

DIARY OF A 3RD YEAR PSYCHOLOGY UNDERGRADUATE & COGNITIVE-BEHAVIOUR THERAPY

Friday 5th January 1996

Today I met a cognitive-behaviour therapist with a view to him helping me with increasing levels of anxiety (to deal with them, not to increase them, that is). As a psychology undergraduate, I tried not to let the behavioural input of therapy prejudice the situation by remembering Skinner's rats or tedious lectures describing strange and disturbing stimulus-response paradigms.

However, PK was quite human (as most people are) and we spent nearly an hour talking about the nature of anxiety and in what situations my inappropriate anxiety responses occur. It seemed ungracious somehow to mention the inappropriate anxiety response I experienced once or twice during the session – but I have every intention to be completely honest and forthright with him and myself from now on (if only I could be sure I am not lying to myself about this intention).

Friday 16th February 1996

I have been keeping a diary of anxiety provoking experiences, as invited to last time PK and I met. Actually, PK seemed a little surprised that I had complied with his request so easily. Well, it wasn't exactly easy – the hard part had been writing down my automatic thoughts, which seemed rather pathetic in blue and white. It was also hard talking about them with a relatively strange person (although PK's dress sense isn't too way out). Perceiving myself also as a relatively strange person, though, helped me to feel more or less at ease – as much as an anxious person can. Even being asked if I would stand on a chair while telling the time, in order to attack my fear of embarrassment, didn't strike me as being completely perverse.

In fact, as PK jumped up on a chair and said the time, in order to encourage me to join him in making an idiot of myself, it only took a few seconds of thinking, 'I've got a right nutter here' before I found myself standing up on my chair and informing PK that it was 12:34 and 20 seconds. However, when he asked me if I could kneel on the floor and bark like a dog, as he then proceeded to demonstrate, I politely declined. A little unkindly on my part, perhaps, the phrase 'barking mad' had sprung to mind.

Tuesday 20th February 1996

I have been conditioned to stand on chairs. My father showed me a jigsaw he had finished which was on a table and in order to see it properly, I found it strangely necessary to stand on a chair ... I also made the regrettable mistake of recounting the 'telling time on chair' episode to my 19 year old son. Since then, he has mercilessly kept asking me what the time is, while pointing to a chair. Once he pointed to the dining room table. Once he pointed to the ironing board. Clearly, he imagines himself a substitute cognitive-behaviour therapist. Well, there are worse substitute careers...

Friday 23rd February 1996

Today PK and I indulged in a little role play in order for me to practise introducing myself to people, which I find difficult. As PK and I introduced ourselves to each other for the tenth time, it occurred to me that my anxious reaction had been substituted by boredom – a case of really quick conditioning – what a guy. We also talked about identifying with, or modelling ourselves on, certain desired qualities of someone or something. After privately deciding I rather fancied being a cross between Edina from *Absolutely Fabulous* and Dana Scully from *The X Files*, I thought it best to give this idea a miss. I only really want to be myself, anyway.

PK then began to enlarge upon *Shame Attack* strategies, by which I could gradually inoculate myself against my embarrassment at being looked at or being the centre of attention. My anxiety level began to rise as he suggested I could attack shame a little each day by wearing odd socks or one earring in public, or by asking for strange items in shops. My cognitive spaces were still boggling when PK suggested we might meet three weeks later, at which time a colleague of his would be sitting in on PK's sessions. Did I mind, he asked a little disarmingly. No, I answered more than a little (subjectively) alarmingly.

I left PK in a slight daze, stopping on the way home to ask for a strange item in the Spar Shop. Sadly, the Spar Shop was clean out of strange items.

Monday 26th February 1996

Today I attacked shame by cautiously wearing non-matching earrings to university. I sensed that people were looking, but nobody said a word...

Thursday 29th February 1996

Today I wore brightly coloured non-matching socks to university, but nobody said a word. In desperation, I asked a friend if she had noticed. She said she had, but thought I was just 'doing my thing'. However, I later bumped into another friend, who pointed to my socks with raised eyebrows. A rather useful therapeutic experience then occurred, as we stood in the middle of the library engaging in a rather female-shrieking-laughter type of conversation for over ten minutes. People kept looking...

Wednesday 6th March 1996

As I walked around the supermarket with odd socks, one earring and a badge saying *Still Incredibly Sexy*, I reflected on the effect that *Shame Attack* (or *Therapy of the Really Embarrassing Kind*) was having on my life. Basically, I have learned how to look weird and not care a bit. This fits in very nicely with my ambition to be eccentric when I am older.

Friday 15th March 1996

For the last week or so, I feel that I have not progressed past a certain point of non-embarrassment. I mentioned this to PK – who was alone, despite having previously frightened me with the expected presence of a sitting-in colleague. I am ashamed to admit that for a split second I wondered if the colleague had been a dastardly ploy, but being a psychology undergraduate has no doubt brought about this reprehensible state of suspicion.

PK and I decided that I might now progress to initiating dialogue with people, including people I don't know. To someone who scored 0 for 'extraversion' on the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire, this is a little alarming. One aim of this strategy, however, is for me to experience taking control in social situations.

Being a psychology undergraduate, I had a long list of questions which had been steadily developing over the weeks. PK very good naturedly answered the first five questions before my allotted time ran out. If taking control in social situations involves asking questions, I think I can do very well.

Friday 19th April 1996

Today PK's elusive sitting-in colleague had unexpectedly (to me) materialised. Well, life is full of little surprises, I thought, as PK asked me his usual question of what had I taken away with me from the last session (a question that must cause precipitate alarm to kleptomaniacs).

The session seemed to pass quickly, after I had confessed to not accosting very many people verbally during the Easter break. We talked about starting and maintaining conversations. PK asked me what I thought this entailed, but I couldn't think of anything to say...

Once during the session, I felt as though I was being assertive when I moved my chair to another place, as it had been by a radiator and was making me feel hot. After I had moved, though, PK felt the radiator and said nothing, which led me to wonder if the radiator had actually been on. Still, my experience with *Shame Attack* therapy has taught me not to be embarrassed by such minor incidentals...

Friday 3rd May 1996

After reporting on my continuing successes and not-quite-so-much successes at dialogue initiation and maintenance, PK and I discussed underlying issues of my social anxiety, which I rather enjoyed (the discussion, that is, not the social anxiety itself). Almost three years of being a psychology undergraduate has obviously sharpened my critical evaluation capabilities. Rather a pity it seems to have sent me halfway around the bend as well!

Friday 17th May 1996

Today PK and I seemed to be thrashing out a few issues concerned with my core beliefs. Apart from believing that they are inside apples, I realised that as much as I am afraid of being odd or different, I am even more afraid of being 'normal'. Happily, though, I do not feel predominantly normal. I thoroughly enjoyed this thrashing out session and was sorry when it ended. I would never have believed that cognitive-behaviour therapy could be so enjoyable!

Friday 21st June 1996

After a break of five weeks, during which time I had been revising for and taking final exams, I saw PK for the last session today. I felt a little sad that such a valuable and personally meaningful experience was coming to an end – but only in an extrinsic way. Intrinsically, I feel the benefits are much longer lasting and maybe (optimistically) for ever.

PK asked (a little anxiously, I thought) if the cognitive-behaviour therapy had been worthwhile. As my mind flashed back to memories of telling the time standing on a chair, wearing odd socks in public and initiating conversations with strangers, I was able to truthfully assure him that my life has qualitatively changed. I no longer feel so interpersonally sensitive or terminally self-conscious. As I shook his hand and left, however, I began to wonder anxiously what he *really* thought of me...