Are You More Paranoid or "Depressive?"

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July 15, 2019 By Mike Barr

Psychologists are said to divide the world up between two types of people — paranoids and depressives. Paranoids are zero-sum types, who at their most extreme see the world as a Hobbesian place where if someone is up, then another must be down. The world consists of only winners and losers, and only suckers think otherwise.

Our president obviously fits into this category, as does Vladimir Putin and any number of other autocrats. But they are simply at the most extreme end of things. Many chief executives, urban elites and generally hard-charging, goal-oriented types fit somewhere along the paranoid spectrum. Empathy, guilt and time can be in short supply in the paranoid's world, a phenomenon that hasn't been helped along by social media and high speed digital culture.

The depressive category, which isn't nearly as bad as it sounds, includes not so much people who are depressed but those who tend to see the world as a rich, novelistic tapestry, full of nuance, with no right or wrong answers. They value human connection and relationships above work, and are content to satisfy rather than maximise even amid all the temptations of casino capitalism. They know that nothing is perfect, and at the heart of all things inevitably lies sorrow. (Probably why they're called depressive.) Lots of folks in the caring professions (and I would think just about anyone who has dabbled or more in the Buddhist vision of the world) fall in this category. Possibly even the prime minister of New Zealand.

Individuals, societies and world views can be paranoid or depressive too. Nazi Germany was clearly paranoid. Social democratic states in Scandinavia seem depressive (in both senses of the word). America, Britain and growing swathes of Europe are at this moment in time much more paranoid than depressive. How much of this is still a hangover from the Great Depression of 2008 is difficult to say, but the guy who wrote the book on this would likely still argue that economic dislocation/stagnation explain just about all of it.

(Adapted from Rana Foroohar's Swamp Notes (ft.com))

Mike Barr, a long ago Poz Senior Contributing Editor and founding member of and scribe for the

Treatment Action Group (TAG), is a functional medicine practitioner, acupuncturist and herbalist in NYC. Reach out to him here.

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