



Imagine you are a rancher who is tracking a mountain lion that has been killing your cattle and scaring your family. Suddenly you hear a snarl coming from the underbrush 20 yards away. Realizing that you will only have time for one shot to protect yourself, a surge of adrenaline and cortisol floods your body to arouse it for the eminent and potentially fatal attack. Your heart pounds faster, muscles tense, blood pressure rises, breath quickens, and your senses become sharper.

Anxiety produces a heightened state of awareness that is intended to make you ready to react and respond to a stimulus. Situations that cause everyday anxiety are seldom a life or death circumstance; however, our primitive brain is hijacked by the surge of adrenaline and cortisol

that accompanies anxiety, which makes us feel like a mountain lion is preparing to pounce. Anxiety can work for you during actual life threatening circumstances, and it can work against you when your personality causes you to react to an everyday experience as a life threatening circumstance.

Personality and Anxiety

I explained in my previous article, *Overcoming the Challenges of Two-Eyed Shooting* that stress and anxiety can adversely affect a shooter's visual processing ability. Therefore, misguided anxiety can become a clay target shooter's worst enemy. Psychologist Bob Rosen, author of *Conscious: The Power of Awareness in Business and*

Life suggests we take a rational approach and analyze any circumstance that precipitates our anxiety, and then determine whether it is producing negative or positive energy.

Rational thinking tells us that anxiety is really just a wake-up call that is telling us to pay attention.

An individual's personality significantly influences whether anxiety produces positive or negative energy. Anxiety creates positive energy in people who are open to new experiences. Hence, positive energy can become a powerful force that heightens awareness, enhances



responsiveness, and promotes peak performances. Anxiety produces negative energy in people who need to be right, strive to exert power, attempt to be in control, and focus on winning. Negative energy creates uncertainty and vulnerability in these individuals. There are three types of anxiety that promote negative energy: performance anxiety, social anxiety, and status anxiety.

Performance Anxiety

In my article, *It's Just a Target I* introduced the concept of valence to shooting clay targets. I explained that valence is used by psychologists to measure the value you place on the outcome of an event or situation, and the emotional impact of that outcome. For example, if you are elated every time you break a clay target the valence is very positive. If you are very angry whenever you miss

a target the valence is very negative. If you are ambivalent about breaking a target or missing a target the valence is neutral.

The valence a shooter places on each clay target varies with the circumstance. For example, a low 8 target during a practice round of skeet likely carries relatively low valence, whereas a low 8 option target when you are 99 straight in a world championship probably carries a very high valence. Nonetheless, the low 8 target is just a low 8 target. My point is that the relative importance you place on each target before you call for it is completely within your rational control.

Introspection is necessary to assess your vulnerability to judgments by others. Sometimes watching a video of your performance will enable you to see yourself as others do. Paul Silva conducted an experiment with psychologically healthy adults who watched themselves giving group presentations. They often cued into their faults (comparing the

“real me” to the “ideal self”) and judged themselves much more harshly than if they had relied only on their own impression of their actual performance.

Cognitive busyness relates to the talking, listening, and reacting to your interactions with others. These experiences are modified by your perceptions and interpretations of non-verbal cues. The traits on which other people base their judgments of us are visible and invisible. Psychologist David Funder opined that other people judge our visible traits more favorably than we judge them ourselves. In a study of anxious public speakers, the speakers usually rated their own performance much lower than the audience rated them.

In her article entitled *The Psychology of Goal Setting*, Anna Kegl described the potent influence goal setting has on the human brain. According to Kegl, once you set a goal it has a powerful effect on how you see yourself. This new identity

develops because “the human brain can’t tell the difference between what we want and what we have.” Technically speaking, this means your brain incorporates the desired outcome of your major goal into your self-image and it begins to influence your perception of who you believe you are. When you fail to attain the big goal your self-image conflicts with your reality and creates constant performance anxiety.

I’ve told many clients, “Your score does not define you.” This maxim applies to your highest score, and your lowest score. Hedonic adaptation dictates that regardless of how elated you become following a personal best, or how discouraged you become after your worst performance in years, you will eventually return to your base emotional state. When you set rational goals that are consistent with your actual shooting ability it dramatically reduces the emotional tension between your self-image and reality.

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Social Anxiety

Social anxiety is an innate response to the threat of exclusion; the feeling that a group does not accept us. Carlin Flora stated, “To navigate the social universe you must understand your self-concept; you need to know what others think of you – although the clearest view depends on how you see yourself.” It is also important to understand that other people have their own idiosyncratic way of sizing you up, which is greatly influenced by their own self-concept. Moreover, the setting and role you happen to be playing at the time of the interaction also affects what people think of you.

Henri Tajfel’s social identity



theory states that a person's sense of who they are is based upon their group memberships. The groups into which people were accepted become a source of pride and self-esteem. The theory is based upon the innate desire of most humans to identify as being part of a group that shares similar characteristics. This group thinking is most evident in team sports with established competitive rivalries, but also relates to individuals regarding their self-identity and self-esteem.

Essentially, we need to feel good about our group to feel good about ourselves. This "us-and-them" thinking creates an in-group and an out-group mentality that provides the basis for social anxiety. There are three mental processes involved when members of a group evaluate an individual as being one of "us" or one of "them."

The first step in the process is categorization (similar characteristics), identification (conforming behaviors), and comparison (superiority). A classic example of social identity theory is

membership in an exclusive gun club because some gun clubs are better than others. Moreover, even within the most exclusive gun clubs the membership will be divided into out-groups and in-groups. A shooter's pre-occupation with the factors that determine whether he or she will be included in, or excluded from, a specific group based upon their shooting averages can be a source of social anxiety.

Status Anxiety

There is a long-standing belief that fear of judgment is the root cause of status anxiety. In the context of clay target sports, individuals worry about how others will judge them on the basis of what discipline they shoot, how well they shoot, what shotgun they shoot, and how they behave after shooting well or poorly.

More recently Alain de Botton opined that meritocracy causes status anxiety due to American's emphasis on materialism. The

concept of meritocracy is based upon the belief that only talented individuals within a defined group merit a place at the top. De Botton suggested that the underlying drive to achieve status is to make the "neighbors" envious.

The more pernicious aspect of status anxiety is that it invades the shooter's mind and erodes his or her self-esteem. Just as Mark Twain lamented, "I've had lots of worries in my life, most of which never happened," a shooter with status anxiety will worry how others are judging his or her actions.

In his controversial book *The Social Animal* journalist David Brooks asserted that a person's subconscious mind largely determines who they are and how they behave. Brooks concluded that humans are emotionally driven by a subconscious fear of loneliness, which precipitates the need to belong to a group of people who understand them. According to Brooks, "Emotion assigns value to things, and reason can only make choices on the basis of those valuations." His most significant conclusion was that our lives and conduct are less under our conscious control than we think. ■

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