

Michael Milburn

Fraught

I woke up like this.

Beyoncé

The January/February 2014 issue of *The Atlantic* features a cover story by the magazine’s editor Scott Stossel, describing his lifelong struggle with anxiety. The same day that I read the article a colleague mentioned it to me, marveling at the variety and severity of Stossel’s symptoms and at his ability to work at such a demanding job while harboring so much turmoil. Not wanting to delve into my own experience with anxiety, I kept my reservations to myself, but my first impulse was to ask how Stossel *could* hold that job. As an anxiety sufferer, I can’t imagine tolerating the meetings, negotiations, public appearances, and general stress that such an executive position would entail, much less possessing the ambition to achieve it. My anxiety is a disabling affliction, preventing me not just from having certain experiences, but from seeking them out in the first place. Stossel struck me as someone who had either overcome his disability, or whose condition was not that bad.

A few days later I heard the author being interviewed by Terry Gross on NPR. A devoted listener to Gross’s radio show “Fresh Air,” I’m always impressed by how composed and articulate her guests sound. Of all the politicians, actors, musicians, and writers who appear in her studio—or, more disorientingly, in a studio far from hers—none ever stutter or garble their words or hyperventilate as they answer her questions before millions of listeners. Those would be my impairments, and I have often thought that if I ever did anything worthy of being discussed by Terry Gross, I would have to decline on the grounds of my anxiety. Yet here was Stossel sounding relaxed and coherent while explaining the disorder that he claims turns him into a sweating,

trembling, cramping, burping, nauseated, constricted wreck whenever he has to speak to an audience. Even allowing for his use of medication and his self-described ability to mask his anxiety—“They didn't know any of it,” he says of his colleagues—what impressed me was that Stossel was *there*, plugging his book, just as he would be in his office the next day running one of the country's most respected publications.

I decided that Stossel's anxiety must be different from mine. While I don't suffer physical symptoms as acute as the ones he describes, I also don't master or hide my discomfort as well. Conversely, some of the concerns that he attributes to anxiety, such as his being “buffeted by worry about my health and my family members' health, about finances, about work, about the rattle in the car and the dripping in my basement, about the encroachment of old age and the inevitability of death,” strike me as normal and universal. Finally, I haven't treated my condition as aggressively, with multiple talk and drug therapies. “The list is long,” he tells Gross:

so starting with psychotherapy, you know, individual talk therapy, sort of psychoanalysis-style psychotherapy; group therapy; acceptance and commitment therapy; cognitive behavioral therapy; hypnotism; EMDR, which is eye movement reprogramming something, where you move your eyes back and forth and it's supposed to make new connections across the two hemispheres of your brain.

I've taken antipsychotics, major sedatives, benzodiazepines like Valium, Ativan, Klonopin. Early antidepressants like MAO inhibitors such as Nardil; various tricyclic antidepressants such as imipramine and desipramine; and then SSRI and SNRI medications, those are selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors; and serotonin and norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors such as Effexor, Cymbalta.

I did spend approximately a decade, on and off, in “individual talk therapy,” which helped alleviate my depression but had no effect on my anxiety, and briefly took the anti-depressant Paxil, which also improved my mood but made me feel like a stranger to myself. A dosage of Xanax from the one prescription that I filled affected me like a couple of shots of vodka, to the point where I wouldn't take the drug in public for fear of acting or speaking sloppily. Stossel's confession to Gross that he took a Xanax before their interview confounded me, since one positive effect of my anxiety is to make me hyper-vigilant about my behavior. Taking a tranquilizer or beta-blocker before a

performance would make me fear that I'd feel complacent and be more likely to screw up. Of course, one could argue that Stossel's drug and clinical therapies are precisely what enable him to function so well. But if it took all of these aids to ease me into the world, I'd wonder how I'd fare if deprived of them, and if it was really me making Terry Gross laugh.

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A former girlfriend of mine used to respond to my complaints about my anxiety by saying that she didn't know what I meant by that word. She admitted to getting nervous before interviews or presentations, but couldn't imagine feeling that way for no apparent reason. The difference between us was that her fight or flight response functioned efficiently, whereas mine remains stuck in a primitive state more appropriate to the days of rampaging mammoths and club-wielding enemies. My attempt to explain the flaw in my alert system failed—it's hard to convey irrational fear to someone who has never experienced it.

