
A MATTER OF STUFFING

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I started noticing the small clumps and shreds of white, fluffy cotton stuffing in various places. This was about the same time I sensed something wasn't quite right in my life. I didn't feel ill. It was an empty, lost feeling.

Those odd bits and pieces of stuffing showed up everywhere I went. And, the odd way I felt just didn't let up. Dizzying, sick sensations made it hard for me to concentrate on anything.

People at work noticed the tufts of stuffing material, too. I pretended to be surprised when anyone pointed them out. A

good friend of mine said, "How could you NOT notice this stuffing? It's all over the place. And it seems to lead back right to YOU."

As we both looked around, it was obvious there weren't any traces of the stuffing, except where I had been. I could tell by the look on my friend's face he was thinking the same thing I was, "How could the stuffing be coming from me?"

He jokingly said, "Life isn't knocking the stuffing out of you, is it?"

The mysterious stuffing plagued me the entire day. I was so light-headed by the time I got home I could barely focus my eyes. I managed to inspect my clothes in the hopes of finding a logical source of the stuffing. I went through everything else, too, including the couch where I had found the most stuffing. NOTHING! There wasn't the slightest hint of a source for where the stuffing was coming from, except ME!

The next morning I woke up with a skull splitting headache and a gigantic gob of

stuffing in my mouth. After raking my tongue with my fingers to get every last cotton fiber out of my mouth, I dashed to the mirror for a closer look. My mouth seemed okay, but when I pulled off my t-shirt I gasped at the hideous indentations in my stomach and upper chest.

The next few hours were a surreal blur. I was sure the intensified aching inside of my head would lead to my brains exploding out through my eye sockets. Having rushed to the hospital emergency room in a panic, I told them I had a sore throat. During the slow motion, eternity waiting in the tiny, hot examining room my mind raced through an obstacle course of throbbing pain as I tried not to think about those two places on my body where the bulk (stuffing?) was missing!

The doctor finally dashed into the room, breaking through my haze of bizarre thoughts. It had startled me the way the door had popped open; and also that the

doctor was a woman. I just blurted out,
"Please help me. I think I'm going nuts!"

"Let's have a look at that throat
first," said the doctor as she crammed an
unusually huge, wooden tongue depressor down
my throat.

Gagging, I spit out the words, "Not.
The. Throat. Chest! Stomach!"

The doctor pulled back, saying, "Throat
looks fine. Just what IS wrong here?"

I ripped off my shirt and pointed to my
chest and stomach, saying, "Does that look
normal to you?"

Eyebrows furrowed, she asked, "Just
WHAT doesn't look normal?"

"Look there and here," I said, pointing
to my stomach and chest again.

Eyebrows now raised, the doctor zipped
her index and middle fingers back and forth
across my midsection, tapping certain
points. Then she abruptly said, "I don't see
anything unusual here."

Looking down I was surprised to see that I had to agree. The indentations had vanished. I noticed more stuffing on the examining table and the floor. My eyes darted back and forth as I uttered, "Uh, well."

The doctor interrupted with, "Look, I just don't see anything wrong here. And, I DO have other patients."

"WAIT!" I blurted out. I didn't know what to say next. I picked up a piece of the stuffing and softly said, "Doctor, I think this is coming from me?"

"What? From your shirt or pants?" she asked, dumbfounded.

Taking a deep breath, I said, "NO!" With my head pounding and eyes squinted, I told her what had been happening lately, as well as my friend joking about the stuffing coming from me. A spur of the moment theory popped into my head that seemed logical at the time so I asked the doctor if she thought maybe the reason the two

indentations had disappeared was because the stuffing had shifted and settled inside of me thereby smoothing things out.

The doctor's attitude completely softened. She was instantly more understanding. Although I didn't realize it at first, the other white-coated doctor she immediately brought in for "consultation" was a psychologist.

There was no doubt this guy was a "shrink" when he asked me if I thought I had a firm grasp on reality. After that, with his hands buried in his coat pockets, he slowly walked me to his office in the "quiet wing" of the hospital. What followed was his lengthy discourse about how we all need something he kept referring to as "reality anchors" to keep us properly buoyed so we can deal with this future of ours which many people feel hasn't turned out the way it should have. I kept smiling and nodding my head in agreement so he would feel I was

benefiting from all of what I felt was just psychobabble.

Finally, he stopped talking and said, "Well? What do you think?"

I paused and stood up, saying, "Well, that's all very nice, Doc." Picking up some stuffing from the chair, I continued with, "Do you see this? It's stuffing and it wasn't here when we came in. Only AFTER I came in and sat down, did it appear. How do you explain that, here in this future of ours you were talking about?"

Before he responded, I took out my pocket knife and slashed open his designer chair. Picking up the foam material and showing it to the doctor, I said, "The stuffing certainly didn't come from your fancy chair, Doc. Where did it come from? Huh? Me maybe?"

Then, to prove the stuffing really was coming from me, I cut into my wrist. Much to my surprise, blood gushed out of the gash in spurts. Coward that I am about seeing blood,

my eyes rolled upward and I passed out. The last thing I remember seeing was the doctor's mouth form a perfect oval.

I floated peacefully in warm, toasty, secure sensations until the loud, harsh words "HOW ARE YOU FEELING?" abruptly shattered their way into my consciousness. Opening my eyes, it was hard to focus in subdued, bluish light. I was in a hospital bed with my arms and legs restrained. A man in a white coat stood close by studying me.

I heard myself say, "Hey, Doc. What's going on here?"

Stretching his lips into a polite smile, he said, "Don't worry. We'll take those off your arms and legs soon. I want to discuss your stuffing." He plucked a few pieces from the bed as he continued. "You're not the only one with such a problem. Look here." He held out a handful of colorful cogs, gears, wires, springs, wheels, pulleys, and rubber bands.

While feeling a twinge of relief mixed with pangs of doom, I asked, "You mean those are from other people?"

He nodded his head in agreement, saying, "Absolutely. Your condition isn't all that unusual. Loose and short circuited wires are the most common reasons folks end up here, but we see just about everything."

"How can this be?" I asked, still staring at his outstretched hand.

Pausing for a moment, as if listening for something, he turned his head slightly sideways and said, "People get pretty edgy. The biggest reason it happens is because of the mundane predictability of life and a failure to adapt to change. Then, of course, there are all those wrong decisions in life which melt over time into regret and lament."

A nurse stormed to my bedside from out of nowhere and shooed him away as she encircled my bed with the pull-around curtain. I then heard the strangest clinking

sounds of objects hitting the floor, but I couldn't quite make out what they were or where they were coming from.

I said, "Hey! That's no way to treat a doctor!"

Speaking in a scolding tone she said, "He is NOT a doctor. He is a long-term patient just like you will probably be."

I heard more peculiar jingling sounds on the floor as she pulled up my sheets. Lifting my head and looking over the side of the bed, I got a look at several shinny, sparkling, stainless steel nuts and bolts scattered about her white shoes. I blinked twice in disbelief when a few more tumbled downward from under her skirt as she gently brushed more stuffing from my blanket.

