

Dear Lauren,

I am writing this to explain how to think about and overcome one's own insecurities.

The concept of a belief system:

A belief system can be understood through this analogy. Consider the process of learning math. First there are a few axioms, or self-evident truths. A straight line is the shortest distance between two points. Things equal to the same thing are equal to one another. The theorems and ideas learned later are all built on these first axioms. It is the same with our own beliefs. Our ideas, thoughts, and beliefs do not exist in a vacuum; they have dependencies and are themselves dependent on other things.

Analogy with fear:

Within every person there exists their own fears, insecurities, doubts. Think of these as little vectors. By themselves, they are small enough in magnitude that they can be managed without too much trouble. You have internalized, perhaps subconsciously, a set of lies that together forms a part of your belief system. This much you yourself have admitted. Think of this set as a vector space. The lies are like matrices, they are like transformations that scale up the little insecurity vectors into something terrifying.

Fear and escapism:

When faced with something terrifying, it is natural to run. Instead of facing it and struggling with it, it is so much easier to run and hide. People run and hide from their 'demons'. Whether or not 'demons' are a literal reality in the classical sense is irrelevant. The concept of demons is at minimum a useful literary tool for describing an observable concept/phenomenon. People run using alcohol, drugs, by trying to distract themselves so they do not need to confront their own mind; they want to escape their own head. This pathological drive is the root cause of addiction, and a great deal of other human misjudgment, which I have seen.

Running does not work:

It is pointless. You can run to the ends of the earth, but your 'demons' so to speak will easily follow, you will exhaust yourself, and they will become stronger. More on this at the end.

The only remaining options:

Consider, from first principles, a situation in which you are faced with something terrifying, and running is not an option. One idea is to fight – this takes a non-zero amount of strength to do. What if we don't have that? *Pray*. It does not matter if you have no belief or faith. Every person, faced with his doom, will pray (exceptions exist; the exception proves the rule). If faced with a truly hopeless situation, if every other action is pointless, if no other actions are possible, the only thing still possible is to pray.

Self preservation a law of nature:

Consider this: any land animal dropped in the ocean with no possibility of reaching shore, will try to swim as best it can, as long as it can. It will do whatever it can do to survive. It is motivated by the drive of self preservation. The same law tying the animal to its actions ties humans to theirs. Prayer is one of the possible actions, it is possible when none of the others are, and if the probability of it changing anything was 0 then nobody would do it, and it wouldn't be ingrained into human nature. It just may be that to pray gives oneself the strength to fight and survive what appeared to be a hopeless situation.

Intuition of the solution:

Recall the initial ‘problem statement’: faced with terrifying fears, uncertainties, worries, insecurities, we have the option to run or fight. This is ‘fight or flight’. The perverse nature of the problem is this: to run, which is usually a good choice in a ‘fight or flight’ scenario, is pointless here. To fight, which is generally a last resort (its risky and full of uncertainties), in this situation *guarantees that you will win*. This is because a lie, when confronted with the truth, loses all meaning.

Solution:

How do you fight? First, face the thought that troubles you. You have to grapple with it and understand it. It is painful, but you must get at the essence of it. Sometimes lies we tell ourselves are sugar coated; they are dressed up to be more appealing. You must ask, what does it really mean in blunt terms? Part of the pain here is that often times some truth may be found in a larger lie, and this not only extends credibility to the thing, but is just painful to accept. For example, if someone were to say: “I am worthless because I am fat”, the truth is: “You may be fat, but not worthless”. Just because a complex thought has a glimmer of truth (or a lot of it) does not mean that, when taken all together, it is true. If it is a lie, there exists some known truth which contradicts it. Put the two together and the lie will lose all meaning.

Vector space analogy concluded:

“You did nail it... but in my brain it is a lot more complex...”. A vector space can be complicated. There can be infinitely many dimensions and a lot of operations. Suppose we thought we had a vector space, but proved that it was not closed under addition. The whole thing falls apart. The collection of things we thought were a vector space still exist. The dimensions are still there, and it is still very complex... but who cares? The underlying axioms the mathematical framework was built upon don’t hold up, so the entirety of it is meaningless. So it will be when you recognize that a few simple lies support what I called a ‘framework of lies’. The ideas and thoughts that once troubled you will still exist, but they will lose all meaning, and *you really won’t care* about them.

Nobody cares about obvious lies:

If you have doubts about the last sentence, consider this statement: “Lauren, you are an evil satan worshipping destroyer of the earth. You are a literal slave owner, you are responsible for all the evil in world, everything is your fault, and you are literally Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, Genghis Khan, and Mao at the same time.” Obviously, this will not upset you at all, and you will probably even laugh at it. It is absurd. The entirety of the issue at heart is misjudging a lie for truth, since a lie recognized as a lie is meaningless.

Bonus: the ‘wicked problem’ dilemma:

A wicked problem is a problem for which a solution cannot reasonably be found until first trying and failing. A good example of this is the 1940 Tacoma Narrows bridge collapse. The bridge was constructed in accordance with state of the art (at that time) theory on suspension bridges. It collapsed due to light wind. The exact cause of the collapse was not known until experiments were done in a wind tunnel and more knowledge was learned about the aerodynamic forces at play (you can read about it here: <https://wsdot.wa.gov/tbnhistory/bridges-failure.htm>). The problem of how to deal with your own thoughts is by definition a wicked problem. The intuitive or naive solution is to try to avoid the negative thoughts. Only by trying this, and acknowledging that it didn’t work (over the long term) can we progress towards an actual solution.

Yours,
Edward