

## Anxiety as the Felt Experience

Brendan Lloyd PhD, November 2019, r: 02.3

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In human terms we are probably most familiar with anxiety by the way 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, etc.

It's interesting to note, however, that the felt experience of anxiety is seen as a symptom from a *medical* and *psychotherapeutic* point of view. The cause of the anxiety is generally seen as an illness of the mind or brain. What is more, the illness theory does not actually explain how the felt experience happens. 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 of an illness, but instead it is the anxiety.

Remember that a starting point is a point of departure, it's not the destination. We note the felt experience and ask, "How did that happen?" We can see it more as an outcome rather than a symptom. All outcomes are due to a process. All processes are made up of steps.

As a further point of interest, any felt experience isn't something that just appears in your body as a symptom; like say a sore throat from a cold or flu. If your felt experience has changed it's because the chemical structure of your body has changed.

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 our body will ebb and flow according to our demands and needs.

Here's an illustration. 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. Then you leap up from the table and gather your stuff. As you rush 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. Bye!

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

If the word *threat* is a bit strong in the example above, then *demand* is doing the same thing to create a response in your autonomic nervous system. It was the *realised demand/threat* that did it. It doesn't even matter if objectively you had plenty of time. It's the **perception** of the urgency as a demand or threat that slammed down on the emergency button.

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 will deconstruct. The chemical structure will return to baseline. For example, you get into your car; you start the engine; and you look at the dash-clock. On reassessment you realise that you have plenty of time. Your adrenaline will return to baseline. The adrenaline comes and goes as is required.

The scenario above illustrates how it happened. As a model the scenario shows how a chemical change occurs to meet a demand. The point is that a preceding event triggered the chemical change. The chemical change was a response or an outcome. The model then 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, we are not even aware of it happening.

Our felt experience changes when there has been a shift or change in the chemical structure of our body. When you say that you feel something, that's right you are feeling *something*. You are feeling the way 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 the way alcohol feels.

From the felt experience of anxiety we can step back and ask, "What do we need in our body to have this feeling?" What we need is elevated levels of adrenaline in our 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 perceived threat.

Where did the threat come from? It came from your reading of the trigger event.

Now we can start modelling anxiety as a process that is made up of a series of steps. The process begins with an event; a threat is recognised; the perceived threat triggers a sympathetic response in the autonomic nervous system; there is the release of adrenaline; and then there is the felt experience.

Even with the rudimentary process-model we can now 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.

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.

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 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.

Don't forget that the point here is the felt experience and how it happens. We're not getting bogged down in the content. We're not involved in an argument as to whether surfing is exciting or not. This is not about surfing; this is model-building for the purposes of understanding the felt experience that is labelled as excitement.

So, the question is: how did you get to feel that way? **You don't have to say anything about surfing to answer the question.** I got to feel that way because I challenged myself. In terms of the process, there is a perceived demand/ threat/challenge; then a whack on the emergency button; adrenaline is released and there is the felt experience.

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. We fully understand that people do actually get killed in these places. It's on the news. It's in the media. Yet we take the seat.

We challenge the odds and slam down on our emergency button as we 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 here 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>i</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, both require an activation of the emergency button. The activation is a step in both processes. More to the point, different processes produce different outcomes.

In spite of the adrenaline in common, there are two important differences between the processes that produce excitement or anxiety

as different outcomes. Firstly, with excitement there is usually an intention or an expectation for excitement. Secondly, and most importantly, the excitement outcomes are from discontinuous events. The anxiety outcome is ongoing and exists within the context of difficulty.

For the excitement experience the emergency button is disengaged at some closing point. The demand is resolved. The threat is dealt with. The risk paid off. The challenge is achieved. In good time the chemical structures of your body go back to baseline. Under the ideal conditions our adrenaline ebbs and flows; it comes and goes as is required.

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?

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. Let's now take a turn in this scenario to begin modelling anxiety.

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...*

Head-chatter will activate your emergency button. Head-chatter that continues *in this way* will continuously activate your emergency button. This is the requirement to

produce anxiety as a felt experience. 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.**

When talking about anxiety the emergency button is initially activated by a perception of threat. The head-chatter is the continuing unrelenting expression of the threat. There is no part of our body, in the mind-body exchange, where the body evaluates the perception. What is perceived as a threat, in our mind, is to the body a threat.

