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WHY WE SEE THREATS EVERYWHERE

0  (<https://thegrowtheq.com/why-we-see-threats-everywhere/#respond>)



Go for a walk around your neighborhood during the day. Are you constantly stressed, on the lookout for potential danger around you? For many of us (though certainly not all), we can mindlessly walk the sidewalks, daydreaming as we mosey along. Now, move yourself to an unknown city, in the middle of the night. Are you still daydreaming through your walk? Or are you more likely to be hyperaware, eyes darting towards that sound down the alley, experiencing tension as you try to navigate the unfamiliar? Now assume, someone told you it was a 'dangerous' area, that you needed to be careful. Your perception changes again. Maybe you are scoping out every stranger who walks by, creating distance between yourself and them.

In the last few newsletters (<https://thegrowtheq.com/articles/>), we've written about the stress response and co-called nervous system dysregulation. Today, I want to cover how our environment impacts stress and what that means to us as a society. We tend to think of stress as straightforward, a reaction to some trigger. But our response to stress starts well before we encounter the actual danger. It starts with our expectations.

Our stress response is predictive. We don't wait for the snake to rattle in the bush. If we are in an environment that we *perceive* to be threatening, we're more likely to be primed and ready for a full-blown stress response. When we think that threats are around us, we're more likely to be on our way to hyper-aroused. Our expectations bias us toward seeing the world as a threat. This is one reason that in certain geographies, black people experience increased rates of hypertension (<https://www.heart.org/en/news/2021/04/15/the-link-between-structural-racism-high-blood-pressure-and-black-peoples-health>). If you are walking around and feeling people judging you, worried about how law-enforcement might treat you even if you are doing nothing wrong, it triggers stress. It's one of the many deleterious impacts of racism.

If we are inundated with messages that the world is dangerous, that there's a potential threat around every corner, we're more likely to be primed to have a threat response. Research consistently (<https://www.apa.org/pubs/highlights/spotlight/issue-181>) shows that the more tragic or distressing TV we watch, the more acute stress we experience. Binge on hours of coverage after the latest disaster, and you're even at risk for suffering from post-traumatic stress (<https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200512-how-the-news-changes-the-way-we-think-and-behave>). According to one study, (<https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.1316265110>) those that watched over six hours of TV coverage of the Boston Marathon bombing reported higher levels of stress than those who were in Boston and directly or indirectly impacted by the bombing itself.

News coverage not only shapes our acute stress, but can shift our perceptions of how likely or dangerous something is. Watch too much news, and we're more likely to overestimate the likelihood of certain types of cancer. This isn't just news coverage, it's our experience. Just ask any medical student. As doctors learn about a myriad of diseases, there's a tendency to start to believe that every sniffle or ache is one of those life-threatening diseases they are studying.

When we make something front and center in our mind, it only makes sense for our brain to prioritize that information. If all you see is violence and fear, it makes sense that your brain starts to predict danger everywhere.

What we consume shapes the lens through which we see the world. And unfortunately, much of what we hear and see tells us the world is a dangerous place. We're primed for threats. And there are dire consequences.

Just this past week, a Kansas City Man shot a 16-year-old boy when the boy mistakenly went to the wrong house to pick up his brother. In New York, a 20-year old woman didn't even make it to the door. A man shot and killed the woman as she mistakenly pulled into the wrong driveway to pick up a friend. She hadn't even gotten out of the car. In the Kansas City shooting, the grandson of the 84-year-old shooter said his grandfather was immersed (<https://www.kansascity.com/opinion/opn-columns-blogs/melinda-henneberger/article274553721.html>) "in "a 24-hour news cycle of fear and paranoia." And likely also consuming messages that stoked racism and unfounded fear of black men.

There are benefits to turning up our dial and having a hyper-responsive fear prediction brain. If we were stuck in a war zone, we might need to be on edge more often. But the vast majority of us aren't at war.

We are in our urban or suburban homes, during a time when crime and violence still exists, but it at a lower level (https://news.yahoo.com/poll-56-of-americans-think-violent-crime-is-higher-today-than-in-the-1990-s-it-isnt-184038225.html?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLmNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAAG8BA0xTEy9cCDsrlrXedYaKmoQZ2sCr35tj-60tDoHXYJqBzda9fAQbPGitFLxyT5zJuj0xpxp0WTD6krukVMFFtPDZAJHhpHtyo_MIVQC-HghZUNOKYgMf15-hmNdrGjQRQxmPBgBSjHj4_AC4pu4QUvpRtvEZhERTzeeH4CV4N) than when I grew up in the 1980s and 90s. Yet, it *feels* much more dangerous. And that feeling is priming us to freak out.

