

# Paranoia

**Jeff Weston** considers whether paranoia is a necessary state in the face of a messed-up world or irrational conviction



**P**aranoia is seemingly many things. An irregular mind.<sup>1</sup> A solvent for messiness and confusion.<sup>2</sup> Disorder of the intellect.<sup>3</sup> The inability to maintain an equilibrium. Excessive brooding. A fallen soul. The absence of something to worship. A self-cure for insignificance.<sup>2</sup> The unwillingness to seek out prestige. A crisis of masculinity. Elevated sensitivity to perceived changes.<sup>4</sup> Catastrophising. An effort to protect civilization. Social uncertainty. Or the delusion of persecution. It has phenomenal range. To some, it's the state we *doubly* fall into when our beliefs are curtailed, doubted and treated as unrealistic; paranoia, the frame of mind which feeds off itself and yet is vulnerable to other voices and actions – particularly as it grew up playing on the streets with its little brother, suspicion, and its older brother, psychosis.

Paranoia can bombard you – just as the opening of this article perhaps did. It has so many facets and faces, and yet its underlying station is arguably '...the unshakeable... conviction that one is being persecuted'.<sup>5</sup> I have removed the word 'irrational' in that sentence because I believe such an assertion is at the very heart of whether paranoia is a

necessary and justified response to the world's ills or somehow, as in the Greek *para* ('beside') and *noos* ('mind'), distracted, beside, or out of, one's mind,<sup>3</sup> ie delusional.

Am I paranoid for even challenging the Feltham/Dryden definition, for partially ripping up their carefully constructed wording? I suspect some would rush in and say yes. We must have certainty. We cannot give validity to multiple viewpoints. But individual experience represents the very foundation of counselling, does it not? We don't pool clients, but rather pay attention and prick up our ears. Diagnosis is often an expedient and opportune path, as opposed to a full embrace of the person before us.

### Case study: Luke

When I think of the clients who have crossed my path, the words depressed, anxious, lonely, angry and despondent mostly flood my mind in terms of how they felt. Paranoid or persecuted don't instantly jump out, although now I have researched the subject of paranoia in greater detail, I have begun to re-evaluate past cases. For example, Luke, whose car kept cutting out – the RAC unable to identify the problem. The local garage, after a few days,

stating that the timing chain needed replacing. He would be without his car for two weeks. It would be like missing a limb. He was given a collection date, but then this date passed. The estimated cost went up too, from £600 to £1,000. He phoned each day – their first excuse that the part had only just come in and that it was '50/50' that it would be ready for the next day. It wasn't ready for the next day. Or the day after that. They stopped answering his calls. He felt as if he'd fallen into a Kafkaesque world where nothing made sense and they intended to steal his car or never complete the job.

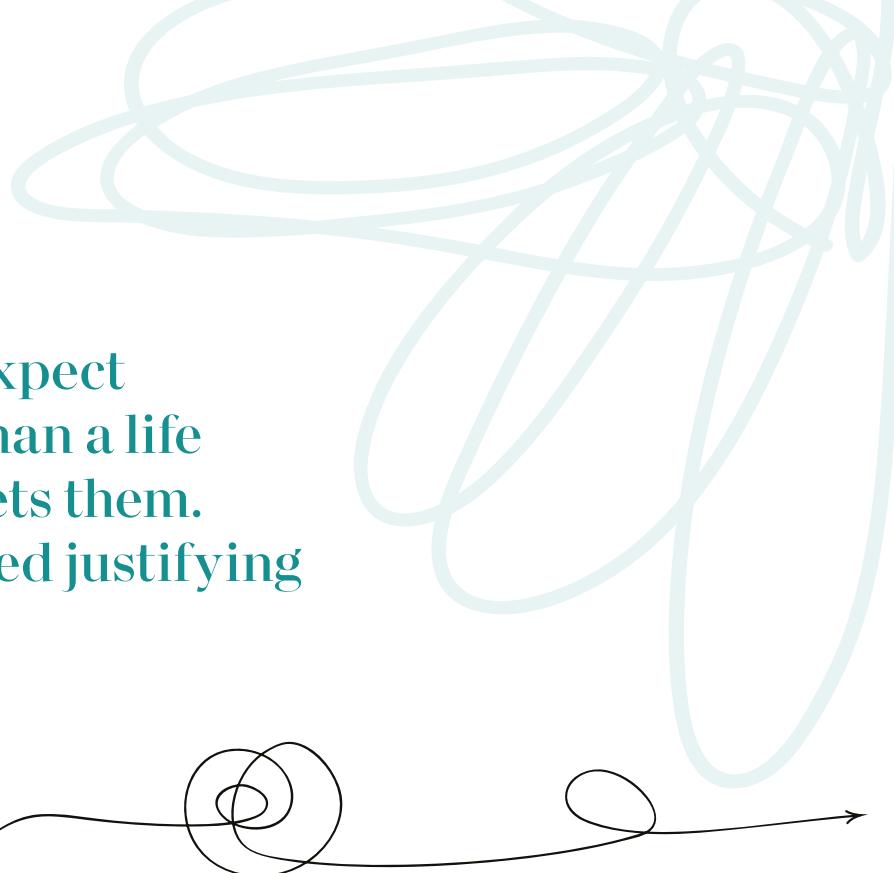
Their inexact language didn't help – '50/50' and 'should be ready for...' He expected better.

