

Excerpt from ‘So you wanna de-bog yourself’

What I found in the mire

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Being stuck is the psychological equivalent of standing knee-deep in a fetid bog. Bog in every direction, bog as far as the eye can see. You go wading in search of dry land and only find more bog. Nothing works, no options seem good, it's all bleh and meh and ho hum and no thanks and *more bog*.

Fortunately, I've spent much of my life in that very bog and I've learned that no matter how you ended up there, the forces that keep you in the bog are always the same. There are, in fact, only three, although they each come in a variety of foul flavours.

So here, to aid you, is my compendium of bog phenomena, the myriad ways I get myself stuck, because unsticking myself always seems to be a matter of finding a name for the thing happening to me...

1. INSUFFICIENT ACTIVATION ENERGY

Most of my attempts to get unstuck look, from the outside, like I'm doing nothing at all. I'm standing motionless in the bog, crying, “THIS IS ME TRYING!” That means I've got insufficient activation energy—I can't muster the brief but extraordinary output of effort it takes to escape the bog, so I stay right where I am.

There are few different ways to end up here.

Waiting for jackpot

Sometimes when I'm stuck, someone will be like, “Why don't you do [reasonable option]?” and I'll go, “Hold on there, buddy! Don't you see this option has *downsides*? Find me one with only upsides, and then we'll talk!”

I'm *waiting for jackpot*, refusing to do anything until an option arises that dominates all other options on all dimensions. Strangely, this never seems to happen.

Often, I'm waiting for the biggest jackpot of all: the spontaneous remission of all my problems without any effort required on my part. Someone suggests a way out of my predicament and I go, “Hmm, I dunno, do you have any solutions that involve me doing everything 100% exactly like I'm doing it right now, and getting better outcomes?”

Declining the dragon

Sometimes I'll know exactly what I need to do in order to leave the bog, but I'm too afraid to do it. I'm afraid to tell the truth or take a risk. And so I dither, hoping that the future will not require me to be brave.

Everybody thinks this is a bad strategy because it merely prolongs my suffering, but that's not why it's a dumb thing to do. Yes, every moment I dither is a moment I suffer. But when I finally do the brave thing, that's not the climax of my suffering—that moment is the *opposite* of suffering. Being brave feels good. I mean, have you ever stood up to a bully, or conquered stage fright, or finally stopped being embarrassed about what you love? It's the most wonderful feeling in the world. Whenever you chicken out, you don't just feel the pain of cowardice; you miss out on the pleasure of courage.

When I put off doing the brave thing, I am *declining the dragon*: missing an opportunity to do something that might be scary in the moment but would ultimately make me feel great.

The mediocrity trap

About half of my friends *kind of* hate their jobs, so they're moderately unhappy most of the time, but never unhappy enough to leave. This is the *mediocrity trap*: situations that are bad-but-not-too-bad keep you forever in their orbit because they never inspire the frustration it takes to achieve escape velocity.

The mediocrity trap is a nasty way to end up in the bog. Mediocre situations, long languished in, become Lost Years—boring to both live through and talk about, like you're sitting in a waiting room with no cell reception, no wifi, and no good magazines, waiting for someone to come in and tell you it's time to start living.

Stoking the problem

I spend a lot of time thinking about my problems, but it usually looks like this:

“Oh boy, what a problem! A real whopper, I'd say. Massive, even. Get a load of this problem! Wowzers!” I can spend *days* doing this. “How big would you say that problem is? Large? Huge? And that's just its size! Don't get me started on its depth.”

This isn't solving the problem; this is *stoking the fire*. It looks like a good use of time, but it's just a way to continue your suffering indefinitely by becoming obsessed with it.

2. BAD ESCAPE PLAN

Even if you've worked up a big enough head of steam to launch yourself out of the bog, you still have to aim properly. ("I'm doing it! I'm doing it!" I shout as I crash land onto my launch pad.)

