

Good Life Engine book.

Membership in the anxiety club.

You don't want to be a member of the anxiety club.

Lidia Rauramo

Copyright © 2023 Lidia Rauramo

All rights reserved.

The GOOD LIFE ENGINE course was created as a course offered by Aalto University by Lidia Borisova and Johannes Kaira. GOOD LIFE ENGINE™ is a trademark of Aalto University.

Good Life Engine book. Membership in the anxiety club.

You don't want to be a member of the anxiety club.

"We may wonder whether the average human will have the emotional stamina necessary for a life of such endless upheavals. Change is always stressful, and the hectic world of the early twenty-first century has produced a global epidemic of stress. As the volatility of the job market and of individual careers increases, would people be able to cope?"

Yuval Noah Harari, "21 lessons for the 21st Century"

Introduction

For whom is this book?

Anxiety is a feeling of unease, such as worry or fear, that can be mild or severe. It feels like everything is ok but you are not yourself. You cannot find peace. Everyone has feelings of anxiety at some point in their life. For example, you may feel worried and anxious about sitting an exam or having a medical test or job interview. During situations like these, feeling anxious can be perfectly normal.

However, for many modern people, being anxious too often is a new normal. Nowadays, anxiety is a common and often debilitating condition that affects millions of people worldwide. It can manifest in many forms. For example, have you ever felt that you never have time for your important tasks, just going into firefighting mode instead? Do you find yourself mindlessly scrolling social media or eating junk food and feeling guilty afterwards? Do you lose yourself in self-pitying thoughts? If you have some of these thoughts, feelings, or states – you are a member of the chronic anxiety club. Many modern people, unfortunately, are members of the same club.

What is this book about?

You can overcome anxiety, which is not a medical disorder but a feeling of unease, by changing your perception, increasing physical activity and making small changes in your everyday routine. The book will explain all the options and help you avoid or decrease anxiety. There is also a productive form of anxiety that I will uncover.

Anxiety, its origins, and coping strategies is an overarching topic of this book. However, I will also reveal modern and not-so-modern life challenges that humankind experiences, misleading societal myths, stress, burnout, and side effects of technological progress, as they all contribute to anxiety.

The book originated from the [Good Life Engine course](#) at [Aalto University](#) (Finland), one of the leading Nordic Universities. It differs from most self-help books, which offer a prescription for a better life based on one or two main concepts. It presents instead a holistic collection of different concepts, approaches, and methods for self-study to practice in your specific life context. In addition, this manual contains exercises that my colleagues and I created for the Good Life Engine

course and other Aalto University courses. You cannot see these exercises anywhere apart from this book or by becoming a student at Aalto University. Over the years, I have seen these tools work effectively on our very diverse crowd of students. From this toolbox and methodologies, you can choose the approach that fits your relationship with anxiety – are you married to it or just dating occasionally? If your life situation changes, you can return to this book and find another relevant tool. Many exercises will have frameworks and templates together with systematic explanations on how to complete them.

Book structure

The book starts with the first chapter describing anxiety as a phenomenon and its origins. It is one of the longest chapters that provides you with a depiction of the modern life of a typical Western person. Many of you will recognise yourself while reading this chapter. From chapter two, I start to provide a collection of knowledge to cope with anxiety.

The next chapter starts with the tool kit on managing your mind to feel better. The chapter with guidance on working with body and emotions to decrease anxiety and stress follows. Next chapter will also include multiple life hacks that don't require much effort or a specific setting but have a tremendous effect on decreasing anxiety. Can some level of anxiety can be good? The answer is yes. The final chapter focuses on productive anxiety.

The whole point of this book is its practicality. My goal is not only to inform you about the topic but to guide you through methods and exercises you can apply on your own.

Anxiety, which is not a medical disorder, but a feeling of unease, can be overcome by changing the perception, increasing physical activity and doing small twists in your everyday routine.

Chapter 1. Meet! Alice, it's anxiety! Anxiety, it's Alice! (a tribute to Alice in a Wonderland)

What is anxiety, and what causes it?

Intro

It is 2019, 2.20 a.m., and I am lying in my bed with open eyes, unable to fall asleep. Outside is pitch dark and will be this way until 9 a.m. because I live in Finland, and it is February. In Finland from November until end of March, we almost don't see any sun. The cold is not a problem, but bright light is absent. I think about Finnish bears who happily went into hibernation and sleep at this time of a year. I contemplate about not being one. My thoughts are jumping from bears to my inability to find my "place" in this world, to my everyday errands, to my guilty feelings about lack of attention that I give to my children, and so on. The next morning, I will have to go to work and, of course, I am already panicking about my foggy head and concentration issues. One night like this is ok, but many nights are not.

It is not the first night like this. I hope the following night will be fine and I will make it without sleeping pills or putting myself on AD (anti-depression medicine) again. I have a love-and-hate relationship with AD—just the same dynamics as my relationship with sleep. Last time, I restarted taking AD when I couldn't fall asleep after taking quite a strong sleeping pill. I hope this time I won't end up doing the same.

My dream is to live in Flow at a slow pace. Do the work I enjoy, spend enough time with my family, do a lot of sport because I love it and constantly explore my curiosity. However, I just can't get there. Nothing bad is happening. I am safe, I have a home (a rental one), my children are safe and healthy, I have work, and my salary almost covers my bills. However, I keep on being anxious. Every look on social media makes me feel I am a loser compared to my colleagues, friends and acquaintances. They manage to showcase so many achievements. I see younger and very ambitious people coming to work in the fields where I struggle to build my brand. I feel old in my 34 years and terrified about the future. As a cherry on top, I feel I do everything wrong by letting these thoughts into my mind. Thus, I spend huge amount of mental energy on blocking "negative" thoughts about myself and, at the same time, feeling ashamed and guilty for just having them. I am overthinking and I can not do much about it. I am anxious and this feeling of anxiety is not taking me anywhere.

What makes me anxious?

What is anxiety and its typology?

As I promised in the introduction, there are ways to decrease your anxiety. Some of them are related to changes of perception. However, to be able to do so, you will need to understand where our unhealthy perceptions come from. After deciphering them, you will be able to change them. In this chapter, I delve into the causes, symptoms, and types of anxiety.

In this book, by anxiety, I mean a feeling of unease, such as worry or fear that can be mild or severe. I will not touch anxiety as a medical condition as I am not a professional. However, the borders between the medical condition and a feeling are sometimes blurry.

Medical definition of anxiety: “Fear is an automatic neurophysiological state of alarm characterised by a fight or flight response to a cognitive appraisal of present or imminent danger (real or perceived). Anxiety is linked to fear and manifests as a future-oriented mood state that consists of a complex cognitive, affective, physiological, and behavioural response system associated with preparation for the anticipated events or circumstances perceived as threatening. **Pathological anxiety is triggered when there is an overestimation of perceived threat or an erroneous danger appraisal of a situation which leads to excessive and inappropriate responses.**

Anxiety disorders appear to be caused by an interaction of biopsychosocial factors. Genetic vulnerability interacts with stressful or traumatic situations to produce clinically significant syndromes.

Characteristic symptoms of pathological anxiety:

Cognitive symptoms: fear of losing control; fear of physical injury or death; fear of "going crazy"; fear of negative evaluation by others; frightening thoughts, mental images, or memories; perception of unreality or detachment; poor concentration, confusion, distractible; narrowing of attention, hypervigilance for threat; poor memory; and difficulty speaking.

Physiological symptoms: increased heart rate, palpitations; shortness of breath, rapid breathing; chest pain or pressure; choking sensation; dizzy, light-headed; sweaty, hot flashes, chills; nausea, upset stomach, diarrhoea; trembling, shaking; tingling or numbness in arms and legs; weakness, unsteadiness, faintness; tense muscles, rigidity; and dry mouth.

Behavioural symptoms: avoidance of threat cues or situations; escape flight; pursuit of safety, reassurance; restlessness, agitation, pacing; hyperventilation; freezing, motionless; and difficulty speaking.

Affective symptoms: nervous, tense, wound up; frightened, fearful, terrified; edgy, jumpy, jittery; and impatient, frustrated” (Chand SP, Marwaha R. Anxiety. 2022 May 8. In: StatPearls [Internet]. Treasure Island (FL): StatPearls Publishing; 2022 Jan–. PMID: 29262212).

Anxiety Disorders as defined in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5th ed.; DSM–5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013):

- Separation Anxiety Disorder: An individual with separation anxiety disorder displays anxiety and fear atypical for their age and development level of separation from attachment figures. There is persistent and excessive fear or anxiety about harm to, loss of, or separation from attachment figures. The symptoms include nightmares and physical symptoms. Although the symptoms develop in childhood, they can be expressed throughout adulthood as well.
- Selective Mutism: This disorder is characterized by a consistent failure to speak in social situations with an expectation to speak even though the individual speaks in other

circumstances, can speak, and comprehends the spoken language. The disorder is more likely to be seen in young children than in adolescents and adults.

- **Specific Phobia:** Individuals with specific phobias are fearful or anxious about specific objects or situations they avoid or endure with intense fear or anxiety. The fear, anxiety, and avoidance are almost always immediate and tend to be persistently out of proportion to the actual danger posed by the specific object or situation. There are different types of phobias: animal, blood-injection-injury, and situational.

- **Social Anxiety Disorder:** This disorder is characterised by marked or intense fear or anxiety of social situations in which one could be the subject of scrutiny. The individual fears that he/she will be negatively evaluated in such circumstances. Person also fears being embarrassed, rejected, humiliated or offending others. These situations always provoke fear or anxiety and are avoided or endured with intense fear and anxiety.

- **Panic Disorder:** Individuals with this disorder experience recurrent, unexpected panic attacks and experience persistent concern and worry about having another panic attack. They also have changes in their behaviour linked to panic attacks, which are maladaptive, such as avoidance of activities and situations to prevent the occurrence of panic attacks. Panic attacks are abrupt surges of intense fear or extreme discomfort that peaks within minutes, accompanied by physical and cognitive symptoms such as palpitations, sweating, shortness of breath, fear of going crazy, or fear of dying. Panic attacks can occur unexpectedly with no obvious trigger, or they may be expected, such as in response to a feared object or situation.

- **Agoraphobia:** Individuals with this disorder are fearful and anxious in two or more of the following circumstances: using public transportation, being in open spaces, being in enclosed spaces like shops and theatres, standing in line or being in a crowd, or being outside of the home alone. The individual fears and avoids these situations because he/she is concerned that escape may be difficult or help may not be available in the event of panic-like symptoms or other incapacitating or embarrassing symptoms (e.g., falling or incontinence).