Anxiety occurs in response to threat—that's its biological function. When the anxiety is disproportionate to the threat, or the threat is imaginary or unidentifiable, or the sense of being threatened is constant, then anxiety becomes a disorder, and the lives of people like me become disordered. The actual feeling is a blend of mental and physical distress—my mind floods my nerves with (inaccurate) information, alerting them to propel my body away from danger. The physical sensation is not pain so much as unease, a pressure or urgency. I've never had an angioplasty, but I suspect the feeling is similar—a discomfort that one can endure, but wishes would stop immediately.

Growing up, I didn't think of my anxiety as an affliction; it felt as much a part of my identity as colorblindness and curly hair. Only when I took a psychology course in college did I discover that anxiety was a common condition with traceable origins. Learning this had no effect on my symptoms—very little that I have read about or tried against anxiety has ever diminished it—but the knowledge that my pain had a name and that I wasn't the only one suffering from it made me feel less isolated. To this day, empathy from any source, even one as impersonal as a textbook, consoles me.

In my twenties I began attending Al-Anon (a program for the friends and relatives of alcoholics run according to the principles of Alcoholics Anonymous) at the urging of a friend who knew of my father's excessive drinking. My aversion to speaking and mingling in groups caused me to drop out after a few months, but my stay yielded one benefit, a book of "affirmations" that a woman handed to me as we departed a meeting. Initially, the uplifting platitudes such as "As I change my mind, I change my life" sounded trite, but I came to take great comfort in them. I'm told that I project an air of composure, an impression that belies the unrest inside me and makes me self-conscious about revealing myself in public. The affirmation book allowed me to keep basking in Al-Anon's climate of empathy without having to expose myself to the program's social demands.

Almost everyone feels some degree of anxiety, often involving a dislike of public speaking or uneasiness in large gatherings, particularly ones composed of strangers. My social anxiety isn't affected by the size or composition of a group so much as by the prospect of being among people at all—or more accurately, the prospect of the prospect. When my anxiety increases before a social event, whether it's a party, a class I am about to teach, or a friend coming over for dinner, I'm not focused on the actual event, but on the abstract idea of it. It's as if there's a menacing sign blinking "Party" or "Class" at the entrance, and all of my apprehension fixates on the sign, not what's beyond it.

Someone with a healthy fight or flight response perceives danger, fears it, decides to confront or avoid it, and the fear subsides. My fear behaves as if there's always a tiger rustling in the bushes up ahead, one that I never meet, much less subdue or flee. According to Dr. Claire Weekes, author of *Pass Through Panic*, our fear of certain situations can become so reflexive that we begin to dread the fear more than the situation, a process called sensitization. ("The thing I fear most is fear," Montaigne wrote, "It exceeds all other disorders in intensity.") In my case, a party or class causes a pang of nervousness, and that pang sparks a long-lasting panic of its own. Alex Taylor, author of a book on anxiety, writes, "How long fear lasts is a great way to identify genuine fear from anxiety-based fear. One is short-lived and lasts only a second or two (genuine fear),

and one is long-lasting and may seem to never stop (anxiety-based fear)....Believe it or not, you never experience fear over something that's happening.”

Typically, as the hour of a social event approaches, my nervousness increases to the point where I'm too uncomfortable to do anything except lie in bed and count my breaths in a vain attempt to calm down. Telling myself that the ordeal will soon be over, I begin craving that moment like a respite from torture. I decide that nothing is worth such suffering, which raises the possibility of not going, which brightens my mood until I remember how often I talk myself out of socializing in this way. Then I either go or I don't—my attendance rate is about fifty per cent, a bit less since I reached middle age and realized that facing down my anxiety hadn't made it any better or me any happier. Though one would think that following through would produce a feeling of accomplishment, a different kind of unease sets in afterward. I depart convinced that I have disappointed or offended, and lie awake regretting my imagined transgressions. I'm not fearing fear at these times, but lacerating myself with judgments.

