FIRST PERSON ACCOUNT

Experiencing Suspicious Thoughts and Paranoia: An Account

Adam[*]

[*]To whom correspondence should be addressed; e-mail: joe.stare@gmail.com

When growing up I was quite a shy child, and although I was quite clever for my age and confident in the company of adults, I really felt lucky to have any friends, and I was usually uncomfortable around kids of my own age. The real problems that I experienced probably began around the time I was 17 or 18, when I felt quite lonely and isolated at school. Even though I had a few friends, I still felt left out and I remember that I started to think that when kids were laughing, that they may have been laughing at me. At the time I knew this was probably wrong, but I couldn't help it, and it started to make me feel even more uncomfortable around school. However, at university, things were better, I didn't feel alone, I made friends and I didn't have these suspicious thoughts for a while, and if I ever did, it didn't affect me.

After university, however, I failed to really get a good start to my career, I was working part time and living with my parents, I had no clue about what I really wanted to do, and because I had no money, I couldn't go out very much. Probably, as a result of being isolated again, the thoughts began to come back. However, this time I began to be under the impression that I had some sort of social handicap, similar to autism and that people could tell this just by the way that I did or didn't make eye contact with them. Consequently, going out on the street became an ordeal because the more self-conscious I felt about my eye contact, the more uncomfortable I felt when looking at people. Eventually, I was convinced that when I was out on the street, everyone who saw me instantly knew I had some sort of social handicap. It actually started to feel as if everybody who met me pretended to treat me normally and then laughed at me behind my back once I'd gone.

Things then took a dramatic turn for the worse after I attended a type of group therapy, which comes under the general name of ''attack therapy.'' It is perhaps difficult to see how a therapy session could trigger psychosis. As you can guess from the title, this type of therapy is where the therapist actually attacks the client. In the intensive therapy sessions I attended, and with the tacit approval of the group, the therapist attacked me hoping to bring about a crisis point in me that would then clear the way to a dramatic ''improvement'' in my personality. Unfortunately, this improvement could only be reached by making me fully realize how fake and pathetic my current personality was. Such an approach perhaps wouldn't affect a confident person too much, but it affected me because at the time, I was looking for some way to change my personality, and I desperately lacked self-esteem and confidence.

I would normally feel very tentative about applying any blame to an external event or person because this is something that as a person I very rarely do. I am much more likely to blame myself entirely for things going wrong rather than other people. Unfortunately, I think that sort of thinking made me the worst client for this course because it really affects people like me, who deep down think that everything really is their fault. The effect of the course was so comprehensive that 2 weeks afterward I tried to kill myself despite never having had a suicidal thought before that day. There are two messages derived from this experience: One, you need to be careful if you tend to blame yourself for everything that goes wrong because this sort of behavior can lead to sudden bouts of powerful depression. Two, avoid any groups or individuals that offer any sort of attack therapy because it is dangerous for your mental health.

After this suicide attempt and some time in hospital, I responded quite well to the medication and I started trying to put my life back together. I needed to get a job, and I needed to cope with my suspicious thoughts. Despite having some therapy, I never once went in to my paranoid thoughts in any detail. However, one of the things I now suffered from was that I thought people were constantly referring to me. I had what is referred to by psychologists as ''ideas of reference.'' During the psychosis, this had reached a very extreme version where I was also delusional. At certain points, I had thought that the world was coming to an end and that the result of this was that the world was constantly referring in a coded way to it's own collapse. I was of course to blame for all this. Somewhat selfishly and perhaps unaccountably, I didn't see the need to kill myself over it.

It took a long time to get to a semblance of normality, but over the last few years despite some blips, I have been reasonably successful. I have had a good job for the last 5 years, I have made lots of new friends, and I have got a place of my own and some money to be able to go out and enjoy life. However, now what I want more than anything else is to be sure that the things that I went through will never happen again. Unfortunately, that is not an easy thing to guarantee, and I think the only way that this can possibly happen is if I become much clearer about my thinking style which brings these things on. One thing that you might hear a lot about is that anxiety is a trigger of suspicious thoughts. I have never been that good at recognizing my own anxiety. Quite a high level of anxiety is pretty normal for me. So normal that I wouldn't normally do anything about it, but I now recognize that it sets the background for the expected potential threats in any situation, and so the suspicious thoughts and ideas of reference can pop right in there.