- **Generalised Anxiety Disorder:** The key feature of this disorder is persistent and excessive worry about various domains, including work and school performance, that the individual finds hard to control. The person also may experience feeling restless, keyed up, or on edge; easily fatigued; difficulty concentrating or mind going blank; irritability, muscle tension, and sleep disturbance.

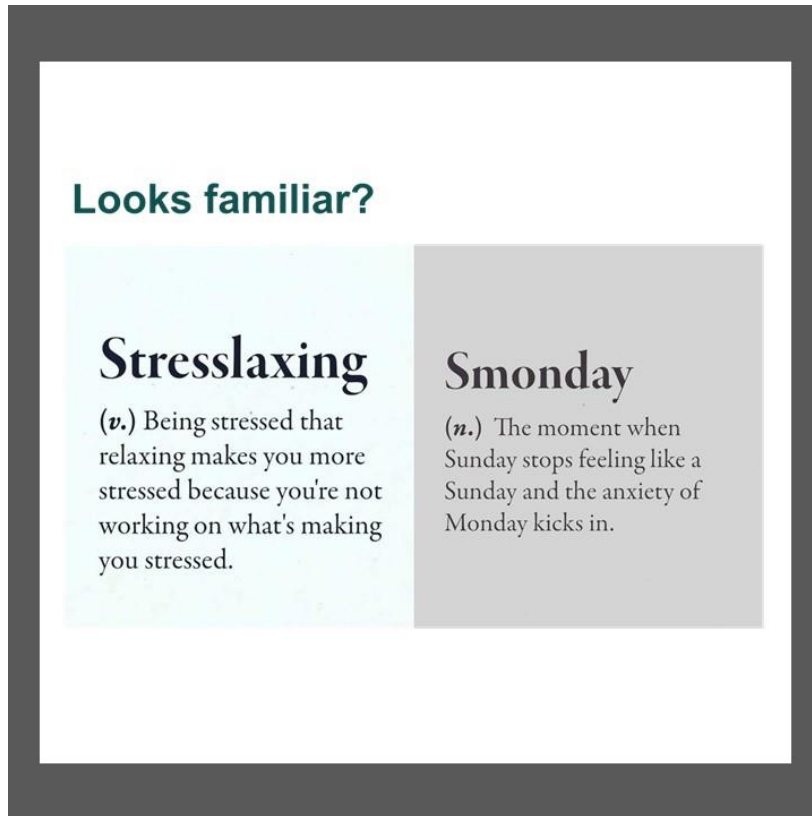
- **Substance/Medication-Induced Anxiety Disorder:** This disorder involves anxiety symptoms due to substance intoxication or withdrawal or to medical treatment.

- **Anxiety Disorder Due to Other Medical Conditions:** Anxiety symptoms are the physiological consequence of another medical condition. Examples include endocrine disease: hypothyroidism, hypoglycemia, and hypercortisolism; cardiovascular disorders: congestive heart failure, arrhythmia, and pulmonary embolism; respiratory illness: asthma and pneumonia; metabolic disturbances: B12 or porphyria; neurological illnesses: neoplasms, encephalitis, and seizure disorder.”

Source: Chand SP, Marwaha R. Anxiety. 2022 May 8. In: StatPearls [Internet]. Treasure Island (FL): StatPearls Publishing; 2022 Jan-. PMID: 29262212.

I will not talk about pathological anxiety. It should be treated by healthcare professionals. I will talk about useless non-pathological anxiety that many modern people experience too often.

Symptoms of anxiety - Stresslaxing, Smonday and holiday sickness



Do you find yourself sometimes worried on a Sunday when you are supposed to relax? You worry about next week, your dreams and plans, important things that you never have time to do, and finally, you worry that you didn't fully rest as you planned. If yes, you have Stresslaxing or Smonday or both at the same time? **Stresslaxing** means that you are already so stressed and anxious that you are stressed while relaxing because you think you are wasting the time. **Smonday** – it is a fear and anxiety when you think about coming working week. Both states are unpleasant to experience.

"I didn't accomplish all of my weekend goals—including relaxation."

My recurring thought in the past.

For many of us, perfectionism means the idea that we can be effective in all areas of our lives from work to self-development. This vision fools us. We push ourselves to be effective with time when we need to rest and recharge. The hours when we are not working, we think we have to effectively dedicate ourselves to other optimisation, body or mind, or our social status. Every hour should be productive. The origins of the word leisure come from the Latin "licere" – "to be permitted" or "to be free". It is a time when you can do what you like, free from generating value. However, how far away are we from this leisure and from spending a day or two without schedules and to-do lists? Many have concerns that they are not doing anything when they are sick. When you are sick, you need to take care of yourself and your body and give it rest. Instead, you might feel guilty for not doing something from home or work to-do list—such an irony.

We don't need to be productive 24/7.

Do you often get sick at the end of an important project when you finally have time to rest? You have been waiting for this precious time so long, but now you just lay down in bed not being able to do anything nice. There is a name for this – **holiday sickness**. Unfortunately, it is a very common phenomenon among modern adults.

Looks familiar?

Holiday sickness

When you wait with such a passion for your holiday and suddenly you are sick. You catch too easy a cold or a bug. However, you are fine again when it is time for a work.

Final question – have you ever felt that you never have time for your important tasks, just going into firefighting mode instead? Do you find yourself mindlessly scrolling social media or eating junk food and feeling guilty afterwards? Do you lose yourself in self-pitying thoughts? If you have some of these thoughts, feelings, or states – you are a member of the chronic anxiety club. Probably, it is not a club you what to have a membership in.

Easily falling ill suggests that you're disregarding your body's signals. The communication between your body and mind are disrupted. When we take a break, our suppressed immune system retaliates, making us more susceptible to sickness. Physical symptoms often reveal our

emotional state if we learn to recognise them. Typically, our physical state precedes our logical brain's ability to understand the situation.

How else to determine that you are systemically ignoring the state of your body – you might produce the following behaviour – denial of your state, passive aggression and intolerance (complete lack of patience), lack of humour, cynicism, and escapist addictions. Did you see one category of people on the holiday beaches who stay with their beer all day under the sun to keep themselves in a sort of brain fog to avoid facing themselves? They do everything to keep their brain away from self-reflection. Overworking is the same escapism but in a different form.

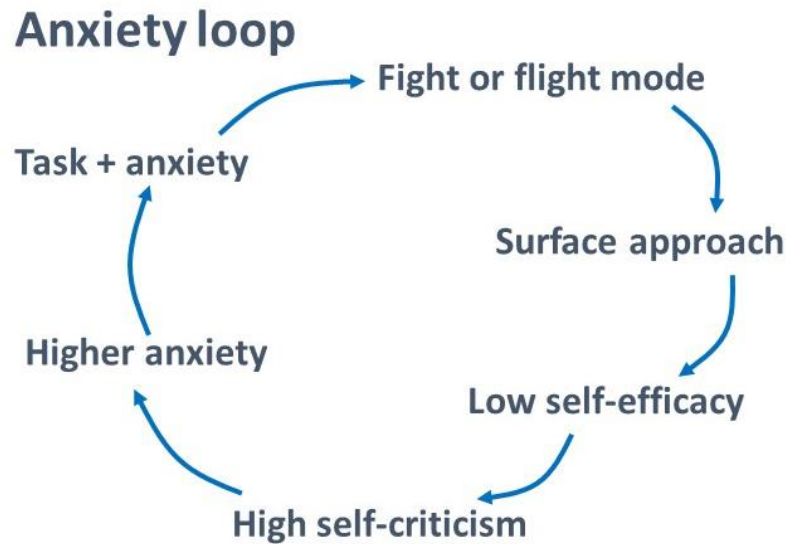
A speculative but so truthful comparison table between a modern person and cave dweller (Hector Garcia, Francesc Mirales, Ikigai).

Cave dwellers	Modern Western humans
Were relaxed most of the time	Work most of the time and are alert to any and all threats
Felt stress only in very specific situations	Are online or waiting for notifications from their cell phones twenty-four hours a day
The threats were real: a predator could end their lives at any moment	The brain associates the ping of a cell phone or an e-mail notification with the threat of a predator
High doses of cortisol and adrenaline at moments of danger kept the body healthy	Low doses of cortisol flow constantly through the body, with implications for a range of health problems, including adrenal fatigue and chronic fatigue syndrome

Why is it so bad to be anxious?

When you are anxious, you reinforce your anxiety. Being stressed and anxious, you fail to perform the task fully. You are not a perfect version of yourself. You have a task to do, but you are anxious about it. First – you procrastinate (fight or flight mode). After a while, you push yourself to start working on the task, but your approach is surface. The result is not as you know it could be if you were fully committed. Your inner critic immediately catches it and starts the self-denunciatory speech that makes you more anxious. You are trapped in the loop.

Why it is so bad to be anxious?



When you are anxious, you are not creative.

I have felt it myself. In August 2019, I initiated the divorce process. It was an extremely hard decision that required a lot of courage. I like the expression attributed to many: “courage is not the absence of fear, it is the ability to act despite the fear”. It was true in my case. I was afraid of so many things: will I traumatise my children? Will I be able to maintain a relatively fine standard of living? How will relatives and friends judge me? What will my ex-husband do, and so on? Still, I proceeded. Of course, all the things I was afraid of happened. At the same time, I was working. I had to teach multiple courses back then. Teaching for me, is creative work. You constantly work on your content, you stay lively and energetic during the contact sessions, always alert to any questions from students, and you come up with new development ideas for your work. It is what a good educator, in my opinion, should do. Instead of being one, I was a robot. I was just performing my tasks with zero creativity, barely surviving throughout the day. To be innovative, encouraging, and inspiring you need to be well, not anxious or stressed. A few years after breaking up with my ex-husband, I slowly returned to myself. I got used to and started to enjoy the new state of an independent woman. Sometimes, to feel better, you just need time and belief that this also shall pass.

“One of the worst features about worrying is that it destroys our ability to concentrate. When we worry, our minds jump here and there and everywhere, and we lose all power of decision”

When you are stressed and anxious, **you might miss a golden opportunity**. Imagine the only thing you are thinking – how to respect the deadline and send the project on time or not get sick with COVID before the holiday. Thinking this way you will miss an opportunity because you won't have enough brainpower or mental energy to take a risky but potentially great decision. You are in stress reaction mode and this is not the mode where we can take risks. You could even lose one life chance because anxiety makes you feel like a hamster running inside a wheel.