It's Not Just What We See, It's Our Skills to Respond

While expectations set the stage, our action capabilities influence whether we'll see something as a threat or not. Imagine I give you a basketball and say you have three attempts to make a three pointer: If you make it, you win \$10,000. If you don't, you have to pay \$10,000. Do you think you'd be a nervous, anxious mess? If you're like me and your last foray onto the basketball court was in junior high, you're probably not doing too well. This is definitely a threat response. But what if you are Steph Curry? Increase the bet to a million dollars if you want. Do you think he's nervous? Sure, a little bit. But he most likely has what we'd call a challenge response, which is a close cousin to a threat response, but where the hormones generally put us in a place to excel. Why? Because Curry is a 48% 3-point shooter for his career, and he has the money to spare. His action capabilities for shooting hoops and his ability to cover the loss far exceed yours or mine.

Remember, our stress response is predictive. There is no need to panic if we know we can meet the demands of the event. It's why research consistently shows that one of the major determinators of whether or not we have a threat response is our perception of control. Can we do something about the threat we are facing, or not? When we lack control, research shows that our PFC is impaired.

Now, what if there was a way to change our action capabilities instantly? If I threw a baseball at your face, chances are you would duck. That baseball is a threat. If I hand you a glove, you don't instinctually duck away, you reach your hand up and catch it. The objects we hold change our perception.

The same thing holds true with the other objects we possess. One way to look at this is via the impact of the ultimate capability and perception shifter: guns. When we are holding a weapon our action capabilities shift. And guess what? Researchers (https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2012-09583-001?fbclid=IwAR0aY35za33Jn-Bau0TUXxHC3GL09mbK-w_fhPirjaOvsqrWxFrvmzTOh64) have found that when individuals are holding a gun, they are far *more* likely to misidentify objects that others are holding. They mistake phones, shoes, and even bananas for guns in laboratory tests. Simply holding a weapon shifts not only our perception, but also our attention (https://link.springer.com/article/10.3758/s13414-013-0538-6?fbclid=IwAR0dRR5SO-NznxICtBrgKyfzJaRLCcxuZu6tk_jnwZvUVIvIjIOEedsXc). Remember the old saying, when you have a hammer, everything else seems like a nail? The science of embodied cognition largely validates this axiom.

When our action capabilities change based on the object we are holding, it alters how we see the world. Have pictures of family on your desk, and you're more likely to work harder and behave more ethically in the workplace. Or alternatively, carry a phone around that tells you what's happening on Twitter is the most important thing in the world, and you start to see the world through a lens where you value that information over all else. You become more likely to grab your phone to scroll instead of sit with boredom or have a meaningful conversation at dinner. You start to believe that the feeling of connection with our social media groups and tribe is more important than those who we actually see

and get to know in the real world. And, of course, that's a recipe for loneliness.

Our environment sends us signals on what is important, of what we should pay attention to and what we can ignore. I can't help but think we've rigged our environment to work against us.

So What?

There is a cost to a world where we constantly feel under threat and in danger. It increases our tendency to frame the world as us versus them; friend or foe. It biases us towards misidentifying threats when there are none, which can lead to violence in the real world. It pushes us from acute stress to the much more debilitating chronic variety. This feeling of the world being threatening isn't reserved for one group, race, or sector of society. We all can *feel* it, and in doing so, be thrown into feeling like we are surviving, instead of thriving. And often based on an experience, a perception, that doesn't align with reality.

We need to realign our fear and threat-sensing machinery with reality. We've created a society that incentivizes anger, fear, and outrage. We've trained our brains to think we are living in a war zone. And as we learned in a previous newsletter on stress (<https://thegrowtheq.com/finding-your-optimum-zone-to-perform-to-your-potential/>), when we are primed with fear, just a touch of stress can take us over the edge. It can make our rational pre-frontal cortex go offline, and put our reactive Amygdala in charge.

We need to have a long think about how our environment influences our actions. No one is being deterministic, saying what you hold, watch, or experience is controlling your behavior. But what the latest science shows us is that it nudges us in particular directions. And I can't help but think, whether through social media, cable news, and on and on, we've primed ourselves to have hyper-reactive fear alarms. We've trained our brains to see threats everywhere. It's time to turn down the alarms.

This isn't all doom and gloom. We have the power to make our environment work with us, to invite positive action, to shade our view of the world in a slightly more positive, or realistic, light. I have tried to follow a few simple rules that seem to be pertinent:

1. Be wary of any media or outlet that clearly tries to evoke a negative emotion. That doesn't mean it's wrong. It just means you should pause and investigate.
2. When you feel certain or outraged or passionate about something, it's a sign to pause, not act. It's at those moments when the cascade of emotions pushing us towards a behavior are most dangerous.
3. Get offline. Do more real things in the real world with real people.
4. Have ways to recharge and check out. To turn the dial down; go on a walk without phones. Have a live like it's 1995 day: meaning you can use your computer to type in word, but not surf the internet; you can call someone on the phone, but no texting or tweeting.
5. Be deliberate and intentional with the news-like information you consume. The danger isn't rap music or video games like my parents thought in the 1990s. We know that's entertainment. The danger is entertainment disguised as information. That applies to cable news, but also much of social media. There's a difference between being entertained and informed, don't confuse the two.

–Steve (<http://www.instagram.com/stevemagness>)

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