

Understanding why paranoid and suspicious thoughts occur

CASE STUDY 1: EMILY'S STORY

My name is Emily. I'm thirty-four years old. I was brought up in north London, where I live now. I work as a solicitor. I'm married and have a two-year-old daughter.

For quite a while now I've been finding social situations pretty difficult. Sometimes I worry that people are talking about me or laughing at me. Sometimes I find myself feeling very distant from the people I'm with – as if I don't belong. From time to time I've felt as if I weren't there at all – like I've somehow vanished. It's been troubling me for a long time, but it seems to have got much worse over the last couple of years. I'm at the stage now where I find myself turning down invitations. Staying at home seems a much less stressful option.

I first started having these thoughts just after I left university. Actually, that's probably not quite right. I

do remember being at parties when I was at university and on the odd occasion wondering whether people were laughing at me, and there was one girl I suspected might be speaking about me behind my back. But it was as if the thoughts popped into my head and popped right out again. I never spent any time worrying about them, I really didn't. I can't imagine how I managed it, but I did.

Anyhow, after I'd finished my law studies (I had to do a degree and then another course after that, all of which was really hard), I worked as a trainee solicitor for two years at a law firm in Manchester. I found that period quite tough. I'd built up a lot of debt during my studies – I think most students do. I was getting a salary, but it wasn't much. I found the work really exhausting – I was used as a dogsbody, given all the chores no one else wanted to do. I worked really long hours. Plus, I was convinced I'd made a big mistake in moving north. I didn't know anyone else in the city. Family and friends seemed a very long way away. I made friends eventually but I'm not sure I ever really felt at home.

My memories of that period are dominated by two feelings: exhaustion and misery! I really worried that I'd made the wrong decision taking up law and several times I strongly considered giving it up. I think there were two reasons why I didn't. First, I didn't want to disappoint my parents: they'd always been proud as punch to think that their daughter was going to be a lawyer. The other reason was that I couldn't think of anything else I wanted

to do. Neither of these now seem very good reasons for keeping going! I've been a solicitor for ten years, but even now I wonder whether it's the right job for me. The hours can be long and don't combine well with family life. The work can also be a strange mixture of the boring and the stressful. There are lots of good bits, of course, but I'm still on the lookout for that perfect job. Maybe I'll find it before I retire!

It was during my time in Manchester that I first noticed that I was maybe becoming a little paranoid. The firm that I worked for was a large one – lots of lawyers and lots of social events designed, I think, to test you in subtle, non-legal scenarios (or perhaps that's just my paranoid reading of it!). I found these social events pretty difficult – I dreaded them, to be honest – and as soon as one was announced I'd start worrying about it. I felt sure I was being judged. I'd see people chatting and I'd wonder whether they were talking about me. If even one person in the group happened to glance in my direction, that was it: I was sure it was me they were discussing. And if all that was followed by someone laughing – well, that was just awful. I always left as soon as I could and then I'd lie awake replaying the evening in my head. I think that at one level I knew I was being stupid – that I was imagining things. And it was funny because I'd always thought of my dad as being a bit paranoid. He was always fretting about what other people thought of us, always thinking that someone at work had it in for him. And I could see that his worries had much more to

do with what was going on inside his head than what was actually going on in the real world. But knowing all this didn't make me feel any better.

Things only started to improve when I changed my job. I moved back to London and it was as if a huge weight was lifted from me – almost instantaneously! Suddenly I had a social life again. My family were nearby, plus almost all my friends from college – and lots of them from school too. And I felt far more comfortable at work. It was a much more relaxed and informal atmosphere than the company in Manchester. We used to go out a lot together after work and I never – or almost never – experienced the kind of worries that I'd had before in social situations.

Okay, so now I have to fast forward a few years! I'd almost forgotten how stressed out social situations used to make me; I hardly ever experienced the sort of paranoia I'd felt while in Manchester. But that all changed around the time my daughter was born. Actually, things were fine until I went back to work after maternity leave. I only took three months' leave because there was a lot of pressure from work. I was made to feel – though no one said so openly – that I'd be damaging my career by being away longer. So Lily went to nursery. Five days a week. I felt incredibly guilty about this. She was so tiny. I hated leaving her and I worried that I was a terrible mother for doing so. On top of this, I had all the usual pressures of work and lots of very broken nights. I don't think I've ever felt as tired as I've done over the last eighteen

months, but that didn't stop me lying awake worrying about the situation.

While all this was going on, the paranoia reared its head again – and this time it was even worse than before. It got to the stage where I'd avoid going out. I was very close to quitting work. I couldn't face anyone. I knew that if someone so much as glanced at me, I'd be worrying about the meaning of that glance for days afterwards. I'd make a mental note of these sorts of 'incident' while I was out and then analyse them all when I got home, usually while lying awake in bed at night. It was crazy. I never told another soul about what I was going through. I'm not sure why. I think it was partly because I was embarrassed that so many people thought I was stupid or not up to scratch in some way. And I thought I had it all figured out: what was there to discuss? It was incredibly lonely, though. I missed the social contact; I missed my friends. And I had this awful thing, this secret, that I had to deal with all by myself. Things only changed when my husband started to doubt my repeated excuses for staying at home. He realised something was wrong – and from that point on things have got much better.