Regular anxiety and stress can lead to burnout.

Burnout is difficult to recognise. You work very hard, you are extremely active, even overactive – how could that be a burnout? We usually have this vision in mind that with depression or burnout, I will just lay on a bed without motivation or ability to do anything. However, overactivity without the ability to finish tasks is a symptom of burnout.

“Burnout” was first recognised as a psychological diagnosis in 1974, applied by the psychologist Herbert Freudenberger to cases of physical or mental collapse as the result of overwork. Burnout is of a substantively different category to “exhaustion”, although the two conditions are related. Exhaustion means going to the point where you can't go any further; burnout means reaching that point and pushing yourself to keep going, whether for days or weeks or years. When you're in the midst of burnout, the feeling of accomplishment that follows an exhausting task – passing the final! Finishing the massive work project! – never comes” (Petersen Anna Helen, Can't even).

“It's the sensation of dull exhaustion that, even with sleep and vacation, never really leaves....It's the flattening of life into one never-ending to-do list, and the feeling that you've optimized yourself into a work robot that happens to have bodily functions, which you do your very best to ignore.” (Petersen Anna Helen, Can't even).

The historical origins of burnout could be found in the definition of “neurasthenia” (dated from 1800) – nervous exhaustion when patients feel because of pace and strain of modern industrial life. Now, technology has created a much faster pace and we are challenged to adapt to it.

Ignoring burnout is like trying to build a solid foundation on quicksand. Burnout is not an illness, but it increases the risk of many illnesses and work-related accidents. As burnout becomes more severe, a person may withdraw from pressures and feelings of guilt. Ultimately, burnout can lead to exhaustion, cynicism, and feelings of inadequacy, negatively impacting a person's self-image and self-esteem.

Why are you anxious?

The causes of anxiety

I bet you don't want to feel anxious. Life is more enjoyable without this feeling of unease and inner discomfort. In the next chapters, I will explain how you can decrease your anxiety. To do so, you want to understand why you feel anxious. There are multiple reasons for this, and each

individual has their unique combination of factors contributing to anxiety levels. However, some of them are common for many of us. Below you will find a wide list of the causes of anxiety.

The information overload

—

One of the causes of anxiety is information overload



We live in the era of information overload. It started far back in 1440 with the invention of the printing press and it skyrocketed with computers and internet. There are far more books to read that one can read during a life span, films that one could watch and music to listen to. We get information about multiple different work, study, or leisure opportunities to be part of. We browse an endless amount of different places on earth worth visiting. However, we still have only 24 hours in a day and things to do just to keep on living. We are forced to choose what to do many times during the day. As Thomas Eriksen writes in his book “Tyranny of the Moment “: “information is no longer scarce. ...the overarching aim for educated individuals in the world’s rich countries must now be to make the filtering of information a main priority” (Eriksen, Thomas Hylland. Tyranny of the Moment: Fast and Slow Time in the Information Age). We get too much information to feel calm.

We get targeted and generic information attacks daily in uncountable amounts—TV, radio, publicity, news, social media flow, etc. Newsmakers and salespeople make their messages short and emotionally overloaded to grab our attention. Meanwhile, our instincts are still with us. We react to stimuli such as loud sounds, bright pictures, and movement on a video. Our stimulated mind jumps from one attraction to another, unable to slow down. We are living in the hyperkinetic environment. Never in history has the human brain been asked to track so many data points.

Information overload and various stimuli resulted in our **addiction to the “dope” and clip thinking.**

By “dope”, I mean dopamine. Dopamine, the "feel-good" hormone, provides a sense of pleasure and the motivation to engage in pleasurable activities. It plays a crucial role in the reward system, which has evolved to reward behaviours essential for survival, such as eating, drinking, and reproducing. The human brain is wired to seek out activities that release dopamine, resulting in a feeling of euphoria.

The excessive dopamine release is why junk food and sugar can be addictive. They trigger the release of large amounts of dopamine in the brain, giving the individual a sense of happiness and a desire to repeat the experience. The stimulation of our senses also releases dopamine and we might become addicted to the kaleidoscope of sounds, emotional triggers, new bits of information, bright colours, and movements.

Alan Watts wrote in *Wisdom Of Insecurity*: “consequently, our age is one of frustration, anxiety, agitation, and addiction to “dope.” Somehow, we must grab what we can while we can and drown out the realisation that the whole thing is futile and meaningless. This “dope” we call our high standard of living, a violent and complex stimulation of the senses, which makes them progressively less sensitive and thus in need of yet more violent stimulation. We crave distraction—a panorama of sights, sounds, thrills, and titillations into which as much as possible must be crowded in the shortest possible time ...We are so anxious for pleasure that we can never get enough of it. We stimulate our sense organs until they become insensitive, so that if pleasure is to continue they must have stronger and stronger stimulants. In self-defence the body gets ill from the strain, but the brain wants to go on and on. The brain is in pursuit of happiness...To pursue it is to pursue a constantly retreating phantom, and the faster you chase it, the faster it runs ahead. This is why all the affairs of civilization are rushed, why hardly anyone enjoys what he has, and is forever seeking more and more”. Watts, Alan W. *Wisdom Of Insecurity*.

When we get a "like" in our Instagram or Tik Tok or message in What's app – we have a dopamine injection. We start to be addicted to it, and we can't stay too long without it. We are not resilient anymore. Previously, people could easily live without constant social approval for days and days. Now we can barely survive a few hours.

With addiction to stimulation, we not only forgot how to wait but how to make our mind wander and play, how to do nothing that creates value, or how to be bored healthily. The “thinking periods” research with undergraduate students in Charlottesville by Timothy Wilson, a social psychologist at the University of Virginia showed that people will rather get an electric shock than to be bored. Conclusion from the research: “In 11 studies, we found that participants typically did not enjoy spending 6 to 15 minutes in a room by themselves with nothing to do but think, that they enjoyed doing mundane external activities much more, and that many preferred to administer electric shocks to themselves instead of being left alone with their thoughts. Most people seem to prefer to be doing something rather than nothing, even if that something is negative” (Just think: The challenges of the disengaged mind, *Science*, 4 Jul 2014, Vol 345, Issue 6192, pp. 75-77, DOI: 10.1126/science.1250830).

Clip thinking

Tik Tok social media is the quintessence of clip thinking. This channel and the fact that my children use it terrifies me. I understand that their ways of thinking are very different from mine. I became extremely anxious only after five minutes of watching it. I force myself to use it because it is the modern way to create your brand, and I cannot ignore it.

Clip thinking" is a term used to describe the impact of media on our thought process. It refers to how we have become accustomed to receiving information through captivating stories instead of comprehensive analysis. The format of short, narrative segments has become so ingrained in our media consumption that it affects our ability to focus on anything more lengthy or intricate. It leads to a tendency to constantly switch between tasks and a difficulty in sustaining attention for more than a few minutes.

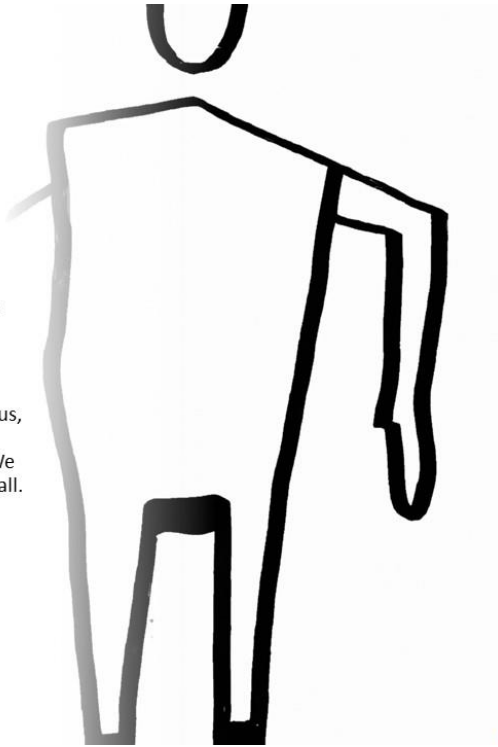
We now have shorter attention spans than ever before. We're used to getting the information we're looking for in seconds. "People's attention span has shrank from 12 seconds in 2000 to 8 seconds in 2015. It is possibly even shorter today" Walid O. El Cheikh, "Pitching for life". This reel of headlines, short videos and emotionally overloaded pictures don't give a rest to our brain. The formats of information are shaping the ways we think in the same way as language shapes our modes of reasoning (Wittgenstein). As a result, most of the time we have scattered thoughts. Our mind, just like a puppy, is jumping from one idea to another without giving us peace and steadiness.

ADT instead of ADD. "ADT – an attention deficit trait caused by brain overload, is now epidemic in organisations. The core symptoms are distractibility, inner frenzy, and impatience. People with ADT have difficulty staying organised, setting priorities, and managing time... The sufferer doesn't experience a single crisis but rather a series of minor emergencies while trying harder and harder to keep up. Shouldering a responsibility to "suck it up" and not complain as the workload increases, executives with ADT do whatever they can to handle a load they simply cannot manage as well as they'd like. The ADT sufferer, therefore, feels a constant low level of panic and guilt. Facing a tidal wave of tasks, the executive becomes increasingly hurried, curt, peremptory, and unfocused, while pretending that everything is fine" says Edward Hallowell, MD, is a psychiatrist served as an instructor at Harvard Medical School (<https://hbr.org/2005/01/overloaded-circuits-why-smart-people-underperform>). ADD is a medical condition, something that people are born with. However, ADT is an acquired condition we get as active members of the digital world.

A phantom limb syndrome

The separation from iPhone is like phantom limb syndrome.

Most of us know how technology works, we know that it is poisonous, and still, we keep on pushing the buttons. We are only humans after all.



Our culture, emphasising technology and multitasking, undermines our ability to maintain focused attention. The biggest enemy of our capacity to sustain attention is of course, in our own pockets—the smartphones that help us in one moment and distract us in another. Research shows that a smartphone on your desk drains your brainpower even if it is turned face down and you do not even look at it. (Scharmer, Otto. *The Essentials of Theory U: Core Principles and Applications*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers). Seventy-nine per cent of smartphone owners check their devices within fifteen minutes of waking up every morning. People check their phones thirty-four times per day. However, industry insiders believe that number is closer to 150 daily sessions. We're hooked (Eyal, Nir. *Hooked*).

