose he got in there spying on me?*' Or the doors could represent the threat of *shame*. The head-chatter might be, '*Is there someone in there listening to what I say what if I get exposed as a nutcase.*'

Just to be clear here, when we talk about "symbolic resemblance" we're talking about your reading of the object or event. Symbolic meaning in this context is the meaning that you project onto an object or event because of what it means to you. In other words, you already subscribe to beliefs about that particular threat and you are on the lookout for it. As a consequence, you find it.

As in the example, you see the cupboard doors and you feel the shame; or you see the cupboard doors and you feel the persecution. We see the threats that we're looking for. In psychology this is known as selective attention.

Our attention is drawn selectively toward any threat that is actual or apparent. We will always be prone to taking-on the elements of truth. In the case of my cupboard doors, of course there could be someone hiding in the cupboard; it's not at all probable but it is possible. In this example the element of truth is the possibility.

We are limited in our capacity to consciously attend to all the incoming information. Our physical senses are bombarded with input. To manage the world around us we selectively attend to what is important to us. You could say that these are our values. The down side is that we tend to ignore or not even notice a lot of otherwise important information. An element of truth is just the elephant's left kneecap.<sup>iv</sup>

Psychologically speaking, we read the environment, and the events in our minds, for meaning. Humans are more than capable of reading meaning into objects or events. For example, there are many people who can see the face of Jesus on a slice of burnt toast.<sup>v</sup>

Symbolic meaning is everywhere. We are constantly reading the events, in the environment or in our mind, for meaning. We are particularly looking out for our threats.

Converse to our values are our threats. We all have our own set of values, thus we all have our own set of threats; our list of favourites. We focus our attention selectively. We find the threats that we're looking for. This human behaviour is so close to us that we don't even notice that we do it.

Our response to a trigger is automatic. We pretty well have no control over these conditioned responses. In other words, these are learned responses. We end up with these well-worn groves in our personalities as a result of our learning. We end up with a hair-trigger on certain cues; this is our conditioning,

if you like to think of that way.

We are not born with these head-chatter threats. We accumulate our knowledge of the world through learning or modelling. We mainly learn to survive within the environment in which we grow up. Mainly we're talking about our family of origin, peers and teachers. At the same time, we each had our own unique place in our family of origin. By the time we turn 20 our personality is the sum-total of our adaptations to life.

Even within families you will find different personalities. Of course, who we end up as is shaped by the people who bring us up. All the same, we each live in our own world with our own unique experiences. Even something as simple as sibling order has an influence upon who-you-are as a person in the end. You end up as yourself, of course, so there are aspects of your personality that are distinctly you, like your own set of threats.

Whatever triggers you may not trigger the person next to you. For example, one person sees my cupboard doors and experiences shame; another might experience abuse; and another will have no reaction at all. So, it's not the cupboard doors that we need to talk about. It doesn't matter what the issue is in your head-chatter. What we do need to talk about is what needs to happen next, once the triggering has happened.

Being triggered is not remarkable. Triggers are a force-of-nature. We have no control over the occurrence of triggers. You will get limited satisfaction from trying to eliminate triggers in your life. So, once you find yourself triggered, it's what happens next that becomes the talking point.

## Change how you feel

What you don't need here are garden paths and blind allies. There is a lot of advice out there that is based on one theory or another. We don't need theories here. To begin with the adrenaline is not a theory. How you feel is not a theory.

In terms of experiencing anxiety, how you feel

at any point in time comes down to two fundamentally important human functions. Firstly, there is your *focus of attention*. Second is your relationship with your *autonomic nervous system*. Our focus of attention as a function of our mind; and our autonomic nervous system as a function of our body. This is an inextricable mind-body connection.

### Focus of attention

We could look at anyone of the vignette examples from above to illustrate focus of attention. All the examples illustrate the *initial triggering* of the adrenaline; then they each illustrate the *continued triggering* of the adrenaline. The continuing adrenaline is to do with how and where you focus your attention.