If you're there in front of the bus the last thing you need is a process that evaluates the authenticity of the perceived threat. No indeed not. You want out of there quick smart.

Yes the bus is real. If it hits you, you'll really be dead. Those facts are to do with the laws of physics and off topic in this discussion.

Yet I say it's a perceived threat. How can it be any other way? Your sensory inputs capture the information from your physical surroundings. This sensory input is processed for meaning. The result of that process is the perception.

The meaning is read and the conclusion is acted upon. If your mind reads 'threat' then your body says go, get that adrenaline out. No questions asked. There's no getting around those fundamental facts.

I suppose, whilst you're in front of the bus, just in the instant you see it, the question could be, "Does this perception apprehend an objective threat, hmmm?" I suppose it would save you a great deal of effort if in the end the bus is no threat in fact. The trouble is, in the bus scenario, you'd be dead before you drew your conclusion.

There's that automatic nature of the autonomic nervous system, for the basics of survival. Generally speaking we have no

control over the initial *sympathetic response*, the first jab on the *emergency button*.

Our autonomic response happens so quickly; there is no way to intervene. As I have said, we would all be dead by now if we did have some intervening process that evaluated the initial perception and the response to the perception.

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. You then notice the discomfort of anxiety.

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

Whatever the threat, whilst brushing your teeth, it was not triggered by an event in the environment. In other words there was nothing to conquer, endure or escape from there in your bathroom. The threat was there all the same. We can be pretty sure of that because of the adrenaline; adrenaline is only ever there because of the perceived threat/challenge/demand.

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 popped into your head about the social event the night before. As you wonder 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.*

Our head-chatter is the unrelenting expression of the threat. The threat is expressed thematically in the head-chatter. There is no evaluative process in our body to declare the adrenaline as unnecessary. Our body responds and does its job.

In the teeth brushing scenario, objectively speaking there is no reason for the adrenaline. There is nothing about the bathroom or teeth-brushing, *per se*, that requires adrenaline as a response. Adrenaline is not part of the solution. Yet there it is. This is the substance of the felt experience of anxiety.

Each day in our lives could have many emergency button banging events. These events will commence with a trigger. A trigger can be literally anything. Anything that is capable of projecting symbolic meaning. Most of the time we wouldn't even notice the triggers; and a lot of the time we don't notice the head-chatter.

For example the trigger for the teeth brushing scenario is contained in a memory of an event from the night before. Memories *per se* are not a threat; but that memory did contain representations of the threat. In this example, at this stage, we could hypothesise that the head-chatter expresses the threat of *shame* (see *Threat Thesaurus*, Appendix A).

Symbolic meaning is everywhere. We are constantly reading the events, in the environment or in our minds, for meaning. We are particularly looking out for threats. This is called *selective attention*; and we find the threats that we're looking for. This is called *confirmation bias*.

For example, you glance across the 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. In this example, the head-chatter could be an expression of *abuse* as the threat (see *Threat Thesaurus*, Appendix A).

In the office scenario it's not a question of whether or not there was an objective threat of *abuse*. Your emergency button does not have the task of sorting out the actual from the apparent.

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' as *abandonment* (see *Threat Thesaurus*, Appendix A).

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 chemistry of your body changes and your adrenaline levels increase. Here we have 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, if it is noticed at all. 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 outcome, the adrenaline in the bloodstream. The felt experience is noticed.

The reason why I've provided a number of different examples is to get away from the specific circumstances as the cause. Here we are not talking about the content. 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.

For sure the content contains the trigger. The trigger is a symbolic representation of the threat or the trigger resembles the threat in some way. **Most importantly the threat is in the eye of the beholder.**

I was once illustrating to a client the nature of triggers. I said, "A trigger can be anything; literally anything". She looked around my office to find something triggering. She looked at the cupboard doors to her right and said, "Even the cupboard doors?" I said, "Yes, even the cupboard doors".

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, *who's 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 the cupboard listening to what I say? What if I get exposed as a nutcase?*

It's not as if the content of the head-chatter makes any sense. Head-chatter is neither logical nor reasonable, so we don't apply logic or reason to understanding it. It's best to understand it thematically. You would need to tune your ear to the thematic expressions. It's too easy to get bogged down in the half-truths and drama of the content.