CASE STUDY 2: KEITH'S STORY

My name is Keith. I was born in Newcastle and I've never lived anywhere else. I'm not saying I've not wanted to maybe try other places, but my home is my home and I can't see myself moving now. I've worked at the Royal

Mail since I was sixteen. I'm fifty-three now, so that's thirty-seven years! I've done more or less everything in my time: delivering post, sorting mail, managing teams, managing facilities, training folk, even worked in payroll for a bit. Right now I'm back where I started: a postman. Being out and about on my own suits me at the minute.

As far as family goes, I'm currently single. I've been married twice and divorced twice. First time around, I was twenty: much too young. We split up after four years together. I married again when I was twenty-nine. Second time around was better: we were together twenty years and had three kids – all girls. I get on okay with my ex, though to be honest I don't have a lot to do with her now. I don't see as much of my kids as I'd like, but the eldest two are working down in London now so that can't be helped. Alice – she's the youngest – drops in occasionally, but she's like any teenager: her parents are the last people she wants to spend time with.

It's funny. Me and my wife both decided we'd gone as far as we could. It's not like she left me or anything. I was sad about it, of course, but I was sure it was the right thing. I was very confident I could cope. I can cook; I know how to keep house. And at first things were fine. I sorted myself out with a nice little flat and enjoyed a bit of time to myself. But it's not worked out the way I thought it would. I feel pretty cut off to tell you the truth. And the timing turned out to be bad too. First of all, I lost both my parents within a year of my divorce. My dad died of

a stroke and after that my mum seemed to lose the will to live. I can understand that; they'd been together fifty years with hardly a day apart. We'd always been a very close family. I'd pop in three, four, five times a week. So them passing on was a big blow.

The other thing was that I began to have a few problems at work. I'd always been happy there, though I'm not all that great with people to be honest. I suppose I'm a bit of a loner. Not that I want to be: I just don't find it all that easy to get along with folk. I had a bit of trouble at school – bit of bullying, you know – and I don't know whether that's been a factor. Anyhow I don't mind a bit of banter – you know, a bit of leg-pulling and teasing. I can take a joke. But then my manager moved on and the guy who replaced him – well, let's just say we didn't hit it off. He was young and very cocky: thought he knew it all. To be honest, I think he saw me as a bit of a threat. Not that I wanted his job. I was very happy doing my own. But he knew I could see through him and of course he knew perfectly well that I had thirty-odd years of experience and he had about two! He also knew that I'd been through a rough time, and wasn't feeling at my best. I think he took advantage of that, to tell you the truth.

I began to notice that he was treating me differently to everyone else. He'd give me the jobs no one else wanted. He'd ignore me in meetings. If I ever wanted to see him about something, he was always busy. As you can imagine, it wound me up something rotten, but what was

really infuriating was the fact that he seemed to be trying to turn my colleagues against me. I couldn't prove any of it, but I was sure that people were starting to treat me differently — people who up until then had been my mates. They'd sort of look at me oddly, or I'd walk into an office and the conversation would suddenly stop. I can think of lots of occasions when I was convinced folk were laughing at me behind my back. What before had seemed to be, you know, harmless banter now seemed like it was malicious and all aimed at me. It was as though everyone was suddenly trying to put me down. Not that I really thought through any of this. I was maybe a bit over-sensitive — as soon as something happened I didn't like, I tended to just assume the worst.

Because of this sort of thing, I suppose I withdrew into myself a bit. I found excuses for not going to the canteen at lunchtime and I didn't go to the pub after work much either. So people stopped asking me to join them, which was probably understandable but didn't make me feel any better: it just confirmed what I was already thinking. I didn't have too much else going on in my life at the time so I had plenty of opportunity to dwell on it all. It became a habit. I'd get home from work, make myself a cup of tea, and try to read the paper or have a nap. But then I'd find myself thinking back through the day. And then all kinds of things that hadn't bothered me at the time — a comment someone had made, a look I thought someone had given me — started to worry me. And I'd go on worrying about them for the rest of the night! It

was like I couldn't concentrate on anything else until I'd identified all the ways in which people had tried to get at me that day. I'd be watching the TV and all of a sudden an incident I'd forgotten would come into my head and off I'd go again.

It got to the stage where I dreaded going to work. I slept badly the night before. I could feel myself tensing up on the journey in. By the time I reached the building I was in a right state: heart pounding, headache, sweating — the lot. I had to really fight the temptation to just turn around and go home. Eventually I gave in to that temptation and stayed away altogether. But that didn't help. I was disgusted with myself for giving in to these fears. I felt like I should have been able to deal with the situation. I was sure other people would have handled it much better than me. And I became a bit of a recluse. I didn't go to work and I didn't go out socialising. All day in the house on your own with no one to talk to is hard. You need a reason to get out of bed in the morning, don't you? Mine was usually to see whether anyone from work was outside in the street checking up on me. Plus I got in a stew about my next-door neighbours. I thought they were starting to look at me a bit strangely. If they were noisy at all, I used to think they were doing it to get at me. They knew I was having a hard time, so why all the banging and shouting? I don't actually think they were being particularly noisy but that's the way I was seeing things back then.