It's the continued triggering that we need to know about. It's the continued use of the emergency button that is the issue here. This has everything to do with your focus of attention.

Our focus of attention is taken to elsewhere by the head-chatter. We get sucked into the head-chatter. It's like getting drawn into a honey trap. So, what is the bait? To be a trap there is bait. What gets our attention and holds it?

Our head-chatter holds our attention in two ways. Firstly, there is the outrage for being triggered in the first place. Secondly, there is the deceptive element of truth.

There is the outrage and the element of truth. These are strong attractions. Our attention is captured and held. We become too easily enmeshed in the content of the head-chatter as a result. Our attention is then riveted on the threat without a resolution in sight. This is the way of stress, anxiety and depression.

From the triggering-event, when you begin to feel ill and nervous, that's the time to call on your skilful mind. You do not need theories. You need to bring your focus of attention back to real-time.

For example, place yourself there in anyone of the vignette-examples. Would you notice your shift in attention? You were doing one thing, like brushing your teeth then you found

yourself elsewhere in your mind. Do you notice that your mind does that?

You can of course bring your attention back to real-time. You might even use your breath to help do that. Your breath is always in real-time, in the present. You can choose to focus your attention elsewhere or you can focus your attention in the present moment. To focus on your breath is to bring your mind's attention back to real-time.

Your skilful mind does the noticing and focusing. This is a skill that can be practised. For example, typical Mindfulness meditations<sup>vi</sup> are an opportunity for this practise.

Mindfulness meditations are typically about your readiness to return your attention back to real-time. Your attention leaving for elsewhere is not the issue. The issue is noticing the shift and returning to real-time.

It's not the meditation that makes the difference in your life. It will be your readiness to develop the skills that will make the difference. The skill here is the noticing and focusing. In other words, you notice that your attention has left for elsewhere and then you bring your attention back to your physical presence. Your physical presence is real-time.

The threat only exists in real-time in your head-chatter. Therefore, the threat is only threatening whilst you have your attention focused in the head-chatter. Anything else in the present moment, other than the head-chatter, is worthy of your attention.

### Autonomic nervous system

To change how you feel you need the adrenaline to return to baseline levels as soon as possible. The other emergency chemical of your body, such as cortisol<sup>vii</sup>, will follow the adrenaline and will also resolve back to the baseline soon enough.

Given half a change your adrenaline will return to baseline quickly. It will happen in good time if you don't get in the way. In other words, we need to be clued-in with some inside information on the working of our autonomic nervous system. We need to get out of the

way, so to speak, to allow our autonomic nervous system to do its job.

There are two main functions of our autonomic nervous system. There is the *emergency button* (the sympathetic response) and there is the *relaxation-switch* (the parasympathetic response).

An emergency button is for quick access. It needs to be big and red and accessible. It's a hair trigger and it activates with just a touch, metaphorically speaking. Our relaxation switch on the other hand is like one of those switches that you find in stairwells. These are the types of switches that just pop back out to turn off. The slightest provocation will cause your relaxation switch to turn off.

Here are three inescapable facts to do with your autonomic nervous system.

Firstly, the emergency button and the relaxation switch cannot be on at the same time. In technical terms they are *antagonistic functions*.

Secondly, the emergency button will override the relaxation switch every time. Emergencies have priority over relaxation. These rules apply every day all the time, night and day. If the emergency button is activated then the relaxation switch will just pop out and turn off.

The third inescapable fact is that the emergency button is activated by the apparent threat, the perceived threat, the symbolic resemblance of the threat, and of course it will be activated by actual threats as well. A threat that is either apparent or actual is a threat as far as your emergency button is concerned.

Whatever you do to manage your anxiety must at least be consistent with the three inescapable facts for it to be effective. For example, don't get confused about the role of your relaxation switch.