We don't need to spend any time challenging the apparent craziness of the head-chatter's content. It really doesn't matter that the client may have nonsense in her head about who's sitting in my cupboard. As a therapist if you want to have arguments with your clients, then go ahead and challenge the content of their head-chatter.

We don't need to decide whether an idea or belief is rational or not. The focus needs to be

on how the idea or belief gets you on the emergency button. This is a focus on the threat not the content. The content is at best **the way in which** the threat is expressed, **this time**.

The necessary insight is to understand how the head-chatter expresses the threat. This is the target for dealing with anxiety. We need to deal with the threat not the nonsense of the head-chatter's content. Knowledge of the threat is the ammunition that we need to get to a resolution of the threat.

I'm drawing a straight line from the head-chatter as a continuing expression of the threat to the felt-experience of anxiety as the outcome, with the steps in between. The head-chatter is the engine room for stress, anxiety and depression.

In the head-chatter there is the unrelenting message – threat threat threat. For the anxiety to go away, or for stress-reduction generally, you want the message to get through to your body that the threat is over. So if you are able to **do something in your mind** that effectively solves or resolves the threat, then the adrenaline production will stop. The residual adrenaline will not take long to disburse.

### Learning from the Head-Chatter

There is head-chatter because the threat is unresolved. Where adrenaline production at elevated levels is an ongoing issue then not only is the threat unresolved but most likely it's not even understood.

If we understand the threat, then we can resolve it. By resolving the threat we turn off the adrenaline production. By turning off the adrenaline we then change the way we feel.

The difficulty with understanding the threat is in the nature of the head-chatter. For example, you could be feeling the adrenaline and not necessarily make the connection to a threat. The head-chatter will be hammering away at the emergency button, but the

contents of the head-chatter will most likely cloud the issue.

The content of the head-chatter is more likely to lead us to blame and denial; this will be our *attribution theory*. We all have a theory or story to explain the way we feel. We often refer to our favourite theories as the truth, or the way it is.

The head-chatter can bubble away subconsciously and at the same time it will be whacking away at the emergency button. It's not like thinking in the sense that you would initiate thinking on purpose; you find yourself in the head-chatter. In other words, it's usually already there then you discover that you're in it.

Even when we become aware that we are in 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.

Most likely we'll feel the adrenaline first; then we'll notice the head-chatter. We are not likely to acknowledge this mental activity as head-chatter at first. We get seduced by the content. It could be that for some of us there is that initial rush of excitement by the initial adrenaline release.

We can get sucked into it, particularly if the content represents a grievance for example. We have a tendency to develop the content. We find it hard to break away from it even if we have a sense for the need to do so. Our mind is elsewhere in the head-chatter and not really paying attention to certain details, like the threat and the adrenaline production.

Yet it is possible to learn from the head-chatter. Head-chatter is a slippery customer. For example, the information that you need is not in the content; what we need is in the theme that is expressed by the content. Also, head-chatter is not thinking; it will disguise itself as thinking; it is sneaky and seductive; it will contain an element of truth but not the whole truth. Head-chatter is that mischievous

monkey-mind.

To learn from the head-chatter the starting point is the noticing and focusing.<sup>ii</sup> In other words, you develop the skill of noticing the head-chatter; you don't let it pass for thinking when you know very well that it's going nowhere. You then bring your attention back to real-time to learn from the head-chatter.

It is certainly not about ridding yourself of the head-chatter. Let it flow; put on your filters for curiosity and interest. Observe the head-chatter in this new light. Let's say that your mindful-observer is standing by the roadside watching the traffic pass. You get to see what's happening; you don't need to be involved. You don't need to stop the traffic; you wave it on. You don't need to get into a car; you need a full view of the road.

You can't do anything inside the head-chatter. For example, you will not succeed in resolving the content. You need to be outside the head-chatter looking in.

To learn from the head-chatter you need to capture it, and then discover the threat. For the skill development I recommend that for a period of time you take samples of your head-chatter and write them down. In other words, you will have the content of the head-chatter written down so it can't escape.

For the skill development it is important to capture the head-chatter in writing. Head-chatter is not thinking so it does not leave a memorable structure in your mind. As an example, think about how difficult it is to remember dreams. Dreaming is similar to head-chatter and quite different to thinking.

