Opinion & Analysis

Anxiety about the environment can be energising

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Coming to terms with the ecological trouble we are in requires more than just understanding the issues intellectually

'DEPEND UPON IT, sir, when a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully." So wrote Samuel Johnson. It has taken a while, but I'm beginning to truly know what he meant.

While it's well understood that people operating in highly stressed situations such as conflict zones are prone to depression, anxiety and panic disorders, in our multimedia world you no longer have to be there to be affected. Footage from the attack on the Twin Towers in Manhattan in September 2001 was replayed thousands of times on TV channels all over the world.

One major study found that in the six months after the attacks, 4 per cent of the entire population of the US suffered post-traumatic stress disorder, many purely via repeated exposure to media imagery.

What this suggests is that the human brain, which evolved over hundreds of thousands of years to deal with the challenges of life on the savanna, is struggling to cope with the sensory overload of modern life, where we are bombarded constantly with imagery from all over the globe.

Small wonder then that so many of us are tuning out, retreating into our inner worlds to shelter from the chaos and capriciousness of the world beyond. The deepening recession is now triggering an upsurge in levels of anxiety and depression, not just among those directly affected, but also among others with safe jobs who are worried about an increasingly uncertain future.

Worrying is catching. Even if you are feeling reasonably positive, being in the company of people who are constantly anxious can in itself trigger your anxiety. Back on the savanna, when one member of the herd is startled, that spreads an instant warning to others that danger is lurking. That reaction is a lot less helpful if you're sitting hyperventilating on the couch as you watch the evening news.

Being in a constant state of startled, adrenaline-soaked anxiety takes a heavy psychological toll, even among the very young.

A friend's 11-year-old daughter burst into tears at the weekend, certain she was going to catch swine flu. Even a noisy chorus of light-hearted oinking among her siblings struggled to persuade her that this was very unlikely to be the case.

A little anxiety can also spice up life. Why otherwise would we pay money to go to the cinema to have the living daylights scared out of us? The same goes for rollercoasters, or indeed the illicit thrill of putting the boot down on a quiet stretch of the M50.

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Quite apart from the corrosive psychological effect of constant high anxiety, an even more insidious danger is that of being blinded to genuine danger. In the fable of the boy who cried "wolf", in the end, the wolf was in fact real.

The polling company Gallup has been tracking the attitude of the US public to global warming. In 1998, just 31 per cent of Americans felt that news and media coverage of global warming was "exaggerated". Its latest findings show a sea change in public attitudes. Since the late 1990s, the scientific consensus on climate change has become infinitely more solid, yet 41 per cent of Americans in the 2009 poll now believe global warming concerns to be "exaggerated", a full 10 points higher than a decade ago.

Another question in the same Gallup poll is even more revealing: in March 2009, for the first and only time in 24 years of surveying, a majority of the US public said the economy should take priority over environmental concerns.

Coming to terms with the nature, scale and extent of the tightening ecological noose that now encircles us all requires more than just understanding the issues intellectually. The really hard bit is accepting them emotionally, for once you do, life can simply never seem the same again. This process mirrors the stages of grief famously described by Swiss doctor, Elizabeth Kübler-Ross.

I took my first faltering steps down this road only around six years ago, and, like many others, doggedly denied the evidence and resisted its implications for as long as I possibly could. After all, if it were really as bad as this, people would be surely doing something. As denial fades, anger intensifies. How can people be so blind; how could I have been so stupid? The phases of bargaining and depression can be particularly tough.

Emerging bruised but a little wiser out the other end of this process can also be extraordinarily energising. There is of course no blueprint. Everyone's journey will be unique.

"Getting involved can be an antidote to the depression that arises from the overwhelming realisations that we face," says Paul Epstein of Harvard Medical School.

A good place to get stuck in is at a debate this evening in the Cultivate Centre in Dublin's Temple Bar. The topic is: "Can Europe lead the battle against climate change – are the Dublin candidates up to the job?" The sitting MEPs as well as Euro wannabees will be along to the event, which is sponsored by climatechange.ie.

Politicians need to know that we are at least as concerned about the habitability of this planet and our children's futures as we are about the bank bailout. And the only way they'll know for sure is if we turn up and tell them, loud and clear.