

Why Crisis Gradient Theory Explains What Nothing Else Seems To

By Jake Petric

The modern era, an age of unparalleled wealth, record comfort, safety and miraculous healthcare to ease all your ails, there truly has never been anything like it throughout all of history. Yet, we simultaneously find ourselves plagued by anxiety, depression, outrage and existential crises like nothing we've ever seen throughout our history. Psychologists label it general anxiety, sociologists call it anomie and philosophers deem it to be nihilism. But none of these labels are in fact an explanation for the paradox itself, "Why do people fabricate adversity in the absence of it?"

I've developed Crisis Gradient Theory (CGT) to fill an explanatory void that doesn't pathologize any of the aforementioned issues as disorders or malfunction, but instead the result of our psychological mechanisms that evolved along side the adversity of survival. But with the lack of real adversity in an age of record comfort-rich environments, the very same mechanisms are now misapplied in the absence of material adversity to fabricate symbolic adversity, as our mind is conditioned for survival in harsh conditions, and is naturally a tension-seeking system.

We don't just seek to rationalise our view of the world, but to create meaning, meaning that can only come from adversity. People are convinced they're seeking comfort, but it's that actual adversity that helps them clarify values, sharpen identity, and create coherent narrative structure. Remove the real crisis, and the architecture collapses into formlessness, unless our psyche fabricates substitutes. Explaining why we now see outrage culture, performative suffering, a crisis of identity, manufactured enemies and the very decadence that's degrading western culture.

Reductionist theories try to isolate this behaviour to trauma or genetics, but CGT recognises the symbolic nature and meaning in suffering. The mind produces meaning by positioning the self against a perceived threat, and these threats don't actually need to be real, they only need to be believable enough to animate someone's cognitive narrative, and a safe world becomes dangerous, not because it is, but because our mind cannot tolerate narrative neutrality.

Most frameworks fall short due to the fact they moralise or diagnose in the way that they ask "what's wrong with people today?", but I propose the question should actually be "What is the mind trying to do?". Reframing the question from one based on searching for dysfunction, to one that instead treats the brain as if it's doing what it's intended to do, but results in our mind simulating crisis in the absence of real crisis. Eating lots of food and becoming overweight for instance is not so much a failure of will, but a surplus of a biological instinct in a resource abundant world in which the mind did not evolve in.

My Crisis Gradient Theory explains this phenomenon by viewing our psyche as a narrative system first and a rational one second. So symbolic adversity isn't just noise, but is more of a misfire of our evolutionary psychology that isn't adapted for resource rich environments, and can help us explain the discontent of people in places with no scarcity and address burnout and malaise in high comfort cultures and answers the question people may have had, being "Why do I have everything, yet can't feel happy?". If we become aware of the nature of this, we can repurpose ourselves consciously to redesign the nature of our adversities. So CGT isn't eliminating struggle, but it can offer something else in the modern era whereby we don't just get "diagnosed", and therefore believe we have a problem in our chemistry. CGT can't fix someone but instead help us recognise that the lack of adversity is the source of our symbolic problems.

The Symbolic Mind's need for Adversity

We can't exist in a vacuum of neutral experiences, our mind behaves as a symbolic interpreter that

constantly weaves raw experiences into a structured meaning, and at the foundation of meaning is adversity. Adversity isn't just pain or discomfort, but a narrative generator and whether the story be ancient or modern the hero has to suffer, as the obstacles the hero faces give the plot its shape and the hero's self coherence. This very structure is a reflection of the very structure that exists within our mind, and the symbolic mind will never relax as it's a fundamental part of our evolved psychology. When an absence of adversity exists, the symbolic mind begins to scan inside and outside our mind for metaphorical predators, social betrayals and imagined failings. Not because it's a malfunction, but instead the very opposite, it's fulfilling its evolved function, that is to "find a meaningful threat and confront it".

When true threats are absent, the mind amplifies minor discomforts into major dramas, we can call this "crisis inflation". A vague and minor off-the-cuff comment can become an attack on your identity or someone taking too long to text back becomes "they don't care about me". In these cases the symbolic mind isn't "lying" to us, but instead it's compensating for the absence of real world narrative that it would derive from adversity. It's creative, not pathological, and was supposed to happen as that's how it was created via its pathway through the evolutionary process. All of our emotions for instance, evolved to fulfil a need or provide an advantage, jealousy exists to help preserve interpersonal relationships and retain certain advantages. Despite jealousy being uncomfortable, those without jealousy were out competed by those who did feel jealousy, deep down even a bad habit is doing something for us, even if that very thing ends up being uncomfortable or self destructive. Without the awareness of this process, we essentially become a slave to it, if we don't seek adversity of our own choice, the symbolic mind will pick one for us. It's not pain or suffering that it's searching for, its meaning in which it can create purpose, purpose that can only be found in the journey of adversity, and it can be up to the individual whether or not it has something to pursue that's either be noble or depressing in its nature.