Compared to some anxiety sufferers, people cut off from society, employment and even the outdoors, I'm hardly a severe case. I hold a job, can function if not thrive socially, and am not subject to panic attacks as long as I avoid the heights and enclosed spaces that trigger my phobias. Like Stossel, I'm capable of appearing composed in public (and possibly in a radio interview, though I'm not about to risk finding out). But anxiety in some form—pre- and post-event nerves, foreboding with no identifiable source—afflicts me every day to the point that it governs most of my actions and inaction. Even when I'm not worrying, I'm anticipating the moment when worry will resume. I have heard chronic anxiety described as an addiction: sufferers become so used to their handicap and so terrified of what they would have to do if freed from it, they take refuge in their symptoms. “Panic and anxiety are artificial forms of fear,” Taylor writes, “and we create them voluntarily to serve some other hidden purpose.” In his *Confessions* St. Augustine said, “I was as afraid of being rid of all my burdens as I ought to have been at the prospect of carrying them.”

This is certainly true of me—I often use my anxiety as an excuse not to participate. Working through the steps of an online program recently, I kept putting off

trying a technique that promised to reduce my social anxiety. It involved writing down a description of one's anxiety-free self, envisioning all the experiences that would be possible, even pleasurable, after this transformation. The prospect of turning into someone who looks forward to parties or improvises rather than overprepares his classes disturbed my anxious self so much that I never followed through on the program. Not that anxiety gives me any pleasure; it just does its job of alerting me to threat too well for me to conceive of life without it. Paul Dooley, host of a popular anxiety-related website, writes:

You think that by closely monitoring for potential disasters you are somehow protecting yourself, and this makes it difficult to adopt new, healthy conceptions of anxiety and what is actually threatening. This is because any new concept of anxiety could take you away from your source of security—your worry.

Worry may be self-serving, but it mystifies me how non-worriers avoid getting blindsided by misfortune—the only surprises that come my way are happy ones because I dread everything so much.

In therapy I believed that a single insight, perhaps a connection to a trauma in my past or a series of childhood experiences, would extinguish my anxiety. When those sessions yielded many epiphanies but no improvement, I tried other alternatives. One psychiatrist, a Catholic priest, recommended meditation, providing me with the mantra "Christ, give me peace" at our first session. I remember thinking that as far as overcoming anxiety went, Christ didn't have to come into it at all; peace alone would be enough. Another prescribed Xanax, which I promptly combined with alcohol to achieve the only full respite I have ever known. Alcohol alone is such a seductive anesthetic in social situations that I had to give it up ten years ago, though I still can't go to a party without thinking how much more fun I would have and be with a few drinks inside me. The rest of the time I'm ambivalent about disabling my anxiety, which for all of its drawbacks makes me a more conscientious teacher and disciplined writer.

When my therapist prescribed Paxil to help me out of a depression in my thirties, she didn't mention its effectiveness as an anxiety treatment (as far as I can tell from my research, the connection was still unknown). In retrospect, I attribute the drastic change in

my behavior during my year on the drug not just to the lifting of my depression, but to the neutralizing of my anxiety. I went out more frequently and enthusiastically, and entered into more romantic and platonic relationships than I ever had before. For the first time in my life, I navigated the world through initiative rather than avoidance. And yet when I picture myself at that time, approaching people at parties, traveling, getting engaged after a short acquaintance—actions that anyone who knows me now would find inconceivable—it’s like I’m watching a different person, or a version of myself who is entering situations that he has neither the temperament nor the personality to sustain.

My fiancé was active in the New York City art world, and brought me to openings attended by well-known painters, gallery owners, and editors. Though I acquitted myself well, looking back I see a man dangerously deprived of the defense mechanism that had governed his behavior since childhood. As much as Paxil burnished my outer self, deep-seated insecurities and apprehensions still percolated inside, waiting for the drug’s effectiveness to wane, or for me to discontinue it, or for some clash of initiating behavior and avoiding nature to cause a psychological wreckage. Paxil worked me free of my depression without relapse, but my anxiety was too ingrained; the engagement ended after six months. Today, I neither aspire to nor feel capable of the life that the drug made available to me. As for Stossel, I wonder if he looks back on performances like his NPR interview with a similar sense of impersonation, or if his medicated self is closer to his symptomatic self than mine.