A smartphone is a type of dope. We all know how it works – we crave to see the likes on our social media or event messages and notifications sent to us. Could you now carry out a simple exercise: put your phone away and note the time after which you have the urge to check it? Did you manage to stay fine for 20 min.? Or 10 min.? It isn't easy even to moderate the relationship with technologies or even switch away temporarily from them. How many families lost each other because one person in a couple was staring too much on the phone? Many.

We look at our phones before we go to sleep. We look right after waking. We look at them when we are in a traffic jam, when we are waiting for something, when we are commuting, etc. We are texting instead of calling. It is scary and shameful to check the average time we spend on the phone. The only thing more terrifying would be to check my children's screen time if I removed their limits.

“We know this. We know our phones suck. We even know the apps on them were engineered to be addictive....these digital technologies, from cell phones to Apple watches, from

Instagram to slack, encourage our worst habits. They stymie our best-laid plans for self-preservation. They ransack our free time. They make it increasingly impossible to do things that actually ground us....What these technologies do best is reminding us of what we're not doing: who's hanging out without us, who's working more than us..." (Can't Even: How Millennials Became the Burnout Generation, Anne Helen Petersen). Our smartphones add neurosis and they make us neurotic.

We blame ourselves for not being able to switch from our phones, to not being able to switch our kids from their phones. But we are only human. We are hooked and it is difficult to jump off the hook. These devices are engineered to make us feel bad about ourselves. "it makes money. That money comes from manipulating, sustaining, and beguiling our attention, which is sold to advertisers, which in turn makes the app money – and makes our phones indispensable" (Can't Even: How Millennials Became the Burnout Generation, Anne Helen Petersen).

Netflix's biggest competition is sleep, says co-founder of Netflix Reed Hastings. It is not a joke and it is scary because sleep is a fundamental need to stay healthy. Justin Rosenstein, the engineer who created the "like" button in Facebook, doesn't praise his invention anymore. He describes like button as "bright dings of pseudo-pleasure that can be as hollow as they are seductive. There is growing concern that as well as addicting users, technology is contributing toward so-called "continuous partial attention", severely limiting people's ability to focus. "Everyone is distracted," Rosenstein says. "All of the time" (the Guardian).

In pursuit of peace of mind, we turn to meditation and upload an app to guide us. The meditation app that sends you notifications – isn't it ironic?! We practice meditation to keep focus and being able to avoid distractions, but it sends distracting notifications.

Technology has addicted us through the use of dopamine-inducing gamification. Detaching from our smartphones is like experiencing phantom limb syndrome. Despite being aware of the harmful effects of technology, we continue to engage with it, as we are only human. Technology is a major contributor to anxiety and can ultimately lead to burnout.

FOMO

We have too many options to choose from.

I love many kinds of sports: swimming, ice skating, jogging, Thai boxing, and tennis at least. I love dancing, but I need to attend dancing classes to have a relatively ok level. Instead of choosing one sport, I try to do all of them occasionally. I stay forever in the "grey mediocre zone" (nice expression from my colleague) regarding sports performance. I have to keep on learning the Finnish language, which is, by the way, the fifth hardest language in the world, to be able to integrate better into the community. I register for the course, enthusiastically start it and shamefully drop in the middle. I don't recall how many times I did it already. I want to continue painting because it brings me joy. I want and need to spend time with my children, my friends, my parents, and, of course, my husband. Otherwise, life will just pass by. I need to maintain my physical and emotional sanity. I want to maintain my appearance. I have a few interesting professional projects I would like to accomplish. I must do all necessary household chores from cleaning to cooking and arranging things. Finally, I need to work to pay my bills and to feel useful

to society. Everything is visible and feasible if I find spare time and money and do some organisational efforts. Obviously, I don't have time for everything. I constantly need to make a choice and feel that with this choice, I am missing out something. I experience FOMO – fear of missing out. Scientists define of FOMO “as anxious feelings that arise when one perceives others are having rewarding experiences from which one is absent. Survey measures of FOMO treat it as an emotional response” (Chan, Steven S., et al. "Social media and mindfulness: From the fear of missing out (FOMO) to the joy of missing out (JOMO)." *Journal of Consumer Affairs* 56.3 (2022): 1312-1331). FOMO is highly correlated with the usage of social media.

Let's take an example of options for professional development.

In the knowledge society, there are more options than there used to be in the very strict societies from the past without social lifts. The son of the peasant would be a peasant, the daughter of an artisan – a wife of an artisan. However, now the information and options are much wider supported by a myth that all options are possible. The hero entrepreneurial story with such figures as Elon Musk and Steve Jobs are quite a tale, and many details in success stories are omitted. It is much easier to become a successful entrepreneur if you have been born in the “right” family, gone to school with the “right” kids and found a great network and connections from it compared to the case if you started in favelas in Brazil, or Pakistan, or Afghanistan, etc. So, to be realistic, not all options are possible, but they seem to be possible.

For sure, the options are bigger than they used to be for humankind a century ago, but they are still limited. Limited by where are you come from and what kind of network you have (because network means trust); limited by your family initial capital (to send you to the right Uni or to help you to mingle among wealthy kids); limited by your stage of life (a single mum with two kids and mortgage can barely afford to quit everything and dive deep into entrepreneurship).

The abundance of options reinforces the feeling of dissatisfaction with our current life. You might keep asking yourself whether your current job or partner is right for you or whether a better one is waiting just around the corner. It is not easy to find inner peace when you believe that you are a hero, and only your laziness prevents you from moving further up on the ladder of success. Our life is not about experiencing and enjoying it in the moment but instead about getting somewhere or attaining something using life as a means to an end.

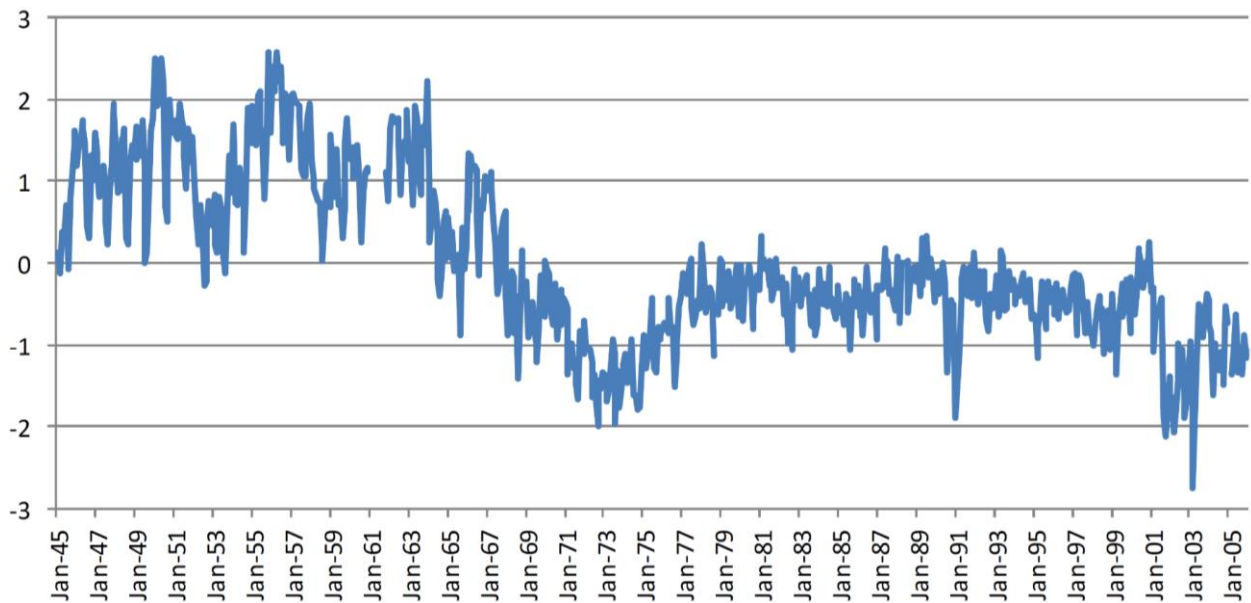
The visibility of options makes us want more, desire more, and feel unsatisfied. It leads to the sentiment that we are missing the golden opportunity of having fun (great party or event), networking (professional event), getting spiritual (self-development occasion), etc. Tinder is a great representation of FOMO. People keep on sticking to it and turning away from good partners because each next Tinder profile deceptively promises to be better. If you always keep your options open, you won't be able to take the decision and start acting accordingly. You will spread your energy into multiple directions without being able to dive deeper enough into a few of them. According to Bill Burnett and Dave Evans who developed the Designing Your Life methodology, it is easier to make a decision from three options rather than five, seven etc. (Burnett, Bill; Evans, Dave. *Designing Your Life: How to Build a Well-Lived, Joyful Life*).

“Yet the incredible range of information freely or nearly freely available has not created a more informed population, but – quite the contrary – a more confused population” (Eriksen,

Thomas Hylland. Tyranny of the Moment: Fast and Slow Time in the Information Age). I would add here – a more anxious population.

The tone of news

The amount of news is not the only problem. The problem is the tone of news that we get – it is negative in general. Below, you can see the graph that measures the tone. Kalev Leetaru applied a technique called sentiment mining to every article published in NT between 1945-2005. Sentiment mining assesses the emotional tone of a text by counting the number of words with positive and negative connotations.



