



The *Faux-Pas* and Hating Yourself

Brendan Lloyd PhD, February 2020. r:02.01

You did that *faux-pas*ⁱ again. Now you're kicking yourself because after all your promises to yourself, you tell yourself that you should know better.

For example, there is a work or social event; you make a *faux-pas*; there is a realisation of what you've done; there is the initial embracement or shame; then there are the later reflections and reminders about that event. Then you get caught up in hating yourself.

What we learn from our mistakes, it seems, is to recognise that we're making that same mistake yet again. We have the wisdom of 20-20 hindsight. Why can't we just get it right, at least by the third time round? How come we are doomed to fail and doomed to suffer?

If this is happening to you then you have insight. In other words you probably have a sense of how you affect the world around you, in the things you say or the things you do, the way you are in the way you respond or react. Then because of this insight you suffer the anxiety of embracement or shame.

So insight is a bad thing, right? *"I suffer because of my marvellous insight."* Or suffering is a good thing, because insight is a good thing. Remember that the insight that we're talking about here is the recognition that you are making the same mistake **yet** again.

Another way to look at it is that you are just being yourself **yet** again. *"I am true to myself. This is the way I am. You can just take me as you find me. It's too difficult trying to second guess everyone's sensitivities or predict when the triggers will occur. I'm just going to be myself and the world will have to accept me as I am."* Well good luck with that.

We could talk about these social errors in terms of what you did to yourself or in terms of what you did to others. For example, you might be overly keen and gushing, or you might be overly apologetic, overly clinging, shy, or hiding. Or you might shame others, respond obtusely, or come

across as irritable or angry or you might display rashness or impulsiveness.

It doesn't really matter if there are behaviours or responses not in the list above. You can make your own list. What we are talking about here is **the realisation that your behaviours or responses put you at risk socially**. In other words you believe that your credibility or acceptability is threatened by your behaviours or responses. At its worst, this is the threat of social inhalation; and perhaps at some other level, the threat of shame or the threat of imperfection.

So: *"If only I could change myself to be more credible and acceptable."* Although this is a powerfully intuitive solution it's probably the least likely to solve this particular problem. Of course you should always do what you can to improve yourself. But can you prevent yourself from making those social errors?

It's pretty hard to change well ingrained habits. By the time we become adults our personality is the sum total of our adaptations to life. By the time we reach 20 our personality is a stable system of conditioning, beliefs, rules and attitudes. We end up with well-worn grooves.

So are we doomed to suffer? It seems that we can keep a lid on ourselves up to a point. Likewise the world will tolerate us up to a point. We can bumble along. We can just keep on going regardless of the uncomfortable feeling in our body. Or you could find out what's going on and make things better for yourself. You can at least change the way you feel.

A sense of proportion

To begin with we need a sense of proportion. No, seriously, this part is important. This is like leaning back in the chair to watch, to see how it works and fits together.

For example, even if there is something to learn from your social errors, is your relentless suffering a proportional response? Why accept the suffering as necessary? Who made up that rule;

you **must** suffer because of your social errors?

It's not as if the suffering has a function or a purpose. It doesn't accelerate a learning process for example. The suffering is something that we reflect upon and then make the promise to ourselves that we won't make that mistake again; but low and behold, there it is; we do it again, and again, and again.

Hating our self is the suffering. We feel it. It becomes our consciousness and our source of knowledge. We go by how we feel. "*I feel bad so I'm bad*", or "*I feel bad because* [inset the *blame story*]".

At this point we can establish that the suffering serves no purpose except to punish our imperfections. Is this even a thing? I suppose that, if you have a Judeo-Christian background, the suffering atones for your sins. But the *sin of imperfection*, I don't buy it? Being imperfect is an inconvenience at worst, surely. There's the sense of proportion for you.

Adrenaline

Ok so the suffering serves no purpose. Yet we continue to suffer. Our social errors are the result of well-worn grooves in our personality. So it seems that we are doomed to suffer. So we have to ask, *what is this suffering?*

For example, we have that sick gutted experience that we take to be meaningfully linked to the *faux-pas*. In other words, in our mind there is the *faux-pas* and it has significance because of the way we feel. We know it's true. We can feel it; it's real.

What we would never consider, or take into account, is that the feeling is actually adrenaline. That initial sick gutted feeling is the initial release of adrenaline. Then the adrenaline-production is kept up by the later reflections and reminders about that *faux-pas* event.

Elevated levels of adrenaline over an extended period of time will make you feel ill, tense and reactive. This is how the adrenaline feels in your body.