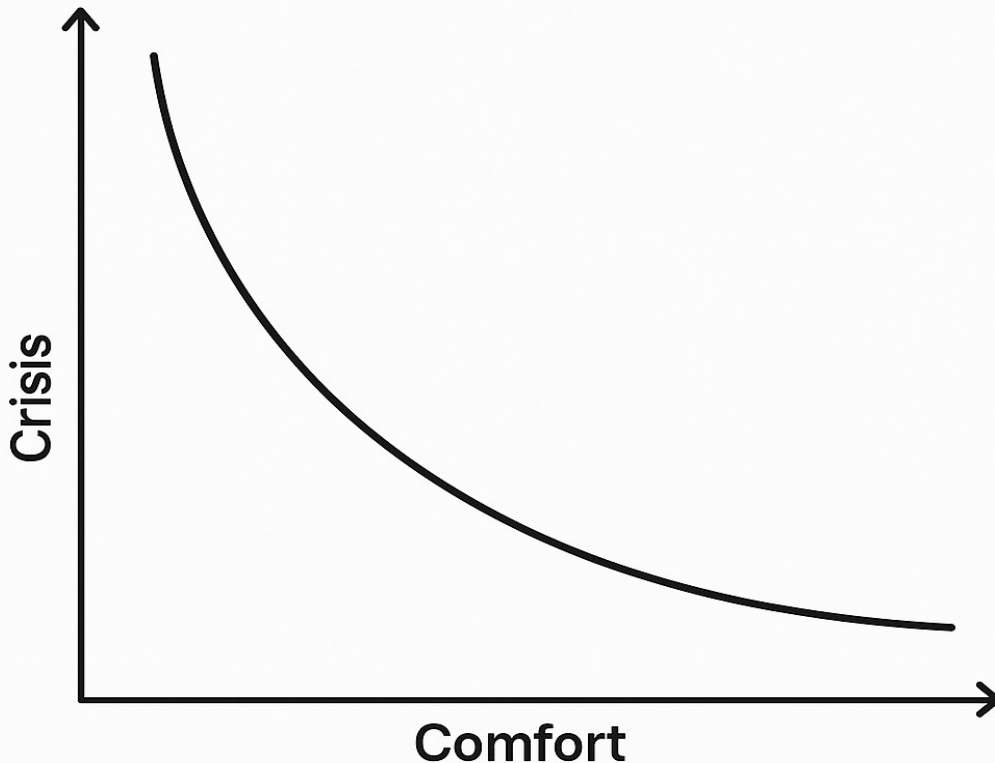
The Psychological Paradox of Safety

We all think we want comfort, and the pursuit of comfort is universal, and as such comfort is mistaken for the goal, the reward after the climb. But our psyche hasn't evolved in a state of peace, and comfort, when stripped of contrast, erodes the very structures that help us understand who we are. Discomfort was a map of sorts that revealed danger, injustice, hunger or some other misalignment and prompted us to movement, and when someone is suffering, they know their story and where they stand in it, and modernity's comfort disorients the psychological compass that is the symbolic mind.

We're suspended by our lack of adversity and devoid of fulfilment, a narrative without stakes or even an end, and no good myth or legend had no stakes. Our ancestors found their coherence in the cold, hunger, war, ritual and of course the need for survival, and we find our coherence from identity, ideology, outrage, existential dread, mental conflicts within ourselves, performative morality, irrational fixation on health, diet, appearance and more. All of which are examples of the fact we've transcended material hardship and developed symbolic hardship as a substitute.

Our perception of comfort has been wrong all along, to the extent that comfort is even mistaken for meaning itself. With the promises of success, money, and stability being sold to us all as existential fulfilment. But once having attained those very things however, we realise this is in fact false and we spiral, because we were never trained to confront a world where achieving our goals leads not to fulfilment, but to the very absence of meaning we seem so averse to, and comfort without challenge is anaesthesia. We can teach ourselves to navigate a map we made ourselves, be free of the tyranny of symbolic problems and never let that map draw itself ever again.

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Authors Notes: My hope is that CGT does more than describe a pattern, and it helps people understand themselves with greater depth, and perhaps to orient their lives toward fulfilment rather than the illusion of comfort. I've combined many disciplines to create what I think is a single logically coherent idea, integrating evolutionary psychology, cognitive psychology, existential philosophy, anthropology, sociology and maybe more to explain something other people haven't, and I understand this is academically risky. But the idea is no where near the end of its development and any input on the idea is much appreciated.