*<http://data.gdeltproject.org/blog/2011-culturomics-20/figure10.png>

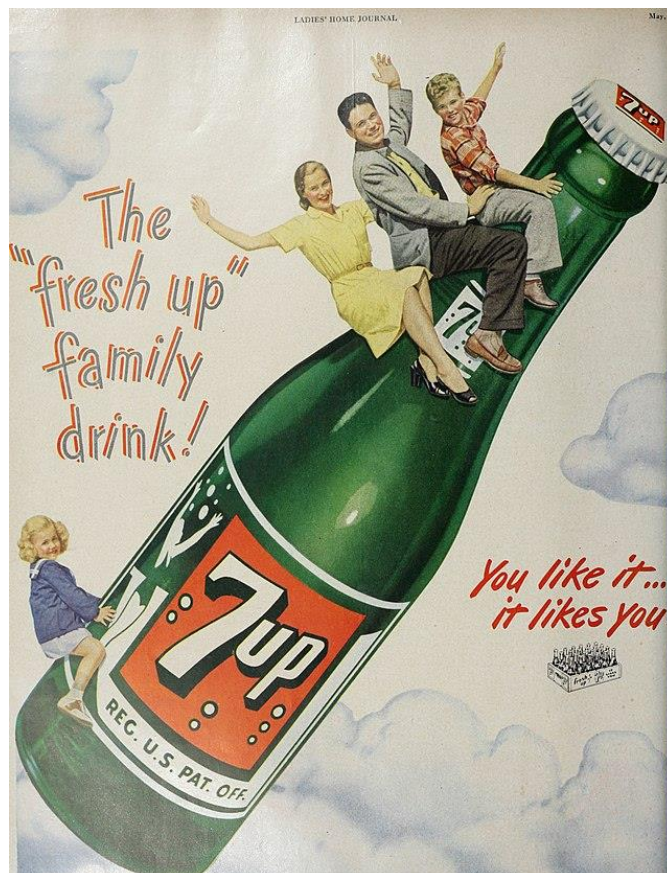
I totally feel how negative all the current discussions are. For example, we had recently at our University an event to discuss the future. People from the think tank, the Prime Minister's office, industry, etc., came to present their vision of the future. Students were the main audience. Speakers at the panel discussion started to paint a very grim picture of the future ahead saying that students happen to live in the worst times of all. Yes, we all know that now we have now a war in Europe, before that it was COVID, the economy is in crisis, energy prices are rising, etc. However, this event was happening at one of the leading Finnish universities. These students are not in the middle of battlefields and, there is a big likelihood they will not be. They have a state financing their high-quality education as well as their housing. Their friends and parents are with them and no one is in poverty because it is Finland with great social security. Why threaten them with such desperate pictures of the present and future?

The answer is easy - it grabs attention. Availability heuristic in the news policy – “If it bleeds, it leads” (Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress, 2018, Steven Pinker). If these public speakers remind the audience about the Great Depression, the poverty everywhere in Europe after the First and Second World Wars, and the poverty and quality

of life remaining low in so many parts of the world but not in Finland, they will not get enough dramatic effect and won't be remembered by students. Their goal was not to empower the younger generation to be active and make changes but just to get attention. How students felt after this event – pretty bad and passive. What is the purpose to trying and studying hard if the world is doomed?

The news is full of horrible pictures as well as headlines. They compete with each other for our time and attention. It creates a constant neurosis that we and our children are in constant danger: "The new era is liberating and frustrating, fascinating and frightening. It creates new forms of vulnerability: globally integrated computer networks imply that anything from computer viruses to designer drugs, lethal weapons, and destructive thoughts flow more freely than ever before, bifurcate and result in incalculable effects through myriad butterfly effects." (Eriksen, Thomas Hylland. Tyranny of the Moment: Fast and Slow Time in the Information Age). After reading the news, we don't feel safe sitting at a nice café in a quiet European city far away from actual War. Juha Akras, our speaker at the Good Life Engine course and co-founder of Hints Performance, said that if you noticed that you feel more anxious after reading the news, don't read them too often and especially in the morning in order not to ruin your mood for the day. Dedicate a specific time during the day when you can check what is going on, but the rest of the day concentrate on your life without constantly worrying about global problems that you cannot change.

Can money buy happiness? The marketing industry



1948 7 Up ad in the Ladies Home Journal, an American magazine

Look at the ad above. What do you see? A happy nuclear family. Everyone is smiling and looking healthy and good. So what is this ad is trying to sell you? The idea is that if you buy 7up, you and your family will be happy. The phantom of happiness is the main marketing product the industry is trying to sell you.

“If happiness always depends on something expected in the future, we are chasing a will-o’-the-wisp that ever eludes our grasp, until the future, and ourselves, vanish into the abyss of death” Watts, Alan W. Wisdom Of Insecurity.

Frank Martela in his book A Wonderful Life writes that Western societies view happiness as a personal objective and obligation. Our culture instills in us the desire to be happy, making unhappiness a double challenge: not only experiencing negative feelings but also feeling guilty for not fulfilling the cultural expectation of constant happiness.

The main message is you are doing something wrong right now. You are eating unhealthy food and feeding your children unhealthy products, not drinking the right drinks and not in the right amount, and not having enough fun. You even managed to brush your teeth in the wrong way. The only possible salvation is to buy the product that salespeople are trying to sell you. These types of messages add neurotic feelings to our life. They all compete with each other for our attention. “The free availability of ideas (and information) simultaneously implies that many of them compete for the free spaces in our heads, leading to confusion and uncertain identities”. Eriksen, Thomas Hylland. Tyranny of the Moment: Fast and Slow Time in the Information Age.

Social media and your acquaintances pictures

From fb meme: “Me trying to excel in my career, maintain a social life, drink enough water, exercise, text everyone back, stay sane, survive and be happy”.



This was my life, and it is the life of many modern adults. Sometimes, I am still neurotic and anxious; I am rarely peaceful and I do not sleep well every night. When I was anxious most of the time, the issue was that it seemed like people around me, my colleagues, and my acquaintances managed to fix their lives holistically. Based on what they posted on social media, their steady achievements, they had a perfectly balanced and simultaneously successful life. I intentionally mention colleagues and acquaintances, not friends. People with whom I don't have a too-close relationship, with whom I don't share troubles but keep a nice looking façade.

The culture is expects you to show constant success in all areas. Now, it is not enough to show how you move on the work ladder. You should, in addition, present how great a parent and a partner you are, how spiritual you are, and how you care about others and the world around you. People compete with their fake social media profiles. They are putting on a smile to make a positive TikTok video during depression or an inspirational post after a sleepless night. We all know the phenomenon when people make public claims about how happy their family relationships are when everything is actually falling apart. Women or men post their pictures in swimming suits because they lack attention. People create Tinder profiles only to get likes and start to believe in themselves again.

People tend to portray a positive image of themselves on social media. It shows only one side of the coin and not the whole picture of their lives. It is good to remember that the people who project an excessively happy image on social media may subconsciously try to convince themselves that their life is good. They could have hidden issues that they are keeping from the public and need extra motivation to just get up in the morning and make it through the day.

“Instagram Mom as the ‘cool, composed mom who keeps a super organised calendar with the family’s appointments, wants to have exciting sex no matter what time the kids went to sleep, can compartmentalise work and home, and never lets her kids watch TV or eat cereal for dinner” (Can’t Even: How Millennials Became the Burnout Generation, Anne Helen Petersen). I am not an Instagram mom and I will never be. Should I feel guilty about it? Instagram parenting – you lie to yourself and others that you can be a perfect parent, at least for a photo. The parents who are truly with children don’t post their children’s photos; they spend time with their children. I never post pictures of my children on social media. First, it is unsafe; second, I don’t need to convince myself or others that I am a good mom.

We are bombarded by stories from all over the world about self-made men and women making a fortune, about ideal parents being able to spend enough time with kids and keep on with great careers, about overachievers who are capable of dedicating time for self-development, professional sports and spiritual practice on top of running their startup. It feels that these people have more than 24 hours in a day. We read about them and we think – what is wrong with me? You might keep on asking yourself the same questions over and over again: “Why am I still struggling with finishing my Master thesis? Why can I not find a golden balance between family and work or studies? Why I didn’t yet create my successful startup at this age? Why I still cannot find time to properly learn a specific skill or why I keep on skipping exercises even if I know how important it is? All these people I read about were able, and I am not”. In the majority of cases, we subconsciously start to compete with these people and decide to work harder to achieve our ideal. We cut our leisure time and sleep to move faster in some illusionary marathon.

We have transformed into brands rather than our authentic selves. A strong brand requires constant upkeep, which means continuous posting. Our online presence has become synonymous with our existence. We post, therefore we are. Every moment, even in our personal lives, has become a potential branding opportunity, leading us never truly to take a break. The ease of technology encourages us to keep up with this cycle, even when we would prefer to engage in other activities such as reading or going for a walk. Curating a partially fabricated version of ourselves on social media is an escape from self-reflection. Overworking is also a form of escape.

We understand that these profiles are not real. However, before we rationalise we react on an emotional level, feeling that we are losing the competition. We subconsciously start to compete. That adds so much anxiety and neuroticism to our everyday life.

Digital and social media are a threat. “Studies show that a large number of Danish families have experienced feeling stresses at times. But Danish parents are not working longer hours, and the amount of leisure time is also the same. What has changed is the amount of hours we spend on digital media and then, in turn, our need for individualisation. It is not enough to be a good citizen who pays their taxes and behave well; we have to have a career, a family, a beautiful home, care for our appearance, realise ourselves – and talk about it on social media. These media take time away from time that could be spend together and can be source of conflict if parents try to limit children’s use of them” (Hygge, the Danish art of happiness, Marie Tourell Søderberg).

Competition

There is a nice joke:

- *How to become rich?*

- *Very easy – you just have to be born in rich family.*

We all chase an illusion that we can have a perfectly balanced life: do only what we like to do, earn a lot of money out of that, be a nice parent who always has time for children, be an empathic partner, and have enough time for self-development. How? At the same time, when we are chasing this belief, there is real competition in the job market. For example, in Finland University graduates in the 60s or 70s were able to find jobs very easily just due to the fact of having a university degree. Now, I observe how difficult it is to find a job for graduates from Aalto Arts, for foreigners with Aalto degrees, and business students if they don't yet have a track record of internships from companies with the right names. Only computer sciences students get a decent job while still writing a Master's Thesis. Yet, we deny the fact that any stable job that helps to meet ends is good. People who are not doing something cool are considered to be losers. The fight for the "cool" positions is fierce and competition is real.

The economy screws in deeper and deeper in a crisis. The Finnish government recognises at all levels that there are fewer job opportunities for people with University degrees than graduates. This realisation created a paradigm in universities to teach students the entrepreneurship mindset and capabilities, hoping that this package will help them to create their workplaces if they don't find them in the market. We all know already that most likely we won't have any pension because there is nothing left. Finland is already in debt after the covid years and this debt is getting worse with energy prices rising.

Being a foreigner, I know how hard it is for immigrants to find a job in Finland. No one says that aloud, but the country is small and it is extremely important who knows whom and from which family you are. The competition is real and fierce. To be seen as a potential career candidate in my industry of self-help, I have to have a job, a master's degree at least, better a PhD, a track record of public talks, events, training, an expert social profile with a huge audience, and proficiency in Finnish language. All this will make me an average prospect. Meantime, Finland has a much smoother situation than many other countries.

