

**What is paranoia and is there anything behind that feeling
that something is wrong with the world?**

Paranoia is not madness, nor is it anything abnormal. In fact nearly 40% of us feel it to some degree. Only in very rare cases when linked with stress can paranoia be linked with delusional behaviour.

Most of the time, those with Paranoid Personality Disorder (PPD) are in touch with reality. Yet they misinterpret others' motives and intentions across. PPD patients are not psychotic, but their conviction that others are trying to "get them" or humiliate them in some way can lead to hostility and social isolation. Hence those with PPD are characterised with mistrustfulness and suspicion. It may be one reason why some of us are more likely to get bullied than others as we interpret the first act of teasing in a very negative manner and are unable to laugh it off and make a friendly retort and/or join the group.

People suffering from PPD can be very difficult to deal with. They never seem to let down their defences. They are always looking for and finding evidence that others are against them. Their fear, and the threats they perceive in the world around them often contributes to frequent complaining or unfriendly withdrawal. They can be confrontational, aggressive and argumentative. Indeed it is not unusual for them to sue people they feel have wronged them.

It is possible to help people dealing with PPD control their symptoms. However the disorder usually lasts throughout a person's life. And unfortunately they're likely to mistrust mental health care providers, and so will not seek help if things get bad.

But PPD does not describe the entire 40% I spoke of earlier, only around 3%. So why are we inclined to question what is real? Why do some people question whether what they experience is real? These questions demonstrate why I think the topic of PPD is more relevant than it seems. Can you imagine how embarrassed (and not to mention enraged) you'd be if you woke you up one day to find out that your entire life was a lie? If 40% of us are likely to be suspicious and occasionally paranoid, and western liberal thought, together with modern scientific methods teach us to doubt everything, then surely it becomes logical to question even existence, or at least the form thereof. After all you can easily say "I think

therefore I am". But can you say what you are? You could be merely a random thought in the mind of God. You could be plugged into a Matrix. You could be living on a television set like the 'Truman Show'.

There are a range of cases, from hardly ever being paranoid (this is probably those of you who never thought of the above questions) to full blown PPD. For instance many people feel excessive paranoia during teen years but thereafter feel it no more than anyone else. However I have not heard of any cases where those with PPD direct that paranoia against only one source e.g. the belief that the Matrix is really how things are. In fact someone who believed this would be likely to feel paranoid about a wide range of things, and constantly misinterpret the intentions of all others, whether or not they believed them to be agents of the Matrix.

Paranoid and suspicious thoughts often have these causes:

- Stress and major life changes. This includes difficult relationships with others at home or at work, and becoming isolated.
- Negative emotions such as anxiety and depression. It can lead us to overestimate the chances of threats and worry too much. The way we feel has a big influence on the way we think.
- Sleep deprivation
- Drugs
- Confusion/our reasoning. Some people think paranoid thoughts are our way of trying to understand and make sense of confusing events. Often suspicious thoughts can take a grip if we do not think of alternative explanations for events, and do not fully consider the evidence for and against our worries. Combined with the causal role played by emotions this could create any number of odd thoughts.
- Normality: i.e. that just less than 40% of all people feel paranoid thoughts (even if they don't admit it). As part of a study by a research group led by Daniel Freeman, a Wellcome Trust fellow at the Institute of Psychiatry in London, around 200 people were required to wear virtual-display devices featuring a 3-D view of a train compartment and animated travellers inside. After taking the same four-minute virtual tube trip between two stops, the subjects were asked to report their experiences with the computer characters. Sixty percent reported positive or neutral experiences, such as "one guy was checking me out—flattering". Yet 40% reported negative experiences such as "a lady sitting down laughed at me when I walked past." In short, the latter seemed to be thinking paranoid thoughts, because in reality everyone had had exactly the same experience.¹
- Familial factors: families that contain more than one member with a mental disorder such as schizophrenia or delusional disorder are more likely to get PPD. Twin studies also suggest a genetic link.

¹ www.paranoidthoughts.com provides information on paranoid thoughts, advice on seeking help, and opportunities for people to share their experiences. The results of the research were detailed in the world's first self-help book on dealing with paranoid thoughts "Overcoming Paranoid and Suspicious Thoughts", published in 2006.

- How a person is raised and develops in early life has a large proportional impact upon their personality when 'grown up'. Children who are exposed to adult anger and rage with no way to predict the outbursts and no way to escape or control them may develop paranoid ways of thinking in an effort to cope with the stress. Indeed this sort of thinking is common with most animals. For instance a few decades ago a Professor experimented in feeding his birds at different times of the day. He ensured the time was always randomly changing. But each of the birds began to believe that something they were doing was making the food come. Some birds would start hopping on one leg; others would peck at the cage in a certain spot; and they all continued this behaviour due to their belief that it brought food. PPD would emerge when this type of thinking became part of the individual's personality as adulthood approached.

These causes are many, and often ambiguous. But any simple answer would not suffice. The reason that people suffer from varying degrees of paranoia is because they have experienced these causes to varying degrees. If you were asked to fill out a questionnaire asking "To what degree do you feel you have experienced/are experiencing these causes? Please number 1 to 10" how would you answer?

If your average score was ten out of ten then you most likely have PPD. If it numbers 1-6 you have nothing to worry about. And if it numbers above 6 then you're likely to experience paranoid thoughts. It's up to you to decide how bad these are and whether it warrants seeking help. If you scored 9-10 then it is likely that you'll always feel paranoia to some degree. But that does not mean help is not available; and it does not mean you should not seek that help.

So, with 60% of people not feeling overt paranoia, and the 40% that do displaying no signs dissimilar to any other psychological case (i.e. the paranoia is not targeted or logical, as you would expect if there was reason behind our paranoia) it seems unlikely that paranoid thoughts are our mind's way of telling us there really is something wrong with the universe.

However, there have been relatively few studies in this field and there is still a huge amount we don't know. It may be that our paranoia is the evolutionary ability of some people to find something wrong with the world. All I can say is that if that is the case we have no proof, and indeed what evidence we do have points very much in the opposite direction.

Just a few more stats from the King's College London below:

- over 40% of people regularly worry that negative comments are being made about them
- 27% think that people deliberately try to irritate them
- 20% worry about being observed or followed
- 10% think that someone has it in for them
- 5% worry that there's a conspiracy to harm them

The frequency of paranoid and suspicious thoughts in the general population:

% having thought at least weekly

- I need to be on my guard against others - 52%
- Strangers and friends look at me critically - 48%
- There might be negative comments being circulated about me - 42%
- People are laughing at me - 34%
- Bad things are being said about me behind my back - 30%
- People might be hostile towards me - 29%
- People deliberately try to irritate me - 27%
- I might be being observed or followed - 19%
- People are trying to make me upset - 12%
- Someone I know has bad intentions towards me - 12%
- I am under threat from others - 10%
- I have a suspicion that someone has it in for me - 8%
- Someone I don't know has bad intentions towards me - 8%
- People would harm me given the opportunity - 8%
- There is a possibility of a conspiracy against me - 5%