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## Paranoid people often expect more structure, rather than a life left to chance. Mess upsets them. Change and progress need justifying



He knew nothing about cars and wished they would give him an honest assessment of when exactly the job would be completed, but he could no longer get through. And walking to the garage took 25 minutes. He decided to ask his wife to phone the garage. It would be a number they didn't recognise and so they might pick up the phone. They did. And she was assertive. She attempted to cut through their vague promises. He believed that all men – particularly labourers (mechanics, builders and the like) – were more responsive to the ‘softer’ sex and wished to maintain a semblance of reliability and strength. He received a phone call the day after – earlier than expected – saying that his car was ready.

He walked to the garage feeling relieved; yet annoyed. It had felt like someone was playing with his life, like they had no respect or appreciation of the difficulties he faced without a car – particularly as he lived 45 miles from his place of work. The blasé man from behind the counter who had originally booked in his car and hypothesised with the RAC man over what the problem might be, now appeared to be more gracious and keener to explain the delay. Jobs were backed up due to COVID – people allowed to delay their MOTs. Plus replacing the timing chain had meant removing so much under the bonnet to access that part of the car. They had, in effect, taken his car apart and then slowly re-built it.

The man suggested Luke return the car after 200 miles for a free, half-hour once-over

to check that everything was running correctly. My client felt defeated, polite and surprised all at once. Why hadn't this blasé man given him such reassurance over the phone in the first instance? Why hadn't he been a little more discerning and considerate? He would get in his car, get his life back, but definitely *not* return to the garage. Ever. Despite the belated explanation.

‘Bad things [happen] due to a single, identifiable source,’<sup>16</sup> Stanton Peele states in an article from 14 years ago. Dread and a loss of control create this idea. And while *potentially* delusional, it does in this instance justifiably point to the blasé man due to his inconsistency and thoughtlessness. Other questions naturally enter the head of the therapist. Did Luke feel a power imbalance when dealing with the garage? If so, why? And is confrontation difficult for him?

It's too late to unearth answers in relation to this retrospective case study, but it does return us to our initial paragraph, full as it is with pluses and negatives concerning the paranoid state. What if paranoia *is* a solvent for messiness and confusion? And an effort to protect civilization? In other words, what if paranoia preserves things (certain values) instead of accepting change, ‘progress’ and social upheaval?

### Case study: Hilary

Hilary was a graphic designer who knew the value of a good computer. She was part of a

team of eight, and judging from the different gripes within the department, knew that her computer was the most reliable. One day her boss advised her to get in touch with the IT team, however, who considered her computer and that of her colleague (who evidently had the *worst* computer) in need of ‘upgrading’, ie swapping for a new one. On the surface, this seemed strange. Surely the worst *two* computers in her department were a priority? How could it be that the best *and* worst were both being exchanged? Was she unknowingly part of some experiment which would root out user incompetence once she and her struggling colleague were using identical machines? Or, worse, perhaps it was a ruse so that someone above her could snatch her excellent, existing computer?

Hilary initially pushed back and avoided making the call to the IT team. Her work was exemplary and that was partly due to the great hardware she had, which didn't compromise the software running inside it. She hoped her boss would forget and everything would return to normal. It made her anxious knowing that her life could be disrupted in a significant way. After three weeks, her boss reminded her again – this time somewhat impatiently. Not being able to joke with her boss, viewing him as slightly stiff plus easily shocked and flustered, Hilary conceded ground and booked in a date to change her computer. Bosses are always right – right? Even when they're wrong! And her boss rarely defended his patch and

mostly bowed to the wisdom of others, even though the IT team had an awful record when it came to procurement and could be incredibly slapdash when moving software and settings across.

