

# KILROY CAFÉ

Philosophy for the Modern Age

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# PARANOIA

## Our Enemy Within

The only thing  
we have to fear  
is fear itself.

By GLENN CAMPBELL

The world is filled with threats. When we encounter one and get bitten by it, we retreat and avoid doing the same thing again. Like an immune system response, we develop a natural fear of the thing that once hurt us.

Years later, the fear itself may become the enemy, making us retreat from threats that either don't exist or are far less dangerous than we think they are. That's paranoia.

The trouble with paranoia is that in defending ourselves against imaginary threats we inevitably overlook real ones, even provoking them. Paranoia skews our perceptual system so we aren't responding to the world efficiently. The more paranoid we are, the more likely we are to screw up our lives through our own bad decisions.

Is the CIA sending mind control rays into your home? Is the TV news anchor mocking you when he reads the headlines? Are there spiders crawling under your skin? These are the sort of bizarre ideas we associate with paranoia, but everyday paranoia is much more plausible and harder to detect.

Am I unworthy of love? Are all members of the opposite sex untrustworthy? Was some random act designed to hurt me personally? Is everything I do

doomed to failure? This is the real stuff of paranoia.

Paranoia serves the ego by giving it an escape hatch. Was it my fault that I failed the test at school? No, the teacher made me fail by *deliberately* giving me the questions she knew I couldn't answer. It is frightening to think that such a conspiracy exists, but not as frightening as accepting my own failure.

Paranoia gives us an opportunity to blame someone else for our own problems. In doing so, however, we neglect to address our problems, and they often fester and become worse.

The greatest irony of paranoia is that it usually brings about the very thing we most fear. If we are afraid of rejection, we are going to become hyper-vigilant for signs of it, and when we think we see them, we may go into attack mode to protect our ego. ("This isn't my fault; it's yours!") Sadly, this aggressive overreaction tends to lead to real rejection. The underlying fear is thus confirmed, and the paranoia becomes even stronger.

Paranoia isn't limited to extremists and mental patients. It is a flaw that runs through all of us. It molds our opinions and shapes our interactions with the world. Paranoia is the great protector of the status quo. It assures that we are never going to rise above the level where our inner self-esteem says we should be.

If a good thing happens to us and we secretly don't believe we deserve it, paranoia is going to give us a reason to reject it. That's why some people find

themselves in destructive relationships again and again. When a good one comes along, paranoia won't let them accept it. They'll find a trumped-up flaw and use it to sabotage what might have otherwise worked.

Paranoia contains two seemingly contradictory elements. One is a secret sense of unworthiness and self-doubt. The other is a grandiose perception of one's importance in the eyes of others.

If you think the CIA is monitoring your phone calls, you are presuming that the CIA *cares* about your phone calls, which is a much bigger stretch than the technical ability. You desperately need to believe they care because it makes you feel important and staves off the doubt you feel inside.

There isn't much you can do about paranoia in others except to be aware of it. Whenever you take people away from the environment they are used to—especially to a much better place—paranoia is a risk. Some people have a higher latent paranoia level than others, and you must be extremely cautious when dealing with them because they could easily attack you in the guise of self-defense.

You only have control over paranoia in yourself. There are plenty of real threats in the world and evaluating them is tricky. Aside from analyzing the outward warning signs, you also have to monitor your own emotions for possible false alerts. Paranoia will always be there, circulating in your head, so you must do your best to detect it and rationally compensate for it.

—G.C.

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