emotional inflammation

Discover Your Triggers
and Reclaim Your Equilibrium
During Anxious Times

LISE VAN SUSTEREN, MD,
and STACEY COLINO
YOU WON’T FIND THE term emotional inflammation in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), the standard guide for the classification of mental health disorders. But it’s a condition afflicting millions of women and men who are currently living in our noisy, chaotic, confusing, and often contentious world. The symptoms can include a maelstrom of anticipatory anxiety, nameless dread, an ongoing state of high alert, or new levels of hyperreactivity, agitation, or hypervigilance. Others experience post-traumatic or even what I have dubbed pre-traumatic stress symptoms.

It may come as no surprise that research suggests that soldiers facing deployment into combat situations often experience repeated disturbing thoughts, images, or dreams of traumatic experiences that could occur or have strong physical reactions when reminded of the possibility of such an event in the future. Perhaps it doesn’t come as a surprise, either, to learn that individuals who are working on the front lines to prevent human rights abuses and racial injustices or battling the climate crisis have similar symptoms. But ordinary citizens can suffer symptoms like this too. They are increasingly asking their doctors for medications to help control symptoms that stem from the current, anticipated, and feared crises and disasters around us or to focus their scattered attention or help them sleep.
Basically, we’re looking for ways to make the pervasive sense of *This sucks!* go away. For the more fortunate among us, the stream of apocalyptic messages comes through newsfeeds; however, we don’t always have time to recover from one alarming piece of news before another follows. For some of us, it isn’t just that these crises are in the news, but also that we’re personally affected by climate issues, racial discrimination, sexual misconduct, and other social injustices. We are living in a world where bizarre is the new normal, where the unexpected has practically come to be expected. Disturbing political, environmental, and societal events—like the metaphorical version of Chicken Little’s frantic warning, “The sky is falling!”—are playing, for many of us, in a repetitive loop in our minds.

Distrust in our institutions is rising as confidence in our leaders declines. The income gap continues to widen, and the economic vibrancy of the middle class, long the backbone of our economic system, is breaking down. Despite all the outrage and indescribable sorrow, mass shootings continue, and hate crimes, mistreatment of immigrants, nuclear missile testing, sexual misconduct scandals, and environmental threats—from the use of toxic chemicals and contaminants—are widespread and ongoing. As the planet continues to unravel from the increasingly frequent and intense impacts of the climate crisis, questions about the future of the human race are being asked. It’s not surprising that millions of people are fearful about the state of the world and even the future of the human race. People want to know, *What the heck is going on?! How can I get rid of the sense of foreboding and this feeling of powerlessness? How can I protect myself and those I love?*

Compounding the problem, we have strayed from the natural conditions that are aligned with how we, as human beings, have evolved to live. Our internal body clocks (our circadian rhythms) have been thrown off course. Technology has stolen our hearts and captured our imaginations, and we are treating the natural world that nurtured us
like a rejected ex. As we become increasingly disconnected from nature and oblivious to the many restorative benefits of living in harmony with it, our physical and emotional energy may be depleted, or we may stay revved in a state of high alert in case we need to fight or flee from danger. Meanwhile, this ever-present anxiety in our minds is like a dark and menacing black pool that has become the dumping ground for every new worry and fear that arises.

By way of example, consider forty-two-year-old Lauren, a high-achieving policymaker who on the surface seemed to be leading a charmed life. When she came to see me, her career was thriving, she was earning an impressive salary, and she was highly valued both at work and on the Washington, DC, social circuit. But inside, Lauren, who is smart, accomplished, charismatic, and attractive, was falling apart. She struggled with emotional lability, rapidly shifting moods that compromised her ability to do her work. The disturbing content of much of the news she tuned in to made her feel constantly on edge. She had a pattern of choosing emotionally distant boyfriends and erupting in bouts of neediness and anger that she’d later regret. Unable to comfort herself, Lauren would often end up eating or drinking too much or, worse, snorting a line or two of cocaine to escape from her distress. After a weekend of particularly troubling excesses, she decided she’d had enough and wanted to stop her destructive patterns. That’s when she came in for help.

As we worked together, it became clear that the demands of Lauren’s work and the pool of bad news she was swimming in (about political dysfunction, human rights violations, disasters, and ongoing threats related to the climate crisis) were making her feel like the world was going to pieces. What’s more, it was driving her own sense of being out of control, which was intensified by memories of the chaotic atmosphere in which she had grown up. With regular therapy to uncover what was going on and a stint on medication to calm her symptoms, Lauren got control of her emotions and made
some changes that were right for her newfound desire for stability and authenticity.

What about the rest of us? There’s just no way around it; we’re living in anxious times: “Collectively, the world is more stressed, worried, sad and in pain today than we’ve ever seen it,” concluded the *Gallup 2018 Global Emotions Report*, which was based on 154,000 interviews with adults in 146 countries. The *2019 Global Emotions Report* did not provide better news. Around the world, worry and sadness, already at record highs, edged up even further, and anger increased even more. Meanwhile, according to the 2018 Looking Further with Ford Trends Report, 70 percent of adults in the US say they feel overwhelmed by all the suffering in the world today, and 50 percent of adults throughout the world say that following the daily news is stressful.