So why does it matter that the feeling is the adrenaline? "*Why can't we just go by what the adrenaline feels like? If the adrenaline feels bad then surely this means that the faux-pas was bad?*"

It matters because the adrenaline does not have

intelligence. The presence of adrenaline in your body at elevated levels over an extended period of time does not have a practical function. In fact it is physically very damaging to your body.ⁱⁱ

The felt experience

The suffering, as a felt experience, is a side effect of the adrenaline's presence. In this sense the on-going suffering is not actually a result of the *faux-pas*. It is instead a side-effect of the way in which the adrenaline feels.

Adrenaline is a shape-shifter. The experience can be labelled differently depending on the context in which we experience it. We have many labels for the felt experience of adrenaline such as, suffering, stress, anxiety, dread, guilt, shame, fear, alienation, etc. But here's a brain twister, what is the difference between excitement and anxiety?ⁱⁱⁱ They are both adrenaline based experiences. In one situation we call the felt experience *excitement* and in another we call it *anxiety*. It's the same adrenaline in both situations.

Ok so the suffering serves no purpose and it comes down to adrenaline production. Our adrenaline production comes down to the *sympathetic response in the autonomic nervous system*, aka the Emergency Button.

Just as a further note, where the felt experience also includes tiredness, fatigue or exhaustion for no good reason, then we bring *cortisol* into the discussion. For example, stressed, anxious, depressed people often say that they have lost their motivation or that they feel unmotivated. In just about every case it's really about energy levels not motivation.

In a nutshell the cortisol mucks around with your blood sugar levels and thus literally robs you of your energy. Our feet are on the ground here. This is not an esoteric discussion. This is about real energy that can be measured and quantified as calories or kilojoules.

The Emergency Button

When it comes to adrenaline and cortisol production, we humans have a certain amount of control over our Emergency Button (the sympathetic response in our autonomic nervous system).

The sense of proportion here is that we do have a certain amount of control. It's not as if we have no

control at all; and it is not the case that we have excellent control. We can attain the heights of pretty-well in control. This is doable and not too much of a strain.

To begin with we will only ever have control of our emergency button after-the-fact. We will never have control over our emergency button before the *faux-pas* event occurs. In other words, we humans don't see it happening, we don't see it coming, but we will know that it has happened.^{iv}

It's important to know that you have absolutely no control over that initial adrenaline release at the time of the *faux-pas* event. This information sets the scene for what we can do and what we can't do. This is good news because it means that we can direct our efforts to where we can have the most success.

The first observation is that it's not all one thing. The suffering that we experience from the *faux-pas* is not just one event, it is an ongoing event. What is more, we usually have a series of ongoing events that overlap and tumble along over the top of each other.

This is where we need to take a breath, lean back in the seat, and take a look with curiosity and interest. Let's break it down. There is the *initial response* and there is the *ongoing response*.

The *initial response* is what happens in the *faux-pas* event. The realisation of the *faux-pas* is the trigger. There is immediate discomfort from the initial surge of adrenaline.

An interesting feature of adrenaline is that its effect will last for minutes only. Even if you were to be injected with a large dose of adrenaline, the effect would be counted in minutes, not hours or days. Therefore the discomfort from the initial adrenaline release from the *faux-pas* will also pass very quickly given half a chance.

So to be suffering with felt experiences of stress, anxiety, dread, guilt, shame, etc., the adrenaline is being topped-up repeatedly. For ongoing suffering the emergency button is being repeatedly activated. **It's the head-chatter that does that.**

The *ongoing response* is where the head-chatter keeps it alive. This is where the elevated levels of adrenaline and cortisol are repeatedly topped up. In other words, the suffering from a *faux-pas* continues because the adrenaline continues, the cortisol follows; the *continuing response* of producing adrenaline and cortisol.

This is where we need to develop a good relationship with our nervous system; in particular our autonomic nervous system; to be more accurate, the *sympathetic response* in our *autonomic nervous system*, the emergency button. In practical terms this means that you develop the skills that help you to get off the emergency button in a timely manner.

The trouble is we don't ever see it that way, particularly in the heat of the moment. We have trouble even remembering that it's the adrenaline that we need to deal with. Instead, we tend to get bogged down in the head-chatter and our blame theories.

Getting bogged down

If we are talking about head-chatter generally, we would not focus purely on social errors as the only trigger. But certainly it could be that social errors are at least one reliable trigger for your head-chatter.

We're doing the head-chatter as an attempt to resolve the threat; in this example the threat of social inhalation or at least the threat of shame or imperfection. The trouble is the head-chatter is not addressing the threat as something to resolve. In other words, the head-chatter is not structured and purposely addressing the threat.

The head-chatter doesn't say for example, "*Oh my God I was threatened by the comment about my credibility last night*". This could be an example of thinking that could lead to letting-go, to maintain forward momentum. The head-chatter doesn't resolve because it says things like, "*That bastard didn't believe me, he's just a fat prick*". This kind of mental activity says, *get out more adrenaline we have a fight on our hands*.