The relaxation switch is not for turning off the emergency button. The emergency button overrides the relaxation switch. You cannot sleep whilst your bed is burning. If you want access to your relaxation switch then you need to be off the emergency button for starters.

The only real way to be off the emergency button is to resolve the threat. If your bed is on fire then you need to put it out in order to get some sleep.

### The basics

To change how you feel there are two fundamental factors that need to be in place regardless of what else you do.

Firstly, you need the willingness and capacity to bring your attention back to the present once it has wandered off to elsewhere.

Secondly all your efforts to change how you feel need to happen in real-time. In other words, whatever it is that you do to change how you feel is done in real-time, not in therapy. If therapy is going to do anything for you then it will at least give you the skills to have and use in real-time.

Also read the two articles *Three-Minute Breathing Meditation: Noticing & Focusing* and *The Head-Chatter Honey Trap*.

### Recovery rate

If the objective is to change how you feel, how long does it take to happen? How much time do you think you need? What if you get quicker at it as you practise the skills? We can call this time needed the *recovery-rate*.

Commonly, recovery-rate is a measure of fitness. For physical fitness it's the time it takes for your heart rate to return to the baseline after a period of exertion. We can talk about mental fitness. So, recovery rate is the time it takes for you to get off the emergency button to allow your adrenaline to return to baseline.

We are only able to manage the adrenaline production once the adrenaline is produced. So, to consider the time it takes to get the adrenaline back to baseline makes sense.

We have no control over the triggers. Likewise, we have no control over the initial jump onto the emergency button. What we do have control over is our unnecessary whacking on the emergency button. In other words, we need time to resolve the threat and to get off



the emergency button. How much time do you need?

Think of recovery rate as relative. For example, a recovery rate of a week is better than no recovery rate at all. With no recovery rate all threats are left unresolved; the head-chatter just carries on having its way with your body.

A recovery rate of a day is better than a recovery rate of a week; a recovery rate of hours is better than a day; minutes are better than hours and seconds are better than minutes. With practise it is possible to get your recovery rate down to minutes or seconds. We're talking about the time it takes to be off the emergency button; to change how you feel.

If you have a recovery rate at all, of a week, or a day, or hours, or seconds, then you're on the job. This means that you are learning from your head-chatter; and that you are less and less bogged down in the content. You'll get there if you persist.

The hold up with recovery-rate, of course, comes down to the head-chatter honey trap. To get out of the head-chatter we need to overcome two obstacles. Firstly, we need to get past our natural resentment for being triggered in the first place. Secondly, we need the tools in place ready to go for the real-time events.

## Learning from the head-chatter

Once triggered the head-chatter keeps the adrenaline pumping. The head-chatter is the continuation of the threat. It continues because the threat is not resolved. What is more, the head-chatter obviously does not resolve the threat.

So, what's the threat? The head-chatter holds the answer, but not in an obvious in-your-face kind of way. There is a nuance and subtlety here. The head-chatter will be hammering away at the emergency button, but the contents of the head-chatter will most likely cloud the issue.

In our head-chatter we are more likely to vent,

complain, rationalise, blame and deny. We have our blame-stories our attribution theories. It's even possible in our head-chatter to talk about fear without even asking the question, "*What's the threat?*"

We all have a theory or story to explain how we feel. We often refer to our favourite theories as the truth, or 'how it is'. The head-chatter can lead us in to paralysing analyse.

Head-chatter is not like thinking in the sense that you would initiate thinking on purpose. You will find yourself in the head-chatter. In other words, it's usually already there then you discover that you're doing it.

Even when we become aware that we are doing the head-chatter, we are not likely to have an immediate knowledge of the threat. We are likely to believe that we are thinking; or working something out.

We are not likely to acknowledge the mental activity as head-chatter at first. We can get sucked into it, particularly if the content represents a grievance as an example.

Also, head-chatter is sneaky and seductive; it will contain an element of truth but not the whole truth. Head-chatter is that mischievous monkey-mind that will lead you astray. Yet it is possible to learn from the head-chatter.