A WORLD OF WORRIES: GLOBAL TRIGGERS

Not surprisingly, individuals from different countries worry or feel stressed out about different issues. But a significant proportion of the world’s population is distressed about the direction their nation is headed in, believing that it’s on the wrong track. In a recent survey of people in twenty-five countries, unemployment was found to be the leading concern, followed by financial/political corruption, poverty, and social inequality. In Mexico, personal security is a leading source of stress. In Afghanistan and Yemen, war and humanitarian crises are at the top of the list. In the UK, the leading sources of stress are financial matters, work, and health concerns, whereas in Australia, the rising cost of living is the primary concern. While the triggers may be slightly different, this much is clear: in myriad ways, all around the globe, people are hurting.
“Deaths of despair”—from suicide and those linked to alcohol and drugs—are on the rise. From 1999 to 2016, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, suicide rates in the US increased by more than 25 percent, and 54 percent of those who died from suicide had not been diagnosed with a mental health condition. It’s not just adults who are affected. From 1999 to 2014, suicide rates among kids and teens between the ages of ten and nineteen increased 33 percent, and the latest data, from 2019, indicates that the gender gap in suicide is narrowing because more girls and young women are committing suicide than in the past, with the largest percentage increase in those aged ten to fourteen years.

The number of people diagnosed with major depression in the US increased by 33 percent from 2013 to 2018—and even more among young adults (an increase of 47 percent) and teens (a 47 percent jump for boys, and a 65 percent spike for girls). The percentage of high school students who had experienced periods of persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness during the past year increased significantly from 2007 to 2017, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s Youth Risk Behavior Survey. (For the record, “persistent” in this survey was defined as almost every day for at least two consecutive weeks and sufficiently severe that the student stopped engaging in some of his or her usual activities.) Nearly one-third of the students surveyed experienced these persistent feelings of despair in 2017!

THE BODY, MIND, AND SPIRIT EFFECTS

Given these statistics, who would doubt that we are experiencing a rising state of emotional inflammation? Emotional inflammation takes a toll on your body, mind, and spirit in just about every conceivable way. For one thing, living in a continuous state of high anxiety causes your body’s fight-or-flight response to basically get stuck in
the “on” position: Your sympathetic nervous system stays revved up, releasing a flood of the stress hormones cortisol and adrenaline. Both of these stress hormones increase your heart rate, breathing, and blood pressure, straining your cardiovascular system, as well as your immune, endocrine, and neurological systems. These changes can amp up your pain response and—pay attention, here!—decrease fertility. Collectively, these physiological challenges contribute to allostatic load, a form of stress-induced wear and tear on the brain and body resulting from exposure to chronically or repeatedly elevated stress hormone levels, an effect that accelerates the aging process.

Unfortunately, that’s not all. Feeling unsafe, hypervigilant, hyper-reactive, and/or fearful about the future can lead to sleep troubles and changes in your behavior (with eating, drinking alcohol, or smoking). It can lead to feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, impotent rage, and despair. It can compromise your ability to function at your cognitive best by impairing your focus, as well as your ability to learn and remember new information. Anticipatory anxiety can hijack critical—and fragile—decision-making faculties by disrupting normal neural processes in your brain—reducing activity in the areas that play a role in the processing of risk and fear and areas involved in processing reward. These changes can alter how you make decisions by shifting the way you evaluate potential positive consequences and anticipated negative consequences of your options so that a greater emphasis is placed on the negative. Moreover, when we feel that we have lost our grounding or sense of stability, we can feel a sense of emptiness or feel adrift; or, we may feel alienated from ourselves or from others. Any of these sensations may lead to what feels like a spiritual crisis.

Any way you slice it, pervasive anxiety is a crippling way to live and work; it robs us not only of our well-being and quality of life but our
ability to function. Some people try to get away from these uncomfortable feelings, distracting themselves by running from them, pushing themselves, consciously or not, to go faster, to cram their lives with more activities or more stimulation. Other people shut down or withdraw, while still others feel perpetually on edge or irritable.

As uncomfortable as these feelings are, it’s essential to recognize their importance to us. They allow us, as a species, to evolve and survive, adapt, be resourceful, and creatively solve challenges. And they make us who we are as humans with the capacity for compassion, which is the foundation for empathy and altruism. Our feelings also drive our values. Caring deeply is a good thing, a source of strength and guidance; however, when it’s untempered, the capacity to feel intensely can set you up to be triggered with emotions that can spin out of control. The upside is that embedded in these emotions is an enormous amount of energy—it’s up to each of us to figure out how to harness and direct it toward effecting changes for the better. Once you understand and examine your feelings, you can grow; become more resilient, even courageous; address blind spots (things you haven’t been able to see) in your life; and improve the ways in which you interact with other people. Try to look at this as an opportunity, rather than only a crisis.

