



PanicFreeTV

FOUNDATION SERIES

Episode #3 of 4

THE PANIC PARADOX

“The White Bear Effect”

- Ironically, the very act of trying to suppress a thought makes it much more likely that we'll have it. Trying to suppress a thought makes it stronger, more tenacious, more frequent, and more enduring.
- The name “The White Bear Effect” was coined by Professor Daniel Wegner from Harvard University, after his research showed that when people are instructed to suppress thoughts of white bears, they can't help but think about white bears much more than normal (even after the experiment is over).
- Why does this happen? Because, in order for us to make sure that we're NOT thinking about something, some part of our brain has to think about it, which ironically keeps the thought alive.
- The White Bear Effect particularly comes into play when when we're under what's called “mental” or “cognitive load”.
- Mental load just means your conscious mind is working really hard. It can come from having a lot on your mind, or from engaging in a difficult mental task. It can also come from being distracted. And most relevant here, it can come from stress and anxiety.
- In other words, when we're stressed or anxious, trying to suppress a thought is even harder than normal — and so by trying to NOT think something, it's even more likely we will.

Trying To Suppress or Fight Against Anxious Thoughts Backfires

- As we covered in Episode #2, a panic False Alarm triggers the FIGHT-flight response. In other words, panic creates a natural urge to either try to escape from the situation we're in, or to FIGHT panic itself.
- What are the different ways we might try to fight panicky thoughts? We might TRY to ignore them, forget them, debate them, eliminate them, distract ourselves from them — or in other words, try to SUPPRESS them. It's a totally natural response, any sensible person would do it... and unfortunately, more often than not, it backfires.
- Because of the White Bear Effect, trying to suppress anxious or panicky thoughts makes those thoughts stronger, more resilient, and more enduring — and because of that, it fuels The Panic Pattern (see Episode 2 for more about The Panic Pattern).

Common-Sense “Solutions” That Can Subtly Reinforce Both Anxiety & Panic “Attacks”

There are several “attempted solutions” for panic and anxiety that intuitively seem like good ideas, but that careful research has shown actually make panic and anxiety worse. Unfortunately, many of these strategies are commonly recommended by therapists — who either don't have the time, or expertise, to keep up to date with the research. This makes it really difficult for people to end their problems with panic and anxiety, even with “professional” help.

Here are a few examples of strategies that seem as if they SHOULD help, but that research has shown can trigger The White Bear Effect, and as a result, make anxiety and panic worse:

- **LOGICALLY CHALLENGING ANXIOUS THOUGHTS:** Trying to logically debate, challenge, or talk back to unwanted anxious thoughts is often a subtle form of thought suppression (it's an effort to eliminate unwanted thoughts).
- **DISTRACTION TECHNIQUES:** Trying to continually distract or preoccupy yourself, in an effort to avoid thinking anxious thoughts, can also trigger The White Bear Effect.
- **THE POSITIVE THINKING PROBLEM:** When people believe they ALWAYS need to be 100% positive, that they can NEVER afford the “luxury” of a negative thought, or that ANY negative thought needs to be replaced by a positive one... this sets them up, ironically, to be at the mercy of “negative thoughts”.

Trying To Control or Fight Against Panic-Related Body Sensations Makes Those Sensations Stronger

- James Gross from Stanford University has shown that trying to fight against or control unwanted EMOTIONS is not only tiring and stressful, but it can also prime the fight-flight response that's behind panic. This means that, just like trying to suppress anxious thoughts backfires, so too does trying to suppress or control panic-related body sensations or feelings.
- In other words, trying to fight panic in any way is fuel for The Panic Pattern, and it makes the situation worse. This is why “The Panic Paradox” exists.
- Panic is deeply counter-intuitive, and because of that, so too are the solutions. What common sense tells us SHOULD work usually makes things worse — and what DOES work, as you'll soon discover, tends to fly in the face of common sense.

The Emotional Dog Wags The Rational Tail

- To paraphrase Professor Jonathan Haidt when he was at The University of Virginia, when it comes to how our brains work, the emotional dog wags the rational tail.
- Because the Panic Mistake happens deep in the unconscious parts of our brains — it's NOT a logical, rational mistake. And because of this, the answers for panic are also NOT logical... nor are they rational.
- Real change doesn't come from "head knowledge" — it comes from something much, much deeper. It comes from real, tangible, lasting, EMOTIONAL shifts.
- When you feel safe, secure, and calm in the very situations that used to make you feel anxious, then your thoughts and body sensations are automatically different, and there's no need to try and fight them with logic (or with anything else).

A Scientifically Validated Technique For Ending Panic False Alarms

- Since trying to fight against a Panic False Alarm tends to fuel The Panic Pattern and makes it worse, if someone has a "panic attack" I don't ask them to relax. Instead, I ask them to VOLUNTARILY make the False Alarm a LOT bigger. I ask them to voluntarily give me the biggest "panic attack" they've ever had. What happens universally is that they can't. Paradoxically, it relaxes them.
- It's totally counterintuitive, but trying to VOLUNTARILY increase a False Alarm is an effective way to end it — and there are multiple scientific trials showing this really does work WHEN used as part of a larger, systematic approach.
- While there are important nuances that make this work (well beyond the scope of this episode), the reason I share this here is that I want to get curious — perhaps panic doesn't follow the "rules" everyone expects it to. Perhaps the only reason you still have panic False Alarms in your life is because you've been following "common sense" (as any intelligent person would).

Coming next...

EPISODE 4: "PANIC FREE"

- "Panic Free" ISN'T about coping better with panic attacks — because having to "cope" means you still have them.
- "Panic Free" doesn't even mean that you're able to immediately stop a "panic attack" as soon as it begins — because, at best, that's just a good start. (Plus, the vast majority of methods people use to end or cope with "panic attacks" backfire in the long term, and reinforce a life of panic.)
- What "Panic Free" really means is that panic has truly become a total non-issue for you in your life. It means that you're naturally and effortlessly as panic free, care free and "normal" as anyone else you know... without even thinking about it. It means no more panic "attacks" ever again — because panic is truly a thing of the past for you.

The Scientific Research Is Very Clear On Two Important Things:

- **FIRST:** We need a systematic approach that addresses every aspect of panic, to make sure you truly have a panic-free life.
- **AND SECOND:** With the right systematic approach, you can be "Panic Free" faster than you've probably ever thought possible — even if you've had panic in your life for a very long time (even decades).
- The most important thing to know is that there are NO lost causes. Everyone can be helped, and usually far faster than they expect. In fact, ending panic is usually extremely quick and easy IF you have the right approach.
- **That's what the next episode is all about.**