

# Threat Thesaurus User's Guide

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The Threat Thesaurus (TT, see Appendix) makes sense if you look at anxiety and depression as felt experiences rather illnesses.<sup>i</sup> The illness approach says that the felt experience, the way you feel, is a symptom of anxiety or depression. Whereas here we say that the felt experience is the anxiety and depression.

The basic assumption is that a felt experience is potentially changeable. To change the way you feel is doable. In other words, it can be done.

The illness view does not even explain the cause of the felt experiences of anxiety or depression because the focus is on the theoretical illness. So, let's get grounded. For example, to experience anxiety or depression you need *sustained elevated levels of adrenaline and cortisol* in your bloodstream. This point alone is crucial to your understanding of what's happening to you with these felt experiences.

It's not just *elevated levels* of adrenaline and cortisol that creates these unwanted felt experiences, it's the *sustained elevated levels*. The illness point of view does not explain this or what to do about it.

In other words, when you experience anxiety or depression there is something driving your autonomic nervous system to continuously produce adrenaline and cortisol. You'd want to know what this is and how it works. You'd want to strip away the mystery and the theories so that you can get on with changing the way you feel.

To have *sustained elevated* levels of adrenaline and cortisol you have an *unresolved threat* at the very least; and quite probably you don't know what it is. This user's

guide is a tool for naming these otherwise unknown threats.

## Head-Chatter

The head-chatter is responsible for your sustained elevated levels of adrenaline and cortisol. The head-chatter is whatever it is that you do in your mind to keep the threat alive. The head-chatter, when it's there in your head, is a continuous expression of the threat whether you recognise it or not. The emergency button<sup>ii</sup> is activated whether you're aware of the head-chatter or not.

The head-chatter can be obvious or subtle. It can be conscious or at first subconscious.<sup>iii</sup> It can be like a set of stories that keep looping and repeating. It could be like conversations. Or it could be that you have an audience there in your head-chatter. It's not something that you do on purpose; you will simply find yourself doing it, if you notice it at all. It's sneaky.

Head-chatter could be like muttering to yourself. If we do it out loud we can call it venting. Have you noticed how people venting get louder and more worked up as they continue? It's the adrenaline.

The head-chatter, regardless of its form and regardless of its content, is the continuous expression of the unresolved threat. This is why the head-chatter hangs around, or seems to endless loop back on itself. The threat remains unresolved regardless of the continuous head-chatter. Consequently there are the sustained elevated levels of adrenaline and cortisol to contend with.

The head-chatter will not address the threat. It might complain about it; but it will not resolve it. The content of the head-chatter could easily be a diversion from the threat. All

the same the head-chatter will grind-on. It will achieve false hope at best whilst it whacks away on your emergency button.

We will never arrive at the resolution through the content of the head-chatter. The only way to arrive at a resolution is to name the threat and to deal with it directly. You need to name the threat at the very least.

## Threat labels

To address the threat you need some way to identify it. You need a handle on it to get hold of it. What you can use is a label. The Threat Thesaurus (TT) shows a comprehensive and exclusive list of 11 threat labels. In other words, the 11 threats listed should cover the territory of head-chatter threats. At the same time there is no significant overlap in the definitions for each label.

It is safe to assume that if you have a sample of head-chatter, regardless of the content, the head-chatter will be an expression of at least one of the 11 threats in the thesaurus.

It is also possible to observe more than one threat in any one sample of head-chatter. Regardless of the number of threats in your head-chatter at any given time, the TT has the scope to cover the ground without being boundless and endless. We're after a resolution here, not a wild goose chase.

What you will learn, from observing your head-chatter in this way, is that you have a list of threats. You will discover your list of favourites, or your playlist. The list will not be exhaustive or endless. There will be at least a couple or so on the list.

You won't find random threats just turning up in your head-chatter. The threats in your head-chatter will be from your playlist. When your head-chatter is triggered, at any point in time, it will be about at least one of your threats.

Once you have established your list of threats you can then rank-order them from most prevalent to least prevalent. Through Mindful

observation you will notice that some of your threats might be triggered daily whilst others are triggered occasionally. It all depends on the availability or prevalence of the triggers; and we have no control over the triggers.

Once you discover your threat labels with the aid of the TT, you can then go on to use whatever labels suit you. If you can find your own labels that make sense to you, then you're on to something. In other words, we need a specific label for each threat, regardless of the labels we settle on.

The objective is to name the threat or threats that are expressed in the head-chatter, in real-time. This is an ongoing project. You do this as part of the process to change the way you feel.

## Capture the Head-Chatter

We need to capture the head-chatter to learn from it. With practise you will develop this skill. At first it is a difficult task because the head-chatter is such a slippery customer. Also, in real-time the head-chatter is often in the heat of the moment.