Come the day of the swap, Hilary was nervous. Three of the four people on the IT team, she absolutely didn't have faith in. She was aware of their shortcomings, their historical blunders, how they rushed her so that they could 'sign off' the job rather than truly care about replicating her original, smooth computer journey, plus understand the impact any small difference made to her daily life in terms of efficiency and accuracy. On days when she had a chance to kick back a little and joke with her colleagues, Hilary often made pointed remarks that the IT personnel maybe shouldn't apply too soon for any vacancies within Silicon Valley. She considered them lazy, unwilling to get to grips with the precise requirements of her software's compatibility with new hardware, and inarticulate when it came to justifying such a change. 'New... old,' that's all they used to say, as if a baby could beat a 35-year-old in a 100m sprint.

Eyeing up the man at the side of her, quite platonically, she noticed that he didn't appear to have semi-cyborg characteristics typical of people within the IT team. He was fluent and lucid. He took her through each step of the transfer like a consummate professional and valued her input. He was, quite evidently, new himself – untainted by the hasty methods of the existing crop. Hilary thus found a like-minded individual within a previously feared department. It could have been Carl Rogers himself. He was genuine, warm and empathic.

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Mess upsets them. Change and progress need justifying. Never put a nerd at the wheel unless he/she has a heart too! Growing up as a child in a stable household, one gets the sense of how things fit together – who does what, which tasks belong to who, what our roles are, how civilization functions, how society operates, what we are responsible for. But this requires cooperation, discipline and commitment. Break any of that, peel any of it away, and we're left with chaos, disruption, a juddering wreck.

'Pain then pleasure,' I used to say to my children as they were growing up. Work hard and then enjoy your free time. No one will tie you down. Experiment in your 20s. Discover things. Find yourself. But for Christ's sake, *don't* get married, have a child, buy a house or become a manager – these are responsibilities that will take your sanity, your choices and your hair. Figure the world out! If that's at all possible. Away from counselling, we all have opinions – especially when consorting with family and friends.

### Case study: James

James – another former client – felt his home life lacked harmony. He was 50 years old, his son lived away at university, and so it was now just him and his wife. They argued a lot, over nothing. Disrespect had crept into their relationship seven years ago and had been ever-present since. He recalled simple acts and togetherness ceasing. They no longer went for walks or to the theatre. They no longer offered to make each other a drink (or toast) around 9pm each evening, as they always had. It was strained, difficult, uncomfortable and impossible. Only the middle class can afford to get divorced though, someone once said. As much as it grated him to hear that, he felt it was partly true. 'Start again at my age?' He shook his head several times, silently and with great sadness. 'It would kill me. Unhappiness or poverty – they're my two choices.'

James always struck me as an upstanding man, quietly respectful, dutiful, a good, attentive father – virtuous, yet with a dry sense of humour. He had been in the same job for two decades. His wife had raised their son unbelievably well and had not returned to work once he was ready for secondary school; a conscious choice from them all so that there was less pressure in the family home – more of a relaxed, old-fashioned atmosphere. He regularly recalled wonderful memories –

pushing his son on the swings in the park, having picnics in the country together (his son crawling on his back), birthday parties (blowing out candles), driving to friends (his wife filming the journey, together with their young son's quirky behaviour and the loving banter between all of them).

They grew apart. It was no one's fault. 'These things happen, don't they?' James asked me, not entirely sure himself, nor willing to face his new reality. The problem was he didn't enjoy speaking to his new neighbours. 'Why would I? I don't have anything nice to share. I don't feel as if I have a normal, healthy life anymore. I feel empty.' The family next door had two young children. He wanted to engage with them. He wanted to tell them what a great time he'd had in his early 30s raising his son, how he'd felt like Superman at times – full of extra energy, playfulness and optimism – but he couldn't. Because there was no one at the side of him celebrating that too. No one laughing with him and making life easy.

Because of the half-person James had become, he felt as if he was talked about, estranged from his immediate neighbours. When his son came home during the summer and at Christmas, he felt a little more energised, able to mess around and be his old self – have pointless, silly discussions with his son just for the hell of it. But most of the time, life was a drag. Full of silence, bitterness and being ignored. 'How was your day?' he often asked upon returning home from work. 'Usual,' his wife responded. She had become vague, unapproachable and quite truculent. He had no idea how to be civil with her because *everything*, it appeared, was an affront. The most innocuous line was now provocation.

