

FEAR AND
SELF

LOATHING

**IN THE
CITY**



A guide to keeping sane in the square mile

Dr. Michael Sinclair

ROUTLEDGE


FEAR AND SELF-LOATHING
IN THE CITY

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FEAR AND SELF-
LOATHING IN THE CITY
A Guide to Keeping Sane
in the Square Mile

Michael Sinclair

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FOREWORD

The City has always attracted bright and talented people to work in its various organisations and institutions. This is what has helped to position the City of London as a hub within global financial markets. The workforce of the City is hugely diverse and people come to work here from every country. Their backgrounds are varied; some are privileged, coming from well heeled families and have received a private education; others have had to battle against the odds, coming from modest or even deprived families and communities. Both genders are almost equally reflected among the workforce; there are straight and gay people in the City; all ages are represented as are all races, religions and ethnicities.

In spite of the apparent diversity among those who work in the City, many workers share similar psychological traits and are confronted by the same challenges. Most are ambitious—even driven—, committed, enthusiastic, intelligent and may display a streak of perfectionism. A few may exhibit more questionable traits and behaviours; there are among them those who take excessive risks, who gamble, or who lead unhealthy lifestyles. Almost everyone, though, experiences significant stress from time to time, health problems, relationship difficulties (be these at home or with work colleagues), exhibit anger

or aggression, experience anxieties and fears, problems with sleep, pain, alcohol or recreational drug use and of course encounter job insecurity. Some of these patterns relate to work culture as well as job and financial stresses; others stem from their personal background, peer pressure and not keeping a healthy work-life balance.

As highlighted in this book, there is still a stigma in the workplace about anxiety, depression and other mental problems. This applies even more so to alcoholism, drug use or any other behavioural signs of weakness or difficulty, particularly in the present financial climate. *Fear and Self-Loathing in the City* is a practical guide to understanding some of the psychological problems that may confront people who work in the City. It highlights ways to cope with the pressures of the workplace as well as the struggles that we have in our personal lives. It is a hugely practical book, written in a jargon-free style and which contains many case histories to illustrate some of the issues raised.

As the editor for this series of Karnac self help books, it gives me great pleasure to introduce this highly practical and insightful new title *Fear and Self-Loathing in the City*.

Dr Michael Sinclair is a City-based psychologist and has extensive experience counselling people who work in the City. This book will appeal primarily to all who work in the City and similar pressurised environments. It will also be of interest to those in Human Resources Departments and employers who require an understanding of the issues that confront City workers. It also offers practical insights into coping with the personal and psychological problems that City-based workers may confront.

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The preparation of this book has been informed and supported by a number of different people in both my professional and personal life. I would like to acknowledge them here.

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I am also grateful to my clinical supervisor, Dr Peter DuPlessis, for his continuous invaluable support, constructive feedback, and

enthusiasm. He has, without doubt, nurtured my growth and confidence as a clinician over the last nine years.

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Finally, I would like to thank the many patients with whom I have been honoured to meet and work with over the years. They have offered a special gift to me by sharing a part of themselves, and it is thanks to them that I have learnt so much about myself and continue to grow as a practitioner. They made this book possible.

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As a Chartered Psychologist with an impressive academic background and a down-to-earth nature, Michael has provided psychological therapy and coaching of the highest quality to top executives and celebrities for many years. He acts as consultant to the occupational health and human resources departments of several Blue Chip corporations in the City of London, assisting with employees' work-related stress, productivity and absenteeism. He practices from the City of London and Harley Street, and is the Founding and Clinical Director and Principle Psychologist of City Psychology Group (CPG).

Michael is an Associate Fellow of the British Psychological Society (BPS), a Practitioner Psychologist registered with the Health Professions Council, a Chartered Scientist registered with the UK Science Council, a Principle Member of the Association of Business Psychologists, a Founder Member of the Society of Coaching Psychologists, a Practitioner Member of the Register of Psychologists Specializing in Psychotherapy (BPS), and an International Member of the American Psychological Association.

Since completing his training at London Metropolitan University, the University of Essex and the Tavistock Clinic, London, Michael has gained invaluable experience over the years working in GP surgeries, specialist mental health clinics, schools, corporate organizations, and the Royal Free Hospital, London. He has lectured on a variety of psychological and other health-related topics at the Royal Free Hospital School of Medicine, Roche Pharmaceuticals, BUPA and City University, London.