It is certainly not about ridding yourself of the head-chatter. We need to observe it for just long enough to get the information that we need. To do this, put on your filters for curiosity and interest. Observe the head-chatter in this new light.

## Letting go

Letting-go is a natural human process. There is nothing spooky or woo-woo<sup>viii</sup> about letting-go. What we're looking at here is your ability to communicate with your autonomic nervous system. Letting-go is part of the language for communicating with your emergency button in particular.

Letting-go is not giving up. Letting-go is not pretending that the threat does not exist. Letting-go is not about not caring. There are

three dos and five don'ts for letting-go.

The three don'ts...

1. Don't rationalise the head-chatter.
2. Don't deny the head-chatter.
3. Don't fight the fight the head-chatter.

The 5 dos...

1. Do acknowledge the head-chatter.
2. Do observe the head-chatter long enough to identify the threat.
3. Do acknowledge the threat.
4. Do thank the head-chatter for the information about the threat.
5. Do let the head-chatter pass, like standing at the side of road watching the traffic appear then disappear.

Think of this task, letting-go, as *positive disengagement*.

Letting-go is not the destination. Letting-go is the process by which you achieve your goal. This is the real-time moment-by-moment conscious intention to change how you feel.

Letting-go is both a mind and body skill. There is the mental side. There is also a physical side. This is after all the mind body connection.

### Your body

The physical aspect of letting-go begins with your breathing. Your breathing is a physical and mechanical function. To breathe-in you flex your diaphragm muscles. To breathe-out you relax your diaphragm muscles. For the sake of the illustration, we can call this natural breathing.

Flexing your diaphragm to breathe-in has the effect of pushing your guts out as you draw the air into your lungs. There is no need for your upper chest or shoulders to move for breathing in. Do it with your diaphragm.

Then, to breathe out all you need to do is to let go. You don't need to twitch a muscle for the air to escape from your lungs if all you do is let it go. For breathing, to let go means to release the tension in your diaphragm muscles. Nothing more than that is required. Every natural breath involves 50% relaxation.

You can practise natural breathing. You can do it while you watch TV, or standing in a queue, or sitting at the traffic lights. It might seem ridiculous or unnecessary to practise breathing. We would all believe that we are well seasoned breathers. All the same, observe your usual breathing. Do you use your diaphragm to breathe in, or do you do it in your upper chest? If you use your upper chest, that's shallow breathing.

Our breathing or breath-rate dramatically affects the levels of carbon dioxide (CO<sup>2</sup>) in our blood. This is not the case for the oxygen. Increasing your breath rate, like hyperventilation, will not increase the oxygen in your blood. The only way to get more oxygen in your blood is to get more red blood cells.

Breath-holding or shallow breathing will cause a build-up of CO<sup>2</sup>. Hyperventilation will cause the CO<sup>2</sup> to flush from your blood stream. Neither shallow breathing nor hyperventilation is good for you in terms of how you feel.

When you're embroiled in the head-chatter or allowing your attention to leave the present moment you are likely to breathe shallowly or even hold your breath. This will certainly increase CO<sup>2</sup> in your blood. Your blood will become more acidic. The feeling could be just a weird discomfort, or a churn in the gut, or a weighty-dread. Just by snapping back to natural breathing you will bring your body back into balance very quickly. The bad feeling (associated with the shallow breathing) will pass very quickly.

### Your mind

Now for the mental side of letting-go. Letting-go as a mental process is something that we do every day. Most of the time, you wouldn't even notice that you're doing it. Without this ability we would be paralysed and incapable of doing anything.

Just image if we couldn't let go of the horrors that we see and hear of on the daily news? We see and hear about the horrors and injustices and yet we are able to get on with our lives. We

let it go at least to the extent that we are able to get on with our lives. In other words, letting-go is an ability that we use on a daily basis to adapt to the apparent threats at our door step.