Let's say you wake in the morning with a dream in your head. At first the dream seems to make sense. You think to yourself I must remember those details. Then some time later you try to recall the details only to find that all you can do is remember that you had a dream. The details have decayed into metaphorical dust.

Our dreams will often be on the same sorts of themes as our head-chatter. Fortunately we are awake with head-chatter. Therefore we have the opportunity to capture it, and make use of it.

For the skill development we write down the head-chatter. In the body of the page you will have the content. You will also need a thick margin down one side of the page. The margin is there to write the name the threat.

Once the head-chatter is written down it can't escape. It becomes an object on the page. We then have the opportunity to gain objectivity.

**In the beginning of the skill development it's often the second or third reading of the captured head-chatter that reveals the important information.**

I've noticed that people tend to rationalise the head-chatter when first asked to reflect upon it. This rationalising only serves to hold up the process and delay progress.

Sometimes people are embarrassed by their head-chatter; and clearly writing it down could be a challenge. As a rationalisation some people say things like, "I know it's stupid. I know it's crazy. I always think stupid shit." Any rationalising is getting bogged down in the seductive half-truths of the content. By focusing on the content we pass up the opportunity to learn from the head-chatter.

We don't just take one sample of head-chatter to understand our unresolved threats. We need a series of samples with different content to see the consistency and persistence of the same set of threats.

Most likely your head-chatter over all will contain a number of different threats. The threats won't necessarily all be there at once, in any given sample. It is possible, however, that any given sample could express more than one threat. Sometimes our head-chatter will cascade through a number of threats. It's important to remember that the threats

expressed in our head-chatter are not random or arbitrary.

The point is that the possibilities for content are infinite; at the same time the threats will be a small number. Your head-chatter will always contain the particular threats that you subscribe to. This is what we can call our list of favourites. It's your mind's a playlist if you like. Even though the possibilities for content are boundless, the threats expressed by the content will always be from our predictable and limited playlist.

I suggest that as you re-read each sample, you underline the phrases that express the threat. This requires some thought motivated by curiosity and interest. Use the *Threat Thesaurus* (see Appendix A) for guidance. In other words you will draw the conclusion from what you learn and what makes sense to you. This is a skill that can be practiced and developed.

Let's use the following snippet of head-chatter as an example. *Is there someone in the cupboard listening to what I say? What if I get exposed as a nutcase?* The content is simply in the literal meaning of the words. To understand the threat I ask, what's it saying? The head-chatter is saying that *I'll be exposed*. This could be an expression of the threat of *shame*.

To say that the snippet of head-chatter above represents an expression of *shame* is not supposed to be a diagnosis. As a therapist I am not making a diagnosis. I am not telling the client that she has beliefs around defectiveness and shame. The understanding of the threat needs to come about due to a process of negotiation with the owner of the head-chatter. It needs to make sense and feel right to the person doing the head-chatter.

In other words when I make suggestions for what the head-chatter sounds like, I'm putting forward what I call *likely suspects*. So in my discussion with my client I will present more than one likely suspect. For example,



with this sample, is it the threat of *abuse* or the threat of *shame*? There is then a discussion as to why it would be one or the other.

Why would it be the threat of *abuse*? The content sounds a bit paranoid. It's like as if someone is going to do something nasty to her. Why would it be *shame*? There is mention of being exposed. So what fits better in what she knows about herself? And more importantly, do we see *abuse* or *shame* in other samples with different content?

If after the discussion we decide that *shame* fits and that the threat of the *abuse* is not reflected in this sample, then we add (or confirm) *shame* as a favourite; and confirm its place on the list of favourites.

In this example, to be sure that *shame* has a rightful place on this person's list of favourites we will see it in future samples of head-chatter. The threat of *shame* (or any other threat in the Threat Thesaurus) is not created by the content. The content is not creating the threat. The threat is expressed through, or by, the content. In other words the threat was triggered and now the head-chatter is venting on it.

We start to build our list of favourites once we see the same threats turning up in different samples of head-chatter. The content of our head-chatter is changeable. It can change in the course of one day yet the threats will be the same across a lifetime. The threats stay the same because our personality is a stable system of adaptations, beliefs and values.

In the example above I used a snippet of head-chatter. A full sample would contain all the other head-chatter that came before and after the snippet. To do the best here you need full samples of head-chatter over a period of time. Once you have the skill of identifying the threats expressed by your head-chatter you'll be able to do it quickly whilst standing on your feet.

