**Why am I suddenly behaving so strangely?**

Anybody that knows me will tell you I am a people person. I love nothing more than catching up with people having a natter (generally with a cuppa) so the thought of being stuck at home away from work was a little ( no let’s be honest, quite a large dinosaur sized amount of ) scary.

I’ll confess my desire to keep me feeling connected to people led me to kidnap every office plant in building and take them home to have around me. I’m not even kidding my car looked like a jungle had taken over on the way home. I did for a split second wonder how on earth I was going to explain a car filled to the brim with plants as “essential shopping items” to any curious police officer that may have decided to stop me. I wasn’t so sure that “I’m sorry Mr Officer but these are for my mental health” was going to cut it. I also managed to eat everything in my fridge that looked remotely unhealthy, rang all my family (even the ones I don’t normally talk to) and did a full blitz clean of my entire house (and we are talking disinfecting skirting boards level of cleaning here, people).

These are pretty bizarre actions for a usually fairly rational human right? What am I doing and why am I doing it? I am a fully “all growed up” adult in her (dare I say it) mid-thirties, stealing plants from the office and antibacterial wiping the skirting boards.

So, I got to thinking why I most certainly was, and why, some of you too may be doing strange things at this strange time of a COVID-19 outbreak. As is very typical of me, I looked back to my Psychological understanding of us as wonderful and fascinating human beings and I had a few thoughts that I thought I would share with you in case some of this resonates with you. Yes it is science and some of you I am sure will now be gradually nodding off already at the mention of the “S” word. Don’t worry, for those of you who are dozing I’m glad I was able to help you retain a good level of sleep, some of you are currently laughing at the image of me driving my clapped out car (affectionately known as the bucket) down the road wearing a spider plant for a wig (lovely image or what?) For those more awake, here is the science bit…..…

**Humans as social beings:** We are social beings (most of us anyway) and our evolution has depended on survival. It may surprise you to know that we don’t have amazing speed, big teeth or claws and so really humans should be rubbish at surviving predators or ensuring we have enough food to survive. However, we have these great (if a little tricky) brains and over time we have sussed out that our survival has a better chance if we group together and share resources so we feel the need to have others around us to keep us alive.

Hang on I hear you say…. “Didn’t the government just tell me I have to stay home and have no face to face contact with the people that my brain tells me keep my surviving?” Uh huh, that’s right I did…… I wonder if that has anything to do with why I’m behaving strangely.

**Anxiety:** No dinosaurs or sabre toothed tiger’s means we don’t have to be on high alert to protect ourselves from them. Our brains are clever but not perfect so, although they have taught us over time to use Skype and online shopping sites they have not taught us to stopping being scared. So we are on high alert for other things now such as germs and my declining bank account funds. We didn’t have that worry when we were running from sabre toothed tigers did we? But those shoes are definitely an essential item.

Oh you say, “So you’re telling me that my brain looks for things to worry about all on its own?” Yep that’s also true…… And we currently have a virus outbreak. I wonder if that has anything to do with why I’m behaving strangely.

**Control:** We love a bit of control don’t we? Who gets the TV remote, what to wear, our careers, what to have for tea, telling the kids that they need to do it your way and follow the house rules you set for them, choosing how you get to work etc. You see this is one of the things that keeps us feeling safe, it gives us a sense of power, of predictability about the world we live in which is reassuring us that the world is a safe place.

Yeah but you say,” the government have taken the control over some of my actions and told us we have to follow their rules instead of our own ones and the world is not safe right now, did you forget we are in the middle of a pandemic”…….your right they did (quite rightly did to keep us safe) and no it doesn’t feel to safe right now does it..... I wonder if that has something to do with why I’m behaving strangely.

**Creatures of habit**: We like and need a routines and habits. Some of them are good for us and take the pressure to think away from our brains. When we do things out of habit it requires less cognitive energy so we do these things to make life easier for ourselves. I.e. we tend to follow the same routine for brushing our teeth and then our brain is free to solve the problem of how we go about replacing the hubby’s treasured possession we accidentally broke the night before without him knowing, (oops).

