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Mental Sustainability: Redefining Success for the Anxious

Anxiety has led me towards nearly every great achievement in my life. In the past, I would sometimes reflect on it and consider anxiety as a blessing, not a sickness. My anxiety propels work ethic like an engine, breeding accomplishment. On the outside, it may seem that I'm a tireless worker and I've earned what we deem "success", but my unique brand of suffering hides behind a mask. Societal indicators of achievement like recognitions and awards act as a veil concealing my illness. When you really break down the definition of success, my seeming accomplishment is all an illusion created by our culture's rather simplistic determinants of achievement. In reality, there's no wealth, it's just me, scared and oft-misunderstood.

At its worst, my illness tricks me into believing that failure is inevitable. It's not a matter of if, but when. It culminates to the point where I am convinced that ending my life is the only escape from failure. That is my way out.

My anxiety can easily be misconstrued as a blessing. I'll use academia as an example, which works nicely because education is so commonly used as a measuring stick for one's reputation in our culture. My grades in high school were nothing spectacular, but good enough. I got As and Bs in all my classes without too much exertion. I always thought of going to university as a given, not a privilege. I coasted (and it was blissful).

When I got to university, everything began fairly standard. I was still relatively care-free and sheltered by my parents' support knowing that if anything bad happened I could come running back home. As I progressed through college, things changed. Graduation loomed and I began to think about what I was going to do post-graduation. I was not sure what it was I wanted to pursue, but in my mind, a high GPA was a prerequisite regardless. This caused my anxiety to gain speed and, to no coincidence, my grades accelerated also. I would analyze every detail, study to the point where I was making serious social sacrifices, and obsess over failing classes I was never in jeopardy of flunking. The night before the exam, I'd review the notes that were already etched into the walls of my mind, be in bed by quarter to ten, and lay wide awake through the entire night. I was able to perform well on exams despite my lack of sleep. It turns out that muscle memory is not greatly hindered by fatigue. My GPA rose, yet my mental health plummeted.

Some worrying is necessary for life. After 23 years of living with mental illness, I've come to recognize my border between logical worrying and unhealthy worrying. This divide is different for every patient of anxiety, but here's what I've come up with: Healthy worrying is rational and keeps us safe from harm. Without rational worries, we'd all be maniacal daredevils who run with scissors despite our mothers' best scoldings. Unhealthy and unsustainable worrying throws all rationality out the window and allows itself to consume your mind entirely.

It makes sense to have some concern that our house will burn down. That peril would be devastating. In avoidance, we take preventative action. We employ a fire department, install smoke detectors, equip our homes with fire extinguishers, plan emergency exits, and purchase

insurance. After all these pre-cautions, we then, ultimately, rest easy.

Let's take a trip from the Rationality Pole to the other end of the axis. I remember being seven years old and worrying that I had flesh eating disorder. At least once per week, I would hurry to the boys room from my classroom or the playground and inspect my legs, as I figured this was the appendage that carried the most flesh. I would get light headed, dizzy, and begin to sweat from my panic. Eventually, I'd end up in the nurse's office laying on the cot for sometimes hours. I learned to talk myself down. I'd repeat aloud, "You'll be alright. You'll be alright. You'll be alright."

In retrospect, I realize that my seven-year-old self wasn't thinking logically. Despite asthma and mild hay-fever, I was in good health. As I've matured, I have gradually began to worry about things that are not so far-fetched. One trend continues: my worries are not based on logic or fact and they are entirely consuming. What's changed is I've become less successful at talking myself down. My mind has sophisticated, as have my worries. I'm combatting a more cunning and clever foe.

"What are you worried about?" he said.

"I want to be prepared for the worst."

Your end-game with anxiety is to forecast the negative. To play the probabilities and avoid the worst. Ironically, this can get taken to the extreme in the case of clinical anxiety, which I believe by virtue, is irrationality in quest of logical reasoning. The whole idea behind anxiety as an emotion is to be pre-emptive in order to avoid misfortune. Without even noticing, we often take this emotion so far that we actually begin to think irrationally by playing up the odds of extremely unlikely circumstances. In my experience, anxiety is a far worse emotion than the feeling associated with anything I've ever worried about. It is perhaps the devil's greatest sleight of hand.

When anxiety consumes you, the things you fear becomes so real that you actually experience the emotion as if it was happening. This is what makes anxiety worse than the actual events that I worry about. It's not that the things I fear aren't terrible, it's that with my anxiety I live through every single one of them. I've failed countless exams, been fired from several jobs, ruined every relationship that ever mattered to me, and ultimately, grown to be an old man that passed in the night without a soul to notice.

I graduated with my bachelor's degree with distinction. I was gainfully employed immediately upon graduation. I've travelled across the continent for business. I've checked off many of the boxes for a young adult to termed "successful" by society. The reason I mention these milestones is not to boast. I mention them as a means of contrast to highlight that they are by no means the only measure, or even an accurate measure of success or achievement. They are an illusion.

We've become engrained with the idea that achievements are quantitative. Qualitative results are seldom sought out. You can measure awards, prizes, salaries, and titles. When we define success, these are the sorts of signals we tend to think of because that's what we've been taught by our

culture. It makes sense. Those indicators are plain and obvious. You cannot readily measure euphoria, but you can certainly sense its aura extrude from a human being when you stick around long enough.

You routinely hear the story of how the underdog overcame all odds to become a champion, etc. The claim is that the results achieved exhibit personal strength and character, so if we just look for those signals of achievement, then we can see where success lies. Let's go one step further into the plot of our protagonist. Let's look at the motivation towards all the hard work and determination. Mine was incredibly unhealthy and based on fear. In my case, my quantitative results were not out of desire for achievement, but the polar opposite: a fear of failure. It was not strong character, diligence, and perseverance to reach a goal. I was running from the beast I created in my mind.

Mental health is a continuous endeavour, and the "result" or achievement point that is said to determine success is just a single point on a spectrum that gives zero indication of trends, deviations, and trajectories. See the passing face of a man on the street, dressed in an Armani suit, grinning while talking on his smart phone? Or the surgeon as she removes her latex gloves, exiting the ER laughing with her colleagues? These scenes don't hear the silence of the night being drowned out by an ocean of anxious chatter.

None of this is revelation. The mental health of a human being continues to be understated and we need to look deeper into human welfare. Our culture measures us on our curriculum vitae rather than the emotional sustainability of our lives. Anxiety is a fire and societal expectations are kerosene. I cannot say for certain why society continues to measure us based on our statistics, but if I had to guess, I'd say because it's easy. It takes no personal connection, it's quick, and one size fits all. At some point or another, we've all been concerned with our personal success and if we measure up to what we're expected to be. If this weren't the case, maybe I wouldn't be sitting here on a Sunday evening with a knot in my stomach, never quite able to sit comfortably.