I am currently working in academia and I know that the competition here is tremendous. How many circles of hell must a researcher pass to get published? The article should be impossibly perfect to be accepted. Here is a comment that one researcher shared at the session about accepting life as it is with all its ups and downs: "My problem is not that I do not accept imperfection, but academia does not. I feel that I will never produce good enough work because there is always a point of view I have not considered in my work". The real issue here is not a person's perception of the situation or high expectations towards oneself but the harshness of the system, the reality that doesn't give much choice for peace.

For example, the journalism job market in US. "In my newsroom, for example, reporters are given the option of taking a day or two off after covering a traumatic event, like a mass

shooting. But few take that offered day, because in a job like journalism, where thousands are hungry for your job, it's not actually an opportunity for rest – it's a chance to distinguish yourself as someone who doesn't require space for mental recovery" (Can't Even: How Millennials Became the Burnout Generation, Anne Helen Petersen).

The DWYL maxim or find your passion

Dialogue between career coach and client

- I want to change my life
- What is your passion?
- Well, I don't know.
- Come back when you will know.

Continuing from the competition topic, one of the big contributors to our anxiety is the Do What You Love (DWYL) maxim. It gives a false illusion that we can combine work and passion. Of course, in some cases, we can. However, in most life situations, we cannot.

First - most people don't have a passion. Most people do not have that one thing they are passionate about—that singular motivator that drives all their life decisions and infuses every waking moment with a sense of purpose and meaning. It is normal. People who have a such passion or even obsession are rare.

Second, people need to take time to develop a passion. And the research shows that, for most people, passion comes after they try something, discover they like it, and develop mastery—not before. Director of the Stanford Center on Adolescence found that only one in five young people between twelve and twenty-six have a clear vision of where they want to go, what they want to accomplish in life, and why. Experience suggests, similarly, that 80 per cent of people of all ages don't really know what they are passionate about. (Burnett, Bill; Evans, Dave. Designing Your Life: How to Build a Well-Lived, Joyful Life).

However, the DWYL maxim – Do what you love, Don't Waste Your Life. It is pretty bad belief to concentrate your work around your passion. "The rhetoric of "Do what you love? And you'll never work another day in your life" **is a burnout trap**". (Can't Even: How Millennials Became the Burnout Generation, Anne Helen Petersen).

The original idea of a calling or passion came from Protestantism – "the notion that every man can and should find a job through which they can serve God" (Can't Even: How Millennials Became the Burnout Generation, Anne Helen Petersen).

Pitfalls along this way:

- o You are expected to be fine with small or even no payment because you are the lucky one – you do what you love. The practice of paying too little but creating an idea of a cult that people will think it is more their family and community than the workplace was developed in startups in Silicon Valley. Engineers stayed and are staying many hours overtime for free because they don't see the borders between their work and private life. Thus, it is fair when they are eligible to the share of stocks for such commitment, which doesn't always happen.

When passion becomes a socially accepted motivation for a new employee, the discussions about wages, social benefits, medical insurance, etc., are unimportant because, at the end of the day, this person is allowed to work for something he/she is passionate about. He/she should be grateful to the employer for such an opportunity.

Companies can benefit from our illusions. Employers have developed algorithms that differentiate between "passioned" job applicants and those just "submitting" an application. This is based on the assumption that "passionate" applicants are more likely to accept tasks and carry them out without complaints or demands.

- Your personality and your work emerge. If something crashes at work – it directly affects your personality.

- The borders between work and leisure time disappear. That leads to more work and less leisure. "Adam J. Kurtz rewrote the DWYL maxim on Twitter: "Do what you love and you'll ~~never work a day in your life~~ work super fucking hard all the time with no separation and no boundaries and also take everything extremely personally" (Can't Even: How Millennials Became the Burnout Generation, Anne Helen Petersen). Every moment the person doesn't work within his/her passion, it means someone else is moving forward. The feeling of competition is very high.

- If, for some reason, you found yourself in a job where you are not exploited and you don't hate it, but you don't have this "calling" or it's not your core "passion", – you think that it is shameful. Shame not to work at the cool job, to prefer stability and a clear work-life balance to hustle culture. It is shame to have only one job; it is shame not to commercialise your hobbies, not to have a great social media account, not to have a freelancer job on the side, not to overwork and tell about it everywhere.

My colleague from University was sharing the following story from work. They hired the intern whose tasks were to update social media, organise events, and do many routine tasks. It was what he was hired for. However, he started to complain that many tasks are boring and not interesting and instead go to management meetings and propose ideas for business development. In Finland, the work environment is very flat, and everyone can easily communicate with all top managers. Being creative at work and proposing innovations is of course, good, but not at expense of other direct duties. Also, it is difficult to fire someone. As a result, my colleague and other team members did all the routine tasks that the intern should do while waiting for the end of his contract, which, of course, was not extended.

The DWYL maxim is an example of luxury belief. **Luxury beliefs - ideas and opinions that confer status on the rich at very little cost while taking a toll on the lower class.** Rob Henderson, a Ph.D. candidate at Stanford, developed the notion. In the past, upper-class Americans used to display their social status with luxury goods. Today, they do it with luxury beliefs. Below are some examples of luxury beliefs.

A very common Luxury belief that you should be brave and settle in the entrepreneurial journey. It is very risky, and many would crash their lives and the lives of their family just boldly following their entrepreneurial quest.

The luxurious mindset holds the view that religion is unreasonable or detrimental. The wealthy and upper class are more likely to be non-believers or not have a religious affiliation. They have the means and resources to flourish without the binding force of religion in their lives. However, religion plays a vital role in the social cohesion of low-income communities. Disregarding the significance of religion can negatively impact the less fortunate. On the other hand, the affluent often find purpose in their careers, but most ordinary people do not have that privilege. They work to earn a living, and without a strong family or community support, their job can seem purposeless.

One myth that keeps us moving forward (and not the worst) is the myth of the wholly self-made person. It is a nice idea, but of course, illusionary. It is a myth that if you work hard, you will reach the stars. This myth completely neglects constraints. Some barriers are difficult (sometimes almost impossible) to cross and it is just like that. Not everything is possible. Believing in this myth when we don't succeed, we blame ourselves for not succeeding instead of realising that it was a myth we tried to replicate. The idea of a completely self-made man or woman, like all mythologies, depends on deliberately ignoring certain facts. It is often perpetuated by those who have already gained advantages from it.

Another example of the luxury belief that I describe above in the part on social media is the idea that you can create a perfectly balanced life. Many myths mislead us. When we try to accomplish something mythical and we burn out on this journey, instead of throwing this idea into the trash bin, we start to blame ourselves for not being smart enough, not being hardworking enough, etc. As a result, our anxiety grows like mushrooms after the rain.

“All these Luxury Beliefs, in my opinion, are coming from good intentions & a proclivity for open-mindedness. Probably. But when they are adopted & construed by socially powerful communities into a symbol of virtue, these beliefs then go from good to harmful. Because the people who signal these beliefs are not the ones who live out their consequences” (Rob Henderson).

The everyday stress of parenting and how we raise our children now

Modern parenting is another horror story. Recently, I was a single parent myself. Deciding to be a parent in modern society is like deliberately signing a court sentence that you always won't be good enough and fail your children in one way or another. One of the major stressors is the pressure to provide the best for their children and give them every opportunity to succeed. The quantity of information, often contradictory, that tells you what you have to do as a parent is easily available. The tone of voice of this information is the same as the average tone of voice of news, depicting how you are currently harming your children by doing something wrong. Social media contribute to the feeling of ruining your children. It has become easier for parents to compare their lives with others, leading to feelings of inadequacy and stress.

Another major source of stress is balancing work and family life. In today's fast-paced world, many parents work long hours and have demanding jobs, leaving little time for their children and personal lives. It often leads to feelings of guilt. Meanwhile, you just try to find ways to make ends meet and that means work.

When I was growing up, such concepts as listening to children's opinions or providing an encouraging environment, and acknowledging a child's feelings weren't known to soviet parents. Adults were working hard to maintain a living, barely surviving. The fact that you, as a child, had food, clothes, and the possibility to go to school was the standard of perfect parenting. My mum had to wash clothes by hand and stand in long lines to get food using coupons. She didn't have much energy left to be concerned about how I felt emotionally. Life was tough and we have been taught to be grateful for the basic elements without getting to the sentimental level. I had my list of responsibilities and kept my emotions within myself. I was an adult much earlier than many modern children are (including my own). My mum didn't feel herself a bad parent for not having many concerns about my mental well-being compared to how modern mothers often feel.

I listen to my children, to their feelings, concerns, and complaints. They are not afraid to argue with me, to refuse to do what I ask them to do. They expect me to be always available to comfort them, and I am. I sometimes feel that my children own me. I am their property that they can use when they want. I provide them with all basic means and emotional support that I manage to squeeze into my free time. Still, I constantly feel that I am not doing enough because of modern society's pressure on parents.

This pressure is already difficult to handle for nuclear families when there are two parents and grandmas and grandpas nearby. Recently, I was a single parent living in a country where I don't have relatives. I couldn't ask someone to help me pick up my children from kindergarten or school or hobby or drive them to the doctor. I did all by myself, indifferent to my own feelings or health state. If I was sick, I still had to bring my child to kindergarten despite my fever. I am sure my life is familiar to many single parents as well as my feelings about not being a perfect parent.

For me, the biggest irritating factor is that often I am tired at the end of the day and I don't have much energy to have fun with my children. To play, joke, or have this feeling of a party. That makes me feel very sad about the limited joy that they are getting. I know where this idea of ideal mum comes from and that it is an illusion. Still, sometimes I feel bad about being tired and emotionally empty. It might easily lead to a self-destructive thinking loop.

Another challenge of modern parents is the fear of danger. We need constant supervision and attention to children. With the prevalence of online bullying and safety concerns, parents are more worried than ever about their children's safety and well-being. With the horrors that we see in the news, the world seems to be a much more dangerous place than it was before. However, the reality is different.

Being a child in the 90s in Russia, I know that the childhood of my kids is happening in a much safer environment than it was in my case when I was growing up. Being a child of the 90s meant constantly navigating through a dangerous environment without a cell phone or parents tracking your location. In my childhood, we were (unfortunately) able to buy cigarettes and alcohol at any age. One-fourth of my class in ninth grade (age 14) started to try drugs because they were easily available. At home, we had anxious parents losing their jobs and any vision of the future. Many turned to alcohol as a way to escape the dark reality. My father was doing his Ph.D. studies in the Faculty of Physics. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, he just couldn't get any salary anymore just like millions of others. The dangers we had were real. Parents had been worried if we would make it home by night. Such worries as healthy eating or do we watch too much TV, or

do we feel fine were out of their scope. Whereas now, let's say in the Nordics, where life is safe, ecology is great, school standards are high, we worry too much about the safety of our children?