We name the threat as the result of learning from the head-chatter. Once we name it, we can let it go. We let go of the head-chatter that expresses that threat. By naming the threat we gain this control over it; we get to let it go by name. We **do something in our mind** that resolves the threat. This is a mind skill that can be practised and improved upon.

## Recovery Rate

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 has been produced. So to measure 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 ongoing response. 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 weeks 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 seconds. We're talking about the time it takes to be off the emergency button.

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 less bogged down in the content. You'll get there if you persist and learn from your head-chatter. The hold up with recovery rate will be due to how well you understand the threats and the seduction of the head-chatter.

## Letting-Go

A good recovery rate, for getting off the emergency button, requires the mind skill of *letting-go*.

As I mentioned earlier, you need to **do something in your mind** that effectively solves or resolves the threat. If you succeed then the adrenaline production will stop. The thing that you do, we call that *letting-go*. It is a skill that can be practised and developed.

In other words, we're talking about the letting-go as the resolution for the threat. There is head-chatter because the threat is unresolved. Not only that the threats in our head-chatter are unresolvable in any direct sense. For example, how do you resolve any of those threats seen listed in the Threat Thesaurus (Appendix A)? They are by their nature unresolvable in any absolute sense.

John Kabat-Zinn has a wonderful illustration of letting-go in his book *Full catastrophe living*<sup>iii</sup>. 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 open 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.

So, not only is letting-go an imperative, you also need to know what to let-go of. It could be that the monkeys that get away simply have the insight and readiness to let-go.

We humans have a tendency to hold on. We become seduced by the half-truths of the head-chatter's content. Or at the very least we don't have the perspective that the head-chatter is part of the problem and not the solution.

The head-chatter is like a pair of sandshoes in the clothes dryer tumbling on and on, ker-thunk, ker-thunk, etc. At best the head-chatter is an attempt to resolve or solve the threat. The problem here is that the threat is not understood. Whilst the focus is on the content, the threat is obscured from our conscious attention.

There are examples of letting-go in most people's lives. For example, you might watch the Breakfast Show on the TV before you launch yourself into the day. You might be a busy person in your work-life; or you might be heading off to school; or you might be staying home to look after someone. The content of the news items can be quite distressing. As the song once said, "It's a – horror moo-vee – right there on my Tee-Vee... Shockin' me right out of my brain."<sup>iv</sup>

We are bombarded with reports of terrible events that go on in the world around us. The journalist's favourite question is, "Do you think that it's getting worse?" We are told that the world is tumbling headlong into doom and destruction.

All the same, regardless of the terrible events that are happening we still have to earn a living, pass our exams and do the shopping. The point is that we let it go. We drop it at least to the extent that we can get on with our lives. We get on with our life in spite of the horror stories right there in the lounge room. So it's not impossible to do, to let-go.

In relation to the felt experience of anxiety it's the head-chatter that we need to let-go of. If we didn't have that head-chatter grinding away on our emergency button then we would not have the elevated levels of adrenaline over extended periods of time.

The Monkey Trap Story illustrates the need for understanding the trap and how it works. Then in addition to the understanding we need to make a conscious decision to let go. The letting-go will not happen without this intention to let-go.

## Paradoxical Effects

To succeed with *letting-go* the seduction of the head-chatter is worth understanding well. For example, our head-chatter could have content about actual events.

The simple fact could be that the content of our head-chatter, in any given sample, could be referring to matters that actually need our attention. All the same, there is an order of events that you probably should consider.

Deal with the head-chatter first before you attempt to alter the external world. What we don't need in our lives are the paradoxical effects from trying to solve and resolve external issues through our head-chatter. This is one of life's subtleties. This is like trying to see the forest when you don't even know that you're one of the trees.

For example, someone with *abandonment* (see *Threat Thesaurus*, Appendix A) issues might express his head-chatter to his partner with the intention of achieving closeness. The paradoxical effect is that the partner is put off by the persistent expressions of neediness.

A person with *perfectionist* issues might express her head-chatter out loud to her work colleagues. Her intention is to improve the workplace. The paradoxical effect would be the accusations of micromanaging her colleagues.

