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SAFETY IN TODAY'S WORLD

Associate Professor Robert Balas of the PAS Institute of Psychology talks about how the traditional patterns of human behavior are breaking down, causing growing frustration.

How could we describe the sense of safety?
ROBERT BALAS: The easiest way to define it is by negation: it is a state in which we feel no danger. In other words, when we are calm and free from worries and concerns. It is accompanied by a feeling of harmony and mental comfort.

In Maslow's hierarchy of needs, it is one of the basic human needs. It provides the basis for the fulfillment of other, higher-order needs, such as acceptance and self-actualization. The only level below the need for safety is made up by physiological needs that, when deprived, pose a danger to our physical existence – such as sleep, food, and water. They need to be satisfied for us to live.

How can we develop a sense of safety? Where does it come from?
This is a very complex matter, but I would start by saying that the sense of safety is based on the ability to predict what will happen to us in the near or distant future. We can do so thanks to patterns of thought called schemas, which we use to explain the world around us. These schemas describe how the world is organized and what rules govern it. When such a pattern is broken, it offers a dose of novelty that directs our attention to what will happen in the future. As long as we are able to predict this, our sense of safety is not threatened. But when we find ourselves in an environment that is unpredictable, changeable, and difficult to grasp and understand, this causes obvious stress. In moderate doses, such tension may be good for us; it spurs us into action. But persistent stress related to the unpredictability of the external environment can be very harmful. Numerous studies show that prolonged tension contributes to the development of depression, increases anxiety levels, causes memory and attention disorders, and these are just some of its psychological consequences.

Recent years have surprised us with events that were difficult to predict, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Don't we just have to somehow get used to this unpredictability?
Even if we can tame unpredictability to some extent, this certainly does not come without a cost. Many studies around the world have demonstrated severe mental-health costs associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. These include symptoms of depression and elements of PTSD, sleep disturbances, and an observed increase in the use of psychoactive substances. On top of this, there are the consequences of hindered social and professional contacts during the pandemic, which resulted in an increased sense of loneliness, among other things. The unpredictability of the situation was also further compounded by the sometimes chaotic measures taken by lawmakers.

In such a situation, we need to find at least one domain of life that remains safe and stable despite the changing and unpredictable world. A domain that either does not take us by surprise, or gives us mostly pleasant surprises. Examples include social networks: friends, family, acquaintances. Social support helps us to cope with various unpredictable situations without creating a persistent sense of danger.

Is it possible to be better prepared in this regard, through the process of socialization?
This is influenced to some extent by attachment styles, which we develop in childhood. Secure attachment allows for easier adaptation to unexpected, difficult conditions that may arise in adult life. Children, and later adults, who feel safe are curious about the world, and they seek support from their loved ones in difficult moments, when their sense of security becomes shaken. This is a healthy model. Other attachment patterns include ambivalent attachment and disorganized attachment. These, in turn, intensify the sense of the loss of safety. People who have developed these attachment patterns may feel frustrated even when minor changes occur.

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But it's not just our upbringing that influences how we react to danger and unexpected events. Personality traits also play a significant role. Psychology has long recognized a personality trait called "openness to experience." It is unique to each person, and there is a whole spectrum of openness to change and novelty. People with a low level of this trait actively seek stability. They react more strongly to the loss of predictability and are more severely affected by the loss of the sense of safety. Conversely, those who are highly open to all kinds of change and adventure react less strongly to various changes, are better adapted, and even seek to be surprised. In addition to openness to experience, a person's reaction to the loss of the sense of safety is determined by another personality trait called "neuroticism." Neurotic personality is characterized by a greater tendency to experience negative emotional states, such as anxiety and stress. Neuroticism

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Further reading:

Bourmistrova N.W., Solomon T., Braude P., Strawbridge R., Carter B., Long-term effects of COVID-19 on mental health: A systematic review, *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 2022.

Tan C.S., Hashim I.H.M., Pheh K.S. et al., The mediating role of openness to experience and curiosity in the relationship between mindfulness and meaning in life: evidence from four countries, *Current Psychology*, 2023, https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-021-01430-2.

Boot A.B., Eerland A., Jongerling J. et al., Gathering, processing, and interpreting information about COVID-19, *Scientific Reports*, vol. 11, 2021, https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-021-86088-3.

is a risk factor for phobias and other anxiety disorders. Therefore, highly neurotic individuals will react strongly to losing their sense of safety. This is influenced not only by social and personality-related factors, but also by other traits. Examples include what is called the "need for cognitive closure," which refers to a person's preference for following established patterns of thought. Unforeseen changes in the environment break these patterns. In people with a high need for cognitive closure, this triggers many reactions, which can be maladaptive (such as a sense of being threatened and the related stress) or adaptive (adjustment of these patterns to new conditions). To recap, there are many factors behind human reactions to unpredictability, and we don't necessarily all react with a sense of being in danger or by losing our sense of safety. But many people do.

Is society's level of security declining? Did people feel safer a hundred years ago?

In a sense, they obviously did. Even a hundred years ago, the world was probably more predictable than it is today. If we look at the world in which our grandparents and great-grandparents lived, it was a lot less complex. Of course, many of them survived a war, but when we compare our lives and the lives, say, of the inhabitants of a Subcarpathian village back in the 17th century, the latter were incomparably less complicated. Today, everything is in flux, everything is changing constantly. In the modern-day world, old patterns of human behavior are falling apart because the world is a lot more globalized and complex. This is influenced by at least two factors: first, the development of technology, and second, the related access to information.

But shouldn't better education and access to knowledge reduce the sense of insecurity?

Yes, on the condition that the information that we receive is consistent and creates a clear picture of the surrounding world. I have the feeling that this is not the case at all. Fifty years ago, people would go to a doctor and get a single, binding and indisputable diagnosis. Today, we double-check everything with various sources, and the varying information we find is often not only inconsistent, but even impossible to reconcile. This leads to growing frustration and a lost sense of safety.

What can we do to feel safer in today's world?

I think no one knows the answer to this question. One way could be to look for stable spaces or to focus on an aspect of reality that we can control, one that depends solely on us.

INTERVIEWED BY **JUSTYNA ORŁOWSKA, PhD**