



FLEMING VIGNA BALMER
REGISTERED PSYCHOLOGISTS

Why can't I handle this?

On being overwhelmed by Posttraumatic Anxiety

By Dr. James Alcock

Most people like to believe that they are able to control their emotions, at least most of the time.

We are adults, after all! What a shock it is, then, to find that following a traumatic experience, our emotions often control us, and there is very little that we can do about it. This realization has very negative effects on one's self-image, which compounds the problem considerably, and can lead to profound interference with normal family, occupational, and social activities.

Consider this example: You are sitting in your car at an intersection, waiting for the light to change. Suddenly, another vehicle rear-ends you, and you sit helplessly at the mercy of cross-traffic as you are pushed into the intersection. The fear that you are going to be killed overwhelms you. Fortunately, no one hits you, and you suffer only some whiplash pain.

However, something strange occurs in the days that follow. Despite your efforts to put on a brave face, despite your knowledge that nothing "serious" has happened to you, you shake when you get behind the wheel to drive, and feel woozy when in heavy traffic. As a result, you now only drive when it is really necessary, and you avoid the highways, where speed frightens you even more. As a passenger, you are nervous and "jumpy," and find yourself pressing on an imaginary brake

each time that danger seems to loom, which is often. You have trouble getting your mind off the accident, and sometimes awake in the night, terrified by nightmares. One day, while walking to your car in a busy shopping mall parking lot, you feel very dizzy, experience strong pains in your chest, and have difficulty catching your breath. Fearing this to be a heart attack, you drive to the nearest hospital, where you are examined and told that this is "only" anxiety. Your family doctor gives you medication that helps control some of the symptoms, but they do not go away, and this worries you even further.

As time goes on, you begin to withdraw from your social life: others do not understand your problem, and besides, you no longer enjoy most social activities. You worry about what has happened to you, and about your inability to rise above it. You lie in bed at night, your mind focussed on the changes in your life since the accident. Lack of sleep makes it all the harder to function during the day. Your memory and concentration are letting you down, you are becoming more irritable with your family, and you are difficult to be around.

What is happening to you? The explanation is really quite simple: your body is working just the way that it is designed to do. Part of the nervous system, the autonomic nervous system, does not connect directly to the part of the brain that does the thinking, and is therefore not under conscious control. As well

Fleming Vigna Balmer - Registered Psychologists

Bramalea Medical Centre, 18 Kensington Rd., Suite 403, Brampton, Ontario L6T 4S5 | Tel: (905) 793-8858 Fax: (905) 793-8134
Email: info@fvb-psychologists.com Web: www.fvb-psychologists.com

as controlling the internal glands and organs, it serves to energize the body whenever danger is perceived - adrenalin flows into the blood stream; an accelerated heart rate and increased breathing ensure that a plentiful supply of oxygen flows to the muscles; the liver breaks down fats into sugars to provide more energy; and the body becomes a powerful fighting or running machine.

Not only does that reaction furnish great energy with which to deal with danger, it also creates changes in the brain that serve to avoid being in such situations in the future: The next time one experiences a situation that is similar to the one that caused this reaction, the autonomic nervous system will react in anticipation, to "get us ready." So now, when you sit in your car at an intersection, or in heavy traffic, or even when you just think about what might have happened, this autonomic arousal to some degree or another catches you in its grip again. Thinking about all this can lead to insomnia, nightmares, and panic attacks. Force of will does not have much effect, because the autonomic system is not connected to where thinking takes place. Your reaction to the stress leaves you feeling helpless and perhaps even childlike.

Automobile accidents are the leading cause of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and upwards of 45% of such accident victims may develop PTSD, with women being at a somewhat greater risk than men (Blanchard and Hickling, 1997). The more traumatic the experience, of course, the more serious this reaction is likely to be.

Fear of dying in the accident or having been involved in a prior motor vehicle accident both heighten the risk of a debilitating posttraumatic reaction. If there has also been serious physical injury or severe pain, or the loss of a loved one, then the situation is even more complex, with depression and/or grief being of major importance.

Fortunately, good psychological therapy can usually greatly alleviate or overcome such a devastating emotional reaction to trauma. However, early identification of the problem is essential to facilitate treatment and to prevent greater impairment and the development of a chronic, harder to treat, disorder. (Butler, Moffic, and Turkal, 1999). Systematic desensitization is a powerful tool which reduces or eliminates the anxiety component of such a reaction, while cognitive-behavioural therapy is an effective means of overcoming the depression and feelings of helplessness that typically develop as a result of the anxiety reaction.

REFERENCES

- Blanchard , E.B. & Hickling, E.J. (1997) After the crash: Assessment and treatment of motor vehicle accident survivors. Washington,DC:American Psychological Association.
- Butler,D.J., Moffic,H.S., & Turkal,N.W. (1999). Post-traumatic stress reactions following motor vehicle accidents. American Family Physician, 60 (2), 524-534.