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In search of a new set of affirmations to load onto my iPod last year, I came across Paul Dooley’s podcast *The Anxiety Guru*, in which he treats topics such as “How to Cope With the Fear of Fear” and “How to Stop Morning Anxiety.” Dooley’s explanation of adrenaline helped me to depersonalize my feelings by identifying their physical source.

The amygdala [the group of neurons in the brain linked to the processing of emotions, particularly with regard to survival] sparks the body by sending signals to various organs causing sensations like a pounding heart, hyperventilation, and

most crucially, the release of stress hormones ... like adrenaline and cortisol....This same idea applies to all physical symptoms that you experience.

On Dooley's recommendation I purchased Dr. Claire Weekes's audiobook, *Pass Through Panic*. The audio format allows me to listen at times of peak agitation, such as driving to a social event. As with Al-Anon, I benefit more from the empathy that these authors' voices convey than from the information they impart, though each offers helpful insights. Weekes urges her patients to accept rather than resist anxiety in order to reduce their sensitization to triggering situations. When I practice acceptance while lying in bed in the morning, the torment gradually dissipates. Perhaps acceptance should extend to anxiety in general—does Stossel exacerbate his condition by fighting it with therapy and medication, amplifying it in his mind? Do I run the same risk through my use of self-help literature?

Though my anxiety continues to resist lessons of reading and experience—like a version of Bill Murray's character in *Groundhog Day*, I wake up nervous about school no matter how well the previous day has gone—I have made progress. Thanks to books and podcasts, I'm less bewildered by my symptoms and able to view them with detachment. I minimize unpredictability in my life by sticking to a schedule, and use exercise to muzzle my inner drill sergeant who grasps at any grounds for self-reproach. Having been undisciplined and overweight as a youth, I know how these lapses affect my morale.

Teaching's a good corrective, too, getting me out of my house and head. Like an athlete whose nerves abate once the game starts, I usually stop dreading a class when I'm in the middle of it; standing before my students, I'm no longer anxious about the prospect of being there. "You can't fear something that's happening," Taylor writes. Also, when I'm listening to other people, I can't hear the critical internal voice that picks away at my self-esteem whenever I'm alone. Teaching lets me think of myself as normal, even outgoing—look at that guy, presiding over a roomful of boisterous adolescents! I used to scold myself for not seeking out intimidating situations in the hope that the repeated exposure would desensitize me. But this is exactly what I do as a teacher; for twenty years I have driven off to school each day with a feeling of dread in my stomach. The improvement in my anxiety has been minimal, but I take pride in my perseverance.

Maybe Stossel uses his editing job similarly, as a way of standing up to his anxiety. Of our two professions, one might even see mine as the more demanding for a social basket case. But I'm also impeded by anxiety in a way that Stossel appears not to be. Even though readings and book-signings are the best way for a writer to make readers aware of his work, increasing sales and leading to connections with editors and other writers, I have given up on these activities, which prey on my mind for days in advance, distracting me from my writing. My refusal to promote my work discourages me, as does my inability to attract readers. I'm happy to be medication and therapy free, and to spend time writing that other writers spend in public, but I envy Stossel for overcoming what I cannot.

This morning I woke in my usual anxious state and probed for any past or future events that could be causing it. Failing that, I tried to observe my distress objectively—the adrenaline surging through my body; the stubborn mental miscues that fueled it. I counted my breaths and surrendered to Dr. Weekes's advice of acceptance, welcoming the panic and letting it run its course until it subsided. Then I got up and began my day. This ritual reminds me that for all the progress I have made in managing my anxiety, I have no control over its onset. Dooley writes:

You have ... already acquired enough information and evidence to counter your anxious thoughts, your neurosis, but it remains. You constantly see harmless situations as threatening; you avoid any and all things you think will evoke anxiety. And you just can't seem to stop the pattern ... Your anxious thoughts, fears, and insecurities are buried deep in your mind ...

In my twenties I couldn't imagine being an anxious fifty-year old; at fifty-six, I still hope to see a day when fretting over the future doesn't seem worth it any more, though at my age that's unlikely. My body will keep hammering home its warnings and I will still take heed—there's danger out there, and it's not just me.