

LEAD

Can't Stop Feeling Anxious? Neuroscience Says Your American Brain Is to Blame

Overanalyzing everything is part of our American mind and history. You can fix it. [🔗](#)

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Depression and anxiety are on the rise and now recognized as "diseases of modernity." Western cultures in particular see the highest rates of anxiety-related disorders compared with Eastern and other non-Western cultures. So what's to blame for the influx of anxiety and stress?



There are likely several factors at play. Many people have pointed to the rise of smartphones and the erosion of meaningful social connection, growing levels of sleep-deprivation, and an overall increase in sedentary lifestyles. There must be more to it, though, since these trends aren't unique to Western living; they're happening everywhere. The issue runs psychologically deeper.

Roots of anxiety and the American mind

Our heightened anxiety has its roots in the way we think. American psychology is different from that of other parts of the world. My fellow North Americans, you are likely more of an analytic thinker, meaning you see the world in a linear fashion, carving out separate events and peering at them through a lens of cause and effect.

You are rule-bound and systems-oriented. You care less about context. You know the old saying, "Can't see the forest for the trees"? That's you: a tree-obsessed American.

In contrast, the majority of the world's population (around 85 percent and comprising mostly Eastern cultures) are holistic thinkers. They see the world non-linearly, recognizing the



contextual and overlapping features of a given event or situation. Most phenomena, to them, consist of complex interconnections that fit together in greater harmony.

A simple example highlighting the difference in cognition comes from what researchers call the "triad test." Suppose you're presented with a dog, a rabbit, and a carrot, and then asked which two belong together. The analytic thinker – the typical American – chooses the dog and rabbit because both satisfy the internally held rule of "animal category." The holistic thinker, on the other hand, chooses the rabbit and carrot because of the interconnected and functional relationship between the two: A rabbit eats carrots.

A consequence of analytic thinking is that its adherence to rule-based reasoning breeds a type of hyper-rational mindset. You believe every problem has a solution. It's simply a matter of analyzing, solving, striving, looking, doing, working, acting, thinking.

Because your world can be logically reduced to a set of basic cause-and-effect principles, you think answers can always be found, including problems of anxiety. Ironically, it's the constant striving for answers and solutions that makes anxiety worse in the long run. You can't analyze your way out of an anxious state.

A difference in philosophical traditions



To understand how these two thinking styles link to differences in anxiety, one must look at the philosophical and historical traditions of East versus West. In many Asian cultures, holistic thinking traces its roots back to ancient Eastern philosophies, most notably Confucian and Taoist traditions. The teachings of the Chinese classics, the I Ching and Tao Te Ching, continue to shape the holistic cognitive style of East Asian populations today.

A similar enculturation process holds for you in the West. Your thinking of hyper-analytic style can be traced back to the atomistic philosophies of the ancient Greeks like Socrates and Plato.

Try not to try

Within non-Western traditions, there is a prominent teaching that helps to explain the Western anxiety trap. It's called *wu wei*. A famous Taoist concept, it's roughly translated as non-action. It says that we shouldn't hurry to action. We shouldn't constantly strive toward "doing" in an attempt to resolve an issue, since things will resolve themselves if left alone. Ironically, the lesson here is that often the best way to resolve our stress and anxiety is, well, to not do anything at all.

Here's the good news: Westerners can reach *wu wei* by turning up an intuitive style of thinking and turning down an analytical, deliberate style of thinking. Recent advances in



cognitive psychology are showing that this shift can be done through routine mental exercises.

Even though these differences between East and West are deeply rooted in both cognitive functioning and historical epistemologies, you're not doomed to live forever in your Western-biased anxiety trap. You can break out of it. The mind is highly plastic, capable of rewiring itself given changing inputs from internal and external experiences. That means we can, in fact, think more like Easterners. We can engage in certain practices like the art of non-action, and have it positively impact our mental well-being.

So what are you waiting for? You need to do, well, nothing. Nothing at all.

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DEC 28, 2022

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