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Am I Schizophrenic? Surviving Life and Death Situations

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Am I Schizophrenic? Surviving Life and Death Situations
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“On a given day, a given circumstance, you think you have a limit. And you then go for this limit and you touch this limit, and you think, 'Okay, this is the limit.' As soon as you touch this limit, something happens and you suddenly can go a little bit further. With your mind power, your determination, your instinct, and the experience as well, you can fly very high.” Racing driver Ayrton Senna in an interview for *Racing is in My Blood*, 1991

“They used to say about Ayrton Senna, the great racing driver that his brain worked much faster than the rest of us..... When my driveshaft sheared I experienced the same phenomenon. If you'd asked me only seconds earlier to relate everything I knew about tail rotors I would have stumbled and stuttered and mumbled a few disconnected facts, but at the instant of failure my brain speeded up to a flash of lightning that I have never experienced before or since. I very meticulously remembered everything I'd ever read, heard or talked about relating to tail rotors.” Grayson, 2015. P.205

What goes on inside of the minds of individuals in life and death situations? Very few talk about their experiences. Our immediate thoughts and decisions often determine the final outcome of events. I have decided to tell some of my personal stories in the hope that it will encourage others to do likewise. There were times when my very survival depended on my immediate decisions and actions.

In life threatening situations my mind or my decision-making ability sometimes changes into a different higher mode with all of my senses at full capacity, clear calm logical thinking, and time slowed down. It is known that the brain has an ability to short cut its normal working procedures in certain circumstances (Sapolsky, 2017). The change inside my brain and body was more than the adrenalin rush I normally experienced as a lifeguard and lifeboat crew member. My thinking is also completely different to the mental pressure experienced during a state or college examination. I can have three different voices speaking to me inside of my mind such that I have questioned my sanity and asked if I were schizophrenic. However, the lifesaving mental state has not been there in times of emotional trouble or stress. It emerges only when a life is at risk. Concern or even fear about how employers and other authority figures might interpret such thinking may lead those experiencing similar thinking to keeping quiet about such events.

I watched a young man drown when I was 12 years; survived a childhood drowning event; my boyhood friend drowned in our local river; in a 5 minute period alone in a hospital mortuary with my dead father my youth ended and I became a man; and faced a parent's worst nightmare - resuscitating our youngest daughter in our home.

"The air temperature is minus twenty degrees.... 'You set, Buddy?' cameraman Simon asks me. I smile back. I am unusually nervous. Something doesn't quite feel right. But I don't listen to the inner voice. It is time to go to work.....It is time to get into my secret space. A rare part of me that is focused, clear, brave, precise. It is the part of me I know the best, but visit the least.....Beneath me is three hundred feet of steep snow and ice....I leap....I know something is wrong...I flip nimbly on to my front and drive the ice axe into the snow....It works like it always does. Like clockwork. Total confidence. One of those rare moments of lucidity. It is fleeting. Then it is gone. I am now static. The world hangs still. Then – bang. Simon, his heavy wooden sledge, plus solid metal camera housing, piles straight into my left thigh. He is doing in excess of 45 m.p.h. There is an instant explosion of pain and noise and white....I am thrown down the mountain like a doll. Life stands still. I feel and see it all in slow motion... I am crying. They are tears of relief...The next day, I forget the crash. To me, it is past. Accidents happen, it was no one's fault. Lessons learned. Listen to the voice."

Grills, 2011, p.10

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John Connolly has over 40 years lifesaving experience and is the founder and Honorary Secretary of The Lifesaving Foundation. He had a long voluntary career within RLSS as a pool and beach lifeguard, lifeguard trainer/assessor, and as a branch officer. He has been awarded Honorary Life Membership of both Royal Life Saving Society UK and of the Royal Life Saving Commonwealth Society. In 2017 he was the recipient of the Royal Dutch Society for the Prevention of Drowning's (KMRD) 250th centenary's Medal of Honour.