

Embracing the Chaos

By

Rajaa Bokhari

When I first started treatment for general anxiety disorder, I thought it was a one-time thing. Through eight months of therapy, I thought my anxiety would be behind me - I would think clearly and manage my emotions properly, instead of being dragged by them in whichever direction. All the time I had spent second-guessing myself, judging each of my actions critically and disapprovingly, and feeling paralyzed at taking another step, would come to an end. Four years since my treatment, however, I realized I was wrong.

Fighting anxiety, with its accompanying sense of distress and drowning, seems to be a lifelong battle. It's as though it doesn't get cured, but it doesn't go into remission either. Anxiety can only be momentarily tempered. Brought under control. Managed. Like a PR campaign, the anxious thoughts are explained away, the knots in my gut gently untangled, and a fresh new start commences.

Of course it feels really good to experience this process of explaining, detangling and starting afresh. There's a sense of empowerment in halting your train of distressing thoughts, to softly guide your stream of consciousness onto the right track. The problem is that, after the first few times, you begin to realize how incredibly exhausting this can get. Because it's the same cycle every time, of experiencing and managing your anxiety before moving forward, only for it to start all over again. It's almost as if your biggest enemy is not the anxiety itself, but a world that has been built to ensure that you always stay anxious.

Last summer, this world got more uncertain, turbulent, and unpredictable. After ten years in Dubai, I moved back to Karachi, where I was born and mostly raised, returning to my birthplace at the cusp of thirty. If recovering from an anxiety disorder is challenging, it is a whole new kind of challenge in Karachi. Almost immediately I had detected cracks in my carefully-developed and well-stocked arsenal

of therapeutic skills - self-soothing, cognitive reframing, positive self-talk, grounding, meditation, journaling, what have you.

Previously in Dubai, during times of heightened distress, I could go for a walk around my apartment complex, take a nice long drive, or find joy in the colors of the meal I had cooked. Just to soothe myself and clear my mind of its racing thoughts, which were unhelpfully panicky and invariably full of self-loathing. I could be hard on myself in a way in which it would break my heart to treat someone else. But my self-soothing activities, identified with the help of my therapist, were especially helpful in these circumstances - surprisingly simple to do, yet providing immediate relief.

However, in Karachi, the story was different. This city - my home, my identity, the foundation of my life - has turned self-soothing on its head. How do you go for long walks when the streets are littered with trash, replete with people begging, and run amok with “private” security in Vigos openly carrying large guns? How do you go for long drives on unsafe roads that are full of potholes and open manhole covers? If you can even afford a car, or the petrol to fuel it up! And how do you cook in the blighted heat with no air-conditioning because what’s regular in the rest of the world is still a luxury in Pakistan?

Karachi is testing the limits of my mental health. When I first arrived, my brain was scrambling to put together the crazy fragments of reality shooting at it from all directions. This city is loud - and, at the same time, incoherent. Its people are always on the move, bustling through its busy streets and barely registering things that can only happen here - such as an Audi giving way to a donkey cart. Buses come to their stops - but those stops can be anywhere, including in the middle of the road, right before the entry to a roundabout, which might have a person or two lying on its enclosed patch of grass taking a much-valued afternoon nap. If this metropolis could

be abstracted as art, it would be the splash of color from a paint can knocked over old canvas.

It's not a beautiful or oddly charming sight. Instead, it's draining. There is too much to do and not enough time to do it - the story of every big city - but also, no right way to do it. The systems don't work or won't work, it's hard to discern, and you feel like you've stepped into the past, but not with a vintage kind of feel, but like everyone is trapped in a world that has since moved on. It's as though the last few years on the global calendar skipped over Karachi. The first time I visited one of the nicer office towers in Clifton for a work meeting, a security guard actually wrote my name and phone number down on a thick, dusty old register. I get handwritten receipts from smaller stores - it would be kind of hipster hadn't the city's recent past been so morbid.

It's always a case for alarm when someone chooses to live in the past, to the point that the blessings of the present seem uninteresting. Karachi's people really do seem uninterested. Why wouldn't they be, since they live in a rare metropolis that is always short on water, gas, and electricity; has no mass-transit system to speak of; lacks clean and safe public spaces; and is accustomed to the occasional terrorist attack. My heart sinks. In fact, not just mine - I feel everyone else's depression, too. There's a persistent sadness enmeshed in the humidity of this city by the sea.

Sometimes, a ray of hope may shine through - people enjoying a mushaira at the Karachi Literature Festival, or painting on the grounds of the Frere Hall, or squealing with joy at the high tides of Sandspit Beach. But good mental wellbeing cannot persist in small chunks of warmth and comfort. The city has to consistently soothe its people, the warmth and comfort existing as a part of its very personality. Karachi needs to be a home - safe and cozy - recharging its inhabitants after a long day and calming their degenerating nerves. Maybe some people will still call it a home,

but I can't help viewing it as dysfunctional: neglectful of my well-being, unreliable in its basic provisions, and discouraging rather than nurturing.

