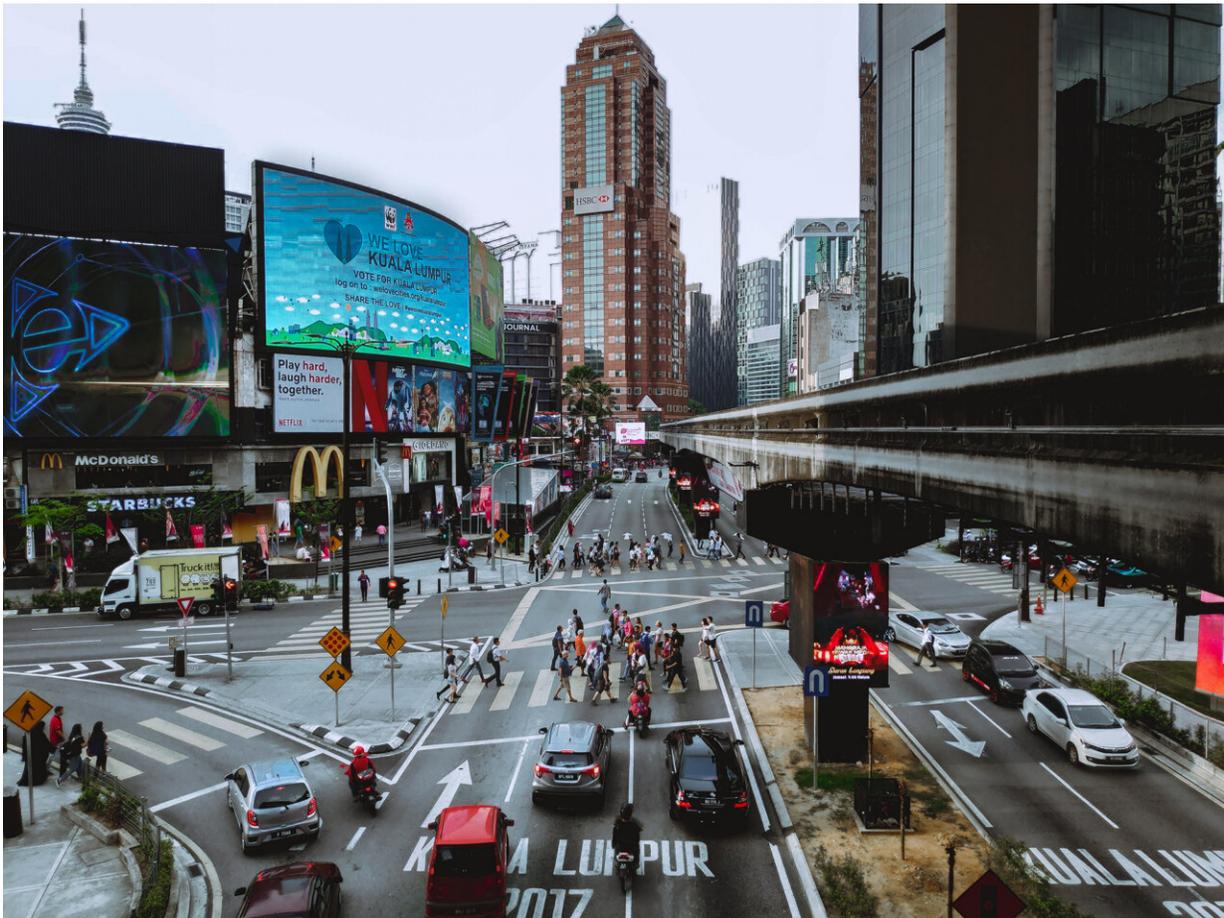


Overthinking could be driving creativity in people with neurotic disorders

August 28 2015, by Steven Lyon



Credit: Khairi Harry from Pexels

People who suffer from neuroticism – a condition characterised by

anxiety, fear and negative thoughts – are extremely tuned in to looking for threats. For that reason, you may expect them to perform well in jobs requiring vigilance: stunt pilots, aviators and bomb defusement. Yet, the [evidence suggests](#) they are actually more suited to creative jobs.

Exactly what drives [neuroticism](#) and the creativity it is associated with is not known. But researchers have now come up with a theory which suggests that it could be down to the fact that people who score highly on neuroticism tests, meaning they are prone to anxiety or depression, [tend to do a lot of thinking](#) – often at the expense of concentrating at the task at hand.

Past, present and future

The hypothesis, which is yet to be experimentally verified, is an extension of what we already know. People who have neurotic traits typically [look for things to worry about](#) (a mechanism dubbed "self-generated thinking"). For example, people who get depressed are consumed by such self-generated [negative thoughts](#) that they forget what they are supposed to be doing. In other words, they are not very tuned in to the "here and now", which is pretty important if you need somebody to concentrate on defusing a bomb.

What the new research helps to do is explain the underlying brain mechanisms that interfere with "on the job thinking". A certain amount of brain arousal is great for concentration but too much interferes with clear thinking and that's what you want when performing stunts, flying planes, and disposing of bombs.

So where does the creativity come in? The authors argue that people who engage in self-generated thinking are creative because they are not rooted in reality – they are away with the fairies. Indeed, they may resist attempts to get them to concentrate on reality whilst they focus on their

own thoughts. It is hardly a surprise, then, that their ideas can be new, whacky and original.



Anxiety and depression can be a lonely place. Credit: hikrcn

So while people scoring high on neuroticism may struggle with a lot of stress, they can still have a successful working life. They may actually be able to find creative solutions to problems that didn't exist in the first place, and in the process come with some pretty useful and imaginative stuff. Rather like [Billy Liar](#), in his escape from his tedious existence conjuring up some fairly exciting daydreams.

Remaining questions

We know that people who are clinically depressed spend an extraordinary amount of time living in the past. We know that people diagnosed with chronic worry (Generalised Anxiety Disorder) spend an extraordinary amount of time living in the future. The strength of the study is that it pulls together what is already known about people who spend a lot of time engaged in distorted thinking, some of which can be labelled as creative.

The authors argue that this creative flair applies specifically to [problem solving](#), as they believe rumination and worry improve such skills. However, this is questionable as there is actually evidence that people who are depressed or worry are [not very good at problem solving](#) at all. Indeed, one of the interventions recommended for both conditions is [Problem Solving Therapy](#). To adequately solve problems you need to be approaching reality and its problems, not avoiding them through aimless thinking. The new study falls short by not discussing this.

The authors also argue that psychological interventions such as meditation and mindfulness – which are thought to dampen some of these heightened responses by grounding people in the "here and now" – may do more harm than good. The jury is still out, but there is [enough evidence available](#) suggesting the benefits of mindfulness for people who are depressed and anxious with limited side effects.

Neuroticism, by its very nature, alerts you to past and future danger and some individuals can make good use of that. And that can be good. Our caveman ancestors came equipped with primitive brain parts allowing them to engage in predicting threat. But even if anxious or depressed people are able to come up with some great ideas, they are surely far more likely to contribute to society in the long run if they can find relief from their suffering.

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