Human beings have a tremendous capacity to rebound from hardship, to grow and learn from their experiences. Though it’s a controversial concept in my field, post-traumatic growth can occur when people experience beneficial psychological, emotional, or social changes in the aftermath of a severe illness or injury, the death of a loved one, a natural disaster, or some other form of adversity. In a study of 3,157 US veterans, 50 percent reported at least moderate post-traumatic growth after their most traumatic event, and 72 percent of veterans who had previously screened positive for PTSD experienced some post-traumatic growth.
A WORLD OF HOPE

In late 2018, Vice asked 105 influential thinkers from around the world what gave them the most hope for the future. They were permitted to answer the question in any way they liked. Topping the list was young people and youth movements, which are reinventing activism and finding new ways to address mounting threats (such as climate change) and long-standing social injustices. After that, these thought-influencers mentioned technological and scientific innovations (including robotics and medical breakthroughs like genome editing and cancer immunotherapy), advances in equity and social justice (such as the Me Too Movement and the shifting of shame from victim to perpetrator), music, the creative imagination, human ingenuity, and human kindness and compassion. In other words, there’s plenty to be hopeful about and inspired by, even in these challenging times.

As Daniel Szafir, PhD, an assistant professor of computer science, creative technologies, information science, and aerospace engineering at the University of Colorado Boulder, put it, “We have the recipe for success as a species: We are incredibly resilient and creative in the face of adversity, can build on the knowledge and developments of prior generations, and have a unique capacity for individual self-improvement over the course of a single lifetime. If you are reading this, you are amazingly lucky to be alive right now.”

CHAOS AND CRISES IN OUR MIDST

Many of us are worrying about the crisis or catastrophe that could strike today or tomorrow—and the fear is both top of mind and deep in our hearts. As survey after survey has shown, stress, worry, and
anger have intensified in recent years. In 2017, a survey of 1,019 adults throughout the US, on behalf of the American Psychiatric Association, found that nearly two-thirds indicated that they were “extremely” or “somewhat” anxious about keeping themselves and their loved ones safe and healthy and more than 50 percent were extremely or somewhat anxious about their finances or the impact of politics on their daily lives. In 2018, the American Psychiatric Association repeated the survey and found that 39 percent of respondents said they were more anxious than the previous year, particularly about their safety, health, finances, relationships, and the impact of politics on their daily lives.

Along with the dramatic increase in anxiety, the hierarchy of triggers for our collective case of emotional inflammation often reflects what’s happening in the news. It can feel as though we’re living in a horror-house hall of mirrors, where waves and spikes of disturbing, sometimes distorted, news assault us often out of nowhere. Fake news has permeated the culture, and worse, so has deep fake video, which is even more skewed and misleading; both are driving conspiracy theories that foster mistrust of each other as well as additional unease about who or what we can rely on for the truth. It is a time of moral vertigo, where the lists of disgraced former heroes, idols, and role models grow longer on a near-daily basis. Powerful, once-admired people in entertainment, politics, the media, the arts, and other influential domains have been taken down by accusations of sexual harassment, misconduct, or assault. Hearing that privilege allows some individuals to buy or bribe their kids’ way into prestigious colleges and universities adds another layer to our collective outrage. Sometimes it feels like the world is undergoing an ethical free fall and we are experiencing drama overload.

Alexandra, a fifty-two-year-old writer in New York City, had always been somewhat anxious, but her anxiety stayed below the
surface until she had kids. After a difficult divorce in 2010, her anxiety ramped up a bit more as she realized she’d been in a psychologically abusive marriage. It increased again in 2015 as she supported one of her twins, born female, as he transitioned to male. Then things really came to a head during the presidential election in 2016. Alexandra, who had been sexually assaulted when she was fourteen, said, “Seeing the way women were being treated across all aspects of life, and seeing the vitriol and abuse writ large on the news, was devastating to me. The public cruelty to women woke up all the trauma of what I’d been through.” Besides feeling constantly on edge, she became hyper-vigilant: “I felt like if I took my eye off the ball for even five seconds, something worse would happen,” she recalled.

When she began experiencing worrisome brain glitches, during which she’d have nonsensical thoughts or forget a point she was trying to make, she became truly alarmed. “It scared the crap out of me,” she said. “The more scared I got, the more anxious I became and the worse I felt.” In 2017, she was diagnosed with PTSD, brought on by an enormous amount of personal stress, as well as by the current political and social climate. In addition to going to therapy and increasing her antidepressant dosage, she now carries Ativan with her in case she feels on the verge of a panic attack.

Many of the issues that are contributing to our emotional inflammation are outside of our control. A 2019 Gallup poll, based on interviews with a random sample of 1,059 adults throughout the US, found that the top ten issues they worry about a great deal are as follows:

1. The availability and affordability of health care
2. Federal spending and the budget deficit
3. Hunger and homelessness
4. Drug use