Michael has published his research in academic journals and presented at international professional conferences. He is an experienced clinical supervisor and continues to be involved in the training of other counsellors, psychologists and psychotherapists.

As an advisor to the media, Michael has provided expert commentary and psychological insight on a range of topics, from breaking news incidents, to celebrity conduct. He has also contributed to many publications, including: the *Times*, the *Daily Mail*, *Psychologies Magazine*, *BBC Focus* and *Men's Health*. He has also been interviewed on television by Reuters, CNBC, BBC News, and BBC Breakfast, as well as providing live commentary on BBC Radio Five Live.

INTRODUCTION

I have a friend that plays basketball—badly. Every time I go over to his house, he is in the back garden, shooting hoops with his two boys. The kids run rings around him, grabbing the ball from him at every opportunity and scoring more and more points. Although my friend is pretty easygoing it had reached a point where he was getting a bit fed up with being so thoroughly thrashed by his young children. ‘Competitive dad’ soon made an appearance and he began to get more and more frustrated with his inability to get the ball into the basket. Of course, this caused him to snap at his kids, as he became angrier with himself.

One time, when I went over there, he was on his own in the back garden, repeatedly throwing the ball in the direction of the basket, and missing every time. Admittedly, this was all quite amusing to watch, but after a while, I felt a bit guilty taking enjoyment in his sheer ineptitude, so I went out to talk to him.

He greeted me as I approached and then smiled, ruefully, as the ball missed the hoop entirely and bounced into next-door’s garden. I thought this would be a good time to ask him a question:

'Tell me what you are thinking about when you are about to throw the ball,' I said.

'I am thinking that I better not miss this basket or I'm going to be really annoyed with myself,' he replied.

'Well, have you tried thinking about 'I can' rather than 'I can't'? And how it would feel to actually get the ball in the basket rather than how you would feel if you missed it?'

Sure enough, the next time he threw that ball it went straight into the hoop.

For me, this story really captures the essence of what this book is really about: changing the way we think. How we think has a profound effect on our emotional experience, our confidence, and consequential behaviour; if we think in a more helpful way, it is more likely that we will get the results we want.

* * *

A career in the City is an attractive proposition for many with its high-adrenalin assignments and generous pay packets, but it is certainly not for everyone. City workers in the Square Mile are put under enormous amount of pressure to perform at peak levels.

Overtime is an expected part of the deal and then there's the compulsory after-hours socializing. Many City workers find themselves torn between their work and personal lives and struggle to balance the two. They are often left feeling frustrated and anxious about their ability to manage their time and live in fear of letting people down, losing out on that bonus, or failing to progress up the career ladder.

The fact is that the City is not just a buzzing place of businesses, tall buildings, and a relentless series of meetings after meetings; it's a whole state of mind far greater than the Square Mile. The City's fast-paced working culture is contagious for some and it can encourage some pretty unhealthy habits such as boozy lunches, late nights, and skipping meals. The problem is that it's all too easy to get locked into a way of life once people start becoming dependent on the money that success brings. Some may begin to feel 'institutionalized' and wonder if they are able to cope at all without the lifestyle to which they have become accustomed.

* * *

As a City psychologist, I see a lot of people who work in the Square Mile, struggling with a whole range of emotional and mental health issues. It is quite understandable that with high-speed information technology, rising expectations, global competitiveness, loss of job security, and reducing staff levels; work-related stress amongst city workers has increased. However, most of them admit that it takes them a lot of time to realize that they are not coping very well and that they need to seek help. This is because there is such a stigma about mental health, particularly in the workplace. In such a competitive environment, emotional and mental health problems like anxiety or depression are perceived as a sign of weakness. Therefore, employees tend to hide their anxious feelings and hold them in.

However, internalising our emotional distress, generally, somatizes problems, manifesting in physical discomfort such as headache or back pain. Such is the culture of the City that most of my clients will openly admit that having back pain or headaches is far more acceptable to them than depression or anxiety.

The word 'stress' is also bandied around quite a lot in our society. 'I am stressed because I didn't make that deadline,' or 'I am ill because I have been under so much stress.' This may sound a little controversial but I don't actually believe too much in 'stress' as a valid description for how we feel a lot of the time. I think of it as a blanket term to cover underlying emotional problems that we would rather stay hidden. On many occasions, during psychological therapy, I have heard people express themselves as 'feeling stressed' when they are actually angry, depressed or anxious. As one patient put it: 'I would rather own up to feeling a bit stressed than telling everyone I suffer from depression.' Although almost one in four people in the UK suffers from depression or anxiety, there is still a massive stigma associated with these mental health conditions. Therefore, being 'stressed' is seen as far more acceptable than being 'depressed'.

