

THE ANXIETY TAMER

Jürgen Margraf developed a therapy for panic attacks that works incredibly fast. Now a Humboldt Professor at Ruhr-Universität Bochum, the psychologist is investigating how people stay mentally healthy.

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THERE ARE OCCASIONS when even anxiety researchers get anxious. Jürgen Margraf has experienced many such moments, and remembers one in particular. "It was my first dive in the sea," relates the Professor of Clinical Psychology and Psychotherapy, sitting in his office on campus at Ruhr-Universität in Bochum. On the wall there are two drawings by his children, a car and a clown. Otherwise, the room is dominated by books, many of them written by Margraf himself.

Anxiety struck him underwater on a family holiday to Turkey. Fully equipped with a neoprene wetsuit, buoyancy jacket, lead weights, oxygen cylinder, snorkel, goggles and diving fins, Margraf did a gentle backward roll off the jetty into the sea. He tried to breathe but couldn't catch his breath. "I thought the stupid diving regulator wasn't working," he relates. Margraf's heart started pounding, loud and fast. But then he forced himself to calm down and managed to take a deep breath, and then another. "Of course there wasn't anything wrong with the equipment," he comments.

It's hard to believe that this man should have experienced such anxiety. He is tall, well over 6 feet, and his clothing is as casual as his demeanour: jeans, light blue shirt and a discreetly-checked brown jacket. "Not being afraid of anything at all is not healthy," says Margraf. "Anxiety is only dangerous if we can no longer control it."

How to control their anxiety is something Margraf has already taught hundreds of patients. Together with his wife, the child and adolescent psychologist Silvia Schneider, with whom he has lived and

worked for the last 24 years, Margraf developed the Marburg Therapy Model back in the 1980s – a treatment that takes just 15 hours and frees people of their anxiety. Patients not only learn to face up to the situations that cause anxiety but also how a panic attack comes about in the first place.

The mechanism behind such attacks has become known as the "Margraf Vicious Circle Model". According to this, physical reactions such as palpitations, breathlessness and the like are triggered by stress or movement. Whilst a healthy person doesn't take much notice of all this, an anxiety patient intently observes his or her symptoms. They cause anxiety which makes the brain release more stress hormones. This, in its turn, exacerbates the physical reactions. A panic attack is on the way. "In a situation like this, many patients believe they are going to drop dead on the spot," says Margraf. They therefore have to learn how to evaluate their physical symptoms.

The mortal fear his patients experience is one of the reasons why he admires them so much. "An agoraphobe genuinely believes that his heart will stop beating if he goes into a big shop," says Margraf. "And yet he's prepared to give it a try just because I, his therapist, tell him that he has to face up to the danger and then his anxiety will gradually decrease." This is something Margraf particularly emphasizes in his teaching, too. "Every therapist must be aware how much these people are actually accomplishing."

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JÜRGEN MARGRAF
helps people face up to
their anxiety – and has
great respect for their
courage.



EXCELLENT LONG-TERM RESULTS That his short-term therapy really does cure anxiety disorders permanently is something the psychologist, who was awarded a Humboldt Professorship in March 2010, has only just been able to prove. He has traced patients whom he treated more than twenty years ago. By far the majority of them have never suffered a panic attack since.

Jürgen Margraf's fascination with the human psyche goes right back to his youth. "I was in Year 11 when I had the idea of studying psychology," he explains. Margraf attended the German School in Brussels. His father, a manager who had worked his way up without

an academic education, had accepted a job in the Belgian capital five years previously.

"I was supposed to be presenting an essay on the theme of utopias," Margraf remembers. He decided on the utopian novel, *Walden Two*, by the American psychologist B.F. Skinner, in which he describes his vision of a peaceful community that knows neither property nor punishment. "I was in revolutionary mode at the time and thought we had to change the world," Margraf recalls. Skinner's ideas, which are based on the insights of modern behavioural psychology, fascinated the 17 year-old. >



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But his marks were not good enough to study psychology. “I didn’t work very hard at school,” he admits. So he enrolled at LMU Munich to read sociology and ethnology – and soon realised that these subjects would not take him where he wanted to go. “I wanted to know how humans function, what makes them what they are, what drives them.”

Margraf returned to Brussels where admission to study psychology was not restricted. “But the course there was far too schoolified,” he says. He continued to be enrolled at the university but spent most of his time working in an office – and was thoroughly dissatisfied with his life. So he then decided to try the lateral entrance route and re-apply to study psychology in Germany. “I told myself: if this works, you’re going to do a few things differently in future,” he remembers.

Margraf got a place at Kiel, gained some experience as an assistant to Urs Baumann and, before taking his Diplom, moved to Tübingen where Niels Birbaumer became his mentor. His first degree in his pocket, he relocated with his then girlfriend to Stanford University and travelled all over the USA attending congresses at which he used his own data to disprove the established theories on the development of panic attacks. He was still just 27 years old.

ULTIMATE GOAL: PREVENTION Today, the eminent researcher Jürgen Margraf enjoys all the freedom a Humboldt Professorship has to offer. “It means I can finally conduct broad-based, long-term research projects,” he notes. “I don’t have to spend time convincing reviewers and am free to design my projects as I see fit.”

Together with his wife, he has set up the Center for the Study and Treatment of Mental Health in Bochum where children, adolescents and adults who suffer from panic attacks and phobias can get expert help. In addition, various studies are being run at the centre, which address the epidemiology of anxiety disorders.

But Margraf’s pet project, which would probably be impossible without the Humboldt funding, is a long-term study on the major, unsolved problem of how people preserve their mental health. “For every patient who receives psychotherapy there are two or three healthy people who seem to manage to cope with their lives on their own,” says Margraf. “What I would like to know is how they do it. What are the factors that keep them mentally fit?” And since Margraf

likes to think big, he doesn’t intend to restrict his research to Germany. “We want to ask the same questions in Rwanda, China, Russia and the USA,” he says.

His life’s ambition in professional terms is to create the basis for his colleagues to be able to work more preventively in future. “I hope that, one day, we won’t have to wait until the horse has bolted before we shut the stable door, but can take action beforehand,” he says.

In order to achieve this goal, he puts up with a very heavy work schedule. He travels a lot, not just for his research but also in his role as the President of the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Psychologie (German Society of Psychology), which he took on in 2012. He gives lectures and seminars. “But I still try to find time for creative things like thinking and writing,” he says. Margraf has already published some 400 scientific articles in the course of his career.

And despite all this, the 57 year-old radiates calm. “I live what I preach to my patients,” he says, “and that means finding time for leisure.” In his spare time, Margraf reads a lot, listens to music, does sport, potters around the garden, enjoys cooking, most of all with his wife, and is interested in wine and archaeology. “And we see our friends regularly,” he says.

For his own well-being, Jürgen Margraf tries, above all, to achieve a balance between work and the other facets of life. “I always want to be there for my friends, for my wife and my children – and I hope soon for my grandchildren, too.” The researcher is already looking forward to being a grandfather. And he would like to continue travelling a lot with his family. But he is not actually planning a diving holiday. “Instead,” he says, “we’ve discovered snorkelling.”