We all at least have the ability to compartmentalise our minds. We all have the ability to put aside the fact of tragedy and injustice that always occurs somewhere. It comes back to focus of attention. Your emergency button will respond according to your focus of attention.

The Mindfulness tradition also provides a useful perspective on letting-go as a process. In particular we can look at Jon Kabat-Zinn's Monkey Trap story.<sup>ix</sup> The story is reproduced here in Appendix B.

To summarize, the Monkey Trap Story is an allegory or a metaphor that illustrates three important points.

The first point is that the story uses a clever trap to illustrate the issue with letting-go. In other words, there is a perceptual distortion in the appearance of the trap. It's not at all what it looks like. You don't know that it's a trap until you find yourself trapped. We find ourselves in the head-chatter and we can get stuck there.

The second point illustrates that letting-go is a real-time event. In other words, the monkey can save himself if he lets go of the banana as the hunter approaches. Letting-go is not something that you do in therapy. It is something that needs to happen in real-time as the requirement for letting-go occurs.

The third point is that letting-go is a conscious choice. We are compromised by the trap's illusion. For example, it looks like a free banana; but with the hunters approaching the illusion is broken. The monkeys that get away are the ones who choose to let go of the highly prized banana.

The head-chatter makes the false promise of a resolution for the threat. What is more this promise is made without even acknowledging the threat.

The head-chatter's grip on you can be broken by how you feel. In other words, at some point

you will notice the adrenaline and you will notice the unpleasant experience. It is at this time that we need to call it for what it is, it is the adrenaline. What we usually say is that it's the anxiety or the fear; no it's the adrenaline that you feel.

To call the feeling anxiety or fear is a theory. That feeling that you call anxiety is your body communicating with you. This is not a theory. If you have elevated adrenaline in your blood stream then you need to act. You need to resolve. You need to find a verb and do it to finish it.

The verb that we need sounds like, finish it, or complete it, or resolve it. That is the language of the autonomic nervous system. This is not a language of words. It's a language of actions. If the resolution actually happens then the emergency button will actually turn off.

Naming and acknowledging the threat is an action. Naming and acknowledging the apparent threat will put it in its place. You listen to the head-chatter just long enough to get enough information and you draw a conclusion. In other words, by doing the acknowledging and naming the threat you are by your actions finishing, completing and resolving. Don't skimp or rush through this process because it won't work that way. Naming and acknowledging the threat is not a ritual it's an effort. It's a verb for your autonomic nervous system.

You acknowledge the head-chatter threat and name it. This process will get your emergency button's attention. The message would be supported by your natural breathing. With the problem-solving and naming the threat, together with natural breathing, your emergency button will get the message and turn off.

As a skill of mind and body letting-go is a conscious act that we need to draw on each time there is a triggering event. Every time our head-chatter starts up there is the requirement to get free of the head-chatter honey trap in order to get off the emergency button.

To obtain a skill, you do practise. You will shorten your recovery-rate as you develop the skill of letting-go.

### Let go what?

As an example, let's say that you are well practised in useful mind skills. Let's say that at some point in time you're triggered by one of your favourite threats. You will probably notice the feeling in your gut first. Or at least you will notice feeling bad first. Then you notice that your attention is caught in the head-chatter. In response you then focus your attention on to your breath. Your breath, your breathing is real-time.

In real-time you quickly sum up the head-chatter and name the threat. In this example you recognise the threat of [*insert threat label*]. In a very short time, you change from experiencing the discomfort of the adrenaline to experiencing contentment.

Even if the threat of [*insert threat label*] does exist elsewhere, does it matter? Is there something that needs to be done about this elsewhere threat? Or for that matter, what can actually be done about this elsewhere threat?

Let's go one step further. Even if the threat does exist elsewhere and even if something does need to be done about it, do you then need to give up the feeling of contentment at this moment in time? Do you still need your head-chatter to be banging away on your emergency button?