I find people as having the most potential as a source of threat and because of that I am prone to suspicious thoughts about others. So now what I do is try to address the level of anxiety I feel in these situations. The way I do this is partly indirect and partly direct. The direct part is that if I am in a situation where I might expect a bit of anxiety, but before any suspicious thoughts occur, I say to myself, "there is no threat" and I try and back that up with observations. Almost all my anxiety centers on other people, so the times when I am likely to feel a threat are predictable—it is when I am surrounded by other people or when I know I am about to be surrounded by other people. By anticipating the anxiety and trying to do something before it takes hold enough to lead to a suspicious thought, I can get on top of the anxiety that is feeding in to the suspicious thoughts. Doing something actively about my anxiety before it leads to a suspicious thought is actually a lot easier than dealing with the thoughts once they have occurred because once they occur, it is often very hard to dismiss them, no matter how irrational they might seem to others.

I have discovered that there are two kinds of state of mind that most often lead to me thinking that there is a potential threat. One is when I think I am probably the object of attention. This is closely related to ideas of reference I mentioned before. If you think about it, thinking you are the object of someone else's attention is completely necessary to think that someone is perhaps a threat to you, but what is nice about this is that I usually think I may be the object of attention, without much evidence that this is true. So it means that I can follow-up this thought simply by looking at someone to check whether I really am the object of their attention. If they are looking somewhere else, I can disconfirm the thought. I now know that I am not the object of attention and feel much less anxious as a result. The reason I am

looking is important to remember. For example, just looking around while feeling anxious doesn't work so well, while deciding before I look what I am looking for and what it will mean if I see it, works very well. It is very interesting for me when I first realized that my instinct is almost always not to look for fear of making uncomfortable eye contact, yet most of the time I look and see the person looking elsewhere or absorbed in something and instantly feel more relaxed as a result. The threat level goes down and I am then much less likely to have a suspicious thought. By the way, if they do look at me when I look at them it is strangely enough often still recognizable as accidental eye contact and so still supports the idea that I am not the object of attention.

Another thing I have noticed regarding my level of anxiety when around people is that the other main way in which people can become more of a threat actually comes from myself. It is when I think about them, that I then think if they realized what I am thinking about them they would want to do me some harm. So the event which increases how much anxiety I feel in a situation is simply to have a thought that I then think if revealed would probably lead someone to want to attack me in some way for it. It is pretty simple, and I don't know why it has taken me so long to realize that this affects my anxiety, but now I have, and realizing it has helped me enormously. There are lots of ways that I can practice thinking things and realizing that there is no danger of them being revealed and so the general level of anxiety I feel in situations goes down. I think most psychologists would agree that this is also very freeing as, in general, I used to constantly censor my thoughts and I don't do that anymore, I give my thoughts free reign and don't invest any of them with such importance. One thing that is interesting about this though, is that until I really tried to do something about my anxiety, I would respond anxiously to having thoughts about people, even though there was no immediate evidence in most cases that there was any chance of the thought being revealed. Therefore, it seems to be really important for me to be clear to myself about what I am trying to achieve when allaying my fears. I need to be clear headed and calm and objective about what the evidence I am about to gather means. Only by paying conscious attention to what things should mean, do they come to mean what they should.

Now that I know all this I can trace this fear way back to when I was a little boy and fancied girls and was really afraid that the girls or others would find out. Also, you may remember I said that I was a pretty clever kid. Well I was so clever that a lot of the time I was thinking how stupid the other kids or even the adults were, and I was also really afraid of this showing in my face. So in retrospect, these things do seem to have deep roots.

That pretty much summarizes where I am at the moment, and I feel more confident now than I ever have,

that if I did decide to stop taking the medication, I would still be able to cope, despite the increase in anxiety that I would likely experience as a result of stopping the medication. I hope that anyone reading this will, with help, also soon feel confident that they can overcome their suspicious thoughts. One way you can do this is by anticipating and dealing better with the anxiety, which provides the climate for these suspicious thoughts to occur.