

HEALING HYPERVIGILANCE

If you suffer from hypervigilance, you may be engaging in an exhausting, never-ending strategy of scanning your environment for evidence of danger. Hypervigilance is not a disorder in and of itself, but it goes with other disorders such as posttraumatic stress disorder or an anxiety disorder. Hypervigilance is a mindset that over-estimates the potential for danger at any given moment. It is accompanied by a state of physical reactivity as well as consequent fearful behaviors – all operating together to ward off the possibility of danger. While this unrelenting wheel of vigilance may *feel* like it will protect you from harm, it probably will not. The following observations are offered to help release you from the trap of hypervigilance, encourage you to let down your guard, and assist you in developing the insight that there might be better ways of keeping yourself safe and secure.

What's wrong with hypervigilance?

- ◆ Hypervigilance (scanning for danger) doesn't actually prevent danger.
- ◆ Hypervigilance keeps you in a perpetual state of fear, creating the very same experience you have been attempting to avoid.
- ◆ Hypervigilance doesn't help you make predictions, or prepare you to cope with difficulty.
- ◆ Hypervigilance may cause you to make mistakes, and to confuse harmlessness with dangerousness.
- ◆ Hypervigilance may make you fatigued and accident prone, creating potential new hazards.
- ◆ Hypervigilance may make you miss other important cues in the environment, which require your attention for optimal performance and connecting with others.
- ◆ Hypervigilance may cause you to miss what is meaningful and valuable in your life.

Why doesn't hypervigilance protect me from danger?

There is no way to prepare for unknown danger by scanning for it or bracing yourself against it. This is because nothing in the future ever happens exactly the way we imagine it to be. Sometimes it's worse, sometimes it's better, but it is always unknown. If you want to calmly plan for something that might be beneficial to you in

the future, go ahead, that's ok. But such purposeful preparation doesn't require fear or anxiety, it requires action. And that quality of responsiveness is very different than hypervigilance.

What would I be doing or thinking instead?

As an alternative to hypervigilance, you could practice something qualitatively different, called *mindfulness*. Mindfulness would allow you to be present with a wider range of experiences, attend to what's real, be more focused on the here and now, and enable you to be a gentle, neutral witness to each passing moment as it naturally occurs. Mindfulness would help you to better connect with yourself and to others, be more relaxed, notice more instead of less, and become more present and able to respond.

What should I do about my fear?

Start by knowing that *there is a child inside of you waiting to be reassured*. Sometimes when we are afraid, we put our most frightened self in the driver's seat, expecting it to handle the most complicated situations. This is a mistake, because the child-like part doesn't feel equipped – it is confused, frightened, and hasn't developed the right kind of wisdom or necessary power to deal with difficult situations.

Put someone good in charge: Your wise "inner adult."

Remember that as a child, you instinctively knew how mature adults ought to behave – morally, responsibly, and appropriately. As you were developing into an adult, the younger part of you has constantly been watching. It hasn't been just watching other adults, it has been watching *you*. The child inside of you is still hoping that you will be that kind of adult, someone he or she can be proud of.

Trust that your wise and competent presence has existed throughout your life, and knows how to respond in every present moment. It has all the information in every moment to know exactly what to do. Hypervigilance is not helping to prepare you for anticipated or unanticipated events. Mindfulness will help you, with the presence of your wise and caring inner adult. If the adult part of you is warm and compassionate, the child part will feel reassured and healed – *so long as it can feel this presence*.

So, don't disappear. Move calmly into the driver's seat. Not only is it good to rise up above the other adults who have failed you in the past, it is important that you make your strong and benevolent presence known. Assure your inner child that this competent presence is *here – finally here* – and this will make all the difference in the world.

Live with Ambiguity.

Your task is to refrain from searching so desperately for evidence of harm. If something needs your attention, I assure you that you will find out about it in a “normal” kind of way; the way we eventually find out about things. **Not** because we were repeatedly checking to see whether everything was safe, but rather because things that are relevant simply become known. Learn to live with ambiguity. Relax into knowing that, without hypervigilance, you have relatively complete and accurate information. The ambiguity that is in and around you is an unclear, imperfect, benign presence that can be trusted and accepted.

What’s more, the Unknown that you fight so vehemently – that you fear, blame, rail against, and pray would become Real so that it could finally leave you alone – is often better than every known thing you have ever wanted to control. Let me put it another way: every good thing in your life that surprised you was previously unknown to you. You didn’t anticipate or create the people who showed up and loved you. You didn’t manage or direct the gifts that you were given, either literally or metaphorically. Live with the Unknown, because the stuff that will make you happy will be the stuff that you never could have predicted.