In short, it's chaos. Since the city isn't cared for by the people in charge, it cannot care for the people for whom it's been placed in charge. Such dynamics are endemic in any toxic home environment, so the earth under my feet doesn't seem like Mother Nature, but like a sad, battered wife deprived of care and necessities, hence unable to look after her children. And chaos reigns in this household, as the children scatter about managing things for themselves, but by their nature are so green and powerless that they do so poorly, wastefully, and dangerously.

I'm too young to know how Karachi used to be, but I know what it's not. It's not a place where I can plan for the long term, or even for the next day. This is not an exaggeration: I agree with a maintenance person to come fix something, and the next day he stops answering his phone; I decide to take an online meeting from home, and the electricity goes out for the whole night; I buy pet food for my cat, paying a little more each time without receiving an explanation. Grocery budgets double overnight. Trash doesn't get picked up for days. The water supply goes from thrice a week, to once every ten days, to once every two weeks.

On my drive home from work, which starts in Civil Lines and ends in DHA Phase VI, I feel the depression I had kept at bay through a productive work day, beginning to seep through my carefully constructed boundaries. No surprise, as my car whizzes past terrible sights of barefoot children begging at the Boat Basin roundabout; an overburdened donkey dragging large bars of steel on a rickety cart across the long Mai Kolachi Bypass; the exhausted motorcyclists making their everyday loud, expensive commutes through dilapidated infrastructure; and much, much more.

How do I keep my wits about me in conditions like these? How does anyone, especially those whose pitiful sights I witness? I think I'm adapting to just living in the chaos. Is that the same as giving up? Brushing off the dirty streets and nonsense bureaucracy and senseless violence - letting the faint buzz of repressed anxiety drown out the cries of the city - its cries for help? It's hard, even impossible, and a little bit scary. What if I regress into a cocoon, trying to shrink myself away from the insanity of my world, enshrouded in fear, shame, and disgust?

Because that's how I feel most people in Karachi have come to live: in survival mode, they do the minimum they need to exist - within a circle of control that keeps diminishing day by day. Their nerves are fried and under constant attack. But all humans are born with the drive to labor and learn, so that we can engage with the web of life, ensuring not only our existence but exercising our creativity and ingenuity. This drive has to be exercised somehow.

But that's tough when you live in a broken system, and all of your creativity and ingenuity is spent on mundane tasks, executing hodgepodge techniques for basic amenities, like restoring the electricity supply of your house or trying to get an accident report from the police for your insurance provider. Without paying bribes, calling in favors, being stonewalled or even abused by those holding authority over your peace of mind. Your drive to grow and create is completely exhausted - and for what? Nothing spectacular or revolutionary. The banality of this situation is nothing short of soul-crushing.

And when you live long enough in the filth, dust, and heat, you begin to really believe that you might just deserve this. A third-class citizen. Maybe other people live in nicer places because they are meant to deserve better. Was this true? Was my fate sealed the day I was born in Pakistan, in Karachi? That, too, during the 90s, when the south of Pakistan had become the wild wild west. The day I caught myself sinking

into this thought pattern was jarring. Had I really healed if I could still think this way? Had I healed only to thrive in the developed world?

It's impossible to ponder over such questions without driving yourself mad - with that same pestering anxiety flaring up and the tools to self-soothe even less accessible than before. So every time I feel as though my thoughts are getting away from me, my stomach is churning, and I feel useless in the face of Karachi's troubles, I have to ground myself. I have to come back to the present, to the task at hand, like the book that I am reading, or the person that I am speaking to, or the errand that I am running. I don't know what other option I have.

And there are some small dividends to this approach. I can enjoy the moments that matter more - comfy weekend afternoons with my partner; getting high by the beach à la Lana del Rey; feeding stray animals outside my house; reading a philosophy book in the garden; going to the countless number of art and literary events still thriving in Karachi, perhaps in spite of Karachi. Each moment seems even more firmly etched in my brain, the contours of its memory composed of every feeling that I had at the time. This is the life of contradictions, of beauty between the uglier sides of reality, a world that is so broken that its resistance to its dire fate is its stubborn existence. Karachi will not succumb so, as its citizen, born and raised - at least mostly - I cannot succumb to my own despair either - at least mostly.

Perhaps this is the course life will have to take for as long as I am alive, and it just does not get better. And it doesn't have to be better. In the struggle to control my fate, the city competes with me, a battle I don't seem to be able to win. So I'm shrinking the combat region into a microcosm of events and decisions where I am the one indisputably in control. Which is the present, this exact moment, not a splice of time before or after. I choose to stay here, erase the future, unless the future is now. If

the city can't be kind to me, I will be kind to myself, and maybe one day Karachi will relent, too.

As revelatory as this seems to me - my long-awaited zest for the present - there are people who live this way regardless, because it sounds quite pleasant, even empowering, clever perhaps. The Stoics and Taoists and Existentialists and Sufis that I have read and absorbed into the fabric of my personal value system seem to say the same thing to me: be mindful of the present, live in harmony with nature, find your own meaning in life, follow the way of love. Despite swallowing one book after the other, filled with the words of the greats, it was Karachi that really drove the point home.

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