

# PSYC SPOT PSYCHOLOGY CLINIC

Understand and Develop Your Inner-Workings

## *Why People Feel Anxious Even After Realising There Is Nothing To Be Anxious About?*

NEWSLETTER #1

One of the first steps in addressing anxieties is to distinguish whether one's anxiety system (which is actually our personal alarm system) is accurately responding to a threat or just setting off a false alarm. It would be nice if having this insight is sufficient, but it rarely is. So for instance, a person who washes his hands 20+ times may eventually come to realise (and others might realise from the outset) that washing one's hands once or twice is enough, and any remaining anxiety towards germs is a false alarm. Yet such realisations, while necessary, is insufficient. Typically, the person would still be anxiously driven to hand-wash 20+ times. This gap between one's "head-level" understanding and "heart-level" feelings can easily cause maddening frustrations.

Why does the anxiety system fail to correct its responses after the person realises that the threat is exaggerated or even non-existent? Is this because something is defective or "disordered" in the minds or brains of those struggling with anxiety problems? Not at all. **The way our anxiety system operates independently from our conscious cognitive system (e.g., conscious realisations) is a feature, not a bug.**

Recall that the anxiety system is basically an alarm system. For any alarm (think fire or security alarm) to serve its function of alerting people to threats they are not aware of, it must be detecting signs of threats outside of those people's awareness, then decide whether the alarm should go off without those people's involvement. By extension, for the anxiety system to serve as our personal alarm, it must be scanning for and making decisions about threats outside of our conscious awareness – and therefore operate outside of our conscious influence.

Another feature of alarms is that they must be working 24/7, something our conscious mind is clearly unequipped to do.

If the Nobel Prize winning psychologist can be believed, then we have another mental system better suited to this kind of tasks. There is what he calls System 1, which is an evolutionarily old (think "reptilian brain") faculty that is largely incapable of comprehending language or logic, but can work unconsciously in the background independent from the more intelligent but easy-to-tire System 2. The point is, our language-based reasoning and conscious realizations about the absent of threats are incomprehensible to the largely non-verbal, non-rational, and unconscious mental faculty that controls anxiety responses. **By way of analogy, trying to use language and logic to shift our anxiety system (i.e., trying to talk ourselves out of anxiety) can be as futile as a pet owner trying to train a reptile using reasoning and verbal explanations.**

How then do we correct patterns of false alarm anxieties? The exceedingly short answer is that we can change (aka "condition") our anxiety system through experiences (i.e., the anxiety system, just like the reptile, may not learn through conscious verbal reasoning, but it can learn through experience), such as "facing our fears" when we know the threat is exaggerated or absent. But if it were that simply, anxiety problems would not be so common and persistent. There are many caveats and make-or-break aspects to these tasks. Done in the wrong way and we could make our anxieties worse rather than better. Thus, it is often worth seeing a Clinical Psychologist for assistance.

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