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I was just asked by someone: Why is it that I feel constantly anxious when there isn't a history of trauma or anything like that? Sorry this is a bit long... so I've posted it here rather than on Facebook where the question was raised.

Most general anxiety (a tendency to constant worry) seems to be built bit by bit, by small upsetting events that accumulate into a large level of unresolved emotion. Let me explain:

A shy kid goes to school nervous. He or she sticks out like a sore thumb because they are shy. They get picked on and have a bad experience. Nothing big, just unpleasant. On some level the brain goes - "I made you worry going in so that you'd be careful and on alert. You had a bad experience. Therefore I was right. You need to be worried and on alert tomorrow too!"

Repeat this sort of experience over and over and the mind becomes conditioned to always worrying. Stress hormone levels go up and it becomes easier to worry. It can get very out of control. My mind was in that state for decades.

Another factor is hereditary anxiety. This can occur with absolutely no genetic element. Our cells respond to the hormones available. They grow receptors to pick up what's available on the principle that, if the body is releasing it, then it must be needed. In the womb, if the mother is anxious and worried constantly then there is more stress hormone in the system and the baby's cells are picking it up. Studies have shown that newborn children can have a tendency to be anxious from this.

The odds are that if you've been anxious your whole life, that one or both of your parents were anxious too. We learn this from our parents who behave nervously and are worried that we should be too. This can occur unconsciously while we are a babe in arms.

What matters most in terms of events that teach the mind to keep us anxious, is how emotionally open you were when something happened. I've worked with soldiers who held dying friends, who were under bombardment, who saw the worst horrors, but who's was OK afterwards. That soldier accepted the horror as part of saving lives and his mind dealt with it without problem, but when he was 5 he was bullied by a teacher and that still hurt and caused him difficulty.

It's not what happened; it's how much it hurt, and how often small hurts built up into a misfiling in the brain. If the brain has misfiled lots of stuff under 'dangerous' then you'll find a stress/fear reaction being triggered by lots of stuff that matches that misfiled pattern.

Now, there are other ways this can happen, but in my personal experience, and in the vast majority of the clinical work I do, the equation is: too much hurt, (either lots of small stuff or a few big issues), builds a reservoir of unresolved emotion that bleeds into daily life by keeping you anxious/worried/stressed. Your mind does this to try and help you. it gives you a bad feeling to keep you from things that it has mistaken for actual dangers. They could be social situations, driving, flying, or almost all of life in some cases.

The mind's intent is good, but the pattern needs to be changed and the reservoir of emotion dealt with to change the feelings. Knowing what's going on may hopefully help you find the right answers for you. You know who you are :)

Change is easier than you think.

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