

Author with anxiety issues takes fascinating look into rising worries of the world



JOHN WALSHE

Daan Heerma van Voss is 37 and from a well-known Dutch family. His father was a broadcaster, his mother a professor of sociology. He and his younger brother Thomas are both highly-regarded literary novelists.

He is also an award-winning journalist, particularly noted for his account of being embedded with Dutch peacekeeping troops in Mali. He suffers, however, from a crippling anxiety that has had massive effects on his mental health and relationships.

The *Anxiety Project* is an attempt to make sense of the condition that has plagued him since the age of six or seven, when attempting to cross a plank bridge over a stream led to his first panic attack.

The most reliable way to quantify someone's anxiety is to measure the level of cortisol (the stress hormone) in a

sample of their hair. The average reading for someone in the western world is 2.7 picograms per milligram. For those with long-term mental health issues, this can rise to 15 picograms.

Van Voss's results veered from 34.4 to more than 200 picograms, so high that researchers feared the test had been faulty (which they subsequently discounted).

"The fear has always been there," he admits, explaining how he has tried to keep his life "as small as possible" in order to protect himself from it.

Van Voss analyses the physiology of anxiety, explaining how a small, almond-shaped structure in our brain called the amygdala is crucial. Without it, we do not feel fear. He also notes how our most primal terror, that of impending mortality, is thanks to our limbic system and large prefrontal cortex which allows for language and abstract thinking.

Van Voss wonders if genetics make him more susceptible to fear, tracing his family's history of anxiety in a direct line from his great-grandfather to himself. He grapples with the "nature versus nurture" question by delving into a wealth of reading from Batman comics to the writings of philosophers Soren Kierkegaard and Martin Heidegger.

PSYCHOLOGY

The Anxiety Project: A Journey to the Centre of Our Deepest Fears

By Daan Heerma van Voss (translated from Dutch by David Doherty)

MacLehose Press/Quercus, €23.80



He examines the changing attitudes to and treatments for anxiety, which have brought us to the clinical definitions we use today. Many of them can trace their origins to the treatment of traumatised US soldiers in World War II. The volume of potential patients meant "it was time to remove mental illness from the realm of grand theories dreamed up by lone scholars", and instead take a "more scientific approach that could be used by any doctor: one that was measurable, objective, clear and widely applicable".

This resulted in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) in 1951, but it is the third volume from 1980 whose legacy remains today. DSM III was "a radical departure" from its predecessors, classifying anxiety as a standalone disorder.

Van Voss argues that in creating DSM III, "a few dozen people influenced the fate of tens of millions".

Van Voss makes the claim that many of the re-

searchers had financial ties with pharma companies and thus skin in the game when it came to deciding which disorders received official status. "An officially recognised condition would effectively create... an opportunity

to make billions in profits." Van Voss questions the "friendly, perhaps even amorous" relationship between the healthcare sector and pharma which still pervades today.

Worldwide, an estimated 7.3 per cent of us suffer from an anxiety disorder. "Never before have so many people been so scared." In most western societies this figure is rising, as we struggle to cope with the hectic pace of modern life, from social media to the rise of individualism.

The latter problem has its roots in the free market fundamentalism proselytised by Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s, which has led to a dramatic rise in income inequality. "For all its implicit promises and ideals," Van Voss believes, "the modern neo-liberal system breeds frustration and fear."

The *Anxiety Project* is a journey, both literal and literary, as Van Voss travels to the centre of his fears. His account is both highly relatable, as he admits the devastating effects of anxiety on his closest relationships (the book begins with his partner leaving him), and fascinating as he explains the societal shifts that have led to the evolution of homo anxiosus.



Author Daan Heerma van Voss suffers from crippling anxiety

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