Our head-chatter is seductive; it sucks us in; it contains an element of truth but not the whole truth. It will disguise itself as thinking. We find ourselves in it. We don't ever go there on purpose. It's often subconscious. Therefore, just by noticing your head-chatter you're doing well for starters.<sup>iv</sup>

To recognise the head-chatter we need to appreciate that the possibilities for content in our head-chatter are boundless. In other words, the subject matter of the head-chatter's content could be about anything. You name any conceivable topic and your head-chatter could be banging away on it; but ultimately, we are not interested in the content. The head-chatter's content is not the primary issue when the intention is to change the way you feel; mainly because the content is all about an unresolved threat that is probably unresolvable.

The issue is *the expression* of a threat or

threats in the head-chatter. This is a thematic expression. Think of it like a text message (SMS) on your phone. The message that you create is the content; then on top of that there is the metadata. When you press send, you transmit both the message and the metadata. When it comes to dealing with the head-chatter, it's the metadata, *so to speak*, that we're interested in. In other words, we need to develop an interest in the thematic expression of the head-chatter's content. But we need to view the content to get there.

There is a skill development phase to capturing the head-chatter. To develop the skill you need to capture and write down samples of head-chatter. The skill of capturing the head-chatter could take a few weeks of practise for a thorough job.

For development you need to repeat the process; write down the head-chatter then work out what it represents or expresses. This is like an exercise repetition; like 10 push-ups very day. In this case it's at least one sample of head-chatter every day; write it down and work it out. In the end you will have the skill to do this standing on your feet in the heat of the moment and you won't need to write it down.

How much practise do I need? Personally I think that you couldn't do too much practise for this skill; just so long as you have a sound understanding of what you're doing and why you're doing it.

In other words you would be Mindful in your approach to capturing your head-chatter. In this context Mindful means two things. Firstly, you need to be clear about the difference between head-chatter and thinking. Thinking brings on the resolution whereas head-chatter brings on the adrenaline and cortisol. Secondly, we're talking about a conscious intention with a real-time focus tempered by curiosity and interest (the non-judging mind).

Also you need to give it as much time as it takes to discover your full list of threats; this will be your list of favourites; it will be a short

playlist; but it can be like an Easter-egg hunt to name them.

When it comes to writing down the head-chatter there are four recommended *dos* and *don'ts* to make life easier.

Firstly, develop your skill for noticing and focusing.<sup>v</sup> In other words, you notice that you're in the head-chatter, and then bring your focus back to real-time. In other words, you need to step outside of your head-chatter to view it. You can't view it from within; you will not find the useful information from being immersed in the content. The content is the distraction (diversion); this is particularly so if the content is embroiled in a grievance or a desire for example.

Secondly, when you write down the head-chatter you don't need to spend time or effort describing anything. For example, you don't need to spend any time on describing the head-chatter or how you feel.

Just use the required time to write down the head-chatter *verbatim*, or as close to word-for-word as possible.

Thirdly, don't try to write it down whilst it's happening. Some of the most likely times for head-chatter are, whilst driving a car or having a shower or cutting a slice of bread or whilst jogging or whilst preparing your child for bed or walking to the shops and so on.

Also, it's not as if you can just grab a pen and paper and start having head-chatter. It comes and goes as it pleases. It's all to do with the availability of the triggers. We have no control over the comings and goings of the triggering-events.

In any case, even if you could dive for the pen and paper when you first notice some head-chatter, by the time you have the pen poised, the head-chatter will be gone; the opportunity will have passed.

Fourthly, focus on the task of capturing the head-chatter. Do not try to analyse the head-chatter. Do not rationalise the head-chatter. This is not an exercise of immersing yourself

in the head-chatter one way or the other. There is no need to go down the rabbit hole.

For the skill development we need a strategy to remember the head-chatter so that we can write it down at the first opportunity.

The main strategy is to wrap the head-chatter in thinking. In other words you give the head-chatter structure to make it memorable. The thinking would sound something like this... "What did I just say then [*repeat the head-chatter to yourself*]? So what was I saying before that [*repeat the head-chatter to yourself*]? How did I get to that topic [*search your mind and repeat the head-chatter to yourself*]? What was the trigger? So how did that go again [*repeat the head-chatter in your mind*]?" Etc.

For success here we need our *curiosity* and *interest* filters. We are not, for example capturing the head-chatter to keep the adrenaline pumping. We do it to remember the head-chatter. So we are not capturing the head-chatter to dive deeper into it. You certainly wouldn't want to be developing the head-chatter; but we do need a good look at it long enough to learn from it; no more than required.

Capturing the head-chatter might be a formidable task for anyone. It might seem too embarrassing. We might *not want to know* about the head-chatter because of its content.