Many of my patients complain about the pressures of work. In many cases, it is the work culture that demands that they work late, and avoid taking lunch breaks, or days off. It is almost that the workplace doesn't allow for human emotion. However, in spite of how we feel about our working culture, it is more about how we manage our own experience that counts. If we learn to develop a certain amount of self-awareness around our psychological states, be more

assertive, and look after our own needs in a productive way, then we can deal with the pressures of the office—on our own terms.

* * *

Another aspect of the City working culture is the level of perfectionism that exists. The majority of my City patients are total perfectionists and tend to be really hard on themselves. What I try to explain to them is that perfection is an unobtainable illusion: it doesn't exist. Often, perfectionists only focus on the negatives and live in a perpetual state of fear: fear of failure and rejection. Perfectionism means thinking you're never good enough and/or never feeling satisfied with what you have achieved. Therefore, we tend to do everything possible to avoid those unpleasant feelings, for example, working 24/7, spending too much time in the gym, or drinking too much.

Perfectionists also sometimes have a habit of thinking they don't deserve success. A very common concern amongst some of the successful city workers that I have known is their tendency to feel like a 'square peg in a round hole' i.e., they truly believe they are 'fakes' and 'frauds' who don't deserve to be in such a high-powered position, and that they have only achieved so much through sheer luck and 'winging' it. Therefore, they often lie awake at night, worrying that they will be found out as useless, and that it's only a matter of time until their colleagues discover their hidden 'incompetency', and when that happens, they will be sacked!

A tough working culture can really prey on our insecurities; it is easier for an over-achiever or a perfectionist to get sucked up into the whirlpool of the working culture of the Square Mile. Insecurities like fear of failure or rejection thrive in a pressurized environment and bring out the worst in us if we allow it to. Thus, it is not about blaming the City working culture, but how we relate to it. Many of my patients have found it useful to take a look at how they can manage themselves, in relation to their own working environments, so those environments bring out the best in them, rather than the worst.

* * *

This book covers a whole range of difficult situations. Mental health problems do not just affect the sufferer but also have a great impact

on those around them. Therefore, this book is not just for the person dealing with the problem but also serves as a guide to friends, work colleagues, and families to help them find the best approach in which they can support others in overcoming their problems. Sometimes we can feel helpless when we see a loved one suffer. Perhaps, the next time you see someone angry, anxious, low, upset, or drinking too much, you will be able to understand them a little better and approach them in the right way to help them deal with their issues.

Many of the chapters also deal with our relationships with others and how we can improve the way we relate to one another. If we can handle our own insecurities, become more confident, assertive and self-aware then we are in a better position to allow those around us to be themselves, and accept the way they are. By knowing ourselves in this way, we are able to have really productive and fulfilling relationships with others.

* * *

During therapy, I use a combination of four evidenced-based psychological theories, included in some form or other in this book: Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), Systemic Therapy, Person-Centered Therapy, and Psychodynamic Therapy. My patients are, by nature, rather goal-orientated creatures and so they tend to find my brief, focused and time-sensitive approach most helpful. Let's face it—with pressing deadlines and meetings to get to, we don't have hours of time to sit around in therapy. The approach and tips included in this book are collated from tried and tested hours of my therapy practice with City workers. It's all about getting productive, focusing on what works, and doing less of what doesn't work, to help move forward.

The following is my own philosophy of how those theories work, and explains the way I use them during therapy:

CBT

CBT is a widely practised method of psychological therapy these days, and it can help to bring about a quick sense of relief for those experiencing emotional and situational difficulties.

The 'C' in CBT

The theory is that if we think differently, we will, ultimately, feel differently, emotionally. Therefore, it's not just about positive thinking but about making changes in the way we think.

Others might tell us to be more positive but, sometimes, it simply isn't possible to see the positive in some situations. If we keep looking for the positive we will find ourselves getting stuck, therefore, it is unhelpful to see positive thinking behaviour as the ultimate goal we are trying to achieve. Just thinking differently, rather than positively about a situation, can bring about a profound sense of relief and change in our emotional experience. There is always another way to see a situation!