Here are a few of my recurring bad escape plans:

The "try harder" fallacy

I played a lot of *Call of Duty* in high school, and I used to roll with a gang of bad boys. We weren't very good. Whenever we lost the first round, which was almost always, we would regroup in the pregame lobby—basically the online locker room—and decide what we really need to do in the next round is "try harder." As if the reason we had all just been shot in the head 25 times in a row was that we were not sufficiently dedicated to avoiding getting shot in the head. Armed with the most dimwit plan of all time, we would march into battle once more and lose just as badly. As our virtual corpses piled up, we'd yell at each other, "Guys, stop dying!"

This is the *try harder fallacy*. I behold my situation and conclude that, somehow, I will improve it in the future by just sort of wishing it to be different, and then I get indignant that nothing happens. Like, "Um, excuse me! I've been doing all of this very diligent *desiring* for things to be different, and yet they remain the same, could someone please look into this?"

Blaming God

I spend a lot of stints in the bog wailing about how I don't have enough time. "Oh, if there were only 25 hours in the day," I lament, "the things I would accomplish!"

But here's a stupid question: what am I mad about, exactly? That I don't have a time-turner? That I can't find a little eddy in the spacetime continuum where I can hide out while I cross a few more things off my to-do list? Do I really believe that the way to get unstuck is to ruminate on how unfair it is that time marches ever forward at one second per second?

This is *blaming God*: pinning the responsibility for my current predicament on something utterly unchangeable. And while many religions teach that God intervenes in human affairs, none of them, as far as I know, believe that he responds to whining. (Would *you* worship a god who does miracles if you just annoy him enough?)

Diploma problems and toothbrushing problems

Some problems are like getting a diploma: you work at it for a while, and then you're done forever. Learning how to ride a bike is a classic *diploma problem*.

But most problems aren't like that. They're more like *toothbrushing problems*: you have to work at them forever until you die. You can't, as far as I know, just brush your teeth really really well once, then let 'em ride forever.

I only started making progress on my mental health when I realized I was facing a toothbrushing problem: feeling normal again would probably require me to do stuff every day for the rest of my life. I might get better at doing that stuff, just like when you first start brushing your teeth as a kid you get toothpaste everywhere and end up swallowing half of it, and eventually you learn not to do that. But even when you're a toothbrushing expert, it still takes you a couple minutes every day. You could be mad about that, but it won't make your teeth any cleaner.

Fantastical metamorphosis

Here's one of my favourite bad escape plans: I'll just be a different person in the future. Like, "I know I hate working out, but in the future I will overcome this by not being such a baby about it." Or, "I find quantum physics boring, so I'll just learn about it later, when I find it more interesting."

These are *fantastical metamorphoses*. I have not, so far, woken up one day and found myself different in all the ways that would make my life easier. I do hope this happens, but I've stopped betting on it.

Puppeteering

Sometimes it feels like the only solution is to get other people to act differently. I'm only stuck because other people are unreasonable!

And so another bad escape plan is born. A good word for this is *puppeteering*: trying to solve your problems by controlling the actions of other humans. Puppeteering often looks attractive because other people's actions seem silly and therefore easily changeable. Funnily enough, it doesn't feel that way to them. They have lifetimes of backstory that lead them to act the way that they do, and their actions are, on average, only as changeable as yours. So unless you think of yourself as being easily redirected with a few tugs of your strings, puppeteering is probably not going to get you out of the bog.

3. A BOG OF ONE'S OWN

A confession: most bogs are imaginary. The world doesn't stick us there; *we* stick us there. These are, paradoxically, the most difficult bogs to escape, because it requires realizing that our perception of reality is not reality, and a lot of the mind is dedicated to preventing that exact thought.

Floor is lava

Every kid learns to play the "floor is lava" game, where you pretend that you'll get incinerated if you touch the carpet. Even toddlers can pick it up, which reveals something profound: very early on, we acquire the ability to pretend that fake problems are real. We then spend the rest of our lives doing exactly that.

Often, when I'm stuck, it's because I've made up a game for myself and decided that I'm losing at it. I haven't achieved enough. I am not working hard enough and I am also, somehow, not having enough fun. These games have elaborate rules, like "I have to be as successful as my most successful friend, but everything I've done so far doesn't count," and I'm supposed to feel very bad if I break them. It's like playing the absolute dumbest version of *the floor is lava*.