The natural curiosity that we need is the idea that we do need to know and that we want to know. It's like eating raw carrots; you have to chew because your gut needs the fibre. Curiosity shines the light in, to give you a good look; you might need to be curious on purpose. This will require at least some effort; like chewing raw carrots.

In the end, the content is not the focus. It's just that we need the content, intact, to see what the head-chatter is expressing; this is all about what you see when you look past the content of the head-chatter.

Once written down we have it captured. With sufficient practise you will develop the skill of capturing the head-chatter without writing it down. You will be able to capture it in your head, standing on your feet in the heat of the moment.<sup>vi</sup>

## Name the Threat

With the head-chatter captured and written down we can go to work. During your skill development phase take the time to read the captured head-chatter with Mindful curiosity and interest. During the process of the skill development you will need to read it several times. Don't allow yourself to be sucked into the content. Try to at least get an idea of a growing distance between yourself and the content.

We need to listen in a certain way. We need to listen past the seduction of the content's drama and elements of truth in order to hear the expression of the threat. The head-chatter after all is the expression of a threat or threats regardless of the content.

By capturing the head-chatter in writing means that we have an object. Now we look for objectivity. We ask a useful question.

Q: "What is the head-chatter about?"

A: The head-chatter is about the threat of [... *insert Threat Label* ...].

What we're looking for is a way to identify the threat. We need a label for the threat so that we can complete the answer. We need the answer to at least achieve a functional resolution of the threat.

The TT (see Appendix) shows 11 Threat Labels in the left column. These labels each describe an identifiable threat as per its definition.

The Threat Labels are defined by the list of Theme Labels. The Theme Labels gather-in the definition for each Threat Label. Thus each threat is distinctive in the list. There should be little or no overlap in what each Threat Label represents. In other words the threat of *Shame* is not the same as the threat

of *Abuse*.

Uncovering the threat is a step in the process for adrenaline and cortisol management. For this to be practical we need fewer labels for our threats rather than an endless list. For example, threats of *chaos*, *time wasting*, *inefficiency* and *incompetence* can all be summed up as the threat of *imperfection*.

You can test the head-chatter's flavour by using the *Head-Chatter sounds like...* column. You can ask, what's the head-chatter sound like? You're likely to have your own idea about what it sounds like, so read more than one set of examples. Don't just confirm what you believe you know, test what you know.

Test your theory out. For example you could ask the question, "Why would it be *Imperfection* and not *Shame*?" Or, "Why would it be *Abuse* and not *Abandonment*?"

As an example, a person could notice the adrenaline as the felt experience of guilt. For a perfectionist this guilt-feeling could easily be mistaken as *shame* with the, *I'm not good enough*, head-chatter. On examination of the Theme Labels for *Shame* we see the threat of *exposure*, yes, but there is also a focus on threats of *scandal*, *disgrace*, *dishonour*, etc.

On the other hand the themes for *Imperfection* are the threats of *chaos*, *disorder*, *getting it wrong*, *time wasting*, *incompetence*, etc. So what fits the head-chatter better?

You could sum up by saying that the threat of *Imperfection* is all about the *rights and wrongs*; whereas the threat of *Shame* is all about *exposure and disgrace*. Again, what fits better? At this point it is likely to be one or the other. In the first instance, the answer would not be set in concrete in any case; revision and refinement will come with further insights.

Likewise why would it be *Abuse* and not *Abandonment*? The head-chatter says, '*She says she's working back late, yeah, I bet she's seeing someone else.*' Both *Abuse* and

*Abandonment* have paranoid themes so there could always be that initial confusion.

*Abuse* is all about the threats of *persecution*, *bullying*, *ridicule*, *corruption*, *attack*, etc. *Abandonment* is about threats of *desertion*, *being left*, *rejection*, *being forgotten* etc. In this example we could sum up by asking is the head-chatter about *being attacked* or is it about *being left on your own*?

It would be safe to pick one over the other based on what you know about yourself. At the very least at the beginning of the skill development you can make a list of your own *likely suspects*. Over time your list of favourites will emerge.

What we're after in the end, from the period of skill development, is our list of favourites. In other words, you will most likely discover that you subscribe to more than one threat. Most likely in total your head-chatter is the expression of a small number of threats. This will be your list of favourites.

Any one sample of head-chatter could be an expression of more than one threat. Most likely though, any one sample will not necessarily contain all your threats at once.

As mentioned before, each of your threats will have a particular sound or voice. For example, if you have *Imperfection* and say *Abandonment* as favourites, they will each sound different; you will not be confused once you understand how each of them sounds in your head-chatter. Do the exercise for yourself; look at the *sounds like* column in the TT; see how each threat sounds different to the others as an expression in your head-chatter.

The *sounds-like column* is not a list of exactly matching words. The emphasis is on what it '*sounds like*'. We're looking for the thematic expression. Try not to get bogged down in the literal meaning of the words.