Our head-chatter won't be an attempt to defuse. It will **not** say for example, "*I must brush up on my facts on that topic and try to find a way to be better understood*." Instead our head-chatter inflames and is likely to say, "*They're always picking on me. I must have 'stupid' written across my forehead or something. No one values my point of view. They always make out like I'm an idiot*."

Our head-chatter **doesn't** say for example, "*Yes I did feel a bit threatened when they laughed at me last night*." Our head-chatter is more likely to say, "*Well, I can tell you, I won't be going back there*,

even if it was the last place on earth."

Our head-chatter would **never** say, *"They reject me because I'm so pushy. I'll have to make sure that I don't over-do it."* Our head-chatter is most likely to say, *"For sure they all think that I'm a prick. But if it wasn't for me the whole thing would go pear-shaped. I must be stupid. I get sucked in every time."*

There is the seductive quality to the head-chatter. It sucks us in with its elements of truth. The one compelling element of truth is, *"If they didn't do that to me, I wouldn't feel like this."* How can you argue with that as the truth?

The trouble with the element of truth, in the example above, is that it has a **focus on the initial suffering and does nothing to resolve the ongoing suffering**. The element of truth will trap you in the head-chatter and will guarantee your ongoing suffering.

We can get stuck on the fact that it happened; the *faux-pas*. We felt the adrenaline. It was an unpleasant experience, then we get stuck on the fact that it happened. It's as if we need the ongoing suffering to vindicate our outrage, our sense of justice, our sense of validation, or our desire for vengeance, etc. We get on a roll.

Take venting out-loud as an example. If you tend to vent and rant, have you noticed how easy it is to get going? Have you noticed how desperately you seek out an audience? Have you noticed how difficult it is to stop once you get going? Have you noticed how the venting just goes around in circles and never resolves? Have you noticed the adrenaline in your gut at the same time?

The head-chatter is the venting but in your head and not out loud. Or sometimes people will mutter their head-chatter to themselves. Some people admit that in their mind they have an audience for some of their head-chatter. We get on a roll.

In our head-chatter we are addressing the issue brilliantly. In our head-chatter we know exactly what to say to regain our credibility and acceptability. The only thing we **do** accomplish is stress.

Whether we are embroiled in our head-chatter or on a roll with our venting we are on the emergency button. This is because regardless of the content, the head-chatter or vent will be the continuing expression of the threat. It won't be a

resolution of the threat but will remain an expression of the threat.

What to do

What to do instead of feeling stressed and hating yourself for making those social errors?

At the top of the list of things to do is *self-absolution*. Definitely accept your imperfections. Definitely improve yourself where you can. Definitely forgive yourself for being an imperfect human.

Self-absolution is on the top of the list for practical reasons. It's all about the mind body connection. If in your mind you are acting out a battle, then in your body you have elevated levels of adrenaline and cortisol.

The practical matter is that you don't need all that adrenaline and cortisol in your body at elevated levels over an extended period time. This is called stress and it's not good for you.

For practical reasons definitely accept a certain amount of social discomfort; like the way you might accept the aches and pains of a good gym workout.

The social errors will happen. The discomfort will pass if you give it half a chance. The adrenaline and cortisol will quickly return to baseline if you let them. What we don't need is the head-chatter that keeps it alive.

Next on the list of things to do is to manage your head-chatter. It's the head-chatter that continuously exposes your body to elevated levels of adrenaline and cortisol. It's the head-chatter that exposes you to the threat of social annihilation or shame or imperfection. The head-chatter will be a constant expression of the threat.

The main point here is that the constant expression of a threat is not the resolution of the threat. Therefore the resolution is in your ability to let go of, or positively disengage from the head-chatter.

Let-go to disengage

Here I'm referring to the requirement to let-go of, and disengage from the head-chatter. We're not solving the problems of the world here, we're working on changing the way you feel.

Our head-chatter is largely subconscious. In other words you will not notice that you're doing it until

somehow your attention is drawn to it. You will find yourself in it. You will find yourself in the story. It's not something that you would initiate, like thinking.

The primary skill here is the *noticing and focusing*.^v This is a skill that you can develop to enhance your ability to notice your shift of attention into the head-chatter and then to bring your attention back to real-time. At the very least you would enhance your ability to notice the difference between thinking and head-chatter. This is a skill that you develop through your curious and interested observations (mindfulness-awareness).

It doesn't matter how you discover your head-chatter.

You might discover your head-chatter by the way you feel. The felt experience of adrenaline is always a clue that something is happening. The presence of elevated adrenaline in your body, for no good reason, is probably the most likely way to find yourself in the head-chatter.

