

On the Order of Panic By Valle Hansen

Walter Cannon, an exceedingly smart Harvard guy, "discovered" the defense mechanism (modern terminology) cleverly and rhythmically dubbed the "fight or flight response" almost a hundred years ago. The impetus behind identifying the fight or flight response was essentially a means to explain the primal, innate reactions of animals when confronted with any sort of external "stressor," be it the rustling of a leaf by gravity's effect on an acorn or the sudden appearance of a toothy, man-eating mammal in their sightline. Humans, being, however loosely, members of the animal kingdom, should theoretically fall under this generally widespread regulation of negative stressors, and did, for quite a while.

While this framework embraces a [basically] universal reaction to "stressors," I don't think it's quite as all-encompassing as Mr. Cannon made it out to be, which, in his defense, is perhaps a reflection of the times he lived in [although, one could argue that his "times" were much less ancient and esoteric (read: Darwinian) than we may be led to believe; he, I can only assume, was not confronted with dinosaurs or werewolves or cavemen wielding Pepsi cans, and in fact lived during one of the most financially stressful periods in history {a situation which, significantly, does not permit the "fight or flight" response room to assert itself}]. In earlier years, the choice was simple—a bald eagle swoops down and tries to kill you: Flee; a bald eagle swoops down and tries to kill your children: Fight.

The state of affairs is thus: The fight or flight response is one that rears its instinctive head when one is threatened bodily, or physically, and it basically pumps a central line of delusions into your mind; essentially, either you think you're a hero (hallucinogens), or you think you're a track star (steroids). Again, very helpful for Croc Dundee, but in this day and age (yes, I just wrote that), apart from some notable exceptions [read: murderers, rapists, pedophiles, and cowboys], this just isn't going to cut it. Our problems are pretty much at this point wholly emotional. Not only have fighting and flighting become stigmatized by the new-age self-help era and branded with terms like "anger management problems" and "avoidance issues," but they are also wildly impractical options for confronting modern stressors. Consider, for example, your new dot-com going bankrupt after only just making it onto the stock scene. Do you run off to the Cayman Islands with no money but the cash you took from your partner's wallet? Do you punch your partner in the gut for choosing Apple ads over Hawaiian shirts? Possibly, yes, in an impulsive moment of reverting back to your caveman roots. But what would this really accomplish in the long run, aside from a supreme sense of emotional release followed closely by crippling regret for not handling the situation better?

So what's the solution to our sudden lack of self-defense capabilities? In times of social turmoil, I like to turn to the ancients. So, as Charles "The Man" Darwin would say, "Let's evolve!"

Well, I maintain (and this, friends, is my thesis statement) that we have evolved. Survival of the fittest lives on! In addition to the fight and flight options, which of course necessitate years of therapy, I propose that we (as in, humanity [read: Americans]) have come to rely on a third alternative, one which is increasingly becoming the go-to response to any externally [or, indeed, internally] motivated stressors: the freak-out. I know it doesn't rhyme and isn't very mellifluous at all, but sometimes you have to sacrifice aesthetics for accuracy.

Back to the matter at hand: The freak-out (referred to by the neurosis seekers as an "anxiety attack") has essentially morphed into the new "fight or flight." What can we do to confront all of our modern stressors (unfulfilled ambitions, financial instability, divorce, Republicans, globalization, free trade, hipsters, basic midtwenties crises, etcetera) but panic? Panic is the answer! It's not a disorder; it's our new-age defense mechanism, a process that should assure us in no uncertain terms that we are, in fact, evaluating our stressors and responding to them in kind. No longer are the threats as simple as choosing life or death; instead, the bald eagle of earlier is now stopping in our path and telling us that he'll let you and two of your children live, but you will all have to carry on with all sorts of hindrances, including but not limited to the inability to love, a serious financial strain, and fear of abandonment by a father figure. What then? Our brains have evolved to take in the treacherous and often fractured postmodern world in which we find ourselves by panicking. It's the only natural response we can have in the face of such variegated stimuli.

Thomas Szasz, a noted and excitingly controversial psychiatrist, wrote a book about the fallacies of mental illness. Specifically, he claimed that there is actually no such thing as mental illness; what we refer to as a "disease of the mind" he likens to an infinite series of games, each of which can be played in an infinite number of ways. Behaviors that are classified as "mentally ill" are just different ways to play the game than we are used to, no better and no worse than behaviors argued as "normal."

While I don't necessarily agree with Dr. Szasz's basic tenet, and while Dr Szasz is reportedly a wackjob, some of his ideas can be skewed as relevant to the discussion on the table. If you oversimplify his point (I generally tend to go in for oversimplifying), it makes a lot of sense. Fighting and flighting are two different directions to take when confronted with an obstacle in the "game." But, as we've so recently and so gallantly come to terms with the fact that things aren't always

“black” or “white,” we’ve had to make adjustments. And our adjustment to this particular issue has been to freak out—a response that in no way deserves to carry a connotation of mental inferiority or paralysis.

The moral of the story is this: Freaking out is important. It’s what we have to do to survive in this new era of emotional turmoil and internal stressors. It’s not a disease of the mind; it shouldn’t be stigmatized into one. On the contrary, the freak out marks us as rational, sensible beings. The world as it is right now is a chaotic mess of everything we know to be wrong. We hate each other; we’re afraid of everything; Mother Nature, among other nameless, faceless forces, is trying to kill us. The only sane, logical response is to freak out. Why? Not because we prefer to remain stagnant and paralyzed, but because we realize that there is an immense disconnect between our view of what reality should be and what it is. Freaking out bridges the gap.

Sure, Valium and Xanax have their places in our society, but they’re no different from endorphins, which roll in unannounced after a few hours of fleeing. Not really. People who proudly proclaim that they don't "suffer" from an "anxiety disorder" need to take a step back and evaluate their current standards of living, which would be classified in modern terminology as a clear-cut case of avoidance, or, possibly, sociopathy. Sadly, at some point, they’ll come to realize that they have not evolved to face modern threats, and instead have chosen to believe (read: deluded themselves and others) that our current reality is acceptable. These poor megalomaniacal souls will therefore become extinct (read: committed) in a small matter of time, leaving the unstable status quo to the emotionally healthy freakers.