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Will we duck in time?

Throw a stone at the guy opposite you and the chances are that he'll do a great job of ducking. And if you'd conducted the same experiment a couple of million years earlier, the same unlucky fellow would have done an equally good job. His brain, like yours, evolved a long time ago to become a phenomenal machine for avoiding tangible dangers that pose an immediate, personal threat. Sadly, his brain (like yours) is not evolved to handle the very real dangers that threaten us today, e.g., destruction from nuclear weapons, pandemics, and climate change. A recent survey I conducted of public policy experts shows that they believe there is a 33 per cent likelihood of us destroying the majority of the human race within 200 years.

In the twinkling of an eye, in evolutionary terms, our brains almost tripled in size from the half kilogram of *homo habilis*, 2 million years ago, to the hunky 1.3 kilogrammes, 200,000 years ago of

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homo sapiens (humans). That remarkable transformation produced a frontal lobe that makes us unique among animals at foreseeing the consequences of our action. As a result, we've been able to create antibiotics, astronomical instruments, and atom bombs. But we never evolved to handle the power we now possess. Evolution left out two key abilities: handling abstract problems and coping with fragile egos.

Unlike our ability to handle oncoming rocks, we are not good at coping with the enormous, abstract problems our frontal lobe has helped us create. Take climate change. It's hard for our minds to grasp the real effects of melting ice caps, increased ocean acidity, and changes to weather patterns. To most of us, all that stuff can seem a bit, dare I say it, nebulous, even irrelevant, as we think about what to do with our busy days. To make matters more difficult, anything we try to do now doesn't bring what our brains expect: an immediate, tangible increase in our safety. In brief, because our species never needed to handle these abstract problems, we simply haven't evolved to handle them well.

Evolution's second omission is an antidote to our tendency towards fear and aggression. While psychologists comparing humans with other species have described us as "psychopathic" because of this pre-disposition, most of us politely describe the core of the problem as our having "sensitive egos". I recently witnessed an example while coaching a former executive of a major financial institution. For a year he had worked with his firm to make sure they were prepared for him to take early retirement. He missed his children and wanted to be part of their daily lives. He wanted to drive them to

school. However, on his last day of work, the CFO of the firm became demeaning, rude, and contemptuous of him. Rather than brush that off and embrace his children as he had planned, my client vowed to strike back at the CFO by destabilising the firm's half billion dollar investment in Southeast Asia. He worked slavishly at his new project for three years until his original firm was clearly suffering. His mellow retirement had been entirely hijacked by his ego and his children continued to be driven to school by a chauffeur. (Incidentally, his original firm then offered him one of the most senior positions in their company and a lucrative signing bonus. He turned them down – and then he did, finally, take his retirement.)

However, the effect of ego-pinching goes far beyond corporate vendettas. Several senior statesmen, including Singaporean luminaries, believe that one of the reasons for the US-led invasion of Iraq was a vendetta against Saddam Hussein by the family of George Bush. If that is true, thousands of innocent men, women, and children have died because of ego.

There are now 22,000 nuclear warheads, each of which is between 100 and 1000 times more powerful than the bombs that destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Several are "missing" and may be in the possession of rogue states that are led by people with particularly sensitive egos. It is simply logical to think that it is a matter of time before our technological prowess and tendency towards aggression meet in catastrophe. After all, in the last century alone, we killed more than 100 million of our own kind and we did not have the type of technology that is available today.

I had the privilege of asking the former Secretary General of the United Nations,

Kofi Annan this question. He said that we have a 30 per cent chance of destroying ourselves. I went on to ask ten faculty members of the LKY School and Harvard Kennedy School how likely they think, it is that we will destroy at least half of our species in 200 years. The median response was 33 per cent. When asked what they thought the likelihood was of our destroying our species at some point in the future, they responded "100 per cent."

I asked Annan how we might overcome these two flaws in our psychology. He said, "We have to build empathy. Those with the ability to fix the problems must see the impact these problems have." My initial reaction was that his solution sounded weak, tedious, and ineffective. But the more I think about it, the more I realise we have no other choice. Fortunately, recent research on empathy and compassion shows that people who deliberately try to cultivate these qualities themselves become happier. In fact recent brain scans have found that among the happiest people studied are those who deliberately try to cultivate compassion. So perhaps empathy and compassion aren't as weak as they sound.

As I look at the running shoes I am wearing, which may well have been made in an exploitative Nike-like sweatshop; as I consider the carbon footprint of a holiday I have been planning for months, I hope others will do better than me at developing real empathy for our grandchildren. I am hoping that others will change their behavior and spare me the cost. At the same time, I am forced to realise that this makes me part of the problem. And that may be an important step in developing the real empathy I will need to create my own change. [GiA](#)