The final point is to highlight that actual-threat and apparent-threat are threats. Actual threats are threats that are actually happening. Apparent-threats are threats that are not actually happening.

Mainly we humans are well adapted to the actual-threats. Mainly, the actual-threats in our lives are the demands of daily living. Most of us most of the time are doing well enough with our actual threats. We bumble along in life paying our way and keeping well.

The people who don't do so well with the actual threats are those who don't have the resources such as money or available employment or a home to live in. Or there are people who are overwhelmed by the force or persistence of bushfire followed by flood followed by Covid-19.

Also, there are actual threats that can come from criminal behaviour and social injustices. For example, if you are at the brunt of social injustice then you don't need a psychologist. You need a lawyer or the police or an ombudsperson.

Where we do struggle as humans is with the subtle not-so-obvious head-chatter threats. These are the apparent threats. The head-chatter threats are not like actual threats. Actual threats are at least potentially resolvable.

Our head-chatter threats remain as unresolved in any absolute and complete sense. Even if these threats don't exist elsewhere, they do exist in the head-chatter.

Make it a practice to positively disengage from the head-chatter as soon as possible, in that moment.

To illustrate negatively disengage think of stomping your feet on the way out and slam the door behind you. To illustrate positively disengage think about quietly say goodnight as you go off to bed.

Your autonomic nervous system reads your actions. If on one hand you're repeating the word 'relax' whilst on the other hand you are hissing the word through your teeth, your emergency button will not buy it. It will stay on.

It's less important to focus on the right words to say but crucial to focus on how you say it. If you do it as positive disengagement, then your emergency button will find your actions more believable.

## Appendix A

### The Threat Thesaurus

Q: What is the head-chatter about?

A: The head-chatter is about the threat of [... insert threat label ...].

Threat Label	Head-Chatter	Theme Labels
The threat of...	Sounds like...	The threat of...
<b>Imperfection</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can't they get it right?</li> <li>• I should do more.</li> <li>• Why do it that way?</li> </ul>	Chaos, disorder, getting it wrong, missing the details, broken rules, all going wrong, time wasting, disappointment, inefficiency, poor morality, stupidity, incompetence
<b>Abuse</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There're out to get me.</li> <li>• They're messing with me.</li> <li>• They do it on purpose.</li> </ul>	Persecution, bullying, ridicule, corruption, attack, exploitation, injustice, damage, trickery, crime, misrepresentation
<b>Catastrophe</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It will all go wrong.</li> <li>• A disaster is waiting.</li> <li>• It must be cancer.</li> </ul>	losing control, going mad, getting ill, accidents, calamity, devastation, disaster, emergencies, fiascos, meltdown, tragedy, trouble
<b>Abandonment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I'll be alone.</li> <li>• They'll find someone better.</li> <li>• They don't even think about me.</li> </ul>	Desertion, being left, rejection, being forgotten, being passed-over, not being noticed
<b>Invalidation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I don't matter to them.</li> <li>• I'm invisible to them.</li> <li>• I <b>do</b> have a point of view.</li> </ul>	Annihilation, nullification, cancelation, dismissal
<b>Shame</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They'll find out what I'm like.</li> <li>• I will be shunned.</li> <li>• I'll be exposed and humiliated.</li> </ul>	Exposure, contempt, humiliation, embarrassment, scandal, disgrace, dishonour, stigma, infamy, smear, losing face
<b>Subjugation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I'm powerless.</li> <li>• No one does what I want to do.</li> <li>• They just won't listen to me.</li> </ul>	Defeat, slavery, oppression, powerlessness, capture, domination, coercion, tyranny, repression
<b>Failure</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I can't do it.</li> <li>• I'll never understand it.</li> <li>• It doesn't matter how hard I try.</li> </ul>	Personal inadequacy, disappointment, bankruptcy, breaking down, collapsing, fading out, defeat, loss, bungling, decay, downfall
<b>Isolation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I'm not connected.</li> <li>• I was dropped here by aliens.</li> <li>• I'm alone amongst these people.</li> </ul>	Separation, segregation, alienation, homelessness, invisibility
<b>Deprivation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I'm always missing out.</li> <li>• It's not fair on me.</li> <li>• They just don't see my needs.</li> </ul>	Limitations, deficiency, constraint, rationing, solitude, indifference
<b>Unfairness</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do I have to do it all every time?</li> <li>• Can no one else see what needs to be done?</li> <li>• When do I take time off?</li> </ul>	Self-sacrifice, being taken advantage of, being used, not being appreciated, being taken for granted