So if you have that felt experience of stress, anxiety, dread, guilt, shame, fear, alienation, etc., then you have head-chatter. The head-chatter will be urging you on to produce more adrenaline. The head-chatter will be telling you that you don't have head-chatter. Or it might be a blame story. Look around you, if there is no one coming at you with an axe, your house is not on fire, no one is in mortal peril then the adrenaline is there because of head-chatter. In basic terms your body got the message about a threat and the message just keeps on coming.

A part from going by how you feel, you could discover your head-chatter by direct conscious attention to the activity of your mind. For example, head-chatter is different to thinking. We are likely to report that we had unwanted thinking. We are likely to use the word thinking when we really mean head-chatter.

Head-chatter could seem like thinking. It might be in your head like thinking. If you do notice the head-chatter first, then check in with your body; there will be the signs of adrenaline.

The head-chatter will sometimes give itself away. For example, the head-chatter will be a vent or a blame story; it will not resolve; it will go around and around; it will not lead to a resolution. It does your head-in and you note the confusion in your

mind.

Ultimately and as a general rule, our head-chatter is always the expressions of unresolvable threats.^{vi} It doesn't matter how you catch-on, or capture it. You may notice it by the way you feel; or you might notice it because you're confused; the noticing is the skill.

This is the pointy end of Mindfulness; the 'noticing that your mind has left the room'. On this point alone there is no hard and fast rule that says that you must be present at all times, in the tedious absolute sense, but we do need to know when our mind wanders off too far. The head-chatter is the mind running off to join the circus, *so to speak*. A wondering mind will cause damage.

To capture the head-chatter you can bring your attention back to real-time then review the head-chatter. With the head-chatter captured you have it there in your sights. You then have the option to *displace* or to *diffuse*. You do this to positively disengage from the head-chatter.

To *displace* is no more than maintaining your focus of attention in real-time. You displace the head-chatter with the present moment. The head-chatter itself takes your attention off to elsewhere. To displace the head-chatter you apply effort and discipline; you maintain your attention on the matters before you in real-time.

Real-time is where you are physically. It's your focus of attention that we're talking about here. We're not solving the problems of the world; we are focusing our attention in a particular way, on purpose, to change the way you feel.

To *defuse* the head-chatter means that you go one step further; you call it out; and you name the threat or threats. This is the more deep psychology approach. This approach very much highlights letting-go as a process that brings us to a positive disengagement.^{vii}

To defuse implies that you have arrived at a resolution of sorts. Whilst there is an expression of a threat, as far as your body is concerned, there is a real threat. So it is a matter of convincing your body that the threat is over.

Remember that our head-chatter is an expression of *unresolvable threats*. These are threats that exist because you believe in them. What we believe is real is real in its consequences.^{viii}

These beliefs are an expression of your

personality. They are the results of your formative years as your personality developed. These are not beliefs that you can just forget or ignore or just leave unattended. These beliefs are the well-worn grooves that get you stressed.

So if you find that you experience adrenaline from committing a *faux-pas* then at least your nervous

system is working properly. Also, the unpleasantness of the adrenaline has nothing to do with who you are and how you relate to the world. You are probably not perfect but most likely you are authentic if you make mistakes.

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- ⁱ *Faux-pas* is the French way of saying the *wrong step*; in English *faux-pas* mean *social error*.
 - ⁱⁱ Read *Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers* by Robert Sapolsky and *The Stress of Life* by Hans Selye, to get a full appreciation of the damage done to our body by adrenaline and cortisol
 - ⁱⁱⁱ This question is answered in the article titled [Anxiety as the Felt Experience](#).
 - ^{iv} Nisbett, R. E., and DeCamp-Wilson, T. (1977). *Telling more than we can know: verbal reports on mental process*, *Psychological Review*, 84(3), 231-259.
 - ^v *Three Minute Breathing Meditation*: <https://byronbaypsychologist.com.au/psychologist-byronbay/mind-skills-articles/02-Meditation-threeminutesbreathing.pdf>
 - ^{vi} *Threat Thesaurus User's Guide*: <https://byronbaypsychologist.com.au/psychologist-byronbay/mind-skills-articles/The-Threat-Thesaurus-2019-11-13.pdf>
 - ^{vii} *Let-Go for Health Sake*: <https://byronbaypsychologist.com.au/psychologist-byronbay/mind-skills-articles/Let-Go-for-Health-Sake.pdf>
 - ^{viii} According to sociologist W. I. Thomas, "if a person perceives a situation as real, it is real in its consequences." The Thomas Theorem: our behaviour depends not on the objective reality of a situation but on our subjective interpretation of reality. www.sparknotes.com -- identity-and-reality