The self-perpetuating, continuous hush between James and his neighbours, he found difficult to bear. But he could not rewind. He could not be someone else. He could not suddenly introduce himself as an upbeat,

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## Were my clients instinctual or delusional? Should we be able to handle certain setbacks in life rather than become fixated with the idea that there is a dubious hand at play?

engaging chap, because he had laid low for so long and now imagined that lack of confidence – created in the furnace of his failed marriage – to have painted a picture of him in the eyes of the people on the same street. He dearly wished one of his neighbours would ask something interesting – something to kick-start their non-existent camaraderie, a *real* question, rather than small talk and inherent judgment. But it never came. And so his isolation deepened.

James perceived the gaiety and happiness of next door (he often heard them in the garden) as reminiscent of his own time as a young father. He also perceived it as taking his voice away more and more. He couldn't be natural, authentic or instinctive anymore. He thought things through far too much. He was a bad actor, a worrier when in life, despite his clear genuineness when in therapy. Just as Luke's car had been kept at the garage (presumed stolen) and Hilary's computer swapped at work (the anticipation of this horrendous), James felt his voice had been stolen too. Transport and technology (both the means to earn a living and survive) and now communication (James finding it difficult to thrive) had been plundered somehow. All three clients disappeared in some way – found themselves less than whole.

### Instinct or delusion?

In February of this year, Sheri Heller wrote: 'I am compelled to mull over the psychological repercussions of nerve-wracking reality being spun as benign, even promising. Along the lines of "The Emperor's New Clothes", twisted media-generated fabrications have cautioned me to consider how contemporary life, rife with false narratives and lies, is challenging all of us to collectively question if our perceptions

are instinctual or delusional.<sup>7</sup> This single paragraph impressed me more than most articles and entire books do. It encompasses so much in an intelligent, forthright manner. Were my clients instinctual or delusional? Should we be able to handle certain setbacks in life rather than become fixated with the idea that there is a dubious hand at play?

I think it depends on that person's experiences and struggles. A '...contributory causal factor [in relation to paranoia is] worry'.<sup>8</sup> Worry can tarnish your finer thoughts, have you wonder if life is indeed too much – tilted against us unfairly. As beautiful as Thomas Jefferson's words are ('...all men are created equal... endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights... Life, Liberty and the *pursuit of Happiness*'<sup>9</sup>), they really only have us equal for one second. After that, once out of the starting blocks, the *pursuit of happiness* and the good life is influenced by so many things – money, attachments, charisma, thick skin etc. If I told you that Luke had a high degree of 'early life adversity'<sup>10</sup> (which is associated with paranoia), would you be more lenient in judging him and his reaction to certain events? Likewise, if I informed you that Hilary had scored high on the MARTI scale (Motivation to Acquire Relationship-Threatening Information),<sup>11</sup> would you feel for her in social situations?

'There... ain't no pity... in the naked city,'<sup>12</sup> Etta James sings, among other brutally heartfelt lines. Existential therapy tends to harness such elemental suffering. And philosophy '...lends [it] a particular lens [which] fosters an open attitude to what [and who] we meet'.<sup>13</sup> Human beings are not so much *born* as 'thrown into the world',<sup>13</sup> according to Heidegger. This gives us a rough sense of meaninglessness, eventual death, random events and chaos, but it also helps us focus on meaning, values and beliefs – ultimately what's important to us.

A paranoid 'scream' or ballad – the belief that harm is intended by others – often indicates that humanity has taken a wrong turn, that progress isn't progress at all, but something concocted arbitrarily by a hierarchical society. As Adam Phillips writes, '... since God is dead ... someone has to know what is going on'.<sup>12</sup> The modern paranoid's wail is both heightened awareness and an accurate indictment of the world, I would suggest. It isn't just God who is dead, but politics – very much

irrelevant and exhausted as a project. If those deemed paranoid point out such maladies in the world, then surely that is a service ('manning the barricades of civilization'<sup>14</sup>) rather than something irrational. ●

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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Jeff Weston** is a writer, existential psychotherapist and the author of *WAGENKNECHT: all men crack up at forty*. [www.helpineedsomebody.org](http://www.helpineedsomebody.org)

### YOUR THOUGHTS, PLEASE

If you have a response to the issues raised in this article, please write a letter, or respond with an article of your own. Email:

**privatepractice.editorial@bacp.co.uk**

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