The idea of this tool is to help you to narrow down the threats on your playlist to one label each. What you need is a concise/succinct list of favourites. You need to see the consistency of the meaning in your head-chatter, not confusion.

For example, over a number of samples of head-chatter you might find themes that reveal themes of *chaos*, *disorder* and *time wasting*. You need fewer labels to work with not an endless list. These thematic expressions in this example can be summed up as the threat of *imperfection*.

In compiling this list of Threat Labels I have tried to eliminate redundancies. For example it seems unnecessary to have a threat label for *oppression* when it can be covered by the *Subjugation* as the threat.

## Appendix B

### The Monkey Trap Story

John Kabat-Zinn has a wonderful illustration of letting-go in his book *Full catastrophe living*. This is his Monkey Trap Story. In India, so the story goes, there are monkey hunters that use a coconut shell as part of a trap.

There is a hole made at one end of the coconut shell that is just big enough for a monkey to squeeze his hand through. At the other end of the shell there are two small holes for the wire to go through.

The hunters go to a tree that has monkeys in it. The coconut shell is wired to the base of the tree. A banana is placed in the shell.

The hunters go hide and watch. The curious monkeys climb down from the tree top to investigate. A monkey will see the banana and put his hand in the shell and take hold of the

banana. At that point the hunters run over to grab the monkey.

The monkey doesn't want to let go of the easily won banana. The monkey is trapped because he cannot get his fist from the coconut shell whilst he has hold of the banana. He has to let-go, or be caught.

So what is the trap? How does the trap work? What is the mechanism? Is it the coconut shell? Is it the banana? No, it is none of these things. It is simply the monkey's grip on the banana. The trap is of the monkey's making. Only the monkey has control over his grip on the banana. To be free all the monkey needs to do is to let-go of the banana before the hunters get to him.

#### Endnotes

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- <sup>i</sup> Anxiety that originates from psychological processes as described herein. What is said here does not apply to felt experiences of anxiety that are due to physical reasons for example concussion, amine sensitivity, brain tumour, or a 'psychological masquerade'.
  - <sup>ii</sup> Just as general rule, I do not support the use of alcohol, so my example here is not permission to abuse alcohol.
  - <sup>iii</sup> <https://www.hormone.org/your-health-and-hormones/glands-and-hormones-a-to-z/hormones/adrenaline>
  - <sup>iv</sup> What can you learn about the whole elephant from closely examining its left knee cap? Would you for example know about its trunk or big ears or its diet or its social behaviours?
  - <sup>v</sup> Google the term "face of Jesus on a slice of burnt toast" and select from the list of about 6.2m items.
  - <sup>vi</sup> Mindfulness meditations include the Body Scan, Listening, Walking, etc.
  - <sup>vii</sup> Cortisol provides felt experiences such as fatigue/exhaustion for no good reason and depression. Cortisol follows about 15 minutes behind the adrenaline in the triggering-event. Then it slowly breaks down and returns to baseline once the adrenaline has turned off.
  - <sup>viii</sup> Slang for unconventional beliefs regarded as having little or no scientific basis, especially those relating to spirituality, mysticism, or alternative medicine.
  - <sup>ix</sup> Jon Kabat-Zinn; [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jon\\_Kabat-Zinn](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jon_Kabat-Zinn)