Did I create these games by thinking really hard about how to live a good life? No!

Super surveillance

During the Trump administration, I took on a part time job: keeping up with all the outrages. Every twenty minutes or so I would have to check my phone in case any new outrages had occurred, so that I could...collect them? Make them into a scrapbook? I'm not sure.

I now think of this as *super surveillance*, tracking every problem in the world as if they were all somehow, ultimately, my problems. Super surveillance is an express ticket to the bog, because the world is full of problems and you'd be lucky to solve even a single one.

I know some people think that super surveillance is virtuous, but they mainly seem to spend their time looking at screens and feeling bad, and this doesn't seem to solve any of the problems that they're monitoring. To them, I suppose, the most saintly life possible is one spent sitting in front of a hundred screens, eyelids held open with surgical instruments, bearing witness to all human suffering simultaneously. I, uh, feel differently.

Hedgehogging

Sometimes I get this feeling like, “Nothing will ever work out for me, I will always be unhappy, the rest of my life will be a sort of wandering twilight punctuated with periods of misery.”

And my wife will go, “You're hungry.”

And I'll go, “No, no, this is true unhappiness, it comes to me unadulterated from hell itself, it lives inside my bones, I am persecuted by God, you could not possibly know what it's like to be me.”

And then I'll eat a burrito and be like, “Never mind I'm fine!”

This is *hedgehogging*: refusing to be influenced by others, even when you should.

Personal problems growth ray

You know how, when you go up in a tall building and look down at the street, everybody looks not just small, but kind of silly? Like, “Aww, look at those tiny little guys, walking around in their suits like they're people! They don't even know they're so small!”

This is how other people's problems look to me. A friend will tell me, “I'm stressed!” and I'll go, “Aww, what a silly little problem, walking around like it's real! Just don't be stressed, and then you won't be stressed!”

My problems, on the other hand, are like 50-foot-tall moody teenagers. They're so big and so real and so complicated! They cannot possibly be solved! I can only flee from them, hide among the rubble, and peek out at them with horror!

Such is the result of the *personal problems growth ray*, which makes all of your own problems seem larger than life, while other people's stay actual size. This makes reasonable solutions look unreasonable—the actions that solved *your* human-sized problems could never solve *my* giganto-problems; they can only be addressed with either a lifetime of cowering or a tactical nuke.

Impossible satisfaction

Sometimes people will be like, “Well, whatcha gonna do, life is suffering,” and I'll be like, “Haha sure is,” waiting for them to laugh too, but they won't laugh, and I'll realize, to my horror, that *they're not joking*. Some people think the bog is *life*!

I get why you might think this if you've experienced lots of misfortune. But most of the people I know who feel this way haven't. They're usually people with lots of education and supportive relationships and a normal amount of tragedies, people who

have all the raw materials for a good life but can't seem to make one for themselves. Their problem is they believe that *satisfaction is impossible*. Like they're standing in a kitchen full of eggs, flour, oil, sugar, butter, baking powder, a mixer, and an oven, and they throw their hands up and say, "I can't make a cake! Cakes don't even exist!"

WISHING YOU GOOD ALTITUDE

In the big scheme of things, I haven't been alive for all that long. So there are probably lots of ways into the bog I haven't discovered yet. But I've been down there enough times to see the same patterns repeat, and sometimes I can even interrupt them.

That's why having goofy names for them matters so much, because it reminds me not to believe the biggest bog lie of all: that I'm stuck in a situation unlike any I, or anyone else, has ever seen before. If you believe that, it's no wonder you'd suffer from insufficient activation energy, or bad escape plans, or self-bogging: you have no idea what to do, because you don't think anything you've learned can help you at all. Whenever I feel that way, if I can think to myself, "Oh, I'm making the floor-is-lava mistake," I can feel my foot hit solid ground again.

So, best of luck.

And may you only spend as much time in the bog as is necessary to learn the lessons it has to teach you.