In Chapter Seven, we look at the topic of Pain Management, where sufferers experience a 'phantom' pain that, medically, doesn't exist. In this instance, a positive nature does not really help, and phrases from others like: 'There's nothing wrong with you,'; 'Pull yourself together', etc. does not encourage you to see your own situation any differently. Therefore, the cognitive or thinking part of CBT really comes in handy here as it helps us to gradually change the way we think in order to feel more at ease and confident about our situation.

The 'B' in CBT

It is almost impossible to automatically snap into a different way of thinking. Therefore, we may have to behave differently or act differently in order to think differently and, therefore, feel differently. This might involve confronting a situation that we have previously avoided or have found difficult or distressing, and making an effort to approach it in a different manner. In this way, we can try to look at the problem from a different perspective, and try to analyse the factors that cause us to feel distressed or behave in a certain way. When we confront these difficult situations again and again, armed with our new, helpful, and alternative way of thinking about them, we can learn to manage our distressing feelings in a more confident way.

In Chapter Three, we meet John, a City professional who has a drinking problem and behaves erratically as a result. His recovery involved assessing the reasons why he drank, and encouraged him to face difficult situations he had been avoiding. I also suggested

ways in which he could change his behaviour. Consequently, all of these methods helped him to battle his drinking problem.

Systemic theory

Systems Theory essentially means that we are all part of a system, always connected to other people in our environments. This theory claims that there are certain patterns of behaviour or ways of relating to others around us that are the mechanisms that uphold and maintain a problem for us. Therefore, we might need to look at our own systems and the patterns of behaviour that exist between us, and others around us, to see how we can behave differently, break those unhelpful patterns of behaviour, and make changes in that system.

As an example, two people (one patient, one psychologist) in a counselling session have created a new system in the world, and developed certain ways of relating to each other; most of which are outside their conscious awareness. The psychologist will talk to the patient about their problem and suggest ways in which they can help. During this time, the patient might nod or make acknowledging sounds such as ‘um’ and ‘ah’, which the psychologist responds to and then the process becomes more circular—the more the psychologist speaks the more the patient attends, and so on. This is one pattern of behaviour that exists in the behaviour of communication between the two. If the patient stops actively listening or responding, then the psychologist may also be stopped in his tracks.

Similarly, we might experience difficult relationships with others, at home or at work. For example, you may be unhappy with the way your boss is treating you and might become frustrated as a result. However, if you look closely at the patterns of behaviour that exist between you and your boss and notice how those patterns might be maintaining this difficult relationship, then you may think about how you could behave differently to help change his behaviour towards you in a positive way.

Person-Centred theory

The main premise here is that people already have all the resources within themselves to improve their situations and deal with their

emotional upset. We all have an innate tendency to be the person we want to become. However, due to expectations that are placed on us, and our innate desire to survive, succeed, and be liked in certain situations, we may adopt a way of 'being' that is out of line with who we really are, or desire to become. In therapy, patients are encouraged to explore their difficulties in a non-judgemental, understanding, and empathic forum; they are shown positive regard and acceptance.

Many people, particularly those that may want to strive forward in their City careers may find that they have to live up to certain high expectations that, at times, go against their natural tendencies to be different. A Person-Centered approach can help such people come to terms with the conflicts between what they naturally desire and what they expect of themselves, and help to change those ways of being that might be keeping them 'stuck' and in distress.

Psychodynamic theory

Psychodynamic Theory holds that another part of us is at work, known as the 'emotional self' or 'subconscious', which predicts and fuels the way we think, feel, or behave in any given situation. Chapter One explains how our emotional self may be on a single-minded mission to avoid a reoccurrence of a previous trauma, so it shuts itself off and leaves us without really knowing why we behave in a certain way.

For example, say you feel lonely and anxious about being single but then you meet someone. Initially, you are very excited and it all goes well. Then after a while, the excitement fades and despite all your attempts to impress your partner, those feelings of anxiety come back. Something blocks you but you don't know what it is; you can't seem to commit to a date and when you do, you become overwhelmed with fatigue or you find it difficult to arrive on time. Returning a text or calls becomes impossible, and then you start thinking that if they really loved you they'd try calling or texting again.