The paradoxical effect comes about due to a focus on the content and in the absence of understanding the threat. Understanding the threat is crucial where letting it go is the imperative; and you need to know what to let go of.

It's true that literally anything can be the trigger for an unresolved threat. Therefore an actual event where stuff really happens could be the trigger. In the example below the actual event is the external threat; and then there is the head-chatter adding a further layer of threat. This is an additional threat over and above the actual threat in the physical world.

For example, there could be a university professor who has received the news about the budget cuts and the new cost-saving restructuring, along with staff culling and further restrictions on resources. This news is certainly challenging. Adaptation is necessary for moving on and for her health and wellbeing generally. The adaptations require a learning curve and extra effort. This is stressful on its own.

In the example, the adaptive solution for the professor would be to focus on the process of adapting to the changes. The question for the stress-reduction is, "How do I get this done; what's the first step?"

The extra layer of meaning for the professor could well result in stress symptoms such as irritability and sleep disturbance at the very

least. The head-chatter could fire up, *why the hell should I have to do this, where is the justice, they're just trying to kill us off. They're trying to silence us, I can tell you we won't be silenced, etc.*

Ok, just because you're paranoid, doesn't mean that they're not out to get you. It could be true; the pro-vice chancellor may well have the professor in his sights for part of the culling. All the same the professor's head-chatter expresses the threats of *abuse* (see *Threat Thesaurus*, Appendix A).

So maybe it's a matter of opinion right here. Is the abuse created by the pro-vice chancellor; or is it an expression of the professor's personality?

To the extent that the blame question has any importance I have my response. That is to say, if the stress-symptoms don't matter then the head-chatter doesn't matter.

So if you have a political concern and you can't let it go, then go for it. The stress might even be functional and motivational. Just keep an eye on your health. You'll need a thick skin and you'll need to keep fit; and good sleep will always be the best antidote.

All the same I suggest that the professor in this example would do better if she understood her internal threats before she faces off on the external threats.

For our professor, any solution that comes out of the head-chatter might lead to emotional arguments where reason and logic would be more effective. The emotional arguments could be the strategy to gain credibility and support amongst her colleagues. The paradoxical effect could be the lack of support for her concerns.

The simple thing about paradoxical effects is that we haven't understood the threat. When we express our head-chatter out loud, for example when venting, we also express the threat without knowledge of the threat. Therefore the audience may simply disagree

with us on emotional grounds. For example, "I understand how you feel, but..." Or, "No I don't feel that way about it."

## The Threat of Injustice

The big challenge for any person, if stress-symptoms are the issue, is that commitment and effort are required to live a happy life. In saying that, I'm aware of the political question. The politics of mental health is the blame game. For example, "I can't be happy until they stop doing that to me".

As a person who lives on this planet I am not blind to issue of injustice. I'm certainly not unaware of issues such as bullying and domestic violence. As a psychologist I'm not offering solutions to save the world. I'm talking about what you can do to reduce the burden of your felt experience of anxiety.

Even if you are a person who is caught up in the politics of justice, where there is an objective cause of suffering, you still need to be on your feet to fight your cause. I'm saying there is still something to learn from your head-chatter so that you can continue to keep up the fight.

To illustrate this point I site the example of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (1918-2008). In 1945 Solzhenitsyn was 27 and a Captain in the Soviet Red Army. When he died in 2008 at 89 he was known as an author and essayist. He won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1970 and four other notable literary awards for his efforts<sup>v</sup>.

Solzhenitsyn was twice decorated on the front-line in 1944. He led men into battles. They were beating back the invading German army. In 1945 he was arrested for sedition by the Red Army counter-intelligence unit. This was just months before the end of WW2.

He was sentenced to 8 years of hard labour in the Soviet labour-camp system. He was sent to various Siberian prison camps for the last three years of his sentence. It was this experience that gave rise to his famous title

*One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (1962).

The *Denisovich* story is about one day, out of many, in a Soviet Siberian prison labour-camp. The story begins when *Denisovich* gets out of bed in the morning; and it ends with him going to bed at the end of the day. The last few paragraphs are his recount of the day. He puts his head down on the pillow and he thinks to himself, 'well that wasn't too bad; in fact it was a good day'.