Finally, equipped with our frustration with the job search and fierce competition, we prepare our children to thrive in the distant future when they become adults. There is a name for this - **concerted cultivation**. We tell them: "you need to study well if you want to find a job in the future". We drag them to multiple after-school classes adding anxiety to them and ourselves. This type of education became quite popular in the US, many Asian countries, and Russia at least. You cannot just be a mother or father but a future career coach. Children become mini-adults, with the attendant nervousness and expectations, years before adulthood hits. Every mum partly transforms into a Tiger mum. (Xie, Sha, and Hui Li. "Tiger mom, panda dad': a study of contemporary Chinese parenting profiles. *Early Child Development and Care* 189.2 (2019): 284-300.) (More about Tiger mums in the part of "all or nothing mindset").

Epidemic of Multitasking

Let's move forward with causes of anxiety. If multitasking is a good thing?

We often think that combining tasks will save us time, but evidence shows that it has the opposite effect. The human brain can absorb millions of bits of information but only process a few dozen per second. Multitasking is switching between tasks quickly, which drains energy and hampers the ability to focus on one task effectively. Focusing on a single task is key to reaching a state of flow.

With the power of technology behind us, we started to accomplish many tasks simultaneously. We listen to a Zoom lecture meanwhile checking our emails. It felt as though we had gained extra brains and hands. However, in our quest for quantity and efficiency, we failed to realise that it may come at the cost of quality and effectiveness.

Concentration on a single task	Multitasking
Makes achieving flow more likely	Makes achieving flow impossible
Increases productivity	Decreases productivity by 60% (though it doesn't seem to)
Increases our power of retention	Makes it harder to remember things
makes us less likely to make mistakes	Makes us more likely to make mistakes
Helps us feel calm and in control of the task in hand	Makes us feel stressed by the sensation that we're losing control, that our tasks are controlling us

We pay full attention to those around us	We become addicted to stimuli: always checking your phones, always on social media ...
Increases creativity	Reduces creativity

*Ikigai: The Japanese Secret to a Long and Happy Life, Héctor García and Francesc Miralles.

Multitasking is a straight road to anxiety. Our monkey mind jumps from task to task, from thought to thought.

Feeling bad about feeling bad

There are multiple external causes of anxiety. However, some of the reasons we create ourselves. For example, we blame ourselves for feeling bad. It is linked to the idea of perfectionism in all areas of life. If you feel bad, you will blame yourself to be so imperfect that you even feel bad. We are hurting ourselves for the feelings and thoughts that we can hardly control. Instead of helping ourselves, we hurt ourselves. That leads to more anxiety.

The reason why we do that is that we have **negativity bias**.



“Negativity biases, or the tendency to weight negative information, events, or emotions more than positive, have been documented extensively throughout psychology (for reviews, see Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001; Rozin & Royzman, 2001). Indeed, some have

concluded that humans may have a general bias toward negativity. For example, greater attention tends to be given to negative than positive stimuli (e.g., Oehman, Lundqvist, & Esteves, 2001; Pratto & John, 1991), negative information is weighted more heavily than positive information (e.g., Gilovich, 1983; Peeters & Czapinski, 1990), and negative emotions tend to be more influential than positive emotions” (Kiken, Laura G., and Natalie J. Shook. "Looking up: Mindfulness increases positive judgments and reduces negativity bias." *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 2.4 (2011): 425-431).

Eeva Jakonsalo, the life coach giving training in self-compassion, mentions the following effect of negativity biases. A person with negativity biases will

- Recall and think about insults more than compliments
- Respond more –emotionally and physically –to negative stimuli
- Dwell on unpleasant or traumatic events more than pleasant ones
- Focus our attention more quickly on negative rather than positive information.

Negativity bias was a useful mechanism that helped our kind to survive. During evolution, it was very helpful. However, nowadays, its advantage turns into disadvantage. In teaching, negativity bias means that as an educator, I pay much more attention to one or two negative feedback points for the course among multiple positive ones.

“To varying degree, we all have the negative habit of picking on what isn’t going well due to the risk aversion gearing of our brain being stronger than the reward gearing” (Dr Tara Swart, The source: The Secrets of the Universe, the Science of the Brain).

Negativity bias is the voice of the inner critic inside us. It is important to remember that this inner voice is not our enemy; it wants to protect us. That inner critic has good intent. The more you try to avoid the inner critic, the more often it will come to you. We anyway have to be able to thank it for trying to look after us. You can tell this voice: “I am thankful, but probably now I don’t need this kind of protection”. **Don’t beat yourself up for feeling down.**

Negative thoughts, if not worked through, will take up all the space in our minds. The inner critic is louder when you are tired when you didn’t sleep enough or have enough time to rest.

“All or nothing” mindset: perfectionism

Another reason why people feel bad about their performance is perfectionism.

To explain it, I would like to go back to pre-Covid times. Imagine it is September 2019, pre-Covid. We were having the first session of the Good Life Engine course and gave an assignment to the students to pick their big goals and choose the routines to reach them. The students' task was to execute their chosen routine for nine months, the duration of the course. I was reading the plans that the students created for themselves. The following is an example of one of the plans.

“My goal is to finish my studies as soon as possible with excellent grades to get to a PhD program later on. Meanwhile, to secure some work experience and spare money, I want to work part-time as a programmer. I also know about the importance of a healthy lifestyle – I need to exercise every day. To stay focused and aligned with myself, I need to practice meditation regularly. I know about the importance of nutrition. Thus, I will cook special vegetarian dishes for myself. Soon, I want to launch a startup in fintech. However, I don’t have enough expertise in the field yet. Thus, I will self-educate myself daily about the industry, watch videos, or listen to podcasts.

My daily plan is as follows: I wake up every day at 7 a.m. and do morning yoga and meditation rituals for 40 minutes, cook a healthy meal for breakfast, and after breakfast, leave for the university. On my way to the university, I listen to a podcast about fintech. At the university I study until 3 p.m. Afterwards, I go to work and listen to the podcast simultaneously. I work until 8 p.m. and then go to the gym. After the gym, I go home and visit the grocery store on my way. At home, I cook dinner, plan for the next day, and reflect on my day. Before going to bed, I read something related to fintech. I go to sleep at 11 p.m. Consistency in the plan is the core. I must limit social activities to save money and, most important, time to keep the rhythm”.

How does this plan sound to you? From the first glance, you can see that the student is familiar with the importance of well-being practices. In addition, he is focused on his important personal goals, such as learning about fintech. Willingness to move fast on the career ladder pushes him to study and work simultaneously, but he tries to find a sort of work-life balance. He even goes to sleep at a reasonable time to get 8 hours of sleep. In an ideal world, it would be a good plan.

However, every plan is a myth. He will manage to follow it for a few days until very soon some unpredictable things will start to happen. For example, the weather is wet and he is too sleepy to be able to wake up at 7 a.m. All his morning routines are ruined. Rushing towards the university, he blames himself for the failure. Then, the course teamwork takes much longer than he anticipated. He isn’t able to reach his study target. Again, he feels bad because he has failed to follow the plan. One evening he misses his bedtime while watching a movie, and another day he violates his dietary restrictions by eating junk food or drinking beer with friends. A guilty feeling ruins his next day and he promises himself to push harder. At some point, he starts to severely restrict himself from social interactions to be able to follow his tight schedule. If as a teacher, I do not interfere and help him to correct his plan, he will become increasingly frustrated with his inability to execute his plan perfectly.

The issue is that most of our students don’t accept the idea of slack or flexibility in their life plans. Many Aalto University students have high levels of self-criticism and perfectionism. It doesn’t make any sense because these students are brilliant; they managed to study hard before getting into this University and have kept on doing well in their studies. Instead of being self-critical, they should pat themselves on the shoulder.

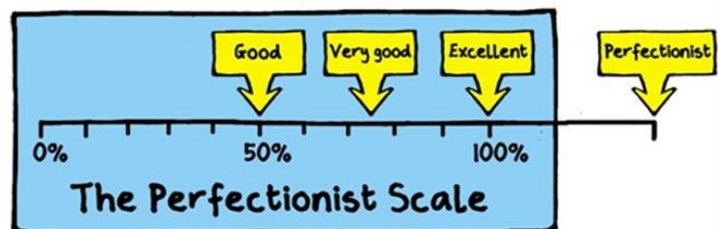
Both self-criticism and perfectionism are common problems for many people. This combination turns people into their own worst enemies and their harshest supervisors. Alan Watts described in “Wisdom Of Insecurity “: “I can only think seriously of trying to live up to an ideal, to improve myself, if I am split in two pieces. There must be a good “I” who is going to improve the

bad “me.” “I,” who has the best intentions, will go to work on wayward “me,” and the tussle between the two will very much stress the difference between them. Consequently “I” will feel more separate than ever, and so merely increase the lonely and cut-off feelings which make “me” behave so badly” (Watts, Alan W. Wisdom Of Insecurity). It is every person’s battle that consumes their energy.

Perfectionism and self-criticism lead to unrealistically high personal standards, a preoccupation with mistakes, doubts about actions, a desire to control everything, selective filtering of information to emphasise our failures and mistakes, and polarised thinking: all or nothing. Overstated claims and demands on oneself dehumanise us. My example student believes that people can operate like machines. His plan is too packed and too inflexible. It includes only things that need to be done, but not things that help him to feel alive and enjoy the present moment. Even meditation is a “must-do” exercise. Every single deviation from the plan leads to a guilty and self-destructive loop.