“So your telling me my brain is now having to work harder because I can’t follow the normal routines I normally do, great now I have more thinking an problem solving to do than normal”….. Yeah you are correctamundo… I wonder if that’s why I am behaving strangely.

So let’s go back to why am I stealing the plants again? Look I even have a diagram to put it into.

Drive system

Threat system

Self-soothing system

You see our brains have these three interlinked systems in them that control how we think and feel. Different things in our lives can make these different systems get bigger or smaller and what we feed gets bigger. A bit like in the garden if you water the plants and give the sun and nutrients they grow. If you forget them they shrink and wither away.

Our threat system is the danger specialist. It looks for things that can hurt us so we can act to protect ourselves from them. Our threat system is totally on it with every inch ready to strike at the next bit of COVID news we hear. It might make us want to run and hide, freeze and do nothing, fight back or give in to the idea we are going to get ill.

Our drive system is resource focused. It wants us to strive for goals and achieve targets such as getting food and shelter and relationships. Therefore, hearing that we are running out of food and can’t see any of our family might have a bit of an impact on this system. Hence why some people have been seen barging others out of the way for that bag of fusilli pasta and buying enough loo roll for a zombie apocalypse.

Our soothing system is how we make ourselves feel good. It seeks out things that will make our brains release those happy hormones. Which is probably why the last checkout assistant said she had seen such a huge amount of people suddenly buying chocolate and alcohol.

So, let’s take look at the strange things I did and see if we can figure out why. I took the plants and brought them home. This gives me a sense of being close to the colleagues I have lost through not being at work. It also gives me a sense of something I can control to replace the send of control I have lost through the new rules.

I disinfected my entire house possibly because my threat system is telling me that COVID-19 brings danger and I have to eliminate the danger for survival. My brain has decided the best way to deal with this threat is to disinfect everything around me to manage this danger. It also gave me something I can strive towards a goal to achieve and a sense of control.

I ate the entire fridge probably to try and achieve that feel good factor from something artificial. A less helpful; but understandable attempt at self-soothing.

I spoke to all my family probably not because I love them all (even though I do) but because I needed that sense of them being around me, being connected to them and knowing that they are all safe and well and were not going to forget me.

So perhaps my behaviours are not as strange as I first thought and perhaps the reasons we do these things are normal and understandable. So if you have made it this far and not abandoned this in order to now go and clean your own skirting boards because you now realise you don’t even know the last time you looked at them, then you have my gratitude.

The trick is to keep the systems balanced reasonably well take notice of what you’re doing and readdress the balance. So, if your charging round the place where “every little helps” or imagining that every person you see from 20 miles away is a petri dish of disease with strings of garlic round your neck, or you are finding that you are living on the sofa eating ice cream and bingeing on box sets and grown up juice, just perhaps you need to re-balance your systems a little. So give yourself a nice treat, a walk, a bubble bath a good book for a little every day if your threat system is taking over. Perhaps your drive system is a bit withered and you need to find a little of what you can control or strive for, you know you are dying to tidy out the garden shed really don’t you or take up a physical exercise program? Perhaps you need to pay attention to the threat system trying to take over and give it a little (not too much attention and thank it for trying to help you).

Mostly, I encourage you all to try not to judge yourselves for your actions, laugh at the funny ones and rise up high to the scary ones and while you’re up there. Oh and you may want to dust down those cobwebs you’ve now just noticed while you up there….. See goal achieved, feels pretty good doesn’t it.

I will leave you with my discoveries and I hope that it is useful or interesting or at the very least entertaining. Fellow colleagues please be assured that I will return your plants to you and I am feeding watering and talking to them every day, we’ve even had a bit of a sing song together.

Best wishes Katie

Katie