Why a good day? Why did Solzhenitsyn write about a good day in a Siberian prison camp? Surely a bad day would highlight all the injustice and suffering much better. Well for one thing I don't think that *Denisovich* is about injustice and suffering. I think that it's about hope, forgiveness and proportion.

There is no trauma in *Denisovich*. There is no mention of personal trauma by Solzhenitsyn in his more substantial title *The Gulag Archipelago*. He does not present himself as a victim. In *Denisovich* he forgives the guards because he sees them as being in the same boat. No one wanted to be there in Siberia least of all the guards.

In *The Gulag Archipelago* he doesn't skirt around the injustices perpetrated by humans on humans. He doesn't blame Communism for the suffering. He condemns the Russian people for their cruelty and indifference to suffering.

He was charged with sedition in 1945 because he spoke out on forbidden topics of the USSR. He experienced hardship and loss because of the Stalinist Soviet regime. Yet he does not place himself as a victim.

In *The Gulag Archipelago*, Solzhenitsyn makes allusions to his head-chatter; there are "insistent thoughts about one's own transgressions, errors, mistakes. ... the difficult cycles of such ponderings [persist] over many years..." Yet he lived a long and productive life; he survived two wives and raised three children. So how did he manage his head-chatter?

Here is a further quote from *The Gulag Archipelago*, "... whenever I mentioned the heartlessness of our highest-ranking bureaucrats, the cruelty of our executioners, I remember myself in my Captain's shoulder boards and the forward march of my battery through East Prussia, enshrouded in fire, and I say: 'So were we any better?'"

In other words he **does something in his mind** to manage his head-chatter before he takes on the outside world. He certainly brings in a sense of proportion. His head-chatter does not run off to develop anger and outrage. He quells his personal threat of *abuse*. Then, as the next step, he writes about the injustices.

*The Gulag Archipelago* is about heartlessness and cruelty. It's a documentary about Stalin's Soviet Union. Solzhenitsyn leaves the facts to speak for themselves. He does not embellish the story further with a dressing of anger or outrage. He does not thump a tub. He does not try to appeal to our emotions. He is not trying to inflame. Yet the story of the heartlessness and the cruelty is told all the same; and he won a Nobel Prize in literature; and the Soviet Union collapsed in 1989 in any case.

## Resolving the Threats

We have no control over the triggers for the threats in our lives. We have no control over the initial sympathetic response in our autonomic nervous system. It is after all *The Emergency Button*. It's there for emergencies.

We have the ability to instantly recognise threats. The initial whack on the emergency button is beyond our conscious control. It needs to be like that for our basic survival.

What we do have control over is the ongoing response. Once we're on the emergency button the next thing to do is to get off it. For a quick recovery rate, getting off the emergency button requires the satisfactory resolution of the threat.

The solution for stress-reduction generally

and in particular reference to anxiety management, is the *letting-go*. We resolve the threat that is expressed in our head-chatter by letting-go of the head-chatter. We do this for personal stress-reduction, not to magically solve the issue in the external world.

There is a functional order of events for stress reduction. First thing, deal with the head-chatter, and then fix the world. Trying to fix the world through the head-chatter will create unwanted paradoxical effects in your life.

Naming the threat is a useful skill (see Appendix A). As I keep on saying, you need to **do something in your mind** that effectively solves or resolves the threat. Naming the threat is a good start to the process of getting off the emergency button.

The message that your body needs to hear is, *yes I've got this, that's my shame... Or, yes I've got this, that's my abandonment popping up... Or, yes I've got this, that's my focus the abuse aspect...*

It's not the words that you use that are important; it's the process that counts. In other words, the literal meaning of the words that you use to get off the emergency button is not the issue. It's all about whether each word takes you in the direction of letting-go.

Keep your ear tuned to the inflammatory words and phrases in your head-chatter. These inflammatory words are working to keep you in the head-chatter. Observe them to see how it works. See how they suck you in.

Inflammatory words are a subtle detail. For example you may find yourself hammering out an email in reply to something that gets on your goat. Read it out loud to try and pick out the hand grenades that you're delivering in the text. These hand grenades will be the inflammatory words.

Think of the word "*again*". It sounds innocent

enough. But what about using the word like this: "*again and again and again*". It starts to become inflammatory. The use of any word in an inflammatory manor will get you on, not off, the emergency button.

