

# Escape anxiety

BRIAN DEAN wants you to calm down.

WE'RE LIVING in an anxiety culture and we're driven, to a large degree, by fear. If this doesn't seem obvious from stress-related ailment statistics and the massive consumption of comfort food and tranquillisers, it becomes apparent when you observe the daily behaviour of the people around you. Almost everyone is acting a bit worried, at least some of the time.

The media seem partly responsible, and according to a MORI poll, around half of us think that newspapers have a vested interest in making people afraid. In 1995, the makers of *Frontline*, a Channel 4 documentary about crime, requested interviews with the editors of the *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Mirror*, the *Sun*, the *Daily* and *Sunday Express*, *Today*, the *People* and the *Star*, to ask how they justified their fearmongering news coverage. They all refused to be interviewed.

The first time I took a long break from newspapers

and TV news, I shed a whole layer of anxiety. Several people have reported to me a similar experience. You may not realise you're carrying a burden of superfluous worry until you drop it. Or, to put it another way, you sometimes aren't aware of the unsettling background hum until after it stops—and then the silence is so sweet that you'd never welcome back the noise.

Of course, you might believe that the quiet is abnormal in some way. Many people can't put up with long periods of silence, and nor can they tolerate being 'uninformed'. They have to turn the television or the radio on. Even when there's no compulsion for the mental stimulation of noise or entertainment, there's an underlying belief that being uninformed is somehow irresponsible or unsafe, and that the proper way to absorb important information is via the mass media, particularly the 'news headlines'.

Often it's hard to avoid feeling Oprahfied –

pressured to have opinions on issues that the media presents as important. There's the fear of falling behind, or of losing out by not understanding some new trend or buzzword. According to a report in the Guardian newspaper (22/10/96) nearly half of the population have this fear. It's a form of 'information anxiety', which is caused by the 'ever widening gap between what we understand and what we think we should understand' (according to Saul Wurman, who coined the term). But what makes us think that we 'should' understand anything?

The info-anxiety theory says that we should find more effective ways to process information, so that we can absorb more without being overwhelmed. A better approach, however, might be to simply filter out the 99% of information that serves no purpose for you. The 'responsible' scaremongers, of course, would like to convince you that the media narrative is of the utmost importance, but mostly it appears to be non-useful, vaguely entertaining distraction. And of the non-trivial, non-amusement content (for example, some of the 'News'), most concerns things you're powerless to influence. Conversely, the

issues you might be able to influence seem notably absent. Why clutter your brain with things you can do nothing about? How can it be irresponsible or unsafe to ignore it, if it's of no use to you?

If you've had your fill of media-induced foreboding and perpetual disquiet, there's a useful gimmick you can apply to create your own anxiety-free zone whenever you have some spare time to yourself. The idea is to remove yourself, for a set period of time, from any stimuli likely to trigger the slightest hint of apprehension. Take a holiday from anxiety-inducing media.

Television is, of course, out of the question, and so are newspapers and magazines. It's only a temporary measure, so no worries. You're taking a well-deserved break from the media, not entering a monastery. By the same token, try to avoid feeling superior about it. The media mindset may be a toxic mix of dog-eat-dog insecurity, alarmism and corporate pressures, but it's not a manifestation of evil. This isn't about moral or political purity, but about getting rid of anxiety. Still, it helps to remind yourself that unease and dread can be transmitted like a virus

from television or newspaper content—even from apparently harmless lifestyle pieces in the Sunday colour supplements.

A stroll in the country may appear to be the best way to avoid worrisome media stimuli. Unfortunately, this doesn't remove stressful internal stimuli, as an unoccupied mind is likely to ruminate over perceived troubles, particularly if it's been programmed to be so by a lifetime of processing media content (either directly or via your parents, peers or teachers). Unless you're some kind of expert meditator, probably the most effective way to 'control' your thoughts for extended periods is to read a good book. Any pleasurable, escapist fiction which is unlikely to remind you of any of your problems is recommended for this purpose.

Another essential ingredient for creating an

anxiety-free zone is plenty of your favourite 'fun' food: doughnuts and coffee, ice cream, hot dogs, popcorn. If you make a habit of eating nice food when you read a book, you may find that you get the urge to read more often instead of watch television.

Finally, anyone who thinks that they 'don't have time' to create anxiety-free zones might want to lie down for a few minutes. You need help and you're not alone. If you lack time due to the restrictions of wage slavery, it might be a good idea for you to phone in sick at the next opportunity. Prevention is better than cure, so always remember to take a sickie before you get ill. If you're self-employed or don't have a job, the anxiety-free opportunities are numerous and limited only by your imagination. There are always practical constraints, of course, but it usually doesn't cost you anything to stop worrying.

