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## It's Just a Thought — Rick Cropp, Author and Newspaper Columnist

At one time, I thought I was going insane - a common theme I learned later. Over a hundred times a day I would catch myself daydreaming about fearsome catastrophes - my car going off the road at high speed, criminals breaking into my house and killing me or a loved one, gunfights, knife fights, war, disease, divorce, jail - anything catastrophic, in my head, I gravitated to it.

I would begin to sweat, my heart would rattle out of my chest and I sometimes had so much adrenaline rushing around in my body I shook. I would find myself completely stopped, hands and face clenched as I watched all these things unfold on my internal movie screen. By the end of every day I was exhausted.

I slowly stopped going out with friends, (they said I was too preoccupied, an understatement), and stopped going to certain places afraid that these waves of mayhem would start again. I couldn't watch TV programs with violence in them because it triggered these fantasies (besides, it was boring. What went on in my head was far gorier, far more Technicolor vivid than any TV show). I was cranky and tired all the time from the internal struggle and being hyped on adrenaline.

I tried everything to make the thoughts go away. I stopped watching the news, stopped drinking coffee, exercised more and quit a stressful job. I told myself to get a grip and stop being weak, tried pills, tried everything, all the while realizing that my peace of mind and possibly my sanity was disappearing. All I wanted was for it to stop.

I had no idea where this all came from or why it was happening but I knew it was getting worse. More than once I stood at the end of the Second Narrows Bridge wondering if jumping wasn't the only way I was going to rid myself of this horror. Fortunately, when I got right down to it, the trade off for this kind of successful "cure" seemed a little steep.

I was so embarrassed by my inability to control my thoughts that I lied to my wife (What would she think of this monster who thought such horrendous things?) and my doctor. When I finally confessed to my doctor, he sent me to a psychiatrist who said "everyone has rotten thoughts sometimes and it doesn't mean anything. Take these pills whenever you have these thoughts." Which I did. The pills didn't stop the thoughts but they didn't seem quite so terrifying, at least for a while. Eventually I got tired of moving through life like a zombie (I did catch up on my sleep.) and trashed the medication.

Back came the terrors. The strange thing is that I still functioned. My career did well enough but it was stressful hiding the problem, praying that I wouldn't have to go to lunch with a client when the demons raged at their worst or give a talk at work after not sleeping all night. Friends just thought I was moody. Some people commented on the number of colds I got every year (my number one excuse for avoiding a commitment when I was overwhelmed by the gore in my head). But other

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than that, I looked "normal". Amazingly, I fooled them all. I married well, made a bit of money, carved out a terrific life for myself as a successful writer (travel not horror) - except for this one overwhelming "problem".

Eventually I realized that I could do no more. I had tried to be self reliant but it was

time for the cavalry if this life was going to be saved. I read about other people who seemed to have somewhat similar problems but with some crucial differences. The condition was called obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), part of complex conditions called anxiety disorders. The classic case was Jack Nicholson in the movie As Good As it Gets who feared contamination and washed his hands constantly. I didn't do that or any other visible things. What took place was all in my head. Still, there were unmistakable similarities between what was happening to me and what I read. (I did yelp or grimace occasionally when these thoughts were particularly horrid. I assumed this was evidence that I was teetering on the edge of a total breakdown that would find me full time on the streets in the rain mumbling from a dumpster).

I made an appointment with a psychiatrist doing a research project on OCD at St Paul's Hospital who gave me a battery of tests which confirmed that this was a classic case of obsessive compulsive disorder. Hey, we were making progress. He said it was fairly common and there was treatment that worked fairly well. Great, I am all yours. Cure me.

Then came a brutal shock. He couldn't treat me. No one in St Paul's could, in fact. He referred me to the UBC Anxiety Clinic. They had a small program but it was full and the waiting list was closed. I tried other hospitals, private psychologist (the government does not pay for this) and finally, in disgust at the lack of qualified help, laid siege to the UBC clinic until I had a slot on the wait list. Two years after the initial diagnosis and more than a dozen years after I had first started to try to do something about it I finally made real progress.

The psychologist at the UBC Anxiety Disorders Clinic gave me a battery of tests and asked hundreds of questions. I answered truthfully expecting dramatic disgusted responses to some of the horrid things I told them about. No one seemed surprised. This seemed to be pretty easy stuff to them. During the interview process, as I got a little braver, I asked some of the urgent questions that plagued me. First the simple ones: Are there other people who have these kinds of thoughts? Oh, yes, quite common. Does it get worse? There are ups and downs but with moderate cases like yours, it would be unlikely. Can it be treated? Simple, they said, 10 weeks and there is an 80% chance you'll see improvement.

Then the harder, more important, questions: Will I go insane? No. Not a chance. Will I hurt someone because of these thoughts - mistake a dream for reality? They asked me, Have you ever hurt someone before? Nope. Then no. You're sure? Positively. It will never happen.

In my car after the interview I cried with relief. There was a possibility of a normal life, I was not alone and I wasn't going to go insane.

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The treatment lasted a bit longer than 10 weeks. At some point I had had enough to satisfy me that it was under control and that I had a new skill set to really manage the problem. Most of all I accepted the fact that this is a part of me, that I had to make a few allowances, in the same way someone who tires quickly might adjust their life by taking it a little easier or getting a little more sleep or the way one adjusts to the fact that they are not a great athlete but decide to play the game anyway. You adjust and get on with it.

It gets uncomfortable still sometimes but it is clear to me that the thoughts are not what they seem - there is no life threatening emergency going on. Part of my mind is just playing tricks on me. I have even come to appreciate just how inventive I can be. If I could just market some of these fantasies as movie scripts, move over Steven King. The best part is that I do not think of myself as weird anymore. I am so attuned to the start of one of these episodes now that I can feel normal, carry on daily tasks while this whole dreadful movie flickers just behind my eyes. It's like having a bad horror show on TV playing low in the background while I do the dishes or write a column. Most often, I ignore the background static.

If there is anything I want to tell you, it is that it seems to be part of the symptoms that it is nearly impossible for you to tell anyone what is going on. You become terrific at making your way in the world without letting on that you are on the edge of a precipice. Because you can hide a lot of it, you can go for years, desperate and silent. It truly does not have to be that way. Although treatment is not easy to get - many doctors misdiagnose the problem through ignorance or because they never get a complete picture from the tight lipped sufferers - perseverance can bring you back to health. The treatment entails a lot of homework but it does work miracles.

If you suspect that you may have an anxiety disorder, (take the test on this website), please, take control of your own treatment, go to the library and read, ask different docs, go see a psychologist but persevere. It is worth the effort. Life with an untreated anxiety disorder is a plague. With it under control, it is unbelievably sweet.