Also, be careful that you're not trying to defuse your head-chatter with additional head-chatter. For example, *oh God there's my abandonment head-chatter again. Why can't I just be normal? Why do I have to have abandonment issues of all things? I'm damaged goods. How's this supposed to help, naming the abandonment?*

The above is an example of the threat of *shame* cascading off the *abandonment* threat. With this continuing head-chatter the emergency will continue. Your body will experience elevated levels of adrenaline whilst the head-chatter continues, but on a different threat.

The example above also illustrates how one threat can be the trigger for some other threat. Literally anything can trigger the threats on our play-list of favourites. In this example, both threats need to be understood and named.

The anxiety is a construct. It's only anxiety if you say it is. But the felt experience is the adrenaline regardless of what you call it. It's still adrenaline regardless of the theories that are attached to the feeling.

I think that the term *anxiety* is an inflammatory word. We don't really need to use the word unless it's a legal matter. We can think about the felt experience of anxiety as an adrenaline experience. To feel the adrenaline you come out of the head-chatter back to the present moment. Then you think: *I got on the emergency button, now I need to get off; what's that head-chatter saying? Etc.*

Who said that letting-go was easy. True it's not, but it's not impossible to do. It does take some effort. That's funny isn't it? It takes effort to relax. After all, *letting-go* is relaxation. This is a type of relaxation that

goes with action. For example, *you let go of the banana but then you have to climb the tree quick smart*. This is the effort that is required for a good life.

The one thing that you may learn very quickly is that the kinds of threats that we're talking about here have an ongoing status of *unresolved*. You might even begin to believe that these kinds of threats are in fact *unresolvable*. They are resolvable in the sense that you are able to resolve them every time they're triggered. They are resolved by letting-go.

The threats that we're talking about here do seem to have that quality of permanence. What you will realise from capturing your head-chatter is that the same threats reappear and continue to appear in the head-chatter. This is your playlist. These are your favourites and they just keep on coming back. The truth is they never leave.

Our personality is a stable system of adaptations, beliefs, attitudes and values. Our personality does not change much at all by the time we pass 20 years of age. So trying to eliminate anxiety by becoming a different person is not sustainable.

So there you are in your daily life, you feel the adrenaline and you know what to do. In other words, you notice the adrenaline; you then notice the head-chatter; you bring your attention back to real-time; you capture the head-chatter; you identify the threat; you let-go of the head-chatter, whilst standing on your feet. What are you left with?

You're left with the real-time tasks of your life in front of you. Surely that's enough to deal with without chasing the adrenaline over a ghost from the past. Make a choice.

To feel satisfied in life you don't have to like something to accept it; you don't have to be comfortable at every moment to be happy; it's all a matter of proportion. Effort is always required to feel good. We can always learn to drive the machine better.

To help you to improve your relationship with your nervous system...

1. Feel the adrenaline; call it adrenaline, not anxiety.
2. Recognise and discover the head-chatter
3. Practise the noticing and focusing
4. Capture the head-chatter
5. Listen to the expressions of threat in the head-chatter; look past the content
6. Identify the threats to name them (see Appendix A: *Threat Thesaurus*)
7. Let-go of the head-chatter to let go of the threat or threats that are expressed in the head-chatter
8. At every opportunity return to real-time to live your life; there's plenty to get on with without the extra adrenaline to make you feel ill.

This is for your personal stress-reduction and for managing anxiety.

## Appendix A

### The Threat Thesaurus

Q: What is the head-chatter about?

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

<b>Threat Label</b>	<b>Head-Chatter</b>	<b>Theme Labels</b>
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.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.hormone.org/your-health-and-hormones/glands-and-hormones-a-to-z/hormones/adrenaline>

<sup>ii</sup> Three-Minute Breathing Meditation to practice the Noticing and Focusing: <https://byronbaypsychologist.com.au/onlineconsult/md-articles/02-Meditation-threeminutesbreathing.pdf>

<sup>iii</sup> Jon Kabat-Zinn PhD (1990), FULL CATASTROPHE LIVING: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness.

<sup>iv</sup> "Horror Movie" was the second single from the Skyhooks album *Living in the 70's* and was their first number-one single in Australia, staying there for two weeks in March 1975.

<sup>v</sup> Templeton Prize (1983); Lomonosov Gold Medal (1998); State Prize of the Russian Federation (2007); International Botev Prize (2008)