Perfectionism and self-criticism

- to unrealistically high personal standards,
- a preoccupation with mistakes,
- doubts about actions,
- a desire to control everything,
- selective filtering of information to emphasize our failures and mistakes,
- and polarized thinking: all or nothing



© Bev Webb 2012

www-the-square-peg.com

Eeva Jakonsalo said that perfectionism leads to the following assessment of our abilities that we have in our heads:

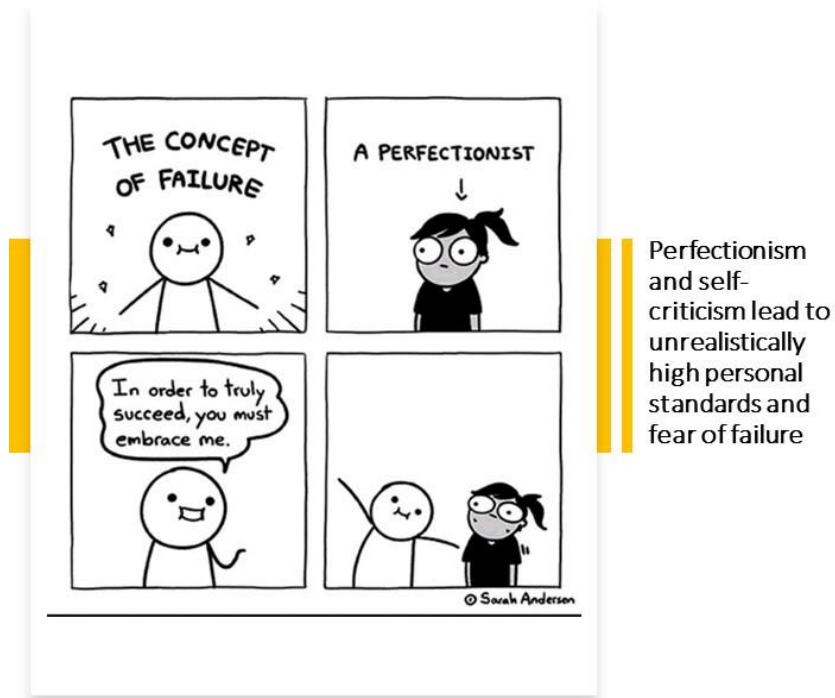
- I can't do it perfectly
- I won't learn
- Someone can do it better than me
- I shouldn't even try
- Someone will notice that I can't

Of course, it is a blocking behaviour that limits our joy from trying things.

Perfectionism and self-criticism usually originate from pressure from parents and society. One of the life tasks for all grown-ups is to distinguish what we need and want and what society in all its aspects, wants from us.

Probably some of you had a “Tiger mum”, or some of you are one. With all good intentions, Tiger Mum will push her child towards perfectionism. This strict, demanding parenting style is often associated with East Asian cultures, especially Chinese. However, I would extrapolate it to Russia, Eastern Europe, the Middle East and India at least. Most of my students coming from these regions carry with them high expectations for success from their families. Tiger parenting is characterized by high expectations for academic achievement, strong discipline, and a focus on developing character traits such as perseverance and determination. The term “tiger mother” (“tiger mom”) was proposed by Yale Law School professor Amy Chua in her 2011 memoir *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*. She described her parenting practices “such as having high academic expectations and restricting her children from having play dates, watching TV, or choosing their own extracurricular activities” (Xie, Sha, and Hui Li. “Tiger mom, panda dad’: a study of contemporary Chinese parenting profiles.” *Early Child Development and Care* 189.2 (2019): 284-300). She argued that such practices can help their children succeed in work and life.

Tiger mothers are known for being highly critical of their children's performance. It leads to “Forced perfectionism” – when parents don’t give a choice to their child apart from succeeding. A child doesn’t have a right to make mistakes and fail. This mindset adds anxiety to the adult version of this child.



School and work culture reinforce us to think self-critically

"Most of us have been primed to aim for success. We've been schooled from an early age to focus on good grades, regular promotions, performance awards. As a result, most of us see failure as an unacceptable. The working culture also rewards only performance. The more senior the manager, the greater the social and psychological penalty for being fallible. Most organizations reward success and penalize failure" (Amy C. Edmondson, "Teaming").

The critical side also might be an integral part of our personality. We cannot just take it away from us. We cannot just step from a self-critical person to a self-compassioned one but also be aware of this trait and be smoother to ourselves.

The remedy against the marathon towards perfectionism is letting yourself not to be ideal. Defining something or someone ideal means it is a direction to follow, not the real human. Otherwise, it won't have a label of "ideal". So why are we trying to reach the ideal if it is unreachable instead of just loving our strengths and accepting our imperfections? Our imperfections are making us human.

The main mistake of self-critical people and perfectionists is to think that getting joy from life is in conflict with advancing in career and studies, that having free time and a social life hinders work achievements. Later on, I will explain how to change this misconception. The solution is to

work on habits of thinking (mindsets), embrace self-compassion, re-assess life values and goals, learn how to work smart, not hard, and not delay living until some illusionary future moment.

Anxiety about the future

Searching for stability is part of our nature. People naturally seek stability in their personal lives, relationships, and communities. It provides a sense of security, comfort, and predictability, essential for mental and emotional well-being. From an evolutionary perspective, stability has helped humans to survive and thrive by allowing them to establish and maintain relationships, form communities, and build structures and systems that support their needs. It has been crucial for survival. In contemporary society, stability remains a key concern for individuals. People strive for stability in their financial and professional lives, seeking secure jobs, stable housing, and predictable income.

However, the world is unpredictable. It has never been predictable. If you check, for example, the medieval age history of any state in Asia or Europe, you see how wars succeeded each other over just a few years. Peasants were being taken over consecutively by a succession of different armies. Subsequently, humankind faced the Industrial Revolution, the Enlightenment, and technological progress that changed economies and ways of living. Last century: the Russian revolution, two world wars, the Vietnam war, the Balkan war, and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Stability was never there. I am 39 years old, my parents are in their 60s. They were the first generation in Russia hoping to live without a War in proximity during their lifetime. This expectation was dismissed last year after the start of the War in Ukraine. Life never promised and demonstrated real stability for humankind, and still, we search for it.

Uncertainty, unpredictability, and the uncontrollability of life and the future are important factors in anxiety. People see the challenges coming from climate crisis, AI, and war.

Eco-anxiety

Eco-anxiety is one form of anxiety about the future.

Eco-anxiety and climate anxiety describe anxiety related to the ongoing ecological crisis. Famous Greta Thunberg spread the discussion about eco-anxiety into the media by openly speaking of her climate change anxiety. Ecoanxiety is an anxiety about the future and is related to the threads that our uncertain world situation brings us (Panu, P. Anxiety and the Ecological Crisis: An Analysis of Eco-Anxiety and Climate Anxiety). "Ecoanxiety: A chronic fear of environmental doom...Eco-anxiety, the generalized sense that the ecological foundations of existence are in the process of collapse" (Panu, P. Anxiety and the Ecological Crisis: An Analysis of Eco-Anxiety and Climate Anxiety).

Panu P. points out that eco-anxiety appears to be closely associated with uncertainty, unpredictability, and uncontrollability. While it can manifest as fear and worry, it is generally considered a non-clinical form of anxiety. Across various disciplines, eco-anxiety is often discussed as a form of existential anxiety.

Younger generations are afraid of the future. They don't know if they will have a chance to breathe fresh air or drink fresh water or if all they will do is desperately compensate the damage

that we and previous generations made to our planet. The issue is that fear and anxiety rarely create motivation to act. Instead, they contribute to the existential crisis when people don't see the point of trying, working hard, and looking for solutions because fear makes everything pointless. News and public figures don't make the situation easier. Instead of motivating younger generations to be better and to search for creative solutions to make life in the future better, they point to more and more disastrous pictures making younger people afraid. A healthy dose of fear is not harmful, but too much paralyzes people.

Anxiety about AI

*“The machines who labor for us and alongside us are enslaved and exploited in their own fashion. Gone are the days of dumb engines and processors. Today, nearly every machine contains some type of adaptive intelligence. What gives human beings the right to arbitrate when an intelligence becomes equivalent to a person?
The Machinehood Manifesto; March 20, 2095”*
— S.B. Divya, Machinehood

I use Dall-E to generate tailored pictures that I can use for slides in my teaching, Insta posts, and this book. It is easy and fast. I can create something I need without spending hours explaining to a graphical designer or illustrator how I see the final product. Now, I can have a finite product in seconds and for free. Like many others, I don't need an illustrator anymore. I was trained as a painter with formal painting education at my evening school for six years. I know how hard it is to paint a painting, even if you have a good idea. Now, AI does it so fast and much better than me. I am happy that I didn't make painting my main career; otherwise, I would be in trouble now.

I work in Academia, and talk about AI is the main discussion topic. Students' essays constitute a big part of the assessment of students learning progress. Now, for sure, some students started to use open AI to generate texts just like I use it when I cannot rephrase a quote from someone perfectly. Educators are splitting into two opposing camps: one camp is saying that we need to trust students that they will not use Chat and pretend that nothing has changed. Another camp to which I belong thinks that chat usage is unavoidable and we need to redesign our assignments until another AI comes into play. I can imagine how many journalists and writers are terrified right now, rightly expecting huge competition from people who will start to generate texts using chat. Social media will flourish with a new wave of blog and post writers with basically one writer – chat GPT. It is terrifying. I am blessed to have a face-to-face teaching job because no robot can substitute me for now.

All these changes are exciting and terrifying at the same time. Exciting until one day you find an AI doing your job much better than you. Job loss is one of the biggest concerns related to AI. We are worried that AI will replace human jobs, leading to widespread unemployment. Getting a job, even for a person with a University degree, is already very difficult. How would it be with the widespread use of AI? What will graduates from Aalto Arts do in the future?

Another concern is the lack of control: People may feel that they are losing control to AI, which could make decisions that affect their lives without their input or consent. It could lead to feelings of powerlessness and uncertainty. AI doesn't have empathy. AI raises complex ethical questions about responsibility, accountability, and morality. For example, who is responsible when

an AI system causes harm or makes a mistake? AI doesn't care about the story of a single human being. If you want to understand what I am writing about, just watch a few series of Black Mirror.

The next worry is privacy. AI systems often require access to large amounts of personal data, and there are concerns about how this data may be used, shared, and protected. There are fears that AI may be used to invade people's privacy or to engage in mass surveillance, which started to happen in some countries during COVID time. Russians, for example, found their location was constantly tracked during COVID, with the justification of preventing the spread of the pandemic.

Another form of anxiety that most European and Russian person has is anxiety about the war in Ukraine. The basic question that everyone asks is when the war will be over and how. Every Finnish person, myself included, observes how our bills for the energy crisis are skyrocketing, as well as prices in general. The state is deeply in trouble without the prospect of better times. Will the War extend to other territories or not? Will it end up with nuclear weapons? Of course, the degree of anxiety is huge.

Enough reasons for anxiety. Please, don't be anxious that you are anxious and that so many factors contribute to it. In the next chapters, I will provide some solutions to handle anxiety.