

# EXISTENTIAL BLACK ICE

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Many of us function pretty well in lots of different areas of life. For instance, we might thrive at work, feel comfortable with our children, and enjoy socialising with our friends. In domains such as these, we may have a sense of confidence and competence: we feel that we can function well and do a good job. But there may be other areas of living, perhaps just one or two, where we really seem to ‘get into a spin’. We lose our sense of bearings, and cannot really judge for ourselves which way is up. It might be around money, or relationships, or travelling. For me, it is around health issues. If I feel an ache somewhere, or a new blotch on my skin, I am straight to the most serious diseases: cancer, multiple sclerosis, myxomatosis. I find it almost impossible to keep things in perspective and see things rationally. For my wife, Helen, it is packing. She is one of the most intelligent, well-organised women I know, but faced with the choice of what to take on holiday and what to leave behind she is in a total panic.

Katherine McArthur, a colleague of mine, thought a good term for these areas of living would be ‘existential black holes’: something that sucks you in and you cannot get out of. Or you could call them ‘existential hot spots’, or ‘thin skinned spots’ (Holzhey-Kunz & Fazekas, 2012, p. 42). But the idea that there are particular domains in our lives when we get into a spin seems to be a familiar one to many people, and it is the term ‘black ice’ that fits best for me: skidding around without being able to get a solid footing. You may find it useful to think of what areas in your life, if any, are covered in existential black ice.

Existential black ice may form around certain areas of our lives for the same reason that we can get into vicious psychological spirals. We start to worry about a certain area, worry that we will worry about it, and then worry even more. When I discover a new ache in my body, for instance, my anxiety is not so much about being ill, per se, but about worrying that I will be worrying about being ill for weeks. And, of course, because I worry about that, I perpetuate the fear that when I am facing health issues I will experience intense worry, hence making it even more worrying when I discover a ‘symptom’.

As with vicious spirals, the way to melt psychological black ice may be to acknowledge and accept the original experiencing: to know, for instance, that I *will* get scared when health difficulties come up, but that I can cope and manage with that. As with skidding on ice, however, I have also learnt that sometimes I need something very stable, reliable and grounded--another person’s perspective--to help me regain my bearings and see up from down.

## References

Holzhey-Kunz, A., & Fazekas, T. (2012). Daseinsanalysis: A dialogue. In L. Barnett & G. Madison (Eds.), *Existential psychotherapy: Vibrancy, legacy and dialogue* (pp. 35-51). London: Routledge.