Over many repetitions of capturing the head-chatter and naming the threat or threats you will see the pattern emerging. You will truly

get to know yourself.

You'll see how your mind works. You get to go back stage and see the ropes *as it were*. The same threat or sets of threats will always be there regardless of the content of your head-chatter.

The TT is a tool for naming the threat with the intention of resolving it. The resolution is something that needs to occur then-and-there, on the spot, in the heat of the moment, in real-time. By engaging in the process your adrenaline and cortisol levels will return to baseline quickly enough. You will change the way you feel.

### Change the way you feel

Is this your objective? Do you want to change the way you feel? This is doable if you know what to do and how it works.

Here are three inescapable facts. Firstly, if you feel anxious or depressed then you have sustained elevated levels of adrenaline and cortisol in your body. Secondly, the sustained elevated levels are due to at least one unresolved threat. Thirdly, you will change the way you feel by resolving the threat or threats in real-time.

The key is the head-chatter. You need to find a way to positively disengage<sup>vii</sup> from the head-chatter's grip. You need to do this on the spot when the head-chatter is there in your head. Sometimes this is simply a matter of recognising the head-chatter and then simply directing your attention back to your real-time focus. Sometimes you need a bit more ammunition. Sometimes you need help to escape the head-chatter's seductive grip.

The extra ammunition is to name the threat. You can listen to the head-chatter long enough to get the message, then you can let it go. You do this by naming the threat. For example the head-chatter could be a replay of events of something that happened last Sunday morning. You recognise the head-

chatter as the same old story. You've heard this story before in many other samples of content. This time the content is about last Sunday morning. But you know it's your *abandonment* story. You can let it go because for one thing you've heard it before.

These head-chatter threats only exist in real-time in your head-chatter.

What is your real-time focus? Is your attention focused in the present or focused elsewhere in the head-chatter? Your body will respond to your shifts in attentional focus. **If you focus on the threat then your body will produce the adrenaline and cortisol.** If you focus on the present moment instead of the head-chatter, then your emergency chemicals will resolve to base-line. You will change the way you feel.

To find the present moment in real-time look to your left, what do you see? Look straight ahead, what do you see? Take a breath, what do you feel? Then relax your diaphragm to let the breath go. What do you feel? Even that small exercise could change the way you feel, even if it's just noticeable at first. You get better with practise.

### Further reading

The Head-Chatter Honey Trap.

<https://byronbaypsychologist.com.au/psychologist-byronbay/mind-skills-articles/HoneyTrap.pdf>

Let-Go for Health Sake.

<https://byronbaypsychologist.com.au/psychologist-byronbay/mind-skills-articles/Let-Go-for-Health-Sake.pdf>

The Faux-Pas and Hating Yourself.

<https://byronbaypsychologist.com.au/psychologist-byronbay/mind-skills-articles/Faux-Pas-and-Hating-Yourself.pdf>

Three-Minute Breathing Meditation.

<https://byronbaypsychologist.com.au/psychologist-byronbay/mind-skills-articles/02-Meditation-threeminutesbreathing.pdf>

Anxiety as the Felt Experience.

<https://byronbaypsychologist.com.au/psychologist-byronbay/mind-skills-articles/AnxietyAsTheFeltExperience.pdf>

## Appendix: 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

<sup>i</sup> Psychological treatment is not recommended where the underlying issue is a physical illness. Any information here on the subject of anxiety or depression is in the context where any "psychological masquerade" is already ruled-out. Google the search-term "psychological masquerade" to read about illnesses that present as anxiety and/or depression.

<sup>ii</sup> Emergency Button is a metaphor to represent the function of the sympathetic response in the autonomic nervous system. For example, elevate levels of adrenaline and cortisol comes from a jolly good whack on the emergency button.

<sup>iii</sup> Subconscious means that your mental activity is not noticed. Mental processes become conscious when you turn your focus of attention to the mental activity.

<sup>iv</sup> *The Head-Chatter Honey Trap* article covers the issue of the head-chatter's seductive qualities. <https://byronbaypsychologist.com.au/psychologist-byronbay/mind-skills-articles/HoneyTrap.pdf>

<sup>v</sup> Three-Minute Breathing Meditation to practice the Noticing and Focusing: <https://byronbaypsychologist.com.au/psychologist-byronbay/mind-skills-articles/02-Meditation-threeminutesbreathing.pdf>

<sup>vi</sup> You will find more details on the subject of capturing the head-chatter in the article titled Anxiety as the felt Experience, <https://byronbaypsychologist.com.au/psychologist-byronbay/mind-skills-articles/AnxietyAsTheFeltExperience.pdf>

<sup>vii</sup> Positive disengagement from the head-chatter is covered in detail in the Head-Chatter Honey Trap article.