When they don't repeatedly call you, you start thinking about your partner in a really negative way, as if they're only after one thing and aren't interested in who you are. Eventually, you withdraw; they get angry and the relationship ends. Then you find you are lonely again, unsure as to why you behaved in such a way. You start regretting your decision, perhaps even thinking that that person

might have been ‘the one’ and wonder why on earth you sabotaged the entire relationship.

Often, when we act like this in a relationship, there is a good chance that we have been ‘stung’ before. Perhaps, in the past, we had a relationship where we became very attached, and really opened up to the other person only for the relationship to end badly. This one experience, irrespective of how long ago it took place or whom it was with will have an impact on the rest of our relationships, often on an unconscious level. Thus, Psychodynamic Theory allows us to understand the psychological forces that are at the very source of the way we act, and helps us to, consciously, view and change our patterns of behaviour.

* * *

This book is designed to help you to overcome your emotional and mental health problems, and to learn how to provide the right support to others who might also be having difficulties. It is not to be taken as the ‘experts’ view nor should the reader think that the author knows what is best for them. I do not meet patients to ‘fix’ or take away their problems (much to their surprise!) but to join with them in a collaborative discussion so they can develop a better understanding of their situation, and implement the right changes into their lives that work best for them. I hope that this book serves as a similar function to the reader.

The case studies will provide you with a bit of background about each mental health problem, and the useful exercises and tips may help you to find a way to address your own situation. I have also used a few friendly business clichés which I have heard are quite a feature of the office language in the Square Mile (especially during ‘Buzzword Bingo’!). As mentioned, I have provided the same ‘quick-fix’ solutions and exercises that I use with patients during my own counselling sessions, so I know, first hand, how effective they can be. So I ask you to please invest some of your time and attention and give this book your best shot!

(Please do note that the content of this book is not to be used in the diagnosis or treatment of any psychological conditions, nor is the information to be used to replace the services of a trained and qualified mental health professional.)



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CHAPTER ONE

Rocking the foundations

“Criticism, like rain, should be gentle enough to nourish a man’s growth without destroying his roots.”

—Frank A. Clark

Do any of the following statements sound familiar?

‘I’m not good enough’

‘He must think I’m really boring’

‘I can’t believe I made that mistake; I’m such an idiot’

‘I *always* say the wrong thing’

‘I totally screwed up that meeting’

‘That presentation I did was awful’

‘I *never* make my deadlines’

‘Everyone else is doing better than I am; I should be better than this’

‘I just got made redundant: they must have thought I was useless’

‘I didn’t get promoted this year; I’m incompetent’

‘Everyone got a bigger bonus than me: I’m treated so unfairly!’

Yes, we have a tendency to beat ourselves up. Our negative critical inner voice is always there in the background, telling us how stupid, incompetent, inadequate, and disliked we are. By setting impossibly high standards, we will attack ourselves if we don't live up to our own expectations. We also have a tendency to focus on mistakes rather than achievements and often compare ourselves with others: everyone else is more intelligent, happier, and wealthier than we are.

Because this critical voice is a part of us, and often subtly interwoven into our daily thoughts, we don't even notice it. In fact, it feels pretty normal to speak to ourselves in this way. Many of us spend our lives trying to make peace with our inner critic, without even realising it. One way of temporarily shutting it up is by satisfying our own high standards. If we achieve a goal, it can feel so fantastic that we want to strive for that feeling in everything we do. This high is addictive and reinforces the perfectionist in us. It means that when we reach one goal, we immediately raise the bar and work tirelessly to achieve the next euphoric feeling—let's face it we're emotional addicts!

Conversely, if we don't get that promotion or bonus, make that deadline or have the 'perfect' relationship, then we feel a massive low as we berate ourselves for failing to live up to our own standards.

Adopting this way of thinking often feels like we are on an emotional rollercoaster. If you think about it, the critic in us acts as a means to reach the next emotional high, it provides the downward momentum that allows us to shoot up higher with our next achievement. Without the critic, we may not get the same or an even greater buzz from our next achievement. The lower the feeling we experience as a result of our critic the higher the feeling we will experience when we inevitably succeed again.

It's got to be perfect!

The perfectionist is someone who has excessively high standards and expects to get everything just right. Aiming for 'perfection' is an endless struggle as we can always find the faults in everything if we look hard enough, whether it is giving the 'perfect' work presentation or being the 'perfect' body weight. Expecting to be perfect, and to perform 'perfectly' means that we are never satisfied with our